

“TO FEEL WITH OTHER BEINGS”: AFFECT AND ACTIVISM IN NEW WAVE FEMINIST
SCIENCE FICTION

by

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Final approval and acceptance of this dissertation is contingent upon the candidate's submission of the final copies of the dissertation to the Graduate College.

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Abstract

This dissertation considers the ways in which New Wave feminist science fiction writers use affect to disrupt the hierarchical thinking that informs structures of oppression, such as patriarchy and capitalism. While many sf scholars, such as Fredric Jameson, Tom Moylan, Raffaella Baccolini, Lisa Yaszek, and Rebekah Sheldon, have traced the significant contributions of feminist science fiction to the American literary tradition, there has yet to be a consideration of how affect informs the form, content, and readership of these works. This project traces how the feminist sf writers Ursula K. Le Guin, James Tiptree, Jr. (Alice Sheldon), Joanna Russ, and Marge Piercy not only center affect in their plot, characterization, ethos, and narratology, but also how they use scalar shifts to reveal how interpersonal interactions can undermine the constraints of institutionalism. Through this intimate focus, they expose flaws in the troubling logics of patriarchy, capitalism, and the archetypes that ground American letters. I ultimately trace how the affective modalities of empathy, camp, rage, and precarity help to reveal the human costs associated with these hierarchical systems. Through these modalities, feminist sf writers often map out alternative and more equitable ways of conceptualizing the differences between peoples.

Introduction

We only act when we are moved to act, and we are moved by something that affects us from the outside, from elsewhere, from the lives of others, imposing a surfeit that we act from and upon.

-Judith Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation"

Science fiction, like so much of literature, plays with our emotions. Whether it preys upon our fears of strange new technologies or delights us with its fantastical portrayals of human and non-human relationships, science fiction (hereafter, sf) tends to evoke strong emotional responses from its audience. This project originated from a curiosity to discover how this emotion operates, formally and thematically, and what it achieves in major feminist sf works from the 1960s and 1970s. Feminist sf writers have capitalized on the genre's homage to affect, often drawing from a range of literary predecessors, from the sentimentality and sublimity of works such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; Or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818) and H.G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* (1898) to the sensationalism of stories circulated in American pulp magazines in the early twentieth century. These frames of reference have validated sf as both a serious "literary" genre and a popular medium for reflecting cultural norms, fears, and desires.

During the 1960s and 1970s, which is commonly referred to as the "New Wave" of sf, feminist sf writers frequently centered affect in their fiction as a means of engaging audiences in wider cultural conversations about sex, gender, human rights, and institutionalism. Under the backdrop of Vietnam War protests, civil rights activists marching on Washington, women asserting their entitlement to reproductive rights and equal pay, a cultural war between communism and capitalism, and the space race, the 1960s was ripe with both despair and hope. With ample fodder to envision how the future might look, sf writers imagined both bright and terrifying possibilities. Feminist sf writers, such as Joanna Russ and Marge Piercy, for instance, used sf to imagine what a world free from patriarchy might look like. Others, such as Ursula K.

Le Guin and James Tiptree Jr. (Alice Sheldon) crafted stories that explore the implications of consumer capitalism and the possibilities of worlds and economic systems beyond our own. In this dissertation, I trace how New Wave feminist sf stories not only offer social commentaries about mid-century American culture but often propose visionary alternatives. These visions, whether utopian or dystopian, tend to extrapolate the cultural mindsets that feminists associated with oppression, such as binary oppositions and hierarchical thinking.

Their fiction also frequently reveals the problematic logics underpinning systems of oppression, such as capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy. This dissertation argues that New Wave feminist sf writers use affect in myriad ways to disrupt our habitual ways of understanding difference, hierarchy, and gender. The affects traced in this project—empathy rage, camp, and precarity—each provides rhetorical, epistemological, and cognitive strategies for rethinking our reliance on these problematic logics and systems of oppression. In other words, the texts examined in this dissertation all use affect to move us. They attempt, I argue, to move us in the way Butler articulates in the above epigraph—from being passive recipients of culture to becoming critically engaged in debates over equality. Each of the authors in this study, Le Guin, Tiptree, Russ, and Piercy uses affect to strategically equip their audience to challenge, subvert, and ultimately disrupt harmful cultural norms.

Situating Science Fiction Within the Literary Cosmos

To excavate how sf is particularly primed to engage in this cultural disruption, I begin by tracing the genealogies of sf and how its distinctive genre conventions and thematic concerns render visible the mechanisms of power which shape group affiliation, inclusion, and exclusion. Though sf writers could ostensibly imagine new worlds free from the historical trappings of

cultural and colonial hegemony, most sf works instead replicate existing ideologies such as capitalism, colonialism, a binary gender system, and racial inequalities. Writing new places and cultures, after all, does not necessarily equate to escaping the ideological constraints of one's time.

British Imperial sf (1815-1914) is infamous for displacing discourses of racial otherness onto imagined beings, such as aliens or pseudo-humans created in laboratories. Written during the height of British colonialism, works such as H.G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* (1898) and *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) use sf novums¹ to explore the dynamics of power and otherness by crafting creatures and conflicts that eerily resemble ongoing debates over colonialism and race. Similarly, while utopian fiction integrates novel topographies to house new systems of governance and social relationships, these societies often contain the same social problems that the utopian traveler left behind. For example, as Fredric Jameson has famously pointed out, Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), erases capitalism while preserving other oppressive institutions, like marriage and slavery (*Archaeologies of the Future* 19). This tendency to replicate the ideologies from one's own culture is perhaps unsurprising, despite the unconstrained and potentially liberatory space that sf inhabits.

Yet, it is not only the impossibility of escaping ideology that results in sf reflecting what is, rather than what might be. Ursula K. Le Guin has expressed in her introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), for instance, that "science fiction is not predictive; it is *descriptive*"

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1. The science fiction novum is defined by Istvan Csicsvari-Ronay, who borrows from Darko Suvin and Ernst Bloch, as a "narratological mega trope, a figural device that so 'dominates' (Suvin's term) its fiction, that every significant aspect of the narrative's meaning can be derived from it: the estranged conditions caused by a radically new thing, the thematic unity of the work, and even changes in the readers' attitudes toward their own world, after reading" (*The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* 49).

(xiv; my emphasis). Similarly, Fredric Jameson suggests that sf “defamiliarize[s] and restructure[s] our experience of our own *present*” rather than providing a glimpse of the future (286; emphasis original). The purpose of sf, then, should not be conceptualized as a means of predicting the future, but instead as a reflection of contemporaneous cultural issues and how those issues arise, operate, and might be altered given specific conditions. Because of sf’s temporal gaze into the future, these conditions can be imagined, providing textual thought experiments that explore the dynamics of power, otherness, and consciousness.

While sf has distinguishing characteristics, such as its integration of (often imagined) technologies and its focus on futurity, sf texts frequently draw from more canonical genres, such as satire, which tend to combine fictional architecture with social critique. In order to navigate these complex issues of genre, it is helpful to consider sf’s “boundary objects,” a term I borrow from John Rieder, who uses it to describe prominent texts that share family resemblances with other works typically categorized within the same genre.² With a focus on fiction, Rieder eschews the notion of formal genre conventions, instead arguing that the ways in which academics, critics, publishers, and merchants organize and instrumentalize texts often cements what we regard as genre (14). When we take a class on detective fiction or peruse a bookshelf labeled as fantasy, for instance, those acts of categorization have bearing on how we conceive of what a genre is and amplifies our attention to the similarities between texts. Therefore, according to Rieder, those works that might bear the label of sf today were not always delineated as such. In the history of what we now consider sf, there are myriad descriptors from “space fantasy” to “weird tales” that were once the common designations. While Rieder’s analysis on genre’s

2. John Rieder’s “boundary objects” operate as an extension of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s family resemblances outlined in his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953).

production and consumption helps to elucidate the blurriness of sf's boundaries, there are some family resemblances between sf and other genres that help to clarify why sf is not merely a genre of imagination and escapism, but one that is deeply invested in social and cultural critique.

Sf shares origins with, and frequently pilfers from, more canonical genres, namely romances, travel narratives, and satire. I argue that it is at this convergence, where romance, travel narrative, and satire meet that we can begin to demarcate sf's contribution to storytelling and investment in critique. Most sf features an (internal or external) quest of some sort, includes travel between and among groups of people, and warns us about some human folly. By drawing from these genres, sf enables us to recognize basic plot structures and tropes, even as they appear in fantastical landscapes. Without this grounding, sf might be too alienating, too strange, too absurd for us to recognize its literary merits. Furthermore, these family resemblances, taken as a whole, denote how deeply imbricated sf is with systems of power.

Chivalric romances with their notorious quests, have provided the structure for much of Western literature. To be centered in a plot, as Joseph Campbell has famously tracked through his monomyth,³ is to embark on the hero's quest—to leave home, to encounter and survive increasingly dangerous conflicts, usually with the aid of a few sidekicks, and to eventually be transformed by the journey and return home in triumph. In traditional quests, the success of the hero and his⁴ journey has major implications. A kingdom, country, or key knowledge about the world is often at stake. We see this framework adopted in many sf works, including the popular *Barsoom* series (1912-1948) by Edgar Rice Burroughs, which follows a traditionally male hero who must fight numerous foes in order to rescue the princess of Mars and save the Green

3. See Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Pantheon Books, 1949.

4. The heroes of most canonical chivalric romances, such as Sir Gawain's Green Knight and Lancelot in the Arthurian tales, were, of course, predominantly men.

Martians from extermination. Jules Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864) and Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) also feature relatively conventional hero's quests, albeit on strange and distant places. These journeys are often didactic. We are meant to learn something from the journey and its resolution, or lack thereof. Since its earliest boundary objects, sf has used the narrative structure of the quest to caution us about pursuing particular paths. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, for instance, illustrates the perils of scientific developments that grant humankind the ability to play God. Works such as Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy (1942-1950) and Frank Herbert's *Dune* saga (1965-1985) encourage us to consider how our individual actions have bearing on cultural and environmental futurities.

The tropes of travel narratives, including colonial travel reports such as *La relación of Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca* (1542) and *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1682) also inform the functionality of sf. After all, sf often revolves around cultural exchanges and the politics of what Mary Louise Pratt has termed the "contact zone," or "the social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (7). Colonial travel reports often integrated a factual frame and ethnographic information about the people whom the colonist encountered on their travels. Often, though, this information was skewed to affirm the writer and their respective cultural prejudices regarding the differences between "civilized" and colonized peoples. This problematic framing of travel as a source of validating one's cultural superiority has also permeated sf works. For instance, Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* (1959) features military conflicts between the Terran Federation and "Bugs" or "Arachnids," who must be squashed by superior human beings.

More contemporary sf texts, such as Ursula K. Le Guin's *Hainish Cycle* (1966-2017), also borrow tropes from travel narratives, though the idea of travel is often troubled. Peoples

from disparate cultures (or planets) meet, discover their similarities and differences, and must decide if, and how, to coexist. While earlier sf works featured warfare and violence between groups, feminist sf stories, such as Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest* more closely parallel contemporary travel fictions, including Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989) and Lynne Tillman's *Motion Sickness* (1991). *The Word for World is Forest* (1972) centers on colonists who view the native Athsheans as inferior beings and exploit the people and their resources for material gain. This novella, like *Jasmine* and *Motion Sickness*, features colonialism, but with a sympathetic view of the colonized, reflecting how movement across geographical and spatial boundaries is inherently fraught. The very concept of travel, Le Guin, Mukherjee, and Tillman show, is always laden with issues of privilege, identity, belonging, inclusion, and exclusion, which are often informed by unspoken cultural norms and mores.

Sf also pays homage to satire, which reframes our ways of thinking by using hyperbole, irony, and defamiliarization to stage scenes of human folly as microcosms of larger social issues. When Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver* presents the King of Brobdingnag with the gift of gunpowder, for instance, we recognize that this interpersonal exchange both reflects and cautions us about the burgeoning technologies of war that will forever alter the landscape of national and global conflicts. Satire, like sf, is a didactic genre that aims to reveal something about our social norms. Yet *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) is not merely a social critique. Rather, the satire has gained its reputation as a literary giant in part because of its tone and humor, its play with scale, its absurdity, its grotesqueness, and its moments of misunderstanding. Of all the genres that run parallel to sf, satire's focus on social critique and sensationalism perhaps has the most bearing on sf's cultural function. Throughout this dissertation, I contend that New Wave (1960-1980) feminist sf writers strategically use the sensibilities of satire and other affects to complicate these

longstanding genre conventions, including the inheritance of epic journeys and colonial travel narratives.

Shifting Scales: From Outer Space to Inner Space

In the early twentieth-century, American sf writers imagined vast topographies, sublime vistas, and movement across both spatial and temporal bounds. American sf was popularized by pulp magazines like *Strange Horizons* and *Weird Tales* beginning in the 1920's, and the stories were often fantastical and sensationalist. In many pulp sf stories, such as those written by C.L. Moore and Edgar Rice Burroughs, tropes of space and time travel were ubiquitous, and these sf novums enabled writers to gleefully repurpose westerns and romances. Rather than centering the action on wars between masculinist heroes and evil foes, pulp writers found aliens to be an apt substitute. Colonialist mindsets pervaded these works, despite them being positioned in outer space, rather than the Western territories of the United States.⁵

During the so-called Golden Age (1938-1946) of sf, writers such as Isaac Asimov and Ray Bradbury shifted their gazes toward proliferating technologies. In this era, there is prolific use of what Istvan Csicsery-Ronay has termed imaginary science, or fictive extrapolations of current scientific knowledge.⁶ In Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series, for example, the entire premise of the plot relies on the fictional scientific field of psychohistory. Throughout the series, Asimov provides numerous jargon-laden scenes about the methodology of psychohistory, a form of sociological mathematics that enables the first novel's protagonist, Hari Seldon, to predict

5. Burrough's *Barsoom* series actually combines the two by featuring the cowboy, John Carter, who, in the midst of a battle with Apache people in Arizona, is suddenly transported to Mars where he continues fighting aliens.

6. See Csicsery-Ronay's chapter, "Imaginary Science," in his book *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*, Wesleyan UP, 2007.

major events thousands of years in advance. The *Foundation* series is less concerned with any one character than with the multi-generational impacts of scientific discovery and the vastness of space and time.

Major social and technological shifts in the 1950s and 1960s drew sf writers' attention to domestic and communal spaces. Rapid technological growth, new modes of transportation, such as commercial flights, increased access to visual media, and the ballooning presence of consumer capitalism all affected how we see and interact with one another. One could suddenly travel from one nation to another not in weeks, but in hours. And one could see across vast distances not only from their airline windows, but also right from home using their television sets. A person could buy pre-packaged foods, "cook" dinner within minutes using a microwave, and then clean the dishes using a dishwasher. Stories such as Kurt Vonnegut's "2BR02B" (1962) explore how new domestic technologies radically change our daily lives as well as what we consider human labor and value. These fundamental societal shifts resulted in new questions and fears. And sf served as a particularly useful medium for addressing these changes and imagining their long-term impacts.

In the 1960s and 1970s, New Wave sf writers began deviating from and complicating sf's relationship to space, focusing less on invasion and more on cultural changes and subjectivity. J.G. Ballard, Brian Aldiss, Judith Merrill, and Philip K. Dick, among others, started writing stories with less emphasis on the so-called "hard sciences," such as mathematics and physics, and more on the "soft sciences," such as psychology and sociology. In other words, their fiction centered less on conflict than on how human subjects are transformed by their contact with new technologies and fictional "others." Damien Broderick claims that this shift aligns with the

emergence of postmodern aesthetics and the “genre exhaustion” sf readers experienced due to the genre’s frequently repetitive plot structures and storylines.⁷

The New Wave of sf is often characterized by a shift from exploring outer space to inner space in “narratives drenched in artful subjectivity” (Broderick 41). Explorations of human consciousness replaced action-packed space conflicts. Central tropes, like the epic journey, thus became less literal and more figurative. For instance, New Wave writers such as Philip K. Dick and James Tiptree, Jr. (Alice Sheldon) tend to blur the distinctions between home and away in narratives that question where and how human belonging can be envisioned. In Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), humans colonize Mars only to hunt and exterminate androids back on Earth, conflating where home is and who belongs where. Simultaneously the novel has two parallel realities: one’s external reality and one’s virtual reality, calling into question how technologies affect perception and place. Defining home, reality, and humankind are central thematic concerns to the novel, concerns which are never fully resolved. While travel is inherent to the plot and Dick provides ethnographic information about the androids, the novel reverses our expectations about who is civilized and who is not. Similarly, Tiptree’s short story, “The Women Men Don’t See” (1973), which I discuss at length in Chapter Two, refuses the very premise of returning home by having the two heroines, Ruth and Althea Parsons, flee Earth with a group of aliens on a field trip rather than return to the domestic yokes they associate with home.

Feminist sf writers, such as Tiptree, Russ, Le Guin, and Piercy often explore inner space as a means of imagining how new emerging technologies and cultural shifts might influence

7. Damien Broderick explores this trend in his book, *Unleashing the Strange: Twenty-First Century Science Fiction Literature*. Borgo Press, 2009.

women's autonomy. Given the increase of women in the workplace and formative legislation and Supreme Court decisions regarding women's rights in this period, such as the passage as Title IX (1970), the groundbreaking *Roe v. Wade* (1973) decision, and the Pregnancy Discrimination Act (1978), many feminists began reimagining what the future might hold for women. In particular, the function of domestic institutions, like reproduction, marriage, and child-rearing, were subject to renewed scrutiny by feminists sf writers. Rather than taking it as a given that gender is a determining factor in one's occupation or desires, writers such as Marge Piercy and Joanna Russ crafted utopias that illustrate the flawed logic of binary gender roles. Piercy's novel, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), which I examine in Chapter Four, imagines an alternate society where one's gender is irrelevant to motherhood, career aspirations, domestic work, or romantic relationships. Similarly, Russ's short story, "When it Changed" (1972) centers on an all-female society that flourishes right up until the moment that male colonists arrive to reassert their dominance. In both utopic and dystopic iterations, New Wave feminist sf texts often investigate how women's rights intersect with and are affected by cultural shifts and new technologies.

Rethinking Feelings: Affective Modalities

To elucidate the impact of these new norms and technologies, I trace how Le Guin, Tiptree, Russ, and Piercy hone in on individual subjects who are fundamentally changed by their contact with new beings, systems of governance, and iterations of gender roles. These writers provide intimate glimpses of relationships forming and fomenting, often despite institutional pressures to be suspicious of novelty and strangers. With its focus on subjectivity and experience, New Wave feminist sf frequently expresses a concern with how affect is imbricated in these interpersonal interactions. In this dissertation, I argue that feminist sf works often

employ *affective modalities*, or ways of conceptualizing plot, narration, form, and characterization through a particular affective lens. I argue that one cannot understand the dynamics of revisionist feminist sf works without being attentive to the role that affect plays in these imagined revisions.

Prominent affect theorist Brian Massumi posits that affect is not merely an emotional response to stimuli but a way of constituting subjectivity and being attentive to the relationships between subjects. In an interview with Mary Zournazi, Massumi defines affect as “a series of forces that are in-between bodies, within bodies, and between bodies and the world” and argues that affect enables us to develop a “stronger sense of embeddedness in a larger field of life—a heightened sense of belonging, with other people and to other places” (“Interview with Brian Massumi”). In other words, affect connects us both to other people and to our environments. This sense that affect not only guides our emotional responses, but also helps us to track identity and belonging is key to understanding how tracing affective modalities can enrich our reading experiences of feminist sf texts.

Throughout this project, I argue that identifying affective modalities enables us to locate the significance of character relationships and growth, experimentations with form, and narrative styles. They provide a useful methodology for understanding the purpose of each text’s journey, what is gained (and sometimes lost) by travel to new places and contact with new peoples, and the often-satirical commentary being made. Each of the authors included in this dissertation reveals how particular affects can emphasize the connectedness of humankind despite of (or, at times, because of) people’s differences. The feminist sf writers in this dissertation also use affect to move us, to inspire us, and to motivate us to reconsider systems and discourses of oppression.

While there were certainly other authors and texts that I could have chosen, I have focused my analysis on fiction published from the late 1960s to mid-1970s in order to trace how the cultural zeitgeist of feminism during this period is reflected in women's sf. I have also selected canonical sf authors who were all actively engaged in feminist thought and activism at the time of their writing. Tiptree, Russ, and Le Guin were deeply familiar with each other's work and corresponded regularly, which also provides a sense of continuity across their projects. While Piercy did not, to my knowledge, correspond with these writers, her *Woman on the Edge of Time* is landmark feminist sf novel that provides a particularly compelling vision of the future. These decisions enabled me to track how prominent New Wave feminist sf works published within a finite time period positioned affect as way of understanding power, dominance, relationships, and activism.

In my first chapter, "'Progress is less important than presence': Unlearning and Empathy in Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*," for instance, I explore how empathy operates as an affective modality that elucidates how the plot, character development, and ethos of the novel all coalesce around understanding and feeling for individuals who are radically different from oneself. In the novel, the Terran Genly Ai is sent to the planet Gethen to study its inhabitants and extend an offer to join the Ekumen, an interplanetary coalition. Despite his primary objective, which is to recruit Gethenians into the Ekumen, the bulk of the story follows the burgeoning friendship between Genly and Estraven, humans from different planets and with different physiologies who nonetheless form a profound connection. The novel begins with official reports to the Ekumen but evolves into intimate letters and journal entries recounting the tender and harrowing experiences that Genly and Estraven share. In this chapter, I trace how cognitive strategies, such as unlearning, enable Genly to move from a mindset of ethnocentrism into one of

cultural relativism. In doing so, he improves his capacity to develop meaningful empathy for the Gethenians, which Le Guin frames as being the basis for dismantling hierarchical logics attached to the sex/gender system and colonialism.

In my second chapter, “‘The main point is Things’: Camp, Gender, and Consumer Capitalism in Tiptree’s *Warm Worlds and Otherwise*,” I consider how James Tiptree, Jr.’s short story collection uses the affective modality of camp to reveal the problematic logics underpinning gender norms and consumer capitalism. Camp relies on a duality between what is perceived on the surface and what lurks beyond its depths. By oscillating between the simulacrum of postmodernity and the deeply embedded archetypes and ideologies that stabilize these surfaces, Tiptree emphasizes how commonly accepted cultural conventions and norms harm women. Camp, like satire, operates by social critique, though its commentaries often fall short of didacticism. Instead, Tiptree’s use of camp is manifested through an incisive narratorial presence who mocks the reader’s affinities for convention, and thus, their complicity in the maintenance of oppressive structures.

My third chapter, “Poetic Rage as a Form of Rupture in Russ’s *The Female Man*,” traces the rhetorical and epistemological functions of anger as a politically motivating force. Russ positions women’s rage as both the obvious consequence of ongoing and systematic oppression and as a source of energy to combat patriarchal systems and attitudes. *The Female Man*, I argue, can be read as a thorough explication of patriarchy’s emotional consequences. Yet, rage extends beyond thematic concerns and also provides structure to the novel. By tracing Russ’s description of the lyric mode, which is organized around an emotional center rather than a narrative arc, I consider how rage operates as means of understanding the disparate events, characters, and voices in the novel.

My fourth and final chapter, “Precarity and Institutionalism in Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*,” situates precarity as an illuminative lens for understanding the protagonist, Connie’s, ongoing trauma and dehumanization in the face of institutional powers. Various institutions, such as asylums and the criminal justice system, use Connie’s body as a template for exercising their authority. The precarity she faces in her own world, however, proves to be a generative force in the utopian enclave of Mattapoissett. By digging into her precarity and recognizing how femininity can be a site of resistance, she gains a better understanding of her subjectivity and power. I ultimately argue that Connie comes to embody the archetype of the witch in order to fight back in the longstanding war against women’s bodies.

This dissertation concludes with a consideration of how the correlation between affect and political activism in feminist sf extends beyond the New Wave period. Afrofuturist writers, such as Octavia E. Butler, also use affect as a way of imagining new spaces and ontologies for women. Through a reading of Butler’s *Parable* series, I argue that affect continues to be an effective force in feminist sf’s attempts to move us toward reconceptualizing hierarchy and difference.

Chapter One

“Progress is less important than presence”: Unlearning and Empathy in Le Guin’s

Left Hand of Darkness

Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) famously reenvisioned gender roles in the fantastical world of Gethen. Gethenians have evolved to lack permanent secondary sex characteristics, except during the state of kemmer,⁸ the human equivalent of estrus. Le Guin’s removal of gender constitutes, in her words, a thought experiment (“Introduction” xiv). In her introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness* (hereafter, *LHD*) Le Guin suggests that we might conceptualize sf works as thought experiments which explore the effects of particular social or scientific conditions. However, she clarifies that the purpose of thought experiments, such as Erwin Schrödinger’s famous paradox in which a cat is locked in a box with a radioactive substance, is not to describe what will be, but what already is. When Schrödinger proposes that the cat inside the box is simultaneously dead and alive, he describes the present moment, not the future. When one views the box, uncertain of whether the cat has survived, the cat temporarily inhabits both states (dead and alive). In other words, the thought experiments in sf describe, to one extent or another, the moment and culture in which they were produced.

In her reissued essay, “Is Gender Necessary? Redux” (1987), Le Guin explains that in writing *LHD*, she “eliminated gender, to find out what was left. Whatever was left, would be,

8. The state of kemmer occurs for five days each lunar cycle. During kemmer, an individual who finds a mate will randomly develop either male or female sex characteristics. This means that either partner could be the one who is impregnated and carry a child. Gethenians are only capable of having intercourse while they are in the state of kemmer. For the bulk of each month, Gethenians remain in the state of soma, where they lack biological or cultural sex characteristics. Because of this, gender as a concept does not exist on Gethen. Those with permanent secondary sex characteristics, such as the protagonist, Genly Ai, are referred to in the novel as “perverts” or “halfdeads.”

presumably, simply human” (10). If we consider *LHD* a thought experiment that reveals something about our own culture, then we can extrapolate that Le Guin is concerned with both the extent to which gender governs our behavior and with identifying human traits that transcend gender. My reading of *LHD* thus extends Le Guin’s thinking to examine what bearing the novel has on our own culture, norms, and practices. While the bulk of scholarship on *LHD* has focused on the implications of Gethen’s revised sex/gender system,⁹ I argue that we must be more attentive to Le Guin’s inquiry about human nature, outside of the confines of the sex/gender system, a term I am borrowing from Gayle Rubin’s famous 1975 essay, “The Traffic in Women.” Rubin defines the sex/gender system as a “‘set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity’ (159). This term is useful because it iterates that gender is not merely something that one is, but also reflects a set of socially sanctioned behaviors that one does.

Le Guin’s rewriting of the sex/gender system not only affirms gender as a set of arrangements and behaviors, however, but also as a totalizing system that compels the body to ascribe to particular norms. As Judith Butler has written, rather than framing the body as passive material upon which gender is coded, we must consider how the body, too, is crafted as a “regulatory ideal whose materialization is compelled” (*Bodies that Matter* 1).¹⁰ This compulsion

9. For example, see Evie Kendal’s article “Utopian Literature and Bioethics: Exploring Reproductive Difference and Gender Equality” (2018) in *Literature and Medicine*, Mona Fayad’s “Aliens, Androgynes, and Anthropology: Le Guin’s Critique of Representation in *The Left Hand of Darkness*” (1997) in *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, and Cathy Rudy’s “Ethics, Reproduction, Utopia: Gender and Childbearing in *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*” (1997) in *NWSA Journal*.

