Dreaming the Future

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This paper describes my changing relationship to science fiction, surveying the mainstream tradition of utopian SF from a feminist perspective. Bogdanov's novels are seen as a bridge linking a pioneering analysis of science as both progress and problem to our current concerns. Lastly I discuss a number of our most loved feminist SF writers, suggesting that they have created a safe and playful space where the cultural politics of science can be both explored and shared with great numbers of women.

This paper does three things, perhaps four, because the very fact of my choosing to discuss feminist science fiction under the title of *Dreaming the Future* represents a move towards bringing the cultural politics of science and technology into sociology. The paper begins by talking about my changing relationship with science fiction—how I graduated from being a compulsive consumer to being a refusenik and then the how and why of becoming interested and more in feminist science fiction. Next it surveys the mainstream tradition of science fiction writing from a feminist perspective, particularly the more overtly political projects of utopian and dystopian novels. Bogdanov's (1984) *Red Star* and *Engineer Menni* are seen as a bridge linking an earlier analysis of science to contemporary perspectives. Lastly the paper looks at influential feminist science fiction writers, from Gilman, through LeGuin and Bryant, to its final focus on Piercy, Russ and Gearhart as representing recent interventions in the cultural politics of science.

Confessions of a Compulsive Reader

As a very young woman I was a compulsive reader. I suspect that the class antagonism I experienced as a "scholarship girl" attending an upper middle class school in the immediate post-war period meant that voyaging within my head was less precarious than everyday life. In pursuit of a nameless but insatiable hunger, I indiscriminately consumed, surely never "read" in any of the senses my English literary friends use, an incredible quantity of books. Actually that's not quite true. I read about some things with a single-minded determination to make sense of them. It was the poetry and novel-reading

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where the nameless hunger ruled supreme—nineteenth century realism, eighteenth century precursors, fantasy and SF, crime, romance, modernism—all had to be read.

The external hierarchy between genres, writers made little impact on these activities. Particular authors, sometimes just individual books mattered. *Orlando* I read and reread, whereas *To The Lighthouse* or *Mrs. Dalloway* could only hold my attention once round. Other novels written by less grand writers mattered to me in a way, that at the time and for a long while after, I didn't have the words to say. It has been in the re-issue lists of the feminist publishing houses, where I recognize like old friends those books from thirty-plus years back, that I can glimpse the then inarticulatable principles that were operating.

These led individual authors and indeed whole genres to crash. They produced only a blank screen, their power to insist that I read them gone. Thus crime—except when I have flu—went. Romance become an embarrassing bore. Fantasy had a hard time, as I thought the task was to change the world, not dream. But the blankest screen belonged to Science Fiction. It went beyond merely not wanting to read it but to feeling that it was actively hostile and unpleasant. The pervading quality was a macho enthusiasm for the technology of domination, and its equation of technological advance with progress. Generally politically reactionary, it was frequently racist and almost invarably sexist. As Ursula LeGuin wrote in *Language of the Night*:

> The only social change presented by most SF has been towards authoritarianism, the domination of the ignorant masses by a powerful elite—sometimes presented as a warning, but often complacently . . . in general American SF has assumed a permanent hierarchy of superiors and inferiors, with rich, ambitious, aggressive males at the top, then a great gap, and then at the bottom the poor, the undereducated, the faceless masses and all the women. (1979, 99)

While LeGuin's own work was an important exception to the dominant tradition of SF her analysis spoke to my revulsion. To no little extent SF seemed to be part and parcel of the genocidic war the US was waging in South East Asia, where an all powerful science and technology harnessed to imperialistic ends was seeking to crush and erase people and nature alike. In SF and in reality, Man saw himself as infinitely irresponsible, always able to move on, to find and conquer new worlds, brutally and carelessly vandalizing and laying waste to 'his' environment. There was always another planet, another third world country, out there.

Yet simultaneously, against the technocratic dystopias offered by reality and by SF, was the confidence of the political generation of the sixties that believed that it was in the process of making a new and wonderful society. Whether on the scale of the vast revolutionary movements of national

liberation which swept the world, the cultural revolution in China, or the new social improvements rising in the old capitalist societies, the sixties were above all an age of practical utopianism. Maybe in periods of immense social confidence when those who have been cast as having no part to play in the making of history, suddenly move on stage as historical subjects, the need for fictional utopias is less acute. When we feel "In that dawn 'twas bliss to be alive," or as the graffitti of 1968 urged "Let the imagination take power!" then our dreams and desires and our everyday lives converge; each is a poet and our imaginations are in charge of our futures.

It was only in the mid seventies that I began to discover the burgeoning wealth of feminist SF. At first I was reluctant to like it, for its evident utopian strand was surely a distraction to stop us realizing our dreams. I caved in over Marge Piercy's *Woman On the Edge of Time* (1976). Moved by her meticulous account of Connie's all too painful existence at home and in the pyschiatric hospital, Connie's time travelling in which she could even "fly back into the past and make it all come out differently," read initially as a cop out. But I learnt to live with fantasy. Whether it was the metareality of the mirrors on the Greenham fence reflecting back the powers of imperial America or the result of being able to recognize—not without a struggle—that Piercy had written of a still problematic outcome, of dystopic and utopic alternatives; or whether I simply gave up the uneven struggle against an inner need for dreams, need not concern us here.

