Sexing Utopic

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> "A novel which makes assumptions about men and women is just as political if they"re patriarchal assumptions as if they"re feminist assumptions. Both have a political dimension. Both have to do with who wins and who loses, who gets what piece of the pie, who gets to survive and who doesn"t, who gets rewarded, who gets punished, who goes to jail, who goes to mental institutions, who goes to the White House."
> Marge Piercy[1]

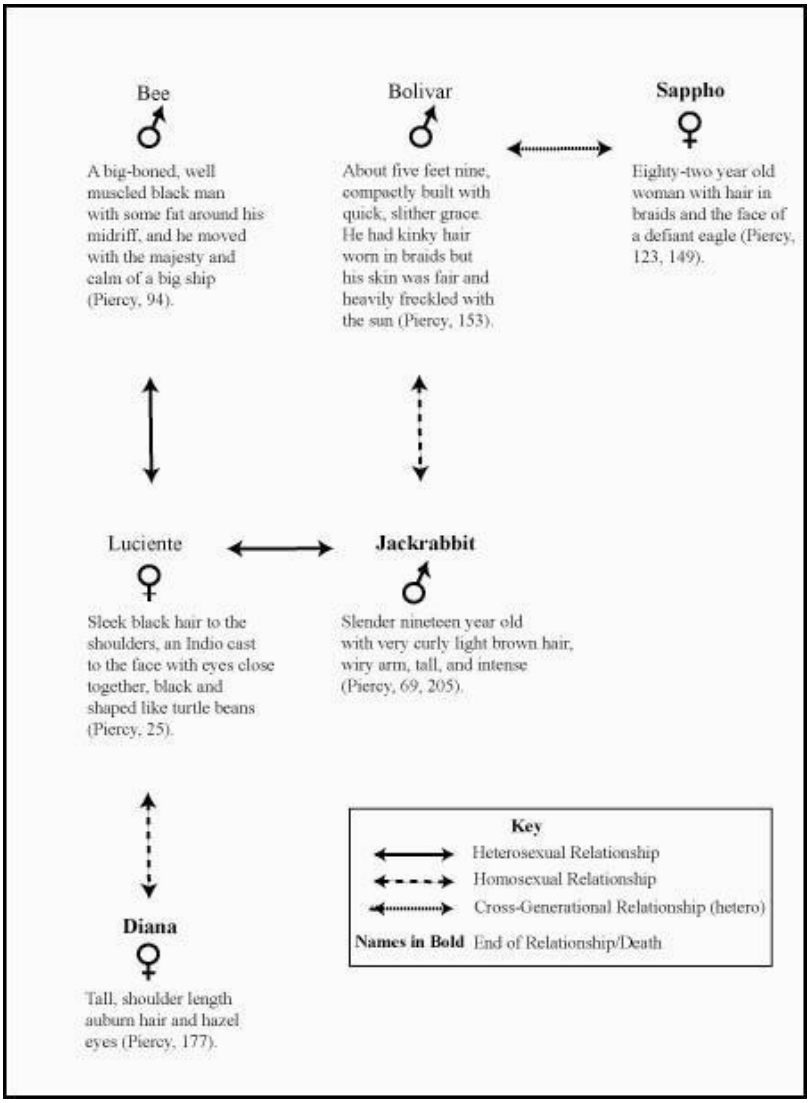
> "I believe we are accountable for what we write just as we are for what we say to people we meet on the street. We are engaged in the wars of our violent times whether we wish we lived –as I surely do – in less interesting times or not; we are responsible for our choices the same as plumbers and politicians and bureaucrats, and our novels embody our values and choices."
> Marge Piercy[2]

Written in 1973, Marge Piercy"s *Women on the Edge of Time (WET)* was groundbreaking in giving individuals autonomy of their sexuality. In a time when homosexuality was still listed as a mental disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders of the American Psychiatric Association, Piercy created characters free to experience the full range of human sexuality. For this and many other reasons, Piercy deservingly has been lauded for her novel *WET*. Upon first reading this novel, I was elated to find a book with such acceptance towards human sexuality. This openness continues to be fought for long and hard today, over three decades after Piercy wrote her novel. It was not until reflecting back on the characters and relationships in the novel that I began to question the social role of Piercy"s novel today. For Ken Plummer, all stories have a social role:

