

Collective close reading: queer SF and the methodology of the many

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Abstract

Beyond Gender Research Collective are a group researchers, activists, and practitioners brought together by a shared commitment to imagining the world differently through collaborative explorations of queer, trans, and feminist science fiction. As Beyond Gender, we understand ourselves as an example of what Jasbir K. Puar describes as a queer assemblage; we form, and are formed by, a practice we have developed called “collective close reading” (CCR). We begin this chapter by outlining CCR as a practice of utopian worlding: CCR is our method for reading and enacting science fiction, through which we exercise our capacity for imagining, dreaming, and building together. We apply this methodology to Ursula K. Le Guin’s “The Shobies’ Story” (1990), particularly focusing on the ways in which Le Guin’s narrative gestures new modes of art and of kinship, based on celebration of communal activity and politics of affinity. We conclude by connecting this reading of and through Le Guin’s tale to our collective practices of performing science fictionality and of empathetic friendship. In doing so, we demonstrate how – like Le Guin’s Shobies – Beyond Gender’s dedication to communal play and care allows us to insist upon expansive, heteroglossic, and generative possibilities in our collective futures.

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Collective Close Reading: Queer SF and the Methodology of the Many

Beyond Gender Research Collective

Amy Butt <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1762-2768>, Tom Dillon <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5656-8074>, Rachel Hill <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4563-5790>, Sinéad Murphy <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8546-0748>, Eleonora Rossi <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0645-2660>, Smin Smith <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6581-5281>, Katie Stone <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4643-4168>, Sing Yun Lee

Introduction

At the beginning of Ursula K. Le Guin’s novelette, “The Shobies’ Story,” we are introduced to a group of people from across the Ekumen who have gathered together to test an experimental mode of instantaneous space travel. We meet them in their “isyeye,” a word that, in the dominant language of this fictional universe, means “‘making a beginning together,’ or ‘beginning to be together,’” – a period in which a number of individuals consciously and consensually coalesce to form a group (“The Shobies’ Story” 75). However, as both characters and readers learn, the process of group formation is never truly over; it is always continually negotiated. As they initiate the new method of space travel, the group cohesion dissolves and each individual experiences their new location differently. They must relate their varied experiences to each other to regain their group identity and make their return; partial, fragmentary, and contradictory as they are, these stories nevertheless create a narrative whole whereby the group can construct a shared reality. The telling of stories, then, both performs and prefigures, bringing the world into being by enacting it through narrative. Finally, these various stories, like the narrative threads themselves, weave bonds of care between the individuals, remaking them as the Shobies.

Le Guin’s tale, revealing as it does the constitutive interplay between storytelling and socially constructed “reality,” speaks to how we, as the Beyond Gender Research Collective, put science fictional ideas into practice. In particular, it inspires us to create both new modes of art and new modes of kinship based on the celebration of communal activity and the politics of affinity rather than conventional ideas of individual excellence and biological identity. In this chapter we demonstrate our method for reading and enacting science fiction, which we call “collective close reading.” First, we outline our understanding of this methodology before applying it to “The Shobies’ Story” and then connecting it to our collective practices of performing science fictionality and empathetic friendship.

Like Le Guin's Shobies, the Beyond Gender Collective is formed through collective play and communal care, in this case, dedicated to explorations of queer and feminist science fiction (SF). Our own "isyeye" (never complete, always in process) began in 2018 when a group of researchers and students met to discuss our shared joys and frustrations with SF and SF studies. The group continues to grow. Though we have found in SF, in the words of our Beyond Gender Manifesto,

New worlds, forgotten ways of being, creatures whose strangeness show us the strangeness in ourselves. . . . We expect more. . . . We believe that SF has an ethical obligation to disrupt the prevailing logics of the suffocating now, to instead envision and bring about emancipatory futures, futures which multiply, rather than reduce, our ways of being in (and beyond) the world(s).

(Beyond Gender 10)

Shobie-style, we meet to read, tell stories, write, play, and care for one another – acts that, as in the best SF, make and remake the world. Also like the Shobies, who operate from a convergence of emotions and affects and who combine the organic and the inorganic in their journey across the galaxy, we are what Jasbir K. Puar describes as a "queer assemblage," which, with "its espousal of what cannot be known, seen or heard, or has yet to be known, seen, or heard, allows for becoming/s beyond being/s" (128).

