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### Feminist Science Fiction of the 1970s

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"Feminist Science Fiction of the 1970's"

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BY

Mira Tapella

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## Back to the Future: Utopic Feminist Science Fiction and the Women's Movement of the 1970s

Mia Tapella

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Women have made incredible gains toward achieving parity over the course of the twentieth century, reaching outside patriarchy's limited sphere of possibility in an attempt to pull themselves toward a brighter future. Each step women make in the direction of equality they face attempts to push them back, and the struggle is constant. Yet some moments in history stand out as significant. Often referred to as the Women's Liberation Movement or second-wave feminism, the 1970s is remembered for the vibrantly active and ferociously optimistic grassroots women's groups that became highly visible during this time. Focusing on social issues and the broad spectrum of factors contributing to women's oppression, second-wave feminism is credited with enormous legislative and social gains for women in the United States.

In the 1940s, when the parents of these women were marrying, millions of women went to work in factories to support the war effort and take over jobs for American men fighting overseas. More than 80 percent of women wanted to keep their jobs, but when World War II ended and the G.I.s returned home, over 800,000 women were fired from the aircraft industry, followed by others. To encourage women to be happy staying in the home, and to encourage capitalist values against the threat of communism, the US government and many major corporations launched an enormous propaganda campaign targeted at the re-domestication of female citizens. Advertisements featuring slim-waisted silhouettes and glimmering appliances pervaded magazines and media, and the iconic 1950s housewife was born (Newsom).

Yet not all women remained satisfied with their lives as adoring wives and doting mothers. After witnessing the race revolution of the early 1960s, women of the 1970s began to undergo a radical shift in consciousness that no longer tolerated their relegation to second-class citizenship. Rather than embracing traditional ideas of femininity, they revolted against sexualized views of womanhood and aimed to expose the patriarchal roots of even the most familiar institutions, including motherhood. The radicalism of this time came to characterize the Women's Liberation Movement as an era of exciting discourse, optimism and hopes for change:

Late twentieth-century feminists could, and did, readily produce critiques of the current positioning of women, of ways of thinking about women, of relations between women and men. But at least some of the most compelling emotional potency of such critiques emerged when they were positioned in contrast with a vision of an entirely different cultural, political, and social order, an imagined ideal, a utopia. (Maragey)

Using tools like anthropology, economic theory, and psychoanalysis, feminist theorist of the 1970s traced sex oppression to its very root, and the findings were both radical and revolutionary. Gayle Rubin, credited most notably with the defining the sex/gender distinction, has said of this time: "We were all pretty utopian in those days. I mean this was about 1969 to 1974. I was young and optimistic about social change. In those days there was a common expectation that utopia was around the corner" (Rubin, Butler). Arguably essential to the explication of these utopian ideals is the writing of utopic fiction, and no genre is better equipped to handle the radical demands of 1970s feminists than that of science fiction. The representation of utopia as "both a fictional and a theoretical space, the nexus of the two that allows an author to imagine other possible worlds" (Miller) enabled science fiction writers to not only give shape to ideas proposed during the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s, but also to test those theories under various terms in endless imagined futures.

Perhaps the most important triumph for feminist theorists of the 1970s was their success in illustrating how pervasive and all-encompassing patriarchy is in Western society. Heavily influenced by Marxism and New Left politics, they were able to connect a variety of issues to the problem of sexual division, including labor, personal property, and environmentalism. However, what defined these groundbreaking feminists was also what may have limited them: “The feminism of the 1970s, overwhelmingly, expressed a belief in possibility, in becoming; this was an aspect of their optimism” (Maragey). Their optimism sometimes bordered on naiveté, and they never dreamed the honesty of their message would meet such strong opposition.

Yet where the theorists left off, others picked up the torch and peered into the murky future they left behind. Exploring the ideals of feminist theorists as realities, and illustrating the possible dystopic effects of feminist values, “the specifically feminist utopias/ science fictions emerged from an activist women’s movement” (Maragey). It has been argued that science fiction, as a genre, is an ideal tool for explicating critical theory, because it “extrapolates beyond our present condition to imagine the potential transcendence of these limits, to examine the possibility of new social forms and identity configurations, and to critically interrogate the current manifestations of the human, its philosophical outlooks, and its sociocultural practices” (Miller). The function of science fiction as a tool for exploring cultural theory is not unique, but very clearly and effectively at work in feminist science fiction during the 1970s, particularly in Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Angela Carter’s *The Passion of the New Eve*, and James Tiptree Jr.’s *The Girl Who Was Plugged In*.

Throughout Piercy’s 1976 novel *Woman on the Edge of Time*, the reader follows Connie, an impoverished Mexican-American woman whose consciousness becomes divided between the

dark realities of her own world and a strange vision of the future, the author's utopic amalgamation of liberal and feminist values proposed during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Ideas of kinship, gender and sexuality, private property, labor and class division and even reproduction are placed in discourse with the oppressive natures of patriarchy, capitalism and industrialism. Connie's journey represents a state of transition that can be seen as a reflection of the early attitudes surrounding the second-wave feminist movement. Shulamith Firestone, an innovative and exciting young feminist thinker in 1969, said of her contemporaries: "Their first move is a careful joint observation, to resensitize a fractured consciousness. This is painful: no matter how many levels of consciousness one reaches, the problem always goes deeper" (Firestone). This "fractured consciousness" is quite literally what Piercy's heroine undergoes throughout the course of the novel. As she struggles against the oppressive forces in her life, Connie comes to communicate with Luciente, a "sender" of signals, who enables Connie to visit her home in an utopian realm of the future. However, Luciente's visits and their mutual communication are not without motivation. There is an unclear sense that the survival and insurance of Luciente's future in some way depend on Connie's actions in her own life. As Luciente says ominously, "We are only one possible future" (Piercy). Connie's constant transition between such extremely different worlds places her in a state of liminality; she is at the threshold of determining what the future holds, not yet having achieved or absolved either possibility.