> What are the links between stories and the wider social world – the contextual conditions for stories to be told and for stories to be received? What brings people to give voice to a story at a particular historical moment? What are the different social worlds" interpretive communities that enable stories to be told and heard in different ways? And as the historical moment shifts, … what stories may lose their significance, and what stories may gain in tellability?[3]

In the 1970s, this book was part of the larger social movements (feminism, gay liberation, racial equality) and is reflected in the manner in which Piercy created the utopia. But Plummer also notes that texts change with time; texts that were once radical become conservative and vice versa.[4] The text itself is fixed, but the contexts within the text shift with society. To help visualize my question, I created a figure (see below) of the main characters and their relationships from utopic Mattapoisset. As mentioned, my initial reaction to *WET* was quite enthusiastic, but at the end of the novel there were lingering feelings of doubt. The figure helped to illustrate what was disheartening in the novel and led to a closer examination of the text.

This essay looks only at the characters and their sexual relationships in the future world of Mattapoissett, as that is the ideal utopia Piercy created to critique American society in the 1970s. [Many of her criticisms are poignant today as individuals still struggle for civil rights and even acceptance within society at large.] It is in this comparative sphere that Piercy really puts forth her values and choices. Individuals are free to be solitary, monogamous, or polygamous, and couple regardless of gender or age as long as all participants are willing. It should be noted that Piercy eliminated racial hierarchy in the future world by having the community "mix the genes [of all races] well through the population. At the same time, we decided to hold on to separate cultural identities. But we broke the bond between genes and culture … we want there to be no chance of racism again."[5] By merging the physical traits of humans, culture is no longer tied to appearance. Yet the values within cultures are preserved. For example, the main utopic community in the novel is based on the Wamponaug Native American culture whereas a neighboring village embraces the Harlem-Black culture. Social class is another variable Piercy removed. In this world, everyone"s basic needs are met including a space of one"s own, food and clothing.[6] Additionally, they share community property like bicycles, have created temporary (and biodegradable) clothing for special occasions, and if someone would like a material possession, they may procure it through the library system.[7] Over and over again Piercy stresses the wholeness of the individual not to be divided into a sum of parts or artificial variants but to the health and well being of the entire person.



Looking at the figure we see many of the relationships from Mattapoissett. Through these relationships we can see the wide variety of sexual relationships that Piercy has used to challenge the dominant patriarchal paradigm, where:

> sexuality that is "good," "normal," and "natural" should ideally be heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-

> commerical. It should be coupled, relational, within the same generation, and occur at home. It should not involve … roles other than male and female. Any sex that violates these rules is "bad," "abnormal," or "unnatural." Bad sex may be homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, or commercial. It may be masturbatory or take place at orgies, may be casual, may cross generational lines, and may take place in "public," or at least in the bushes or the baths.[8]

As the figure shows, many of the characters have more than one sexual relationship and these relationships cross the boundaries of generation and orientation.

Connie, our guest into the future, is told early on that Luciente has two male „sweet friends," Jackrabbit and Bee, and of another early relationship with a woman named Diana. It is interesting that Connie does not react shocked when Luciente tells of her lovers. There are many discourses on biological sex, gender and sexuality working that Piercy has orchestrated the levels to achieve her desired affect: showing how these constructions work and how they limit personal identity. At this point in the story, Connie believes Luciente to be a man due to Luciente"s androgynous appearance – dresses in heavy work clothes, is athletic, of slim build, and no make-up/decoration. Therefore, it is not as surprising for Luciente to have more than one relationship as that has been the privilege of the male social role. Also, because of this gender confusion, Connie is not shocked when Luciente tells that her fiercest love was with a woman for, from an essentialist perspective, it is natural for a man and woman to love or as Adrienne Rich has written, compulsory heterosexuality. Nor is Connie too surprised by Luciente"s coupling with males as Connie sees Luciente as too feminine for the male sex role, "Really, he was girlish. Mariquita (homosexual)?"[9] Here we see the argument of intersecting gender and sexuality – transgressions against one (gender) become transgressions against the other (sexuality) and vice versa[10] (Weeks 37). Since Luciente does not fulfill the social role or identity of a "man," then "he" must not be a "real man":

