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FEMINIST LITERARY UTOPIAS

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INTRODUCTION

> The title women and fiction might mean . . . women and what they are like, or it might mean woman and the fiction that they write; or it might mean women and the fiction that is written about them, or it might mean that somehow all three are inextricably mixed together . . . .
>
> Virginia Woolf
> *A Room of One's Own*

The relationship between gender and genre, as illustrated above by an excerpt from Woolf's famous essay of 1929, has been extremely problematic, to say the least. Denied access to institutionalized learning and to life outside their "proper sphere," women remained historically marginal to the business of literary production. Because it did not significantly threaten the hegemonic status of male authorship, the issue of gender (together with that of class and race) was seldom recognized and hardly ever addressed. As a result, the category woman writer was subsumed into that of the universal genderless writer (whose prototype, by the way, was male), creating much painful uneasiness for the always exceptional woman who "attempted the pen".[1]

By and large, until very recently, "woman and what they are like" was dictated by male heterosexual desire, expressed both in the fictions written about women and in the fictions women wrote. For no writer entirely creates his or her own fictional world. Writers write out of a literary tradition, negotiating between inherited and oppositional views, reading their plots as they write them in the light of what is culturally available. It is not my purpose to discuss in full the emergence of gender as a category of

analysis, or to give a detailed account of the rise and development of feminist literary criticism and theory. But a few words about the altered perspectives brought about by the second great wave of feminism are definitely in order here.

In the past twenty years or so criticism has dealt extensively with the relationship between women and literature — as both readers and writers. Unknown or forgotten women authors have been re/dis/covered; a tradition has begun to be constructed and, more importantly, existing theories of literary production and criticism have been challenged and changed. Triggered by the countercultural movements of the 1960s and inaugurated with Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* in 1970, the initial stage of feminist literary criticism was bent on revealing the inherent misogyny in the institution of literature through a critique of male stereotypes of women and traditional criteria of excellence. Women began to realize that their experience — as writers, readers, critics and teachers — could not be equated with that of men, usually taken to be the norm.

From this apparently simple realization, it became obvious that a re-evaluation and (re)discovery of women's texts was very much needed and that, instead of focusing on what had been said about women through literary conventions and critical theories, criticism should look back at what women had written, much of which had been either lost or overlooked. This second phase, usually termed "gynocritics," had the great merit of mapping a practically unknown territory of literary production and establishing a specifically female parallel tradition. Several pioneer studies belong here, among which I shall mention by way of illustration *The Female Imagination* by Patricia Meyer Spacks (1975), *Literary Women* by Ellen Moers (1976) and *The Madwoman in the Attic* by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979). The focus of gynocritics was on retrieval and re-evaluation; the stress was on antagonism. There was practically no concern with theory, a field associated with cold masculine rationalism.

But, as Elaine Showalter remarks, "while feminist criticism was one of the daughters of the women's movement, its other parent was the old patriachal institution of literary criticism and theory; and it has had to come to terms with the meaning of its mixed origin" (7-8). In a third moment, therefore, feminist critics began, very reluctantly at first, to address theoretical issues related to literary production, reception and influence, in other words, to revise an inherited conceptual framework and to formulate alternative positions. The new interest in theory was also fostered by contact among three different currents within feminism: the American, with its socio-historical interest; the British, with its emphasis on Marxism and popular culture; and the psychoanalytically-oriented French feminism of Kristeva and Hélène Cixous.

As a result of such developments, by mid-1980s a new category of analysis emerged, not only in literature but also in socio-political and cultural feminist studies: the category of gender, which together with that of race and class had been subsumed under the universalizing concepts of liberal humanism. From the perspective of gender, the literary text began to be seen in its relation to hegemonic discourse as an instrument of ideology and as one of the places where subjectivity is constructed. Theories of the subject increasingly began to inform literary and textual feminist analyses as the recent work of Catherine Belsey and Teresa de Lauretis illustrates.

One of the most interesting and productive areas of investigation arising from the feminist concern with subjectivity has been exactly the problematic relationship between women and fiction, especially the novel and its more popular or "generic" forms such as science-fiction, fantasy, utopia, detective and romance. The focus of analysis ranges from readership to narrative structure and conventions of gender, but underlying most studies there is a shared concern with the ideology of patriarchy and the role of the woman writer in creating oppositional stances to hegemonic discourses.

To illustrate the major contemporary analytical trends — and at the same time lay some preliminary theoretical bases for the present study — I would like to discuss three representative works of feminist scholarship published between 1982 and 1990.

The premise of Rachel Brownstein's *Becoming a Heroine: Reading about Women in Novels* (1982) is that for many generations women readers have emulated fictional heroines in the process of defining themselves and of shaping their identities. "[The] classic heroine-centered novels," she writes, "comment on how literary conventions partly determine images of women in (and out of) literature" (xx). From the paradoxically pure and seductive heroine of love poetry and romance to what she terms the "self-reflexive" or "conscious" heroine of the realistic novel and the "fluid" female character of much modernist prose, Brownstein argues that women in literature have seriously affected the lives of women readers in the pursuit of "an objectified, coherent, gender-based essential self" (xxv). The feminist project, in its attempts to deconstruct and revise traditional scripts of female subjetivity must, therefore, deal not with the ideals themeselves but with the narrative conventions (plot and character) in which such ideals of femininity are couched. A critical awareness of language and discourse and of the literary and sexual assumptions embedded in the conventions of fictional narrative is the first step towards change.

Likewise, for Rachel Blau DuPlessis in *Writing Beyond the Ending* (1985), no fiction is value free. Narrative practices go hand in hand with social practices, and the strategies writers employ can either reinforce or rupture prevailing relationships and consciousness. In her words: "Narrative in the most general terms is a version of, or a special expression of, ideology: representations by which we construct and accept values and institutions" (x). Unlike Brownstein, however, DuPlessis focuses not on continuities but on discontinuities. Subtitled "Narrative Strat-

egies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers," her study investigates how contemporary novelists call narrative forms into question by delegitimizing certain conventions.

Based on the Marxist theories of Raymond Williams and, to a lesser extent, Althusser, DuPlessis argues for creative practice as site of struggle and change. She recognizes, furthermore, "a consistent project that unites some twentieth-century women writers across the century, writers who examine how social practices surrounding gender have entered narrative, and who consequently use narrative to make critical statements about the psychosexual and sociocultural construction of women" (4). Changes in the story indicate a critique of social norms through a pocess of denaturalization, i. e., distancing the reader from what is expected as a natural and universal pattern.

Among the several tactics for "writing beyond the ending" — which she defines as "the invention of strategies that sever the narrative from formerly conventional structures of fiction and conciousness about women" (x) — are the breaking of the traditional marriage/death closure, the imposition of the quest over the love plot, the colletive vs the individual protagonist, and, most importantly for our present analysis, the use of genres such as science fiction, fantasy and utopia to break conventional narrative boundaries. "If a novel travels through the present into the future," she argues, "then social or character development can no longer be felt as complete, or our space as readers perceived as untrammeled" (178). Estranged from the world as we know it, readers can construct new forms of subjectivity and sociality, and thus depart from models of heroine-identification such as those recognized by Brownstein.[2]

Speculative fiction by women is also the subject of Anne Cranny-Francis' *Feminist Fiction,* published in 1990 and subtitled "Feminist Uses of Generic Fiction." According to Cranny-Francis, the appropriation by feminists of the "popular" genres,

or generic fiction as she terms them, is doubly political. On the one hand, such forms have been excluded from the literary mainstream in the same way that women have come to occupy a marginal or "sub-generic" social position. On the other hand, because they foreground instead of naturalizing their narrative conventions, forms such as science fiction or literary utopias lend themselves more easily than does mainstream literature to exposing the discourses of sexism or white supremacism as ideological practices.

Utopia has indeed a long history as a form of political resistance — as its extreme popularity in the American literature of the 1880s and 1890s attests. Its use by both socialists and feminists has been significant. We must, nevertheless, heed Anne Cranny-Francis' warning:

> Feminist generic fiction is not simply masculinist generic fiction with female heroes telling stories of oppression; as such it would risk becoming an even more effective apology for patriarchy. Feminist generic fiction is a radical revision of conservative genre texts, which critically evaluates the ideological significance of textual conventions and of fiction as a discursive practice. (9-10)

Whether we trace it back all the way to Plato's *Republic* or to Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), from where the genre derives its name, the truth is that utopia has occupied an important position in Western culture, though by strict literary standards of aesthetic excellence, it has been seen as marginal, as a hybrid minor genre between literature and political theory.[3] According to the conventions established in the European Renaissance, a typical utopian narrative consists of a guided visit to another place — which has been differently defined as *eu-topos* (the good place) or *ou-topos* (no place). Expressing the ideals of an incipient capitalism, its predominant concern was with an ideal state, and its main target of speculation was political structure and public institutions. As Angelika Bammer observes in her recent *Partial Visions: Feminism and Utopianism in the 1970s* (1991), "to

rethink power altogether, to think not only of changing institutions and systems of state, but the structures of consciousness and human relationships, went beyond the boundaries of the genre" (13). Thus the initial frame of reference of utopia is male-defined and public, and therefore political in its strictest sense. The fictional reordering of the private sphere — issues of relationships and consciousness — belonged to other genres such as romance and fantasy.

The utopian figure, usually an island, is necessarily idealized as perfect, or quasi-perfect, becoming an instrument of critique of existing structures and thus allowing the reader not only to escape but also to challenge the belief that political and social conventions are commonsense, i.e., natural.[4] During the 17th and 18th centuries, under the impact of rationalism, the fantastic, or purely literary, utopia gave way to a utopian political practice, which sought to be operational instead of theoretical.

The next burst of literary utopias appeared in late l9th century under the impact of the theories of Fourier and Owen. This time the climate was brought about by the opposition of socialist ideas to the capitalist state. In the Anglo-American tradition Edward Bellamy's somewhat naive *Looking Backward* (1888) and the more politically engaged *News from Nowhere* of Willian Morris (1890) remain as the standard representatives of the genre. Differently from More's, the utopian figure in these novels is not displaced geographically, but temporally (Boston in 2000 A.D. and London in the 21st century, respectively), therefore imparting a stronger ideological pressure on the reader. The traveller-guide (Hythlodaeus in *Utopia*) is replaced by two different characters: a traveller *to* utopia and a guide *from* utopia, whose explanatory exchanges help expose ideological positions. Transported by means of dream or mesmeric trance, Bellamy's traveller invites a passive reading position, especially by the fact that his narrative closure occurs in the future, leaving the reader as a

distant and unreachable observer. Morris's text, on the other hand, returns the narrative to actual conditions, enabling a deeper reflection about social injustice and imparting a socialist subject position to the reader.

But for all their "revolutionary" ideals, 19th-century literary utopias more often than not failed to address race and gender inequalities. "With alarming frequency," writes Angelika Bammer, "those who wield power in the real world continue to do so in utopia, while the others, in positions of servitude, remain equally unacknowledged and invisible in both" (19). Governed by principles of control, law and order, even the most "idealized" utopian vision was unable to envision a situation where "otherness" did not need to be repressed or eliminated. Therefore women, as the prototypical Other, did not fare well in standard nineteenth-century Utopias.

If, as we have indicated in this brief historical outline, utopias tend to appear as a consequence of transitions in political philosophy, of historical ruptures, or of shifts in institutional organization, women, excluded from the public sphere, could not participate in the same utopian ideal — at least not in the same fashion. As Bammer remarks, "From the perspective of women's history . . . the history of utopia must be charted differently. For if utopias appear when people's consciousness of possibilities are changing, women's utopias appear when women realize that times are changing, i.e. getting better *for them"* (22). Indeed, even though there have been quite a few fictional utopian works by women throughout literary history,[5] it is in the context of the modern feminist movement that utopianism acquires specific concerns. Though most late l9th-century and early 20th-century woman-authored utopian novels were largely socialist, they proved for the most part extremely conservative in what regards gender relations. Their women in the future embodied white bourgeois ideals as they represented domestic goodness against the

naturally evil outside world. The separation between power and love, career and family was usually upheld, in favor of the latter, obviously. One of the few writers to overcome this division is Charlotte Perkins Gilman, feminist and political activist, author of *Women and Economics* (1898). *Herland* (1916), her all-female utopia, may be considered together with Morris' *News from Nowhere* as the main predecessors of contemporary feminist utopia. Employing many of the estrangement techniques of the genre — geographical displacement, utopian travellers and guides — *Herland* envisions a world where the dichotomies attending the position of women are exposed and eliminated. As "one of the earliest feminist utopias to exhibit political and textual sophistication and to construct a feminist reading position as a strategy in the production of a feminist subject" (Cranny Francis 125), *Herland* is paradigmatic of the flood of utopian fiction by women in the 1970s, following the radical movements of the 1960's. Explicity feminist in that their main target is not capitalism but patriarchy, such fictions deny the validity of hegemonic discourses and institutions at the same time that they promote a redistribution and reconceptualization of power. According to Carol Pearson's "Women's Fantasies and Feminist Utopias", in their critique of patriarchy such works envision a world that is better for women for its emphasis on power shared instead of power over; they go beyond the "polity" model to create imaginary spaces where the full potential of women can be realized.

