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RE: *When Women Write Tomorrow*

Dear Professor Dolidon,

Thank you so much for allowing me and our class to serve as editors for your manuscript, *When Women Write Tomorrow: Reading Contemporary French Science Fiction by Women*. It's been a privilege to learn through having the opportunity to work with your book this term. And thank you for coming to visit our class and give us more context into this work! It's so clear throughout the manuscript that you have an incredible passion for this topic, and it was fascinating to get a glimpse into the world of French science fiction.

The information presented in this manuscript is excellent and clearly demonstrates your expertise in your field, and thus will not be addressed unless something specific coincides with other issues. In this letter, I will primarily address issues with **purpose, framework, audience, structure, and use of quotations**. I will also offer a few suggestions for revisions; it will be your choice as the author and expert to accept or ignore them. My intention is to provide a set of fresh eyes on your work and to offer suggestions as a member of a "general audience" rather than as an expert in French literature.

When Women Write Tomorrow is centered around **elevating the works of French women science fiction writers**—detailing a brief history of the genre, pinpointing texts of note, and analyzing their significance. While it is not a feminist text and you do not provide feminist analysis, it does exist in part to challenge the acts of patriarchy which have pushed these women's works to the sidelines of the genre. It is designed to utilize literary analysis in order to demonstrate the value, worth, and merit of these short stories. Have I accurately summarized the intentions of the manuscript?

Your manuscript appears to be written for a **highly educated audience** of people interested in science fiction and/or French literature. The work is largely written from an informational and

impersonal point of view, though you do inject yourself into the work at a few key points. I will discuss this further later.

Manuscript Summary

When Women Write Tomorrow begins with a **Preface** detailing its purpose and your intentions as the author. Here, you share that this will not be a book about feminist science fiction, and you detail exactly what will be discussed: French and Quebecois science fiction texts written by women. This text is written in English because you intend to encourage North American readers, students, and teachers to learn more about French science fiction. For this reason, the book will largely focus on texts for which there are English translations available.

The **Introduction** shares information on the history of French science fiction, even before it was known as such—asserting that the origins of science fiction can be drawn back to the works of Cyrano de Bergerac, Voltaire, or other male writers. While French science fiction as we know it today cannot be pigeonholed into any one category or theme, it is especially suited to “reimaginings of the human” (2). It is mentioned several times that not nearly as many women published science fiction in comparison to their male counterparts. This has undoubtedly influenced the frequency with which science fiction texts are analyzed, even by other women. Julia Verlanger is highlighted as a somewhat notable exception to this, though you share that many of her later stories fell victim to heteropatriarchal stereotypes about women and what women characters should look like (i.e. “blond bimbos and typical male muscular heroes obsessed with sleeping with them” [6]). From there, the **Introduction** transitions to covering feminism within science fiction, discussing why the genre is an excellent vessel for feminist ideas and depictions, sharing a few short analyses of women in the genre—both characters and writers. The difference between “feminine writing” and “texts written by women” (15) is discussed. Finally, the end of this chapter sets the tone for the rest of the manuscript, asserting that you will be discussing texts written by women without comparing them to men or offering feminist insight into their themes and/or content.

Chapter 1 begins with a summary of the theme of knowledge as it relates to the science fiction genre. This chapter is designed to “deal with SF at the structural level (as an epistemological genre in itself) much more than the following chapters” (1). In this chapter’s introduction, you analyze science fiction *as* a knowledge-seeking structure, constantly changing and evolving as society’s developments grow. It is a form of social commentary. In addition to this, science fiction also frequently features narratives surrounding seeking knowledge and/or information. It is established that this chapter will analyze the ways in which authors treat and handle knowledge within their works. The three stories being analyzed are introduced: *If Thébalduis Dreams . . .* by Sylvie Denis, *The Swing of Your Gait* by Sylvie Lainé, and *Beyond the Terminator* by Laurence Suhner. Analysis of the first story begins with a background on the author before moving on to an overview of the premise. Then, analysis is offered on the topic of utopias and the philosophical nature of the story. Analysis of the second story begins similarly, but this time it is tied in with and compared to Denis’s piece. Then, virtual reality is brought into the conversation, as is metamorphosis. Finally, a close reading of the third piece (by a Swiss author) is offered in conversation with the two previous pieces. The chapter concludes with a section suggesting ways to discuss its content further.