As Beyond Gender we form, and are formed by, the practice of collective close reading (CCR). *Collective*: we choose messy multiplicity over the illusory unity of the sole authoritative voice, the single story. Together we fight. The academy's demand for definitive individual scholarship; modernity's fetishization of the single male genius; neoliberalism's untenable valorization of unending competition: these threefold pressures conspire against us, trying to separate us, to turn us against each other. But we refuse to capitulate to these atomizing demands. *Close*: instead, united in joy, galvanized by anger and protected with friendship, we draw closer to each other through, by, and with SF. We fiction ourselves into being as an ever shifting collective, a multitude, a crew. *Reading*: is always rereading, an act of (re)creation. Never a definitive or complete object, we encounter texts as collaborators; we find openings which forge collective modes of subjectivity; we generate ways of being together which, in turn, repotentialize texts. With increasing intimacy, close reading blurs the distinction between reading and writing. We know that to analyze is to retell stories in another language. Never closed, CCR is our polyvocal praxis of utopian worlding.

At the conclusion of "A Cyborg Manifesto," (1985) Donna Haraway argues that the cyborg, as a metaphor for feminist politics, "is a dream not of common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia. . . . It means both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, space stories" (181). Haraway's rejection of common language restates the cyborg's rejection of gender essentialism, arguing for a more open collective feminist politics based on difference rather than shared biological experience. The alternative to common language, suggested by Haraway, is heteroglossia: the coexistence of seemingly contradictory,

conflicting voices. Haraway posits heteroglossia as a powerful tool for rewriting and remaking both the world and the self. As collaborative practice, this brief quote suggests that heteroglossia not only deconstructs but also builds alternative worlds and ways of being together. Such a practice, central to *Beyond Gender*, is enacted in “The Shobies’ Story” around the hearth of the ship: the multiple and contradictory stories told by the crew resist a single “true” narrative of events and instead build a complex reality constructed from clashing and complementary voices. It is with this polyvocality of selves that we collaborate with SF, that we sift through, unearth, and rewrite its infinite codes. It is as a multitude of multitudes that we together become SF.

Performance

In “The Shobies’ Story,” Le Guin writes:

The effective action of a crew depends on the members perceiving themselves as a crew – you could call it believing in the crew, or just *being* it – Right? So, maybe, to churten, we – we conscious ones – maybe it depends on our consciously perceiving ourselves as . . . as transilient – as being in the other place – the destination?

(101)

Our reading of SF is an open process which extends beyond any given text, an invitation to create and interact with the world in a science fictional way. In exploring how to communicate these ideas to and with each other we can find ways to act using SF, and as science fictional beings. Here, Le Guin utilizes both context and language to lead us into a realm of multiple possibilities, and estrangement occurs on a bodily level as well as a cognitive one; in short, it occurs in the fabric of the story and in the construction of that fabric.

In our work, science fictional thinking gestates and makes possible science fictional praxis. Two members of *Beyond Gender*, Sinjin Li and Raphael Kabo, worked together to create *Loving Allness*, a multiplayer game with an objective of world-building and future-making through collective storytelling (Li and Kabo). It asks each player to share a story which is then added to by others, these multiple strands are then reassembled by all players creating shared responsibility for the collective storyworld. The designing and making of the game shared many of the qualities of playing it as a group, exercising our capacity for imagining, dreaming, and building together.

A key component of the game’s design is the use of an abstract visual language (in the form of pictorial tiles) to act as storytelling prompts. In using these we depart from the relative comfort of language-based thinking and writing, creating an intimate space to share subjective and multiple interpretations of these tiles – a heteroglossia particular to that group and the freshly made stories shared by its members. This act of telling and listening, of inhabiting worlds of each other’s creation, evokes trust between and compassion towards each other. It has contributed to

our practical understanding of collective thought and action as both an emotional and intellectual undertaking. The act of collaboration is not only what is created as a result of our coming together but is our lived experience of each other's presence and communication in our day-to-day lives, in our work and our recreation. *Loving Allness* is an expression of our interest in non-binary thinking and future-making, and a medium to explore relating to each other via imaginations and friendship. It allows us to insist upon expansive and generative possibilities in our collective futures.

