

**Imaginactivism: A Speculative Fiction Workshop and Public Conversation on
Environmental Justice, Flourishing and Cohabitation**

Science & Justice Research Center Critical Listening

October 18th 2017

Workshop Overview:

The Imaginactivism workshop, organized and facilitated by Joan Haran, featured Starhawk and Donna Haraway, as well as Elizabeth Stephens and Martha Kenney. It was a speculative fiction workshop aimed at providing a platform for thinking about our collective responsibility to reshape our modes of being if we are to hold open the possibility of flourishing for future generations of humans and non-humans alike. The workshop was focused on Haraway's concept of *SF*¹ (speculative fiction, science fiction, speculative fabulation, and string figures) as a mode of active engagement with the world, exploring the ways Haraway and Starhawk's work engages with movement-building. Exploring their insistence on accounting for compromised and difficult relationality, shared responsibility and non-innocence, workshop participants engaged in visualization and collaborative writing exercises to imagine an alternative future for the Santa Rosa area after—and in the midst of—devastating fires.

**Speculative Fiction Workshop with Joan Haran and Martha Kenney
With interventions from Starhawk, Donna Haraway, and Elizabeth Stephens**

Fiction is a powerful medium for exploring questions, not so much a medium for providing answers. Start with a question and explore through characters and passions.
- Starhawk

The Imaginactivism² workshop was a half-day intensive session with Joan Haran and Martha Kenney, including presentations from Elizabeth Stephens, Donna Haraway and Starhawk on the possibilities of speculative and visionary storytelling. Providing a welcoming opening and framing for the day, Joan Haran discussed how both Haraway and Starhawk use science fiction not to conjure purified alternatives or forms of escape, but seek to remain embedded in and accountable to the world. She highlighted the insistence of both that we account for compromise and difficult relationality, and foster shared responsibility and non-innocence.

Elizabeth Stephens is the Chair of the UCSC Art Department, a performance artist, filmmaker, activist and educator. She does work around speculative sexualities, having created the new field of research, SexEcology. At the workshop Stephens discussed her documentary film *Goodbye Gauley Mountain: An Ecosexual Love Story*, a documentary focusing on destruction of the

¹ As Haraway (2011, p. 12) writes, “SF is that potent material-semiotic sign for the riches of speculative fabulation, speculative feminism, science fiction, speculative fiction, science fact, science fantasy—and, I suggest, string figures.” Haraway playfully uses multiple meanings of SF games to dismantle the fact/fiction binary, drawing connections through the various practices of creating and imagining reality/stories/worlds, “practices of scholarship, relaying, thinking with, [and] becoming with” (Haraway, 2011, p. 15). Haraway (2011, p. 12) adds: “In looping threads and relays of patterning, this SF practice is a model for worlding. Therefore, SF must also mean ‘so far,’ opening up what is yet-to-come in protean entangled times’ pasts, presents, and futures.”

² Imaginactivism is a compound word coined (Haran 2015) to denote the entangled relationship of imagination and activism. One of key questions raised by the Imaginactivism research project is: how are interpretive / activist communities or networks formed, inspired and / or restored or reinvigorated by fictional cultural production? This workshop is one attempt to explore this question collectively.

Appalachian Mountains via mountaintop removal practices of coal mining, as well as her new film *Water Makes Us Wet* (2017) created with her life partner and collaborator Annie Sprinkle. Sprinkle discussed the connection between Haraway's SF book chapter "The Camille Stories"—which partially takes place in Gauley as well—and how both SF projects generatively explore questions around how we go about re-inhabiting and learning to live on, and with, damaged landscapes. Stephen discussed the activist performance art practice she developed with her life partner Sprinkle in which they marry various environmental entities including the Appalachian Mountains, the sea, and the sky. Through this practice they enable people to create rituals and make vows, exploring how humanity could create empathy for and love the places and environmental entities which are vital to our ongoing existence. Stephens' work employs love as a powerful emotion to explore how humanity might engage generatively with the natural world, even in death, putting forth the speculative question: Could love heal?

