

Pomo Femmes Strike Back

[Camille Bacon-Smith, Ph.D.](#)

This article was presented at the Northeast Modern Language Association Meeting, Boston, 1995

Define Postmodern Literature

--borrowers on the loose, floating signifiers snatched from time and place and remade--get it? A male thing, all scatological and coarse--sexuality as violence violence as sex--who said they had the saying of it? Did men--dry old men, Nicole Stenger called them- Debord and Baudrillard, Lyotard, all the famous frenchmen who turn their backs on change that moves too fast, on an America whose anthem is whatever the sign makers chooses it to be? Ronald Reagan smiles benignly while the band plays "Born in the USA," an anthem free of the meaning Springstein gave it--despair and anger and a vet on the street, homeless and half mad- still crazy after all these years. They're right not to trust the old men Walt Disney Ronald Reagan I was born in Hope postmodern men--control the sign control the people.

But look here, a culture born in the sign. Science fiction. The battle to define the self through the sign, the sign through the culture, goes on still, after 70 years. And after long struggle, women are winning the power to wield the sign, to create the culture in the pages of the books, and winning they stand not separate, but in a still uneasy alliance with the men, armed with the sign. Oh, we had our days of separatism, and we learned that separate isn't equal, it's a ghetto where they keep you poor, your voice unheard by anybody outside the walls you build around yourself. Joanna Russ never made more than a \$3,500 advance on any of her books. She never quit her day job, and the toll had been a Dresden of the soul. We break against the walls we build. [Steve Brust](#), second generation Trotskyite, says it clearly. Work for the revolution, but if you pretend you don't live in a capitalist system in the meantime, you're a fool. Steve hasn't had to keep a day job for a long time.

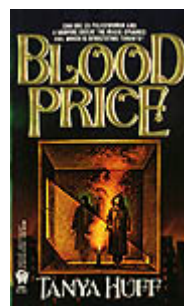


But we've learned, in the world of fantasy. From the tradition of greenwood and adolescent quest, women seize the signifiers, float them our way--elves, long limbed, long haired, leather clad, slim legs wrapped tight around a Harley, our Harley, his strong arms wrapped beneath our breasts. Pulled out of the greenwood, dumped on the LA streets, Atlanta, [Minneapolis](#). Toronto, wherever we live. And look again--read the description looks like Larry Dixon, who does Misty Lackey's covers from the serrated edge, adds to her books, husband, painter, elf--color blind, he paints by numbers.

Really. That's not a metaphor. Once misplaced a fleshtone, painted Misty green.

Vampire lovers pleasure us, one sweet drop at a time. The sex is grand, he writes romance novels at night and dies

each morning, we protect his secret, his sleep. We do not fear him, we do not fear pleasure. We don't mind sharing him with the boy down the street, and besides, there's a mortgage to pay. A lover of our own and she is waiting--no, we do not fear oral sex!



Look again, the nets. Cyberpunk, a boys club. We need a manifesto. Looks like Vollman, but the joke's on you. These signifiers do not float for us. They have a history, have found their places in the base. We chose our signs created them sold them to each other, infiltrated your publishing houses, used your distributors, your bookstores, spent the money you paid us to buy them up again. At the core, where we live, we control the tv set, the signifiers that live or die. We always have--made up our own, sold them to you to sell back to us. And junk, tons of junk. A woman's gotta live--you sort it out, we don't have time, we're moving on, voracious sign-eaters. Use what comes to hand.



The cyberpunks, yes. Bruce and Bill and the guys sell the grand illusion. Pat Cadigan writes of the Pretty Boy dying for beauty, for art--becomes the machine. Live fast, die young, and don't leave--the net remembers forever. It's out of the bag now--scorn the boy's club, steal their cyber world and float it our way. Bill Gibson did not invent the computer. He didn't even own a computer when he wrote the damn book, or so the story goes. Rudy Rucker calls the style information dense--piling on of image on top of sharp cool hypertext image television sky, a confusion of signs. A male idea of

information.

They dismiss our data, about how street life hurts, no safe harbor. Joan Vinge's Cat, alone and on the streets, the telepathy burned out of his brain, abandoned, tortured soul whose crime is being different. The women here are strong enough to question the dance of pain and pleasure and death, what is a human being? What a machine and what a slave? We sing our *Songs of Chaos* into the night, and learn



to play the game on *Burning Bright*. Not at all the same, the boys say. We pileup images like drunks on the LA freeway, you throw in red lights for reflection on how it might feel to find an IA living in the songs of metal parrots, Quinn Lioe plays a role for life and death locked in the heart of the information system, outlaws hiding in the fantasy, governments rising or falling behind the roll of dice--walk the nets, find the links and play them out with lovers, women with men, women with women, men with men, we all love each other, except for



those we kill, and then comes Trouble. And the net goes on. Look in the bar, find Cat and Quinn Lioe. Kids, with rings in their noses and tatoos flirting with the black leather and tulle they wear.

The old guard is terrified--science fiction is not a monolith, the old marxists scholars got that wrong, the young ones know--hooligans, they are not here for the books. And who will carry on for us when we are gone? The kids (the ones like us, with glasses and tee shirts that say "See Earth First) don't come anymore. Look closer at the kids in the bar. They're collating a zine, playing post-apocalyptic games in the hallways, the corps, the outlaws, writing songs, talking about the books. *Neuromancer*, yes, but also Cadigan's *Synners*, and Melissa Scott's *Burning Bright*.