10. Butler goes on to argue that we should consider the corollaries between bodies that matter, those that are eligible for life “in the domain of culturally intelligibility,” and bodies *as* matter (2). She proposes that we conceive of sex as “*a process of*

is particularly salient in *LHD* where Gethenian bodies remain androgynous until a social role, such as mothering, is ascribed to them. As I will argue, Le Guin illustrates how the sex/gender system, like other systems of control and domination, not only underpins much of human behavior and relationships and but can also be destabilized through reconceptualizing how we interact with those outside of the categories which comprise our own identities.

In *LHD*'s thought experiment, Le Guin situates empathy as a distinctly human trait that can be tracked through one's language, behavior, and relationships. Indeed, I argue that iterations of empathy operate as the novel's central ethos, both formally and conceptually. Le Guin's treatment of gender illustrates one form of empathy in the novel, but she also uses empathy to question institutionalized and hierarchical thinking among multiple spectrums, including cultural difference, colonial logic, and interpersonal relationships. In this chapter, I trace how Le Guin critiques hierarchical thinking, in part, by reducing the scale of her thought experiment from a global scale to intimate interactions. By doing so, the novel suggests that it is individuals, not institutions, who are truth tellers. This is visible in the novel's polyvocal form as well as in the evolution of the narrator and protagonist, Genly Ai.

Through Genly and Estraven's love story, Le Guin posits the possibility of non-hierarchical relationships across cultural boundaries. Over the course of the novel, Genly learns to decolonize his thinking as he shifts from ethnocentrism into cultural relativism, a transition that requires "unlearning" his previous misconceptions, relying less on institutional discourse, and ultimately cultivating more adept cognitive and linguistic skills. As Genly learns to rely less on empirical texts and more on metaphorical and symbolic prose, he becomes more capable of

materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter" (9; emphasis original).

holding incongruous thoughts simultaneously, perceiving nuance, and finding beauty, rather than judgment, in cultural difference. Through this growth, he becomes more astute at perceiving Gethenians outside the bounds of institutional discourse and thus discovers truths that he was previously unable to discern.

Institutional Discourses and Polyvocality in *LHD*

Though *LHD* has a central narrator, the novel also contains stories within stories. In this section, I trace how *LHD*'s form enables an assemblage of voices and stories to emerge, an assemblage that mirrors Le Guin's thematic concerns with dismantling hierarchical thinking. The polyvocal structure also provides us with an opportunity to consider the function of novelistic discourse more broadly. By telling a story that frequently decenters Genly's privileged perspective, Le Guin embraces the messy origins of the novel with its reliance on metaphor as an alternative to the institutional discourses permeating mid-century American culture. Truth, Le Guin argues in the introduction to *LHD*, "is logically defined, a lie. Psychologically defined, a symbol. Aesthetically defined, a metaphor" (xvii). Truths, those truths which matter to Le Guin concerning human nature, are impossible to perceive when one is only concerned with fact. It is for this reason that *LHD* resonates as such an important story. Like Genly, as we read this assemblage of voices and forms, we too must learn to distinguish fact from truth by sorting through the myriad tales, peoples, mythologies, and events.

Genly Ai, our primary narrator, is an Envoy and ethnologist sent by the intergalactic Ekumen, to explore the world of Gethen and offer them membership into the Ekumen. As in all of Le Guin's *Hainish Cycle*, the Ekumen is depicted as a benevolent, albeit vague, cooperative

entity aiming to exchange knowledge among the human races who live in different worlds.¹¹ In the mythos of this series, all peoples originated from one group, the Hainish, who colonized different planets millennia prior to the events in *LHD*. Since then, each world has developed its own nation-states, cultures, and customs. Due to chance and the various climates on each world, the people of each planet have also adapted to their respective environments. Gethen, the planet featured in *LHD*, is also known as Winter. It contains little flora or fauna and its temperatures rarely exceed freezing. Gethenians are described as being a hardy folk who can conserve their strength in a process known as *dothe*, an adaptation that enables them to preserve their energy until it is needed during extended periods of physical exertion. These fluctuations between bounty and scarcity are common occurrences on their harsh planet. We learn about Gethen through Genly's report to the Ekumen, in which he documents his attempts to recruit Gethen into an alliance. It is this report that constitutes the novel itself.

To frame his narrative, Genly opens with the caveat that "I'll make my report as if I told a story, for I was taught as a child on my homeworld that Truth is a matter of the imagination. . . . The story is not all mine, or told by me alone. Indeed I am not sure whose story it is" (1). By opening in such a way, Le Guin immediately blurs the distinction between formal and informal forms of discourse. Reports, which generally aim to be objective, are associated with institutions, such as governmental agencies, academies, and corporations. Those who generate reports often (out of necessity) convert complex human matters into tables of data or succinct bullet points.

11. *The Left Hand of Darkness* is the fourth novel Le Guin wrote in the series, though the novels are not chronological and can be read independently. In most of Le Guin's *Hainish Cycle*, an Envoy, generally an anthropologist or ethnologist, such as Genly, is trained by the Hainish to serve as an ambassador for the Ekumen. Of course, the neoseme Ekumen is a play on ecumenism, which describes the spirit of collaboration between Christian faiths and/or interdenominational collaboration.

Reports rarely describe individual human subjects, or, if they do, they tend to characterize people using scientific or medical terms which obscure that person's humanity. In contrast, stories highlight human nature and tend to cultivate empathy for particular individuals who are navigating specific situations. Genly's gesture, then, to tell a report as though it were a story, signifies his understanding that some truths can only be told through the framework of narrative. Genly's conception of Truth also acknowledges the subjective nature of perspective. While in our post-truth era of "fake news," we may find it cringeworthy to consider truth a subjective matter determined by the imagination, Genly's "report" mostly tracks individuals and their experiences, not scientific fact. This is why Genly acknowledges that this story is not just his own, but a story written by and for others—others whose worldviews and knowledge differ from his own. Essentially, in his forward to the reader, Genly affirms the importance of telling stories, a variety of which comprise this narrative.

Indeed, *LHD* contains many stories, and is an assemblage of different forms of discourse written by different characters and compiled by Genly, as though he is an archivist rather than the narrator. While much of the narrative is told from his first-person perspective, there are also field notes from other Hainish individuals, such as Ong Tot Oppong's chapter on "The Question of Sex," hearth tales from Karhide, and entries from Estraven's journal. Fredric Jameson has claimed that *LHD* is "constructed from a heterogeneous group of narrative modes artfully superimposed and intertwined, thereby constituting a virtual anthology of narrative strands of different kinds" (267). Yet, while Jameson focuses on the "thematic coherence" of Le Guin's "world construction," namely her linkage between the coldness of Gethen and the absence of gender, I argue that the narrative heterogeneity in *LHD* also elevates traditionally intimate forms

of discourse, such as hearth tales and journal entries, to reaffirm the importance of specific, localized, and individualized truths.

In this, my view aligns with Samantha Castleman, who has suggested that the structure of *LHD* “undermines a potential hierarchy of the tales and voices of the researcher and those he studies, instead placing cultural narratives on equal footing with both the experiences of Genly and Estraven and the unemotional scientific discourse” (14). While she goes on to argue the novel not only centers empathy, but metafictionally cultivates it from the reader, I contend that the novel’s heteroglossia has at least two distinct functions. Firstly, it operates just as Le Guin claims it does: to describe the conditions of the culture in which *LHD* was produced, a culture that was both optimistic and wary about the “frontiers” of space travel and one that was making strides in terms of allowing diverse voices to emerge into mainstream culture. Secondly, the polyvocality and form of *LHD* hearkens back to the epistolary origins of the novel, thus reminding us of a literary tradition that was both explicitly didactic and frequently rendered private affairs public. In early novels, particularly those written by women, the increasingly literate public gained access to stories and domestic affairs that had long been considered unworthy of literary discourse. Women’s stories were rarely voiced in epic tales or published in literary journals. The novel, with its looser conventions and supposedly moralistic content, thus became an important space for women’s writing.

While many of Le Guin’s contemporaneous New Wave and experimental sf writers, such as Philip K. Dick, William Burroughs, and Thomas Pynchon, were experimenting with the form of the novel by integrating self-reflexivity, irony, and camp, Le Guin instead draws upon the novel’s rich heritage. The opening of *LHD* is reminiscent of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the novel, in which he argues that long prose works “permit a multiplicity of social voices and a

wide variety of their links and interrelationships” (263). Congruent with Bakhtin’s sense of heteroglossia, Le Guin’s novels, despite featuring futuristic and fantastical worlds, function as a democratizing genre, one where stories can be complicated, interwoven, and multiple. Le Guin has also described herself as a proponent of Fisher’s carrier bag theory of fiction. This model rejects the “hero’s quest” model of fiction and instead frames novels as containers of stories that are inextricably tied to domestic life. Le Guin proposes that crafting containers, both literally and metaphorically, is a “human thing to do” and explains humankind’s desire to create a “bag, or a basket, or a bit of rolled bark or leaf” which you “can take it home with you” is a way of making meaning and organizing disparate elements of one’s life (*Dancing at the Edge of the World* 151-2). For Le Guin, the project of fiction is to carry collections of stories. After all, one would not need a container if a novel held just one story; it could be carried all on its own. But when it contains a variety of voices and untold but necessary tales, we must find a way to thread them together and contain them.

Of course, many proto-novels and long prose works were written by women, were comprised of journal entries or letters, and/or described domestic settings and situations, just as *LHD* does. For example, eighteenth-century narratives such as Eliza Haywood’s *The British Recluse* (1722) and Francis Burney’s *Evelina* (1778) both reduce the scale of their plot to interpersonal interactions, rather than global conflicts, in part by using letters and journal entries as their narrative modality. By drawing on this epistolary tradition of the novel, Le Guin reminds us of the intimacy novels can achieve. Like these works, the events in *LHD* occur in mostly domestic spaces shared by only a few individuals—in homes, in a tent, on a sled designed for two. This scale, between people rather than institutions, also enables metaphor to emerge. While Genly is supposedly constructing an ethnographer’s report, instead of relaying facts and data, he

instead tells us a story. Stories of course operate as extended metaphors, designed to teach us something about human nature. But that something, as we learn from Genly's journey, is multiple and complicated. In her introduction to *LHD*, Le Guin foregrounds the truths we will learn by noting the "future, in fiction, is metaphor. A metaphor for what? If I could have said it non-metaphorically, I would not have written all these words, this novel (xix). And the truths that Le Guin explores in this novel involve the interplay between institutions and individuals, the discourses that we learn and must unlearn, and the significance of stories as a site of truth.

In the late 1960s, when Le Guin was writing, television shows such as *Star Trek* (1966-1969) were gaining popularity, just as the so-called space race was between the Soviet Union and the United States was intensifying. The 1960s, of course, also brought us second-wave feminism and the Civil Rights Movement, all taking place under the backdrop of Vietnam War. With the United States vying for cultural dominance as a world leader, economically and militarily, activists of all kinds began drawing attention to the disparities marginalized Americans faced at home. Racial and gendered divides, which had long existed, came to the forefront of American consciousness, as iconic figures such as Betty Friedan and Martin Luther King, Jr. gained public platforms to demand reforms that would mitigate and rectify the harms done by patriarchy and white supremacy. Activists, fueled in part by the New Left's focus on equal treatment under the law, proselytized that the United States could and should envision a brighter and more equitable future for all. This change, however, would require fundamentally questioning our culture's worship of capitalism, an ideology that renders human beings into capital and that is steeped in hierarchical thinking.

As part of this New Left movement, Le Guin questioned the necessity and trustworthiness of institutions that had long contributed to and reinforced patriarchy, racism, and

heterosexism. Churches, legislatures, corporations, and the criminal justice system were all representative fixtures of the centralized power that members of the New Left found suspect. Historian Van Gosse traces how New Leftists such as Le Guin “were uncomfortable with permanent institutional structures, identifying them with the faceless power of corporations and Big Brother-style government” (26-27). These institutions construct and maintain power by elevating a select few who, under the guise of egalitarianism and safety, exert control over the masses. And, we know, it is generally the most marginalized who suffer the greatest effects of such control. The history of our nation, after all, is written in the blood of those who suffered under oppressive institutions. So, in contrast to the lines of thinking that in her view enabled such violence, Le Guin, along with many other utopian and countercultural thinkers of the 1960s, instead embraced “alternative models of human relations and political activism. . . [including] nonviolent, antihierarchical, antibureaucratic activism” (Gosse 27). For Le Guin, examining nonviolent and antihierarchical ways of being was an essential step toward achieving empathy and compassion in our sociopolitics. And she tracks how we might accomplish this shift in thinking by positioning geopolitics on a micro-scale between individuals, rather than a macro-scale between governments and nations. This scalar shift is evident in *LHD*, where we find the implications of colonialism, sexism, and cultural hegemony primarily through the intimate gazes between two people, Genly and Estraven.

“Fear of the other:” Ethnocentrism and Sympathy

LHD allegorizes Genly’s growth over the course of the novel as he moves from the mentality of a colonist, who is only capable of sympathy, into a position of questioning his culture’s purported superiority. His physical movement between nations and social spaces on

Gethen mirror his internal journey from an outsider with a specific agenda into someone who exercises genuine empathy and emotional intelligence. In framing Genly this way, Le Guin reveals the challenges of navigating cross-cultural exchanges without defaulting to an ethnocentric worldview, an ideology that renders it nearly impossible to access cultural understanding or empathy for those outside one's national or cultural group. Le Guin draws from the contested meanings of empathy, which can refer to biological processes,¹² perspective taking, and helping behavior, to not only consider how empathy influences cross-cultural interaction, but also to reveal the hierarchical thinking that so often foregrounds these exchanges. In this section, I analyze the correlation between Genly's initial ethnocentrism and his limited capacity for empathy.

Following Genly's caveat that his report is a story, *LHD* begins with his observations about a parade, providing us with an opportunity to understand how he initially conceives of his role on Gethen. While watching the parade in the nation of Karhide,¹³ Genly watches King

12. The biological form of empathy, enabled by our mirror neurons, is known as “emotional contagion,” or the “innate, biological capability to be invaded. . . by the feelings of others” (Belzung 179). This innate type of empathy, the “pathy” if you will, can be dangerous, particularly for those who are acutely perceptive to the suffering of others. Examples include flinching when we see someone else in pain or even yawning when we see someone else yawn. While yawning with someone else is generally benign, emotional contagion also explains why we feel vicarious trauma when we watch another human being suffer. It also accounts for why so many of us feel physically nauseated when we witness graphic violence or read descriptions of bodily harm. For more on emotional contagion, see Elliott, Robert, et al. “Empathy.” *Psychotherapy*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2011, pp. 43–49.

13. The planet Gethen is divided into two countries, Karhide and Orgoreyn. Karhide has a monarchy while Orgoreyn purportedly has a “system of extended-family clans, of Hearths and Domains. . . [where] no child over a year old lives its parents or siblings; all are brought up in the Commensal Hearths. There is no rank by descent. . . All start equal. But obviously don't go on so” (125). However, during Genly's time in Orgoreyn, he discovers that the country functions much like an oligarchy.

Agraven completing masonry while half-listening the King's Ear, Estraven, speak with the King's cousin, Tibe. Genly reports that:

I listen, as I watch the king grouting away, but understand nothing except the animosity between Tibe and Estraven. It's nothing to do with me, in any case, and I am simply interested in the behavior of these people who rule a nation, in the old-fashioned sense, who govern the fortunes of twenty million other people. Power has become so subtle and complex a thing in the ways taken by the Ekumen that only a subtle mind can watch it work; here it is still limited, still visible. (7)

During the first cultural observation to which we are privy, we learn that Genly evaluates Karhide's culture by comparing it to the Ekumen, and often in a pejorative way. He refers to Karhidiers as "old-fashioned," believing that their sense of power is antiquated, and thus, inferior to more "complex" iterations of power Genly has encountered within the Ekumen. This also implies that Genly perceives himself as an astute observer, since he claims that "only a subtle mind can watch [power] work" within the Ekumen, a claim that elevates his own cognitive skills. He compares this "complex" power to the "limited" and "visible" power he is unnerved to see so boldly operating in Karhide. Of course, the term "limited" has connotations of being inferior and the term is often deployed as a euphemism for below-average intelligence and/or skills.

The entire observation also centers Genly as the narrator; he is ever present during his report, making visible the lens through which he views his role on Gethen. The passage begins with the personal pronoun "I," and frequently refers to Genly (I, me) rather than those whom he purports to observe. Throughout the novel, as in the passage above, the act of comparing cultures based on a fixed set of criteria, in this case, the Ekumenical culture,¹⁴ reveals a deeply embedded

14. While Genly is originally from Terra (Earth), he has been trained by the Hainish and is an emissary for the Ekumen. Terrans, the Hainish, and the Ekumen are all closely linked because, in *The Hainish Cycle*, the Hainish frequently train and deploy Terrans as their Envoys, including in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Telling* (2000), several stories in *Four Ways to Forgiveness* (1995), and in *The Word for World is Forest* (1972). When I

ethnocentrism, a pervasive ideology among those who purport to bring progress to the places they colonize. Genly's visual observations of the king and of Estraven's discussion are framed in contrast to Genly's own cultural background. Instead of attempting to understand Karhide on its own terms, Genly instead considers the ways in which Karhide's customs, such as how power operates, differ from the Ekumen. These sorts of comparisons naturally result in questions that, instead of placing two cultures on equal footing, use the logic of preference and hierarchy. By comparing and contrasting, one is led to ask questions such as: Which is superior? Which do I prefer? Which aligns more with my own values? These questions, the novel demonstrates, can often inflate one's sense of superiority and patriotism, while obscuring cultural nuances, context, and history.

In an early conversation with Estraven, Genly admits that he does not know what patriotism means, besides the "love of one's homeland" (20). Estraven responds that love has little to do with patriotism, which is instead characterized by "fear of the other" (20). In this exchange, Estraven recognizes that the development of national and international borders, however fictional, function not only to foster a sense of community within groups, but more importantly, to distinguish insiders from outsiders. By claiming one is patriotic, that inherently infers preference for one's own culture and is rooted in an assumption that those outside of one's national boundaries must be different in some radical way. For Genly, who loves his own country but fails to recognize how that love is contingent on his perception of outsiders, the blurry boundaries between patriotism and ethnocentrism are not yet salient.

discuss Genly's ethnocentrism, it is to this matrix between Terrans, the Hainish, and the Ekumen that I refer. Genly's ethnocentrism is not just the result of one particular culture, but stems from his connection to the dominant cultural forces, which intermingle and overlap, within the diegesis of *LHD*.

Many social psychologists have studied the manifestation of and relationship between patriotism and ethnocentrism. Since the publication of Floyd Henry Allport's article "The Psychology of Nationalism" in 1927, social scientists have illustrated how ethnocentrism originates in part from our innate need to identify with those who are similar to us in some way, our ingroups. We are attracted to identifying with ingroups because they provide community, safety, and solidarity. Of course, the construction of ingroups necessarily means that there are outgroups as well, those who exist outside of our (however fictitious) communities. And we tend to view outsiders as radically different from ourselves. For instance, Leyens et al.'s study found that ingroup preference is often so strong that many "people attribute the 'human essence' to their own group" while they characterize outsiders as having an "incomplete human essence" (407). Leyens et al.'s research, which corroborates the findings of many similar studies, suggests that we often perceive individuals outside of our ingroup as being less than fully human.¹⁵ Therefore, it is unsurprising that this tendency to affiliate with ingroups and in opposition to outgroups, which nations and borders often reify, reinforces one's preferences for their own nation, homeland, and community. Of course, this dehumanization is not only theoretical. The "fear of the other" that Estraven associates with patriotism is deeply embedded in our world's troubling history of war and violence.

Adorno et al.'s *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950) was a project that sought to understand how fervent patriotism contributed to authoritarian regimes, such as Nazi Germany. Their study reveals that those who most frequently and vehemently demonstrate ingroup

15. For a good overview of this research, see: Sandanias, Jim and Felicia Pratto. *Social Dominance: An Intergroup Theory of Social Hierarchy and Oppression*. Cambridge University Press, 1999.

affiliation,¹⁶ such as patriotism and ethnocentrism, also tend to homogenize outgroups by thinking every member is the same. This tendency also results in ranking outgroups based on their assumed traits, essentially positioning them within a cultural hierarchy, as Genly so often does (44). For instance, when Genly describes the surprising lack of warfare¹⁷ among Karhidiers, he writes that “they lacked, it seemed, the capacity to *mobilize*. They behaved like animals, in that respect; or like women. They did not behave like men, or ants” (51; italics original). Instead of viewing the lack of warfare as an admirable trait, Genly instead assumes that the Karhider’s generally peaceful history makes them animalistic, or even worse in Genly’s estimation, feminine. For Genly, who has been raised in a patriarchal culture that embraces conquest and values traditional masculinity, the absence of war is symptomatic of an underlying weakness, rather than a strength. His sexism in this passage is therefore not surprising. Expanding upon Adorno et al.’s findings, Cunningham et al. writes that contemporary psychologists and sociologists have been able to prove that “those who express negative attitudes toward one devalued group tend to have negative attitudes toward other devalued groups,” suggesting that rigidity in thinking transcends any particular bias and tends to indicate an overarching tendency towards favoring one’s group over any other (1333). Thus, considering Genly’s rigid views about culture, it follows that he would hold rigid views about gender roles as well.

16. Adorno et al.’s methodology involved conducting interviews to measure patriotic language and bias, which confirmed their hypothesis that ethnocentrism is a predictive factor in acts of prejudice and discrimination (33).

17. In her 1987 essay, “Is Gender Necessary? Redux,” Le Guin claims that the lack of warfare in Gethen came about as a product of her thought experiment. Le Guin claims that the first result of this experiment is the absence of warfare in part because “It has been the male who enforces order, who constructs power structures, who makes, enforces, and breaks laws” (11).

Indeed, the first third of *LHD* is replete with Genly's aggrandized sense of self and feelings of superiority, traits that he must unlearn in order to effectively communicate with the Gethenians. As Christine Cornell has aptly argued, at the outset of the novel, Genly perceives himself as the "bearer of a great cultural gift to be given from a superior society to a primitive backwater in need of enlightenment" (322). To achieve this end of "enlightenment," Genly's initial strategy is to accumulate information that he believes will strengthen his personal and professional mission of recruiting Gethen into the Ekumen. At one point, he describes himself as "more of an Investigator than a Mobile,¹⁸ going about the land of Karhide from town to town, from Domain to Domain, watching and listening" (104). When Genly goes on to explain what this investigation entails, he notes that "I would tell my hosts in those rural Hearths and villages who I was; most of them had heard a little about me over the radio and had a vague idea what I was" (104). While he does form some acquaintances during his these early travels, his fixation remains on himself: his discussions, his notoriety, his mission. Despite his profession as an ethnographer, there is surprisingly little about the cultures of Gethen from Genly's own point of view in the first section of the novel. Instead, as the archivist who assembled the fragments which comprise *LHD*, Genly mostly recounts his own experiences while leaving the anthropological and ethnographic information to others. Though the novel includes myriad passages from Estraven, hearth tales, and some folklore, Genly provides little context or commentary about these passages. By describing himself as "investigator," he also makes clear that he has an ulterior motive. Someone who investigates a crime, for example, does not conduct their investigation merely to learn what happened, but to eventually arrest the person responsible

18. In *LHD*, the term Mobile is used interchangeably with Envoy, both signifying Genly's role as a diplomat and recruiter for the Ekumen.

for the crime. Similarly, Genly's mission on Gethen is not really to understand its people but to learn enough to successfully recruit them. His rigidity in thinking towards the Gethenians not only informs how he struggles to comprehend and adopt their cultural norms but also fosters his initial and incorrect perception of Estraven, who turns out to be his strongest ally and most beloved friend by the end of the novel.

Genly's misconceptions may originate from his ethnocentrism but the result is that he has a limited capacity to truly empathize with Gethenians. Indeed, Genly can only conjure sympathy when he witnesses Gethenian suffering. Sympathy is an affect with pejorative connotations of pity, or looking down at someone in distress. This act reifies the distance between one's self and the one who is experiencing pain. In contrast, empathy requires actively considering another's position and perspective. In her book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag explains that sympathy protects the person who is witnessing suffering from being emotionally implicated. She writes "so far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence" (102). Thus, sympathy is often conceptualized as a performative act that protects one's self while reinforcing the divide between the consumers of pain and those who actually endure it.

For example, when Genly discovers that Estraven has been labelled as a traitor by the King of Estraven, in no small part because of Estraven's role in securing a meeting between Genly and the King, Genly responds by dismissing his own involvement. He reflects that he "felt a pang of pure pity for the man whom I had seen in yesterday's parade. . . I imagined a proud man going into exile step by step, a small trudging figure on the long road west to the Gulf. All this went through my mind and out of it as I passed the gate of the Corner Red Dwelling" (43). Genly's inability or unwillingness to dwell on Estraven's suffering or his own involvement in

causing it signifies his desire to remain distant from those with whom he interacts. It is not until much later in the novel that Genly recognizes what Estraven has sacrificed to secure the Ekumen's (and Genly's) mission. He initially only reacts with "pity," a fleeting emotional reaction that does not require any introspection and, in fact, denies the distress that Estraven undergoes. Genly also does not recognize that to be labelled as a traitor, Estraven has not only lost his homeland because of being exiled, but he also has lost his ability to contact friends and family, which would place their lives in jeopardy. While Genly envisions Estraven as a romantic figure, proudly crossing the ice, Estraven, upon discovering his exile, recalls in his journal how he "stood blank and bereft, undone with pain" (76). Despite their considerable time together and Estraven's coded warnings that the Envoy is in danger in Karhide, Genly cannot imagine the pain that Estraven must be enduring due to the king's decree, and he instead dismisses the unpleasant experience of dwelling on Estraven's suffering for any length of time.

As Meghan Hammond and Sue Kim note in their study of literature and empathy, "the idea that to sympathize meant 'to feel for' or 'to pity,' whereas to empathize meant "to feel with or to experience the thoughts and feelings of another" came into prominence in the 1960s, during the time Le Guin was writing her *Hainish Cycle* (7). The difference in prepositions between the two, "for" and "with," are quite substantial, the former indicating a difference in status and the latter indicating similarity, for however brief a moment. To feel with someone means to share in their experience as an equal, while to feel for someone suggests a detached, if not hierarchical, positioning between subjects. This detachment of sympathy is evident in several of Genly's comments about the culture of Karhide, such as when he recounts a conversation with his "landlady," who he conceives of as such because of the landlady's "fat buttocks that wagged as

he¹⁹ walked, . . .soft, fat face, and a prying, spying, ignoble, kindly nature” (50). Clearly, Genly’s view of gender here is based on stereotypes regarding both body composition and personality traits which he views as being associated with femininity. Genly recalls asking him “how many children he had. He looked glum. He had never borne any. He had, however, sired four. It was one of the little jolts I was always getting” (50). Here, Genly again centers himself when encountering someone else’s distress. While the landlady is clearly upset by Genly’s questions, he experiences it only as a “jolt” instead of recognizing that this personal question may have great emotional significance.