Certainly that tension around fantasy writing—and most feminist SF novels have strong fantasy elements—is not unique to my experience. Precisely because the writer can make it safe for the reader simultaneously to think about—and transcend—men's violent relationship to nature as well as the structures of gender, class (and more rarely racist) domination, the analysis and the change are likely to be contained within our heads. The richness of the alternative projects of Piercy's Mattapoisett, Russ's Whileaway and Gearhart's Wanderground[1] may be so attractive that perhaps our everyday selves feel condemned to live in a grubby reality with neither the courage—or the strength to oppose it. Should we concentrate our energies on more immediate matters? The only sensible reply that I can make is that nourishing imagination, making it possible both to see and see through the structures and inevitablisms of this society is rather practical and also profoundly subversive of the dominant culture.

But there is a fundamental difference between the best of the new SF fantasy writing and the old—and it is not only the dimensions of gender and race. Whereas the old dystopia or utopia was complete, fixed and final in its gloomy inexorability or its boring perfection, the new accepts that struggle is continuous and interesting. As Luciente, a future person in Piercy's Mattapoisett puts it, the conflict in the future is changed, not ended. Per (Piercy's post-gendered pronoun) says:

> It's that race between technology in the service of those who control, and insurgency—those who want to change the society in our direction. In your time the physical sciences had delivered the weapons technology. But the crux we think, is in the biological sciences. Control of genetics. Technology of brain control. Birth to death surveillance. Chemical control through psychoactive drugs and neurotransmitters. (1976, 228)

Feminist SF writers anticipate and raise in the imagination issues of overwhelming importance to culture and society and, from within their political and theoretical frames, propose solutions. Because a continuing preoccupation is with the construction of gender and the connections between masculinity and the science and technology of exploitation and control, regardless of political perspective, of whether the writer is realist, postmodernist or propagandist,[2] the novels return again and again to Luciente's crux. The significance of the SF feminist writing as an intervention in popular culture needs underlining not least when we think about what was happening—or rather mainly not happening—within left and feminist politics. Apart from the radical science movement the new left and feminism have until very recently neglected the issues posed by science and technology leaving science to the culturally unenlightened at best and at worst as the natural terrain of the right. It has taken the rise of the peace and green movements to raise issues of ecological and species survival, and to insist that science and technology are too important to be dismissed. Red begins to see the necessity of becoming Green while feminism in defense of women's rights takes on sociobiology and in defense of women's bodies takes on reproductive technology.

But feminist SF does this and much more than this, for it offers us dreams and nightmares of different and other futures in which we can see and feel ourselves. The very fact that it is popular means that successful novels sell and are read by hundreds and thousands of women and men. Arguably the marginality of SF's claims to be part of the discussion of *the* novel makes it a freer arena for creative writing—the way that serious literary critics went relatively quiet when Doris Lessing[3] produced the *Marriages of Zones Three, Four and Five* or suggests that marginality has gains. Rather than being a handicap, being a low status/no status genre may well be functional for the prolific and richly visionary outpouring of feminist SF writers. Feminist SF speculates with technological change as an integral and necessary element so as to propose other futures—even multiple and simultaneous other futures, for the linearity of time[4] is itself uncertain—in which dreams and desires, those needs silenced by the orders of domination, find partial expression. Because it can bring together a multiplicity of critiques and alternatives—which we have few, or no, way of putting together in other forms—the feminist SF novel

makes a peculiarly well fitted vehicle for conveying the complex stuff of contemporary social thought. Even where the novelist's style is realist, as with Piercy, the categories of sex/gender, or what constitutes the natural, implode into new conceptual understandings within her utopia. It is only within her dystopia that the concepts and relations are the same—only worse—than today. For Piercy's dystopia is recognizably of a piece with masculinist SF. Socially frozen, technologically dominated, more or less pornographic, mainstream patriarchal SF no way touches us as a literature of desire, only of technological and sexual voyeurism. Piercy's dystopia stands with the text as a prophetic warning, the exterminist opposite of Mattapoisett.

THE SF FUTURE IS MALE?

The dialogue between science and science-fiction has produced two very different traditions in main/male stream SF. One is technicist, a socially unreflecting radiation; the other is preoccupied with the social implications of science and technology and takes the form of utopian futures or dystopic warnings. Technicist science fiction can manage perfectly well without a utopian thought in its head, acting instead simply as a magnifying mirror to existing society. Obsessively concerned with technology, with men's relationship with things, it leaves untouched the social order within which that technology is embedded. If men could travel at the speed of light, if the firepower of their weapons could multiply Hiroshima a billionfold, if they could communicate by telepathy with robots who would obey their every wish, the wishes, it would appear, are not to be greatly different from those of the Dallas soap: riches, power, domination over territory, the crushing of enemies—and available, beautiful and sexually compliant women.

The overwhelming character of these imagined worlds is not merely that they are made by men but that they are almost exclusively populated by men. Such relationships as exist other than between men and machines are between men and men as comrades or locked in mortal conflict. Women are either invisible or are reduced to the passive beauty of the fairy tale princess.[5] Even when, as in the film *Star Wars*, at a pinch the beauteous princess (incidentally the single identified woman in the film except for the Aunt who spends all her time in the kitchen) can fire a ray gun, she is soon confined to her state role of seeing off and welcoming back the heroes.