In her own life, Connie's suffering has been formed by the harsh, disparaging oppression resulting from class, race, and patriarchy. Abused both physically and emotionally by partners and male authority figures, Connie has experienced nothing but the most traditional representations of womanhood—submission, servitude, sexualization, and, her only solace,

motherhood. To this Piercy adds racial oppression and cultural tension, i.e., the guilt Consuela feels when she goes by “Connie”, economic insecurity, emotional despair over the removal of her daughter Angelina by the state, and Connie’s committal to a state mental facility. The conflicts of Piercy’s heroine are extreme, but far from unrealistic, and represent an individual most injured by the systems Piercy and other liberal thinkers found most injurious. Because of the extreme nature of her situation, Connie is useful as a model for the second-wave feminist movement, both to examine the radicalism that inspired these thinkers as well as the hopeful optimism that characterized them. However, the novel also serves as a voice of caution that such ideals will always be under attack by deeply entrenched opposing values, a cultural realization that publishing theorists had not yet fully reached. As Connie’s story unfolds between two worlds, the reader is forced to define her character through lenses not only of the racially and socio-economically divided world of Piercy’s mid-1970’s mental institutions, but those of the genderless agricultural communes of 2137 Mattapoisett, Massachusetts.

Piercy’s novel is not the only to imagine a genderless future society during this time. Joanna Russ’ noteworthy *The Female Man*, published the same year, also envisioned a world free from gender inequality, as did the Samuel R. Delany’s 1976 novel *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia* (Miller). However, neither of these authors can conceive of a world without sexual inequality that still retains the physically tangible sexual differences between human beings; in Russ’ future all the men are dead and Delany’s characters are gender-morphing extraterrestrials. Piercy’s piece is significant in that the people in her novel are biologically recognizable and, though met in radically different ways, their needs and wants are similar to our own. The author expounds on this concept in the way Connie experiences Mattapoisett, as an anthropologist studying an indigenous village. She witnesses a feast, a funeral, a birth, an

adolescent's rite of passage, and a civic conference (Fifer). This makes Lucinete and the rest of Piercy's future seem not only more human than other writers' genderless utopias, but more possible. Piercy sought to create realistic—though no less far-fetched—explications of the radical theories popular within feminist culture during the 1970s.

The second-wave feminist movement is distinguished in history by its far-reaching grassroots appeal. Women's groups like the National Organization for Women as well as state and federal women's commissions established under President Kennedy were influential in passing landmark legislation in the battle for women's liberation. Title IX of the Education Amendments Act prohibiting educational institutions from discriminating against women passed in 1972, followed by the Equal Credit Opportunity Act and other legislative reforms. The movement was especially transformative for younger generations, over half of which agreed by the end of the 1970s that differences in women and men were defined by culture, not nature (Zeitiz). Yet women's rights activists found themselves disappointed by the sexism within the New Left movement, discovering that many who had spoken out against racial oppression were unwilling to throw their support toward women's equality, and instead lashed out in opposition. This led some feminists to develop an identity of separatism and gender division, but "most younger women who identified with the movement were suggesting something entirely more radical than a simple rejection of men. They proposed to reconfigure heterosexual marriage, an institution they understood as central to the distribution of legal, economic and social privileges in America" (Zeitiz). Younger feminists during this time focused on personal understanding and 'consciousness-raising,' focusing on their own re-education of culture and the ways in which they witnessed women participating within it. Motivated on a large scale by personal stories of everyday oppression published in the popular *Ms.* Magazine, the idea that the 'personal is

political' became the mantric principle underlying the radical feminist movement, evolving into dreams of the total cultural restructuring of women's roles. These critiques were often seen as radical to the point of distraction by other, often older, feminists, yet "at least some of the most compelling emotional potency of such critiques emerged when they were positioned in contrast with a vision of an entirely different cultural, political and social order, an imagined utopia" which theorists may have failed to humanize. Answering the call, feminist science fiction writers emerged to give shape to the ideas to which radical feminists gave birth, "rendering our dreams of new modes of living imaginatively concrete and detailed" (Maragey).

The genre of women's science fiction during this time engaged in close dialogue with the political movement it helped to illustrate. Like many feminists of her time, Piercy's society suggests a total restructuring of the cultural systems that dominate Western society. She does away with economic systems of capitalism, which contemporary theorists felt contributed to sexual inequality and oppression and vice versa. Marxist theory, though Marx did not explicitly write on women's oppression, became a tool for explicating the way the class system and market capitalism were contributing forces to women's subjugation within culture. Gayle Rubin, in her groundbreaking 1975 essay, *The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex*, suggests, "If sexism is a byproduct of capitalism's relentless appetite for profit, then sexism would wither away in the advent of a successful socialist revolution" (Rubin). Piercy echoes the beliefs of Marxist feminists through her characters, in one instance a filmmaker named Bolivar, who describes the relationship between capitalism and the division of the sexes:

I guess I see the original division of labor, that first dichotomy, as enabling later divvies into haves and have-nots, powerful and powerless, enjoyers and workers, rapists and victims. The patriarchal mind/body split turned the body to machine and the rest of the universe into booty on which the will could run rampant, using, discarding, destroying. Piercy (204)