Donna Haraway is Distinguished Professor Emerita in History of Consciousness and Feminist Studies at UC Santa Cruz. In her latest book *Staying With the Trouble* she extends her longstanding engagement with SF (speculative fiction, science fiction, speculative fabulation, and string figures) through her final book chapter: "The Camille Stories" through which she explores "oddkin and multispecies reproductive justice." Haraway began her presentation by discussing the shared goal and commitment of workshop participants to exploring what Anna Tsing describes as the "art of living on a damaged planet." A practice that involves what Debra Bird-Rose calls "taking care of country"; not taking care of an abstract future but, what Haraway describes as, the "thick present"—a practice of being accountable to the past in order to find ways of living together in partial flourishing and partial healing *now*. Learning to take care of times that don't work as past-present-future, but require accountability, response-ability and creative speculation. Haraway discussed the origin, goals and commitments of "The Camille Stories" which developed out of a four-day speculative fiction workshop in which participants were given the task of following a human child through five generations into the future. The Camille Stories takes up the task of addressing multispecies environmental *and* reproductive justice, particularly the challenge of reducing human population levels. Thus, the story traces five Camilles from 2025 when human populations reach 10 billion to 2425 when human populations have dropped to three billion and the biodiversity on earth has been reduced by half. Each new child in the story is paired with a species symbiont and genetically modified to take on biological aspects/features of that other species. Haraway described The Camille Stories as string figure plots, an elaborate storyboard, rather than a completed SF work hoping that people will take up her creative provocation to develop their own Camille stories, contributing to the collective task of imagining how to partially flourish on a damaged planet.

Martha Kenney is a feminist science studies scholar whose research explores the poetics and politics of ecological storytelling. Alongside her main research project on the narratives emerging from environmental epigenetics, she is working on a collaborative work of climate fiction (cli-fi) that considers what kinds of labor, sociality and happiness might sustain us in a world increasingly devastated by the violence of capitalist production, consumption, and waste. At the workshop Kenney presented on her collaborative cli-fi work which emerged from a five-week residency at the Banff Center for the Arts and Creativity. Residency fellows collaboratively explored the questions: What might the world look like in 50 years, and what can we do to shape it, moving beyond apocalyptic predictions, post-apocalyptic theories and techno-utopianism?

Kenny described the fellows' ongoing collaboration on an edited volume which takes up the theme of *smoke*. Smoke, she argued, is an urgent figure that engages formations of collectivity and communing that refuse the liberal thrall to transparency and individuation. Kenny described the edited collection as “fables of response-ability,”³ stories that explore how to capacitate response by activating our capacities to attend, and therefore respond, within and as part of a more-than-human world. Kenny explained that such fables act on our sensorium and involve us in alternative economies of attention, initiate us into unfamiliar arts of noticing, teach us how to respond and create openings for different types of response. She concluded by noting that fables of response-ability might not always be true stories, but useful fictions that activate possibilities for inhabiting ecologies otherwise.

During the second half of the workshop Starhawk led the group through a guided visualization in order to raise energy and focus attention on the task put forth to participants: To imagine an alternative future for the Santa Rosa area after—and in the midst of—devastating fires. Prior to the workshop, participants were asked to submit a short piece of SF writing and review Starhawk's blog post response to the ongoing fires in Santa Rosa: “[Lessons From the Fires.](#)” Building off of this initial work, participants were broken into groups of five and set to work negotiating between their visionary imaginaries and the material realities of the past-present-future violence and destruction unfolding in Santa Rosa. Many groups discussed legal issues around property laws and water rights, the role of industry and capitalism, historical and present forestry and fire management practices, as well as issues around migration and illegal labor disparities. Continuing the urgent call to avoid apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives, the group followed Haraway's lead in realizing that there is always “more than you thought, and less than there should be,” attempting to grapple with learning to live with/in fire's destructive *and* generative capacities.

It is interesting to reflect and to note that two of the speculative fabulation projects discussed at the workshop (Around the Hearth in 2167 and the Camille Stories) began as a collaborative writing project.

³ Haraway's work articulates myriad definitions of *response-ability*. In general, the term implies an ethical imperative to foster mutual response by attending to power imbalances between humans and nonhumans, and foster generative ethical relations. In *Staying with the Trouble*, one such example is the ability to “go visiting, to venture off the beaten path to meet the unexpected, non-natal kin, and to strike up conversations, to pose and respond to interesting questions, to propose together something unanticipated, to take up the unasked-for obligations of having met” (Haraway, 2016, p. 130). In other words, this is a situated practice of co-creation.