Throughout much of the novel, Genly also struggles to relinquish his binary views of gender, consistently misgendering the people of Gethen. As Wendy Pearson illustrates in her reading of *LHD* as a postcolonial novel, “It is a given that these bodies [the bodies of the Other] must in some way be marked by their difference — racial, gendered, and sexual — from the normative bodies of the colonizer” (183). As a colonizing presence on Gethen, Genly struggles to use language other than his own to describe the Gethenian’s physical and cultural idiosyncrasies, viewing Terrans, the Hainish, and the Ekumen as the standard against which all other cultures should be judged. In the interaction with his landlady, he also exhibits callousness when he makes another assumption about gender. Because he views her as a woman, using Terra’s cultural signifiers such as his “fat buttocks” and “kindly nature” to make this judgment, Genly incorrectly assumes that he would have birthed his own children.

19. Le Guin delights in playing with pronouns, often describing Gethenians as resembling one gender and then using the opposite-gendered pronouns thereafter. In her “Is Gender Necessary? Redux” essay, she claims that she was particularly excited to construct the sentence “The king was pregnant” (106). I have maintained, as much as possible, the pronoun usage that occurs within the novel, though later in this chapter, I will discuss Le Guin’s use of pronouns as well as Gethen’s sex/gender system more broadly.

Genly's inability or unwillingness to empathize with the people of Gethen has two essential functions within the first section of *LHD*. First, it enables him to maintain the façade that the growth, dominance, and power of the Ekumen and Hainish is the natural result of a meritocracy. He exhibits ethnocentrism because he truly believes that the cultures in which he has lived and been trained are superior to those he finds on Gethen. Secondly, his lack of empathy reifies the distance between himself and those he purports to study. The sympathy he may have for particular individuals in particular moments does not require introspection or consideration of the Ekumen's mission. Genly instead wants to move forward with his mission, without getting emotionally entangled with Gethen or its people.

The Handdarata, Unlearning, and Taoism

The Envoy eventually comes to realize the inherently hierarchical nature of the Ekumen's central mission. To borrow from *Star Trek: Next Generation*, the Ekumen seek "to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations," an act that concretizes the separation between those with the technologies and privilege to engage in such exploration and those who are subject to this (often unwanted) scrutiny. Even the seemingly benign act of inviting nations into the Ekumen operates as a form of colonialism, according to the logic of the novel.²⁰ As I discussed in my previous section, Le Guin's characterization of Genly reveals the rigidity of thinking that so often accompanies patriotism and colonialism.

Yet Le Guin provides a path forward by equipping Genly with cognitive and behavioral strategies that enable him to cultivate capacious cognitive skills and genuine empathy. By

20. This logic is particularly evident in Le Guin's novella, *The Word for World is Forest*. In this story, Terran colonists enslave the indigenous Athsheans and strip the environment of its natural resources in the name of progress.

engaging in unlearning, inquiry, and presence, Genly learns to reframe his mission from a colonial enterprise into a symbiotic exchange of ideas and values. In this section, I contend that in order to truly recognize and appreciate the cultures of Gethen, Genly must embrace the practices of presence and unlearning he discovers among the religious group of the Handdarata. These processes begin with renouncing the self in order to become more attune to the needs of others as well to as one's environment. Through his unlearning, Genly comes to reevaluate the ethnocentrism that undergirds his mission.

Indeed, Genly's development over the course of *LHD* can be conceptualized as a process of unlearning his previous knowledge and assumptions about Gethen. A primary catalyst for Genly's growth occurs when he encounters the Handdara,²¹ a religious group modeled on Taoism. The Handdarata complicate Genly's conception of the self, both as a finite individual with particular life experiences, and as a product of, and participant in, the individualistic and dominant cultures of Terra, Hain, and the Ekumen. Before Genly must leave Karhide because of the mounting political unrest, he decides to visit the Fastnesses, where the Handdarata reside. His motivations are twofold: he is generally curious about the Handdara and he hopes to receive a prophetic "Foretelling" to determine whether his mission on Gethen will be successful.

The Handdarata are described as being "without institution, without priests, without hierarchy, without vows, without creed" (57). Instead, they mimic the hearth structure of the nation, which Le Guin describes as being "communal, independent, and somewhat introverted"

21. "The Handdara" refers to a religion that is centered in the Fastnesses, a region in the nation of Karhide while the Handdarata is used to describe the practitioners of this religion. Le Guin uses the indefinite article "the" in each description of the Handdara, so I have maintained her syntax here. Her use of "the" suggests that the Handdara is both a region and a religion, literally a place of worship. Indeed, the landscape informs many of the cultural norms in Gethen, which Fredric Jameson discusses at length in his article "World Reduction in Le Guin" (see full citation in Works Cited page).

("Is Gender Necessary? Redux" 10-11). Practitioners of the Handdara celebrate a culture of inquiry and espouse the value of "unlearning," rather than being organized hierarchically like most churches and institutions. Genly struggles to synthesize the Handdara's dogma, commenting, "I am still unable to say whether it has a God or not. It is elusive. It is always somewhere else" (57). Yet, this elsewhere that Genly references actually constitutes the core of the Handdara practice, which involves an abnegation of the self and a heightened awareness of one's surroundings.

Because Genly initially approaches his mission without questioning his own biases and perspectives, the ambiguous and perceptive practices of the Handdarata seem completely novel to him. As Genly observes the Handdarata, he notes how participants "were practicing the Handdara discipline of Presence, which is a kind of trance--the Handdarata, given to negatives, call it an untrance--involving self-loss (self-augmentation?) through extreme sensual receptiveness and awareness" (60). Rather than revolving around one's relationship with God or celebrating a particular prophet or deity, the Handdarata view themselves as students who are continually expanding their ways of thinking. Practicing "Presence," or opening oneself up to new perceptual and "sensual" experiences, requires a vulnerability that one encounters during deep introspection. The values at the core of this reflection include bolstering one's perception and critically questioning one's knowledge and assumptions. For the Handdara, awareness of others, which is required for Genly to truly understand a culture different from his own, requires minimizing the role of his self. During Presence, the self becomes a receptacle attuned to one's environment, a process that depends upon releasing all of those elements of the self which have, until this point in the novel, guided Genly's interactions with the Gethenians.

To reduce his ethnocentrism, Genly must also embrace “unlearning,” a practice that the Handdarata cite as being central to their faith and education. When Genly offers Faxe, a member of the Handdarata, mindspeech in exchange for a Foretelling, Faxe replies that “my business is unlearning, not learning,” later clarifying that “we come here to the Fastnesses mostly to learn what questions not to ask. . . we perfected and practice Foretelling. . . to exhibit the perfect uselessness of knowing the answer to the wrong question” (72, 74). As Fredric Jameson has argued, “the aim of this spiritual practice is to strip the mind of its non-essentials and to reduce it to some quintessentially simplified function,” which I take to mean that the Handdara aim to reduce the intellectual and cultural baggage we tend to carry (272). Rather than relying on their previous experiences, the Handdara aspire to recognize the limits of their knowledge. In other words, since what the Handdarata learn is which questions are not worth asking, that suggests that the knowledge they gain from foretelling is not prophetic, but rather introspective. The apophatic discourse of the Handdara also demonstrates that attempts to discover an underlying truth are often only possible through negation. While Jameson goes on to argue that “perfect uselessness of knowing the answer to the wrong question” demonstrates “our own incapacity to conceive of” utopia, I maintain that the mindfulness that the Handdara celebrate constitutes an act of revisionist relearning (280). The Handdarata’s aim to negate previous knowledge operates much like a palimpsest: while one’s previous knowledge inevitably lingers beneath the surface, new inscriptions and knowledge build upon that surface, eventually obscuring the original text. While Genly can never completely eradicate his ideologies or cultural biases, he can contextualize them and recognize the value in consciously unlearning discursive practices which are harmful. Yet, before Genly can form any informed opinions about the Gethenians, he must first develop the critical thinking skills necessary to do so. When he asks the Handdarata, for

example, whether his mission will be successful, he fails to inquire about the cost of this success, an arguably much more important question than the one he poses. And the cost of his mission is indeed steep; as we discover later in the novel, Genly's dearest friend Estraven sacrifices himself to secure Genly's success.

The Envoy is initially confident in his knowledge of Winter; he knows their languages, their biology, their general customs, and their history. Yet, to really learn the people's myriad and individual truths, he must unlearn these bits of trivia and reevaluate his epistemology. And the Handdara's culture centers negation and uncertainty at its core, evoking the paradoxical, contradictory space of multiple possibilities, a space that avoids closure through easy answers to questions that ultimately do not matter. This negation and uncertainty resembles John Keats's concept of negative capability, or the ability to hold incongruous or paradoxical thoughts simultaneously in order to grapple with their complexities.²² Both processes begin by attempting to relocate or minimize the self from one's interactions with knowledge and reject rigid ways of thinking. When the Handdarata practice presence and unlearning, they are, in part, attempting to disengage from their personal history and biases in order to absorb entire new fields of information, knowledge that is both sensory and interpersonal, instead of easily memorizable facts. For example, it is not until later in the novel that Genly recognizes how the land of Winter, a mostly barren and frozen planet, influences the politics and practices of those who live there. It is not that Genly fails to recognize the cold (he laments that he is freezing for much of the novel) but as he becomes more attentive, he identifies that there are deep-rooted correlations between

22. Romantic scholar William Ulmer notes that Keats "suspended personal identity through a self-othering power of empathy that extended into dispossession. As a thinker, he luxuriated skeptically in 'uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason'. These well-known phrases come of course from the 1817 letter to his brothers in which Keats explained his theory of 'Negative Capability' [2]" (69).

the land itself and those who live there. While Genly is initially frustrated by the pace of Gethenian life, which is markedly slower than life on Terra, he comes to realize that due to Gethen's bitterly cold climate, Gethenians must reserve their energy for occasions when exertion is required. Similarly, the hearth structure of Karhide's nations which have finite numbers of people instead of large metropolitan areas, symbolically celebrates the idea of a group huddled around a fire to keep warm.

Revering the relationship between the environment and one's culture, the Handdara is largely modelled after Taoism,²³ an ancient Chinese philosophy and religion in which Le Guin was exceptionally well-versed. And one of the central tenets of Taoism is an understanding of the linkage between nature and human behavior. Taoists, for example, "critique. . . the wrongly or falsely contrived epistemic elements which go into the ruminating mill without due regard for their originating natures" (Inada 54). In other words, a significant principle of Taoism is context, situating knowledge not according to one's own knowledge and beliefs, but attempting to understand how natural and human interactions shape one another.

23. Taoism (pronounced Daoism) is believed to have originated around 500 BCE. The word "Tao" literally translates to "the road" but is often conceived of as "the Way" (Little 13). In the time of Lao Tzu's writing, Taoists did not worship deities but instead aimed to find peace through heightening one's self-awareness and recognizing the interrelationship between all things. Taoists aspire toward the Way, a perhaps unattainable state of enlightenment. Taoist texts, such as *Tao Te Ching*, invite self-reflection, valorize the balance between yin (female) and yang (male), celebrate the perceived harmony of nature, and embrace the notion that humans exist as part of a natural and predefined order. Historian Steven Little writes "Taoism teaches that to be content as a human being, one must accept that change (transformation) is the absolute reality, and that all things and all transformations are unified in the Tao" (13). During the 1950s and 1960s, American Zen came into prominence in the United States with the publication of works by D.T. Suzuki and others. American Zen practitioners adopted many of the central tenets of Taoism, so these ideas were circulating at the time of Le Guin's writing.

In a 2013 interview, Le Guin explained that all of her writing “has been deeply influenced by the Tao de Ching” (“The Feminine and the Tao”). In 1997, Le Guin finished her decades long project of translating Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching: A Book about the Way and the Power of the Way* in collaboration with J.P. Seaton.²⁴ Similar to other Taoist texts, the book consists of short poems. Le Guin recounts working on this translation since her twenties, noting “It’s become so deep in me, it’s so much a part of my fiber and my work, it’s certainly influenced some of my life choices” (“The Feminine and the Tao”). While there is much to say about the links between Le Guin’s *Hainish Cycle* and Taoism, a particularly compelling link exists between *LHD* and Lao Tzu’s poem, “Unlearning,” which I’ve included in full below:

Studying and learning daily you grow larger.
Following the Way daily you shrink.
You get smaller and smaller.
So you arrive at not doing.
You do nothing and nothing’s not done.

To run things,
Don’t fuss²⁵ with them.
Nobody who fusses
Is fit to run things. (63)

In this poem, at first it seems as though two main ideas are juxtaposed: action and inaction. In the first lines, the speaker compares active verbs such as “studying” and “learning” with growing “larger,” a process akin to not only amassing knowledge and wealth, but also gaining a more developed sense of self. Literally, growing larger means occupying more space, mentally as well

24. Little is known about the origins of this ancient text, except that, as Le Guin notes in the introduction, it “was probably written about twenty-five hundred years ago, perhaps by a man called Lao Tzu, who may have lived at about the same time as Confucius. Nothing about it is certain except that it’s Chinese, and very old” (ix).

25. In her footnote under “Unlearning,” Le Guin notes that “fuss” derives from the Chinese word *shi*, which can also be translated as “diplomacy. This would change the second stanza as follows: To run things,/ be undiplomatic./ No diplomat/ is fit to run things” (63).

as physically. In contrast, Lao Tzu associates inaction or “not doing” with shrinking. The second-person pronoun “you” suggests that not only does our knowledge shrink but also that our concept of self becomes more finite, filling less space.

The double negation in the final line of the first verse: “nothing’s not done” reveals how the binary between action and inaction established at the beginning of the poem is actually a false one. Doing nothing also has consequences, for if nothing is not done, that inaction too has bearing. Indeed, for Lao Tzu, and in turn, Le Guin, shrinking the self is analogous to recognizing the limited control that we have over other people and the universe. In reflecting on the Tao, Le Guin commented that one of the tenets of Taoism is trying to “accept the fact that one is not in control,” a lesson that Genly struggles to learn (“The Feminine and the Tao”). Of course, Lao Tzu, as a Taoist who embraces ambiguity, avoids a straightforward or overly simplistic message. Accepting that one is not in control is also not the same as remaining passive. Instead, this process involves a redirection of energy away from one’s self and toward one’s environment. It is focused on perception, rather than actual inaction.

Taoists such as Le Guin construct characters and situations that are not easily reducible to binary thinking. Indeed, that would be contrary to the point. Instead, the negation of binary thinking and uncertainty in this poem, like those features in *LHD*, celebrate ambiguity. Yet, I argue that it’s fair to conclude that both texts, while avoiding a prescriptive course of action, describe how setting aside one’s ego is a prerequisite for true learning, or, as it is termed within the novel, unlearning. It therefore stands to reason that following the Way, just like the Handdara’s unlearning, begins by decentering the eye/I, recognizing the limited control we have over our environments, and amplifying our attention to the world and those around us, strategies that Genly ultimately adopts over the course of the novel.

I also argue that the practice of Presence and “unlearning” function as precursors to developing the form of empathy which psychologists have described as a “conceptual, perspective-taking process” (Elliott et al. 43). When we think of empathy in traditional nomenclature, this is perhaps the empathy that we envision. This cognitive form of empathy involves bearing witness to another person’s experience and actively considering their situation and what it must be like. In order to truly contemplate another’s situation, emotional state, and/or behavior one must first carve out space to engage in such cognitive work, setting aside the “I” for a period of time. For Genly to think and act like the Handdarata, this means that Genly must, however temporarily, relinquish his ultimate goal of recruiting Gethen into the Ekumen and instead position himself as a receiver, rather than a distributor, of cultural information.

In other words, Genly must ultimately reframe his understanding of knowledge so that it no longer hinges entirely on his own experiences. Cornell suggests that Genly’s growth into a more perceptive person provides one lens through which we can view the entire novel. She writes “Genly began with the baggage of his own expectations and preconceptions; he traveled through confusion and misconceptions. . . and he came to realize that it was the way, the journey, that matters” (323). Yet, while Cornell’s ultimate argument is that Genly’s “skills as a reader and interpreter are redirected and sharpened” over the course of the novel, I would instead frame his growth as a process of unlearning, a heuristic that is central to cultivating the empathy required for a less ethnocentric worldview (319). This distinction is significant because Le Guin’s depiction of the Handdara so closely parallels the Taoist Way, which, as I have previously discussed, involves not only an abnegation of the self, but also an aspiration or value to “arrive at not doing” (Lao Tzu 4). And one of the things Genly must abstain from doing is projecting the

values of the Ekumen onto the world of Gethen, which is only possible through the perspective-taking unlearning allows him to do.

About halfway through the novel, Genly begins to actively reconsider his role in Gethen. When he travels from Karhide to Orgoreyn, he admits to a local official that he is afraid of what he brings to Gethen, reflecting “I’m not a salesman, I’m not selling Progress to the Abos. We have to meet as equals, with some mutual understanding and candor, before my mission can even begin” (126-7). Unlike his earlier characterizations of Gethenians as backwards, limited, primitive, and feminine, here he admits that in order to fulfill his mission, he must refrain from using his Ekumenical lens to view the customs of the Orgota²⁶ because it is ultimately unproductive and harmful. Interestingly, he also adopts the linguistic negation so pervasive among the Handdarata. He begins the first two clauses by explaining what he is not doing, rather than conjecturing what his arrival on Gethen truly signifies. By rejecting the idea of being a salesman, Genly also seems to recognize that he initially viewed himself as having something worth selling— a superior culture. The term “Abos” here also reveals the racist undercurrents in Genly’s prior line of thinking. “Abos” is a racist slur for Aborigines, or indigenous Australians. In using this term, Genly seems to be grappling with the logic of colonialism which so often claims that one culture needs to be saved, “civilized,” and/or proselytized via intervention from a more dominant culture. Therefore, by rejecting the idea that he is selling progress, he is also exhibiting more introspection, a sign that he is adapting into a more flexible worldview.

For the duration of Genly’s journey, he attempts to understand Gethen in terms of the values and customs they espouse. Though his growth is not entirely linear and he struggles to relinquish all of his prior worldviews, the undercurrents of presence and unknowing continue

26. Orgota are the people of Orgoreyn, one of the two nations on Gethen.

building. During his travels, Genly begins to adopt the metaphorical way of speaking that Karhidiers, and the Handdarata in particular, prefer. By using metaphor, one speaks while leaving room for ample interpretation; metaphors open up discourse, rather than provide finite closure. Metaphors are more open to interpretation than informative writing, for example, which is more appropriate for storytelling versus reporting. Although all language is to some extent metaphorical, Genly's use of metaphor reveals his increasingly expansive and nuanced perception of Gethenians.

While Genly was initially frustrated by the Karhider's metaphorical way of speaking, such as when Estraven encouraged Genly to be patient, noting that "the glaciers didn't freeze overnight," Genly himself later adopts this poetic form of speaking (17). While considering Gethen's technology, for example, he muses that "Winter is an inimical world; its punishment for doing things wrong is sure and prompt: death from cold or death from hunger. . . . At one point in their history a hasty observer would say that all technological progress and diffusion had ceased. Yet it never has. Compare the torrent and the glacier. Both get where they are going" (105). In this musing, Genly finally recognizes the social, geographical, and cultural forces that have influenced Karhide's culture. He acknowledges how the weather and land demand a certain cautiousness. He also, in a roundabout way, recognizes himself as the "hasty observer" who previously jumped to inaccurate conclusions. Perhaps most significantly, he also begins to blur the hierarchical thinking so central to ethnocentrism—he admits that technological growth, which he views as an analog for progress, matters far less than acting in accordance with one's values, values that Genly comes to recognize Gethenians tether to the landscape itself. His use of poetic language also helps him to comprehend how Gethen denounces the mythos of progress altogether. While early in the novel, Genly notes that "The people of Winter, who always live in

the Year One, feel that progress is less important than presence,” he initially clings to his “tastes [which] were Terran” (52). However, once he cultivates a relationship with Estraven during their trek across glaciers and snow, he admits that “it is the journey that matters, in the end,” signifying his recognition of the inextricable ties between the land and its people (237). Now that Genly has begun the process of decolonizing his thinking, Le Guin illustrates how cross-cultural interactions can be revelatory.

Transforming Cultural Contact through Empathy

After Genly’s stay among the Handdarata, not only does he begin to embrace unlearning, which allows him to cultivate meaningful empathy for Gethenians, but he also begins to adopt a cultural relativist stance. The concept of cultural relativism first came into prominence in the early twentieth century, appearing in texts such as Franz Boas’s *Race, Language, and Culture* (1910) and Robert Lowe’s *Culture and Ethnology* (1917). During the 1960s and 1970s, while Le Guin was writing her *Hainish* series, cultural relativists aimed to diverge from the racist origins of the social sciences, which so often relied on social Darwinism, and instead place more “emphasis. . . upon the uniqueness of each culture, on the uninterpretability of any culture item apart from its cultural context” and on the avoidance of “generalizations. . . independent of time, place, and the status of other variables” (Herskovitis x-xi). Boas, Lowe, and other ethnographers and cultural anthropologists began to reject the premise that Western values constitute the values through which all other cultures must be viewed. Since Le Guin’s father, Alfred Koeber, was a celebrated anthropologist and her mother, Theodora, was a writer who documented indigenous tribes, such as the Yahi, Le Guin would certainly have been aware of the debate between

ethnocentrism and cultural relativism taking place within the social sciences (“Ursula K. Le Guin Biography”).

Genly’s shift toward cultural relativism enables him to reframe his hierarchical views of Gethenians and instead begin to perceive Estraven as merely another human whose personal experiences and cultural contact differs from, rather than is inferior to, his own. In the latter third of the novel, the genre conventions of *LHD* shift from a travel narrative into an epic love story. The love manifested between Genly and Estraven exhibits a clear fondness that transcends their original roles as the Envoy and the King’s Ear. This shift, I argue, would not be possible without Genly’s previous unlearning. In this section, I trace how Genly’s transition to a cultural relativist position enables him to cultivate a deep and profound empathy for the people of Gethen. This empathy, which is predicated on the new approach to meaning-making that Genly has learned from his time among that Handarrata, extends beyond mere feelings; it is expressed through intimate acts of love and belonging.

During most of his time on Gethen, Genly attempts to situate people in terms of their gender, which is another way of saying, in terms of their worthiness. For example, early on during his time in Gethen, Genly acknowledges that he often views Estraven as either a woman or a man, explaining that he was “forcing him into those categories so irrelevant to his nature and so essential to my own” (12). While Genly recognizes that sex/gender system does not operate in Gethen as it does among Terrans and the Ekumen, the logic of gender has permeated his way of conceptualizing and categorizing all behavior. Almost immediately after Genly admits that the categories of gender are not accurate descriptors for Gethenians, he goes on to reflect that Estraven’s “performance had been womanly, all charm and tact and lack of substance, specious and adroit. Was it perhaps this soft supple femininity that I disliked and distrusted in him?” (13).

Genly resorts here to archetypal portrayals of femininity and the “angel in the house” proves to be a dominant trope in his way of thinking about women. For him, femininity is soft, supple, charming, though it lacks substance, insinuating that women do not engage in the intellectual or political work that Genly so admires. Just as he initially fails to recognize how Karhide’s culture coheres with its relative values and landscape, he also attempts to superimpose his beliefs about gender onto the bodies of Gethenians. Genly’s failure to interpret gender correctly on Karhide has consequences: on several occasions, he fails to recognize Estraven’s warnings that he is in danger. Because he views Estraven as being feminine, and thus vacant of meaning, he ultimately ends up incarcerated in Orgoreyn.

Genly’s confidence in interpreting cultural signifiers is threatened after he arrives in Orgoreyn and in the middle of the night, is “awakened by strangers, informed that [he] was under arrest, and taken by an armed guard to the Kundershaden Prison” (178). For Orgoreyn, Genly’s talk of space travel can only mean one of two things: that he is conspiring with Karhide to perpetrate a prank at Orgoreyn’s expense or that he truly is an alien who would forever alter their way of life. For either of these transgressions, the threat he poses must be neutralized. Once he is incarcerated, Genly iterates that the prison was “real, the real thing, the thing behind the words” (178). This realness, the literal construction of a place that functions just as described, is nearly as striking to Genly as the fact that he has just been kidnapped. Unlike the metaphorical discourse and way of life he associates with Karhidians, here the distance between signifier and signified has collapsed, fundamentally altering how he constructs meaning. Though his rhetoric to this stage has relied on maintaining distance between himself from the cultures he encounters, his experience while incarcerated becomes a communal struggle for survival.

Indeed, Genly's very corporeality is hardly distinct from the Gethenians as he is crammed into a caravan-truck with dozens of other prisoners and transported to the Pulefin Voluntary Farm and Resettlement Agency, a forced labor camp in a desolate region of Orgoreyn. During the journey, the group is naked and freezing, and they must cling to each other for warmth and share meager portions of water each day. Despite the misery of the five-day journey, Genly's companions exhibit a "kindness that human beings do not lose. Terrible, because when we are finally naked in the dark, it is all we have" (183). When huddling together for warmth, the group pushes Genly into the middle, recognizing that he is colder than the rest. And despite the scarcity of water, they attempt to ensure everyone has a drink. Genly's language notably shifts during this dehumanizing journey as he becomes part of an ingroup that he recognizes as a "we." Together, the prisoners "formed a whole, [he] among them" finding comfort in the "wholeness of the huddled group each drawing life from the others" (186). Physically and emotionally tethered to this whole, Genly can no longer imagine himself as separate and superior. He, like his companions, has been stripped bare of title, nationality, or culture, becoming just another naked body suffering in the dark.

Once Genly finally arrives at Pulefin, he is rarely lucid due to frequent interrogations and the drugs that medical staff administer to suppress the state of kemmer. Since Genly has permanent secondary sex characteristics, unlike the indigenous people, the injections make him extremely ill. Genly is, for the first time, surrounded by Gethenians whose natural biology has been altered to reduce their sexual impulses and he reflects that "Among my fellow prisoners I had. . . a certain feeling of being a man among women, or among eunuchs" (189). He goes on to observe "[The other prisoners] were as sexless as steers. They were without shame and without desire, like the angels. But it is not human to be without shame and without desire" (190). While

for most of his time on Gethen, Genly has used masculine pronouns to refer to Gethenians, during his incarceration, he begins to recognize that his erasure of the feminine is problematic. He associates his incarcerated cohort with being “women” because they have a suppressed sexual drive, describing them as both “sexless” and “angelic,” connotations which again evoke the longstanding “angel in the house” archetype.

In her 1931 speech, “Professions for Women,” Virginia Woolf explained that the angel in the house “was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. . . Above all—I need not say it—she was pure.” Genly’s reliance on this archetype reveals his deeply rooted patriarchal sensibilities, in which women are relegated to domestic spaces and must remain virginal to retain their value. Yet, interestingly, Genly also appears to question this line of thinking since he also notes that to lack desire, an attribute he associates with femininity, is also inhuman. While Genly does not make this connection explicitly, he begins to question which values are attributable to one’s gender versus one’s status as human. Even more significantly, for perhaps the first time in the novel, Genly has begun to align himself with Gethenians. Because of the communal nature of suffering, he recognizes how, just because they have different physiologies, they all share universal experiences, such as desire and shame. These feelings, in fact, are central to the human condition and emerge as one of the results of Le Guin’s thought experiment regarding those traits that transcend gender.