Piercy's future Mattapoissett, in the spirit of Marx, is the result of a working-class revolution, as Luciente describes on page 147: "You lose until you win—that's a saying those who changed our world left us. Poor people *did* get together," and on page 169: "How come you took so long to get together and start fighting for what was yours... it seems as if people fought hardest against those who had a little more than themselves or often a little less, instead of the lugs who got richer and richer" (Piercy). While she does not explicate on exactly how the revolution was achieved, the results have been transformative. The society is wholly egalitarian, sexually, economically, and socially: domestic labor and specialized work may be completed by the same individual, everyone receives the same quality of food, and success is not tied to personal gain but the betterment of the community. Even luxury items and fineries are shared, as Luciente explains to Connie in Chapter 9: "Circulating luxuries pass through the libraries of each village—beautiful new objects get added and some things wear out or get damaged. Costumes, jewelry, vases, paintings, sculpture—some is always on loan to our village. And always passing on" (Piercy). Piercy's Mattapoissett also offers a lesson in biodiversity: "We have so much energy from the sun, so much from wind, so much from decomposing wastes, so much from the waves, so much from the river, so much from alcohol from wood, so much from wood gas" (Piercy). Additionally, this passage illustrates the strong theme of environmental ethics in Piercy's society, and how those values relate to economic issues as well as gender oppression.

Ecofeminism, first termed by Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974, intended to link the women's movement to environmentalism and ecological consciousness. The same year, activists at Berkeley held a conference called "Women and the Environment" (Glazebrook). Ecofeminist thinkers saw the exploitation of women by patriarchy and the exploitation of the environment by

capitalism as deeply connected, both spiritually and politically. For either movement to be successful, the ecofeminists believed in a fundamental restructuring of humankind's relationship of dominance over the environment and each other. Yet many ecofeminists, including Luce Irigaray and others of the French feminist movement, also sought to resurrect ideas of a mystic connection between women and the forces of nature, which others felt weakened their overall objective of women's liberation. Piercy's society illustrates the practical interconnectedness of environmental consciousness with not only women's liberation, but social liberation as well. The supreme goal of Piercy's egalitarian paradise is precisely to remain so; equality is prized over all else. When priorities shift from gaining profit to, perhaps, feeding everyone, the whole system of values is altered, as Piercy discusses on page 120-1:

After we dumped the jobs telling people what to do, counting money and moving it about, making people do what they don't want or bashing them for doing what they want, we have lots of people to work. Kids work, old folks work, women and men work. We put a lot of work into feeding everybody without destroying the soil, keeping up its health and fertility. With most everybody at it part time, nobody breaks their backs and grubs dawn to dusk like old-time farmers. (Piercy)

Instead of expanding and creating capital, in Piercy's society human welfare and maintaining the health and sustainability of the environment have become preeminent issues. Piercy illustrates how the adoption of socialist models and the abolition of capitalist models drastically alters value systems and relationships at every level of social and cultural organization. However, while Rubin and other theorists agree that systems of capitalism as they function in Western culture perpetuate sexual inequality, none are convinced that economic revolution alone would solve the problem. Shulamith Firestone, in her 1969 revolutionary essay *The Dialectic of Sex*, says of class and gender:

Just as the end goal of socialist revolution was not only to elimination of the economic class *privilege* but of the economic class *distinction* itself, so the end goal of feminist revolution must be, unlike that of the first feminist movement, not just the elimination of male *privilege* but of the sex distinction itself: genital differences between human being would no longer matter culturally. (Firestone)

Piercy readily takes up the torch in her explication of Firestone's rather tall order. In her future human beings have achieved a society truly free of gender distinction. This is never more apparent than in Connie's perception of her biologically female guide Luciente, who, for much of the story, Connie presumes to be male. Despite regularly noticing effeminate qualities in Luciente, including a high-pitched voice, fine bones, and hairless cheeks, Luciente's demeanor is stronger than all these physical elements in making Connie perceive Luciente as man. As Piercy demonstrates on page 59: "Luciente spoke, she moved with that air of brisk unself-conscious authority Connie associated with men. Luciente sat down, taking up more space than women ever did" (Piercy). Connie is further confused by Luciente's failure to denote a sexual orientation, and Connie finds herself guessing at both. As Piercy shows, the abolition of gender lends itself (as Rubin predicted) to the elimination of obligatory heterosexuality in society, allowing notions of sexual orientation to all but evaporate.

In the United States, homosexuality was treated as a mental disorder until 1973, when, to widespread protest, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its official diagnostic manual. During Connie's imprisonment in a state-run mental facility she meets Skip, who has been repeatedly institutionalized for homosexuality since he was a child. Piercy illustrates the horrors of Skip's persecution and inner turmoil through his violent suicide with an electric knife, and it is to his memory that Connie ultimately promises to take action (Piercy, 335). The politics of feminism and homosexual culture have long been linked, and both

made gains during the 1970's. In an interview with Judith Butler in the early 1990's, Gayle

Rubin reflects on the political atmosphere surrounding sexuality:

Somehow, the political conditions of sexual practice were undergoing a shift in the late 1970s, and the emergence of creative gay male sexual political theory was part of that. The major development was the phenomenal growth of the New Right. By the late 1970s it was mobilizing explicitly and successfully around sexual issues. The New Right had a strong sexual agenda: to raise the punitive costs of sexual activity for the young, to prevent homosexuals (male and female) from obtaining social and civic equality, to coerce women to reproduce, and so forth. (Rubin, Butler)

As Rubin explains and Piercy illustrates, the rights of homosexuals and women are indeed linked, if only through those who persecute them. Indeed, much like the oppression of women, condemnation of homosexuality in favor of heterosexuality has been an organizing factor of Western culture. Even Connie finds herself troubled by the free displays of love between men of Mattapoissett, prompting another character to address her aversion: "All coupling, all befriending, goes on between biological males, biological females, or both. That's not a useful set of categories. We tend to divvy up people by what they're good at and bad at, strengths and weaknesses, gifts and failings" (Piercy 206). The dream of gender and queer theorists could not be more realized in a single statement, though few then understood how powerful the realization of this concept might be.