The locker-room world of dominant SF comes into dramatic visibility in the reactions to Joanna Russ winning the Nebula Award for *When it Changed*:

> Yet it (the novel) was also severely criticized in some science fiction publications. It is a bit odd that readers should feel threatened by a story in which well-characterized likeable women can get along without men, when there is such an

abundance of science fiction in which well-characterized likeable men get along without women.[6]

MEN'S UTOPIAS: WOMEN'S DYSTOPIAS?

If mainstream masculinist SF has little utopian elements for either men or women, what does the overtly utopian tradition offer? In that utopian or dystopian speculations identify dreams and nightmares to encourage us to struggle for or against particular futures, just who is the 'us'?

The immediate trouble, as any swift but engendered survey of the utopian literature indicates, is that by and large men's utopias are women's dystopias. *The Republic, Utopia* itself (whether Thomas More's or H.G. Wells' novel of the same name), the *New Atlantis, Brave New World, 1984*, present to women a dispiriting prospect.

The first scientific utopia, Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*, was written in mid-seventeenth century England in a context of political and cultural revolution. It is a text to which Caroline Merchant[7] has rightly insisted that feminism must pay attention, for Bacon is arguably the ideological father of modern western science. Casting Nature as a woman, Bacon's science is unremmittingly masculine. No longer content to merely appreciate nature, modern science, in order to exploit and dominate the nautral world, had to forceably know her and wrest her secrets from her. For science rape was/is the central metaphor. Indeed, until a renewed feminist movement had rediscovered its own past, perhaps above all—but not only—the outrageous and witty *Herland* ([1915] 1979) of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, it was all too easy to assume that the history of utopian and utopian science fictional writing contained little that was positive for women.

SF AND THE SOCIAL RELATIONS OF SCIENCE MOVEMENT

While feminists have been quick to draw out the violent character of science's relationship to nature and to argue by contrast for ecofeminism, there has been less attention to the expertocratic element within Bacon's utopia and its powerful influence not only on bourgeois but also Marxist scientists. The constant reference to Bacon within the work of Desmond Bernal,[8] arguably the most influential voice within the 1930s and 40s Social Relations of Science movement, is not chance. The claim for a universal and objective knowledge of the natural sciences made socially conscious scientists of the time feel that they were naturally Marxist. This potent politics, linking science with power, has haunted the Marxist critique of science and informed its utopian projects. Despite the difficult circumstances of the interwar period, the social relations of science movement was intensely optimistic. Its science fictional/utopian writing explored the social possibilities raised by impending

scientific developments, as in J.D. Bernal's *The World, The Flesh and the Devil* (1929) or J.B.S. Haldane's *Daedelus*.[9] The unguarded enthusiasm they displayed about the possibilities of intervening in the natural processes of human reproduction reads strangely to a post-nazi and post-test-tube-baby eye. Today when there is such a profound social critique of high tech, interventionism in medicine, the sunny eugenicism of the social relations movement makes startling contrast. These Marxist scientists envisaged—almost to the last man—a glorious future of the endless cloning of Lenin, Einstein and other suitably heroic figures of left masculinist science and politics. Herman Muller's *Out of the Night* (1935) is the archetypal instance.[10] Alternatively, they fetishised abstract intelligence itself, ultimately reducing humanity to a vast disembodied brain, as in Bernal's *The World, The Flesh and the Devil.*

Nor can the lack of awareness be written off as merely a function of their location in history, for Dora Russell's book, *Hypatia: the Woman of Knowledge*,[11] appeared in the self-same series as Bernal's and Haldane's speculative texts. But Russell's permissive non-technocratic vision simply did not fit in with the cultural and political preconceptions of the Marxist scientists and, as such, was effortlessly and, by common agreement, erased from serious (i.e., men's) discussions. (Of course, something rather similar was happening to Woolf at around the same time so as to detach her class politics from her gender politics, but that is another story.)

Cultural Politics and Bolshevik SF

But if Marxist scientists outside the socialist revolution were both sex-blind in their writings and Baconian in their concern to dominate and exploit nature, there is encouraging evidence from the science fiction of Alexander Bogdanov that a revolutionary analysis of science did not have to reduce all social struggles to that of class. Bogdanov's twin novels *Red Star* and *Engineer Menni*, originally published before the revolution, and republished in 1918 (with *Red Star* performed as a play by Proletcult in 1922) reminds us of the richness and diversity of cultural politics in the early period of the Bolshevik revolution. While eventually the entire debate was to be crushed by the monolithic structures of Stalinism, *Red Star* and *Engineer Menni* offer a science fiction utopia which is surprisingly close to contemporary feminist and ecological writing in its complexity and its lack of political and theoretical closure. This stems in good part from his sympathy with, and concern to interpret within a materialist framework, the subjectivist philosophy of science of Ernst Mach.[12] Bogdanov's lack of closure is expressed in his treatment of post-revolutionary Mars, the *Red Star* of his title. At one level the story is one of revolutionary inspiration, for Mars no longer experiences the class and social oppressions of Earth; at another there are still grave problems

between nature and culture. Industrial success has fostered ecological crisis; all too successful medicine has so extended age that for a Martian to be able to die requires voluntary suicide.