In "The Shobies' Story," being in a place, or reaching a destination, requires the same conscious shift in perception as "being a crew," a creative act of utopian prefiguration through collective storytelling which is both process and realization. Our work as Beyond Gender in the design and playing of storytelling games similarly celebrates and recognizes the utopian possibility contained within the making and sharing of storyworlds.¹ In these games, the use of visual art allows us to explore ideas which precede or surpass language, while the physical motions of reading, making, and building allow us to rehearse the construction of these imagined futures in our collective present. The art is not a product, a distinct object, or destination, but the ground upon which we stand.

The creation of "the Shobies" as a shared and collective identity requires a process of both meeting and naming, realized in the gathering together in a specific time and location where this act of becoming can take place: "they met at Ve Port more than a month before their first flight together, and there, calling themselves after their ship as most crews did, became the Shobies" ("The Shobies' Story" 75). Rather than being "named" after the ship, which implies the hierarchical bestowing of a name, this crew calls themselves into being. This self-calling is a

¹ *Loving Allness* is one of several games which have been designed and developed by members

of Beyond Gender, as part of our collective exploration of the potential of ludic SF and collective storytelling. These include: a game session as part of the *Companion Voyages RPosium*, a participatory Research/Game Environment developed with Exposed Arts, led by Avery Delany with Francis Gene-Rowe; *Otherwards*, a queer, interdimensional world-building and storytelling community on Discord, built by Felix Rose Kawitzky; and *We Have the Square*, a collaborative storytelling game inspired by occupation protest movements created by Raphael Kabo and Katie Stone as part of the Utopian Acts project (Stone and Kabo 2020)

statement of intention, a harkening and awakening to another way of being together which reaches outwards and enfolds the space of the ship.

The potency of coming together to share a collective act of performance is one that we explore throughout our work, and just as the place of our gathering has included meeting rooms, galleries, living rooms, and online spaces, our collective identity is re-created and re-made in each performance of meeting. The importance of place was particularly evident in our work at “Future Impermanent,” a workshop and exhibition which saw artists discuss their work within a structure designed and made by the gathered group. Such collective constructions create moments of slippage “between the act of imagination and the act of inhabitation” (Butt 20). This act of calling into being through the creation of a place dissolved the edges of the Beyond Gender collective to create a new affinity group delineated by the hazy edges of this shelter.

Within this shelter, members of Beyond Gender shared Le Guin’s short story “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas.” The story had been cut into fragments and those present each took a scrap of paper and read aloud in turn. In doing so it became a story told in multiple voices, dismantling the “I” of the reader into conflicting and contradictory voices made apparent in the variations of each speaker’s tone. As an act of CCR, huddled within a single shelter and allowing our voices to move into one another, it seemed to demand that we take responsibility for the world created by the act of telling (Stone 16). Much like the Shobies, we performed an act of calling into being through polyvocal performance.

Such performances of being and speaking together were also foundational to the Utopian Acts festival curated by two members of Beyond Gender, which shared “acts which insist on the possibility of another world in the present” resonating outwards from “localized micro-instances of utopian action” (Stone and Kabo 2019). The fleeting nature of these utopian moments in no way undermines their depth or significance. As utopian scholars Ruth Levitas and Lucy Sargisson discuss, the “when” of utopia is located both on the horizon and within the present moment, apparent in each making of a beginning together (13–28). In our work of CCR, the moment of performing is the product.

In “The Shobies’ Story,” the criteria for being a Shoby is acting as a Shoby:
So Lidi looked around, like the violinist who raises her bow to poise the chamber group for the first chord, a flicker of eye contact, and sent the Shoby into NAFAL mode, as Gveter, like the cellist whose bow comes down in that same instant to ground the chord, sent the Shoby into churten mode.

(89)

Nothing connects these spacefarers, who come from different worlds, different societies, and are differently gendered beings except their shared belief in the crew, their conscious formation of a collective “we.”