In the 1970s, as feminists began to imagine a future free of the sexual dichotomy, they also began to perceive how truly and deeply ingrained in human history the sex/gender system is. Gayle Rubin was among the first to expound on the difference between biological sex and culturally defined gender to which Piercy gives life in her novel, and both make clear how strong an impact the gender dichotomy has on culture. Rubin argues that, rather than being a natural and

necessary part of human existence, gender is a socially imposed division of the sexes designed for economic reasons, including the commodification of women (Rubin). Rubin draws on the canonical theories of Levi-Strauss and Freud to understand the history and reasoning behind the oppression of women, but fails to imagine what a world without this fundamental element of culture would look like. Piercy's characters, though they retain their natural biological differences, perceive no distinction between those of either the female or male sex, most noticeably through language.

In future Mattapoissett, though the language is recognizably English and Connie is able to communicate with both English and Spanish-speaking characters, the new social system has created obvious changes in how people speak to and about one another. Language is a powerful part of culture. Rebecca Lakoff explains differences in men and women's language in her 1975 essay *Language and Woman's Place*. She asserts that women are taught from childhood to speak in ways that weaken them and therefore make it easier for others to dismiss them later in life. Women are taught expressions that suggest uncertainty and discourage self-assertion, and, when discussed, women are sexualized and objectified, which further restricts and demeans them. Luciente's language has been purged entirely of gendered pronouns and nearly of all gendered names. Therefore, if one should find it necessary to make a distinction, the reader must rely on Connie or the errant physical detail to guess at the biological distinction of many characters. Instead of "he" and "him," the egalitarian Mattapoissett refers to all human beings as "per" and "person," a genderless distinction that is fascinating for the theorist and appropriately awkward for the well-cultured Western reader, who likely had not realized the pervasive grip gender has on language and character.

Yet the powerful impact of gender distinctions in Piercy's future do not end with "his" and "hers." As Rubin shows: kinship structures are central to the organization of culture, marriage is central to the organization of kinship structure, and gender is central to the organization of marriage. If feminists of the 1970s sought to end gender oppression, many became resolved that revolution was to be had within the kinship structure, or, the family unit. However, the organization of culture and society around marriage was, at least originally, far from arbitrary. To encourage coupling between a man and a woman ensured the propagation of the species, and, as theorist Sherry Ortner points out, the smallest economic unit. The original division of labor, therefore, was between one man and one woman, and society was designed to expect the presence of both. Because women are biologically responsible for childbirth, they were tasked with childcare and childrearing, and because children are incapable of labor and are therefore bound to the home, women became responsible for domestic tasks as well (Ortner).

In Piercy's feminist utopia, kinship structures are only vaguely reminiscent of the rigidly gendered nuclear unit so esteemed by Western culture. There, every child is afforded three volunteer "mothers." Two are responsible for lactation, none are biologically related to the child, and none are romantically involved with one another (which, as Luciente explains, causes obvious complications by involving children in lovers' quarrels). The "mothers" can be of any biological sex, and the role of "father" has vanished into obsolescence, which presents an immediate biological problem. Babies in Piercy's future are no longer born through human biological processes, but gestate in a technological facility called a "brooder." As Firestone predicted, "Until a certain level of evolution had been reached and technology had achieved its present sophistication, to question fundamental biological conditions was insanity" (Firestone). Whether or not humans had achieved that technology when Firestone was publishing in 1969,

they most certainly had in Piercy's 2137 Mattapoisett. Not unlike the system first illustrated in Aldous Huxley's 1931 dystopia *Brave New World*, the distinctly more inviting "brooder" of Luciente's world offers an extra-uterine alternative to procreation, where babies are grown in a climate-controlled world that ensures optimal nutrition and development. While the idea may seem radical and even horrifying (to recall the nightmarish and iconic "baby farm" depicted in popular 1999 film *The Matrix*), some radical feminist theorists of the 1970s argued that it was ultimately necessary to the restructuring of sexuality, marriage, family, and culture. Socially, the system could afford every child the same developmental nutrition as every other child. Connie, for whom motherhood has been one of few sources of true happiness, is horrified by the practice, yet Piercy illustrates how Firestone's controversial call for women to reject motherhood was not only possible, but also necessary:

It was part of women's long revolution. When we were breaking all the old hierarchies. Finally there was that one thing we had to give up too, the only power we ever had, in return for no more power for anyone. The original production: the power to give birth. Cause as long as we were biologically enchained, we'd never be equal. And males would never be humanized to be loving and tender. So we all became mothers. (Piercy)

Firestone, too, argued that until women were as free from biological demands as men, they would never achieve parity within society.

Until the advent of oral contraception in the 1960's, women were often subject to physical and social limitations as a result of unintended pregnancy. Medical technology was the linchpin that allowed women to gain control over their bodies and reproductive futures, and, in Piercy's world, as Firestone predicted, overcoming biological disadvantages allows males and females of Piercy's future to achieve parity. However, Firestone believed that just as a social revolution would require the overthrowing of the upper class by the proletariat, women's

liberation depended on their ability to seize and control the means of human fertility (Firestone). The position is understandable given when she was writing, but Firestone contradicts herself in saying that society should rid itself of the sex distinction but that women should control the means of human reproduction. In terms of technological capabilities, scientists have already successfully grown human egg cells from stem cells in lab trials, well outside the walls of a human uterus (Wade), but have framed their work as a potential treatment for infertility, so perhaps Firestone is right to be cautious.