Bogdanov makes a Martian woman engineer, Netti (and after the masculinity of the previous texts that alone is more than a relief), speak for a libertarian Marxism, which is sensitive to nature, and recognizes the multiplicity of social divisions between people—including both gender and race—indeed welcomes diversity, seeing in this strength not weakness. Even though Earth is barbaric compared with Mars, Netti argues for its free development which the Martians should help. She has the responsibility of opposing Stern at the critical meeting at the Central Institute of Statistics where Mars' policy towards Earth is to be determined. Stern, also an engineer, is given the objectivist part to play. He argues that the gathering ecological crisis of Mars can only be resolved by colonizing Earth, a process which objectively requires the extermination of human beings, a matter to be regreted in so far that this will also require the extermination of the rather small handful of conscious socialists. Against this, Netti says;

> He would drain forever this stormy but beautiful ocean of life! . . . We must answer him firmly and decisively NEVER! We must lay the foundations for our future alliance with the people of the earth. We cannot significantly accelerate their transition to a free order but we must do the little we can to facilitate that development. (p. 1984, 24)

She goes on to talk of the other way of managing Mars' crisis:

> We must increase our efforts to find synthetic proteins . . . if we fail to solve these problems in the little time we have left, we must temporarily check the birth-rate. What intelligent midwife would not sacrifice the life of the unborn child in order to save the mother. If necessary, we must sacrifice part of our life that has not yet come into being for the sake of others who already exist and are developing. The union of our worlds will repay us endlessly for this sacrifice. The unity of Life is our highest goal, and love is the highest expression of intelligence!" (1984, 25)

It is the contemporary sensitivity to ecological problems as well as our interest in utopias which take women's dreams of freedom as seriously as those of men, which makes the recovery of Bogdanov's work particularly valuable. It serves as a reminder that the actuality of cultural and political traditions is often more diverse than the ideological interpretation which has not infrequently been laid over them.

Feminist Utopias

But while looking for pro-woman utopias in the socialist SF library may be regarded by some, to mix my metaphors, as looking for a needle in a haystack, life in the feminist culture itself has become incredibly rich. Where as a very young woman, I used to hug *Growing Up in Samoa* to myself as offering a different way where children and parents would no longer be trapped in excessive intimacy, feminism has made it possible to appreciate that this was not a wonderful aberration, but part of the systematic construction of an alternative world-view. When Margaret Mead (1957)[13] argues for "more vivid utopias," we are reminded not only that every contradiction develops its own opposition, but also that there has been a long standing feminist commitment to make that alternative vision public.

As the result of the efforts of many feminists over the last decade or so, it has been no longer possible for women to feel that the utopian project is inherently masculinist and that it is only exceptional good fortune which brings women's social imaginations into published and accessible form. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's magical text *Herland*, first published in 1915, reports a separatist utopia visited by three men. Each adventurer is a distinctive social type enabling Gilman to poke fun at masculinist scientific rationality, at romantic chivalry, and at macho-men. The super rationalist and sociologist Vandyck notes that the society is civilized and that, therefore, it logically must include men. But while Vandyck is slowly educated, not least emotionally, by Herland, one of the group, Terry, the super macho-man, attempts to rape the woman he is in love with, Alima, on the usual argument that women really want to be mastered. Terry's eventual punishment is banishment. The third man, the gentle and romantic Jeff, after a relatively easy resocialization settles down to live in Herland. Gilman's text, not least in the account of Alima successfully first beating off her would be rapist, then together with another woman trussing him up so that he could cause no further harm until he could be dealt with by due process, radiates the self-reliant, confident good sense of this community of women. *Herland* stands as the antithesis to *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1973), that autobiographical account of a woman confined in body and spirit to the point of destruction. Herland, by contrast is nurturant and just, and its inhabitants are strong, capable and gentle. These values come out of mothering, and in Herland the Mothers are a non-hierarchical counterpart to the usual City Fathers. Motherhood as moral precept and as political theory avoids the compulsory intimacy of the other child dyad—indeed Gilman was, from personal experience, all too conscious that not all women are cut out to be mothers. In Herland a 'different voice' prevails.[14]

Gilman's arcadian vision not only solves the oppression of women, but sees this as also solving class, town-planning, clothes design, disease, dogs fouling

streets, militarism, reproduction without males, violence, agriculture and relationships with animals. While the unquestionably most important thing to do with Herland is to have fun reading this wonderful "vivid utopia," the sociologist in me insists on pointing out a problem with this heaven, namely that it is static. There is no sense in which it will ever be necessary or desirable to go beyond Herland. Yet there is unfinished business, for Gilman's matter-of-fact ethnocentricity grates, not least because all else is incandescent with her powerful sociological imagination. The closure and finality of her vision as against the openness and uncertainty of the visions of contemporary feminist utopian novels marks a central difference. With the exception of Bogdanov, this static quality haunts both the utopic and dystopic texts of the early and mid century.[15]

