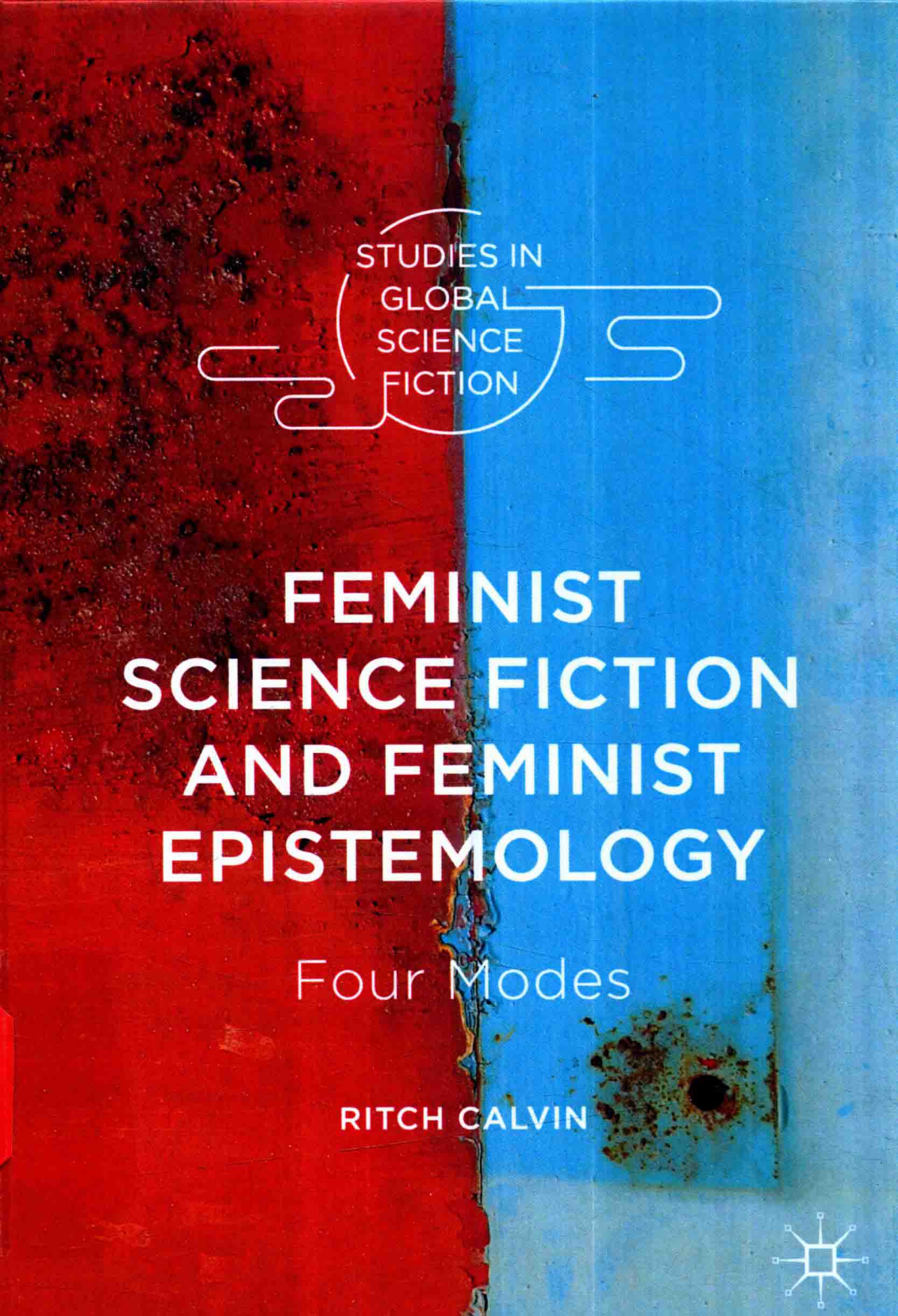
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Four Modes
RITCH CALVIN

Ritch Calvin

Feminist Science Fiction and Feminist Epistemology

Four Modes

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Ritch Calvin
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Studies in Global Science Fiction

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Comparative Literature
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Ithaca, New York, USA

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To Claudia, for everything

Acknowledgments

Writing a book is a solitary act. Writing a book is no solitary act. As this book argues, we each emerge as knowers from a vast discourse of ideas and influences. The number of people who have influenced my ideas is unimaginably large.

A number of my readings of particular novels have been presented at conferences over the past few years. I would like to thank all the contributors and respondents who attended those sessions and who responded to those papers with insightful and informative comments.