Piercy diverges from Firestone in favor of a sexually egalitarian society, where no single group controls anything. In her world, the abdication of reproductive control by women creates new possibilities for men to experience aspects of motherhood that were formerly relegated to biological females such as nursing, as Connie, to her horror, discovers on page 126:

He sat down with the baby on a soft padded bench by the windows and unbuttoned his shirt. Then she felt sick. He had breasts. Not large ones. Small breasts, like a flat-chested woman temporarily swollen with milk. Then with his red beard, his face of a sunburnt forty-five-year-old man... he began to nurse.” (Piercy)

Males naturally possess all necessary physiological elements for breastfeeding, and lactation in men has been reported from the writings of Tolstoy to modern Sri Lanka (Swaminathan). Just as technology allows women to overcome biological hindrances, technology opens the door for males to play a role in the reproduction process that extends beyond insemination. It is perhaps this egalitarian element of Piercy’s future society that makes it so uniquely appealing, especially to modern liberal values: while the dissolution of gender has undoubtedly occurred, traditional elements of both are mutually retained as they are positive and abolished as they are negative.

While many theorists of the 1970s advocated for the dissolution of gender, another group within the Women’s Movement felt strongly opposed to what they felt was the disavowing of

femininity. French feminists like H el ene Cixous sought to reinvigorate traditional ideas of femininity, and its association with the body, with a new sense of empowerment. In her 1975 work *Laugh of the Medusa*, Cixous states: “I write... as a woman. When I say ‘woman,’ I’m speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against the conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who much bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history” (Cixous). Rather than abolishing gender, some feminists felt that combatting such deeply rooted cultural concepts as gender distracted from accomplishing real political change, yet still wished to re-examine the relationship between gender and culture. Echoing these sentiments, other feminist science fiction writers magnified gender to examine its cultural falsities, including Angela Carter in her 1977 novel *The Passion of the New Eve*.

Carter’s novel follows a young Englishman, Evelyn, who is kidnapped and medically modeled into a woman, the New Eve, by a group of militant feminists. During his transformation, Evelyn is imprisoned in their womb-like commune beneath the desert, Beulah, which Carter describes as a high-tech labyrinthine structure filled with pink light, a place where “myth is a made thing, not a found thing” (Carter). The concept of manufactured myth, that society constructs rather than discovers cultural mythology, registers with what Carter attempts to achieve with this work. Through extreme augmentations of gender stereotypes, Carter satirizes the stereotypical representations of “man” and “woman” assigned by culture, thereby illustrating the basis of contemporary concepts of gender therein. While in Beulah, Evelyn is introduced to Mother, a medically heightened physical embodiment of female fertility, in a way that makes “symbolism a concrete fact” (Carter). Carter’s description of Mother is rife with traditional representations of fertility:

Her head, with its handsome and austere mask teetering ponderously on the bull-like pillar of her neck, was as big and as black as Marx’ head in Highgate Cemetery; her face had the stern, democratic beauty of a figure on a

pediment in the provincial square of a people's republic and she wore a false beard of crisp, black curls like the false beard Queen Hatshepsut of the Two Kingdoms had worn. She was fully clothed in obscene nakedness; she was breasted like a sow—she possessed two tiers of nipples, the result of a strenuous programme of grafting, so that, in theory, she could suckle four babies at one time. And how gigantic her limbs were! Her ponderous feet were heavy enough to serve as illustrations of gravity, her hands, the shape of giant fig leaves, lay at rest on the bolsters of her knees. Her skin, wrinkled like the skin of a black olive, rucked like a Greek peasant's goatskin bottle, looked as rich as though it might contain within itself the source of a marvelous, dark, revivifying river, as if she herself were the only oasis in this desert and her crack the source of all the life-giving water in the world. (Carter)

In a single passage, Mother is associated with a cow, an Egyptian Queen, a sow, a planet, Greece, fruit, rivers; all images of female fertility as a source of strength.

During the Women's Movement of the 1970s, a major point of contention between differing ideologies among women's groups was the call of radical feminists for women to renounce motherhood. As one contributing researcher remarked in a 1973 issue of *American Psychologist*:

It appears to me that a significant number of the most forceful spokeswomen for liberation have essentially very little use for children. When spoken of at all, the tendency is to do so coldly and unsympathetically, and to project the view that children are nuisances and a major barrier in one's path toward fulfillment in the larger world outside one's home. The function of child rearing is denigrated and regarded as basically burdensome, noncreative, and in the same category as domestic chores like cleaning and cooking. (Lott)

This impression is likely the reason many women who desired to have children or cherished their children and roles as mothers did not identify with the Women's Liberation movement, as Lott's study points out. However, her findings also show that men who were supportive of women's liberation were more interested in rearing children (in support of the breast-feeding men of Mattapoissett) while the opposite was true for female participants, who likely equated their liberation with the repudiation of traditional reproductive roles (Lott).

Carter's karate-chopping subterranean fertility goddesses are cartoonish representations of many of the most radical feminist views, including separatist lesbianism and anti-masculinity, female control of reproduction, and matriarchy. In his tribal induction to Beulah, Evelyn is cast as Oedipus, chanted on by his single-breasted sisters to consummate his destiny with the Mother. After his subsequent rape, Evelyn experiences further humiliation and remonstrance at the hands of Mother. Clutching him to her many breasts, she forewarns him of his fertile, effeminate future: "Think of the endless prairies I'm going to carve inside you, little Evelyn. They're going to be like the vast acreage of heaven, the meadows of eternity" (Carter). It is Sophia, his lower-ranking captor, who describes their plan for him in full: "She's going to castrate you, Evelyn, and then excavate what we call the 'fructifying female space' inside you and make you a perfect specimen of womanhood. Then, as soon as you're ready, she's going to impregnate you with your own sperm" (Carter). His transformation begins right away, in a public castration and surgery, the first part of which Evelyn himself views, numb but fully conscious, along with the rest of the commune. Upon their removal by Mother's phallic black knife, his genitals are "tossed" to Sophia, who unceremoniously slips them into her pocket, the loss of which he mourns as the excision of "everything I had been" (Carter).