> Many of his physical mannerisms are „feminine" – he uses his hands when he talks, becomes excited and enthusiastic when he shares ideas, his soft voice rises to a higher pitch during these moments, and he cries more, and more openly, than the average guy. „Must be gay …" has been a common refrain ….[11] (Heasley, 109)

As the example from Heasley shows, Luciente is feminized into the passive role of the woman in a compulsory heterosexual society, which easily slips Luciente into the category of male homosexuality. However, it is not long before Luciente

attempts to bring Connie into her time. When Luciente draws close to establish a strong link with Connie, Connie feels Luciente‟s breasts hidden under her heavy work shirt.[12] Connie experiences an initial shock because she has already classified Luciente as a homosexual male and now must reassign her to the female gender. The shock does not last long. With the difficult life Connie has had, this is a minor adjustment and Luciente is her escape out of the mental hospital. The purpose of this scene is to demonstrate how tightly woven gender and sexuality are. Luciente was too comfortable in her body to be a female, yet too delicate to be male, this combined with an androgynous appearance led Connie to assume Luciente was a physical male with female characteristics. The confusion caused by conflating biological sex with gender and then conflating sex/gender with sexual orientation:

> is a social priority, NOT something that is naturally occurring. While the sexes may be different they are not, in fact, opposite. The reality is that neither sexuality nor biological sex is made up of opposites; yet, our dominant meaning system imposes that structure. These are both examples of thinking straight – thinking in terms of opposites and polarities when none exist and naturalizing social practices and beliefs rather than seeing them as social, political, and economic creations.[13]

In Mattapoisset this kind of confusion does not exist; individuals are not typecast into gender roles because there are no gender roles to be typecast into. Each person in the future is free to be themselves without society dictating a social role to perform based on a determined biological sex. Additionally, with the absence of gender roles and reproduction (all babies are created in a facility called the brooder) the need for sexual categories and roles also disappears.[14] Again, Piercy has tried to create a place where superficial and narrow categories do not exist. Unfortunately, this essay needs to reinsert some of these categories to examine how well Piercy achieved this goal.

Looking at Luciente‟s three sexual relationships to start, we see two heterosexual and one homosexual. Luciente‟s relationship with Jackrabbit follows the dominant paradigm with minor deviation. Through the descriptions given of each throughout the novel, we learn that Luciente is a generation older than Jackrabbit, who is nineteen.[15] This should be noted because it is traditionally acceptable for the male to be older in a relationship and has only recently been acceptable for the female to be (slightly) older. [16] This relationship ends not due to its own transgressions so much as because of other larger transgressions Jackrabbit chooses, which will be discussed later. Luciente‟s other heterosexual relationship is with Bee. As we can see from the figure, this relationship does not end; it is accepted. I question this relationship, though. This is because we never see a sexual relationship between the two. Their

partnership appears to be based on friendship and not sex, or to use Luciente‟s words, more of a handfriend than a pillowfriend. Though Luciente says that she and Bee have been lovers for twelve years, we see no sign of passion or even intimacy between the two, especially in comparison to the sexual excitement and display of enamor Luciente has for Jackrabbit or Diana, the two other sweet friends in the figure.[17]