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Contents

CHAPTER ZERO

Ending(s)

Many of my students wonder why I focus so much on epistemology and the questions that it raises. And, thanks to word of mouth and various online resources, they seem to know beforehand that that will be the case. No matter whether the class is an introduction to Women's Studies or an advanced class in Feminist Theory, we tend to turn throughout the semester to the question of knowledge production and validation. Initially, students are skeptical of both the terminology and the concerns of epistemologists, but in most cases, by the end of the semester, they are convinced that the question of "knowledge" matters for feminists, for society, and for themselves. Occasionally, I have had a student return, after zhe has gone off to graduate school or to work in the "real" world, and tell me that zhe now understands why epistemology is so important.[1] In one particular case, another student, now married and the mother of a young child, sent me a Christmas card with the greeting "Merry Christmas" crossed out and the words "Merry Epistemology" inscribed in their place. A small vindication.

Far less often, students wonder why I focus on science fiction. Even as little as a decade ago, I had a hard time filling a class on science fiction. And among the students who did enroll, very few read or watched science fiction. They took the class because it fit into their schedule and/or because it fulfilled a general education requirement. Fair enough; that happens to the best of us. In 2015, however, a class on science fiction, and even a class on feminist science fiction, tends to fill up. Furthermore, most of the students in

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the class are familiar with—and frequently identify as fans of—science fiction. They may not know the entire history of the field; they may not have a very wide exposure to the field; they may not read or watch it particularly critically (though they may well). In a recent semester, I had a student who was an avid reader of "Young Adult science fiction". I had another student who regularly engaged with slash fiction online. In this particular class, over half of the students opted to write fiction for their final assignment.

But why is it so important? Why do I believe that epistemology is the foundation of, and central to, the question of feminist analysis? And why do I believe that it is connected to, or important to, feminist science fiction? Epistemology, generally speaking, is the branch of philosophy that interrogates the nature of knowledge (*epistêmê*). Epistemological inquiries tend to ask questions such as "is knowledge possible?"; "what constitutes knowledge?"; "what differentiates knowledge from belief?"; "what methodologies or practices produce knowledge?"; "what validates a truth claim?"; and "who is capable (or incapable) of knowledge production?" These questions have had profound consequences for Western thought, the development of rational thought, the emergence of science and the scientific method, and—more negatively—for groups and individuals who have been marginalized and excluded from knowledge production and validation processes. Historically, among those groups and individuals who have been excluded have been the slave classes, the working classes, the uneducated (or uncredentialed), and women.

Questions of what constitutes knowledge, of what grounds a truth claim, and of who can and cannot know things have long permeated philosophical, political, and cultural debates. These fundamental questions have been at the center of Western thought and in the midst of many historical debates, from Plato's *Republic* (380 BCE) to the *querelle des femmes*, that took place in Europe in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's claims in *Émile* (1777) that "[i]nvestigation into abstract and speculative truths, into principles and scientific axioms" are outside the abilities of women (232), to early debates in the USA on whether or not women could and should attend college, to Harvard President Lawrence Summers's 2005 suggestion that innate, biological difference may account for the gender disparities in science and engineering. Although each of these instances is quite different from one another, and although in each case the basis or justification is quite different, each one, in the end, questions both the foundations of knowledge production and the (in)validity of certain members of society to participate in the current,

socially defined practices of knowledge production. In all of the above cases, the arguments have been made that women do not have the capacity for thought or for knowledge (as it is defined by the men in question) and that that lack renders women unsuited for many of the social, political, and cultural practices of society. Furthermore, those individuals and their theory of knowledge discount and discredit what half the species can contribute to the human endeavor.

Although Plato almost certainly was not the first human being to ask such questions, philosophical inquiries into the nature and function of knowledge can be traced as far back as him. Gail Fine (1990) argues that in the *Republic* (~380 BCE) Plato attempts a systematic differentiation between knowledge and belief (87).[2] Zhe argues that knowledge of Forms constitutes true knowledge and "knowledge" from the senses constitutes belief (94–5). One of the consequences of such an understanding is that, for anyone who derives knowledge from the senses, then that knowledge can only ever be mere belief since the thing upon which the belief is based—the world and not the absolute Form—is always in flux (Gulley 78). Since Plato confines "knowledge" to the lofty realm of the absolute Form and "belief" to the pedestrian realm of the senses, zher formulation is quite different from a contemporary definition of knowledge. For example, in zher essay, "What Is Knowledge?" (1999), Linda Zagzebski (1999) defines "knowledge" as "cognitive contact with reality arising out of acts of intellectual virtue" (109). In this case, Zagzebski's definition seems much more firmly grounded in the "real," concrete world than in some abstract absolute Form.