As Carter's character completes his physical transformation, his psychological transformation begins, in the form of intensive exposure to video, audio, and image representations of mothering and traditional femininity. This process of mental restructuring through relentless media exposure is reminiscent of the type of "brainwashing" undergone by characters in other landmark dystopian science fiction works (cf., George Orwell's *1984* 1948, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* 1953, Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* 1962). Foundational studies into media representations of women began in the 1970s, and scholars

began to see film, television, and advertising as unique mirrors in which to study women's oppression. A popular model emerging from this research was that of stereotyping, which explored the limited and suppressive roles into which the media forces representations of women, such as the vixen and the virgin, the passive housewife, and the gentle Madonna. These scholars hoped that by exposing women to the existence of these stereotypes they could empower them to resist the status quo representations that the media assigned them (Kitch). The goal of Evelyn's re-programming is precisely the opposite; the women of Beulah attempt to turn him into the media's representation of the ideal woman. A beautiful Hollywood Frankenstein, Evelyn—now Eve—manages to escape before her forced insemination. Oppressor become the oppressed, the newborn heroine escapes Carter's dystopic matriarchy only to fall into the author's drastic exploration of patriarchy.

Eve is enslaved by Zero, a malevolent poet whose harem of abused wives kidnaps her from the desert. Carter's description of the villain and the conditions of the dark farm on which he imprisons Eve is fantastic bordering comical:

Zero the poet adored the desert because he hated humanity. He had only the one eye and that was of an insatiable blue; he covered his empty socket with a black patch. He was one-legged, to match, and would poke his women with the artificial member when the mood took him. Nevertheless, they loved him and did not think they were fit to pick up the crumbs from his table, at which he always ate in solitary splendor. Sometimes, to illustrate the humility he demanded of his wives, he would smear his own excrement and that of the dog upon their breasts. He stood on a rock and bayed his poetry over the desert; once upon a time he'd written it down but he'd grown disgusted with words and their ineradicable human content long ago and now all his poems were howled and danced. He attempted to maintain an existence only in terms of expletives and tableaux vivants; he had almost abandoned verbalization as a means of communication and used everyday human speech only in circumstances of absolute necessity, preferring for the most part a bestial locution of grunts and barks. He loved guns almost as much as he cherished misanthropy and spent several hours each afternoon shooting empty beer-cans from sticks driven into the ground on the patio of the ranch-house. (Carter)

Zero's characterizing factor, illustrated by Carter's description, is his sterility and feelings of

impotence. His abandonment of written language in favor of wailing nonsense across the desert is indicative of his inability to propagate and establish a lineage in literature, mirroring the creative futility of his sexual acts. Zero's return to the bestial state, exemplified by both language and crude actions, only reinforces his consuming desire to produce offspring. Immediately upon her arrival at Zero's ranch, Eve is raped by her captor and experiences the most immediate, physical act of oppression against women. She soon learns the system of rules applied to her new sex; that women are interchangeable tools for sex and reproduction, lower even than pigs and dogs, undeserving of such fineries as soap and cutlery, and forbidden from using language. The women share a shed and a few mattresses, wear only blue jumpsuits, and have had their front teeth removed so as to improve their performance of fellatio. Perhaps the most disturbing effect of life on the ranch is the fierce devotion with which the seven wives regard Zero, believing whole-heartedly his claim that intercourse with him renews health and guarantees the continuation of their lives (Carter).

Eve soon learns the core of Zero's contempt for women; his sterility and its perceived source, Tristessa, "the most beautiful woman in the world." A looming presence throughout the novel, Carter's fictitious Hollywood starlet of classic cinema is adored by the author for her mysterious, paradoxical secrecy, dramatic screen performances of desolation, and haunting beauty. Zero is convinced that Tristessa is the cause of his lack of virility and is obsessed with finding the elusive actress, who faded into hiding years before. He attempts to educate Eve on his motives: "She eats souls. She's magicked the genius out of my jissom, that evil bitch! And it won't come back until I stick my merciless finger into this ultimate dyke... Dyke, she's a dyke, a sluice of nothingness" (Carter 91). Zero's fearful anger of Tristessa's perceived lesbianism is an important aspect of misogynist opposition to the feminist movement, during which time

lesbianism occupied a greater part of the conversation surrounding women's liberation. Radical groups like Redstockings touted lesbianism as women's ultimate opposition to patriarchy, a concept to which Zero, Carter's embodiment of oppressive patriarchal forces, is naturally opposed. Tristessa is discovered after relentless searching, and the characters learn that she is actually a biological male: 'Out of the vestigial garment sprang the rude, red-purple insignia of maleness, the secret core of Tristessa's sorrow, the source of her enigma, of her shame' (Carter 128). Eve and Tristessa discover a symbolic love for each other intertwined in exploring the sexual capabilities of, and evolving relationships with, their own bodies, which they consummate in heterosexual sex in the desert. On the surface, this resolution does more to reinforce ideas linking sexuality and biology than uproot cultural interpretations of gender. Afterward, Eve seems to reflect on what she has discovered about gender:

Masculine and Feminine are correlatives which involve one another. I am sure of that—the quality and its negation are locked in necessity. But what the nature of masculine and the nature of feminine might be, whether they involve male and female, if they have anything to do with Tristessa's so long neglected apparatus or my own factory fresh incision engine-turned breasts, that I do not know. Though I have been both man and woman, still I do not know the answer to these questions. (Carter 150)

Carter seems to suggest that perhaps there is no satisfying answer to problems of gender and sexual oppression, and frequently complicates different positions within the novel. Neither the technologically sanitary matriarchal commune nor the bestial patriarchal ranch is an example of utopia, yet when Eve escapes these forces it is only to further chaos, radicalism, and destruction borne of racial, social, and religious clashes. Carter's *The Passion of the New Eve* is useful in exploring extreme dystopias in both matriarchal and patriarchal societies. The author never fully resolves problems of gender, but illustrates in fantastical images and vivid language the complications that arise in trying to construct definitions around abstractions like sexuality,

gender, and the body.