From the start we are told Luciente‟s relationship with Diana was "The most intense mating of my life … we obsessed … We clipped each other. But I love Diana still and sometimes we come together."[18] This is Luciente‟s major challenge to the dominant paradigm and the relationship of Luciente‟s that must be stopped. In the figure above, the characters whose names are in bold represent the characters who die or are separated. Thus, Diana‟s name is in bold because she is not only separated from Luciente (from her past), but she is separated from the community of Mattapoisset (from another village). It is worth discussing why Diana is granted a life that is separate when the other two characters whose names are in bold in the figure, Jackrabbit and Sappho, die in the novel. Not only does Diana continue to live on in the novel, Luciente and Diana‟s relationship is even allowed to continue intermittently offstage. There are numerous lines of thought as to why lesbianism is more palatable than male homosexuality (one of Jackrabbit‟s indiscretions), and quite a few of these reasons deal with women‟s inferior roles within an androcentric patriarchical structure. Because of this, lesbianism has been considered to pose no real threat to traditional male hierarchy. Once thought of as tragic and demonic (not to mention grounds for death), lesbianism is now often viewed as titillating and erotic. During the 1960s and early 1970s, this dichotomy was increasingly present, especially in Hollywood. Lesbians were either "cured" for their youth and beauty, killed for their overt sexuality, pushed to suicide, or, finally, a few were left to a solitary and very lonely existence.[19] So, Luciente and Diana – still being young and attractive - are not punished with death for their transgression, but separated and permitted to continue their affair on the margin, off-stage, and intermittently where it is non-threatening. It has been argued that when female characters temporarily play with lesbianism, as Luciente appears to, conventions of the imaginary male spectator reaffirm the normative heterosexuality of the characters and maintain the parameters of femininity and the boundaries of heterosexuality through the correlation of female "chicness" with traditional roles and behaviors.[20] That Piercy acknowledged the love between two women and let the characters continue the affair is worthy of celebrating in a time when lesbianism was still feared or silenced. Yet, I wish she had permitted the two to continue their relationship as one of Luciente‟s "core." This would have granted a more hopeful and positive view of lesbianism in the novel especially since Luciente adds that since Diana she has mainly "… liked males."[21]

Even in Mattapoissett jealousy exists. Luciente and Bolivar are envious of one another for their relationship with Jackrabbit. The community in

Mattapoissett steps in to perform a "worming", or to work through the tensions and hostility between Luciente and Bolivar.[22] In this worming, the community only sees the destruction of the community between rival lovers and the strain it causes to Jackrabbit. The community believes that if they do not deal with the hostility now, it could flair up into something that could hurt the social fabric of the community. However, Connie, accustomed to jealousy and possessive emotions in sexual relationships, does not see the tension this way. Through her eyes the tension between Luciente and Bolivar is a battle or confrontation between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Connie proposes, "It seems like everybody is careful not to say what seems obvious to me – that Jackrabbit and Bolivar have … well, they're both men. It's homosexual. Like that might bother a woman more."[23] Connie does not mean that it might bother any woman, for we can see that it does not bother the women of Mattapoissett, and I think it would bother women to a lesser degree today. But to a woman from a time when homosexuals were still labeled as psychologically deviant and dangerous, Connie shows her ingrained disapproval. As Jeffery Weeks explains, even with the advent of the gay liberation movement, male homosexuality is still subject to contempt:

> Homosexuality … carries a heavy legacy of taboo. Homosexuals may be accepted … but homosexuality is not … [because] We in the West still define the norms of sex in relationship to one of the results – reproduction. For long centuries of Christian dominance it was the only justification of sexual relations.[24]

To contrast Luciente and Diana's relationship to Jackrabbit and Bolivar's relationship shows an inequality between male and female homosexual relations. This is because of the transgression the gay male makes to his gender role. The homosexual male is often considered to be equal or less than a woman for not living up to his position within the social hierarchy. A woman, on the other hand, has little power and is, therefore, no threat to the power hierarchy. As Vito Russo writes in *The Celluloid Closet,* "For most people, homosexuality was inextricably bound to the idea of men acting like women – and that was bad, even dangerous …"[25] Jackrabbit pushes this boundary further and seals his fate when he decides to be a mother. He is not fulfilling his gender role as a dominant male heterosexual, nor is he performing his gender role in wishing to perform a woman's role – namely being a mother. The community decides he must serve his time as a soldier before becoming a mother. So off to war he goes to put in his time of masculinity before returning home to be a mother. But instead he dies in battle. Was his death a demonstration of the serious struggle the communities like Mattapoissett were facing to uphold their way of life? Again, his demise is a shame to me as it could also be argued that he died while fulfilling his proper

gender role (fighting) before he could betray his gendered birthright with motherhood.