Chapter 2 follows roughly the same structure as its predecessor, this time exploring texts that explore the connectedness of humans, animals, and other living things. An introduction of science fiction in Quebec is offered early in the chapter, sharing the ways in which the genre gained popularity post WWII. Unlike in France, the science fiction scene in Quebec was in part created by women. A brief history of the authors being discussed is then given, sharing their background in the genre and field. This chapter’s introduction offers insight on nonhuman animals in science fiction and literature, as well as the ways in which they allow readers to “rethink the human-animal boundary” (6). Nature, wilderness, and other natural places/things are also discussed. Unlike **Chapter 1**, this chapter analyzes texts from both authors together, under one heading. First, the narrative structure of the two pieces are compared, as is the chapter breakdown. They both have a fragmented nature, connecting chapters which are seemingly otherwise unrelated. In the next section, the theory of “assemblage” is discussed.

Finally, the role of science in the texts is briefly analyzed, before the conclusion summarizes and wraps up the analysis of the two texts.

Purpose

From the **Preface**, the purpose of this MS is immediately clear: “to fill a gap in studies about women sf writers in France in particular, and to shine the spotlight on authors who contribute excellent narratives to a rich tradition without fair recognition” (1). Its purpose is *not* to provide feminist arguments or analyses of the short stories, but rather to utilize literary analysis in order to demonstrate the value and worth of the texts.

You do an excellent job of expressing in the **Preface** that the manuscript does not exist to “[unearth] women’s texts—they can be found very much above ground” (1). However, it’s important that (aside from the overview of why French women science fiction writers as a whole are generally overlooked), you give insight into why *these specific texts* have been sidelined enough that you felt it necessary to include them in your manuscript. On a larger scale, readers know that these stories are being included because they were written by women, but why else? It’s critical that you answer these questions for each text you analyze: *Why these texts? Why these women?* Surely there are more women writers of science fiction than just those whom you are analyzing in this manuscript. Why did these women make the cut and not others?

Additionally, there seems to be a disconnect or discrepancy between the purpose introduced in the **Preface** and what is laid out in the **Introduction**.

Framework & Concept

In the **Introduction**, you provide essential context and background information for readers about the history of French science fiction and the ways in which women writers have historically been sidelined within the genre. This includes several pages dedicated to the category “SF and Feminism.” While this is an essential part of the history of women science fiction writers, it does muddle your argument.

Sandwiched between the **Preface**'s claim that "this book is not about feminist science fiction" (1) and the **Introduction**'s later assertion that "[you] did not in the slightest care that [the texts] were written by women" (18)—it gives the reader the impression that the analytical framework of this manuscript is perhaps not so clearly defined. Essentially what these components say together is: *the manuscript is not about feminism, but feminism is an essential component of its history, but also it's not important.*

At the end of the **Introduction**, you switch from discussing the history of the genre to introducing the manuscript's coming chapters. Here, you clearly state not only that the manuscript will not include a feminist analysis of science fiction, but also that gender will not impact the analysis *at all*. You write: "I wanted to write a book about stories written by French women—period. So, once I selected the texts I wanted to write about, I did not in the slightest care that they were written by women anymore, unless the text made explicit references to gender roles" (18).

Frankly, I believe that this is a mistake.¹ There is a *significant* difference between literary analysis which is not feminist in nature and literary analysis which ignores the impact of an author's gender entirely. By removing gender from your analysis of these stories, there are key aspects of context and impact that cannot be effectively and/or thoroughly analyzed. In order to reach its full potential, it is *necessary* that the MS include references to how gender impacts the texts being analyzed—both in their content, and in how they have impacted French society.

Additionally, several times throughout the **Introduction** and other parts of the manuscript, you write off the erasure of women science fiction writers as a result of their being statistically fewer of them. "In the case of the history of French SF, there are very few women to report and so it makes sense that they are absent from scholarly studies" (3). "Again, there is *good reason for this*: the number of publications by male authors overwhelmingly overshadowed the few books or short stories written by women" (5). While it is certainly true that there have historically been fewer women writing science fiction than men, I urge you to consider whether or not that is *actually* why they are so underrepresented in studies and analyses. Writing off this underrepresentation as *only* a statistical

¹ I feel it is important to mention here that, while my background in literature is obviously not as extensive as your own, I do have a bachelor's degree in English & Textual Studies as well as in Queer/Gender Studies—and I have written two theses examining the presence and impacts of queer themes and femininity in fairy and folk tales. I mention this only so you know that this is not a suggestion that I am pulling from thin air.

reality is disingenuous to the very point that you're making about the erasure and sidelining of women authors.