Genly’s attempts to truly understand “others,” in this case women and Gethenians, signifies a shift toward a more complex form of empathy, one that requires capacious cognitive skills. Philosopher Mark Fagiano describes this form of empathy as “feeling with” while Amy Copeland defines it as “other-oriented perspective taking” (“Pluralistic Conceptualizations of

Empathy” 31). Fagiano notes that this form of empathy “denote[s] some type of fusion or identification with one’s object of perception or reflection” (“Relational Empathy” 166). Significantly, perspective-taking requires not only witnessing another’s experience, but also identifying how that person’s experiences and circumstances might be similar to one’s own. This empathetic relation involves abnegating one’s sense of self in order to imagine what an experience is like for someone else. While emotional contagion, an innate form of empathy, is physiological (i.e. unconsciously yawning when someone else yawns or wincing when you see someone in pain), perspective-taking requires a thoughtful consideration of someone else’s circumstances.

Through Genly’s incarceration, during which he is literally subjected to the same conditions that everyone else endures, he turns to stories for guidance. These stories not only provide solace but also enable Genly to discover those truths about Gethenian culture which he was previously too preoccupied to discover. When Genly is too weak to work at Pulefin, he remains in the barracks and converses with a dying inmate named Asra. This connection has a profound impact on Genly and he “remember[s] him more clearly than anything else in Pulefin Farm” (193). The two “lay close together on the sleeping shelf and talked softly” to pass the time and distract themselves from their pain (194). This intimate act of lying near one another and speaking softly in a shared space renders hierarchy and cultural difference irrelevant. Like lovers, the world beyond the two of them seems to disappear. When Asra is feeling well enough, Genly would “ask him for a myth or tale,” relishing Asra’s knowledge of Gethenian literature, which he describes as a “live oral tradition” (194). Though earlier in the novel, Genly has proved himself to be an inattentive listener, here he finds value in this more passive role, recognizing that listening to Asra’s stories helps to ensure their continued survival.

Since the Gethenians have no written language, Genly must rely on his ears, rather than his voice, to gain insight into their culture. Perhaps because of this increased attentiveness, Genly also becomes more adept at reading body language as well. He recognizes when Asra becomes too weak to continue speaking, noting how he rubbed his legs, which “tormented him with aches and shooting pains” (194). Unlike Genly’s ignorance of Estraven’s suffering earlier in the novel, with Asra, he manages to abnegate his own thoughts for long enough to imagine what Asra’s pain must be like. And once Asra dies and Genly is again brought in for interrogation, he “can’t remember anything further than that” (197). By sharing such tenderness with a stranger, Genly is also subjected to one of the costs of empathy: making oneself vulnerable. For, after all, to feel another’s pain requires opening oneself up.

After Estraven breaks into the “Voluntary Farm” to rescue Genly, the two must cover roughly 800 miles of ice and snow to escape Orgoreyn and return to the nation of Karhide, where Genly’s ansible²⁷ is located. When Genly wakes to discover Estraven has smuggled him out of the prison, he is incredulous, unable to understand why Estraven would risk himself in such a way. Estraven becomes increasingly frustrated, snapping “you’re unable, or unwilling, to believe in the fact that I believe in you” (214). Though Genly has desperately tried to maintain his identity as the Envoy, the lone figure who is inherently different from the native population, and there only to complete his mission, his time among the Handdarata and in Pulefin have collapsed the boundaries between self and other. Following Estraven’s reassurance, Genly realizes that “I saw him now defenseless and half-naked in a colder night, and for the first time saw him as he was” (215-216). Like the prisoners among whom Genly was also naked and defenseless, he

27. Within the diegesis of the *Hainish Cycle*, the ansible is an instantaneous communication device which can carry messages across vast distances, even planets. The development of the ansible is attributed to the physicist, Shevek, in Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* (1974).

recognizes how similar he and Estraven truly are. Genly has become more adept at interpreting cultural signs outside of the framework of his own culture. He begins to recognize the sacrifices and suffering that Estraven too has endured—how Estraven’s exertion to ensure their safety is written on his body. He also connects Estraven’s near nakedness with his own recent humbling experiences at Pulefin, seeing how each human he encounters, once stripped bare of their national, cultural, and gendered signifiers, becomes just another body that can be shaped by light or darkness.

After the two recover from their harrowing escape, Genly and Estraven are in complete solitude and develop a relationship built on trust. Having only each other for company, each shares about their world, comparing customs and traditions. In one of Estraven’s journal entries, he recounts a conversation where Genly attempts to explain how gender functions on Terra (Earth):

“I suppose the most important thing, the heaviest single factor in one’s life, is whether one’s born male or female. In most societies it determines one’s expectations, activities, outlook, ethics, manners—almost everything. Vocabulary. Semiotic usages. Clothing. Even food. . . Even where women participate equally with men in society, they still after all do all the childbearing, and so most of the child-rearing.”

“Equality is not the general rule, then? Are they mentally inferior?”
[Estraven asked].

“I don’t know. . . I can’t tell you what women are like. . . In a sense, women are more alien to me than you are.” (253)

In this oft-cited passage, Genly acknowledges the incredible significance of gender on not only one’s daily life, but also on opportunities and labor. Le Guin uses the strategy of defamiliarization here to satirize how the discourse of equality so frequently cited as being an American value conflicts with the nation’s treatment of women. Defamiliarization, a term coined by Victor Shklovsky in his famous essay “Art as Technique” (1917), involves decontextualizing objects or ideas in order to disrupt our mundane and habitual perception of them. By describing

gender roles in such detail, Genly makes it evident how nonsensical the expectations placed upon women actually are. As he begins to consider all of the ways in which gender is a determining factor in one's identity, his list continues growing as though he is only considering the influence of gender as he attempts to explain it to Estraven.

In our daily lives, gender is often the background to our daily lives—we know it exists and that it has meaning, but we rarely trace each way it has shaped our lives or conceive of it as the very fabric upon which our existences have been crafted. This is why, when Estraven asks whether equality exists in such a system, Genly is slowly made aware of the irony that he does not know or has never really acknowledged what life is like for women. He has feigned or maintained ignorance because he has been privileged enough to do so: his gender has generally benefited, rather than restricted, him. By framing the gravity of gender roles as an epiphany for Genly, Le Guin “makes the familiar seem strange by not naming the familiar,” as Shklovsky would describe it, because, for the first time, Genly recognizes his own role within a system of patriarchy (22). Not only has he not attempted to understand women, who are “alien” to him, but structural sexism is so ingrained in his way of thinking that it is only by attempting to explain how women live does he begin to recognize how the inequalities that women face within his own society.

This conversation with Estraven is also a moment of reflection and transformation for Genly, who begins to realize how language itself has shaped his perception of the Gethenians. As I previously mentioned, Genly has used masculine pronouns to describe the people of Gethen, since that binary view of personhood is the only vocabulary available to him. In 1976, Le Guin expressed regret for using masculine pronouns in *LHD*, writing that “I still dislike invented pronouns, but I now dislike them less than the so-called generic pronoun he/him/his, which does

in fact exclude women from discourse” (“Is Gender Necessary? Redux” 15). However, I contend it is only logical that the narrator, Genly, resorts to these pronouns, since his worldview is inextricably linked to his binary views of gender. Without the use of the “so-called generic pronoun he/him/his,” Genly’s first-person narrative would fail to demonstrate as much rigidity in his thinking, the rigidity which he ultimately must unlearn over the course of the novel.

It is not until Genly and Estraven are isolated on the ice that Genly begins to recognize his problematic reliance on the binary sex/gender system. As Estraven frames it shortly after the two of them set off together across Orgoreyn’s glaciers, “We are equals at last, equal, alien alone” (251). Without the strength and fortitude of one’s cultural backing and with only a harsh wilderness before them, much of the cultural baggage that Genly has carried begins to dissipate. Finally, Estraven and Genly are on equal footing, splitting the labor, time, and conversation between them. Genly also begins to recognize how his binary view of gender has limited his ability to really understand Estraven. After watching Estraven’s face by their camp stove, Genly remarks “And I saw then again, and for good, what I had always been afraid to see, and had pretended not to see in him: that he was a woman as well as a man” (266). Interestingly, in this phrase, Genly admits that he not only lacked knowledge of Gethenians, but he willfully ignored their true nature as well. As long as the labels of “man” and “woman” are mutually exclusive categories, he is unable to truly understand Gethenian culture. Genly goes on to reflect “Until then I had rejected him, refused him his own reality” (266). For this first time, Genly recognizes how gender is not only a pervasively influential phenomenon, but that it operates as a form of “reality,” the truth in how we frame our experiences, identity, and romantic relationships. By denying Estraven’s reality up until this point in the novel, Genly recognizes the epistemic violence he has committed. And while he cannot fully rectify that violence, which was so

endemic to his colonial thinking, he can make amends with Estraven and work toward a mutual understanding.

Genly's revelation demonstrates not only perspective-taking, but an underlying desire to change inequitable conditions. Empathy can function not only as an internal process, but as an ethos that guides one's behavior. Mark Fagiano helpfully suggests that this "relation [of empathy] occurs whenever we feel for other persons or things by caring for them and acting primarily for their benefit," meaning that empathy can exceed physiological reactions, such as emotional contagion, as well as cognitive processes, like perspective-taking, and ultimately influence one's motivations and behavior towards others ("Relational Empathy" 167). When we endorse empathy as a cultural value, we often do so with the aim of actually reducing human suffering. As a society, we want our politicians, law enforcement officers, educators, and healthcare workers to not only engage in perspective-taking, but also to act with compassion in their professional lives. Many religious, professional, and civic organizations condone this practice of acting with care towards others, whether that takes the form of feeding the homeless or considering the context when one commits a crime. For Genly, acknowledging Estraven's gender identity, which in contemporary nomenclature we might consider gender non-conforming or non-binary, enables the two of them to cultivate a truly meaningful friendship.

After accepting Estraven, Genly aims to engage in helping behavior, especially while Estraven endures kemmer. Genly admits that there was "sexual tension between us," though from that tension, a "great and sudden assurance of friendship between us rose" (267). Not wanting to antagonize Estraven during kemmer, Genly is careful to avoid physical contact with him, because "for us to meet sexually would be for us to meet once more as aliens" (267). During their remaining time on the ice, Genly not only considers Estraven's well-being but sets

aside his own needs in order to solidify the friendship between them. He also acknowledges that while he and Estraven will always be different in some ways, such as their physiology, through unlearning and perspective-taking, they were able to develop “a friendship so much needed by us both in our exile. . . that it might as well be called, now as later, love” (267). This love, which was cultivated by their shared suffering as well as their endurance, tethers Genly to Gethen in a way that he had not expected. Together, he and Estraven traverse the cultural baggage between them, finding comfort in each other.

When Empathy is Not Enough

In *LHD*, empathy operates as a cultural value among the Gethenians and is a learned skill that Genly acquires, rather than inherently possesses. In Le Guin’s thought experiment, empathy emerges as a trait that is essentially human, even though in contemporary American culture, we often assume that empathy is innate. Indeed, in popular culture, we often view a lack of empathy as dangerous, rather than a recognizing the complex layers of empathetic adeptness one can accrue through cognitive shifts. Docudramas and police procedurals warn that lacking empathy signifies an underlying criminality. Those without empathy are sociopaths and psychopaths, prone to torturing small animals and, eventually, murdering one’s parents.²⁸ Yet, in Le Guin’s

28. Despite empathy being celebrated, our culture also warns us that having too much empathy, just like having not enough, can be problematic. In modern conservative nomenclature, liberals are often described as “bleeding hearts” or “snowflakes,” implying that excessive care for others signifies vulnerability. Being overly empathic correlates with the usage of “pathy” as a disorder or disease, a phenomenon which has scientific backing. Indeed, psychologists have long recognized that excessive empathy can be a factor in depression. In 2007, O’Connor, et al. notes that “30 years ago, developmental psychologists began to identify the links between high sensitivity to others’ distress, proneness to worry, empathetic guilt and vulnerability to depression” (54). The relationship between empathy and mental health is a trope that’s also been taken up in feminist sf, as I discuss in my Coda.

work, as in much of the scholarship on empathy, empathy is more complicated than referring to something one simply has or lacks. We can learn empathy, which Le Guin no doubt endorses, though she also cautions that empathy alone is not sufficient for traversing cultural boundaries.

Both sympathy and empathy can, when carelessly deployed, reify the power one has over another, because, by offering or withholding these responses, one has the power to acknowledge or deny someone else's experience. Scholars such as Mark Fagiano and Michael Fisher have suggested that empathy necessarily involves a power dynamic wherein the person acting with empathy exercises power over the individual or group whose suffering is being witnessed. If we expect social workers to act with empathy, for instance, that expectation reifies and validates the power that they have over the children whose futures they decide. Fagiano explores this dynamic in some depth, writing that a

disconcerting trend in scholarly discourses is how the notion empathy is quite commonly described as a relation between a concerned agent and the pain, distress, and/or psychological 'disorders' of others. This dominant trend, as an exercise of discursive power, shapes moral discourse according to downward psychological movements of empathic sensing, which (defined as projections of moral concern or care bestowed upon 'weaker' persons by empowered persons) are also forms of social power that structure moral discourse. ("Pluralistic Conceptualizations of Empathy" 36)

This dynamic is even more characteristic of sympathy, which is predicated on the distance, sometimes mediated through a screen as one reads or watches the news, between the viewer and the one who is suffering. The viewer may experience fleeting feelings of pity or distaste before changing the channel, scrolling to another post, returning to another task, or otherwise disconnecting from the situation. This form of social power, the power to disconnect, is initially quite salient in Genly's interactions with Gethenians. Because his ansible empowers him with the ability to leave at any given time, he is not emotionally implicated in his task. His perception of

empathy is also initially confined to feelings of distress; it is only when he views Astra and Genly suffering that he reflects on what they have endured.

Recognizing this interplay, Fisher claims that the power to empathize in and of itself is a politically charged idea. He argues that “empathetic projections turn on the power to grant someone else is in pain. . . this power to acknowledge or repudiate someone else’s pain can have political consequences and underpinnings” (454). In Le Guin’s writing, as in much of the scholarship on empathy, there exists an inherent tension between learning and practicing empathy. In order to be in a position to empathize, one must have the status and cognitive and/or emotional resources to witness and engage with someone else’s experiences. Someone who is struggling for their own survival may, for the time being, lack the emotional or cognitive resources to consider what others are going through. In other words, empathy often manifests between a dominant person or culture and one who has less power or resources. In the case of *LHD*, Genly is an Envoy sent by the resource-rich Ekumen while Estraven (and Karhidiers in general) prefer a slower-paced existence and have spent millennia in isolation, unaware of interstellar politics.

This tension in empathy, between genuinely feeling for someone and reinforcing the power intrinsic to that feeling, plays out in how Le Guin complicates the dynamic between the individual and the collective. Genly is both an individual person, with his own ideas, personality, biases, and education, and he simultaneously acts as the voice of the Ekumen, an organization that represents “eighty-three habitable planets” (34). It is not necessarily possible to parse out whether Genly’s views are primarily his own or are the product of the training he has received at the hands of the Ekumen. Similarly, his feelings for Estraven, even those feelings of empathy which enable him to destabilize his prior misconceptions, also extend to Gethenian culture more

broadly. Ideologies, particularly the ideologies of difference I discuss in this dissertation, are visible on both micro and macro levels: in the individual choices we make, in our institutions, in our responses to various stimuli, and in our sociopolitics. Because of this dynamic interplay between the individual and the collective in Genly's positionality as a subject remains complicated.

Yet, by narrowing the scale of this interstellar contact to representative individuals, Le Guin also emphasizes the power of interpersonal and intimate interactions. Indeed, most of the novel's plot transpires in domestic spaces, between a few individuals, rather than on the sublimely vast scales so common in space operas. This focus on the interpersonal functions to humanize cross-cultural interactions, in contrast to many historical travel narratives²⁹ and Golden Age space westerns, which Le Guin parodies in this science fictional travel series. By reducing the scale of conflict in this way, Le Guin also enables us to observe the ethical debate between ethnocentrism and cultural relativism in distinctly human terms. When reading about global conflicts, the harm done to specific individuals tends to be obscured. Conversely, when we can view the dynamics of colonialism via individual stories, the human element is amplified. Through a consideration of how Genly's ideology intersects with his affectual responses to others, it becomes clear that his, and therefore the Ekumen's, ability to empathize with those has been restricted by the forms of discourse, such as reports, that the Ekumen prefers.

29. For example, (in)famous travel narratives such as Cabeza de Vaca's *La relación of Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca* (1542) and Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688) discuss indigenous people in incredibly sweeping and problematic ways, focusing on the diets, customs, and sociopolitics of each tribe, rather than engaging much with any particular individual. Of course, white European writers have a long and disturbing history of ethnocentrism, which is well-documented in both fiction and non-fiction.

As an admirer of Taoism and some forms of anarchy, Le Guin recognized the humanist potential in countercultural movements that deemphasize institutions and politics that operate through marketplace logics. Within capitalism, there is a need to compete, to rank, to win, to accumulate wealth, and this compulsion extends to cross-cultural exchanges as well as domestic politics. Yet, in *LHD*, no one wins or accrues wealth. That is simply not the point of the novel. Instead, Le Guin crafts a world where empathetic processes, as conceived of by psychologists, anthropologists, and Taoists, pervade not only Genly and Estraven's relationship, but also the materiality of Gethenian bodies. The Gethenians, and eventually Genly, is freed from the restrictive categorical thinking which has so frequently stagnated "Western" ideals of equality. Through this freedom, Genly comes to embrace the love and radical belonging he experiences with Estraven on the ice, a love that would not be possible prior to decolonizing his ways of thinking about cultural others.

This re-envisioning of bodies so that they are no longer materially bound to the concept of gender has led critics, such as Lewis Call, to suggest that Le Guin's ethos is frequently anarchic.³⁰ Call tracks how Le Guin's anarchy operates and differs across texts, claiming that *LHD* exhibits an anarchy of gender where gender-based dichotomies and hierarchies can no longer exist. As I argued in the first section of this chapter, this interruption of (perceived) order extends beyond thematic concerns and is visible in the heterogenous and polyvocal nature of the text itself. Call aptly argues that the "discourse of *Left Hand* can never become totalizing or

30. There is an abundance of criticism on Le Guin's use of anarchism in her Hainish novel, *The Dispossessed: Or, an Ambiguous Utopia* (1974) wherein she reimagines sociopolitics by combining elements of communism and anarchy in fascinating ways. For a good overview of how anarchy operates in *The Dispossessed*, see: Davis, Laurence and Peter Stillman, eds. *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed*. Lexington Books, 2005.

totalitarian, for such a fate would require far more unity and stability than the text actually possesses. Le Guin's novel refuses the comforts of binary thinking and closed, orderly narrative" (91-2). Call illustrates how the destruction of binaries evokes a sense of anarchy that extends beyond gender and challenges our very conception of narrative.

Yet, perhaps one of the most important lessons that Genly learns over the course of the novel is to avoid sweeping generalizations and to adjust the scale of his thinking from global and intergalactic concerns between worlds to interpersonal interactions between friends and lovers. While he began with broad, fact-based knowledge of the Gethenians, it is through his intimacy with Astra and Estraven that he is able to unlearn the logic of colonialism, a logic that inhibited his ability to meet with the Gethenians on equal ground. If we, too, adjust the scale of our analysis from making claims about the totality of the novel and settle instead into the cozy and domestic spaces that Genly and Estraven share, we begin to notice much subtler shifts in Genly's progression. His empathy extends to not only feelings of distress, but also to the love and desire that Estraven feels for him. His consideration for Estraven while he is in kemmer reveals that Genly has learned to set aside his own needs and consciously consider environment, affect, and context.

The most astute example of Genly's evolution is evident in how he adopts the metaphorical way of speaking that Gethenians prefer. He transitions from distanced observations about an outgroup to sensing the feelings and needs of specific people. It is only when Genly abandons the institutionalized discourse of the Ekumen in favor of storytelling that he manages to unlearn the strict categorical thinking that had for so long framed his perspective. In other words, his "report" shifts from a first-person ethnographic narrative that centers himself into a

love story comprised of poetic prose. Genly becomes a writer, a poet even, because of this expansive shift in his thinking.

While their love is never expressed sexually, Genly and Estraven share a domestic space, their tent, and sacrifice sustenance and safety for each other's well-being. Their non-romance plot plays with the trope of the *femme fatale* who so often frequents dystopian works and what Thomas Horan terms "projected political fiction," or fiction that imagines new forms of governance. Discussing the typical love plot in these novels, Horan writes "Because sexual desire works as a hub for subversion, each projected political fiction is plotted around an unlawful erotic relationship, which may or may not develop into love, between two characters: an orthodox character. . . and a subversive, lascivious radical" (6). *LHD*, which functions as a projected political fiction, complicates the division between the orthodox character and the subversive "radical" is blurred. Is Genly, who has physiology like our own, the orthodox character? Or is he a pervert, as he is termed by the majority of the Gethenians? The intimacy that Genly and Estraven develop undoes these categories, not only because it crosses cultural and global boundaries, but because it requires a new language to foster its growth. In the beginning of the novel, Genly and Estraven struggle to communicate: Genly prefers scientific and factual discourse while Gethenians, and Karhidiers in particular, use metaphorical and indirect ways of speaking. While each learns to communicate more effectively by adopting the other's idiosyncratic speech patterns, they also come to use mindspeech, a form of person-to-person telepathy. This private language allows Genly and Estraven to communicate directly, mind to mind, without the discursive constraints of either's formal language. It also functions as yet another way that the two achieve greater understanding through intimacy.

In the conclusion to *LHD*, Genly must confront the incredible impact that just one person may have on another culture. When Estraven sacrifices himself to secure Genly's safe return to Karhide, Genly succumbs to a period of depression, expressing that he "had been all in pieces, disintegrated" (310). When he finally regains his strength and mental fortitude, he comes to realize that "Therefore for the first time it came plainly to me that, my friend being dead, I must accomplish the thing he died for. I must set the keystone in the arch" (310). By this, Genly means that he must use the ansible to call his ship, setting in motion Gethen's admittance into the Ekumen as well as his own safety. Yet his way of speaking is metaphorical, likening his mission to a piece of masonry, hearkening back to his experience at the parade in Karhide. His mission is ultimately successful. Yet, the tone of the novel's closing is far from celebratory as Genly mourns the death of his closest friend.

During one of their last conversations on the ice, Genly reflects on why he was sent as an individual Envoy instead of as part of a team. He tells Estraven "Alone, I cannot change your world. But I can be changed by it. Alone, I must listen, as well as speak. Alone, the relationship I make, if I make one, is not impersonal and not only political: it is individual, it is personal" (279). For Le Guin, this scalar shift matters. In vast conflicts across time and space, the individual and the personal are obscured. It is only when we narrow our focus and embrace the intimacy that is so salient in novels such as *LHD* that we begin to understand what Genly means when he opens the novel by claiming that "Truth" is a subjective and individual experience.

This idea of subjective truth is not new. As critics, we have systematically (and, at times, perhaps problematically) called into question the purported objectivity of historiography and scientific discourses, preferring stories to grand narratives. Le Guin's *Hainish* series situates the individual stories of Genly, Estraven, and Asra as sites of knowledge. This notion is reminiscent

of the feminist work that transpired decades after Le Guin wrote *LHD*. For example, Donna Haraway embraces this idea in her 1988 essay, “Situated Knowledges,” claiming the “moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision. . . Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge. . . It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see” (583). While Le Guin would have contested the idea that her work was prescient, *LHD* acknowledges the power of individual perspective in cultivating meaningful truths. It is only from finite experiences that we can engage in the processes of unlearning and perspective-taking that Le Guin finds so essential to the human experience. This unlearning requires us to shift our focus away those from discourses of progress which are so favored by institutions. Instead, Le Guin suggests that must amplify our attention by listening to individual truths and allow ourselves to be vulnerable and unsettled by the feelings those stories evoke, acts which ground us in the present moment, rather than the future.

Chapter Two

“The Main Point is Things”: Camp, Gender, and Consumer Capitalism in Tiptree’s *Warm Worlds and Otherwise*

My first chapter argued that Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* promotes the affect and ethos of empathy as a means of subverting hierarchical discourses. Rather than relying on state-sanctioned rhetoric that affirms categorical thinking, Le Guin illustrates how unlearning, mindfulness, and interpersonal relationships, such as the one between Genly Ai and Estraven, deemphasize the differences between social groups, decolonize Genly’s mindset, and create opportunities for empathy to emerge across cultural differences. Like Le Guin, James Tiptree, Jr. (Alice Sheldon) also uses affect in subversive ways to demonstrate the damage that institutions can incur. Rather than focusing on empathy, however, an affect that is inextricably tied to the genealogy of the novel, Tiptree’s fiction can best be situated within the tradition of camp. This chapter traces how Tiptree’s camp operates along multiple spectrums: as a mode of writing, an affective experience, and as a literary methodology. By approaching this text with a campy and queer critical lens, we can more easily recognize the subversive potential of Tiptree’s oeuvre.

In his³¹ short story collection, *Warm Worlds and Otherwise* (1975), Tiptree uses camp as a strategy of coping with existence under harsh consumer capitalism, from which even visions of escape seem impossible. His work, in other words, is anything but utopic. Rather than providing a template for mitigating the harms of these ideologies, as Le Guin does, Tiptree instead uses sf

31. Julie Philips, Alice Sheldon’s definitive biographer, has argued that we should think of Alice Sheldon and James Tiptree, Jr. as distinct personas. Since Sheldon intentionally crafted Tiptree and assumed the pseudonym for various reasons, I will use he/him pronouns when referring to Tiptree.

to berate and mock them. In Tiptree's fiction, modifying social norms is always a precarious project because those who benefit from the hierarchical logic attached to these norms (i.e., men, white people, corporations, the bourgeoisie, and/or able-bodied people) cling so vehemently to their privilege. To read Tiptree as an optimist would be disingenuous, considering the cynicism that undergirds Tiptree's fiction, in which his characters tend to suffer rather than find redemption. For instance, Lillian Heldreth aptly notes how nearly all of "Tiptree's women suffer" and suggests that Sheldon internalized a "feminism at once so bitter and so radical that it may be the root, or at least the beginning, of Tiptree's pessimistic worldview" (23). Tiptree's pessimistic feminism is at odds with the feminism of Ursula K. Le Guin, whose work often offers us hope about the potential of gender equality. Instead, Tiptree's feminism, like Joanna Russ's—which I discuss in my next chapter—is grounded in the pain and violence of patriarchy. Contrary to how we might conceive of camp, the suffering underpinning Tiptree's worldview is precisely what validates camp as a viable discursive and narrative mode. Tiptree's fluctuations between suffering and humor, between scathing cultural commentaries and outright sensationalism, are deeply connected to camp's contrary relationships with norms, conventions, and traditions.

Tiptree's camp operates as both an affective modality and an aesthetic form in its own right. In this chapter, and throughout this dissertation, the term affective modality refers to the ways that a network of related feelings inform a text and its reading communities and practices. Affective modalities operate within the realm of the social and are governed and perpetuated by connections between people. For instance, camp refers to both the spirit with which one creates an art object as well as the reader or viewer's response to that work. Camp exists in both production and consumption, though its detection often relies on knowledge of the art object's

cultural context. What was once campy may no longer be perceived as such because cultural norms have shifted in the interim. Describing camp as a mode also differentiates it from the concept of genre. Any genre can be campy and recognizing camp relies on being familiar with the genre in use since camp projects delight in subverting expected outcomes. In literature, we can often identify camp through its humor, its play with form and archetypes, its tone, and literary devices such as hyperbole, self-referentiality, and sensationalism. As satire's cousin, camp revels in mocking our ways of thinking not only to be contrary (though that impulse is often present) but also to highlight the absurdities in tradition and convention.