Indeed, in the future imagined by both Carter and Piercy, these have become abstractions; theories capable of being manipulated, reformed, or altogether eradicated. Technology enables these writers to transcend the physical body and expand human capabilities physically, intellectually, and emotionally. In Carter's novel, Evelyn's personal transformation into Eve is a reaction to his physical transformation through medical technology as well as his subsequent cultural conditioning through media technology, and then at the hands of patriarchy. Carter places this delicate medical technology alongside violence and advancements in weaponry within the novel, all replete with vivid description, to enhance the novel's theme of technology's influence on sexuality, gender, and the body. In Piercy's future as well, technology is the determinate tool in overcoming not only issues of gender, but class, race, and other oppressive cultural institutions. Piercy even goes so far as to predict the existence of a personal communication device that strongly resembles the functions of modern smartphones: "My kenner? It ties to an encyclopedia—a knowledge computer. Also in transport and storage. Can serve as locator-speaker" (Piercy). By manipulating genetic combinations in the nursery/brooder, citizens of Piercy's future have eradicated the association between genes and culture, thereby effectually curing society of racism (Piercy). However, the power of technology to transform society and the individual illustrated in these novels is never clearer than in James Tiptree Jr.'s 1974 novella, *The Girl Who Was Plugged In*.

Like Piercy's dystopic vision of Gildina's New York, Tiptree's futuristic society is governed by an omnipresent corporate entity, GTX. In this world, advertising has been outlawed, so companies must secretly market their products through celebrity personalities and publicity stunts, not unlike modern reality television. Philadelphia Burke, Tiptree's seventeen-year-old

heroine, is described as “the ugly of the world,” a collection of physical deformations that alienate her from the image-centric world in which she lives. It is precisely this quality—her “rancid girl-body”—that distinguishes her for unique employment after a failed suicide attempt. Pronounced legally dead, P. Burke becomes the secret human operator of an avatar: cyborg teen superstar, Delphi. She relinquishes her autonomy to GTX, agents of which perform the technological colonization of her body, with “electrode jacks peeping out of her sparse hair, and there are other meldings of flesh and metal” (Tiptree). The reconfiguration of her body into a living, breathing, remote control has entwined P. Burke deeply and permanently with technology. Sadly, she is to be forever trapped in a state of liminality: never able to fully inhabit her new identity as Delphi, yet never able to return to the physical isolation of her former self. P. Burke’s remarkable transfer of identity from hideous creature to the darling Delphi is mediated through the new technology, described by Tiptree’s cheeky narrator:

P. Burke does not *feel* her brain is in the sauna room, she feels she's in that sweet little body. When you wash your hands, do you feel the water is running on your brain? Of course not. You feel the water on your hand, although the "feeling" is actually a potential-pattern flickering over the electrochemical jelly between your ears. And it's delivered there via the long circuits from your hands. Just so, P. Burke's brain in the cabinet feels the water on her hands in the bathroom. The fact that the signals have jumped across space on the way in makes no difference at all. (Tiptree)

As P. Burke slowly acclimates to operating Delphi’s lab-grown wire-fitted avatar body, she is introduced to the purpose of her angelic performance of beauty: to sell products. Tiptree’s exploration of Delphi’s exploitive sexualization for the purposes of profit illustrates the way media representations of women in capitalist societies demean and weaken their sense of autonomy (Newsom). As Tiptree’s heroine climbs the star-studded staircase to pop culture fame, the thin line of wires separating P. Burke and her cyborg-self, Delphi, become increasingly

tangled. The liminal state between P. Burke and Delphi is further complicated when she falls in love with Paul, the son of a high-ranking GTX board member, who does not know the truth about Delphi's nature. As their relationship evolves, P. Burke becomes increasingly unwilling to separate herself from the control-chamber, and subjects herself to vast physical suffering in order to keep participating in the illusion. When Paul and Delphi attempt to run away together, the ubiquitous GTX begin painfully punishing P. Burke through the very wires they implanted, severing her connection to Delphi, and splitting wide open the persistent liminal gap within which the heroine remains imprisoned. When Paul discovers that Delphi's head is full of wires, he assumes that the enslavement is contained within the body he holds, not an underground facility hundreds of miles away. He vows to liberate Delphi from the evil forces controlling her, using his connections to orchestrate an escape to the same underground lab in which P. Burke and Delphi were first joined. As they make their escape, chased by fighter jets, P. Burke fights to stay alive, against efforts of GTX to shock her into submission and Paul's desperately misguided attempts to free her from their grasp. The battle for P. Burke and Delphi is waged once again through the technology that mediates her existence.

When Paul finally arrives at the lab, he breaks open the doors of P. Burke's cabinet hoping to discover the secret behind Delphi's imprisonment, a goal in which he is all too successful. Upon seeing him, ideas of separation between herself and Delphi lost to romantic hopes of rebirth, P. Burke leaps out of the cabinet toward the heroic arms of her lover. Frightened by what he has not yet come to understand is the animator of his beloved Delphi, pushes P. Burke from him, wrenching the wires that have become her only attachment to the outside world, and killing her. Tiptree continues to complicate the strange, technologically generated connection between P. Burke and Delphi. Even hours after P. Burke's death, Delphi

remains animated, though eventually she, too, “dies.” Tiptree’s fragmented heroine serves to not only examine the impact of technology on the body, but the capitalist forces at work to try and control that body. P. Burke’s journey to the dark side of women’s exploitation at the hands of capitalism illustrates the way popular culture manipulates women into participating in a system that ultimately sees them as interchangeable sexual objects without autonomy or value.