More direct struggles around science and technology and their dystopic or utopian possibilities initially take place between books rather than within them. Huxley's novel *Brave New World* was deliberately written to refute Haldane's optimistic view of the new reproductive biology.[16] While the left biologists had their sunny hopes of cloning lots of little Lenins, Huxley saw extrauterine birth as promising nothing less than the death of the family—and with that civilization. But at best the debate was between a male left and a male liberal construction of the future, both in the interests of men. Feminism had to wait until Shulamith Firestone's (1970) brilliant—and profoundly flawed—intervention decisively shifted the ground rules of the debate towards women. Her achievement was to take Huxley and turn him onto his patriarchal head, seizing within his dystopia the contradiction which enabled her to reveal the feminist utopian possibilities within it. So where Huxley's test-tube baby signaled the death of the family and the end of a male defined civilization, Firestone saw it as indeed the death of the family, and, precisely because of that, offering the possibility of a truly civilized society in which women could realize their liberation.

It is true that Firestone failed to understand that science and technology were dependent on the social formation within which they are produced and therefore could not be mobilized in any naive way as the instrument of women's liberation, but the point I want to emphasize here is the gain from Firestone's dramatic intervention into the politics of science. Her influential writing encouraged women to think imaginatively about the science and technology of reproduction. Firestone was part of a process of breaking the theoretical and political log jam which resulted from the indifference and/or hostility to science and technology within the women's movement. On the face of things, Firestone's totalizing polemic against motherhood and Gilman's sanctification, diametrically oppose each other, yet underneath this opposition lies a shared political commitment to put women's needs at the centre of their utopias. Each identifies what she sees as the critical link which must be broken in the chain binding women's sexuality, reproduction and oppression, but

each does so in different historical and technological circumstances.

Gilman's solution is to downplay sexuality and desire throughout her writing, nowhere more clearly than within *Herland*. Unless my twentieth century reading is too graphic and I am missing some understanding self-evident to Gilman's generation, conception occurs through the collective wish of women. Desire is to be sublimated it seems, for the male partners of the Herlanders have to be educated towards understanding and practicing a higher love. Yet separating the masculinist equation of love and sex made space for a feminist definition of love and a feminist definition of sexuality. Such a separation was also helpful in a period when abstinence from sex offered the most practical form of contraception for women. Again and again in the voices of the past women have described a good husband as one who is 'considerate,' meaning that he minimized his sexual demands, for restraint was often the only effective fertility control available. By contrast Firestone is writing after the contraceptive revolution which (even though the technologies still leave a good deal to be desired) made it possible for heterosexual women to realize their sexuality independently from their choices about having children. Firestone is therefore able to contemplate breaking the link between women's child-bearing and women's oppression and still meet the societal need for the next generation.

The Sience Fiction of LeGuin and Bryant

These themes of sexuality and reproduction are strongly present in the concerns of the new tidal wave of feminist SF beginning with a slightly older generation of novelists, above all LeGuin, whose almost single voice was first raised against the androcentric current. LeGuin has a profound distaste for the contemporary capitalist and patriarchal U.S.A. In the *Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) she provides on Winter a gentle, anarchistic and androgynous alternative. Gethenians are androgynous, during kemmer, the sexually active period, choosing to be either mother or father.

> On Winter there is no division of humanity into strong and weak halves, protectors/protected, dominant/submissive, owner/chattel, active/passive. In fact the whole tendency to dualism that pervades human thinking may be found to be lessened or changed . . . (1969, 34)

In Annares, the utopian society of *The Dispossessed*, equality between the sexes prevails; names do not indicate the sex of their bearer, language has been emptied of proprietorial relations so terms like wife and husband are not used and even the possessive pronoun relating to 'my' as against 'the' partner is unknown. Indeed there is no great pressure for everyone to live in partnerships. In Shevek and Takver's relationship, love, regard and sexual

desire are equally shared. Desire is not limited to the young and beautiful. After a lengthy separation the partners remeet.

> Shavek saw clearly that Takver had lost her young grace and looked a plain tired woman near the middle of her life. . . . The acuteness of his sexual desire grew abruptly so that for a moment he was dizzy. (LeGuin 1974, 276)

Equally she sees him as looking exhausted and equally desireable. From Annares we learn of the possibility of heterosexual utopia.

LeGuin's optimistic attitude to the possibility of men changing is shared by Dorothy Bryant in *The Kin of Ata are Waiting for You* (1971). Bryant picks up the idea opened by Gilman's teasing treatment of the limitations of her sociologist's masculinist scientific rationality, and extended by Le Guin in attempting to go beyond the dualisms of masculinist reasoning, to a fully blown statement of an alternative rationality. Her unlovely Norman Mailer-type hero kills a woman then is injured in a car crash. In his unconscious state he either visits or dreams of Ata. There he slowly learns the values of the "right brain society." The learning is not without him inflicting further horrors, this time on his hosts, including raping a woman he fancies and eventually learns to care for. Back in "reality" he finds himself in the courtroom charged with the woman's death, with a choice of believing that he has "woken up" or has literally returned from Ata. He either works with his lawyer to escape the charge of killing or he can accept the new values—nagdeo—he has so painfully learnt while staying on Ata, which would necessarily require that he tell the truth and accept the guilt. He reflects that

> there was only one way to find out if Ata was real, that was to believe and do what was nagdeo, even if it meant throwing away my life. (Bryant 1971, 212)

After a struggle he chooses nagdeo. Bryant leaves us with the optimistic promise that even such a man can be transformed.