My purpose in this study is to examine the great flowering of feminist utopian novels in American literature in the 1970s, as a radical critique of narrative and social practice. Following Adrienne Rich's feminist injunction that "Re-vision . . . is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival" (1979:35), I have found in the feminist re-visions of utopia not only the traditional search of an identity or a desire to reform society, but the building of a new consciousness of our-

selves as gendered subjects of discourse. I shall focus, therefore, on two aspects of subjectivity where the issue of gender occupies a position of utmost importance: the motherhood/reproduction issue, and the question of female sexuality. I have selected, from among the texts available to me, five novels spanning a period of approximately 10 years: Ursula LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Dorothy Bryant's *The Kin of Ata Are Waiting for You* (1971), Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) and Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground* (1979). Two other works would have been used, but are unfortunately out of print and unavailable at the time of this writing (Susy McKee Charnas' *Motherlines* (1978) and Mary Staton's *From the Legend of Biel* (1975).

My focus for each of the topics mentioned above will be on the rewriting of narrative plots and character scripts as these revisions break with hegemonic discourses, allowing for new and more empowering subject positions for women. I speak, then, from a post-structuralist perspective, which I hope to clarify in the chapter that follows through the discussion of a few basic theoretical concepts.

NOTES

1 See, for example, Gilbert and Gubar (eds), *The Madwoman in the Attic,* especially pp. 3-104.

2 Several contemporary writers seem to have become aware of the potentialities of speculative fiction. In her classic feminist article "What can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can't Write" (1972), Joanna Russ argues for the so-called "popular" genres of detective, supernatural and science fiction as providing "myths for dealing with the kinds of experience we are actually having now, instead of the literary myths we have inherited, which only tell us about the kinds of experiences we think we ought to be having" (19). At the end of her novel *Lady Oracle* (1982), Margaret Atwood has the writer protagonist, whose

life has begun to get dangerously out of control, declare: "I won't write any more Costume Gothics; . . . I think they were bad for me. But maybe I'll try some science fiction" (345).

3 See, for example, René Wellek & Austin Warren's *Theory of Literature* of 1949 and, more recently, Northrop Frye's "Varieties of Literary Utopias" in Manuel 1967:25-40.

4 Much of the Marxist criticism of literary utopias (Engles' *Socialisn: Utopian and Scientific* of 1882, for example) sees this practice as alienating for its power to change class-struggle into a form of wish fulfillment.

5 Among the several early utopian works by women identified in English literature, the best known are *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405) by Christine de Pizan and *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World* (1666) by Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle (cf. Bammer 10-27).

CRITICAL PRACTICE, GENRE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE SUBJECT

> To practice literary criticism is to produce readings of literary texts and in the process of interpretation temporarily to fix meanings and privilege particular social interests. Feminist criticism seeks to privilege feminist interests in the understanding and transformation of patriarchy.
>
> Chris Weedon
> *Feminist Practice and Post-Structuralist Theory*

Even admitting that both post-structuralism and feminism allow for a variety of different positions and cannot therefore be taken as monolithic "philosophies", it is undeniable that it has been at the confluence of these two contemporary intellectual movements that important issues about subjectivity and social change have been addressed.

If the first great wave of the feminist movement in late 19th and early 20th century failed to bring about profound changes in gender relations, it was exactly because its major "objective correlative" was the vote — a relatively minor and external goal — and its cultural context was liberal humanism. Having obtained the right to voice a political position did no guarantee the validity of such a position, nor did it significantly alter the material and ideological bases on which men and women relate to each other. The binary oppositions that inform most of western cultural practices — male/female, culture/nature, public/private, creation/procreation — were never really challenged, and asymmetries in power relations have remained as the very mainstay of social organization.

What contemporary feminist practice begins to address, as the second wave of the movement reaches the 1990s, is exactly the nature of a social arrangement in which the interests of women are subordinated to those of men. At this point we must clarify that feminism, often misinterpreted by less informed individuals as a power-seeking, self-glorifying and man-hating hysteria, has at its basis nothing more and nothing less than the recognition, as Chris Weedon points out, that patriarchal relations "exist in the institutions and social practices of our society and cannot be explained by the intentions, good or bad, of individual women or men" (3). For social institutions pre-exist the individual. More often than not the individuals themselves are unaware of the hold of such institutions, assuming the values inherent in them to be natural and therefore true and desirable. But subject positions, or ways of being an individual, are neither totally determined nor freely chosen. Different subject positions are proposed by a variety of social texts or discourses, and the individual or social subject may or may not, depending on his or her power to choose, take up the positions offered. Thus, whereas for the liberal humanist discourse which informed the 19th- and much of the 20th-century subjectivity was a fixed irreducible essence, in the context of contemporary post-structuralism subjectivity is "precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak" (Weedon 33).

It is only by denying the essential nature of subjectivity that we can open it up to change. Hence the shared feminist refusal to accept contemporary social and gender relations as "natural". Whether radical (separatist) or socialist (aiming to transform systems of class, race and gender), most contemporary feminists seek an alternative sense of ourselves as women and transformative strategies for existing institutions and practices. In this sense contemporary feminism approaches materialist philosophy in its emphasis on the discursive processes which constitute

individuals into subjects. Indeed, as Coward and Ellis point out in *Language and Materialism* (1977), it is in language that the social individual is constructed. There is no such thing as the fixed human essence propounded by bourgeois idealism; everything is process, "everything that exists consists in contradiction and in the process of transformation" (4), or, as Catherine Belsey (relying extensively on the ideas of Benveniste, Derrida and Lacan) puts it: "The subject is the site of contradiction, and is consequently perpetually in the process of construction, thrown into crisis by alterations in language and in the social formation, capable of change. And in the fact that the subject is a *process* lies the possibility of transformation" (50).

If language as a discursive practice is the site of contradiction and struggle and the place where subjectivities are constructed, it becomes necessarily central to the process of political change. It is thus no longer possible to see language — and literature — as a neutral reflection of social reality. Instead, they become instrumental for the maintenance or alteration of the *status quo.* Informed by contemporary poststructuralist tenets, feminism can now go beyond external goals to focus on the very operation of feminine subjectivity as a precondition for change. In the same way that the determination of dominant meanings takes place through language, existing power relations can be challenged by creating oppositional nonhegemonic stances or discourses. Even allowing for the possibility of misrecognition, the mere chance that a new positionality will be perceived and taken up opens a space for change. Thus, as a hiding place for patriarchal structures of power, the unified and universal engendered subject of liberal humanism, which has dominated most critical theories of literature and which is still valued in contemporary society, must be challenged. Even if the resulting resistant discourse has but a provisional meaning, the fact that it is put in circulation opens experience to redefinition.

Two different and indeed opposed frameworks for reading literary and cultural texts may then be formulated. We may assume a fully self-present subject and thus approach (fictional) texts as expressions of an already constituted meaning arising from authorship, or we may assume a changing and contradictory reading subject and locate meaning in the interaction between reader and text. Under the hegemonic power of liberal humanistic discourse, literary criticism tended to view literature, especially "great" literature, as the receptacle of fixed and universal meanings which enable us to understand the "truth" of human nature, which is itself fixed (Weedon 139). Only very recently, under the double impact of marxism and psychoanalysis, have alternative critical practices been developed. Theorists such as Catherine Belsey, Rosalind Coward, Fredric Jameson and others, based on the pathbreaking work of Derrida, Foucault, Barthes and Macherey, have undertaken a critique of classic realistic fiction as the vehicle *par excellence* of bourgeois patriarchal ideology.

As Belsey remarks, realist fiction offers "a position of knowingness which is also a position of identification with the narrative voice" (53), as the bearer of values which reinforced the *status quo*. Speaking about critical perspective, Fredric Jameson recognizes the need for "some new and more adequate, immanent or antitranscendent hermeneutic model" for literature (23). He sees interpretation as the "rewriting [of] a given text in terms of a particular interpretative master code" (10) and argues for the priority of the political stance as "the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation" (17).

The implication of the positions above for feminist critical practice cannot be ignored: it means the possibility of questioning what is usually taken for granted, of contesting dominant meanings and seeing through the ideology of patriarchy as it informs gender norms and social organization. It is no longer pos-

sible as in the initial phase of feminist literary criticism to rely solely on the "experience" of women and its expression through literature, or to seek an essence of femaleness that would liberate women once and for all. The realization that gendered subject positions are constructed by discourses which compete among themselves explains, for example, the questions raised by Catherine Belsey in her important essay of 1985:

> Why, since all women experience the effects of patriarchal practices, are not all women feminists? And why do those of us who think of ourselves as feminists find ourselves inadvertently colluding, at least from time to time, with the patriarchal values and assumptions prevalent in our society? (45)

In the choice between conflicting subject positions, a discourse of resistance which does not have a firm base in institutional practices — no social power — may not be taken up or even perceived as possibility.[1]

Besides, though positions within discourse are multiple and always changing, at a specific historical moment only a limited number of competing discourses are available, some having more power and status than others. Thus literature, as one of the vehicles or sites for the ideological construction of gendered subjectivity, becomes important not as a mere reflection of female experience (realistic fiction), but as the very instrument for the possible constitution of non-hegemonic positions since by putting in circulation different alternative discourses, it helps construct likewise alternative and resistant subject positions. As Belsey remarks, with both a warning and a promise,

> The interpellation of the reader in the literary text could be argued to have a role in reinforcing the concepts of the world and of subjectivity. . . . On the other hand, certain critical modes could be seen to challenge these concepts, and to call in question the particular complex of imaginary relations between individuals and the real conditions of their existence which helps to reproduce the present relations of class, race and gender. (1985:51)

In other words, any literary text may work for or against dominant ideology, depending on how its interpellation is received and understood. If we, as critics, seek one unified non-contradictory meaning or fixed "truth", we cannot avoid falling into the liberal humanistic tradition with its focus on authorship and realistic representation. If, instead, we attend to the contradictions and multiplicity of possible meanings of a text, we may be able to encounter new and more critical positionalities, not only in the fissures and breaks of the text itself but in the very relation between reader and text.

One of the contemporary critics who provides a useful framework for bringing together concepts such as subjectivity, genre and critical practice is Fredric Jameson, who privileges the subject as the path along which literature needs to be historicized. In the chapter "On Interpretation" of his *Political Unconscious* he recognizes three semantic horizons as different moments in the process of interpretation.

The first is constituted by the text as a closed system, i.e., a cultural artifact which can be apprehended "as the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction" (77). In the second horizon, the realm of ideologemes, the text is seen as a dialogical rendering of contradiction, in which the oppositional pole is presented as antagonistic to hegemonic discourse, precluding any resolution or reconciliation. As in the first horizon, he points out, "the affirmation of such nonhegemonic cultural voices remains inffective" (86), favoring a process of cooptation and neutralization, very much like what happened with the feminist agenda of the early woman's movement. It is within a third horizon, that of a cultural revolution, "in which the coexistence of various modes of production becomes visibly antagonistic, their contradictions moving to the very center of political, social and historical life" (95), that the text or cultural artifact becomes the very arena where conflicting positionalities can be perceived. In Jameson's words,

> These dynamics — the newly constituted "text" of our third horizon — make up what can be termed the *ideology of form,* that is, the determinate contradiction of the specific messages emitted by the varied sign systems which coexist in a given artistic process as well as in its general social formation. (98-99)

And nowhere is this more apparent than in the area of literary genres, which he defines as "literary institutions, social contracts between writer and public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact" (106). The two tendencies of contemporary genre criticism recognized by Jameson — the Semantic, with its concern with "vision" or what it means, and the Syntactic, with its attention to structure or how it works — prove equally important for the analysis of literary utopias, a form which only recently has opened up to innovation and experimentation, but for which change has been, at least theoretically, the very *raison d être.*

Among the four basic genres or modes recognized by Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* — comedy, tragedy, epic and romance — it is the romance that has the highest transformative power in the sense of restoring a lost Edenic balance or foreseeing a less imperfect future. Because it tends to offer possibilities of renewal, the romance mode has usually been reappropriated in moments of transition or discontinuity, when old certainties no longer fulfill their function as providers of stability. From a materialist perspective (and here we again enlist the help of Fredric Jameson), it "generally appears in a transitional moment in which two distinct modes of production, or moments of socioeconomic development, coexist . . . . Their antagonism is not yet articulated in terms of the struggle of social classes, so that its resolution can be projected in the form of a nostalgic (or less often, a utopian) harmony" (148). Such was the case with the Renaissance romance in connection with the rise of capitalism and of 19th-century romance and the emergence of the bour-

geoisie. And, as briefly shown in the Introductory Chapter, not surprisingly these have also been times when the utopian impulse pervaded much of literary narrative. Which does not mean that the conventions of the genre have remained the same, as was also pointed out. What must be stressed here is the fact that romance, with its attending modern sub-genres, has a long history as a genre where the political dimension is paramount. As Cranny-Francis emphasizes, the practices and conventions of generic fiction (the more popular forms of the romance mode as defined by Frye) do not even pretend to be neutral. They are adopted by "oppositional, marginalized voices [which] must battle for airtime; must set up pirate stations in order to be heard" (14).