Although ancient philosophers were obviously concerned with questions of knowledge and truth claims, the birth of modern epistemology is frequently dated to René Descartes's (1596–1650) *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641). According to Laurence BonJour (2002), the issues raised by Descartes within zher *Meditations* firmly establish the "focus of epistemological debates" from the seventeenth century until the twenty-first century (11). Descartes believed that many of the received traditions and ideas concerning knowledge were false; therefore, zhe wished to wipe the tablet clean, as it were, and to reject everything that zhe could not verify as true through zher "method of doubt," which was a radical departure for philosophical inquiries into the nature of knowledge (Pritchard 39–41). For Descartes, however, everything zhe knows and everything zhe experiences could, in fact, be a deception. Zhe does believe, however, that when zhe thinks, zhe exists; zhe must therefore exist—the now-famous

formulation *cogito, ergo sum*. Nevertheless, zhe cannot, via the *cogito* verify zher own physical existence; rather, zhe can only verify that "he exists as 'a thinking thing; that is, a mind, or intellect, or understanding, or reason'" (BonJour 14).

Descartes's *cogito* has had a number of consequences. For one, it has led some thinkers toward a skepticism that provides no pathway outside of or beyond the confines of the mind. If every perception and thought is potentially the result of the deception of an "evil genius,"[3] then no idea and no sensory perception is to be trusted. Consequently, we as knowers are completely cut off from the outside world (Pritchard 138–40), and lines of inquiry such as the scientific method are incomprehensible and pointless. Another consequence, and a significant one at that, is the separation of mind and body. As we shall see, this mind/body split has had profound implications for women, and, consequently, figures prominently in feminist re-evaluations of Cartesian epistemology. To be sure, dualism does not originate with Descartes. For example, Plato discusses a mind/body split in zher *Phaedo* and is evident in zher *Theaetetus*.

As I noted earlier, one effect of modern epistemology has been the emergence of empiricism and the development of the scientific method. British philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) is strongly associated with empiricism. In zher *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), zhe begins by stating, much like Descartes, that zhe seeks "to inquire into the origin, certainty, and extent of *human knowledge*, together with the grounds and degrees of *belief, opinion, and assent*" (26). Zhe, too, seeks to differentiate and distinguish between "opinion and knowledge" (27). Locke argues that the capacity of "understanding" sets human beings apart from other animals and gives them dominion over them, and, furthermore, that the materials of reason and knowledge are all derived from experience (122). Here, Locke defines the two constitutive elements of experience as "Sensation" (that which the five physical senses convey to the mind) and "Reflection" (mental operations such as "perception, thinking, doubting, believing, reasoning, knowing, willing") (123). "These two, I say, viz. External material things, as the objects of SENSATION, and the operations of our own mind within, as the objects of REFLECTION, are to me the only originals from whence all our ideas take their beginnings" (Locke 124). Significantly, Locke (as we will see with feminist epistemology), unlike Plato and Descartes, grounds knowledge in the body. However, the body in and of itself is insufficient for knowledge. Like Plato and Descartes, knowledge depends upon the mind, upon reason. The concrete experience

of the body and of the senses is a component of knowledge, but, in the end, the body and the mind remain separate, and the senses remain secondary to the mind.

While any number of foundational narratives might be offered here, I have limited myself to Plato, Descartes, and Locke because of their relevance to my larger project. Plato represents an example from the Greeks of a systematic theory of knowledge, one that has had repercussions on subsequent epistemologists, and one that has had clear gendered consequences. As feminist epistemologists have argued, both zher premises and conclusions were rooted in a gendered set of values. Descartes represents the beginnings of a modern epistemology, and zher philosophical and epistemological skepticism has also had gendered consequences. Zher separation of mind and body, though not a new argument, solidifies for many the exclusion of the physical, long associated with the female body and the feminine, and the valorization of the intellectual or mental, long associated with the male body and the masculine. Finally, in this very brief introductory narrative, Locke represents the beginnings of modern empiricism, the foundations of science (as opposed to "natural philosophy") and the modern scientific method. As we will see in Chapter One, feminist epistemologists and feminist scientists have been critical of both the theory and the practice of the scientific method. For the purposes of my analysis of feminist SF, rather than the more analytical approach to epistemology that focuses on the conditions of possibility for knowledge, I employ a more naturalized approach to epistemology that assumes that knowledge is possible, but incorporates the fact that feminists have challenged the grounds, practices, and interpretation of this knowledge.

Feminists, then, have developed a number of strategies, which include either demonstrating that women are, indeed, capable of producing and validating knowledge, or redefining the terms of knowledge itself. If women *qua* women are making a claim for themselves for the full participation in social, political, economic, religious, and cultural life, then they must demonstrate that they, as women, have whatever is deemed necessary for participation in that life, namely, rationality, reason, and knowledge. Arguably, this step is a necessary first step toward any kind of identity politics, that is, a "politics that grew out of ... objective material experiences" (Harris 300).