Both Piercy and Carter appear to reach a similar conclusion in terms of women and gender through very different creative avenues. Through radical cultural restructuring, Piercy imagines an androgynous society that liberates women through the total eradication of gender. Carter arrives at her imagination of gender liminality by examining gender constructs through sensational magnifications of concepts of masculine and feminine. Far from attempting to make a broad statement about cultural gender institutions, Tiptree seems to combine elements of theory explored by Carter and Piercy in her examination of how technology centered on the body can be misused by existing oppressive forces. Carter’s characters achieve an interpersonal state of gender transcendence rather than the total reimagining of established cultural institutions explored by Piercy. Though they achieve this understanding through physical transmogrification, similar to Tiptree’s P. Burke, Carter’s novel explores the relationship between the biological sexual body and the culturally generated concept of gender in ways that Piercy and Tiptree do not address. While Piercy offers two clearly defined, fully fleshed visions of feminist utopia and dystopia, she does not directly address how people of the future achieved this liberated status. Tiptree exposes the tyranny of image-centric culture and its demeaning effect on women’s self-worth, but offers no escape from the secretive capitalist forces driving it. Carter makes few clear determinations on sexuality and gender, yet imposes total destruction on the world of her

characters. Yet Eve emerges from Carter's chaotic ideological war with child, as well as a hopeful sense of optimism that implies, not an articulated utopia, but the possibility of one.

Just as Eve explores the extreme worlds of matriarchy and patriarchy, and as P. Burke mentally migrates between a false world of consumer capitalist and its dark basement, so Connie explores two possibilities of the future: an utopia in Mattapoissett, and dystopic future New York, where patriarchal values have triumphed. When she is unable to contact Luciente, Connie finds herself thrust into the strange world of Gildina, where she is exposed to no human contact other than those mediated through her television set and that imposed on her by her owner. Like Luciente's future, the institution of marriage no longer exists here, yet in this case it has been replaced not with supportive circles of friends, but contractual arrangements between soldiers and prostitutes. In this future, all women (except for those of the economic elite) are either prostitutes or vessels for childbearing; the only two functions women can fill in patriarchal society as defined by feminist theorists. Their value is purely sexual, yet there has been a division between sexual appeal and sexual reproduction. Women like Gildina, who are used for prostitution, are surgically altered to such extremes that they are unable to walk or move freely, due to the "extravagance of her breasts and buttocks," as Connie observes (Piercy). Where plastic surgery granted Gildina her unnatural proportions, it also lessened the visibility of her race, which she confides is the same as Connie's. In some ways, Gildina can be seen as a future descendent of Eve, or a fully inhabited generic model Delphi; a more distilled image of the media's "perfect woman," readily achieved with a few reconstructive surgeries.

The first silicone breast implants were developed in 1962, and by the time Piercy published *Woman on the Edge of Time* surgical breast augmentation was common within culture; the FDA began regulating the implants the same year the book was published. Piercy shows not

only the full realization of feminist and New Left values of the 1970s, but total failure as well. A society built on surveillance, Gildina lives trapped in a small apartment where she spends her days using drugs and waiting on her contractor, monitored by implants designed to alert authorities if she should say or think anything “versive” (Piercy). She has never been outside, because total environmental destruction has left the outdoors uninhabitable, food is grown en masse on corporate farms and processed beyond recognition, and healthcare is inaccessible and reserved for the superrich, who live in towers far above the proletariat. As Connie learns from Gildina’s contractor, Cash, who embodies the militaristic, patriarchal forces of capitalism, society is controlled by ambiguous multinational corporations; organizations to which Cash, who has been castrated of anything “inessential,” methodically pledges, “The multi is everything” (Piercy). In Piercy’s dystopic New York, technology has not been used to advance the position of women and other oppressed groups within society, but to guarantee their continued subjugation. In this world, Piercy illustrates the ways in which socio-cultural structures of patriarchy and capitalism imprison and enslave women.

Because these works explore ideas of utopia and dystopia as distinct spaces, they can be described as feminist “heterotopias,” ideal for explicating theory. As described in *Exploring the Limits of the Human through Science Fiction* by Gerald Alva Miller, Jr.: “Science fiction represents a unique form of narrative because it inscribes a distinctive kind of space that allows for the interrogation, elucidation, and generation of theoretical concepts” (Miller). Yet the existence of two distinct spaces also implies the transitional space between them; the liminal state. All three characters, P. Burke, Connie, and Evelyn/Eve undergo a re-education of the cultural values that have shaped their identities. By moving Connie between the dystopic present of 1970s mental institutions and a utopic socialist future, Piercy creates contrast and opens

dialogue between the values and ideologies that govern both worlds. In transforming the physical body (a more immediately inhabited space) of her protagonist from male to female, Carter breaks apart cultural associations of gender, sexuality, and the body, and leaves it to the reader to reassemble the pieces. Tiptree explores the liminal space in its most theoretical; the division of the self as mediated by technology. In all three cases, the characters are in a constant state of transition, of liminality, explored in different ways. In *The Passion of the New Eve* liminality is explored through the body, as Carter's character transitions from the male to female sex, in Piercy's novel through Connie's political reawakening, and in Tiptree's *The Girl Who Was Plugged In* the liminal relationship between mind and body is expanded through technology. While Piercy's novel deals broadly with a wide range of socio-cultural issues, and Tiptree focuses on the capitalist domination of the female body, Carter is more involved with the individual's personal experience of cultural institutions of sexuality and gender. During the 1970s, women's realization that 'the personal is political' broadly motivated the grassroots activism that fueled women's groups during the time these works were published, and all are useful tools in examining the values of the second-wave feminist movement as working models of critical theory.

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