Because "genres work by conventions and those conventions are social constructs [,] they operate by social assent, not individual choice" (Cranny-Francis 17). The ability to use a certain genre involves, therefore, taking up a subject position within the dominant discourse it encodes, unless of course a disruption or contradiction is created that exposes the very generic/narrative conventions and forms. Thus,

> [f]or feminists to intervene in these social contracts, to de/re/construct them, revealing their ideological significance, means a fundamental intervention in the relationship between reader and text, a disruption of the reader's conventionalized understanding of the contract, the literary institution of the particular genre. (18)

In this sense, feminist and Marxist analyses have much to share in their struggle to unmask conservative ideologies and allow for the construction of new meanings through fictional narrative. But both must be aware of the danger of co-option and neutralization by the dominant discursive formation — since the narrative structure itself is an ideological mechanism which informs our thinking and our positioning before the text.

Two works which illustrate this mode of critical practice, though in differing ways, may be mentioned here: Judith Fetterley's

The Resisting Reader (1978), one of the earliest works to criticize the "impersonal" reading of major works of American literature and to emphasize the need for women of reading "against the grain", and Carolyn Kay Steedman's more recent *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986), where she shows the interaction of ideology and narrative in the presentation of personal stories. Using Freud's Dora from "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria" (1905) as one of the examples, she demonstrates that if the discursive positioning of the hearer is different from that of the speaker, the narrative cannot possibly operate successfully. Because Dora's narrative is oppositional, it cannot be accepted as logical by Freud, who "reads" it in another frame of reference as unnatural and therefore hysterical. Taken broadly, Steedman's conclusion could well be applied if not to most at least to a considerable part of literature by women in the wider context of literary history — women who have sounded "shrill" and illogical and have often been consignated to silence. As any muted or marginal group in relation to dominant discourse, women writers have had to work simultaneously with and against tradition, from inside and outside patriarchal discourse.[2]

If we define "reading position" as the position assumed by a reader from which the text makes sense and "subject position" as its discursive equivalent, we can understand how feminist critical practice has had to redirect its focus from authorship to reception, to privilege a concern with audience, with the construction of oppositional reading and subject positions, from where the contradictions inherent to dominant patriarchal gender discourses may be recognized and experienced.

Though allowing for the provisional nature of such positioning and its illusory stability and coherence, the fact it is made available through the creation of contradictions with existing practices provides the possibility of social change.

In *Towards 2000* Raymond Williams recognizes two main

forms of utopias — "systematic" utopia and "heuristic" utopia. The former envisions an alternative organization and thus embodies the hope that institutions and policies may be different (and better) in the future. The latter involves an alternative form of "desire", here understood as that absence of fulfillment or satisfaction which encourages people to imagine different (and better) ways of feeling and relating (12-15). In the analysis which follows we investigate how contemporary feminist utopias (re)work, within and against generic conventions, two basic areas of desire for women — motherhood and sexuality — and how they succeed in positing more empowering subjectivities for women.

NOTES

1 About the issue of social power, see Annette Kuhn, "Genres: Melodrama, Soap Opera and Theory," *Screen* 25.1 (1984): 18-28.

2 This contradictory positioning has received considerable attention in contemporary theory. See, for example, Teresa de Lauretis' *Alice Doesn't* (1984) and *Technologies of Gender* (1987).

MOTHERHOOD: VISIONS AND REVISIONS

> Women give birth to children whom they then mother . . . . This complex of birthing and social action is not on the basis of a unique social relationship between the individual woman and her child/ren but of a social institution, motherhood. Because of the way it mediates between the biology of procreation and historical institutionalization, motherhood provides a prime site for exploring and constructing boundaries between nature and culture.
>
> Heather Jon Maroney
> *Embracing Motherhood: New Feminist Theory*

On November 20, 1976, on the "Op Ed" page of the *New York Times,* poet and critic Adrienne Rich published her essay "Motherhood in Bondage," denouncing a generalized resistance to accepting that male-female relations were founded on the domination of women by men and male-controlled institutions. Identifying motherhood, a political institution closely connected to the heterosexual nuclear contact, as the central cause of such asymmetry in power relations, she asserted:

> Under that institution all women are seen primarily as mothers; all mothers are expected to experience motherhood unambivalently and in accordance with patriarchal values; and the "non-mothering" woman is seen as deviant. (1979:197)

Distinguishing between women's actual experience and such an imposed institutional identity, Rich claimed for an analysis of motherhood as "one possible and profound experience for women", divested of any mystique or mystification, in the hope that "women *and* men might one day experience forms of love

and parenthood, identity and community that will not be drenched in lies, secrets, and silence" (197).

Fifteen years later, on October 18, 1991, on the "Opinião" page of *Zero Hora* (a newspaper in Porto Alegre, Brazil), the physician Franklin Cunha published "Os Signos Femininos", denouncing the control of female sexuality by the rules of androcentric society and "the sacred, universal and compulsory idealization of motherhood". Although psychoanalysis has in part reverted the situation in what concerns female sexuality, he continues, "motherhood is still buried under successive layers of primitive cultural tradition" in which the procreative functions prevent women from analytically examining their condition and identity (4; my translation).

Though distant in terms of space, time and perspective, the articles summarized above point to the undeniable importance of motherhood in the maintenance or alteration of existing gender and power relations especially in what concerns the construction of more positive, more liberating subject positions for women. A revisioning of motherhood has indeed been a major concern of contemporary feminism. Seeking to articulate alternative ways of constructing motherhood in the gaps of official discourses, both feminist theorists and fiction writers have produced discourses which counter the dominant social practices under capitalism and patriarchy, thus defined by Daly and Reddy in the "Introduction" of *Narrating Mothers*:

> Under patriarchal capitalism, motherhood is largely about private property: the children are the property of the father who 'loans' them temporarily to the mother, whose duty is to raise those children according to the father's law. In turn, private property and the whole notion of ownership are about competition; the idea is to amass more, or at least better, property than that held by others, because property is power. Motherhood under the law of the white father requires that the mother love her own children to the exclusion of others, that she place her own children above other children, and

> that she see her own children's claims as *a priori* more valid than the claims of other children. (8)

The positions arising from counter-hegemonic discourses, however, are by no means monolythic or even complementary. They range, instead, from a radical abolition of the biological family through artificially engendered reproduction to a no less extreme overvaluation of motherhood through the extension of the maternal relation to the totality of human activity and social practice. Following such oppositional views, feminist literary utopias of the 1970s may be classified along a continuum ranging from the denial of woman's "natural" predisposition to mother, through the technological abolition of biological motherhood, to an all-female ecofeminist world where women's power derives from a "natural" identification with Mother Earth. In the nature vs culture debates, the pendulum seems to have swung back.

1

The contemporary critique of the traditional association of women with nature has its roots in Simone de Beauvoir's classic analysis of 1949, *The Second Sex,* which sees the emphasis on women's "natural" procreative capacities as the reason for keeping them tied to concepts of immanence and repetition, and excluded from the realm of culture and productivity (57-58). Following her injunction, theorists of the early phase of contemporary feminism, who see the source of female oppression in the concept of asymmetrical difference, seek to reduce the polarization between masculine and feminine attributes by positing an androgynous cultural ideal where difference would be downplayed and even eradicated. To this tendency belong the pioneer studies of Germaine Greer (1971), Carolyn Heilburn (1973) and Shulamith Firestone (1970), as well as the less radical works of Juliet Mitchell (1971) and Elizabeth Janeway (1971). Also to this tendency belong the utopian novels of Ursula Le

Guin, Joanna Russ and Marge Piercy, which will be the object of our analysis in this sub-section.

Because of its foremost position among the theoretical works of the period and of the utopian nature of its vision, Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* deserves a closer look. Subtitled "The Case for Feminist Revolution", the book proposes a new materialist theory of history, which she considers superior to that of Marx and Engels because based on the concept of sexual class, which goes beyond that of socio-economic class, and because capable of bringing about a true revolution which would give women the control of the means of reproduction. Firestone's post-revolutionary society promises a new Paradise on earth through the abolition of maternity and of the family as biological and social determinants:

> The revolt against the biological family could bring on the first successful revolution, or what was thought of by the ancients as the Messianic Age. Humanity's double curse when it ate the Apple of Knowledge (the growing knowledge of the laws of the environment creating repressive civilization), that man would toil by the sweat of his brow in order to live, and women would bear children in pain and travail, can now be undone, through man's very efforts in toil. We now have the knowledge to create a paradise on earth anew. The alternative is our own suicide through that knowledge, the creation of a hell on earth, followed by oblivion. (1)

In her analysis of contemporary society, Firestone recognizes the following aspects as the major causes of sexual inequality: (a) the biological family and its modern version, the nuclear family; (b) the myths of childhood and femininity; (c) racism; (d) romance, (e) the polarization between male and female cultural traditions; and (f) ecology (which includes the issue of reprodutive technology). After examining each one of the topics above, she summarizes them in the Conclusion, pointing to *four* basic requirements for her utopian proposal:

(1) The liberation of women from the tyranny of reproductive biology and the diffusion of the maternal function to society as a whole — both men and women — with the consequent eradication of the family as a biologically based social unit.

(2) The complete self-determination and economic independence of women and children with the consequent eradication of the family as an economic unit.

(3) The complete integration of women and children in all sectors of society through the abolition of segregating institutions such as schools.

(4) The freedom of all women and children as to sexual practices, since sexuality will be dissociated from reproductive ends: "In our new society, humanity could finally revert to its natural polymorphous sexuality — all forms of sexuality would be allowed and indulged" (209).

From the perspective of the l990s, we can observe that, if Firestone's cybernetic socialism failed to change our social and gender relations (for we are certainly closer to a "hell on earth" than to a Messianic Age), if the "first successful revolution" in history has not been successful at all, at least it has foregrounded the issue of sexual difference and of reproduction.

The immediate responses to the book were, not surprisingly, rather negative. Even feminists were either unwilling or unprepared to see the goal of feminist revolution as

> not just the elimination of male *privilege* but of the sex *distinction* itself: genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally. . . . The reproduction of the species by one sex for the benefit of both would be replaced by (at least the option of) artificial reproduction: children would be born to both sexes equally, or independently of either, however one chooses to look at it. . . . (11)

After centuries of believing their association with nature (through biology) as a source of power, women were reluctant to relinquish, or even to rediffuse, the "female principle" (211). But the idea

which had begun to shape itself in the early 60s posed unheard of possibilities for speculative fiction.

1.1

Though not radically feminist in its underlying philosophy, Ursula Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness* deserves being discussed for its almost intuitive and highly speculative grasp of male-female dichotomies and of the importance of motherhood for the maintenance or eradication of asymmetry in gender relations.

The protagonist Genly Ai, an earth-born male envoy to the planet Gethen (Winter), has the mission of convincing the two most important Gethenian "nations" (Karhide and Orgoreyn) to join the Ekumen — a highly technological and "advanced" world that has outgrown nations centuries ago (119,219). Genly Ai's supporter in Gethen is Estraven, who (from our perspective) loses power, respects and also his life in the process of making the union possible. In this sense, the novel is about friendship, the acceptance of difference and about loyalty. But in another very important sense, the novel is an attempt to think beyond dualities, to bridge the dichotomies past-future, order-disorder, male-female, light-darkness, life-death, which inform modern Western philosophy. For Genly Ai's "quest" to be successful, for example, a series of political separations must be overcome. Estraven himself is the symbol of the healing of a historical feud between two "houses" or families — the Stok and the Estre. Karhide and Orgoreyn, the Gethenian nations which must be united, stand respectively, while nations, for the opposing principles of "colour, choler and passion" (101) and of fluidity, insubstantiality (127).