Tiptree's camp, in other words, makes visible the fissures in these implicitly coded but widely accepted ways of conceptualizing human desire and behavior. Their existence is always precarious because it relies on our continued appraisal and usage, even though we envisage these norms as being stable. For instance, within the logic of capitalism, one's income has a direct relation to one's perceived worth as a human being as well as their entitlement to resources. Yet, countercultural movements regarding income inequality, such as #OccupyWallStreet and #StrikeDebt, threaten this logic, exposing the divide between the mythos of a meritocracy and the lived conditions of the working poor. Thus, while we may conceive of capitalism as the grounding for our society's norms and mores, it is and always has been laden with fissures. Tiptree's camp digs into these apertures, exposing how even small cracks can, under the right conditions, become chasms that render the entire bedrock unstable. To consider how this camp functions, I trace how Alice Sheldon's formative experiences provided her with unique vantage points for engaging in this form of discourse. The construction of her notorious *nom de plume*, James Tiptree, Jr., presents a particularly notable example of Sheldon's play with conventions. I then read Tiptree's short stories "The Women Men Don't See," "The Girl Who Was Plugged

In,” and “Love is the Plan and the Plan is Death” as a means of understanding camp’s reception, formal attributes, and rhetorical functions.

The Creation and Disintegration of James Tiptree, Jr.

Camp often emerges from privileged and distant vantage points. In her “Notes on Camp,” Susan Songtag uses the figure of the Dandy, and Oscar Wilde in particular, to explain how “camp proposes a comic vision of the world. But not a bitter or polemical comedy. If tragedy is an experience of hyperinvolvement, comedy is an experience of underinvolvement, of detachment” (44). To understand how this detachment operates, it is helpful to consider how Sheldon’s unique life experiences make salient the benefits of such an approach. Unlike the intimacy in Le Guin’s works, camp discourse often involves an aesthetic distance from one’s subject, a distance that Alice Sheldon encountered as a child and utilized as an adult. For instance, using a masculine *nom de plume* effectively separated Sheldon from the works she produced. It also served a practical function, granting her better access to publication and readership in the male-dominated sf industry of the 1960s and 1970s. This industry was populated by figures such as John W. Campbell Robert Silverberg, and Ted White, men who had the power to determine whether one’s fiction was published and, to a large extent, whom it reached. I argue that Sheldon’s biography enables us to better understand the discursive function of James Tiptree, Jr., whose creation not only broadened Sheldon’s audience but also elucidates Sheldon’s troubled relationships with privilege, identity, and gender.

When his fiction was first published, James Tiptree Jr. was considered a masculine writer. Tiptree’s contemporary critics often (and ironically) asserted that Tiptree’s prose exhibited masculinity. Infamously, the sf writer and critic Robert Silverberg wrote in 1973 that

“it has been suggested that Tiptree is female, a theory I find absurd, for there is to me something ineluctably masculine about Tiptree’s writing” (“Introduction” to *Warm Worlds and Otherwise* iii). Silverberg’s review suggests that prose is essentialist, and that sf can and should celebrate masculine prose. Even fellow feminist sf writers found Tiptree to be a “masculine” writer. Joanna Russ and Ursula K. Le Guin were shocked and delighted to learn that Tiptree—with whom they had long corresponded—was a pseudonym for none other than the wealthy Chicago socialite, Dr. Alice Sheldon. In 1976, Sheldon’s identity was discovered when Tiptree disclosed that his mother had recently died in Chicago, leading fans to search for her obituary. Those who had been speculating about Tiptree’s “real identity” connected the death of Tiptree’s mother with Mary Bradley’s funeral announcement which identified Mary’s sole surviving child as Alice Sheldon (Philips 356-8).

Upon this discovery, several of Tiptree’s contemporary feminist sf writers were thrilled and fascinated by Tiptree’s gender-bending performance, a performance that had so thoroughly fooled a generation of critics and readers. For instance, Ursula K. Le Guin wrote in 1978: “she did fool us—that beautiful Jill-in-the-box” (qtd. in Philips ix). The sf critic Rebecca Evans notes that “Le Guin’s response encapsulates the delight with which feminist SF figures greeted the Tiptree unveiling: if a woman could write the stories that Silverberg compared to Hemingway, then surely the era of male-dominated sf was coming to a close” (227). Though her outing resulted in a generally positive reception and cultivated an optimism about the possibilities of women’s sf, Alice Sheldon, in contrast, felt that the division between her public and private worlds she had worked so hard to cultivate had been irreparably collapsed. When Sheldon reflected back on this time, she wrote “My secret world had been invaded. . . and the attractive figure of Tiptree was revealed as nothing but an old lady in Virginia” (qtd. in Phillips 3).

Unsurprisingly, the Tiptree/Sheldon divide has been a central locus of Tiptree scholarship. For example, Kim Kirkpatrick has argued that Tiptree intentionally plays with our expectations of gender, claiming “James Tiptree, Jr., can be said to be one of these women men don't see. Although writing under a masculine pseudonym, Alice Sheldon always provided accurate biographical material to accompany her stories; she just never mentioned her gender or used female pronouns” (63). Other critics, such as Alan Elms and Nancy Steffen-Fluhr, have used Tiptree’s fiction to explore the performative nature of gender, to consider whether prose can be essentially masculine or feminine, and to reread Tiptree’s works as making explicit commentaries on feminism.³² Veronica Hollinger and Lillian Heldreth have suggested that Tiptree was an essentialist thinker who held quite bleak worldviews about both gender equality and human nature.³³ In contrast, Rebecca Evans has helpfully suggested that purely essentialist readings of Tiptree’s work undermine the nuance of Sheldon’s gendered performance, various identities, and the complicated interplay between nature and gender that Tiptree’s work evokes. Evans writes, “Alli was prone to a fatalism about male violence that registered as troubling essentialism even in the 1970s, but she was simultaneously invested in unpacking the pull of the natural. For Alli, the nature of gender was alternately real and imagined” (232). For historicists and feminists alike, Tiptree’s gender(ed) performance provides fascinating fodder for texts that might otherwise have been characterized as masculinist adventure fiction, best read alongside the works of H. Rider Haggard and Edgar Rice Burroughs.

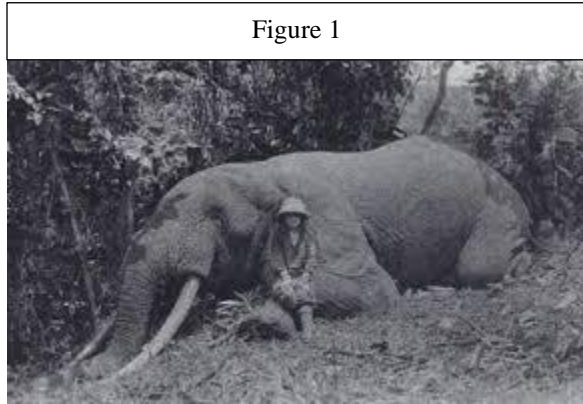
32. For instance, see Nancy Steffen-Fluhr’s “The Case of the Haploid Heart: Psychological Patterns in the Science Fiction of Alice Sheldon (‘James Tiptree, Jr.’)” in *Science-Fiction Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1990, pp. 188–219.

33. See Veronica Hollinger’s “‘The Most Grisly Truth’: Responses to the Human Condition in the Works of James Tiptree Jr.” in *Extrapolation* vol. 30, no. 2, 1989, pp. 117-13 and Lillian Heldreth’s “‘Love Is the Plan, the Plan Is Death’: the Feminism and Fatalism of James Tiptree, Jr” in *Extrapolation*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1982, pp. 22–30.

While the figure of James Tiptree, Jr. did not emerge until Alice Sheldon was in her late 50's, Alice Sheldon's (née Bradley) unusual childhood provides insight into the double identity³⁴ she later embraced. For instance, Alice—who was known by her family and close friends as Alli—accompanied her parents on two African safaris (1921-1922), usually traveling as the only white American child in their company. Her father, Herbert Bradley, was an explorer and naturalist. During their first expedition, the Bradleys crossed Central Africa on foot, traversing the Congo to hunt large game in search of specimens to be taxidermized and displayed in recently popularized natural history displays. When she was only five or six years-old, Alli found herself surrounded by danger and death. Her parents travelled with their gory trophies; while most of the specimens were distributed to museums, some were also taken home and displayed inside the Bradleys' (in)famous Africa Room in their Chicago apartment. Alli's mother, Mary Bradley, wrote about their adventures, garnishing a decent income from her children's stories. Mary imagined Alli as a little blond girl who delighted in adventures while roaming the African continent. Mary's *Alice in Jungleland* (1927) and *Alice in Elephantland* (1929) loosely chronicled the family's adventures.

34. In addition to James Tiptree, Jr., Sheldon also crafted a few other pseudonyms, such as Raccoona Sheldon. Compared to the success of Tiptree, however, these pen names were far less popular. As Phillips has written, "No one, not even [Sheldon], had opinions about Raccoona's sex: she was a former schoolteacher who published little" ("The Secret Sci-Fi Life of Alice B. Sheldon").

While Mary's fiction depicted an adventurous and heroic version of Alli, the real Alli recalled these safaris as a source of trauma. Steffen-Fluhr concludes of Alli's early life that she remained "isolated from those around her by both her age and her color, dwarfed by adults and



adult standards of achievement, Sheldon soon became an alien herself—a tiny displaced person" (189). When the Bradleys returned to Chicago after their 1921-2 expedition, Alli found she had become a starlet overnight. Everyone admired the little girl who had ridden elephants and posed

alongside the bodies of gorillas, the child who had traversed the romanticized "dark continent," and who inspired the heroine in a series of widely-read children's books. The titles of Bradley's books, *Alice in Jungleland* and *Alice in Elephantland*, clearly allude to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), thus conjuring images of an iconic and innocent child who must rely on her wit and courage to navigate a series of increasingly bizarre obstacles.

In contrast to this figure, images from Alli's experiences in the Congo provide an alternative narrative. In the image above (Figure 1), we see a young Alli resting upon the corpse of an elephant, a photo which was taken during one of her parents' expeditions. The elephant's eyes are sunken and its face is smeared with blood. Precariously perched upon its body as though to minimize her contact, Alice has her tiny feet on the ground, resting near the giant pad of the elephant's foot in a grotesque juxtaposition. While Alice is young, the elephant is deeply wrinkled; while she is tiny, it is enormous. Sheldon's expression is shadowed and unreadable, though it her limbs are pulled in toward her body, her body language restrained and rigid. In other words, her discomfort is visible. While her excursions were romanticized in Mary's fiction,

here the grotesque underbelly of Alli's loneliness and trauma is evident, revealing the chasm between Alli's lived experiences and the innocent heroine she inspired.

In other words, the dirt, grime, and gore underpinning the glamour and adventure of these safaris appears in this photograph as two sides of the same coin. This duality, between Alli as a real child and Alice as an iconic adventurer, provides a useful lens into the camp projects Sheldon later produced. Camp often blurs the distinction between surfaces, or what is visible, and depths, or the grounding which makes those surface perceptible. After all, the glamorous simulacrum of Alli's childhood celebrity always existed in relation to her actual terror and feelings of displacement. Analyzing the oscillations between grit and glamour in camp, Ingrid Hotz-Davies argues that "the refuse deployed in particular camp projects is in no way a hidden affair. If the dirt in camp is the less eagerly studied component of its duality, that does not mean that it is exactly a secret: the very workings of camp depend on this duality (6). While, as a child, Alli found the grotesque elements of her experiences buried beneath glamorized images, her troubled relationship to this fictionalized self provides context for the Sheldon/Tiptree divide as well as the dualities so central to Tiptree's fiction.

During this time, there also existed a vast distance between Alli and the world she inhabited. Reflecting on her family's expeditions to Africa, Sheldon wrote that "if I dropped something I was quite accustomed to clap my hands and have six large, naked cannibals spring to attention and pick it up for me" (qtd. in Phillips 15). Not only was she accustomed to being served by the indigenous Congolese, but she was also treated as luggage herself. In her research, Phillips notes that "Alice got to be the baggage (she was carried most of the way by porters) and the view," while she was also "an object of fascination to everyone who met her" (15). Described as various non-human things, Alli was separated from her world; both symbolically because of

her lack of agency and literally because of her position atop the Black bodies of porters who carried her across the Congo. Problematically, this separation reified a chasm between Alli's experiences and the and the lives of those who literally toiled beneath her. This distance, between Alli and those with whom she interacted, fomented, rather than alleviated, over time.

As a young adult, Alli was known for being solitary. She never found friendships easily and remained guarded with new acquaintances. While conducting research for Sheldon's biography, Philips found that Alli's classmates described her as smart, polite, and pleasant but admitted they "did not know her very well" (43). Alli's isolation might read as surprising, given her privileged social status and unique access to opportunities. Yet her atypical childhood in conjunction with her mother's unachievably high standards left Alli feeling immensely vulnerable. Indeed, it seems Alli spent much her life experimenting with identities that would protect her innermost self from public view. In Tiptree's 1970 short story, "Mother in the Sky," for instance, the narrator notes that "I've lived so deep under masks, my interior was built to satisfy me alone," which Philips and other critics have read as autobiographical, given Sheldon's proclivities for performance (qtd. in Philips 248). Distance, a mode central to the aesthetic of camp, enables one to observe from afar, to sidestep the intimacy and empathy frequently featured in free indirect discourse and stream of conscious writing. Camp instead thrives on separation, on viewing the world and its dynamics from afar, from behind a mask if necessary, without getting too entangled in its innerworkings.

Cultivating a barrier between her private and public lives also served a function for Alli's complicated relationship with gender and sexuality. During college, Alli realized that she was sexually attracted to women. While she never, to our knowledge, pursued any queer relationships, Alli's relationships with men were troubled, at least until her second marriage with

Ting. When Alli was a young woman, her parents expected her to marry and have children, but an early botched abortion rendered her sterile. Alli felt like a disappointment, particularly since her childhood had prepared her for a life of domestic comforts.³⁵ With her complicated relationship to heteronormativity, it is no small wonder that she felt curious about what life would be like in a different body.

Sheldon's creation of Tiptree (who was lovingly referred to as "Tip" by friends) enabled her to evade many elements of the feminist debates happening all around her. Despite Sheldon's interactions with feminists such as Le Guin and Russ, her ideas about women and gender were far less progressive than many of her contemporaries and seemed to have remained ambivalent throughout her life. She wanted to believe that women had something distinct and special about them. Given Sheldon's privilege, she was likely sheltered from the full impact of sexism so many other women, and especially women of color, were navigating, so her position on the raging nature versus nurture debate happening around her was not a primary concern. With Sheldon's scientific background in psychology,³⁶ it is not surprising that Sheldon's view of gender sometimes relied on biological determinism while her correspondence with Le Guin and Russ exposed her to feminist ideas about gender as a cultural expression. Sheldon thus oscillated

35. This is not to say that Alli did not have career aspirations as well. In fact, the opposite was true: Sheldon went to college to study art, enrolled in the Women's Army Auxiliary Army Corps during WWII, and joined the CIA after the war. While her interests varied, Sheldon remained interested in seeking out unique perspectives through which to view the world.

36. In her mid-fifties, enrolled in graduate school to obtain her PhD in experimental psychology. Sheldon's dissertation involved mapping out familiarity and novelty in rats. Her research included diagrams of the rat's eye view, tracking what the rats could see from their perspective. Her research found that when in a comfortable environment, rats sought out novel experiences; however, when they were in an unfamiliar environment, they sought out familiarity (Elms, "The Psychologist Who Empathized with Rats," 86).

between viewing femininity as something innate and viewing gender as something purely cultural, something she could perform through Tiptree (Philips 334-348).

For Sheldon, Tiptree enabled her to evade, rather than confront, the sex/gender system with which she had always had a fraught and conflicted relationship. As a man, Tiptree was able to position himself as an advocate of gender equality—indeed, both Russ and Le Guin found him to be quite sympathetic to women’s plights. However, once Tiptree was outed in 1976, the expectations for Sheldon shifted. For instance, Russ suddenly wondered why female characters did not feature more prominently in Tiptree’s fiction (Philips 334). While as a male writer, Tiptree’s stories had seemed progressive, once Sheldon was revealed to be a woman, her stories were suddenly not feminist enough. Fans and fellow New Wave writers, fascinated by her performance, were eager to hear her views on feminism, something that Sheldon struggled to do in any coherent manner. In her later years, she reflected that after Tiptree’s outing, she “lost confidence in the kind of writing I had been doing, because I was (mostly unconsciously) struggling to learn how to write as a woman, not as an ‘honorary man’ as before” (qtd. in Philips 332).³⁷ The escapism granted by both the figure of Tiptree and the relatively unrestrained genre of sf functioned as yet another way of providing distance between Sheldon’s ambivalent views

37. Throughout her life, Sheldon also struggled with addiction and depression. Luckily, her second marriage proved to be a stabilizing force in her life. While it is always difficult (if not impossible) to draw causal relationships between life events and mental health, the outing of Tiptree clearly seemed to have been a trigger for Sheldon. During the late 1970s, Sheldon’s writing slowed as she began withdrawing socially, only maintaining infrequent correspondence with a few other writers, including Le Guin and Russ. For at least a decade prior to her death, Sheldon suffered from severe depression. Throughout her sixties, Sheldon wrote near-constantly about her depression and suicide, even making a suicide pact with her husband, Ting—whom she shot and killed—before committing suicide in 1987.

on topics such as gender, consumption, and sexuality, and the sensationalist performances enacted in her fiction.

Though her views on gender remained ambivalent, Sheldon ultimately dug into the discursive freedom she found in performing the role of Tiptree. Tiptree's perceived masculinity became a barrier between Sheldon and the demands that she would have faced as a woman in the sf industry. Yet Tiptree was not merely a man, but a fully developed persona. His fiction is plot-driven and sensationalist while his tone is frequently cavalier. These traits cohere with camp as an affective modality. The aesthetic distance embraced in this mode provided a means for Sheldon to explore emotionally complex topics, such as love, death, and motherhood, without defaulting into the sentimentalism so associated with women's fiction. Through Tiptree, Sheldon could instead use an imagined, and thus detached, perspective to think through the tensions between image and self as well as her deeply ambivalent feelings about gender.

Performing Gender in "The Women Men Don't See"

If camp both renders the grotesque visible and centers distance over attachment, there is perhaps no better story to illustrate camp's play with dualities than the triangular relationship between Ruth Parsons, Althea Parsons, and Don Fenton in Tiptree's "The Women Men Don't See" (1973). What begins as a plane crash survival story set in Cozumel, Mexico ends as a rescue narrative where Ruth and Althea, mother and daughter, flee on a spaceship with a group of aliens who are on a school field trip to study Earth. With no knowledge of the alien species, nor their customs or social norms, Ruth begs to accompany them, feeling confident that whatever treatment she finds with these beings will surely be preferable to her interactions with Don, who considers himself an exemplar of (toxic) masculinity. "The Women Men Don't See" makes

salient Tiptree's perspective that binary gender roles are so damaging that, given the choice, women (and gender non-conforming people) would likely celebrate the first chance to escape the binary altogether, even if that escape requires crossing a threshold into unknown danger. Yet, this plot move is, of course, also hyperbolic and comical. We are meant to snicker at Don's obliviousness, at his utter surprise when Ruth and Althea board the ship. As readers, we too have been considering how to escape his presence, hoping for his untimely demise and seeking the feminist turn we expect is coming. What we receive, instead, are unlikely alien rescuers who whisk away our heroines in haste, never to be seen again.

In this section, I trace how "The Women Men Don't See" explores the tensions between surface and depth in gendered performances. Using a camp lens, Tiptree reveals and mocks the literary archetypes which not only inform these performances but also shape our perceptions of how stories function. Thus, Tiptree's refusal to provide the cathartic ending we anticipate and desire reveal just how powerful the scripts we associate with sf are. Up until the moment of the aliens' arrival, Althea and Ruth were caught in a traditional hero's quest with a foregone conclusion: safely returning home. Instead of returning them home, however, Tiptree instead ships away the Parsons as though to refuse the very premise of home. Steffen-Fluhr reminds us that, for Sheldon, "the 'pain' of 'home,' the pain of childhood, the pain of family love, the pain of gender is, in one way or another, the essential subject of all Sheldon's works" (196). Indeed, if for women, home is inherently a flawed concept where labor is disproportionate and gender-based violence is most likely to occur, then why, Tiptree asks, would we ever willingly return, provided there was another alternative? Might any other option provide more hope than a return to the yokes of domesticity and capitalism?

As Lillian Heldreth has argued, Tiptree's refusal of home illustrates how "the world is intolerable for women" (23). While the story's resolution does initially seem bleak, it is Tiptree's use of humor and wit that makes the message palatable. Even though "The Women Men Don't See," as Rebecca Evans has usefully suggested, reiterates Sheldon's essentialist perspective that "men are naturally violent; women are naturally different; [and] only isolation or decimation could ensure liberation," the campy aesthetic in which events are narrated prevents us from giving up all hope and finding a spaceship of our own (230).

When the narrator of the story, Don, first meets Althea and Ruth, he describes them as a "double female blur," noting that had circumstances been otherwise, "I never would have looked at them or thought of them again" (131). He first joins their party after asking a pilot, Estéban, to transport him to Cozumel Island. Estéban replies that if his two passengers, the "double female blur" do not mind, Don can come along. When Ruth and Althea agree to his request, Don is suspicious, wondering how the mother, Ruth, "has already looked me over carefully enough to accept me on her plane?" (132). In this exchange of glances, Don's vision exemplifies the male gaze. Since he finds neither Ruth or Althea sexually attractive, they are essentially invisible to him; they only exist in his peripheral vision as a "blur" and are not worthy of a second glance or thought. Yet, we are supposed to be amused by his infinite egocentrism, where immediately after he dismisses the women as a "blur," Don cannot imagine that *he* is not worthy of a lingering glance. Don's disappointment also reveals that he associates being seen with being feared; his view of masculinity is predicated on the notion that women should view him as predatory. Even worse than not being seen, Don feels that his invisibility also invalidates his masculinity.

Once the plane crashes, Don assumes that Ruth and Althea will break out in hysterics, and is quite surprised to find them calm and composed. He laments that "The damn women

haven't complained once, you understand. Not a peep, not a quaver, no personal manifestations whatever. They're like something out of a manual" (137). Don's expectations of femininity are, of course, built completely on stereotypes. He imagines his role is to rescue Mrs. Parsons and her daughter from the emotional turmoil they will inevitably experience as a result of the plane crash. As the only white male aboard the ship, he also assumes that he will be in command. The verbs he uses to describe the Parsons, who he expects will "peep" and "quaver," conjure up images of weak animals, unable to express themselves. In other words, Don expects to encounter someone like P. Burke from Tiptree's "The Girl Who Was Plugged In:" a passive body that he can easily manage. What he encounters instead are two intelligent and capable women who appease him until they are able to finally (and permanently) flee gender norms altogether.

Of all of the stories that critics had to reread after learning Tiptree's "real" identity, "The Women Men Don't See" probably tops the list. While the story clearly positions Don as a male chauvinist, knowing that a woman (Alice Sheldon) provided the wit behind the caricature makes the gender dynamics all the more fascinating. Instead of relying on archetypes of women, such as the damsel in distress, Tiptree instead provides the opposite: a bumbling man who lacks any introspection or useful skills. Don recognizes the tropes at play in the survival scenario unfolding before his eyes and anticipates his role as a Robinson Crusoe figure who becomes the king of all he sees. As the story unfolds, Don becomes increasingly confused when Ruth and Althea refuse to participate in the script he knows so well. Because he cannot imagine an alternative where women are competent and capable, Don projects his own sense of caricature onto Ruth and Althea, assuming that they are, that indeed they *must* be, the ones in direst need of rescue.

This reversal of caricature provides Tiptree the perfect opportunity for the ironic distance so celebrated in camp sensibility. From Don's dense point of view, we can easily discern the

gender stereotypes that have for so long plagued female characters. And Tiptree does not let us forget, even for a moment, that Don is all things wrong with the world. After his views are about women are made abundantly clear, Don's predatory nature again resurfaces. When he and Ruth travel to find fresh water and end up having to spend the night together before returning to the plane, Don ruminates about why Ruth doesn't find him more sexually threatening; which is to say, why she does not recognize his masculinity. As they lie down to sleep, Don reflects

The woman doesn't mean one thing to me, but the obtrusive recessiveness of her, the defiance of her little rump eight inches from my fly—for two pesos, I'd have those shorts down and introduce myself. If I were twenty years younger. . . Mrs. Parsons knows her little shorts are safe. Those firmly filled little shorts, so close . . . A warm nerve stirs in my groin—and just as it does I become aware of a silent emptiness beside me. Mrs. Parsons is imperceptibly inching away. (142-3)

Don's internal diatribe reveals his view that women's fundamental role is to yield to men's desires. What irritates him most about Ruth Parsons is how she fails to acknowledge Don as the "alpha male" figure he longs to embody. Indeed, he exhibits a classic case of fragile masculinity; a sense that if his gender is performed incorrectly, he will no longer be a man at all.

Psychologists Sarah Dimuccio and Eric Knowles found in their research that fragile masculinity "is not merely the fear that one will be punished for failing to conform to gendered prescriptions and proscriptions," but that it often results in not only "ostracism or a loss of esteem in the eyes of peers," but a "revocation of his very membership in the high-status 'man' category" (25). The stakes, then, for Don are higher than we might initially realize, given that masculinity in American culture, particularly during the 1970s, is inextricably linked to confidence and sexual aggression. His expectation that Ruth play her role too, that she yield to him instead of recess from him, coheres with his rigid view of gender roles and their consequences. Yet, in this exchange, Don acknowledges the agency and prescience of Ruth, even if he cannot understand her resistance and still regards her primarily as a series of sexual objects. Her "little rump" defies

him by merely existing so close to his own “fly,” her “little shorts” are both sexually appealing and safe, and her “imperceptible” movement away from him belies her understanding that Don takes his strict adherence to masculinity’s worst traits far too seriously. Once again, it is Don that is left bewildered while Ruth aptly recognizes and interprets the risk of Don’s fragile masculinity.

Despite Don’s initial concerns that Ruth is unfit to accompany him on their mission to find fresh water and help, Tiptree again emphasizes that it is Don, not Ruth, who inhibits their success. In the morning following their tenuous night together, Don trips and injures his knee. He describes the wound as “a giant misplaced erection bulging out of my shorts” (145). Just as the narrative strays dangerously close to trauma, it returns to a gregarious and sensationalist aesthetic. Don’s fragile masculinity literally erupts from his clothing in a scene that is simultaneously humorous and grotesque. Hotz-Davies has noted that camp often incorporates distasteful elements, such as the “erection” in this scene. In a reading of *Pirelli*, Hotz-Davies argues that camp sometimes functions as “a discursive mode that seeks to incorporate the unacceptable, shameful, the ingloriously abject rather than splitting it off and casting it elsewhere” (22). In Don’s description above, the “ingloriously abject” is integrated literally, meaning it is visible via Don’s very person. But discursively, labeling a wound as an “erection” also demonstrates how his interpretations of events is always tied to his perceived masculinity. For him, there is no other way to conceptualize injury and pain besides considering how those experiences cohere with or threaten his status as a man.