This is the way in which we believe in, or are, Beyond Gender. We are a group brought together not by inherent connection but by a shared commitment to imagining the world differently. In her Foreword to *This Bridge Called My Back*, Cherríe Moraga states of the contributors: “We are not so much a ‘natural’ affinity group, as women who have come together out of political necessity” (viii). Similarly, Hortense Spillers asks: “Could we say, then, that the

feeling of kinship is not inevitable? That it describes a relationship that appears natural, but that must be cultivated under actual material conditions?" (76; emphasis in original). It is this tradition of unnatural feminist kin-making that we seek to uphold. Following Donna Haraway, we understand SF as a field in which there is no relation which can be accepted as a given because all kinship networks are “derivative of theory, not of nature” (“The Past Is a Contested Zone” 23) and thus are open to interrogation and transformation. Like the Shobies, we are unnaturally drawn together by our desire to investigate the impossible.

Justine Larbalestier has argued that “SF is not a genre exclusively made up of written texts but a community or series of communities,” and it is in this spirit that we as Beyond Gender collectively read and play, perform and create, critique, and become SF (iii). Our challenge to those who consider it impossible and unnatural to move beyond binary and essentialized understandings of gender is not just one of literary representations but of resource distribution and workplace conditions. We read collectively both in seminar rooms and on the picket line. For us, coming together with university and college union (UCU) strikers and distributing scraps of SF to read as a group was a way to demonstrate that a challenge to one form of impossibility is a challenge to the boundaries of possibility itself.² To say that we are Beyond Gender is thus to join in solidarity with those who refuse the designation of increased pay, secure contracts, and manageable workloads as “impossible.” By coming together in this way, we “demand the impossible” (Moylan i).

Friendship

Our mission to think with the Shobies also entails exploring the value of kinship and solidarity created by affective bonds that exist outside those of the heteronormative family. During a talk delivered at the *Riga Biennial*, Sophie Lewis noted that the Covid-19 pandemic has made “it painfully obvious that the nuclear family is not an infrastructure up to the task of looking after people under conditions of lockdown and bodily precarity and vulnerability and need” (“Mothering”). As we continue to exist in isolation, with a sense of distance that is intensified by the fraught separation of the United Kingdom from a precariously bonded European Union, we rely on SF to unite us, and on co-production to continuously reforge and reinforce our slippery coming together in a myriad of online spaces. Holding up the Shobies’ nearly instantaneous journey from Hain to M-60-340-nolo as our model, we celebrate the messiness of their mission together, which relies not on a model of hierarchical control, but rather on the spontaneous emergence of instances of communal agreement, forms of interdependence which “might be

² For other utopian responses to the recent UCU strikes in the UK see

called supervising or overseeing if that didn't suggest a hierarchic function. Interseeing, maybe, or subvising" (88). This is the basis of "churten theory," the Shobies' mode of travel based on shared imagination, social cohesion, and mutual agreement as to the object of the group's perception. Embracing this methodology of togetherness in otherness, we, as *Beyond Gender*, rely on shared utopian imagination in our collective work. In our view, "assuming that solidarities are forged through emulation risks ignoring how likeness is actively produced," and we embrace the elements of becoming-together which present productive tensions, recognizing that "ways of articulating solidarity are always partial, limited, and situated" (Featherstone 22).

These ideals informed our panel for the Unfair Cities conference in Limerick in December 2019. We placed closely read texts in conversation with one another, using Raccoona Sheldon's short story "Your Faces, O My Sisters! Your Faces Filled of Light" (1976) as an anchoring thread with which to think through the ambiguous utopianism encoded in the cityscapes of the other texts under consideration. We dedicated much of the panel to live discussion between ourselves and with the attendees on the continuities and discontinuities we found in this project. In our collective work, we leave space for unresolvable tensions between texts – indeed, we foreground and extrapolate from these, recognizing the generative potential of comparative analysis which favors affiliation over filiation. This echoes "The Shobies' Story," when Shan takes care to talk through the nuances of two crew members' interpersonal relationship with everyone else in the crew as "the tension between the mother and son had to be understood to be used effectively in group formation" (78); *Beyond Gender* similarly considers the potentiality of differences to be procreative rather than limiting, and asserts that this gestatory potential lies in the capacity of the group to "mutually interverify" ("The Shobies' Story" 83). In this sense, our methodology resonates with Paul Kincaid's ideas in "On the Origins of Genre" around the "family resemblance" between SF texts. Any "unique, common thread" or "unique, common origin" that binds such texts together is contingent, since

science fiction is not one thing. Rather, it is any number of things – a future setting, a marvelous device, an ideal society, an alien creature, a twist in time, an interstellar journey, a satirical perspective, *a particular approach to the matter of story, whatever we are looking for when we look for science fiction*, here more overt, here more subtle – which are braided together in an endless variety of combinations.