In Chapter One, I offer some working—albeit contingent—definitions of "feminist science fiction" and "feminist epistemology." I argue that science fiction and feminist science fiction (even granting that it is a too-complex term)

both consist of a set of writing and reading practices that code and decode social practices and norms, and that feminist science fiction, in particular, focuses on the social practices and norms regarding sex, gender, sexuality, race, and class. These fictions offer a fictive or diegetic world that differs in some ways from our everyday lived reality, and in this gap, the narrative encourages readers to reflect and re-examine zher own assumptions and practices. These fictions operate as both reflections of and cultural engagements with contemporary social, cultural, and political concerns. As Brian Attebery (2002) and Justine Larbalestier (2002) argue, feminist science fiction operates as one cultural location in which we can decode the cultural constructions of sex, gender, and sexuality. Further, as Jenny Wolmark (1994) argues, feminist science fiction always has a political aim (1, 24).

In the second half of Chapter One, I turn to the other key term of analysis: feminist epistemology. Although women have engaged with epistemologies for millennia—consider Christine de Pizan's *The Books of the City of the Ladies* (1405) and Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) as early examples of (proto)feminist incursions into epistemology—the contemporary feminist engagement with gender and epistemology begins with Lorraine Code's 1981 essay that asks if gender is an epistemically significant factor. Since that time, feminist philosophers and scientists have challenged the grounds of knowledge, the criteria of knowledge, and the interpretations of data. I have identified six specific ways in which feminist epistemologists have challenged traditional, masculinist epistemology, including the sex of the knower, the valuation of the abstract over the concrete, the dismissal of the physical, the focus on rationality and reason, the devaluation of embodied knowledge, and the containment of (some) bodies. I will then argue in Chapters Two, Three, Four, and Five that feminist science fiction shares or reflects some of these same concerns.

In Chapter One, I argue that while "feminist science fiction" (as an umbrella term, as a reading and writing practice, and as a critical lens) has become too vast and varied to be of much use, I suggest that "feminist science fiction" exists, but that it takes a number of specific forms. I suggest that one of these forms of feminist science fiction focuses on questions of epistemology, which I am calling "feminist epistemological science fiction" (FESF). Some feminist authors and feminist texts ask the same questions that we see feminist epistemologists and scientists asking about knowledge, and they make these questions a part of the text in a number of ways. Although an author might raise epistemological questions in any

number of ways, over the next four chapters I will focus on four modes that I think are both common and effective. I argue that FESF narratives foreground epistemological concerns by way of the plot (i.e., the reconstructed series of events that occur in a narrative) and by way of structural elements of the narrative (including—but not limited to—the narrator, the temporal structure, and the perspective). These two modes are aspects of the form of the narrative. The remaining two modes are aspects of the content of the narrative, and include an attitude or approach to science (sometimes a feminist corrective to scientific practices and sometimes a rejection of Western science) and an attitude or approach toward language (sometimes an argument that language must be reformed and sometimes an argument that it must be destroyed and recreated). Chapters Two, Three, Four, and Five will examine each of the four modes of FESF in more detail and illustrate them at work in specific texts.

Chapter Two turns to the first mode of FESF. In, perhaps, the most obvious of the four modes, I turn to the question of plot, that is, the reconstructed account of what happened in the narrative. Who did what to whom? What happened and why? In many ways, plot summary or plot analysis is the most common sort of criticism, from short reviews to online discussions. Readers want to know what happened, and they want to know what that means. What does it mean, after all is said and done, that Hamlet lies dead on the stage? What does it mean that Atticus Finch, an adult white male in the US South defended a black man from rape charges? What does it mean that this man probably held some racist views of zher own? By examining the plot of three science fiction novels and one novella, I will show that they are feminist (i.e., they are committed to the politics of feminism) and that the plots of these narratives raise epistemological questions. I do not mean to suggest that they raise only epistemological concerns; on the contrary, I will point out that they all also raise significant ontological concerns. I will argue, however, that the central element of the plot is knowledge production and validation.

Chapter Three examines the second of the four modes of FESF, structural elements. If the events of the narrative can raise epistemological concerns, then the way in which that story is told can also raise—and reinforce—those concerns. For example, in a novel in which the plot focuses on a young man who undergoes a medical procedure to increase zher mental capacity, the elements of that novel, including the journal format, the typography, and the orthography, reinforce the changes taking place within the young man, Charlie Gordon. Although any narrative consists