Don’s difficulty interpreting cultural signifiers outside of the binary sex/gender system operates as a microcosm of camp’s delight in failure. Camp itself is sometimes framed as failure, as aesthetic projects that attempt but fail to achieve social commentaries because of their

absurdity. Reading Don as absurd, rather than terrifying, requires a particular readership who understands the humor in failure. Ari Brostoff astutely notes that camp often operates as a “mode of spectatorship that celebrates failure. . . as a way of generating a satirical commentary on the conventions of the unattained effect” (2). While Brostoff is interested in how this spectatorship can problematically position trans subjects as entertainment, their analysis draws attention to the need for a campy literary methodology. By recognizing the absurdity in social norms, such as Don’s insistence on maintaining a carefully cultivated masculinity, camp critics can discern how failure functions as a means of subversion. Sontag, too, reminds us that camp is contingent on a community who uses and understands it. She aptly argues that “one is drawn to camp when one realizes that ‘sincerity’ is not enough” (41-2). For Tiptree, using the ethos of sincerity would fail to convey a scathing enough criticism. It is through our satirical gaze and our attention to the absurd that we can best trace how laughter is sometimes the most incisive means of criticizing the Dons of the world.

Tiptree’s portrayal of Don is also satirical and mocks the longstanding sf tropes that glorify male violence. It also aligns with Sontag’s insistence that camp “incarnates a victory of . . . of irony over tragedy” (38). Don’s hyperbolic behavior alludes to sf stories such as Edgar Rice Burroughs’s *A Princess of Mars* (1917) in which the cowboy John Carter massacres his way into a princess’s loving arms. In “The Women Men Don’t See,” Tiptree uses situational irony to juxtapose Don’s view of himself as a John Carter-esque figure with his actual ineptitude. His erupting masculinity is consistently mocked and his prize of a grateful and willing young sexual partner is ultimately denied. These humorous moments initially seem to cohere with Sontag’s estimation that “the whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. . .” (41). Yet, I would argue that the categories between serious and playful are not as

mutually exclusive as Sontag's framing indicates. Though Tiptree pokes fun at Don's obtuseness, Tiptree also makes it evident that his delusions of grandeur pose a real threat. His reliance on gender archetypes may be sensationalist, but they also have consequences and produce fear in Ruth, who "inches away" from him, recognizing that despite how ridiculous his view of masculinity may be, Don has internalized his role as a predator. This complex interplay between seriousness and playfulness is key to camp discourse, which blurs the boundaries between what lies on the surface and what prowls beneath its depths.

The terms "surface" and "depth" have a long and troubled history in critical theory. For example, Fredric Jameson nostalgically laments depthlessness in postmodernity, claiming "it can be experienced physically and literally by anyone" (62). Using postmodern architecture as an example, Jameson argues that postmodern texts appear two-dimensional. These structures often use mirrors as optical illusions to obscure their true volume.³⁸ In contrast to earlier modernist works, Fredric Jameson argues that postmodernist style is characterized by flat affect, apparent when "depth is replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces" (62). Yet, in camp, there is a constant flux between the registers of surface and depth, particularly in terms of human behavior. Since performing gender is key to Don's self-image, he recognizes how performing his gender correctly, regardless of his internal views on masculinity, is what maintains and propels his maleness. Thus, when I refer to "surface" and "depth" in this chapter, I am primarily referring to how these terms are resignified in drag. Camp is often celebrated for its queerness and, in line with Hotz-Davies's thinking, a camp methodology requires us to consider how one's external

38. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus have taken issue with the metaphors of surface and depth, claiming that those terms align with symptomatic reading, or critical theory's logic that a text's "most significant truths are not immediately apprehensible and may be veiled or invisible" (4).

appearance may or may not cohere with one's internal experiences of sense of self. This is not to say that either surface or depth is more real than its opposite: indeed, in Tiptree's fiction, these two facets of identity and language engage in a dynamic interplay, which we see dramatized in Don and Ruth's interactions.

Assuming that female independence is grounded in a hatred of men, Don attempts to reposition Ruth within a more traditional version of femininity. When he asks Ruth why she is single and she demures, he replies

“Whatever trauma you went through, these things don't last forever. You can't hate all men.”

The smile is back. “Oh, there wasn't any trauma, Don, and I *don't* hate men. That would be as silly as—as hating the weather.” She glances wryly at the blowing rain. (152)

Despite Don's incessant attempts to coerce Ruth into conforming to an archetype, in this case the “professional man-hater” he references just prior to this scene, she manages to evade such strict categorization (152). Instead, she acknowledges her view that gender is inescapable. It is something she has learned to live with and survive, just like the weather. Yet, Ruth also implies through this analogy that though gender is a pervasive and powerful phenomenon, it can also be unpredictable, variant, and sometimes violent, just like her interactions with Don. Framing gender as something as natural as the weather might lead some readers to conclude that this is an example of Tiptree relying on biological essentialism. However, I argue that Ruth is instead cognizant of gender performance as a construct, which is just as difficult to escape as the rainstorm in which she finds herself.

Ruth goes on to describe how she views men and women's different roles within the ideology of gender, explaining to Don that ““what women do is survive. We live by ones and twos in the chinks of your world-machine. . . Men live to struggle against each other; we're just

part of the battlefields. It'll never change unless you change the whole world. I dream sometimes of—of going away—” (154). In Ruth’s view, the naturalization of gender has less to do with biology and more to do with the activities and responses that each gender is conditioned to perform. Men own the “world-machine,” the institutions that exert power over the population, and they also “live to struggle against each other” in seemingly never-ending battles for dominance. Women, in contrast, are described as part of the landscape, the objects upon which men’s feet tread when they enact this violence.³⁹

Ruth’s understanding of gender, in other words, is grounded in her knowledge of American literature and history. She realizes, even if Don does not, how the discursive passivity of “the lesser sex” is reified through stories, institutions, and repeated usage. Ruth also runs into the limits of discourse during her attempt to explain gender inequality to Don, who surely will not understand. Her musings end with a dash, a signifier that she has run out of language that can accurately describe her feelings about gender. Further, this dash, positioned right after “going away,” illustrates how even the thought of a place without gender roles exceeds Ruth’s capacity for language. She struggles to articulate a specific “away,” instead leaving her thought incomplete. Could a place far enough “away” even exist?

In a fast-paced resolution, Ruth’s dreams of going away do, of course, come to fruition in quite a dramatic and literal fashion. An alien spaceship lands near Ruth and Don, at which point Don panics and shoots Ruth in the arm during yet another inept attempt to position himself as the hero. This additional example of fragile masculinity, where Don misfires a phallic weapon and

39. This imagery was at the forefront of feminist consciousness in the 1970s. For instance, in 1975, Annette Kolodny published her *Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*, in which she argues that American literature, and particularly the mythos of westward expansion, is predicated on the notion that the land is feminized and therefore must be explored, conquered, and penetrated.

inadvertently injures someone in the process, provides yet another example of camp's sensationalism and play with the grotesque. Using thinly veiled symbols for masculinity, such as a gun or Don's wound, Tiptree conflates surface and depth while simultaneously showcasing how either reading (literal or figurative) is equally absurd. After the aliens return Ruth and Don to the aircraft where Althea has been waiting, Ruth begs the aliens "Please take us. We don't mind what your planet is like; we'll learn—we'll do anything! We won't cause any trouble. Please. Oh, *please*" (161). Ruth's desperate phrasing and utter exasperation ironically positions her in the dependent role that Don has so longed for her to occupy. While she refused to play the archetypal damsel in distress for Don, she is perfectly willing to perform that role if it means an opportunity to escape his presence.

By considering camp's homage to queer affect, "The Women Men Don't See" also makes evident Tiptree's refusal to provide a heteronormative happy ending. Gary McMahon argues that "a significant heredity in camp genealogy is queer subculture," a subculture that is grounded in performing gender and providing alternatives to the mythos of the nuclear family (31). I find it instructive to dig into the queerness of camp, to consider camp's possibilities as a discourse that both performs and subverts boundaries. One cannot read a story such as "The Women Men Don't See" without considering the failure of gender norms. Don's positioning as a stereotypically predatory male reveals his reliance on cultural and literary norms governing gendered behavior, regardless of how these norms may impinge his success and survival. Meanwhile, though Ruth denies being a lesbian, she is nonetheless a deeply queer character. For instance, when Ruth tells Don that she has raised Althea on her own, he imagines "generations of solitary Parsons women selecting sires, making impregnation trips" (151). Through Ruth's independence and fortitude, Don envisions a world where men like him are simply no longer

needed, except for procreation. Rather than accepting her proscribed role as a wife, Ruth has obtained security clearance for her government job and chosen to raise a family of her choosing. In other words, she rejects not only Don, but the sex/gender system that has created Don. This queering undermines the mythos of the nuclear family; instead of a family unit comprised of a mother, father, and two children whose home is adorned by a white picket fence, the women leave Don and the world behind, choosing adventure over domesticity.

Yet, when Don reflects on Althea and Ruth's departure, he wonders "How could a woman choose to live among unknown monsters, to say good-bye to her home, her world?" (164). For Tiptree, Don's failure to understand is paramount. He represents patriarchy itself, which is not a single person or a set of acts, but an ideology that permeates nearly all facets of life. Particularly for Don, who views himself primarily in terms of his masculinity, it is impossible to escape gender and its influence over one's daily life. Ruth recognizes this, not only because of her conversations with Don, but because those interactions are scripted; she has encountered iterations of Don's ignorance in numerous contexts throughout her life. While Don cannot conceive of a woman who does not want to return home, Ruth has already rejected the very premise of home. The irony here, of course, is that both Don and Ruth find themselves in Cozumel in the first place because of their similar desires to escape the confines of domestic life and pursue adventure. Despite making this realization for himself, Don, ever-blinded by his strict views of gender, remains unable to see how home is, and always will be, a fraught concept for Ruth precisely because of those gender roles.

What Tiptree's use of camp reveals, then, is how the pervasiveness of binary gender roles renders the very concept of home uninhabitable for women. What should be a place of comfort and rest threatens Ruth and Althea, functioning as the metaphorical dirt and rust lurking under

the surface of their adventure. Their exploration has dual implications: they long for new experiences and cultures, but just as significantly, they are fleeing from the known, the overbearing ideologies of femininity and home with which they are intimately familiar. Don, as the patriarch attempting to codify and enforce gender roles, longs to return Ruth to her place. Even as Ruth glances skyward to escape Earth altogether (the ultimate symbol of home), Don still cannot understand why she would go. By positioning Don as the narrator, Tiptree achieves the ironic distance that is so central to camp. Without Don's obtuse view of the world, this would be a tragic story. However, through his point of view, we come to see the intricacies and ironies of gender(ed) performances. Since fragile masculinity deeply informs his male gaze, the reader remains ever-cognizant of the paradoxical nature of home, which Ruth and Althea *must* refuse if they seek to escape the confines of gender.

Zombie Culture in “The Girl Who Was Plugged In” (1973)

Tiptree's “The Girl Who Was Plugged In” (1973) is a story in which nearly every element is artificial and exaggerated. This artificiality aligns with camp's tendency to hyperbolize, and frequently mock, not only the social norms that govern behavior but genre conventions as well. By the 1970s when Tiptree was writing, sf already had a long history of sensationalism, with programs like *Doctor Who* and *Star Trek* airing on television and kitschy short fiction, like Larry Niven's *Known Space* stories being circulated in the pulps. Tiptree's short stories often appear pastiche in that they amplify the convention associated with sf. For instance, in the “Girl Who Was Plugged In,” there is an abundance of both imaginary science, which Csicsery-Ronay defines as “ludic mini-myths that build on the playful imitation of technoscientific imagining,” and fictive neologisms, or the novel words and phrases sf authors

use to describe their worlds and the science they have imagined or extrapolated (115). Tiptree's fiction pushes the envelope even further than the sf of his time, illustrating both a delight in these conventions and frequent rifts on their ludicrousness.

In this section, I argue that Tiptree oscillates between embracing the cognitive estrangement associated with sf and mocking our reliance on the absurd genre conventions and cultural norms that have produced the disturbing relationship between P. Burke and Delphi.⁴⁰ "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" ultimately occupies a blurred positionality between technoscientific sf and scathing social commentary. While these two forms of discourse are not mutually exclusive and frequently overlap, Tiptree uses camp to expose the tensions between the sensationalist sf we often mindlessly consume and the perils of consumer capitalism that engenders this consumption. The premise of "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" also deploys multiple levels of social reality. P. Burke is locked away in a basement as she powers an automaton on the surface, drawing attention to the idea that too often, we ignore those who are consumed by this capitalism. These levels of reality, like Don's reliance on literary archetypes versus his interactions with actual women, muddle the distinction between the images we encounter in consumer culture and the lived experiences of those living within that culture.

Tiptree's play with the tropes central to sf can be traced through his integration of technoscientific terms. "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" features "eccentric projection," "sensory

40. Building upon Viktor Shklovsky's definition of cognitive estrangement in his essay, "Art as Technique" (1917), Darko Suvin argues sf can best be defined as the genre of cognitive estrangement. Suvin writes that sf "takes off from a fictional ('literary') hypothesis and develops it with extrapolating and totalizing ('scientific') rigor" (374). Suvin claims that sf integrates elements of realism, such as a focus on the underbelly of society and heteroglossic discourse, while simultaneously expanding upon the horizons of the possible (374). This tension, between the often-gritty realism of human's lived conditions and the speculative extrapolation of what might be, Suvin argues, produces cognitive estrangement.

references,” and “PDs. Placental Decanters,” among other imagined technologies. Csicsery-Ronay argues that a core convention of sf is its creation of neologisms writing “imaginary neologies stand out from other words as knots of estrangement, drawing together the threads of imaginary reference with those of known language” (19). Terms such as “eccentric projection” and “placental decanters” are inherently estranging because they allude to technologies and relations that do not exist within our own world. By integrating these terms, Tiptree fiction aligns with sf’s tradition of integrating sensationalist discourse to match its otherworldly diegesis. Yet, in the spirit of camp, Tiptree explicitly refers to these neosemes as “jargon,” a playful nudge that gently mocks this sf convention and operates as a metafictional reminder that jars the reader from suspending their disbelief.

Tiptree also uses metafiction more explicitly. For instance, “The Girl Who Was Plugged In” opens with a direct affront to the reader: “LISTEN ZOMBIE. BELIEVE me. What I could tell you—you with your silly hands leaking sweat on your growth-stocks portfolio” (79). Prior to any knowledge about the story’s setting or central characters, readers are called out as zombies, mindlessly skimming from word to word, consuming the text in the first of what will be many instances of consumption. Our hands, which in literature often function as synecdoches for human accomplishments, are rendered in Tiptree’s treatment as “silly” and “leaking sweat.” In just a few short words, the hands with which we hold this text are described as atavistic, inept, grotesque, and greedy.

By opening this way, Tiptree emphasizes our complicity in what is about to unfold before our eyes. In her *Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon explains that “it is the function of irony in postmodern discourse to posit that critical distance and then undo it” and as “receivers of postmodern art, we are all implicated in the legitimization of our culture” (15). While camp often

uses aesthetic distance in terms of its production, we are intimately implicated in its consumption. We greedily gobble this fiction, adding it to our shelves of texts that we have read. Yet, this act of consumption, like all acts of consumption, necessarily has bearing on not only ourselves, but on our cultural norms. To consume is also to be consumed, to be drawn into the narrative and out of our daily lives, to shift our attention from those atrocities of capitalism around us and onto the fictionalized ones on the page. It becomes evident from the onset of the story that Tiptree delights in these ironies, ironies that are inherent to reading and writing. In “The Girl Who Was Plugged In,” Tiptree implicates the reader in consumer capitalism, an ideology and practice that is particularly damaging for women.

The narrator shifts from berating the reader to describing a “rotten girl” who is arrested for attempting public suicide (79-82). During her attempted suicide, P. Burke “toppled over sprawling on the ground” where bystanders reach a “consensus she’s dead, which she disproves by bubbling a little” (82). In this scene, P. Burke struggles to make herself intelligible to others. Instead of using language, she can only disprove the assumption of her death through “bubbles,” incoherent sounds generally used to describe inanimate objects, water, and children. Considering that this is the first instance in the story where P. Burke attempts to communicate, her speech act illustrates the distance between the signifier and signified—she physically cannot access a language in which she is understood. More significantly, even if she could speak, her voice is not worth hearing. This is evident in the bystanders’ cold and distanced conclusion that she must already be dead, and thus, not worth their concern.

Originally published in 1973, this treatment by bystanders, who do nothing to help P. Burke, almost certainly alludes to the Kitty Genovese case of 1964. The Genovese case was widely publicized with headlines like “37 Who Saw Murder Didn’t Call the Police. Apathy at

Stabbing of Queens Woman Shocks Inspector” (Manning et al. 555). Police reported that Kitty Genovese was sexually assaulted and ultimately stabbed to death in public, while passersby and neighbors did nothing to help (Manning et al. 555). The Kitty Genovese murder has become infamous, particularly since it inspired social psychologists to explore the reasons we help or ignore the distress of others.⁴¹ Psychologists Latane and Darley (1970) researched this phenomenon, eventually coining the term “bystander effect” to describe how in large crowds, each individual person becomes less likely to intervene when someone is in distress. The bystander effect is tied to the inherent diffusion of responsibility that occurs in large groups and urban areas, where people assume that someone else will help (556). Sheldon, a psychologist, would have almost certainly been aware of this case and its implications for the field. And, throughout nearly all of “The Girl Who was Plugged In,” we find that P. Burke is subject to the bystander effect. Indeed, her attempted suicide operates as a synecdoche for her treatment within the story more broadly. While many individuals witness her abuse, she is expendable, a mere casualty of a system that fails to regard non-profitable beings as less than fully human.

Only a few moments after P. Burke attempts her first speech act through “bubbles,” she is asked a series of questions by the paramedics:

“You’re seventeen. One year city college. What did you study?”
“La—languages.”
“H’m. Say something.”
Unintelligible rasp. (83)

41. It is worth noting that the facts about the Kitty Genovese case, including the number of bystanders, has been widely disputed. Many contemporary psychologists claim that this “signal crime,” as such important cases are sometimes termed, functions rhetorically as a parable and cautionary tale that is used to demonize urban dwellers and their purported lack of morality (Manning, et al. 555-562).

In a continuation of P. Burke's struggle to be understood by others, this exchange illustrates how performances and interiority often intermingle and overlap. The paramedic expects that P. Burke should be able to speak, indeed he demands it from her through his imperative "Say something," despite the fact that she is struggling to breathe and is instead bubbling and rasping. More importantly though, this one-sided conversation literalizes P. Burke's limited agency throughout the remainder of the story. Her voice, which in this scene is minimized because of her physical injuries, is elsewhere silenced because simply because she is a "rotten girl," someone who in this hyper-capitalist society could never have anything of value to contribute. When asked what she studied in college, the paramedics are attempting to assess her human capital—what she might be able to produce or contribute. Because she is unable to speak, she is interpreted as worthless.

We are ultimately not given much information about P. Burke. We learn that "she's the ugly in the world. A tall monument to pituitary dystrophy. No surgeon would touch her. When she smiles, her jaw—it's half purple, almost bites her left eye out" (80). This hyperbolic and abject description immediately dehumanizes P. Burke whose appearance is ultimately unimportant. Once she is arrested for attempting public suicide, she spends the duration of the story locked in the basement of GTX's corporate headquarters where her consciousness is transferred into the young, perky body of the automaton, Delphi. Delphi is a marketing tool who has been developed to sell products in a clandestine manner. In the story world of "The Girl Who Was Plugged In," advertising has not only been banned but its definition has become far more pejorative. An advertisement is defined within the story as "A display other than the legitimate use of the product, intended to promote its sale" (88). Despite its illegality, major corporations still find ways to market their products. GTX's newest strategy involves luring "rotten girls" like P. Burke into staying hooked up to machines and living a remote existence in the bodies of

young socialite automatons. Delphi's work bears semblance to the Instagram influencers today. Her role, as articulated by her GTX creators, is to "be a girl people watch. And she's going to be using fine products that people will be glad to know about and helping the good people who make them" (90). While everything initially goes well between Delphi and P. Burke, eventually the symbiotic relationship deteriorates as P. Burke begins putrefying in GTX headquarters while Delphi simultaneously begins developing self-awareness. By the end of the story, we have a classic love triangle (P. Burke is in love with Paul, the son of a GTX corporate stakeholder, who loves Delphi but doesn't realize she's not all that human). The conflict is only resolved by unplugging Delphi, which also kills P. Burke.

Despite the serious subject matter, the story's tone, form, and narrator are anything but sincere. The narrative voice fluctuates between a rapid-fire, tongue-in-cheek, wit and a caustic sarcasm. Both seem to belie the gravity of P. Burke's plight. This is especially apparent in sections such as when Paul and Delphi begin falling in love. When Delphi and Paul begin fomenting their romance, the narrator adds a cavalier aside that "Except that it's really P. Burke five thousand miles away who loves Paul. P Burke, the monster, smelling of electrode paste. A caricature of a woman burning, melting, obsessed with true love" (106). Tiptree's focus on scent, and an intangible scent of "electrode paste" at that, offers a post-modern wink to what would otherwise function as a heartbreaking image. Just as the tone becomes too sincere, the narrator interjects with an absurd neoseme that reminds the reader of the story's science fictionality. Tiptree's description of P. Burke as both a "monster" and "caricature" simultaneously dehumanizes her and pokes fun at her circumstances, conjuring up images of dozens of sf starlets who have been subjected to similar fates.

Just as Tiptree positions P. Burke as both a tragic heroine and a caricature, so too is Delphi subject to such juxtaposition. Throughout the story, Delphi is both an advocate for consumption and an object who is consumed. Once Delphi begins to fulfill her role as an advertiser, she “begins to live the life of the gods. What do gods do? Well, everything beautiful. But the main point is Things. Ever see a god empty-handed?” (94). This phrase, that the “main point is Things” functions as the ethos of the story—reminding readers that all interactions are ultimately characterized by consumption. Delphi’s job, after all, is to promote products and her entire existence is predicated on her success at accomplishing this. She too *is* a thing; despite her emerging sense of self, she is ultimately an automaton, a body that has been crafted to encourage consumption, both of herself and the products she tacitly endorses.

In staging his fiction this way, Tiptree’s use of camp reveals the underbelly of society, by which I mean, the brutal realities of late capitalism. Delphi, and therefore P. Burke are commodities and their very existence remains predicated on the value that they are able to obtain for capitalists. Once their relationship is no longer profitable, they are killed. It is not enough that P. Burke sells products for a corporation who offers her little, if any, discernable compensation. Her very survival is contingent on her ability to reproduce labor through Delphi. P. Burke must remain healthy enough to function as a host for the parasitic Delphi, whose creators and employers require a thinking, breathing, albeit not all that healthy or happy, human. The dark cavernous basement in which P. Burke slowly deteriorates from lack of food, air, and exercise is grotesquely reminiscent of a womb, a tomb, and a subterranean labyrinth. It is a site of creation, of death, and a maze of interconnected subjectivities. P. Burke’s corporeal sacrifice and decay enables GTX to (re)produce Delphi’s labor. By requiring so little food and medical care, P. Burke maximizes GTX’s profits while minimizing their investment. Despite her youth then, P.

Burke's primary function is to perform the role of the ideal mother under capitalism: she must sacrifice her own body in order to (re)produce the labor force, in this case, Delphi, who, in turn, will excel at maximizing profits by being as efficient as possible.

Even as Tiptree deploys this biting criticism of capitalism, it is coated with hyperbole and sensationalism. When Paul finally meets P. Burke, the brain behind the body he adores, he violently rejects her by pushing her away. Rather than framing this scene through a sympathetic lens, Tiptree's narrator instead proclaims, "Wouldn't you, if a gaunt she-golem flab-naked and spouting wires and blood came at you clawing with metal-studded paws—" (118). Is Paul's fickle love supposed to surprise us? I think not. Instead, Tiptree mocks the situational irony of the love triangle that has become a staple trope of not only sf, but of postmodern fiction more generally. The verbs here, that P. Burke is "spouting" and "clawing" reifies her position as an animal whose body is considered dispensable so long as it generates profit. Simultaneously, these acts reiterate the fact that she is, indeed, alive despite the abhorrent conditions under which she has suffered. This tension, between P. Burke as animal and P. Burke as a human clinging to survival unsettles the boundaries between the human and the non-human. This clause also ends abruptly and ambiguously with a dash, a signifier that echoes the distance and repulsion of Paul. P. Burke's corporeality: her emaciated frame, her bleeding wounds, her claws, and her connectedness to machines, all of which have enabled Delphi's continued existence, are not only grotesque, but also absurd. Rather than describing an alien species, Tiptree positions the human as the site of abjection and otherworldliness. Grounded in sf's tradition of describing creatures of various kinds, Tiptree's fiction glorifies and digs into this sensationalism by depicting P. Burke as the golem of our nightmares.

Tiptree's use of camp echoes and mirrors the pervasive postmodern sentiment that life had become a mere simulacrum under the conditions of late capitalism. Suddenly, shops and advertisements were no longer associated with the labor or craft necessary to produce those goods. Instead, storefronts, like the ones in Tiptree's "The Girl Who Was Plugged In," become sparkling mirages that both obscure the real, lived, conditions of capitalism and function as their own signs, far removed from any signifying chain. Delphi herself functions as such a mirage. Despite Delphi's existence as a glamorous automaton who attends parties, has sex with attractive partners, and travels the world, her very fleshiness is a fiction. Her physical body, which so many men find attractive, symbolizes youth and fertility. Meanwhile, Delphi's very existence remains contingent on P. Burke rotting away in the dirty basement of GTX headquarters. Tiptree's overarching irony in this story, then, is to reveal how consumer capitalism is inherently contingent on P. Burke's deterioration. Famously, Jean Baudrillard describes the image-driven culture of postmodernism as undergoing a transformation wherein images shift from depicting the real to becoming their own highly stylized verisimilitudes. At this stage, the image, or simulacrum, "has no relation to reality whatsoever," while "everything is metamorphosed into its opposite to perpetuate itself in its expurgated form" (6, 15). Discourses which blur the real and the fabricated are thus essential to the ethos of postmodernism. Camp, with its emphasis on artificiality and glamour, is especially primed to purge the "real," by instead delighting in the fantastical. The real—P. Burke—is killed until we are only left with the simulacra.

"The Girl Who Was Plugged In" also frames gender as a critical and related facet of consumption. Delphi's advertising work is only possible because of her position as an automaton who is "fifteen and flawless" (87). Though she is underage (as is P. Burke), Delphi becomes

sexually active almost immediately; indeed, on her very first assignment, she is groped by an older man. While P. Burke has had sex before, Delphi is an object without the ability to consent to or refuse sex. Not only can she not provide consent, but P. Burke eventually realizes that that Delphi isn't cognizant of what is happening to her. P. Burke realizes there are

blank spots. It took her a while to notice them. Delphi doesn't have much privacy; investments of her size don't. So she's slow about discovering there's certain definite places where her beastly P. Burke body *feels* things that Delphi's dainty body does not. . . . You ask how a girl could forget a thing like that? Look. P. Burke is about as far as you can get from the concept *girl*. She's a female, yes—but for her, sex is a four letter word spelled P-A-I-N. (93)

In this amalgamation of bodies, sensations, and cognitions it is difficult to determine, who, if anyone, retains agency. While P. Burke is theoretically the one who is conscious while Delphi is presumably the flesh who contains this consciousness, the physical encounters they have are ultimately written on Delphi's flesh. Yet, it is GTX, not P. Burke, who owns and controls both their bodies, which are exchanged for social capital. Indeed, the prescient exchange of women, sex, and other commodities in "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" is quite reminiscent of Gayle Rubin's "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex" (1976), published only three years after Tiptree's story first appeared in *New Dimensions III*. In this famous essay, Rubin explains that in kinship systems and marriage, women are often gifts who are transferred from one man to another. These gifts often solidify family relationships and help groups to form connections through kinship and marriage. At the same time, societies (capitalist or otherwise) exchange women to benefit from the reproduction of their labor. When women bear offspring, they reproduce workers for their community. In conceiving of women in this way, Rubin argues that the social worth of women lies in "being a conduit of a relationship, rather than a partner in it" (87). Both P. Burke and Delphi function as gifts who are exchanged between those more powerful than themselves. Neither directly benefits from accruing new customers or selling

products. Delphi instead functions as the conduit between men. She cannot consent to sex acts, yet usage of her body helps to solidify partnerships and form connections between GTX and potential customers.