When Women Write Tomorrow is under no obligation to act as a feminist text. There is no need for you to abandon the entire concept of this manuscript and instead write a feminist analysis of French women's science fiction. However, I believe that writing off feminist analysis and the impact of gender in these texts is detrimental to the purpose of the manuscript—*especially* if you are also writing off underrepresentation as nothing more than the impact of statistics.

Audience

In the **Preface**, you self-define your audience as “North-American readers at large, French teachers and students too” (1-2). Though you are a professor who recognizes and acknowledges her academic tone as a side effect of the profession, the manuscript is intended for a general readership of even those who are not already interested in or familiar with science fiction.

However, there is often a disconnect between your intended audience and the voice and structure of the manuscript.

Voice

The **Preface** has an excellent voice. It's conversational and easy to understand, and it gives just enough information to intrigue readers and garner excitement for what's to come. However, the **Introduction** leans heavily into a highly academic tone, providing a great deal of background information on the history of French women science fiction writers. While incredibly important to the manuscript, most of this information is shared in a way which will be inaccessible to the average reader.

The average American reads at a 7th- or 8th-grade level. Given the intrinsically academic nature of this manuscript's topic, it's not necessary to tone down your natural voice *that much*. However, the information as it is presented now sits solidly at a college-graduate-level. Especially if your goal is to

spark interest among those not already invested in French literature, science fiction, and literary theory, this is too advanced.

It is full of references to writers and theorists unfamiliar to a general audience, as well as difficult quotes and long French excerpts—a trend which is also present in the introductory paragraphs of **Chapter 1** and **Chapter 2**. Structured as they are now, these quotations will be alienating and intimidating to non-French speaking audiences. I will touch more on this later. As for the references to writers and theorists, something like a glossary or “cheat sheet” (either at the end of each chapter or in the back of the book) could be a helpful way to overcome this without removing those necessary elements of the text.

Structure

The current structure of the manuscript is also somewhat uncondusive to a general audience. As it stands now, **Chapter 1** and **Chapter 2** are *very long*—48 and 41 pages, respectively. When this work is published, since book pages are generally smaller and contain only around 250 words, they will be even longer. This may be inaccessible (or at least intimidating) for a general audience, especially with the academic tone that is present in the manuscript as it stands now. The easiest or most natural way to do this might be to put summary and introductory information in one chapter and close readings in another. Or, rather than having a very long chapter on knowledge and an even longer one on living, these themes could instead take the form of even larger sections. The sections could then be further broken down into smaller chapters. This structure would even allow you to include analysis of more texts if you so desire.

Headings & Subheadings

These changes will *also* help with maintaining consistency in structure throughout the chapters. Currently, the analytical chapters are broken down as follows:

Chapter 1

- Summary
- Introduction
 - (SF as a) Knowledge-Seeking Structure
 - Knowledge-Seeking Narratives
 - The Stories
- Close Reading 1: Sylvie Denis
 - Premise: The Search for a New Community of Knowledge
 - Thébaldi: From Utopia to Simulacrum
 - From a Detective Story to a Philosophical Tale
- Close Reading: Sylvie Lainé
 - Preliminary Thoughts on Denis and Lainé
 - Virtual Reality and the Body
 - Metamorphosis
- Close Reading: Laurence Suhner
- Discuss It Further

Chapter 2

- Summary
- SF in Quebec
- The Authors
- Introduction
- Close Reading: *Fauna* and *Aquariums*
 - A Fragmented Narrative Structure
 - Assemblages in *Fauna*: Shivering Heights and Laura
 - Assemblages in *Aquariums*: Leo, Émeraude, and the Whale
 - The Role of Science
- Conclusion

While it is unnecessary for the two chapters to mirror each other exactly, the differences here are so drastic that it may be distracting or confusing. In **Chapter 1**, each story being analyzed is given its own heading, whereas **Chapter 2** combines them under one. Additionally, the “Discuss It Further” section is missing from **Chapter 2**.