Public Conversation Overview:

The Science and Justice Research Center (SJRC)⁴ hosted an event bringing together Donna Haraway and Starhawk to dialogue around questions about their lifetimes of activism and writing in a conversation moderated by SJRC Visiting Scholar and organizer of the event, Joan Haran. The event, “A Public Conversation with Donna Haraway and Starhawk: Magic, Figuration & Speculative Fiction as Calls to Action,” explored the convergences and divergences of their respective work particularly focusing on the role of imagination and science in shaping narratives of the near future. This public dialogue was part of a larger SF workshop which took place earlier in the day aimed at providing a platform for thinking about our collective responsibility to reshape our modes of being if we are to hold open the possibility of flourishing for future generations of humans and non-humans alike. During the public dialogue, both Haraway and Starhawk discussed the environmental and social justice activist movements that inspired their work including the Livermore Action Group (LAG) and the anti-nuclear movement, the Occupy movement, Standing Rock and the Black Lives Matter movements. In particular they both discussed the importance of alternative forms of organizing that foster creative collaborative acts of response-ability.

Dr. Haran invited Starhawk and Haraway to reflect on the ways in which they have addressed their readers and students to engage and empower them. In particular, she inquired into their innovative and creative rhetorical strategies, and about the ways in which they are both motivated by speculative fictions and use them to motivate others. Throughout the evening the dialogue centered on their shared commitment to “staying with the trouble,” avoiding end-of-times apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives—particularly those that “leap over” the existing capitalistic, racial and environmental issues we are currently grappling with, and choose to portray dystopian fascist and/or hyper-capitalistic futures—choosing instead to imagine how the struggle against these oppressive and destructive forces might play out. Highlighting the importance of the imagination in crafting narratives that are sensual and affective; inspire worldly action; and alter normative and deterministic understandings the future by opening up possibilities for people to think otherwise. As Dr. Haran noted: “Our shared visions might emerge from the actions we take, or they might co-emerge or be co-created, but the important point is that we don’t regard the practice of imagining as simply escape or retreat from the world.”

The generative conversation traversed topics as broad as education, activism, volunteerism, neighborliness, science, reproductive justice, and the dismantling of labor unions. Drawing on personal experiences working in and around disaster zones, they both illustrated how, as Haraway notes, there is always “more than you thought, and less than there should be.” They both spoke about the specific practices they undertake and relationships they nurture to balance their urgent critical concerns with joy, playfulness and pleasure—the delicate balance of love and rage. Rejecting the easy dualisms and dichotomies of modernism and disaster capitalism, they focus on the alternative histories always present that can awaken a sense of response-ability; explaining that “science is made but not made up,” raising onto-epistemological political figural fictional questions around the ongoing struggle of the contestation of stories—which stories get

⁴ The event was additionally sponsored by the Center for Creative Ecologies, the Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems, Departments of Anthropology, Feminist Studies, History of Consciousness, Philosophy, Sociology, Division of Art, E.A.R.T.H. Lab and OpenLab.

to be told, by whom, and for whom—choosing to continue to partake in the larger shared task of using science fiction, speculative fabulation, lively figurations, anarchist activism, and teaching to produce, what Haraway calls, “worldly interference patterns.”

A Public Conversation with Donna Haraway and Starhawk
Magic, Figuration & Speculative Fiction as Calls to Action

“Science is made, not made up.”
 - Donna Haraway

On the evening of October 13th 2017 the Science and Justice Research Center (SJRC) sponsored an event to bring together Donna Haraway and Starhawk, to meet in person for the first time, and have a public conversation around questions about their lifetimes of activism and writing. The conversation was facilitated and moderated by SJRC Visiting Scholar, and organizer of the event, Joan Haran. After introductory speeches by Jenny Reardon, director of the SRJC, and Katharyne Mitchell, the new UCSC Dean of the Division of Social Sciences, Haran provided a general context for the project and her development of the central concept “imaginactivism,” which she described as “a compound word made up of Imagine and Activism, but intended to connote the process relationship between imagining and acting to make change in the world.” The term is intended to highlight the affective impacts of creating and sharing speculative visions of a better future. Inspired by the work of Haraway and Starhawk, Haran’s work explores how activist communities are formed, inspired and influenced by fictional cultural production, particularly what Katie King calls science fiction feminisms. Through this work, which began in 2014, Haran explores how such fictions help to form shared visions of a better world grounded in ethical worldly practices. The event also provided an opportunity to explore the connections between Haraway and Starhawk’s writing and their personal activist / educational work.