Piercy, Russ and Gearhart

Piercy, Russ and Gearhart take a more radical and less forgiving stance to the task of overcoming patriarchy. Russ and Gearhart are unwilling to accept men on any terms; even the Gentles[18]—themselves an echo of Gilman's Jeff—are unacceptable. Their utopias, Whileaway and the Wanderground, are separatist. Piercy does accept men within Mattapoisett, but her new men are not merely socially reconstructed like Bryant's or Gilman's—they are also biologically modified. Fantasy and mysticism around procreation cede to a robust biological interventionism.

Piercy's heroine Connie is within white feminism what Netti is within men's

socialism. For Connie is a woman of colour, poor, forcibly detained within a psychiatric hospital, a child abuser who as part of her struggle to free herself plans to poison the medical staff who care for her. And we identify with her.

Piercy's involvement with radical politics, not least the radical science movement, gives a sophistication to her analysis of science and technology lacking in Firestone. In Mattapoisett the link between biological motherhood and the societal need for new people is broken by turning, just as Firestone does, to extrauterine conception. The difference is that where Firestone saw technology as outside society and as an autonomous agent of change, Piercy locates the technology as an integral part of the new classless society organized around a new sex/gender system. In Mattapoisett she plays with a genetic engineering that outside utopia most of us would find hard to take, remembering the long, brutal and far from complete history of eugenics. She accepts, for example, that human beings take pleasure and comfort in seeing the features of someone they love reproduced in a new being, and has no qualms about proposing that the replacement for the killed Jackrabbit bears some of the beloved's genes.

Neither sex nor gender are immutable in Mattapoisett. Connie meets Luciente as a man, then when she discovers that per has breasts is profoundly shocked. Piercy's realism enables the reader to share this feeling through Connie, and more positively, to move beyond shock through her growing friendship with Luciente. Piercy deploys a similar device when we meet a man tenderly breastfeeding a tiny baby from the brooder. In Mattapoisett both men and women can lactate so that any one of a child's three co-parents can nurture like women. Some feminists have suggested that women pay the hidden price of this change, in that this implies that women must give up exclusive rights to an area of pleasure. Speaking personally, I'm less sure; while experiencing pleasure and closeness in breastfeeding, I never liked the 24 hourness and learnt with some envy of the breastfeeding collectives developed by a subsequent generation of women.

Piercy understands that not only is nature modified continuously by culture—and that includes our own nature—but that our understanding of what is natural itself undergoes subtle changes.

Mattapoisett is ecologically sensitive so that people live in harmony with their environment. They also develop new relations with animals, (or rather some animals, in that conversation between cats and people is possible, whereas a dinner of roast goose remains in carnivorous glory). Sexuality is polymorphous permissiveness, where desire includes love, liking, pleasure and comfort. *Woman on the Edge of Time* uses the safe place of Mattapoisett to redraw the line between nature and culture.

Mattapoisett is fundamentally different from earlier utopias, in that from within Bomb Culture[19] there is a recognition that uncertainty is the only thing we can be certain about. Even utopia has to contest its space for survival

and renewal. Parallel with Mattapoisett is a society where what is gross within contemporary society is amplified a thousand fold. Connie's time travelling to this other place, where women exist as subhuman sex objects, makes it clear why people from Mattapoisett will even die to defend their society. By the side of Piercy's dream of the future is the unequivocal declaration that unless the future defends itself, the nightmare alternative always exists, waiting to overwhelm utopia.

Joanna Russ is less optimistic about the chance of a new society which includes either new men or has a reconstructed sex-gender system. Her utopia is called Whileaway, because the men are "away." It is necessarily and pleasurably separatist. Men, writes Russ, "hog the good things of this world." But where Piercy writes as a realist, Russ is a post-modernist, not simply acknowledging fractured identity but deliberately splitting herself into four—whose names all begin with J—to play out four simultaneous worlds, yet with the J's meeting and travelling together through the hostile terrain of Manland. By contrast with Piercy who works through realism and identification with a heroine who bears the multilayered oppressions of America, Russ, except for brief moments like the love making between Janet and Laura which is privileged both politically and in literary style, precludes identification. Instead the reader is constantly distanced in an explosion of witty and savage writing. Two of the J's are drawn from the present or near present—Joanna (herself) and Jeannine, whose total existence revolves round "the Man"; Janet comes from Whileaway where the men have died from a sex-linked disorder, and Jael is a warrior. In Manland where there are no actual women but only modified men, the confrontation between Boss-man and Jael sends up an all too familiar story. Boss-man, overexcited by a real woman, talks first equality, then fucking, then proposes to rape her. As he demonstrably has failed to take no for an answer Jael kills him. When one of the other J's asks if there wasn't an alternative Jael replies that she enjoyed killing him. Russ decisively breaks the link between sex and violence. To a feminist the scene is comic; a humanist has a hard time.[20]