(Kincaid 415–17; emphasis added)

This contingency does not detract from utopian potentiality, but rather opens up emergent spaces for it: to us, it is deeply meaningful that delivering our panel at Unfair Cities the day after the UK general election in 2019 was the venue at which a conference attendee Dr. Hanna Musiol suggested "collective close reading" as a way of conceptualizing the persistent utopianism of our work in the face of collective dismay.

"The Shobies' Story" is an exemplar of Le Guin's work in reimagining family, summarized by Haraway as a longing for "models of solidarity and human unity and difference

rooted in friendship, work, partially shared purposes, intractable collective pain, inescapable mortality, and persistent hope” (*Modest_Witness* 265). As we call on one another to participate in the utopian project of working as a collective, not by merging our voices, but by protecting their differences and fostering their coexistence, we contaminate the “egoizing” encoded in existing notions of value and productivity in the academy with the creative and critical capacities of collaboration, friendship, and affective bonds (“The Shobies’ Story” 95). Implicit also in this work is a critique of SF’s genre boundaries and taxonomies, much like that outlined by John Rieder in *Science Fiction and the Mass Cultural Genre System*

(2017), particularly the sense that “in modern Western artistic practices more prestige accrues to violating these boundaries than to conforming to them” (24). We point to the pliability of these boundaries, which have at least as much to do with Western-centric notions of canonicity (and the deployment of these in higher education) as they do with the possibilities and limitations of the imagined worlds of a given text, or collectivity of texts.

Staying then with the joys and troubles of pushing boundaries by thinking and writing as a collective, we reassemble each time, that is, for each mission, in a different constellation, in ever-changing and expanding “strategic coalition[s],” united by the solidarity-making process of imagining otherwise (Olufemi 136–37). This work “requires making oddkin,” meeting each other again in “unexpected collaborations and combinations”; as Haraway aptly puts it, “we become-with each other or not at all” (*Staying with the Trouble* 4). When we divide ourselves into smaller working groups over the course of a project (the constitution of which usually reconfigures on each occasion, for each project), we frequently find that we think ourselves into a narrative thread that reflects both our broader discussions and our shared passions. For us, as for the Shobies, collaborative narration is “the chancy and unreliable but most effective means of constructing a shared reality” (Le Guin, “Introduction” 9). We think and speak ourselves onto the same critical texts, but with polyvocal results – the work produced is not uniform, but united by a “perception variation” (“The Shobies’ Story” 91) that gives it meaning. By centering estrangements and forms of “queer assemblage” in our materials and seeking to embody the utopian and liberatory potentialities they offer, *Beyond Gender* enacts a creative process of solidarity-making which does not locate sameness/otherness as a determining binary force, but rather counters this binary as a precondition for solidarity-making at all. In this sense, *Beyond Gender*’s work seeks to align itself with Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s emphasis on solidarity as a creative and generative practice which does not require pre-existing commonality, but which rather “discovers it” by means of creating, sharing, and embracing values within a community (238).

Thus, for us, “love doesn’t just sit there, like a stone, it has to be made, like bread; re-made all the time, made new” (*The Lathe of Heaven* 158). It is the continuous re-making – in the forms of work the collective generates, the spaces in which it is created, and the shifting membership of the group at any given time – that fuels and refuels the utopian energy of *Beyond Gender*’s work. Rather than creating an environment in which “a cessation of cause and effect” creates “a hopeless confusion” (“The Shobies’ Story” 95), the ways in which *Beyond Gender* bends and reshapes “makes space for unexpected companions” (Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* 11). It is by becoming science fictional oddkin that we are able to be *Beyond Gender*.

Notes

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