But if politically and technologically the Ekumen offers Gethenians a utopian alternative, in terms of human development, it is Gethen which provides the most highly utopian vision. As an earlier observer remarks, "The Ekumen could not appeal to these

people as a social unit, a mobilizable entity: rather it must speak to their strong though undeveloped sense of humanity, of *human unity"* (90, emphasis added). In Gethen it is always year one, with the dating of past and future events being constantly altered starting from the present. Progress is less important than Presence (48), and the greatest state to be achieved is the capacity of "seeing whole" (175), for

> Light is the left hand of darkness
> and darkness the right hand of light. (199)

Sexually, Gethenians are neither male nor female and at the same time both. As Genly Ai's predecessor explains in one of the many documents interspersed with the narrative proper, everyone in Gethen is ambisexual, though asexual most of the time. "For 21 or 22 days the individual is 'somer', sexually inactive, latent" (82). Once a month, according to the lunar cycle, hormonal changes are initiated and the individual enters 'kemmer' or estrus, which is thus described:

> When the individual finds a partner in kemmer, hormonal secretion is further stimulated . . . until in one partner either a male or female hormonal dominance is established. . . . Normal individuals have *no predisposition* to either sexual role in kemmer; they do not know whether they will be the male or the female, and have *no choice* in the matter. . . . The culminant phase of kemmer . . . lasts from two to five days, during which sexual drive and capacity are at maximum. It ends fairly abruptly, and if conception has not taken place, the individual returns to the somer phase within a few hours . . . . If the individual was in the female role and was impregnated, hormonal activity of course continues, and for the 8.4-month gestation period and the 6- to 8-month lactation period the individual remains female. . . . With the cessation of lactation the female re-enters somer and becomes once more a perfect androgyne. *No phisiological habit is established, and the mother of several children may be the father of several more. (* 82-83; emphasis added)

Now, the implications of this "thought-experiment", as Le Guin herself has termed it (1989:9), for a critique of gender

relations in general and of motherhood in particular are of the utmost importance. In the first place, the fact that "everyone between seventeen and thirty-five or so is liable to be . . . . 'tied down to child-bearing'" (84) implies that social and cultural expectations and limitations, whether considered a burden or a privilege, apply equally to everybody. No one is freer or more responsible than anyone else. Besides, the psychosexual relationship of sons and daughters to fathers or mothers — a question which has motivated most of the feminist studies of the 1970s, like Chodorow's and Dinnerstein's, for example — ceases to exist and with it many of the myths which inform (and deform) our gender relations (Oedipus complex, penis envy, castration complex, etc). Outside the known pattern of socio-sexual interaction, Gethenians must be seen not as men, but as menwomen, a speculation that often throws the reader off-balance in a humorous but extremely relevant play within our known sex/gender categories. "One is respected and judged only as a human being," the reports warn us. "It's an appalling experience" (86).

Appalling, indeed, is to read, some pages ahead, "that King Argaven had announced his expectation of an heir. Not another Kemmering-son, of which he already had seven. But an heir of the body, King-son. *The King was pregnant"* (89: emphasis added). But, whereas we readers are appalled at the last sentence especially, what causes most commotion among Karhiders is the fact that the king is too old (104). In fact, by ambitiously defying (their) natural law, the king is punished with the death of his child. As Genly-Ai describes him in the final interview, in which permission is finally granted to pursue negotiation with the Ekumen, "He looked unwell, and old. He looked like a woman who has lost her baby, like a man who has lost his son" (245).

Parenting, or the caring and education of children, in Gethen engages a quarter to a third of the adult population, each clan being responsible for their own offspring. Though the parental

instinct varies, it is not sex-linked, i.e., there is hardly any distinction between a maternal and a paternal instinct, which makes perfect sense when we think that the same individual can be the "father" of several children and the "mother" of several others. As the report of the Investigator documents,

> Their tenderness toward their children struck me as being profund, effective, and almost wholly unpossessive. Only in that unpossessiveness does it perhaps differ from what we call the 'maternal' instinct. (89)

What we have then in Le Guin's speculative view of motherhood is precisely the tendency to diffuse it to all humankind, by positing a biology that would render male/female dichotomies inoperative in terms of psychosexual and sociocultural patterning. Though not eliminated, as argued by radical theoreticians of the early 1970s, motherhood ceases to have a differentiating value and thus "deconstructs" — though this is hardly a word Le Guin would use — our assumptions about gender roles. In many ways the Gethenian arrangement offers a valid critique of motherhood as a social practice under capitalism and patriarchy by, to use Adrienne Rich's terms, dismantling motherhood as institution only to affirm it as experience. In the possibility of rethinking motherhood from a different perspective, it opens up a metaphorical space in which cultural androgyny becomes thinkable and, to some of us, desirable. As Genly Ai remarks in the opening of his report on Gethen, "Truth is a matter of the imagination. The soundest fact may fail or prevail in the style of its telling. . . " (9).

1.2

Explicitly and even aggressively feminist, designed in a much more complex way than *The Left Hand of Darkness,* Joanna Russ' *The Female Man* provides several juxtaposed versions of femininity (or lack thereof) and gender relations. The four

protagonists — Janet, Jeannine, Joanna and Jael — who in fact are different versions of the same woman, alternate as the narrating voice, providing a sort of network of critiques and explanations.

Jeannine and Joanna, who embody different versions of twentieth-century woman, and Janet, the visitor from an all-female world called Whileaway, are brought together by Jael, an assassin who comes from a near future polarized into two warring factions of Manlanders and Womanlanders and who thus explains their meeting:

> "It came to me several months ago that I might find my other selves out there in the great, gray might-have-been, so I undertook — for reasons partly personal and partly political . . . — to get hold of the three of you. . . . Current theory has it that one cannot return to one's own past, but only to other peoples's; similarly one cannot travel into one's own future. . . . The only possible motion is diagonal motion. . . . Here is Janet from the far future, but not my future or yours; here are the two of you from almost the same moment of time (but not as you see it!), both of those moments a little behind mine; yet I won't happen in the world of either of you . . . . " (160-161)

Thus, inhabiting and to a certain extent determined by different social formations, the four protagonists are able to cross-examine each other's values and in the process throw the reader in a whirlwind of possibilities — most rather uncanny and several quite hilarious. Starting with Joanna, who is given authorial voice in the narrative, we enter a society which closely parallels our own, and in which new possible roles for women begin to be visualized with the emergence of feminism; then we experience the highly polarized social arrangement of Jeannine's world, where the ideology of romance (the passive heroine being rescued into marriage by an all-powerful wage-earning prince-charming) pervades human relationships. In contrast to these closely connected "present" worlds, we have two opposing "future" worlds — Jael's separate spheres of Manhood and Womanhood, and Janet's all-female world of Whileaway. Though there is some

indication that the utopian Whileaway, which is in fact Earth ten centuries from now, was only possible after Jael's Womanlanders had killed all the men, these two speculative futures will be treated as alternative consequences of the eradication of gender relations as they exist today.

Even at the risk of oversimplifying a rather complex and fascinating narrative, which becomes clear only when the experiences of the four protagonists can be fully juxtaposed, I will be treating the issue of motherhood separately, conflating only the views of Jeannine and Joanna, as the opposing twentieth-century attitudes they appear to represent.

Jeannine is very much attracted to the idea of marriage. A 29-year-old librarian in a New York from a slightly different 1960's than Joanna's, she lives alone in a small apartment, wondering "why life doesn't match the stories" and thinking "I ought to get married" (108). Like her cat and her ailanthus tree, however, she lacks a certain human will or impetus to make something of her life. Following de Beauvoir's ideal of immanence (women are, men do), Jeannine inhabits a world of traditional femininity:

> Women's magic, women's intuition rule here, the subtle deftness forbidden to the clumsier sex. Jeannine is on very good terms with her ailanthus tree. Without having to reflect on it, without having to work at it, they both bring into human life the breath of magic and desire. They merely embody. (108)

Like her mother and her sister-in-law, Jeannine is steered towards fulfillment by simply being a woman: "that caretaker of childhood and feminine companion of men is waiting for her at the end of the road we all must travel," comments one of the voices in the novel (119). Described as "a real, first-class Sleeping Beauty" (131), she embodies and is likely to reproduce a sort of pre-feminist womanhood which waits to be rescued and given meaning to by men. Echoing the "feminine mystique" so well recognized

by Betty Friedan (1962), her refrain consists of, "I have everything and yet I'm not happy" (150).

And neither is her feminist version, Joanna, her opposite, the female man. Successful (Ph.D), intelligent (I.Q. 200+), professional (an engineer and college professor!), she is neverthless unable to reconcile her life with her body: "I'm not a woman; I'm a man. I'm a man with a woman's face. I'm a woman with a man's mind" (134). Extremely articulate, ironic and aggressive, Joanna is responsible for some of the best passages in the novel, as the account (summarized below) of how she turned into a man illustrates:

> I'll tell you how I turned into a man.
>
> First I had to turn into a woman.
>
> For a long time I had been neuter, not a woman at all but One of The Boys. . . . (133)
>
> I had a five-year-old self who said: *Daddy won't love you.*
>
> I had a ten-year-old self who said: *the boys won't play with you.*
>
> I had a fifteen-year-old self who said: *nobody will marry you.*
>
> I had a twenty-year-old self who said: *you can't be fulfilled without a child.* (135)

> Anyway everyboy (sorry) everybody knows that what women have done that is really important is not to constitute a great labor force that you can zip in when you're at war and zip out again afterwards but to Be Mothers, to form the coming generation, to give birth to them, to nurse them, to mop floors for them, to love them, cook for them, clean for them, change their diapers, pick up after them, and mainly sacrifice themselves for them. This is the most important job in the world. That's why they don't pay you for it. (137)

Rejecting the whole script of "femininity" but still feeling less than human for being a female of the species ("for honestly now, whoever heard of Java Woman and Existential Woman?" [140]), Joanna decides "to resolve contrarieties" (138) by uniting in herself

both male and female qualities and becoming The Female Man, with both "the burden of knowledge" and "the burden of compassion" (202). Her views on motherhood as belonging to the domestic sphere may be said to echo the critique of the institution as expressed in the 1970s.

> (Mothers have to sacrifice themselves to their children, both male and female, so that the children will be happy when they grow up; though the mothers themselves were once children who were sacrificed to in order that they might grow up and sacrifice themselves to others; and when the daughters grow up, *they* will be mothers and *they* will have to sacrifice themselves for *their* children, so you begin to wonder if the whole thing isn't a plot to make the world safe for (male) children. But motherhood is sacred and mustn't be talked about.) (204)

Talk about it we must, however, as we turn to the future worlds of Jael and Janet, visited through time travel by our collective protagonists.

In Jael's world the dichotomy between male and female, which was extensively pointed out by Joanna, acquires extreme proportions, allowing for virtual parodies of maleness and femaleness in terms of social behavior. Manlanders all carry guns, are fascinated by pregnancy, believe their "women" (males altered through sex-change surgery) civilize them, and keep attempting to get back together with womanlanders "on an equal basis" as the Boss tells Jael during their interview:

> "What we want . . . is a world in which everybody can be *himself*. Him. Self. Not this insane forcing of temperaments. Freedom. Freedom for all. I admire you. . . . You've broken through all that. Of course most women will not be able to do that — in fact, most women — given the choice — will hardly choose to give up domesticity altogether . . . . Most women will continue to choose the conservative caretaking of childhood, the formation of beautiful human relationships, and the care and service of others. Servants. Of. The. Race. . . . (177)

Motherhood is referred to as "the joys of the uterus," compatible with "the emotional nature of women" (179). But, of course, Manlanders have no children; they must buy them from womanlanders, who become their wholesale producers of male children, though we are never told how this is done. All we learn of Womanland is Jael's story, and all we are allowed to see is her automated "home" and her "classic mesomorphic monster-pet" Davy, whom we shall meet in the next chapter.

Describing herself as an independent and successful woman of forty-two who drifted away from the "community", Jael admits she is glad to have been brought up as a man-woman (as opposed to the woman-woman). She is proud, heroic, powerful and rational (Alice Reasoner is her other name), the very antithesis of the woman-substitutes in Manland, and in many ways a "negative" futuristic version of the female man.

For a more positive version of the feminist ideal embodied in Joanna we must turn to Janet and to Whileaway — the future without real men, where gender stereotypes seem to have been eradicated. As Janet's self-introduction illustrates, male and female characteristics seem to have been fused in Whileawayan females:

> I was born on a farm on Whileaway. When I was five I was sent to a school . . . and when I turned twelve I rejoined my family. My mother's name was Eva, my other mother's name Alicia; I am Janet Evason. When I was thirteen I stalked and killed a wolf, alone. . . . I've worked in the mines, on the radio network, on a milk farm, a vegetable farm and for six weeks as a librarian after I broke my leg. At thirty I bore Yuriko Janetson . . . . I love my daughter. I love my family (there are nineteen of us). I love my wife (Vittoria). I've fought four duels. I've killed four times. (1-2)

A predominantly pastoral society, Whileaway is advanced in the sense of following natural abilities and potentialities. People go about leisurely on foot, and are not attached to either places or possessions. Everything is constantly "in transit" and they celebrate the natural events of marriage, divorce, birth and death

equally. The same tentative grasp of the world is evoked by their God, who is obviously female and "a constantly changing contradiction" (103). Their celebratory dancing is different from both eastern ritual and western ballet, for "If Indian dancing says I Am, if ballet says I Wish," the dance of Whileaway says "I guess" (102).

Motherhood in their society is seen as a vacation, a time to have fun and enjoy life. But the ties between mother and child are broken early, when the child is sent to school at the age of four or five. The separation between mother and child is very painful for both, informs Janet: "The child cries because she is separated from the mother, the mother because she has to go back to work." In fact, having a child means for Whileawayan women "the only leisure they have ever had — or will have again until old age" (49).

Though we are not told how reproduction is effected, we may gather from the passage quoted below that there is some form of genetic engineering or intervention and that having a child is not purely a matter of personal choice or convenience:

> Whileawayans bear their children at about thirty — singletons or twins *as the demographic pressures require.* These children have as one *genotypic parent* the biological mother (the "body-mother") while the non-bearing parent *contributes the other ovum* ("other mother"). (49;emphasis added)

Thus, in spite of being a single-sex society, Whileaway approaches in more ways than one the ideal propounded by Ursula LeGuin in ambisexual Gethen. Though sexually female, individuals in Whileaway seem to have overcome polarities as to gender identity. For though the care of young children is the temporary responsibility of the "body-mother", the "other mother" has a similar role to that of the other parent in Gethen. In this way, the same person may be the "body-mother" of one child and the "other mother" of another. Besides, the care of

children is temporary and the family unit does not rely on reproduction or biology for its existence. Consisting of twenty to thirty people, ranging in age from 22-25 to the early fifties, it is in fact a transitory social unit, a kind of "geographical home base" (52) very much in the fashion of the social organization proposed by Firestone and other theorists.