The conversation began with a discussion of both Haraway and Starhawk’s engagement with the Livermore Action Group (LAG) in the 1980s, an anti-nuclear network of activists utilizing nonviolent direct action and civil disobedience. In particular, LAG blockages at the Lawrence Livermore Lab in 1982, at which 5,000 people were arrested, as well as at the Nevada Test Site (now renamed the Nevada National Security Site) in 1987. Starhawk and Haraway both described the importance of the decentralized consensus-based horizontal organizational structure that underpinned the blockade activities, as well as the underlying commitment and beliefs of participants in actively protecting vital planetary systems and fostering worldly practices of collective flourishing. Such practices can be seen recently at Standing Rock and many other indigenous decolonial struggles occurring across the world. Both Starhawk and Haraway view their current work and practices—namely writing, educating, and speaking/performing—as a form of activism aimed at supporting, inspiring, energizing and legitimizing various direct-action initiatives, while also reaching other more diverse audiences.

The conversation then turned to the role of *joy* and affirmative practices in their work as scholars and activists. Both Haraway and Starhawk admitted to having generally joyful and optimistic characters, as can be seen in their often playful, humorous and hopeful writings. As Haraway noted: “I am genuinely amused by contradiction as opposed to [frustrated] by it, I think the fact

that you told a number of lies by the time you reach a period at the end of an ordinary sentence is funny.” Both Haraway and Starhawk note the need for “all kinds of sensibilities” in figuring out how to grapple with the urgencies, inequalities and devastating loss of our times. However, they warn that optimism is necessary and needed, particularly by leaders and organizers, so as to not fall into the paralyzing abyss of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic “doom and gloom” stories. As Starhawk noted: “Yes, things are bad. They are probably worse than you thought, but they actually could be better than you might even be able to imagine.” Both find hope in the resiliency and creativity of the natural world, the desire of all beings for connection, and the potential to work with the natural world as an active agent instead of another tool / resource for extraction and exploitation. As Haraway explains: “The game of life on earth is a kind of extraordinary loquacious conversation rooted in the desire of touch.” Yet, as they discuss, the most challenging conversation / connection needed right now is between humans with different ideological and religious beliefs and agendas.

However, despite the differing ideological and religious beliefs and values existing between people—and a seeming unwillingness to communicate—both Haraway and Starhawk discussed examples of how catastrophic situations can bring people together in mutualistic, caring and neighborly ways that transcend difference. Starhawk spoke about her time in New Orleans after hurricane Katrina working with a group called Common Ground Relief, and Haraway spoke of the neighborly practices and spontaneous caring that occurred after the fires in Sonoma County in which hundreds of people lost their homes, including many undocumented migrant workers. They agreed that such situations however devastating provide openings for alternative futures to be imagined and created, yet real challenges from economic institutions—including banks and insurance companies—and normative, socially unjust planning and governance systems hinder innovative change. They stressed the important role *imagination* plays in bringing about needed change, as Starhawk notes: “You have to be able to envision something if you want to bring it about.” In particular, Haraway and Starhawk discussed the need for imaginaries of the “near-term” (i.e. within the next 100-200 years) when humanity will be in the midst of dealing with the effects of climate change and the struggle against capitalism, instead of the post-apocalyptic “doom-and-gloom” stories that don’t include imaginaries for grappling with these crises. One example provided by Haraway was Kim Stanley Robinson’s work, specifically his new book *New York 2140* (2017) which includes, “the imagination of the details of the struggle against capitalism the struggle against racism and the struggle for collective communitarian living.”

The conversation shifted to a conversation about their own work, describing what events influenced and inspired the narrative plot and characters, as well as the effects their work had on their own lives and others. Starhawk explained that all of her work begins with a question, and that the narrative trajectory and characters emerge from that initial question. The “Fifth Sacred Thing,” written in the late 1980s and early 1990s was heavily influenced by the anti-nuclear movement (discussed earlier in the night) and attempted to grapple with the question: How do you respond to violence without becoming violent? The sequel, “The City of Refuge” written in 2012, was influenced by the Occupy movement and attempted to grapple the question: How do we create a new world when people are so damaged by the old world? Haraway discussed the process of writing the last chapter in her most recent book “Staying with the Trouble” (2016) which originally began as a collective writing exercise as part of a writing workshop at a speculative fabulation workshop. The chapter, “The Camille Stories,” followed a child—