Russ eschews that restricted variant of feminist sci-fiction where the utopia merely ensures role reversal;[21] instead she burlesques it by creating a scene between Jael and her pretty boy live-in lover only to reveal that Dave is in fact a robot. Janet's comment is left to sum up: "Good Lord," she says "Is *that* all?"[22] Heterosexuality is shown as integral to Jeannine's oppression, and as a mere robotic substitute within Jael's role-reversed world. Within Russ's utopia, polymorphous permissiveness is not sufficient to deal with men. Only lesbianism offers the possibility of fusing mutual caring and passion. Men are by definition not includable within Whileaway. *The Female Man* avoids the essential trap within separatism by showing the men in the lives of all four J's as repellent. Russ has no Jeff and no Gentles. Thus while Gearhart, like Russ, proposes a separatist utopia, she lets herself be charged with

essentialism through her creation of Gentles—that is men who have struggled to become sensitive. She even gives a Gentle lines that enable him to criticize the Hill women for putting Gentles into a biological determinist Catch 22. Gearhart makes it clear that the social achievements of the Gentles are in the last analysis unequal to the implicitly "natural" superiority of Hillwomen. Nor is this opening towards the possibility of equal heterosexual relations unique in Gearhart's text, for in the Remembering rooms where the Hillwomen go to recall the bad old days, where sex and violence were locked together, they can also see—albeit exceptional and rare—images of loving and nurturant relationships between men and women. These anomalies in the lesbian utopia are never explained by Gearhart, they are just there.[23]

Gearhart's and Russ's anomalies and silences in dealing with the phenomenon of sensitive men suggests that the dualism they wish to maintain between heterosexual dystopias and separatist utopias contain all of dualism's usual problems for women. By contrast Piercy's polymorphous permissiveness offers a more open utopia where passion and nurturance are not tied to any privileged sexuality.

Nonetheless Gearhart's utopia speaks strongly to a movement which has sought to avoid "stars," for she has neither identifiable heroines, nor even recognizable individuals. The Hillwomen—like Greenham women—have a collective identity. Sensitive to the current distaste for high tech reproduction, the Hillwomen reproduce by gene-merging, the process mingling mysticism and science to women's gain. Gearhart's feminism is profoundly ecological, going far beyond the relatively modest project of Piercy (in which conversation with cats is arguably a quiet personal squiggle on her canvas).[24] The Hillwomen communicate with the sky and trees. Indeed the sense of where one species ends and another begins is blurred, a blurring that has developed politically with the rise of the animal liberation movement. Gearhart is concerned not simply to establish a respectful relationship to the environment, which is a common enough aspect of utopian writing, but to establish nothing less than a common means of communication between nature and culture which will overcome the division between them. The ecofeminism which informs her utopia and leads to the necessity of communication for the new natural/cultural system of the Wanderground finds support in the dangers that Cernobyl and Three Mile Island, acid rain and Star Wars present to both people and planet if the present antagonism between nature and culture continues unabated. (Gearhart's communication project echoes Bogdanov's hope for a new language which would overcome the social divisions between nationalities and ethnic groupings in the new revolutionary society.)[25]

With the single and exceptional voice of Marge Piercy, these white feminists do not go beyond a non-racist stance. Even Gearhart, a profoundly political writer, who has been described, non-pejoratively, by one literary critic as a propagandist who writes SF, cannot take anti-racism on board. She praises

Piercy's work and goes on to reflect on her own:

> For me moving myself out of a non-racist stance and into an anti-racist one is like trying to push an idle steam roller. I can't get moving, it seems hopeless, and it's easier to do something that I have more passion about, more success in doing. (Gearhart 1984, 301)

Indeed that the two women of color who appear in the Wanderground are rescued by white Hillwomen is not in itself an overly encouraging signal to black women. This may be the price of a concept of sisterhood that claims a solidarity which, beginning by de-emphasizing individuality ends by being unable to cope with difference. A utopia created from within the perspectives of white feminists, in which the distinctive experiences of women of color and black women are erased—not least at the hands of white women—is vulnerable to criticism of ethnocentricity.[26]

Cultural Politics and Feminist Science Fiction

All utopias are global projects. Their visions of transformed natural and social worlds endeavor to create seamless webs. As I have argued, by contrast with the masculinist utopias and science fiction, feminist utopias emphasize again and again that technology is not inevitable. Perhaps it is this emphasis, at a time when high technology threatens to destroy our lives, which helps explain my own return to these writings after so many years away. For feminist science fiction with its strong fantasy strand has created a privileged space—a sort of dream laboratory—where feminisms may try out different wonderful and/or terrifying social projects. In these vivid utopias we can play safely with social possibilities that are otherwise excluded by the urgency of daily life. In these utopias, issues of sex/gender relations, of harmony of culture with nature, of the very rationality and linearity of time itself, are opened for our inspection.

But it is above all with questions of sexuality and reproduction that the utopias and fictions I have been describing are concerned—or at least this is how I have read them. And I think the reasons for this are instructive. In a society where science and technology act not only as forces of production but of reproduction, there is a peculiarly pressing need for a safe space to speculate. It is one thing to transform the production system, even with all the costs that this entails to workers, and quite another to be the personal bodily site of transformations of reproductions. Speculations about the social implications of extrauterine birth were common even long before the early seventies, when it became clear that the births of Louise Brooks and the other IVF babies were simply a matter of time. But even then, did we really understand what this might do to the meaning of motherhood, embedded

as that was within a construction of the natural? Did we admit how intimate, how painful are these issues of change in the reproduction system? For women that piece of nature being raped out there in aggressive Baconian style is actually our bodies and our lives. By contrast the feminist utopia offers that self which only gets one lived life—for all the rest is borrowed experience—the chance to dream of other futures.