1.3

Similarly to *The Female Man,* Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* presents us a future society based on a feminist critique of contemporary gender arrangements. Less complex than Russ' novel, it nevertheless superimposes future and present worlds in such a way that the human aspirations frustrated in the "real" world may be fully actualized in the utopian society.

With the protagonist, Connie Ramos, the reader is transported back and forth from New York in the mid-seventies to Mattapoisett in 2137. Through Connie as well the reader is led to feel all the inequalities of class, race and gender of contemporary western society, as she, a poor unemployed, 37-year-old Mexican-American woman, struggles for integrity and personhood.

Widowed, jobless, excluded from any friendship or kinship network, Connie has been forced to give up her only affective tie, her daughter Angelina, after having abused her in a fit of despair and self-hatred, as we learn in retrospect:

> . . . it hit her [Connie] that having a baby was a crime . . . that she had borne herself all over again, and it was a crime to be born poor as it was a crime to be born brown. She had caused a new woman to grow where she had grown, and that was a crime. (62)

As the narrative opens, we find Connie attempting to compensate for her total displacement from power by fantasizing affective ties with her niece Dolly, who is pregnant: "She and Dolly and Dolly's children would live together. She would have a family

again, finally" (14). But soon afterwards, while defending her niece, Connie hits Dolly's "boyfriend" and is taken to a mental hospital under the charge of aggressive behavior. There, under the oppressive rule of "the system",[1] and feeling a growing need to escape from the contingencies of her life, Connie makes contact (through hallucinations, we are led to believe) with Luciente, a person from the future who is able to "transport" her (and us) to the utopian society of Mattapoisett. In fact, Connie's "guide" to the future can easily be interpreted as the person Connie herself could become under a different set of socio-cultural assumptions and under more life-enhancing psychological and material conditions.

Mattapoisett embodies most of the counter-cultural practices advocated in the United States of the late 1960s. It is equalitarian, pacifist, and ecological, incorporating most of the "dangerously utopian" tenets set down by Firestone in her cybernetic socialism. Technology is advanced but not dehumanizing and magical practices coexist with an advanced medical science.

Although biological differences have not been eradicated, reproduction is extra-uterine. From genetic material stored in a brooder, embryos are gestated in a big uterus-like machine whenever required for the maintenance of populational balance, observing the need for racial and sexual diversity.

Though childcare is communitarian, mothering is taken up by a group of three desiring adults, of either sex and any age, who set up a temporary sort of "family" until the child reaches puberty. Such parents, or "comothers" as they are called, are seldom emotionally involved among themselves "so the child will not get caught in love misunderstandings" (74). Breastfeeding, which can be artificially adapted to males as well, is voluntary and may be shared by two or more comothers. In this way the asymmetries of the nuclear biological family, with the (usually) exclusive nurturing of children by women, cease to exist, as does

the still prevalent association of women with private space and men with the world outside the home.

When she learns of such maternal practices, Connie cannot help being utterly shocked and disgusted:

> How could anyone know what being a mother means who has never carried a child nine months heavy under her heart, who has never borne a baby in blood and pain, who has never suckled a child. Who got that child out of a machine . . . . All made up already, a canned child, just add money. What do they know of motherhood? (106)

And upon watching a forty-five-year-old red-bearded man breast feeding, Connie's disgust turns into indignation:

> . . . how dare any man share that pleasure. These women thought they had won, but had abandoned to men the last refuge of women. What was special about being a woman here? They had given it all up, they had let men steal from them the last remnants of ancient power, those sealed in blood and in milk. (134)

But, as Luciente explains, birth in Mattapoisett is no longer women's business:

> "It was part of woman'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 never would be humanized to be loving and tender. So we all became mothers. Every child has three. To break the nuclear bonding." (105)

Thus, by extinguishing all systematic sex-distinctions and eliminating biological motherhood in her utopian future, Marge Piercy is able to create an absolutely genderless world of biological males and females. Whereas in the Gethen of Ursula LeGuin's *Left Hand of Darkness* gender equality is achieved through the extension of biological motherhood to everyone, and whereas in the Whileaway of Joanna Russ' *The Female Man*

gender differences are eradicated through the elimination of biological males and through the appropriation by women of the so-called "male" qualities of the human species, in Piercy's Mattapoisett biological differences have ceased to matter and, paradoxically, everybody can be a mother because nobody "really" is one. As Frances Bartkowski remarks in *Feminist Utopias,* "Piercy's family is an extended one in which notions of motherliness have replaced motherhood" (72).

By envisioning social formations which foreground the issues of biological reproduction and social and psychological mothering, the three novels discussed here wholeheartedly embrace the feminist theoretical intervention in the ideological and structural organization of gender brought about in the 1960s. Furthermore, their critique of hegemonic patriarchal constructions of femininity, besides supporting the more radical positions illustrated by *The Dialectic of Sex,* foreshadows the growing tendency to validate "motherhood" as an alternative *modus operandi* in social relations, one which would heal the nature-culture split for both men and women and which is seen by Heather Jon Maroney, "as a metaphor/m melding analysis and poetics, outside the rule of phallocentric linear logic" in the effort "to create [a] new rationality capable of uniting nurturing and strategy, past and future, the conscious and unconscious" (404).

2

The first reactions to Firestone's radical separation of women from their reproductive capacities through the rediffusion of the "female pinciple" to men came through the work of Juliet Mitchell and Elizabeth Janeway. Though not completely rejecting Firestone's biologist position, they shift the analytical focus to the broader context of the public vs the private realm.

For Mitchell (1971), four main factors contribute to the oppression of women: her reproductive function, her role in

production, male control of female sexuality, and the socialization of children along different ideological lines. As she concludes, "the liberation of women can only be achieved if *all four* structures in which they are integrated are transformed" (120). Denouncing the cult of motherhood as inversely proportional to the socio-economic oppression of women and seeing her reproductive capacity as synonymous with the definition of womanhood, Mitchell warns: "So long as [motherhood] is allowed to remain a substitute for action and creativity, . . . women will remain confined to the species, to her universal and *natural* condition (109; emphasis added).

Similarly, in tracing the evolution of the nuclear family and examining the separation between the public and the private spheres, Janeway (1971) emphasizes the cultural and psychological bases of woman's oppression, contributing to a shift of focus from biology *per se* to its implications.

From such studies, a new attitude emerged which saw difference as the basis not only of oppression but also of liberation, and began to reject androgyny by focalizing specifically female concerns. Not surprisingly, several analyses of motherhood appeared in the mid-1970s, such as the well-known works of Adrienne Rich, Dorothy Dinnerstein, and Nancy Chodorow, which raise important questions about the cultural significance of maternity.

Adrienne Rich (1976) is the first to attempt to bridge the gap between radical feminism and biological motherhood. In their effort to recover for women the control over their reproductive capacity, radical feminists had thrown out the baby with the bath water. Literally. What Rich does is separate motherhood into two differentiated concepts: experience and institution. She writes:

> I try to distinguish between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children, and the

> *institution* which aims at ensuring that that potential — and all women — shall remain under male control. (13)

For Rich, Firestone adopts a male perspective which prevents her from perceiving biological motherhood as a new emotional and political context, a potential source of experience and creativity. In such a "motherly" mode, a new form of relationship could be established, one without dualities or polarities. Freed from its institutional ties, motherhood would become an extremely valuable instrument of transformation in so far as it would recover "the miracle and paradox of the female body and its spiritual and political meanings" (24).

Dinnerstein's *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (1976) extends its analysis to the effects of motherhood (as an institution) to society as a whole, exposing the dangers caused by existing arrangements to the future of humanity. For Dinnerstein, the opposition between male and female, with the consequent division of "responsibility, opportunity, and privilege" and the mutual psychological dependence it brings about is the first cause of the social and political conflicts which assail us.

Also based on psychosocial gender organization, Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) examines the development of children into adulthood, trying to determine the origin and the perpetuation of gender differences. Starting with the question, Why do women mother?, she rejects two traditional answers: the theory of nature, according to which women would have an innate predisposition to mother, and the theory of social roles, which attributes the maternal tendency to socialization into gender stereotypes. Based on object relational theory, she diagnoses the drive toward mothering and towards heterosexuality as the result of a typically "female" psychic (as opposed to behavioral) structure imposed since childhood. Like Dinnerstein, Chodorow emphasizes psychosocial structure over the biological (Firestone) or cultural (Rich) bases of gender organization. They both agree, however, that it has become

imperative to alter the existing patriarchal structure of the family in order to interfere in the perpetuation of existing relationships.

As we can observe in the studies of motherhood outlined above, the concern with artificial reproductive arrangements, with the freeing of women from their biological burdens, is conspicuously absent. Instead, there seems to be, especially in Rich's view, a concern with the natural experience or bodily fact of motherhood, with restoring the connection between female biology and her nurturing role. As Rich puts it,

> In arguing that we have by no means yet explored or understood our biological grounding, . . . I am really asking whether women cannot begin, at last, to *think through the body,* to connect what has been so cruelly disorganized — our great mental capacities, hardly used; our highly developed tactile sense, our genius for close observation; our complicated, pain-enduring multi-pleasured physicality. (24)

Though diametrically opposed to Firestone in her evaluation of the female body, Rich's view shares with her a certain "utopianism" in the belief that we can detach the experience of motherhood from its social context and transplant it to a more compatible environment, where the affirmative values inherent in maternity, freed from their negative institutional associations, would be allowed to flourish and be diffused to society as a whole. A balance of social power would be achieved not through eradication, but through the very affirmation of difference. Such a possibility exists in the fictions of Dorothy Bryant and Sally Miller Gearhart which we now proceed to examine.

2.1

In comparison with the three utopian novels discussed in the first part of this chapter, we could say that Dorothy Bryant's *The Kin of Ata Are Waiting for You* is both more traditional and more far-fetched. It is more traditional in the sense of following the simple voyage pattern of travel and return, without

superimposed or multi-layered plots; it is more far-fetched in transforming the voyage into a mystical quest in the realm of the unconscious.

In a drug-provoked nightmare, where dream and reality are one, the narrator-protagonist, a writer of sensationalist best-sellers, ends up by killing a woman who embodies the female characters of his fiction. From the beginning the focus on gender relations acquires deep allegorical connotations:

> "Bastard! You son a bitch! Bastard!"
> I was almost bored. She stood in front of me like a woman out of one of my books. I had a sudden thought that I might have invented her: long legs, small waist, full breasts half covered by tossed blonde hair. . . . Her skin, breaking through her smeared make-up, was blotchy.
> "I exist!" she was screaming. "I' m a person!" (1)

Realizing he has murdered the woman in a fight, the narrator attempts to run away but has a car accident and "wakes up" on the island of Ata, among what he takes to be back-to-nature people.

Social customs in Ata are radically different from those he has left behind (our modern, competitive and polarized technological world). Organized into twelve-member groups, or "families", dressed all alike in loosely-fitting tunics, Atans work the fields, share their food and space, and — more importantly — live for their dreams.

The first thing that impresses the unnamed protagonist is the lack of racial and sexual identity:

> Most of the people were of a racial blend I could not quite identify . . . a large minority of them had startling combinations of physical traits, like the black woman with the nordic features and blue eyes, or the golden-haired boy with oriental eyes . . .
>
> I was occasionally confused because of the total lack of sexual roles. The men waited on me as often as women did, and on each other . . . . I saw no difference of function, except the women

> obviously nursed the infants, but the men carried and cared for the small ones as much as the women did. (19-20)

Though pregnancy and childbearing remains naturally the function of women, babies belong to the community and are circulated among adults of different "families." When a woman enters labor, she is accompanied by the "fathers" (males with whom she has had sexual relations, therefore the potential fathers) until all the community is summoned for birthing:

> "Giving birth is a very hard thing. We all try to help. . . . We try to take some of the pain on ourselves, to share it. We try to give some of our strength for the hard work. We try to make the girl feel happy that, once she has done this, she need no longer carry the burden of the child alone. Then she will labor in joy. At the least, we give the warmth of our bodies surrounding her." (149)

In the best tradition of the utopian genre, the protagonist is slowly initiated into the new social practices of Ata and ends up forming a closer relationship with one of its members — Augustine, the black blue-eyed woman — who teaches him how to achieve the dream state, which is the utlimate goal of life on this utopian island.

While still unable to reach the higher states of dreaming, however, the protagonist blunders through a series of quite revealing nightmares. In one of them he is overcome by his shadows, twelve of them, in a desperate dance around a roaring fire, all of them fighting not to be thrown into the flames. Because of its allegorical representation of the struggle between the feminine and the masculine halves of the human psyche, and for its parallelism with the opening scene of the novel, the passage requires being quoted in full:

> After eons there were two of me left, facing each other across the fire pit. One of me was a woman, a hundred women, all the women, hurt, enraged and furious, that I had ever known. One of me was a man, myself, every rotten opportunistic, cruel, avaricious and vain self I had ever been.