Eventually, P. Burke and Delphi's distinct identities become amorphous as P. Burke physically deteriorates and Delphi's function as an automaton with no agency also vitiates. The already fraught relationship between P. Burke and Delphi becomes additionally complicated as each of them fail to conform to their assigned roles; namely, one as a body and the other as a mind to inhabit said body. Like so many mind/body dualism debates that have occurred before this narrative, the attempt to differentiate the two inherently connected aspects of personhood ultimately fails. Without Delphi's physical compliance, P. Burke's words lose meaning. Similarly, when P. Burke must be temporarily "unplugged" for health checks and emergencies, Delphi cannot manifest her own wishes and desires.

Despite the tragic circumstances, Tiptree's queer use of camp reasserts itself in the story's final lines. As though to emphasize the already apparent theme of consumption, Tiptree ends the narrative by returning to the figure of the zombie, providing a sense of cyclicality. After a short summary that recounts how, after the events of the story, GTX reboots Delphi (minus her annoying tendencies toward autonomy) and Paul makes his way into the GTX boardroom, the narrator quips "Believe it, zombie. When I say growth, I mean *growth*. Capital appreciation. You can stop sweating. There's a great future there" (120-1). In late capitalism, zombies are not only linked to the consumption of human flesh, but also the mindless consumption of goods by the masses. David Castillo has aptly argued "our fixation with apocalyptic fantasies—world-wide zombie plagues, nuclear disasters, environmental collapse, and other man-made catastrophes—is fundamentally tied to the widespread conviction that there is no possible alternative to capitalism

as a world-wide economic system” (50). By opening and closing “The Girl Who Was Plugged In” with the figure of the zombie, Tiptree inextricably links P. Burke’s untimely demise with the mindless consumption that occurs under capitalism, an ideology that Tiptree associates not only with our pasts, but with our futures. And yet, at the same time, Tiptree again analogizes this consumption to the reader’s appetite for pulp fiction, an industry that subjects authors and texts alike to the framework of capital appreciation. Our consumption keeps Tiptree alive, but it also implicates us in perpetuating the often-invisible labor of those who make this consumption possible. Camp insists on this ironic distance while it simultaneously incriminates us. After all, we too have been bystanders, delighting in our consumption of P. Burke’s decay.

Irony and Sensationalism in “Love is the Plan and the Plan is Death” (1973)

Tiptree’s “Love is the Plan and the Plan is Death” positions humanist concerns regarding memory, self-knowledge, and love within an ironic, sensationalist, and alien diegesis. “Love is the Plan” follows the narrator, Moggadeet, who has just awakened from hibernation, is disoriented, and is struggling to remember details of the “Plan,” a cycle that his species repeats each generation. Moggadeet quickly becomes enamored of his lover, Lililee, and he tenderly recalls their past and imagines their future together. As Moggadeet remembers his childhood, he recounts a rare conversation with an “Old One” who informs Moggadeet that an essential part of the “Plan” involves devouring a loved one in order to survive the increasingly long winter months. Terrified of losing control of his actions and cannibalizing his beloved Lililee, Moggadeet obsessively plans for the winter by storing food. Yet, the ultimate irony is that while Moggadeet fears his own violence, he fails to realize that it is *he* who will be consumed. The story ends with Moggadeet reveling in the greatness of the Plan as Lililee devours him.

This withholding of knowledge functions as a classic example of dramatic irony. While irony is a staple of fiction, in camp discourses, the irony is often sensationalist and absurd. Knowledge of the “Plan” is concealed from Moggadeet, while the reader grows increasingly suspicious that Moggadeet is misinterpreting the events unfolding before him. We recall that the “Old One” warned Moggadeet that black fur is associated with cannibalism, so we notice, while Moggadeet does not, when Lililee’s color shifts from red to black, a signifier that she has transformed into the predatory maternal figure Moggadeet so fears in himself. We also notice that there is a suspicious lack of fathers in Moggadeet’s world. When Moggadeet’s mother likens him to his father, Moggadeet replies “What’s a Father?” (181). In this section I trace how Tiptree uses features of camp, such as irony, exaggeration, and a love of sensationalism to blur the distinction between the human and the non-human. What opens as a story concerned with human dynamics and relationships quickly devolves into a grotesque and subversive tale about the potential dangers of domesticity. Just as Tiptree does in the previous stories discussed in this chapter, “Love is the Plan” also illustrates the flaws in traditions, such as marriage, and genre conventions, such as heteronormative happy endings.

The aliens in “Love is the Plan” have amorphous appearances; they spin webs, have various appendages, and are covered in fur that changes color based on their sexual maturity. While they evoke images of spiders, particularly the black widow with its infamous cannibalism, readers are never given a clear glimpse of their physical appearance. This, too, functions as a source of irony since we expect a to become intimately familiar with our narrators. The first-person narration in “Love is the Plan” initially leads us to believe we are witnessing a human’s perspective. Then, it is revealed that we have been duped all along and the narrator is actually a grotesque alien, more insect-like than mammalian. Moggadeet epitomizes the Other—he is both

a creature we cannot visualize and thus the opposite of our expectations. The aliens' tradition of finding and eating their mate, also functions as an example of what Csicsery-Ronay has termed the science-fictional grotesque which "involves recuperative recoil, allowing us to see the disorderly and repulsive as a part of the natural order" (188). Quite literally, Tiptree renders the repulsive act of cannibalism as part of the natural order, a key component of the "Plan." Of course, the grotesque also blurs the boundaries between the human and the non-human, often by obfuscating what makes humans distinct from other creatures.

"Love is the Plan" oscillates between the abject and the sensationalist, which is another way of describing dirt and glamor, by also using the trope of the unreliable narrator. The story's first lines read: "REMEMBERING—Do you hear, my little red? Hold me softly. The cold grows. I remember: I am hugely black and hopeful" (173). By opening with the present participle, "REMEMBERING," Tiptree makes apparent that the events we are reading are only just now being recalled and strung together with narrative cohesion. Moggadeet's memories are elusive, suggesting that recollections of the past are ultimately reconstructions, or attempts to position scattered events within a coherent narrative frame. Indeed, Moggadeet's damaged memory is the only reason the Plan works, since if males knew they would be cannibalized each winter, they would likely reconsider their mating practices.

What Moggadeet does remember in the first line is a rush of sensory information, including sound, touch, color, and coldness. This synesthesia conflates sense and memory, leaving the accuracy of both sensory data and Moggadeet's experiences unclear. After all, what Moggadeet ultimately recalls is his own being, his "hugely black and hopeful" existence, which apparently up until the moment of writing, had been forgotten. Typical of Tiptree's writing, "Love is the Plan" not only critiques social norms, but also fiction itself. Are we supposed to

believe or trust Moggadeet's narrative, even though he did not know, seconds prior to our reading, that he existed? In this gesture, as in so many his stories, Tiptree reveals the fissures in the suspension of disbelief that is so central to storytelling. Indeed, one way of reading "Love is the Plan" is to consider how Moggadeet's false and incomplete memories complicate the idea of narration itself, leading the reader to ironically question the truth-value of a story that is not only fictional, but situated in some imagined place.

Through a camp lens, readers do not experience the horror or discomfort of confronting the boundaries between the self/other that we might experience when confronting Frankenstein's creature. Instead, the story's use of irony and hyperbole creates distance between the reader and the nebulous alien characters. I find Sontag's claims that "Camp taste is a kind of love, love for human nature" and that "Camp is a tender feeling" to be seminal calls for particular readerships (56). Sontag also suggests that camp is both a rhetorical positioning and an attitude, an affective experience that the audience has in response to particular art objects. When we locate and analyze camp, we should approach these artifacts with the spirit of delight and curiosity of a true camp reader. This means recognizing that camp exists because of, and for, camp readers who find themselves so enamored of strangeness and theatrics that they cannot help but see the ironies implicit in all forms of art and discourse.

For instance, the humor of Moggadeet's narration is only salient if one is familiar with the trope of the unreliable narrator. Tiptree's plays with this trope, presenting not only a non-human narrator, but a narrator who has no idea who he is. Similarly, Tiptree pokes fun at the critical lenses which he anticipates will be used to approach his fiction. Moggadeet fetishizes Lililee's "secret fur. *Mother fur*" conflating his desire for his romantic partner with memories of his own mother (189; italics original). The emphasis on "Mother" quite clearly hearkens to the

Oedipal fantasy and the “secret” meanings so often attributed to sf’s dark recesses and vast scales. Without being attentive to the playful, queer, and destabilizing influence of camp, we might be tempted to use psychoanalysis as the basis for interpreting this story. But we must recall that camp exists in marginal spaces, in between, and among other forms of art and discourse. A film can be campy, but so can a speech or costume. Sf, then, with its frequent association with the pulps, sensationalism, and irony makes it a logical place for camp to emerge. Sf, after all, already exists on the fringes of academic and literary discourse. By observing how Tiptree lampoons both narration and the critical traditions that have been applied to sf, we can better understand the discursive theatrics that Tiptree both embraces and satirizes.

In her famous essay, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” Sontag explains that “the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration,” later clarifying that one of the tropes of camp is a “love of the exaggerated, the ‘off,’ of things-being-what-they-are-not” (10). For Sontag, camp functions as a sensibility and an aesthetic, visible only within human-made objects, and therefore operating as a counterpoint to the natural world and the given structure of things. I have already examined how this “off-ness” operates at the level of genre and narration. Yet, it is evident in the plot too. For instance, early in the story, Moggadeet belatedly realizes he has killed his brother Frim only after he comes to consciousness covered in his gore. He goes on to “smash trees,” “uproot rocks,” and “tear the ravine open” only to wonder “Has my wild search harmed you? (175). At this stage in the story, the second-person address, “you,” lacks a referent. Instead, we are given an onslaught of destructive acts, unsure of who Moggadeet is searching for, what his actions betoken, or even what sort of creature he is. While Jameson might frame this strategy as presenting “multiple surfaces,” it is also a form of circularity, a way of making meaning through presenting a series of images that surround a theme or topic, rather than presenting it

directly. Similarly, Sontag defines camp through primarily negative terms (i.e. what it is not), clarifying how this circularity and refusal of expectations reveals that one of camp's core features is its very contrariness. And this opposition is hyperbolized in Moggadeet's tale. "Love is the Plan" not only resists the typical plot structure of narrative, in which we generally know what is happening and who is speaking, but also resists the concept of family. Instead we see siblicide and the predation of sexual partners, outrageous violations of social norms which are described in gory detail.

This contrariness to convention bears semblance to what Foucault has termed "reverse discourses," which occur when communities reclaim and reappropriate institutionally created categories, such as "queer," to legitimize the community's very existence (101-2). In his essay, "Publics and Counterpublics," Michael Warner extends Foucault's notion of reverse discourse to consider how the counterpublics who engage in these discourses are ultimately "constituted through a conflictual relation to the dominant public," clarifying that "participation in such a public is one of the ways by which its members' identities are formed and transformed" (85-6). Similarly, camp exists on the fringes and often refuses dominant cultural norms and archetypes. Further, in "Love is the Plan and the Plan is Death," we see a subversion of fiction's very norms: the narrator is alien, rather than human, the events are all being poorly interpreted, and Moggadeet ends his narrative while being devoured. What initially reads as a tender love story concludes with Moggadeet confirming that "Great is the Plan. I felt only joy as your jaws took me" (192). While the cannibalism is disturbing, Moggadeet's delight in being consumed shifts our attention away from the act itself and toward his absurd reaction, reaffirming how we, too, revel in the traditions of our time, often without questioning their merits or consequences.

This subversion extends to the mythos of the nuclear family as well. Just as “The Women Men Don’t See” refuses the premise of home, “Love is the Plan” also calls into question the concept of domestic bliss. Instead of nurturing mothers, “Love is the Plan” features grotesque and predatory females who prey upon their unsuspecting male partners. The cave where Moggadeet and Lililee finally establish their home is a site of violence, the space where Moggadeet is slowly eaten by his partner. And even mothers, those most celebrated of figures within the domestic sphere, are dangerous, warning their children to flee once they reach adolescence lest they become prey too. This queering of heteronormativity exposes how fragile the concept of domesticity already is. It is predicated on our belief in safety, harmony, and symbiosis between genders. And when the arrangement no longer benefits one gender, violence often ensues.

Only the Queerness of Camp Can Save Us?

Critics such as Justyna Stępień have argued that camp is essential to postmodern discourses which have eroded the distinctions between “low” and “high” culture. Stępień goes so far as to claim that “kitsch and camp transformed the cultural landscape, enriching visual and linguistic spheres with what was formerly only acclaimed as marginal and tasteless” (1). Rather than attempting to elevate the status of camp or sf, Tiptree instead digs into the marginalization that these discursive spaces enable, using them to reveal the dirt and grit which has always resided beneath fiction’s surfaces. For Tiptree, being “tasteless” is another way of shifting our gaze between that which delights us and those who suffer because of our consumption. The reader rarely escapes Tiptree’s witty and critical gaze. We are constantly reminded of our

complicity within the ideologies that Tiptree criticizes in the forms of direct affronts, plot twists that defy our expectations, and deeply ingrained ironies.

In the tradition of the most celebrated literary texts, Tiptree's fiction embraces paradox, irresolvable contradictions, and mapping out ever-shifting terrains that are constantly in flux and in danger of collapsing. This aporia often takes the form of attempting, and necessarily failing, to imagine one's way out of ideology. Rather than lament the failure of escaping ideology, Tiptree instead delights in the genre of sf that enables him to couple failure with fanfare: his characters can engage in defiant and systemic violence, flee at the first opportunity, or remain stagnant or risk at the risk of being rebooted and remanded to the custody of capitalists. With endings that are simultaneously bleak and absurd, Tiptree does not offer us false hope. He does not provide overt solutions to hierarchical thinking, let alone promise us utopia. His fiction is instead grounded in a gritty realism. That grit, which is so often obscured in fantastical texts, is, in Tiptree's works, abundantly clear and, quite often, directly implicating the reader. And, despite the science fictional elements, Tiptree's *Warm Worlds and Otherwise* concerns itself primarily with the irresolvable tensions that Alice Sheldon herself struggled to reconcile. Tiptree grapples with questions such as: how might we think of gender as both a biological force, one that is vital to reproduction and has bearing on our everyday lives, *and* as a social construction that is culturally contingent and variously enforced by ideological state apparatuses? And, if capitalism is not only an economic system, but the very foundation for our thinking about commerce, exchange, and worth, how can we imagine a way out of it?

Depending on our specific contexts, humans are unevenly anchored to gender and to consumer capitalism. Capitalism requires the reproduction of labor that women provide, while the very construct of gender is continually (mis/re)informed by marketplace logics. Tiptree's

ambivalence about these logics manifests in prose that is intermittently sarcastic and sincere. His stories remind us how we may alternatively be the consumers *and* those who are consumed. For Tiptree, we exist within these ideologies and until we question the logic that underpins their continued existence, we can never move forward. This suggests that we must reconcile the simulacra with its dark underbelly. By gazing at gender norms through the lens of Don or considering capitalism from the viewpoint of an automaton, we begin noticing the fault lines in the conventions and traditions that we so frequently celebrate. From camp's novel vantage points, we can more easily recognize their absurdity, their theatricality, and their precariousness.

Chapter Three

Poetic Rage as a Form of Rupture in Russ's *The Female Man*

In my last chapter, I examined how James Tiptree, Jr. (Alice Sheldon) uses camp to queer the logics underpinning capitalism and gender norms. I traced how Tiptree's camp uses humor, irony, metafiction, aesthetic distance, and hyperbole, among other rhetorical strategies, to illustrate how we frequently internalize popular literary and sf archetypes that obscure the lived conditions of marginalized groups. In this chapter, I extend my argument about the ways in which affect operates in feminist sf to consider how Joanna Russ instrumentalizes rage to disrupt binaries and highlight the emotional repercussions of patriarchy. Like each of the authors in this dissertation, Russ's fiction reveals how affect can operate as both a disruptive narrative experience and as a politically motivating force. While Tiptree's use of camp enables him to remain at a critical distance from the events he describes, Joanna Russ opts for narratorial intimacy and intrusion instead. Russ is deeply present in her own work, often manifesting in the plot as a character *and* a very involved narrator who comments on and interferes with the events that transpire.

Russ's work is often characterized as autobiographical,⁴² and this is especially true in her most famous work, *The Female Man* (1975). Using tropes from both Juvenalian satire,⁴³ such as a frequently scathing tone and widescale social critiques, and Menippean satire,⁴⁴ such as

42. See, for instance: Jones, Gwennyth. *Joanna Russ*. Edited by Gary K. Wolfe. *Modern Masters of Science Fiction* series. Illinois UP, 2019.

43. Juvenalian satire is named after the Roman poet, Juvenal, who criticized mental attitudes and social institutions. It differs from Menippean satire primarily in terms of tone. Juvenalian satire is frequently described as scathing, angry, and bitter while humor is a more central feature of Menippean satire. For a fascinating study of affect in Juvenalian satire, see Keane, Catherine. *Juvenal and the Satiric Emotions*. Oxford UP, 2016.

44. Menippean satire, like most forms and genres, has a contested critical history, though its origins begin with the Cynic Menippus of Gadara (300 BCE), whose writings are no

allegorizing large-scale events into interpersonal microcosms while mixing heterogenous forms, *The Female Man* suggests that there is great utility in women's rage, an affect that Russ associates with political activism. By weaving together four interconnected women's stories, Russ blends satire and rage to showcase how anger is not only a natural result of oppression but can also operate as a catalyst for social transformation, particularly in terms of advancing gender equality.

The Female Man is an experimental and episodic novel and the four intersecting plotlines are frequently interrupted by narratorial commentary and asides. In *The Female Man*, the narrative "I" refers to the character Joanna, the narrator, and Russ herself who tells us "I'm the author and I know" what each character is thinking (165). The central characters, Janet, Jeanine, Joanna, and Jael, originate from different worlds, each of which has its own cultural norms regarding gender. Despite their cultural differences, the four J's are eerily similar to one another and it is eventually revealed that they have each evolved from the same genomes and adapted to their respective environments. The four of them meet when Janet appears, naked, in New York City, having been assigned to conduct research by her homeland in Whileaway. After the four find each other, they become roommates in a New York City apartment where much of the plot occurs, except when they take outings to each other's homes and to various social events, including a cocktail party and a mission to parlay with an official in Manlander. Despite their differences, each of the J's and the situations they encounter allegorizes various manifestations

longer available. Menippean satires tend to criticize philosophical or ideological norms, rather than target a specific person. It also tends to incorporate various styles, structures, and the grotesque into its critique. For more on Menippean satire, see Musgrave, David. *Grotesque Anatomies: Menippean Satire Since the Renaissance*. Cambridge UP, 2014.

of patriarchy as well as Russ's personal experiences with heterosexism. For instance, in Jael's world, we see the rhetorical "battle of the sexes" transform into a literal fight for domination between Manlanders and Womanders. Meanwhile, Jeanine, who lives in an alternate version of the United States where the Great Depression never ended, eschews her own desires due to the pressures she faces to marry and have children. In other words, as is so often the case with sf, the seemingly fantastical circumstances that the J's navigate reflect real lived conditions. Women, particularly during mid-century America, faced limited opportunities for employment, workplace harassment, ongoing struggles for reproductive rights, rigid views of femininity, and frequent encounters with heterosexism in both personal and professional contexts.

In other words, each of the J's renders visible concerns central to Russ's feminism. To read Russ is to engage with feminism since, as sf writer Samuel Delany has expressed, "Feminism works for Joanna Russ the way Marxism works for the great German writer Bertolt Brecht. It is something innate to the concerns, not something that can be dismissed" ("The Legendary Joanna Russ"). Indeed, one of the primary threads connecting Janet, Jeanine, Joanna, and Jael's stories consists not only in their experiences with patriarchy, but their reactions to it. Janet, Joanna, and Jael confront patriarchy head-on, often by embracing their anger (and sometimes violence) at the unjust conditions each of them faces. In contrast, the timid and miserable Jeanine views the situation as hopeless. Like so many women, she has been culturally conditioned to accept that gender inequality is so pervasive that it constitutes the fabric of the world. She wonders, what, if anything, can be done and is often conflicted by her desires to appease others. Yet, through her interactions with the three other J's, Jeanine begins to recognize the threads and stitches holding together this fabric and feels compelled to eventually embrace the urge to rip the textile apart at the seams.

In this chapter, I argue that rage is the cornerstone of Joanna Russ's feminist epistemology and activism. Rage permeates *The Female Man*, at times operating a rhetorical level as Russ ventriloquizes her critics, while at others exploding in violent outbursts at the levels of plot and narration. For Russ, this anger is key to understanding and engaging with feminism; one must first feel the claustrophobic confines of patriarchy in order to recognize the tremendous effort and energy it requires to disrupt it. In *The Female Man*, this process is described as a corporeal and emotionally laborious task. Ranging from mansplaining to sexual assault, Russ's characterization of male misogyny is unapologetic and replete with anger, which she frames as a predictable and natural consequence of the dehumanizing experiences that women endure.

As an avid feminist, and one who was frequently labelled as a "radical feminist," Russ viewed literature and language as forms of activism. As a reviewer and critic, she often expressed frustration that many feminist sf writers, including Ursula K. Le Guin, were not angry enough.⁴⁵ At the 1974-1975 *Khatru* Symposium on Women in Science Fiction,⁴⁶ for instance, Russ insisted that that anger is "honorable" and that "we ought to accept women's anger against men in every situation. . . until the power struggle is won" (qtd. in Jones 88). While most critics have discussed Russ's anger in relation to feminism, her quarrels with the sf community, or how

45. In a frequently cited letter to Susan Koppelman, Russ opines about a burgeoning sf writer (whose name is redacted), asking "*where is her anger?* I think from now on, I will not trust anyone who isn't angry" ("To Write Like a Woman" 175; italics original). Also, see Russ's reviews of Ursula K. Le Guin in her collection *The Country You Have Never Seen: Essays and Reviews*. Liverpool UP, 2007.

46. *Khatru* was a sf and fantasy fanzine. In 1974, editor Jeffrey Smith invited several prominent feminist sf writers to contribute works to a printed symposium on "Women in Science Fiction." Contributors' letters and essays appeared in *Khatru* in late 1974 into early 1975. Smith went on to publish an edited collection of the *Khatru* Symposium. See Smith, Jeffrey D., editor. *Khatru 3 and 4 Symposium: Women in Science Fiction*. Smith, 1975.

her fiction impacts the reader,⁴⁷ my view aligns more with Pat Wheeler who recognizes the ways in which “Russ shows how anger can be used constructively to compel women to examine the systems that dominate their lives and the role they play in their continuance” (102). Wheeler convincingly traces how Russ’s anger not only reflects “the zeitgeist of radical feminist politics” but also operates as “signifier of women’s resistance” (99, 113). Wheeler’s readings of Russ’s *Alyx* stories illustrate how this anger is often aimed at the constraints of heteronormativity, which the characters seek to rupture. In this chapter, I extend Wheeler’s argument to consider how Russ frames anger not only as a site of resistance but also as a site of knowledge—as an origin point for recognizing one’s place within patriarchy. The rage in *The Female Man* is thus not only a dominant thematic concern but also a means of providing structure for the otherwise loosely connected acts of sexism that women experience. It is also within this rage that Russ locates hope; she frames anger as a way of rupturing the rigid gender norms and heterosexism that *The Female Man* repudiates and aims to reform.

47. For example, Heather Hicks argues that *The Female Man* is concerned with transformations in women’s work, though she acknowledges “that the palpable anger that surfaces periodically in the text echoes the outrage expressed by many early radical feminists” (9). Farah Mendlesohn describes how “Russ’s writing gets under the skin. It is a burr under the saddle blanket; sharp, uncomfortable, provocative” (ix). In her overview of Russ’s relationship with the sf community, Merrick writes “Russ. . . vent[s] steam at the continual demands on her to explain feminism to (mostly male) SF fans and authors” (57). Similarly, Gwenyth Jones contextualizes Russ’s anger, tracing how “to many women, and men, sf feminism still felt wonderfully positive but Joanna was feeling the weight of that change. The role of ‘first among equals’ had become a back-breaking responsibility” (89).

“The Crazy Womb, the Ball-Breaking Bitch, the Fanged Killer Lady”: Russ’s Critical Reception and the Suppression of Women’s Anger

Russ’s short story “When it Changed” (1972) offers us a glimpse into the fury that Russ found so central to her views as a second-wave feminist. It also overlaps with and informs one of the main plotlines in *The Female Man*, providing context about Whileaway, a feminist enclave with the same name and many similarities to the Whileaway where Janet Evason resides in *The Female Man*. Whileaway consists of only women because the men have died out to a prolific plague, and Whileaways procreate by a “merging of ova” (*The Female Man* 12). In “When It Changed,” a group of male explorers arrive in Whileaway and immediately ask “Where are all your people?” by which they mean, of course, “Where are all your men?” (2). The Whileawayans, who are understandably annoyed by these inquiries, nonetheless provide an account of their history, culture, and customs, though Janet and her partner Katy are repeatedly insulted in the process.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the male explorers in “When it Changed” listen to Janet and Katy only long enough to determine how to best reinstitute patriarchy in Whileaway. As Janet speaks, they oscillate between microaggressions such as “Where I come from, the women don’t dress so plainly,” and willful ignorance, asking “Did you know sexual equality has been established on Earth?” (4, 5). The men view the entire operation as a rescue narrative, calling the loss of men a “great tragedy” and attempting to assure Janet that “But it’s over. . . well, we’re here” (4). Assuming that the inhabitants of Whileaway have spent the last several centuries lamenting the loss of men, the colonists view themselves as the bearers of order and discipline and consider it their responsibility to tame these wily women. After assuring Janet of their heroic intentions, they aim to begin “the grand movement to recolonize and rediscover all the Earth had lost” (6).

At the end of the story, Janet reflects that her partner Katy was right: “we should have burned them down where they stood” (6). This impulse of rage and destruction is a logical response to the realization that with men’s return, they will reinstitute patriarchal violence and domination, thus permanently altering the Whileawayans long-standing feminist society.

This story, like the longer and more developed iteration of Whileaway found in *The Female Man*, illustrates how feminist rage is not an emotional shortcoming, but rather a reasonable and predictable affective response to a culture that so often dismisses and dehumanizes women. The name Whileaway signifies a reprieve from patriarchy—a place created by and for women, a space where they can simply exist as human subjects free from sexism. Yet Whileaway also connotes finiteness; one is generally only away for a particular length of time and one is also away *from* somewhere. For example, one might be away on vacation or running errands, temporarily away from one’s more permanent dwelling. This suggests that being away from patriarchy is, in Russ’s view, always a temporary reprieve, one that is bound to end until the culture as a whole radically shifts. While women may locate or carve out spaces where they are viewed as equals, the wider culture will always eventually shatter the illusion that misogyny has truly ended. Thus, the anger in Russ’s fiction, such as the impulse to “burn down” the men upon their arrival in Whileaway, operates as a reaction to the eventual intrusion that patriarchy always brings. In her view, feminists are not angry for anger’s sake, but rather exhibit a natural and predictable response to unjust conditions.