The last character which gave me such hope, but ultimately also died, was Sappho. Here was an eighty-two year old woman, who was not only sexually active, but had a twenty-five year old lover (Bolivar). In our society which allows older men to still be virile (including the manufacture of drugs to aid in that virility), women often seem to lose their sexuality with menopause. Socio-biologists would argue that this is due to the loss of the women‟s ability to procreate, that without the function of reproduction women become neuters and are even referred to as handsome, a masculine trait, rather than pretty, a feminine trait.[26] In our culture, Sappho would be deviant since we "associate sex and romance with the young [and] if the aged show their sexuality, they are thought to be lecherous perverts of society."[27] Anne Fausto-Sterling argues that:

> …one‟s physique, one‟s anatomical function, and how one experiences one‟s sexual body change over time. We take for granted that the bodies of a new-born, a twenty-year old, and an eighty-year old differ. Yet we persist in a static vision of anatomical sex. The changes that occur throughout the life cycle all happen as part of a biocultural system in which cells and culture mutually construct each other … We think of anatomy as constant, but it isn‟t; neither, than, are those aspects of human sexuality that derive from our body‟s structure, function, and inward and outward image.[28]

Fausto-Sterling is arguing for a more fluid understanding of sexuality. With the change in anatomy a change in sexuality should also be considered, not just the death of sexuality. With the freedom of the female body from reproduction, all women in heterosexual relationships should have the option to be like Sappho – sexually active, free of the constraints reproduction can bring. This is also Piercy‟s intent, I believe, but until our culture stops seeing the purpose of sex as reproductive – denying the emotional, sensual and relationship aspects – sexuality for the aged cannot exist. Instead, society "actively discourages sexual expression [of the aged] – not only intercourse but masturbation – to try to sublimate erotic interests into crafts or television or to deaden them with medication."[29] I believe Sappho died in the novel not for her sexuality, but as a means for Piercy to show her values and beliefs on dying. However, a positive symbol of female sexuality for the aged was extinguished in the process.

In such a dense and political novel, Piercy has woven the chance for full human possibility throughout. From the earliest age, children are not taught shame and guilt for exploring their bodies by themselves or with others, "Mostly they learn sex from each other. If a child has trouble, we try to heal, to help…"[30] When Connie exclaims in fear the children could hurt themselves, Luciente

smilingly asked whether as a child she too had not played such games. Upon reflection Connie remembered her games with her younger brother and admitted "not one ounce of Connie's flesh believed it had done her any harm."[31] This freedom to couple and explore continues throughout the lives of those in the future world. Individuals are free to have sexual relations with anyone that feels the same, whether sweet friend or not. Luciente teases Jackrabbit about his sexual activity explaining his knowledge of comforter patterns, "Only you have been in enough beds to be sure."[32] There is no jealousy for Luciente, as Jackrabbit's sweet friend, when she says this nor when he flirts with others openly in front of her, much to Connie's personal outrage. But not everyone in this utopia chooses to have sex, and there is a great respect for these individuals too. For example when introduced to Magdalena, Connie is told that "Person is chaste and solitary …"[33] Connie responds with the typical 20th century insult, "You mean old maid?"[34] Luciente, sensing the contempt in Connie's voice, responds "… we respect people who don't want to couple. It's her way …"[35] In Mattapoisset, sex is a part of life and all sexualities are respected.