> We faced each other and danced obscenely, cruelly, furiously, ever alert, watching. For every move of the dance was a threat, an aggression demanding simultaneous reaction and defense.
>
> It seemed to go on for years. I was tired. I had to destroy her. I tried every way I could think of, but she anticipated my every move. Then she grabbed the initiative and I was defensive until I could get it back. But I was so tired. Finally I stopped doing anything but defensive, complementary moves. I let her dictate the dance. (129)

What we have here, then, is the foreshadowing of a mystical conversion from misogyny to the "female principle", a conversion which had had its beginning in the sharing of a childbirth experience and which reaches its climax when, having become one with Augustine, the protagonist can follow her in his dreams while she visits *his* world as a healer. When she is killed "by frightened men in a senseless riot" (198), the protagonist has internalized her values to such an extent that he can return to his old life a different person. Waking up (this time for real) in a hospital bed a few weeks after the accident, he is sufficiently enlightened to admit his crime and be killed for it.

Even at the risk of returning to an essentialist position as to "the feminine," we must recognize that Dorothy Bryant's novel illustrates a growing tendency within contemporary feminism to re-evaluate and revalue those aspects of femininity which have traditionally been considered inferior because "natural": the power of intuition, closeness to nature, irrationality, lack of aggressive instinct, etc. Atan society, anarchic in its intuitive organization, valuing custom over constraint or force, non-hierarchical and non-polarized, is a "feminine" vision. The narrator's journey, a sort of Pilgrim's Progress towards full humanity, can only be completed through an acceptance of the "female principle." In this sense, the novel is not feminist but femininist, and the protagonist ends up by becoming not a female man but a "feminine man."

2.2

In her ecofeminist utopia *The Wanderground,* Sally Miller Gearhart goes a step further than Bryant in positing an all-female world from which competition, greed and ambition are conspicuously absent. In the same way that Bryant makes use of the dream as a pre-verbal source of power, Gearhart takes memory as her weapon against patriarchy. As critic Mario Klaren remarks, "Re-membering is part of the general regressive move in the novel toward more primitive or ecological, and thus more powerful, modes of being" (319).

Organized by means of several narrative strands, the stories of the Hill Women, the novel presents a picture of everyday life in a separatist community, with memories and flash-backs explaining how a group of women came to defect from patriarchal oppression in the city and to establish a rural female counterculture where women and nature interact as equals, respecting, communicating with, and drawing strength from each other:

> "I will warm you," she heard. Laughing, she turned to the tree. Gently she laid herself against the heavy bark, spreading her legs and arms about the big trunk.
>
> "I take when you give," said the tree.
>
> "I know," she said. "And I take when you give." (13)

Having restored a primordial interaction with the natural world, they are able to return to pre-verbal stages, developing forms of interpersonal communication entirely beyond the need of either the spoken or the written word. They "mind-touch", function as "remember-guides" to other women, enfold each other through "mindstretch", relive past events through "full remembering", detach their "soft" selves from their "hard" selves, and meet together by means of "channel-linking" in decision-making "gatherstretches."

Without any form of political organization or written records, the Hill women rely entirely on collective memory for a sense of community and history.

> Decades ago each woman who had escaped to the hills had offered — usually with great pain — the memory of her city experience, however dramatic or wild, however heroic or horror-ridden . . . . From countless seemingly disconnected episodes the women had pieced together a larger picture so that now they had some sense of what had happened during those last days in the city. . . . As a woman shared, she became part of all their history. (23)

In the remember rooms children learn about the revolt of the Mother, which closely parallels the revolt of the women as they flee from the City: "Once upon a time . . . there was one rape too many. . . . The earth finally said 'no'" (158).

Attributing physical female qualities to the earth, Gearhart subscribes to the mythical tradition of a gendered world in which all life emanates from the mother. "'All roads lead to the mother,'" hears Fora as she looks for the deep cella, when she is to become a "flesh mother."

Procreation in *The Wanderground* starts by means of "implantments" which take place inside the earth in an underground cavern like a uterus. Accompanied by her sister-mothers, the woman descends into the cella for the implantment rite, which consists of pulling a stone off a black hole in the rock and being "swept backward by a gust of heat," welling up "from the earth's bowels" (51). Likewise, nature has a healing power, with earth, moon, wind, water as providers of energy. Not only that, but in the same way that it empowers women through a return to the uterus of the Earth Mother, it has disempowered males by making them impotent beyond the walls of the city and thus rendering rape impossible.

* * *

Nothing seems farther from the radical denial of biological motherhood which informed theories such as Firestone's and Piercy's than these two utopian novels. It is easy, therefore, to agree with Heather Maroney that "there is some irony in the fact

that feminist theory is renewing itself by embracing motherhood" (421). Although this position apparently clashes with the long-held emphasis on the similarity between men and women, with the utopian search for equality in every respect, the fact that feminism is beginning to place motherhood and the traditional qualities associated with femininity at the center of the debate about gender may indeed contribute to a different revision of the binary oppositions of patriarchal discourse by inverting the balance of power attributed to them.

Besides, the growing contemporary emphasis on motherhood both inside and outside the heterosexual nuclear family, with its accompanying assertion of the superiority of woman's modes of interpersonal relations, becomes especially relevant in the face of the new reproductive technology being developed by the (male) scientific community and of the new conservatism which threatens many of the feminist gains. Looking ahead into the 1980s, however, we can see that the project of dismantling the institution of motherhood "under the law of the white father" (Daly & Reddy 8) has continued in works such as Mary O'Brien's *The Politcs of Reproduction* (1981), Ann Ferguson's *Blood at the Root* (1989) and Sara Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking* (1989), which although deserving attention, are out of the scope of the present analysis.

NOTE

1 Similarly to many novels of the 1960s and 1970s, the mental institution in *Woman on the Edge of Time* stands for a microcosm of society at large, reproducing and even exaggerating its hierarchies of power and concepts of normalcy.

SEXUALITY: SUBVERTING THE ABSOLUTISM OF THE TRADITION

> 'Sexuality' is as much a product of history as of nature. Shaped by human action it can be transformed by social and political practice. . . . the body can no longer be seen as a biological given which emits its own meaning. It must be understood instead as an ensemble of potentialities which are given meaning only in society.
>
> Jefferey Weeks
> *Sexuality and Its Discontents*

Whereas traditional literary utopias have dealt extensively with revisions of the body politic, the feminist utopias of the 1970s, as has become evident through the discussion carried out so far, shift the focus from the polis to the individual's social and physical body, from politics to sexual politics. A study of such literature as a potential locus for social change would therefore be incomplete without a discussion of sexuality in its non-procreative aspects, especially if we consider that the separation of the two spheres is a relatively recent phenomenon.

Without intending to explore either its psychological or its ethical implications, we shall take a closer look at the construction of sexuality in the historical present — its habits, expectations and beliefs — identifying the major ideological contradictions of its practices and the speculative fictional discourses built upon them.

As Jefferey Weeks remarks, "Over the past generation, many of the old organizing patterns and controls have been challenged, and often undermined, and sexuality has come closer than ever before to the centre of public debate" (16). Indeed, the period ranging from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s

witnessed a series of changes in sexual behavior brought about by the Beat, Hippie and New Left movements, whose agendas challenged the deeply ingrained patriarchal tradition of heterosexual marriage and procreative sex. But what has come to be known as "the sexual revolution" is by no means coterminous, as many believe, with the female liberation advocated by contemporary feminism.

Although the increased permissiveness of the sexual revolution may be seen as "one necessay condition for the advance of American feminist goals" (Ferguson 1989: 5), it has not fundamentally altered sexual asymmetries. For while on the one hand there have been considerable gains — single and divorced women are no longer seen as deviant, premarital and non-marital sex becomes socially acceptable, conjugal rape and sexual harassment begin to receive legal attention — on the other hand the very emphasis placed by "liberation" on the pleasure aspect of sex ends up by turning it into a market commodity, with women as objects rather than subjects of desire.

Furthermore, by sexualizing primarily the female body, the male-controlled sex industry of post-war capitalism makes women the target of consumerism as well. Attractiveness becomes paramount, and sexual skill the basis for the achievement of happiness. In the form of a host of "how to" and "you can have it" manuals, knowledge about sex invades the market, showing both men and women the road to sexual fulfillment and to personal success, with "true femininity" and "true masculinity" as the signposts.

The so-called sexual revolution becomes non-liberatory in still another way. Though allowing for the emergence of several sub-cultures, or practices outside the heterosexual contract, it ends up by promoting virtual ghettos of sexual identity: knowing *what* you are comes to mean knowing *who* you are. But the concept of identity, by professing to show what we have in common, what is "true" about ourselves, ends up by obscuring

the real diversity of human types and behavior. The labeling of sexual groups becomes inevitable:

> Transvestites, transsexuals, paedophiles, sadomasochists, fetishists, bisexuals, prostitutes and others — each group marked by specific sexual tastes or aptitudes, subdivided and demarcated often into specific styles, morals and communities, each with specific histories of self-expression — have all appeared on the world's stage to claim their space and their "rights." (Weeks 187)

Though triggering a subversion of the absolute standards of femininity and masculinity and opening possibilities for alternative sexual practices, such "minorities" tend to become closed groups or political factions vying for social spaces without considerably affecting basic patterns of sexual arrangements and social practice.

In the case of women, the emergence of an openly acknowledged lesbian community has a dramatic importance for feminist politics and theory. Differently from the male homosexual, lesbians do not necessarily define themselves by means of sexual practice. In her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Existence," Adrienne Rich recognizes a "lesbian continuum" which includes "a range . . . of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman." In this continuum she places other forms of primary intensity among women such as the sharing of inner life, the bonding against male oppression, practical and political support, marriage resistance and female networks (1986:51). In this way, lesbianism becomes a metaphorical space for the rejection of several hegemonic practices such as the heterosexual nuclear contract and the ideology of romance. It is "a form of naysaying to patriarchy, an act of resistance" (52).

In spite of not doing away with sexual asymmetry, the issue of dissenting sexual groups, especially in the case of lesbianism, shows that there needs to be no necessary relation between sexual practice and sexual identity. And that identities are not

expressions of secret essences dictated by sex, but choices about what we want to be — not biological givens but cultural constructions. Or, as Weeks puts it,

> An examination of the evolution of oppositional sexual identities reveals the degree to which they are social inventions. In turn this confirms the degree to which the edifice of sexuality that envelops us is a historical construction, and what has been historically constructed can be politically reconstructed. (210)

In their effort to revise and reconstruct gender arrangements, feminist utopias have devoted considerable attention to sexuality. For the purpose of analysis, it is possible to identify some clusters of concerns among which the following seem to be foremost: (a) stereotypes of sexual identity, (b) the objetification of women, (c) the issue of power in sexual relations, and (d) forms of sexual contract. Although not treated separately, all of the issues above will receive special attention in the discussion that follows.

* * *

Whether favoring androgyny or depicting single-sex worlds, all of the utopian societies under analysis downplay feminine allurements and masculine strength in favor of a natural and authentic sensuality. As with the motherhood issue, the question of sexuality may be placed along a continuum ranging from the eradication to the affirmation of difference.

In *The Left Hand of Darkness* the very physiology of Gethenians forecloses sexual differentiation and the problems arising thereof. Potential hermaphrodites most of the time, their normal state is one of latent sexuality which can be activated only for short periods every month and even so only by contact with other individuals also in "kemmer." As documented by an outside observer, "The society of Gethen, in its daily functioning and in its continuity, is without sex" (84). When an excessive prolongation of the kemmer period with permanent hormonal

imbalance occurs, the individual is considered a "pervert". Though not excluded from society, perverts are tolerated with some disdain, as the Terran Genly Ai soon discovers.

Perhaps the most important implication of the Gethenian sexual arrangement for a critique of the present consists in the fact that "There is no unconsenting sex, no rape. . . . Coitus can be performed only by mutual invitation or consent. . . . Seduction certainly is possible, but it must have to be awfully well timed" (85). Besides, without sexual differentiation, the whole edifice of dualistic thinking (strong/weak, dominant/submissive, active/passive, etc) and its attending social asymmetries give way to equality and, most importantly, to humanity (human unity).

When questioned by Estraven about what women on Earth are like, Genly Ai has trouble deciding whether we are a different species:

> "No. Yes. No, of course not, not really. But the difference is very important. I suppose the most important factor in one's life, is whether one's born male or female. In most societies it determines one's expectations, activities, outlooks, ethics, manners — almost everything. . . . It's extremely hard to separate the innate differences from the learned ones. . . ." (200)

What is at stake here, then, is the old concept of biology as destiny, a concept that even the envoy Genly Ai finds disturbing when meeting his ship's crew after three years in Gethen.

> They all looked strange to me, men and women, well as I knew them. Their voices sounded strange: too deep, too shrill. They were like a troupe of great, strange animals, of two different species. . . .