Camille—through five generations as the world grapples with the catastrophic effects climate change—comprising anthropogenic global warming and sea-level rise, desertification and agricultural failures, ecosystem fragmentation and mass species extinction. Haraway discussed writing as a process of “inhabiting the fiction,” as Camille became “more and more real” as they developed “per”⁵ through the generations, awakening a sense of responsibility in the authors and investment in the readers. Haraway also discussed how her work is inhabited by the thoughts and ideas of her friends, colleagues and collaborators. Indeed, the footnotes in her book “Staying with the Trouble” are full of respectful acknowledgements and references, as she initiates a cats-cradle game of just and justifiable modes of knowledge production. As Haraway argues, “science is made, not made up,” and has been subject to the same forces of oppression (including racism, classism, capitalism, and other -isms) as other socio-political issues, and we need to “stick up” for some ways of accounting for the world and not others.

The conversation shifted to a discussion of the perceived difference between science and spirituality. Starhawk described her spirituality as fundamentally an understanding of life, and the universe, as being alive, dynamic and having the potential for change. Haraway described science as a practice—removing it from the discourse of belief and into the domain of practice—in hopes of exploring the messy politics of knowledge production that many have worked so hard to scrub clean. Traditional science has, as Haraway continued, relied on the certainty of mononaturalism, the belief that there is one nature—one ontology—knowable through measurable empirical research. Instead, many decolonial activists and scholars have argued for multnaturalism (as opposed to multiculturalism) which brings with it uncertainty and multiplicity. Haraway explained that she has always been drawn to the sciences that “can’t get through the day without storytelling as part of their practice,” sciences—such as developmental biology—unable to rely on the certainty of quantifiable measurable facts, as opposed to the so called hard sciences including physics and chemistry.

Critical Listening Reflection

The central questions addressed during the evening centered around the role of the *imagination* in shaping livable futures, and the role of narratives in inspiring and gathering people together to enable them to do things in the world. In particular, the dialogue focused on the difference between science and belief (or spirituality) and the implications this distinction has in the “era of post-truth” when ideological differences create conflicts and injustices. What is the role of SF in current times? And why do we need it more than ever? Ruha Benjamin provides a succinct and poetic summary when she states: “Such fictions are not meant to convince others of *what is*, but to expand our own visions of what is *possible*.”⁶

In general, the conversation was rather agreeable and congenial, with little critical discussion about disparities between Haraway and Starhawk’s work, nor within their own work as it developed and changed over time. There was also little discussion of the history (and struggle) of the field of feminist science fiction and speculative fiction (many female SF writers had to hide

⁵ Haraway utilizes the gender-neutral pronoun “per” drawing from Marge Piercy in her book, “Woman on the Edge of Time” (1976).

⁶ Ruha Benjamin. (2016). “Racial Fictions, Biological Facts: Expanding the Sociological Imagination through Speculative Methods.” *Catalyst*, vol 2 no. 2. <http://catalystjournal.org/ojs/index.php/catalyst/article/view/88/202>

their identities using pseudonyms), nor the role of SF within academic discourses. Until rather recently, Haraway has been one of the only academics outside of the field of literature to draw on SF in her academic work. Yet, Haraway has previously described that early in her career she had to “white out” particular publications from her resume, including an article she wrote for the journal *Woman: A Journal of Liberation* in which she reviewed Marge Piercy’s SF novel *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976).⁷ It would have been interesting to hear a discussion about the affordances and challenges of working within academia and outside of it, and how that shaped both of their work.

Similarly, the general audience for the night was a mix of academics and non-academics, bringing different expectations for the event. However, it seemed that in general the audience wanted more discussion about concrete practical actions. What can I do? What can we do? The conversation focused more on the imagination and less on actions. Additionally, there was little talk about what a livable future might look like, and I believe that the conversation could have connected more with the work done earlier in the day in the workshop. The bridge from imagination to action is troubled with many social, political and economic barriers—some of which were discussed during the conversation—and many of which are addressed by feminist SF writers through their work. I believe that exploring and amplifying this aspect of SF writing would have been fruitful and constructive.

⁷ See Haraway’s acceptance speech at the Pilgrim Award July 7, 2011. Article: Haraway, Donna J. “The Struggle for a Feminist Science: Reflections Based on *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *For Her Own Good*.” *Women: A Journal of Liberation* vol. 6 no. 2 (1979), pp. 20-23.