In an interview between Ira Wood and Marge Piercy, Wood asks, "Why is sex so important in all of your writing?"[36] In her reply, Piercy says that if she understands and portrays a character's sexual behavior, she is able to show the reader much about the character. She elaborates that "Much that goes on between people can be revealed in the sexual relationship, the power relations, the affectional relations, the aggressive relations, the competitive relations."[37] In *WET*, Piercy does an incredible job of creating characters who experience the fullness of human possibility. From the aged to the young, from heterosexual to homosexual to bisexual, to polygamous to monogamous to solitary, all characters are fully realized sexually. This is why Piercy still is praised for *WET*. But what does it mean if we look at who survives and dies, who is rewarded and who is punished? The lesbian relationship has been pushed off-stage, far removed from the community. Both of Bolivar's lovers die, leaving him alone. Jackrabbit is killed in battle, unable to return and be the mother he wishes to be. Wise Sappho expires after a long and full life. In fact, only one relationship remains unharmed – Luciente and Bee, yet their heterosexual relationship shows no passion beyond friendship. What do the failures of these relationships mean if we interpret Mattapoisset to be a utopia? Is it still a utopia in the sense of sexual autonomy when no sexual relationship survives at the end of the novel? Has this story lost significance as the historical moment has shifted; that is, as we now have more visible and positive representations of a wider continuum of sexualities than when *WET* was created? These questions still persist for me as I struggle to hold onto the idealism the novel first produced and the hope that one day all individuals and their sexualities will be equal.

End Notes

1. Marge Piercy, "Interview with Karla Hammond," in *Parti-Colored Blocks for a Quilt* ed. M. Piercy, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1982), 34.
2. Marge Piercy, "The City as Battleground," in *Parti-Colored Blocks for a Quilt.* ed. M. Piercy, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1982), 171.
3. Ken Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds* (New York: Routledge 1996), 25.
4. Plummer, 25.
5. Marge Piercy, *Women on the Edge of Time* (New York: Fawcett Crest 1976), 96.
6. Piercy, *WET* 64.
7. Piercy, *WET* 145, 167-168.
8. Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader.* ed. H. Abelove, M. A. Barale and D. M. Halperin, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 13-14.
9. Piercy, *WET* 32.
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11. Robert Heasley, "Crossing the Borders of Gendered Sexulaity: Queer Masculinities of Straight Men," in *Thinking Straight: The Power, the Promise, and the Paradox of Heterosexuality.* Ed. C. Ingraham, (New York: Routledge, 2005), 109.
12. Piercy, *WET* 58.
13. Chrys Ingraham, *Thinking Straight: The Power, the Promise, and the Paradox of Heterosexuality.* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 2.
14. Piercy, *WET* 97.
15. Piercy, *WET* 47, 205.
16. Hernan Vera, Donna H. Berardo, and Felix M. Berardo, "Age Heterogamy in Marriage," in *Journal of Marriage and the Family,* Vol. 47, No.3 August 1985, 554.
17. Piercy, *WET* 57.
18. Piercy, *WET* 56.
19. Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet*, Revised ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 156.
20. Susan E. McKenna, "The Queer Insistence of Ally McBeal: Lesbian Chic, Postfeminism, and Lesbian Reception" in *The Communication Review*, No. 5 2002, 288.
21. Piercy, *WET* 56.
22. Piercy, *WET* 199.
23. Piercy, *WET* 206-207.
24. Weeks, 26.
25. Russo, 133.
26. B. Strong, D. DeVault, and B. Sayad, *Human Sexuality: Diversity in Contemporary America*, 3rd ed. (California: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1999),187.
27. Strong, et al., 195.
28. Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 242-243.
29. Strong, et al., 196-197.
30. Piercy, *WET* 130.
31. Piercy, *WET* 131.
32. Piercy, *WET* 122.
33. Piercy, *WET* 129.
34. Piercy, *WET* 129.
35. Piercy, *WET* 129.
36. Marge Piercy, "Afterthoughts: A Conversation between Ira Wood and Marge Piercy," in *Parti- Colored Blocks for a Quilt.* ed. M. Piercy, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1982), 304.

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