There are many ways to address these structural inconsistencies. However, my suggestion is to include a “Summary” section as you have it now, followed by an “Introduction” where you provide any necessary background information on authors, stories, locations, etc. Then, I would suggest a “Close Reading” heading for each story being discussed, and a “Discuss It Further” section at the end of *every chapter*.

Additionally, a heading at the end of the **Introduction** chapter may be necessary. As it stands now, you shift very quickly from “After the Formative Years and Toward Contemporary SF” to an

un-headed section preparing readers to transition to the manuscript's body chapters. Adding a heading here will make the resulting tone shift less jarring and will better prepare the reader for what's to come.

Quotations & Translations

It's very clear how much time, effort, and research has gone into composing this manuscript. You have a wealth of quotations ready to back up every point that you make, and it does a lot to emphasize the validity of your arguments. However, especially if you are trying to reach a general audience, you are relying too heavily on these outside quotes.

Many of these quotes are highly academic in nature and/or long French excerpts. For times when quoting French is desired and/or necessary, there are two key things you should be doing. First is ensuring consistency throughout the *entire manuscript* in regards to how you are formatting your translations. How you choose to do so is entirely up to you, but it's critical that you remain consistent. Second is omitting very long French quotations, at least within the main body of text. For non-French speakers, these long blocks of French are intimidating and distracting. I understand the desire (or even need) to include them, but it may be better to either put them in a footnote or in a dedicated section at the end of each chapter or at the end of the book as a whole.

Additionally, the heavy use of quotes from other scholars and writers means that your voice is often lost in favor of another academic's words. To avoid this, I suggest that you make a valiant effort to include no more than one (or sometimes two) quotes in any given paragraph. Not only will this give ample time and space for quotes to be thoroughly analyzed, explained, and given context; but it will also ensure that your own voice as an expert in your field is present throughout the manuscript.

While referencing other scholars is a key component of strong literary analysis, by relying too heavily on the words of others and not providing enough of your own interpretations, you are weakening your stance as an expert. *You* are the one writing this book. *Your words* should make up the majority of its argument. And especially because you are a woman who is an expert in her field—writing about women who are expert science fiction writers but have been pushed to the

margins of the genre *because* they are women—by relying so much on (especially male) quotes, you are in a way pushing your own voice to the margins in much the same way.

Grammar, Spelling & Abbreviations

Despite heavy quotation usage, there are so many places in this manuscript where your own voice shines through beautifully. Your strong use of “I” statements, especially in the **Preface** and **Introduction**, is a great quality of this piece, and it inserts you as the author into the story as a reliable, present, and personable narrator. By relying so heavily on quotations, you are taking away from this effect.

Using “I” statements in place of some of these quotations will have two effects: First, it will further establish and support your expertise; and second, it will make the manuscript more widely appealing and easily digestible for a general audience. Using more “I” statements and bringing your own voice into the manuscript more will also create a character, if you will, that is *you*. It will imbue the work with your personality and voice in a way that will help engage the reader and endear them to you and your expertise.

On a somewhat smaller (but more general) note, I suggest that you definitively select *one* abbreviation for science fiction. Personally, I don’t think it matters whether it is “sci-fi,” “sf,” or “SF,” but I do think it needs to be *only one of these* unless you are directly quoting someone else using a different abbreviation. Switching shorthand throughout the text is somewhat confusing and jarring. If you choose to use “sf” or “SF” as opposed to the more common American shortened “sci-fi,” I would also include a brief note in either the **Preface** or **Introduction** informing readers of which abbreviation you will be using, as well as why you chose that one (if it’s relevant).

Additionally, there is some attention needed to spelling, header formatting, and accented vowels throughout the piece. As you are revising and editing, take a fine-toothed comb through your spellings of author names, scholar names, character names, place names, etc.—especially in the case of accented vowels. For example, in the section in **Chapter 1** on Sylvie Denis’s story, there are several times where Thébaldi becomes Thebaldi, Irena becomes Iréna, etc. Finally, ensure that all headings and

subheadings follow the same format, respectively, throughout all chapters. They seem to alternate between being formatted in all capitals, bolded letters, etc.

Wrapping Up

Thank you again for entrusting me and our class with your manuscript. It was truly fascinating to read, and I hope to have the opportunity to revisit it in its final form someday. You've provided excellent analysis of the stories selected, and I have no doubt that the remaining chapters will be just as strong. It's been a pleasure to edit your work.

Sincerely,

Ash Duggirala