A Gethenian, by comparison, with "his quiet voice and his face, a young serious face, not a man's face and not a woman's, a human face," seems to Genly Ai "a relief, . . . familiar, right" (249).

At the opposite pole of this fully human integration of masculinity and femininity we have the societies of Sally Miller

Gearhart's *The Wanderground,* where sexual identity is depicted in terms of four distinct factions warring among themselves: on the one hand, *the Men* and *the Women,* who inhabit a highly controlled totalitarian state in The City; and on the other, *the Hill Women,* an Amazon-like lesbian community, and *the Gentles,* both living outside the limits of the City but with very little good will towards each other.

The Men and the Women are virtual caricatures of traditional masculinity and femininity. Men, as a dominant and exploitative sex, have thoroughly determined what women should be like: dependent and powerless, no matter whether seductive (prostitute) or lady-like (wife). As one of the Hill Women "shares" with her companions in a remembering ceremony, when some women began questioning their status under male rule, there had been a backlash of conservatism which caused a violent split in society:

> "When I left, state laws were being revised to require every woman to be married. Polygyny was even being sanctioned in some areas so men could have several wives. Curfews on women went into effect early. Any woman caught wearing pants went to a behavior modification unit: she emerged wearing a dress and a very scary vacant smile. . . ." (152)

The "freak" women, those who refused to conform, became the object of "purges", persecutions very much like the witch-hunts of our history. Except that the punishment was rape, not death. For those who cooperated with the male establishment the options were wifehood or whoredom.

The society of the Hill Women grew, then, from a group of misfits — those women who, refusing to remain under male rule and be sexually available to them, found in each other the necessary support for establishing a community based on female natural powers. Not equality but difference, with femaleness and not femininity as the attribute for an ethically superior, fully "human" race. The power of bonding. The "lesbian continuum" proposed by Adrienne Rich.

Not surprisingly, lesbianism is the worst crime in the City, and ordinances require every woman to be escorted by men in public places, as one of the Hill Women "on rotation" in the City reports. Passing for men, due to their lack of feminine attributes, Hill women infiltrate the enemy territory as spies, giving rise to unexpected confrontations. Virtually attacked by a prostitute — the very incarnation of sensuality, "her body encased in a low-cut tight-fitting dress" — one of the Hill women describes her "double": "This was the city edition, the man's edition, the only edition acceptable to men, streamlined to his exact specifications, her body guaranteed to be limited, dependent, and constantly available" (63).

But Sally Miller Gearhart's vision allows also for a different species of men — the Gentles. Lacking the destructive drive of the genuine males, they were "[m]en who, knowing that maleness touched women only with the accumulated hatred of centuries, touched no women at all. Ever" (2). At first "unable to sustain their man-ness" and to "grasp their woman-ness," they had turned to the Hill Women for help, a help that had been firmly denied: "They must help themselves" (3). Towards the end of the novel, under rumors that the Men are beginning to regain their potency outside the walls of the City, a new alliance for the survival of the planet is being proposed by the Gentles: "Does it occur to you that we might have some humanity too? That as a special breed of men we may be on the brink of discovering our own non-violent psychic powers?" (179) The Hill Women remain divided on this matter, and the narrative ends on a note of doubt as to a possible union of these two polarized non-polarities (Hill Women/lesbians vs Gentles/gays) in the future.

A similar postponement of integration between males and females is presented in Joanna Russ' *The Female Man,* more specifically in the lesbian world of Whileaway, which can be interpreted as "while (the men are) away" (Spector 202). That female homosexuality constitutes the sexual identity of

Whileawayans and that it is still very much a taboo in our days, becomes clear at the very opening of the novel, as Janet is being interviewed on television:

> MC: . . . Don't you want men to return to Whileaway, Miss Evason?
> JE: Why?
> MC: One sex is half a species . . . . Do you want to banish sex from Whileaway? . . .
> JE: I'm married. I have two children. What the devil do you mean?
> MC: . . . I'm not talking about economic institutions or even affectionate ones . . . . [T]here is more, much, much more — I am talking about sexual love.
> JE (enlightened): oh! You mean copulation.
> MC: Yes.
> JE: And you say we don't have that?
> MC: Yes.
> JE: How foolish of you. Of course we do.
> MC: Ah? (He wants to say, "Don't tell me.")
> JE: With each other. Allow me to explain.
> She was cut off instantly by a commercial poetically describ ing the joys of unsliced bread. (11)

The only sexual taboo in Whileaway consists of making love with someone considerably older or younger than yourself, for the difference in experience necessarily implies a dominance behavior. Other than this, sexual mores uphold a free homosexuality on the basis of equality and consent.

Criticism of the contemporary sexual identities abound in *The Female Man.* But perhaps the most incisive is that of the polarization between Manlanders and Womanlanders in Jael's near future (roughly one generation away from ours). As Jael herself reports, she can remember her mother's time, her own development into a man-hating "fem", and the war between "the Haves and the Have-nots" [!] (165). After about forty years or so, they have entered a cold war, with the men wanting to get

back together with the women and the women refusing them. But unlike The City of *Wanderground,* Manland has retained no women. Instead, they have had to create their own sex objects through "natural selection" aided by sex surgery: In the process of being made into Men, some little boys fail to acquire the necessary characteristics of aggressiveness and competition. One out of every seven fails early and makes the full change through surgery. One out of seven fails later and makes only half a change, keeping his genitalia but growing emotional and feminine. Five out of seven make it, becoming "real-men." As Jael explains, "All real-men like the changed; some real-men like the half-changed; none of the real-men like the real-men, for that would be abnormal" (167).

After encountering several of the half-changed, who are employed in menial jobs and dress up in high-heels, pink brocade and the like, Jael (and Janet, and Joanna, and Jeannine — who "accompany" her on a mission to Manland) finds herself face-to-face with the Boss and allows the reader to observe a real-man in action. Having proposed his plan of a union with Womanlanders, the Boss, fascinated by what he takes to be a real-woman, proceeds to make a pass at Jael:

> "Kiss me, you dear little bitch," he says in an excited voice, mastery and disgust warring with each other in his eyes . . . .
>
> "Look," [says Jael], grinning uncontrollably. "I want to be perfectly clear. I don't want your revolting lovemaking . . . ."
>
> "You're a woman," he cries, shutting his eyes. . . . You want me. It *doesn't matter what you say.* You're a woman, aren't you? This is the crown of your life. This is what God made you for. I'm going to fuck you. I'm going to screw you until you can't stand up. *You want to be mastered* . . . . All you women, . . . you're waiting for me, waiting for a man, waiting for me, me, me." (180-81; emphasis added)

While this may be true of Jeannine's world, in which women live for The Man, it is certainly a miscalculation on the Boss' part.

Jael, brought up to be a man-woman, fed by the hopeless despair of so many before her who had suffered under the belief that sexuality was the manifestation of oppositional "essential natures" and who felt that even being raped was their own fault (193), ends up by remorselessly killing the Boss.

However, differently from Whileaway, Womanland is not (yet) a lesbian-identified community. A few pages later we encounter Jael at home in an extremely erotic encounter with her "lover" Davy. The sexual act, entirely controlled by Jael, is sensual, non-aggressive, but directed toward *her* pleasure: "I had him. Davy was mine" (198). Under the astonished gaze of her other selves ("Good Lord! Is *that* all?" says Janet to Joanna), we discover that Davy is nothing but a computerized robot. Shocking, perhaps. But as Jael remarks, "Alas! those who were shocked at my making love that way to a man are now shocked at my making love to a machine, you can't win" (200).

Besides challenging the patriarchal assumption that women need men sexually, Russ goes even further by suggesting that if a person desires sex with an object, he or she should get exactly that: an object. As to Janet's remark "Is that all?", Russ may be implying one of two things: either that sex between a human being and a dehumanized object falls short of a fulfilling relationship, or that homosexual relations between women (after all, it is Janet who is surprised) surpasses the merely erotic heterosexual encounter to become a truly integrated loving relationship (cf Spector 200).

That lesbianism need not be the only good sexual experience for women, however, can be observed in *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Kin of Ata Are Waiting for You.*

Opening as it does with a sexual struggle, a struggle of power over (the male creator/writer and his female creature) against power to (the female protagonist who affirms her personhood), *The Kin of Ata* proceeds to disclose a dreamland where sexual differences are downplayed and where issues of gender, race,

and class are absolutely irrelevant. Though they recognize masculine and feminine elements in the natural world and in animal biology, there are no pronouns of gender to refer to human beings in Ata. Everyone is called "kin". Dressing and acting alike, Atanians seem to grow out of animal lusts as they achieve maturity. Children, who openly engage in either heterosexual or homosexual sex play, are seen as "bundles of appetites, hungers" who must give up desire "gradually of their own free will" (152).

Misled by the behavior of children and by what he interprets as an enticing smile of the black woman Augustine, whom he associates with "primitive passion," the narrator/protagonist proceeds to rape her. His mind is laid bare to us, in a bitter feminist critique of "masculine" bias:

> . . . I thought what a great lay she would be if I could wait and do it right. But this time I couldn't wait. I knew I'd come the minute I got into her. But it wouldn't matter to her. She was used to primitive sex. Later I would impress her with my technique. (54)

But what happens later demonstrates that men too, Wanderlanders and Womanlanders notwithstanding, can be loving and tender and sexually pleasing. In a sort of purification ritual initiated by Augustine, a true sexual encounter takes place between them, canceling out the rape. About the many occasions of good sex that follow, the narrator remarks: "She enjoyed our lovemaking and was remarkably passionate, but even at the moment of orgasm *I never felt I possessed her completely"* (119; emphasis added). In the ideal world of the dream, true equality precludes any form of power over or possession.

Dominance and its absence is, again, the focus of Marge Piercy's novel, as the comparison between contemporary society and Mattapoisett unfolds. The opening episode of aggression between Connie's niece and her pimp illustrates not only the ownership by men of women's bodies, but also women's acquiescence to it. A similar pattern has determined Connie's relationships as well. As we learn later through flashback, one of

her few steady jobs had been as a secretary, or, as she puts it, "secretary-mistress-errand girl-launderess-maid-research assistant" to a college professor "who liked to have a Spanish-speaking secretary, that is, a new one every year . . . [and who] called them all Chiquitas, like bananas" (50).

Under the chiquita syndrome, having internalized that there is only one thing men want from women, it is not surprising that when Luciente (the person from the future) appears, Connie mistakes her for a man, though she cannot quite classify Luciente in her schemata for masculinity: "He lacked the macho presence of men in her own family, nor did he have Claud's massive strength, or Eddie's edgy combativeness" (36). She then thinks he must be either queer or insane, for his behavior in no way matches what she has been used to. When they meet again and Connie is told that Luciente needs her receptive capacities in order to establish contact between their worlds, Connie again mistakes Luciente's intentions: "Passive. Receptive. Here she was, abandoning herself to the stronger will of one more male, letting herself be used, this time not even for something simple like sex or comfort but for something murky" (52). Only much later, when Luciente tries to transport Connie to the future by holding her close so that their foreheads touch, does Connie realize that Luciente is a woman. "A dyke, of course," thinks Connie, unable to fit her into the concept of feminity, either:

> Luciente spoke, she moved with that air of brisk unselfconscious authority Connie associated with men. Luciente sat down, taking up more space than women ever did. She squatted, she sprawled, she strolled, never thinking about how her body was displayed. (67)

In Mattapoisett, we learn with Connie, sexual identity is conspicuously absent. Even though there are biological males and females, biology does not determine sexual preference or behavior. Since all can equally "mother," "go on defense" or participate in political decisions, they are indeed culturally

androgynous. Since their social organization is based on a sharing of power, responsibility and material possessions, there is no need for power games. Sexual relations may be either heterosexual or homosexual, and people couple "Not for money, not for a living. For love, for pleasure, for relief, out of habit, out of curiosity and lust" (64). Besides, relationships vary in both kind and degree. Those you are close to emotionally are your "sweet friends", who can be either "pillow friends" or "hand friends". Thus differentiation leads to equality; departure from set patterns of sexual behavior, to freedom and choice.

Mattapoisett, however, is only one version of the possible future, as Connie learns as she accidentally time travels into the wrong channel, so to speak. Gildina, the woman she mistakenly "catches" with, very much resembles the sensuous woman-as-object that both The Men in *Wanderground* and Manlanders in *The Female Man* glorify and long for. Surrounded by mirrors as she lies in bed waiting for her "contractor", Gildina appears as "a cartoon of femininity" with her tiny waist, enormous breasts, flat stomach, and "oversized and audaciously curved hips and buttocks" (288). When Connie asks to be touched and thus certified real, Gildina snaps back: "Don't be lesby. You got no contract on me" (289).