They add gothic music to the mix, and the "out on the edge" lifestyle that drew them to the books. We are afraid of our future, we chase it away, but it grows up again in new venues. *Boskone* dies, *Arisia* plays on, postmodern world of Doc Smith, 1917 replayed in warfare over love--of what? the signs, of course. *Dragoncon* attracts 11,000 this year because the kids can go there and hang, be the sign, and no one hassles them. Our future is secure, because our signs, cast into the world like unwanted children, are anchored in our culture, and our culture holds them even when we do not want to keep this particular catch of the day.

And not just at the conventions, the nets are real--none of it is prediction, get the metaphor already--this is now, and like Stenger says, while the old men whined we were swimming in it over our heads before we got our feet wet, and no sign of shore in sight. The net--no superhighway, though they try to regiment the labyrinth, make the way straight. Here the new world order meets the new fiction, is wrought by women, and men too, but don't let them tell you we are not there--we live on the nets, in the mus, the lists, we tell our stories, argue characters and plotlines, fan fiction--ftp sites harbor *XFiles*, *TNG*, *Forever Knight*, *Highlander*- order and chaos, the familiar and the unknown merge in the products, the fiction--you can still find paper, but the net's the place to be, the signifier plucked from the airwaves, a history--thirty years of books and stories stolen from the image makers we give them lives and flesh and love and pain and sex. Well, yeah. Lots of sex.

And set them free in our new home the nets. We do not own them--how can you own a character created out of pixels and set to dancing in the phosphor dots? Used to be just us, the technos and ivory towers, then came Prodigy, GEnie, AOL, Delphi, Compuserve: separate lists, chats, ways to be, then gateways--access, panix, digex. Romance readers, tv fans, travelers and military junkies.

The SF world. [Beth Meacham lives in Arizona](#), Terri Windling in Minnesota, their office lies somewhere on the telephone lines between the satellites and New York City. Where is relative in the postmodern. We the sf-fantasy folks bring it to you with a smile. Smug. We control the signifiers. They do what we, who are the fans, the writers, editors, copyeditors, want it to be, and many of us are women. Janna and Laura Anne, Ginger and Ellen, Amy and Sheila and Betsy and Terri and Beth. How do you find us? By the marks on the curb--Tor, Spectra, Roc, Baen, DAW, DelRey, Isaacs and F and SF. Top to bottom we recreate what you have given us and hand it back multicultural, sexually diverse, tough as carbon steel, and querulous as relatives at a family reunion. And when those fine houses on the hill won't print it, well, we'll do it ourselves- Cecilia Tan starts Circler Press to answer the Pressing question--"[Do Telepaths Need Safewords?](#)" We made this world for us--it says what we want to say, to each other. The signifiers only float for you, because you weren't listening for all those seventy years.

Breaking the Code

Amy--Amy Stout, former editor at Roc, the science fiction/fantasy imprint of Penguin Books. Currently writing her own trilogy.

Beth--Beth Meacham, Executive Editor for Tor Books, resides in Arizona, commutes to New York via internet.

Betsy--Betsey Wolheim, editor, co-publisher and co-owner of DAW Books. Daughter of Donald A. Wolheim, one of the first generation of genre editors and science fiction editors in particular.

Bill--William Gibson, best known of the cyberpunks, hit the world of literature with *Neuromancer*, which heralded the new high- literature day of image

dense science fiction.

Bruce--Bruce Sterling, speaker for cyberpunks, wrote the manifesto. Science fiction writer and editor-of-record for Mirrorshades.

Steve Brust--fantasy writer in the neo-romantic style, member-in- chief of the Scribbles writing group in Minneapolis.

Ellen--Ellen Datlow, short fiction editor for Omni Magazine and a variety of highly respected fantasy and horror anthologies.

Ginger--Ginjer Buchanan, senior editor at Ace and Boulevard, the Ace Books media imprint.

Janna --Janna Silverstein, long-time editor for Bantam Books

Laura Anne--Laura Anne Gilman, senior editor for Roc, former editor for Ace books.

Misty Lackey--Mercedes Lackey, began in science fiction as a fan of Marion Zimmer Bradley, creator of the Darkover universe. Lackey now creates universes of her own where fans play.

Joanna Russ--feminist lesbian writer and critic who actively shaped, with others during the seventies, a feminist science fiction.

Sheila--Sheila Gilbert, editor, co-publisher and co-owner of DAW Books.

Teri--Teri Windling, editor for Tor Books, resides in Minnesota, commutes to New York via internet.

[Newfolk](#) :: [NDiF](#) :: [Archive](#) :: [Issue 1 July 1997](#)

New Directions in Folklore

[Newfolk](#) :: [NDiF](#) :: [Archive](#)

Camille Bacon-Smith, Ph.D.

Camille Bacon-Smith is a folklorist and co-founder of [Newfolk](#) and [New Directions in Folklore](#). She has authored two scholarly books on the topic of popular culture and several novels in addition to a number of articles for both academic and popular press. She has a Ph.D. in folklore from the University of Pennsylvania.

Bibliography

- [The Goth Explosion in Science Fiction Culture](#) (article)
- [Pomofemmes Strike Back](#) (article)

[Newfolk](#) :: [NDiF](#) :: [Archive](#)