NOTES

1. Mattapoisset is Piercy's Utopia; Whileaway is Joanna Russ' (1985), and the Wanderground is Sally Gearhart's (1985).

2. I am indebted to Inge Lise Paulser for clarifying Gearhart in this way, as, like Paulsen, I was interested in what Gearhart wrote about even while her literary style gave me difficulties. See Paulser 1984. Piercy is, of course, the realist and Ross the post-modernist.

3. Doris Lessing, *Canopus in Argos Archives* series including *Colonized Planet 5* (1979), and *The Marriages between Zones Three, Four and Five* (1980), and *The Syrian Experiment* (1981). Lessing is preoccupied with both individual and societal change in these utopian and dystopian novels. "Things change: that is all we may be sure of" (*Skikasta*, p. 3).

4. I have not discussed time within feminist SF here, but time is playfully constructed. Certainly to enter the feminist SF novel is to abandon chronology.

5. See Marcia K. Lieberman (1986) for a critical account of the passive and beautiful good heroine and the active, ugly and bad step-mother/witch. The book, as its title suggests, includes feminist alternative fairy stories.

6. Pamela Sargen (ed) *Women of Wonder*, New York, Vintage Books, p. liii, cited by Maureen Barr in *Erotic Universe: Sexuality and Fantastic Literature* (ed) D. Palumbo, New York, Greenwood Press, 1986.

7. The conflict between materialistic mechanicalism and idealistic vitalism is seen as part of a long drawn-out struggle in which women are degraded. *The Death of Nature* is juxtaposed to Ecology and feminism (see Merchant 1979). Other commentators have noted how women themselves are portrayed within the New Atlantis, seen as outside reason, even the honoured wife/mother sits outside the door.

8. For an account of the social relations of science movement see Gary Werskey (1976), also Hilary Rose and Steven Rose (1980).

9. J.B.S. Haldane, Daedulus and later Canniculus were in a series concerned with science, technology and the future.

10. Muller (1935) spent some years working in the Soviet Union in the 1930s and was quite entranced with the prospect of cloning male heroes. Even though his widow successfully fought off the proposal that the California Sperm Bank "Genetic Repository" should be called after him, there was a certain justice in the proposal.

11. Dora Russell's *Hypatia* was written to counter the masculinist concerns, yet it is clear from her autobiography that socialist men, including her husband the pro-feminist Bertrand Russell, dismissed the text.

12. This is interestingly discussed by Loren Graham in an introductory chapter to *Red Star* (Bogdanov 1984).

13. Mead cited by Rohrlich (1984).

14. The values of 'motherhood' which prevail in Herland anticipate those discussed by Carol Gilligan (1982).

15. Bogdanov is the major exception. H.G. Wells, 'A Modern Utopia' is aware that with science and technology "change is the only thing that we can be sure of" (Lessing) but he actually is not very successful as a novelist in making the other nature of his society clear.

16. Reported in Daniel Kelves (1986).

17. James Tiptree, the alias of Alice Sheldon should not be forgotten as an influential alternative voice in SF

18. The Gentles are Gearhart's "sensitive men."

19. Jeff Nuttall (1968) represents an early and isolated attempt to talk about the cultural forms produced by a society which has created the means of its own destruction.

20. In that it is Janet from Whileaway who asks if there is an alternative, Russ invites the reader to share both feminism's and humanism's reactions.

21. Role-reversal is fun for a cartoon, an interlude as here, or even a short story. It palls as a full length novel (see Gerd Brantenberg 1985).

22. The creation of Dave enables Russ to play out the role reversal joke, while his synthetic nature reminds that only a non-person can be the suitable recipient of this sort of heterosexist nonsense.

23. Gearhart's essay (1984) suggests that "full separation is impossible at present, particularly if women want to reproduce themselves." This sense of the impossibility of full separation, despite her mix of technology and magic to solve the reproduction issue, constantly leaks into her writing.

24. My cat, Hypatia, made this paw-note point.

25. The need for a common language, for some common means of communication is echoed in writers throughout the century from, say, H.G. Wells to Habermas. Gearhart's intense ecological concerns means that the linguistic community bridges the natural/cultural divide. Donna Haraway, by contrast, sees us as becoming Cyborgs and offers "an Ironic Dream of a Common Language for Women in the Integrated Circuit," (see Haraway 1985; Rich 1978).

26. Black feminist writing has a strong utopian strand—see June Jordan's poem, 'Song of Sojourner Truth' in Rohrlich and Hoffman Baruch (1984); Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple*, London, The Women's Press, 1985; Tom Babera, *The Salt Eaters*, New York, Random House, 1981; Gloria Anzaldua, 'Towards a Construction of El Mundo Zurdo' in *This Bridge called my Back*, Watertown Mass., Persephone, 1981. So far, I have found little black feminist SF writing but there may be good reason for this at the present time.

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