In this dystopian future women are programmed for different functions, as Gildina implies when Connie asks her whether she would have any children: "If it's in the contract. I never had any contract that called for a kid. Mostly the moms have them. You know, they're cored to make babies all the time. Ugh, they're so fat" (290). Though technology has advanced to the point of producing "sense all" devices for video, the movies themselves and the sexual mores which inform them do not seem to have changed much: pornography still relies basically on the exploitation of the female body, as the description of a video catalogue scan reveals to Connie:

> "Hot Dog": A bulgy contracty amuses herself while her man is away with a large boxer dog. HD5. . . .
> "When Fems Flung to Be Men": In Age of Uprisings, two fem libbers meet in battle . . . . Stronger rapes weaker with dildo. SD man zaps in, fights both (close-ups, full gore), double rape, double murder, full sense all. HD15. (293)

Gildina's future, in fact, wars with Mattapoisett in the same way that Manlanders fight Womanlanders, The City threatens the Hill Women, reality opposes the dream. Only in *The Left Hand of Darkness* there seems to be a promise of integration, though no assurance is given that, being biologically differentiated, Terrans could possibly learn from Gethenian androgyny. But the utopian vision provided by Mattapoisett, Whileaway, Ata, and the Hill Women points toward a harmonious integration beyond opposing sexual polarities. Rape, the utmost metaphor for the issue of power in sexual relations, is the target of attack in all but one of the novels under discussion. Again, only in Le Guin's, for reasons that have already been presented, unconsenting sex is biologically impossible.

Taken as a whole, the novels envision a future where sexual identity would either cease to exist or become irrelevant, where sexuality could take a variety of forms outside prescribed societal norms or fixed units of kinship, where power would consist solely in power to choose and power to be, where finally we would all be equal. Utopian, indeed.

Though manifesting it in different ways, these writers share a similar concept of what female sexuality can and should be. As Judith Spector remarks, "It should be sexy" (206), regardless of how it is expressed. Or, as Joanna Russ says of the all-female worlds and their consequent lesbianism: "Sexually this amounts to the insistence that women are erotic integers and not fractions waiting for completion" (Barr 1987:79).

Concerned with more general views of human sexuality, and commenting on her novel from the perspective of 1976/1987[1],

Ursula LeGuin sees *The Left Hand of Darkness* as "the record of [her] consciousness, the process of [her] thinking" (8) in search of the meaning of sexuality and gender. The Gethenian model is not (obviously) presented as a recommendation for humanity but as a heuristic device, a kind of question-asking which she describes as "reversals of a habitual way of thinking, metaphors for what our language has no words for yet, experiments in imagination" (9). Her objective in eliminating gender altogether was to find out, in what was left, what would be then "simply human" (10). The message, as LeGuin sees it, is the following:

> If we were socially ambisexual, if men and women were completely and genuinely equal in their social roles, equal legally and economically, equal in freedom, in responsibility, and in self-esteem, then society would be a very different thing. What our problems might be, God knows; I only know we would have them . . . . [But] the dualism of value that destroys us, the dualism of superior/inferior, ruler/ruled, owner/owned, user/used, might give way to what seems to me, from here, a much healthier, sounder, more promising modality of integration and integrity. (16)

* * *

Whereas the so-called "sexual revolution" has brought about the recognition of individual and group self-expression, the feminist utopias of the 1970s have argued for a truly liberating sexual practice in the sense of demanding freedom in the social relations in which sexuality is embedded. Like feminist theory itself, the utopian dream encompasses several strands and positionings, but the underlying message seems to be the same: though human sexuality cannot be reduced to prescriptive behavior, values can and must be taken into account. As Jefferey Weeks remarks,

> The most significant development in sexual politics over the past generation has not been a new volubility of sexual need, nor the new sexual markets, nor the proliferation of sexual styles or practices. It has been the appearance of new sexual-political subjects,

> constituting new "communities of interest" in political terms who have radically transformed the meaning of sexual politics. (242)

In breaking down the divisions between duty and pleasure, social practice and individual preference, normal and abnormal sexualities, the politics advocated by the feminist literary utopias of the 1970s reunites the spheres of personal and political life. The subjectivization of the erotic must be affirmed in the context of new social practices (moral codes and types of non-contractual relationships). In the last analysis, "sexual politics" is more political than sexual, and sexual liberation can only occur as part of a general human liberation. By putting into question relations of power in areas hitherto largely unrecognized — such as motherhood and female sexuality — feminist utopias contribute to the integration between individual and social growth.

NOTE

1 The article "Is Gender Necessary? Redux", originally published in 1976, was reprinted in *Dancing at the Edge of the World* (1987) with a running commentary updating or reconsidering some of LeGuin's early views.

CONCLUSION

> New utopias . . . would be rooted in the body as well as in the mind, in the unconscious as well as the conscious, in forests and deserts as well as in the highways and buildings, in bed as well as in the symposium.
>
> Northrop Frye
> "Varieties of Literary Utopias"

> Feminist utopian fiction constitutes an intervention in the dominant ideological formation. . . . It constructs for readers a feminist reading position from which the institutional practices of patriarchy become visible, thereby reducing their ability to position the reader so easily, to naturalize her or him so compliantly into patriarchal subject positions.
>
> Anne Cranny-Francis
> *Feminist Fiction*

If, as Virginia Woolf recognized, the relationship between women and fiction is fraught with conflicts and contradictions, even more problematical is the relationship between feminism and utopia. Though a marginal and transitional genre, literary utopia had a solid tradition both as narrative form and as political theory. Appropriating the genre for their critique of patriarchy, contemporary women writers have had to dismantle many of its underlying assumptions and internal elements. The result, as we have been able to observe, was the emergence in the 1970s of the critical utopia, one which offers possible historical alternatives to the present, one in which "[t]he utopian ideal is clearly not 'nowhere'. . . but potentially in the here and now" (Keinhorst 97).

Plato's dream of order and rationality and More's neatly constructed traveler's tale have given way to a new form of narrative predicated on disorder, freedom and intuition — as perceived in our discussion of Mattapoisett, Gethen, Whileaway, Ata and Wanderground. As Northrop Frye has observed, contemporary utopias focus on the body, the unconscious, the interpersonal rather than on the polis (1966:49). Besides, the journey takes precedence over the place; the process becomes more important than the goal.

Without the orderly design and the clear separation between present and future, reality and dream, the contemporary feminist project risks perpetuating an essentialist reduction of women to the female principle, that age-old association of women with nature and with immanence, with organic growth and the preverbal. On the other hand, however, this very break with the forces of reason, design and coherence, with all the ambiguity it fosters, allows for a dynamic interaction which involves the reader in the experience of change and growth.

In his article on the 'reading-effect' of contemporary utopia Peter Fitting recognizes two internal aspects which contribute to this close interaction between reader and text, namely, the positioning demanded of the reader and the closure of the narrative. Differently from the traditional utopia, he argues, the contemporary text does not address the audience rationally; instead, the reader is emotionally and experimentally implicated, 'hailed' as a potential participant in the process of making utopia possible (30-31). Besides, whereas in the traditional novel an "imaginary resolution" is usually provided, in recent utopian writing the reading goes "beyond the ending", to use DuPlessis' expression (cf. 1985).

The Left Hand of Darkness ends with Estraven's son asking Genly Ai to tell him about "the other kinds of men, the other lives" (253) and thus reverting the tale (and the audience) without closing

the exchange. Dorothy Bryant ends her narrative with a direct address to the reader, urging us toward the experience of change:

> Perhaps you picked up this book because of the sensation surrounding my trial. Yet, you must have wanted more than sensation or you would have thrown it aside before now. . . . Listen not to my words, but to the echo they evoke in you, and obey that echo. And think that if a man like me could re-learn the dream, and glimpse for a moment the reality behind the dream . . . then how much easier it might be for you.
>
> You have only to want It, to believe in It, and tonight, when you close your eyes, you can begin your journey.
>
> The kin of Ata are waiting for you. (220)

The final episode of *Wanderground* consists in the death ritual of Artilidea, one of the oldest among the Hill women. The chanting centers on the question, "Will we save the earth, the mother? Slay the slayer's hand in time?" But no answer can be provided. Instead, the words of the challenger are repeated: "Though you have no answer, still you have the task":

> To work *as if* the earth, the mother, can be saved.
> To work *as if* our healing care were not too late.
> Work to stay the slayer's hand,
> Helping him to change
> Or helping him to die.
> Work *as if* the earth, the mother, can be saved. (195; emphasis added)

As with other of the works discussed, Gearhart's is a conditional utopia, one which must be reaffirmed and enabled from the perspective of the present. Although in these novels the future may be projected elsewhere, this place is not a 'nowhere' but an elsewhere we can effectively create. Ours is the choice and the task of reclaiming wholeness and integrity, of saving "the mother", of reuniting the suppressed parts of our full humanity.

As we turn to Russ and Piercy the call for involvement and the lack of closure are still more obvious. In both *The Female*

Man and *Woman on the Edge of Time* the future society can only come about through a struggle in the present. The focus is on process, on the very process of awareness of utopia as a possibility. Although differing in the feminist conceptions of utopia by positing respectively an all-female and a gender-free world, Russ and Piercy depart from the narrative conventions used by LeGuin, Gearhart and Bryant in that they contextualize and historicize their vision. Their alternative worlds are not just abstract conceptions to be reached by dream or metaphor, but concrete possibilities predicated on changes of consciousness (and material conditions) in contemporary western society.

Besides, in both novels the confrontation is effected by characters from the future who come to ask for help in the present in order to build or maintain the utopia. Alternating utopian or dystopian episodes with a narrative set in the present, they create a dialectic between the ideal and the real, with the ideal directly dependent on decisions taken in the here and now. *The Female Man* ends with Joanna (the contemporary radical feminist self) saying goodbye to her other selves (Jael, Janet and Jeannine). Taking authorial position, she clearly places herself in the contemporary context:

> Remember: we will all be changed. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, we will all be free. . . . we will be ourselves. Until then I am silent; I can no more, I am God's typewriter and the ribbon is typed out.
>
> Go, little book, trot through Texas and Vermont and Alaska and Maryland and Washington and Florida and Canada and England and France; bob a curtsy at the shrines of Friedan, Millet, Greer, Firestone and all the rest. . . . Live merrily, little daughter-book, even if I can't and we can't; recite yourself to all who will listen; stay hopeful and wise. . . .
>
> Rejoice, little book!
>
> For on that day, we will be free. (213-14)

Though less radical in her modification of narrative form and voice, Piercy does nevertheless go further than Russ in

constituting the reader as someone who can and must be enlisted. Starting from a marginal position, through the perceptions and experiences of a "schizoid" protagonist who has internalized all the negative labels imposed on her by a sexist, classist and racist technologically progressive society, Piercy proceeds to depict Connie's development into the subject of her own life, as her potential for resistance is triggered and fueled by contact with Mattapoisett. Urged by her utopian friends to help make their world possible ("We must fight to come to exist, to remain in existence, to be the future that happens. That's why we reached you" [197-98]), Connie claims lack of power to effect any change. But she does take power in her hands by poisoning the medical staff who are about to carry out a behavior modification experiment by means of brain implants. She confirms in this way what Sojourney, of Mattapoisett, had affirmed: "The powerful don't make revolutions" (198).

The revolution Connie contributes to starting, however, is not predicated on action, much less on killing, as a form of resistance. It is a revolution in consciousness, very much in the way envisioned by Shulamith Firestone and other radical feminist theorists and illustrated by the utopian narratives that followed. Calling for, as we have seen, new forms of socialization and a philosophical rejection of dualistic thinking, its programme is based on the need of more empowering strategies for women. But to take this utopian project as a blueprint for action, to equate its goals with a practical politics, is to miss its point. What is at stake here is not the actual possibility of immediate agency, but the construction of alternative discursive practices that might expose the contradictions of existing practices and thus provoke new articulations.

If we take feminism to mean "a politics directed at changing existing power relations between women and men in society" (Weedon 1), it necessarily follows that the first step towards change consists in fostering an alternative sense of ourselves as

women (or men). In the same way that Connie learns to see herself as potentially strong, independent, and to accept her physical body as a site of pleasure; in the same way that the protagonist of *The Kin of Ata* learns to be one with Augustine, so can the readers of feminist utopias begin to envision a new sense of ourselves and to discover different ways of understanding our relation to the world. By providing non-hegemonic discourses on motherhood and female sexuality, for example, the utopian narratives analyzed here make available and enable new (feminist) modes of subjectivity.

Because language does not reflect but constitutes social reality, the construction of alternative discourses is of paramount importance for feminism, as for any revolutionary political praxis. Speaking from a post-representational critical mode, we must see "the emancipatory potential of utopias" not in what they show but in their ability to make us "think critically not only about what we think, but how we have learned to think" (Bammer 16-17).

Thus, whether insisting on the genderless worlds of Gethen, Ata, or Mattapoisett, or on the all-female communities of Wanderground or Whileaway, contemporary feminist utopias provide more empowering positions for women by offering us the possibility of a conceptual liberation from culturally constructed gender identities. And this is achieved through a denaturalization of conventions of both gender and genre.

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The *Feminist Literary Utopias* was presented by Susana Bornéo Funck as part of the requirements for advancement to Full Professorship at UFSC in 1992. The study examines utopian novels by Ursula LeGuin, Dorothy Bryant, Joanna Russ, Marge Piercy and Sally Miller Gearhart, published between 1969 and 1979. The focus is on motherhood and sexuality, as privileged sites for a critique of patriarchal ideology and for the construction of the feminist consciousness.

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