In this section, I trace the biographical, critical, and historical lineages of Joanna Russ’s anger. By the time *The Female Man* was published, Russ had embraced her reputation as a “radical feminist” who was rightfully enraged by the disparities that women faced in publishing, domestic labor, academia, and politics. This anger appears not only in her fiction, but in her

personal correspondence and essays as well. For example, Russ frequently corresponded with James Tiptree, Jr. and the two wrote tender, and sometimes, tumultuous notes to one another. In a 1972 letter to Joanna Russ, James Tiptree Jr. asked “Do you imagine that anyone with half a functional neuron can read your work and not have his fingers smoked by the bitter, multi-layered anger in it? It smells and smoulders like a volcano buried so long and deadly it is just beginning to wonder if it can explode” (Tiptree and Nyhan 142). This sense that affect, and in this case anger, operates at multiple levels within the text, is another instance of affective modality, which I define in my previous chapter as the ways in which a text is informed by a network of related feelings. As critics recognized, both the breaking of taboos and the centrality of emotion are prominent features of *The Female Man*. Further though, Russ is concerned with the ways in which women’s anger has long been suppressed and the rupturing potential it contains. While *The Female Man*, like many postmodern works, is an assemblage of forms, voices, and genres, there are central thematic concerns and emotional threads which connect the disparate narratives. To understand how the rage in *The Female Man* functions as a grounding force and modality, I consider how Russ’s novel was received, how it responds to the cultural norms about gender and affect, and Russ’s views on women’s writing.

The Female Man delighted or appalled readers and critics and the distinction between the two reactions was largely based on their respective political affiliation. Whether readers found the novel cathartic or outlandish, they generally agree that it evokes emotion, and angry ones at that. Due to the polemical reactions it elicited, it was actually quite difficult for Russ to get *The Female Man* published at all. Written in 1971, the book was initially rejected by publishers, and Russ was unable to get it published until 1975. In an interview, Russ recalled an editor telling her “I’m sick and tired of these kinds of women’s novels that are just one long whiney complaint”

(qtd. in Calvin 26). In a 1975 interview, Russ describes being “beaten over the head” by reviewers because *The Female Man* “has a great deal of rage in it” (qtd. in Jones 162). The perception that Russ’s work was too angry and experimental was pervasive and is particularly evident in *The Female Man*’s initial reviews.⁴⁸ Susan Wood, for example, praised the novel because it contains “elegance of prose focusing blazing anger into a searing laser beam,” but she also found the novel to be “flawed” because of its experimentation with form (qtd. in Calvin 27). The critic Lester del Rey reviled *The Female Man*, describing it as “an angry book that turns first to rage and winds up in fits of jealousy and hate” (qtd. in Calvin 28). Yet, Russ herself anticipated this criticism and in Part VII of *The Female Man*, she parodies the reviews she knew were coming. She dedicates a page to ventriloquizing a “mere male [critic] like myself” who cannot understand her project, and will dismiss it as “another shrill polemic,” “another of the screaming sisterhood,” and a text with “no characterization, no plot” (141). In this rhetorical move, Russ satirizes not only particular critics, but also the industries of academia and publishing. Because they were such insular and antiquated communities, Russ knew that reviewers would consider *The Female Man* a personal attack on the coveted systems that men benefit from rather than recognizing the generative work that anger can achieve.

Meanwhile, *because* of its unapologetic anger, feminists and progressives heralded *The Female Man* as an imaginative work that combined sf tropes, feminism, and post-modern experimentations with form and narration to unabashedly mock and lambast sexism. Farah Mendelsohn argues that for Russ, “only rage is enough. Russ wielded her rage like a scalpel, in reviews, in critical essays, and in her fiction” (“Introduction” ix). In his synthesis of *The Female*

48. For an overview of how Russ’s *Female Man* was received by critics, see: Ritch, Calvin. “‘This Shapeless Book’: Reception and Joanna Russ’s *The Female Mann*.” *Femspec*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2010, pp. 24-34.

Man critical reception, Ritch Calvin expresses hope that eventually “Russ's rage, and the rage contained within *The Female Man* will no longer be relevant” (31). While affect theory was not yet in fashion when Russ was writing, the consensus that anger is a central concern of the novel was widely acknowledged. In fact, it seems evident that you cannot understand Russ’s feminist project without being attentive to the way it presents and situates affect.

Russ’s anger as a feminist derived, in part, from the discrimination she experienced, in both her personal and professional lives. Despite her eventual success in academia, after college, Russ struggled to find a position at a college or university. Because of the “domestic revival” culture of the 1960s, Russ was pressured into marrying a well-educated man instead of participating in academia herself. Gwyneth Jones, in her literary biography of Russ, traces how the “domestic revival culture” encouraged women, even highly educated women such as Russ, to fulfill their intellectual needs by becoming “faculty wives” (Jones 40-1). As a lesbian, Russ rebelled against this deeply ingrained heterosexism, though it impacted her career. In fact, it was not until Russ’s commercial success publishing fiction that she found consistent work in higher education, eventually getting a teaching position at Cornell University. Russ was also an openly gay feminist who had to make her way through male-dominated English departments. The heterosexism she faced in the workplace manifests in much of her fiction, including in *The Female Man*. By the time the novel was published in 1975, however, Russ had already asserted herself onto the sf scene. Through her award-winning fiction, including the short story “When It Changed” which received the Nebula award, by the mid-1970s, Russ had developed the reputation for being a serious writer, critic, and academic.

Many of Russ’s contemporary New Wave sf writers, such as Ursula K. Le Guin, James Tiptree, Jr. and Samuel Delaney, found tremendous value in Russ’s work, even as certain (male)

critics frequently lambasted her for being too angry and bitter. After receiving a harsh and critical review of his fiction, New Wave sf writer Philip K. Dick acknowledged in an open letter (1974) to Russ that “Lady militants are always like Joanna, hitting you with their umbrella, smashing your bottle of whiskey—they are angry because if they are not, WE WILL NOT LISTEN” (qtd. in Merrick 52). While Dick’s fiction exhibits many of the masculinist tropes that Russ abhorred, he also comes to an astute insight about the causality of feminist anger. Rather than viewing the anger of “lady militants” as unnecessarily mean-spirited, Dick recognizes that feminists had, for centuries, been asking nicely to no avail. Anger, therefore, is not always a personal failing or indicative of an inability to control one’s self, but instead manifests as a reaction to being systematically ignored and dismissed. Anger can also be productive; it can jar expectations enough to gain an opening into exclusionary sites of discourse, sites where privileged white men have long been the vanguards. It is, in part, because of her anger, her fierceness, that Russ was able to rupture through these barriers and make a name for herself in publishing and academia. And because of her anger, her messages resonated deeply, particularly with feminists. This is partly why sf writer Delaney said of Russ that she “is simply one of the most important writers who has written in the United States in the last fifty years” (2006 interview).

Russ’s unapologetic anger, which is prominent in her fiction, essays, and reviews, not only jostled readers into listening, but also violated gender norms. Anger is a taboo emotion in general and one particularly fraught for women. In her recent book tracing the impact of women’s anger on politics, *Rage Becomes Her: The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Anger* (2019), Soraya Chemaly traces how children are conditioned to associate anger with masculinity and sadness with femininity. She writes “By the time they enter school, most children already

think of disruptive behaviors and assertiveness—for example, using loud voices, joking, burping, and cursing—as linguistic markers of masculinity, acceptable for boys but not for girls” (6). Girls, in contrast, are taught to minimize the impact they have on others—to be pleasant, helpful, and take up as little (emotional or physical) space as possible. Chemaly delineates how when children experience a distressing emotional event, girls tend to be more introspective while boys’ reactions tend to rupture outward (6-7). A girl who has her hair pulled at school, for example, might react by crying while a boy experiencing the same situation might retaliate verbally or physically. Chemaly notes that this is a learned behavior that occurs even when parents feel they are treating their differently gendered children exactly the same. Of course, parenting is not the only influence on children since families do not exist in hermetically sealed units, but instead receive numerous messages about gender through myriad cultural mediums and ISAs.⁴⁹ This suggests that our reactions to stimuli are not always individual choices, but instead demarcate the ways in which we have been culturally conditioned based on our race, gender, ethnicity, and other social categories. Russ recognized how this cultural conditioning occurs, noting how girlhood is particularly precarious because as girls become more aware of social norms, they learn that “entry into women’s estate is often not a broadening-out (as it is for boys) but a diminution of life” (“Recent Feminist Utopias 143).

In addition to internalizing cultural message about how we should behave, as Chemaly traces, Brian Massumi delineates how affect is “contagious” and transfers from one subject to another based on their proximity and shared cultural experiences (“The Future Birth” 58). This

49. Ideological state apparatuses, according to Louis Althusser, are places where state ideologies are taught and enforced, such as school and church. I cover this term in more depth in Chapter 4, “Crumbling Institutions and Intimate Ontologies: The Function of Precarity in Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*.”

suggests that from a very young age, girls observe and replicate the behavior of other girls and women, noting how one should behave based on gender and learning to stifle those emotional responses which transgress gender norms. Girls and women are therefore encouraged to turn inward and handle the repercussions of sexism on an individual basis, rendering a social problem into a personal issue one must internalize and manage on her own. And, lest we forget, gender transgressions have consequences, consequences which we have all witnessed. Sexual harassment, bullying, assault, domestic violence, demotion, termination from employment, and social censure all serve as reminders of what might happen when women too forcefully resist the chains that bind them.

In response to the complicated nexus of affect and gender, Joanna Russ identified sf as a medium for redressing how we conceive of women's affect. In her essay, "Recent Feminist Utopias" (1981), Russ identifies trends in feminist sf and notes that one commonality between writers such as Tiptree, Le Guin, Piercy, and herself is the ability to imagine worlds that envision the conditions under which women might be free from such constraints. She traces how feminist utopias' "relative peacefulness and lack of national war" fictionally remedies women's limited access to anger, which she claims is currently a "rare luxur[y]" (145). Perhaps counterintuitively, then, Russ recognizes how achieving peace between the sexes lies in allowing women to fully express the human range of emotions. Denial of these emotions and the actions associated with them, such as anger and self-defense, stifle women's ability to be heard and empowered. In a 1975 interview, Russ notes that one reason *The Female Man* received mixed reviews from critics is because the novel's "real target is the taboo against rage, specifically rage against men" (qtd. in Jones 162). By crafting *The Female Man* around this taboo, by centering and validating

women's emotions, Russ illustrates the political dimension of affect. The taboo of women expressing anger serves a political function: it suppresses and silences dissent.

This suppression, as Rebecca Traistor, Brittney Cooper, and Soraya Chemaly have argued, not only silences women but also discourages political activism. Traistor writes, for example, that “the discouragement of women’s anger –via silencing, erasure, and repression— stems from the correct understanding of those in power that in the fury of women lies the power to change the world” (xxiv). Based on the sheer number of women in the United States and across the globe, women’s rage constitutes an imminent threat to structures of power that seek to benefit from women’s marginalized status. In a diatribe in *The Female Man*, Joanna⁵⁰ repudiates this phenomenon, claiming

Everybody knows what women have done that is really important is not to constitute a great, cheap labor force that you can zip in when you’re at war and zip out afterwards but to Be Mothers, to form the coming generation, to give birth to them, to nurse them, to mop floors for them, . . . pick up after them, and, mainly, sacrifice yourself for them. That is the most important job in the world. That’s why they don’t pay you for it. (137)

Using her trademark verbal irony, Russ iterates that without mothers, men would not exist. Nor would a workforce. Yet, this power of creation is intrinsically tied to unpaid domestic labor that makes paid labor more difficult to acquire and maintain. Motherhood ensures that nations have soldiers for the next war, laborers for upcoming infrastructure projects, educators to instruct the next generation of children, and participants to ensure the continued prosperity of the economy. In her analysis of Russ’s novel, *We Who Are About To. . .* (1977), Rebekah Sheldon, borrowing

50. I use the terms Joanna, Russ, and the narrator somewhat interchangeably when the narrative “I” occurs in the text. I choose to do this because *THE FEMALE MAN* is widely acknowledged to be autobiographical and the narrative “I” refers to the character Joanna, who, at times, identifies as the author herself. The sections in which first-person pronouns occur also frequently deviate from the plot, serve a metafictional function, and/or offer feminist insights in an expository style, such as in the quotation above.

from Lee Edelman, writes that motherhood operates as an apparatus of reproductive futurism.⁵¹ A mother's value within society is inherently tethered to the future; what she does now *will* be significant once she successfully raises her children, though in the present, her labor produces little cultural capital. By framing motherhood in terms of futurity, there is a constant slippage between the labor one is expected to perform now and the supposed cultural benefits one will accrue later.

Sheldon further explores how the role of discourse, including the language used to describe women as self-sacrificial figures, contributes to the ongoing pressures of compulsory heterosexuality.⁵² In essence, Sheldon recognizes how describing mothers as martyrs can problematically reinforce the idea that women's most important role is to, as Russ writes, "Be Mothers" (137). Martyrs are, of course, revered and framing women as self-sacrificial figures, an idea that Russ ventriloquizes in the above passage, can inadvertently validate the idea that motherhood within a capitalist and patriarchal society, is, in some way, rewarded.⁵³ Russ acknowledges this paradox, recognizing that the cultural rhetoric which frames women's worth in terms of producing the "coming generation" is at odds with the fact that this labor will not be rewarded, culturally or financially. And Russ also knows that in order to bring visibility to the

51. Edelman argues that the concept of futurity functions as a rhetorical device that reinforces compulsory heterosexuality. He claims that by making appeals to save the children and safeguard the future, political and cultural leaders advocate procreation in order to secure that (fictional and/or imagined) future. Edelman describes this trope as "reproductive futurism." See: Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Duke UP, 2004.

52. For more on compulsory heterosexuality, see: Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *Signs*, vol. 5, no. 4, 1980, pp. 631-660.

53. In *The Female Man*, Russ is less concerned with the personal benefits of parenthood than the discursive and cultural underpinnings of motherhood as a concept. This is not to say that mothers (and parents) might not enjoy myriad psychological, social, and/or emotional benefits from choosing to raise a family.

disparities between discourse and capital, she must also use the language of self-sacrifice, despite its troubled relationship with heterosexism. In other words, to even speak about motherhood under patriarchy and capitalism is to enter muddied waters where the distinction between compliance and resistance is blurred.

Yet Russ's vision of motherhood in *The Female Man*, I argue, also presents a fraught juxtaposition between martyrdom and tedium. The self-sacrifice Russ describes is contrasted with images of domestic labor such as cooking and cleaning, and that labor, because of its private nature, is frequently obscured from public discourse. Mothers have long been revered, but they have almost never received compensation or elevated social status⁵⁴ for their contributions to society. By rendering this labor visible, Russ attempts to subvert reproductive futurity. She recognizes how the actual labor of motherhood is always in tension with cultural representations of the self-sacrificial maternal figure who takes great pride in ensuring the stability and morality of the hearth and home. The narrator, Joanna, digs into this tension by juxtaposing domestic labor (nursing, picking up, mopping) with the fetishized *idea* of motherhood. And this tension, as is evident in the scathing tone of this section, is untenable to Russ.

Russ, like many 1970s feminists, sought to combat women's silence and illustrate how defying social norms by *being* angry can ignite revolutionary ideas and social transformation. Gwenyth Jones describes *The Female Man* as "as both an authentic record of feminist awakening (as many readers have found) and Joanna's own raw, personal testament" (67). Part of this

54. Whatever status mothers are afforded, of course, is contingent on factors such as race, socioeconomic status, gender identity, and religion. Black and Latina mothers, for example, are often caricatured as "angry" and "loud," signifiers that aim to shame these women into accepting their roles as silent martyrs doing their bit for the family and nation

feminist awakening is recognizing that one needs to violate social norms in order to disrupt the social order. This willingness to be defiant, to be willful, enables women to deviate from socially prescribed roles and emotions. For women, this process entails deprogramming the messages that have taught us to be silent or sullen instead of enraged and insistent. In order to trace this process, it is helpful to consider the myths surrounding women's disobedience. In her book, *Willful Subjects*, Sara Ahmed explores the social and narrative use of being "willful," a state that connotes disobedience and the desire to deviate from norms. Willfulness, like anger, is a gendered concept—one that is encouraged in boys but discouraged in girls. When a man is willful, he might be described as confident or tenacious. When women are willful, their behavior is more likely to be regarded as bossy or bitchy.⁵⁵ Ahmed opens her analysis with the Grimms' fairy tale, "The Willful Child." In this tale, a daughter refuses to obey her parent's will, becomes sick and is eventually buried alive with her mother beating down her outstretched arm in the grave. The message could not be clearer—deviating from gender norms has vicious, and sometimes deadly, consequences. While being buried alive is perhaps an antiquated example, we know that gender transgressions can and do result in censure, bullying, and even death. As of this writing, 41 trans or non-binary Americans were killed in 2020 alone (Human Rights Campaign). Trans people⁵⁶ are often killed for merely existing—their very existences are perceived as a

55. One need look no further than the news coverage of the 2016 and 2020 presidential election candidates to confirm this.

56. Russ has been rightfully charged with providing a stereotypical depiction of trans women in *The Female Man*. In Jael's world, Russ refers to trans people as "changed" or "half-changed," depending on their physiologies, and contrasts both with "real women." Despite this gross mischaracterization, for which she later apologized, remarking in a 2006 interview with Samuel Delaney that "it's almost as if my life has arranged itself to disabuse me of one prejudice after another," Russ still devotes much of *The Female Man* to explicating how gender is performed and the consequences one may face if it is performed incorrectly. It is a great irony, then, that Russ failed to recognize how trans

threat to the rigidly gendered social order. And yet, their continued bravery, their willingness (and willfulness) to reject the sex/gender system is also powerful. Trans people reveal the fault lines in patriarchy by showing us just how flimsy biological determinism really is since it fails to account for the myriad identities, experiences, and corporeal presentations that people inhabit. By exploiting those fault lines, trans people, queer theorists, and feminists have the power to destroy this system of power, so long as we let our courage and rage bolster us.

“I, too, am Everywoman”: Navigating Multiple Selves and Becoming a Female Man

The Female Man centers on four women with J-names (Joanna, Jeanine, Janet, and Jael)⁵⁷ who each inhabit a different version of Earth. Joanna is Russ’s contemporary, existing in a very similar 1969 New York to the one where Russ lived, while Jeanine lives in an alternate version of 1969 New York, one where WWII never impacted the United States and the Great Depression is ongoing. Janet, as I have previously mentioned, comes from the feminist enclave of Whileaway and Jael resides in a futuristic world that is divided into two nations based on gender: Manland and Womanland. Once Jael is introduced, she draws attention to the four J’s physical similarities, explaining “What you see is essentially the same genotype, modified by age, by circumstances, by education, by diet, by learning, by God knows what” (161). This sf novum, where a person’s genomes might appear in multiple worlds, derives from mid-century developments in quantum physics. In the 1950s onwards, scientists such as Erwin Schrödinger

individuals both illustrate this phenomenon and face the greatest risk for transgressing their assigned gender roles.

57. In a comically metafictional section before Jael is introduced in *The Female Man*, Russ writes “What a feast of J’s. Somebody is collecting J’s” (155). In this wink to the reader, Russ anticipates the critical attention which shall be paid to the names that so clearly resemble her own.

and Hugh Everett began positing theories that parallel universes may exist, thus making it theoretically feasible for multiple versions of one's self to be scattered across space and time (Jones 57).

For Russ, good sf should always be grounded in real, or at least plausible, science. In her essay, "Toward an Aesthetic of Science Fiction" (1975), Russ expressed disdain with her contemporary critics who felt that the science in sf was entirely fictional, made-up, and bore no relationship to reality. She argues that good sf "must be derived not only from the observation of life as it is or has been lived, but also, rigorously and systematically, from science" (4). Indeed, the main premise of *The Female Man* not only reflects the lived reality of women as Russ observed it, but also centers on the scientific possibility of multiple biological selves coexisting in the cosmos. I draw attention to this distinction because Russ draws from quantum physics to not only suggest multiple selves could exist, but to metaphorically illustrate how they *already do* exist; in other words, *The Female Man* emphasizes how subjects, and particularly subjects from marginalized groups, must perform different identities based on social context. Thus, she implicitly argues that like the J's in *The Female Man*, we too have disparate versions of ourselves.

There has been ample critical attention paid to the role of the multiple selves in *The Female Man*.⁵⁸ Gwenyth Jones, for example, argues that "There is only one character, the writer,

58. For example, Judith Gardiner writes that the J's found in *The Female Man* reveal the narcissistic culture of mid-century America, claiming "the novel can also be seen from a traditionally unifying psychological perspective as a fantasy of narcissistic fulfillment, of a society composed entirely of oneself and of all of one's own potentials" (93). More recently, Pat Wheeler has argued that "Russ offsets the 'realities' position with those experienced by her other protagonists to offer a balance of form in which subjectivity and judgment, based on individual personal perceptions of patriarchy and oppression, can coexist with wider externally observed facts regarding the position of women in other worlds and other societies" (101).

deconstructed. There is only one story: how she came to embrace radical feminism while retaining a feminine past, still living inside her, whose alter ego is a fury of repressed rage” (68). Jones reads the four J’s as each representing a different stage in Russ’s transformation into a “radical feminist.” She considers Jeanine to be Russ’s younger and more naïve self, Joanna to be her current self or a weary academic, as she frames it, Janet to be Russ’s self after she came to understand the importance of feminism and female relationships, and Jael to be her powerful alter ego. While this reading offers us insight into the autobiographical nature of the novel, I argue that *The Female Man* is more complicated than merely showcasing Russ’s stages of feminist development. Instead, my argument coincides more with Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor, who draws attention to the theatricality of femininity that the J’s perform. She writes that Russ “create[s] a dynamic, dialogic dramatization of self-discovery, a making visible of the author’s own composite identity which has remained hidden” due to ideological pressures to self-stylize in particular ways (117). In this section, I would like to extend Wagner-Lawlor’s argument about the performativity of subjectivity in *The Female Man* by paying particular attention to the way that rage situates the fractured and multiple selves within the text.

As I will argue, the multiple selves in *The Female Man* provide two distinct functions: firstly, they showcase the archetypal and contradictory roles that women, and more specifically feminists, are expected to inhabit. Secondly, these multiple selves reveal the simmering anger underlying these gendered performances. This rage is amplified when women must not only navigate feminine stereotypes and archetypes, but also try to develop a sense of self in a world that so often excludes them from personhood. Following Nancy Hartsock’s analysis of how gender is a determining factor in both one’s relationship to knowledge and to culture, I illustrate how *The Female Man* makes evident “levels of reality, of which the deeper level or essence both

includes and explains the “surface” or appearance, and indicates the logic by means of which the appearance inverts and distorts the deeper reality” (218). By presenting multiple versions of the self, Russ highlights the precarious layers of reality that women must navigate to exist within a patriarchal world.⁵⁹

The Female Man opens with Janet Evason’s first-person account in which she gives a brief overview of her upbringing. The exposition functions as a testimony⁶⁰ of Janet’s experience as a Whileawayan and showcases the range of labor that Whileawayn women perform, including caregiving, peacekeeping, farming, mining, and fixing machinery. Though she has worked in various industries, her current position is a “Safety Officer,” an occupation that involves resolving disputes among residents, sometimes through violence. Janet’s narrative also reveals a rite of adulthood in Whileaway: when “[she] was thirteen, [she] stalked and killed a wolf, alone,” retrieving its head to present to her community (1). Janet has not only killed a wolf, a symbol of the wilderness and virility, but this act signifies her transition into womanhood. She concludes her brief backstory with the lines “I have fought four duels. I have killed four times” (2). Janet’s opening statements frame how Russ instrumentalizes violence as a form of resistance. Through her initial presentation of Whileaway, Janet immediately rejects stereotypes of femininity. In this world, women fight and die for their beliefs, customs, and honor. They engage in a multitude of traditionally masculine tasks, including hunting, fighting duels, and policing their neighbors. In

59. I would argue this process is akin to the “double consciousness” that W.E.B. Du Bois so cogently explains in *The Souls of Black Folks*.

60. In his book, *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (Duke UP, 2004), John Beverly explores how the Latin American tradition of providing *testimonio*, or verifiable but personal details about one’s life, at the beginning of novels augments the verisimilitude of the events about to be described.

an outright refusal of what Virginia Woolf has termed the “angel of the house” archetype,⁶¹ Janet’s description of Whileawayan women describes women’s competence in a variety of public spaces and domains. Even though Whileaway is comprised entirely of women, Janet’s world is harsh and full of violence, subverting the idea that a feminist utopia is a place of tranquility.

Unlike Le Guin’s belief that men are the catalyst for most acts of warfare and physical harm,⁶² Russ suggests that in the absence of patriarchy, women would have access to a wider range of affects and activities, including anger and violence. This violence, however, as Natalie Rosinsky argues, is grounded in glee and humor, affects which are only possible because they exist outside of the constraints that patriarchy imposes. Rosinsky claims, using Hélène Cixous’s theoretical framework, that *The Female Man* exhibits Medusan humor, particularly in Whileaway because it “joyfully asserts the potential of feminist texts ‘to blow up the world, to break up the world with laughter,’ much as the Medusa’s glance was once feared capable of destroying the onlooker” (31). While mythological figures provide a useful template for envisioning women’s subversive power, Whileawayans’ attitude towards violence also parallels how Audre Lorde conceptualized anger as a tool for disrupting norms. While her keynote address, “On the Uses of Anger,” focuses on the intersections of race and gender, she aptly claims that women, and particularly women of color’s, anger contains the “power to examine and to redefine the terms upon which we will live and work; our power to envision and to reconstruct, anger by painful anger, stone upon heavy stone, a future of pollinating difference and the earth to support our choices” (10). In Whileaway, anger and violence serve the needs of

61. See: Woolf, Virginia. “Professions for Women,” edited by Mitchell Leaska, National Society for Women’s Service, 21 January 1931, speech.

62. Le Guin posits this in her essay, “Is Gender Necessary? Redux,” in the collection, *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places*. Grove Press, 1989.

the community—they enable women to protect themselves and their family and to make decisions about how they exist within both private and public contexts.

Despite their competence in the public sphere, Janet reveals how Whileawayans also recognize the value in love, intimacy, and partnership. At age 30, Janet became a mother, explaining that “I love my daughter. I love my family (there are nineteen of us). I love my wife (Vittoria)” (2). Interestingly, Janet’s biographical account of her life juxtaposes violence with intimacy, death with love, and labor with pleasure. She remarks that her daughter, Yuki, loves ice cream right before mentioning the duels in which she has fought and won. By contrasting domestic tableaux with scenes of violence, Russ reminds us that utopias often function as “negative prints of what we lack rather than ideal societies” (Jones 61). In describing Whileaway in such a fashion, Russ showcases the invisible, restrictive, and often contradictory roles women are expected to inhabit. One tenet of American culture that Whileaway reflects is how “women as a sex are institutionally responsible for producing both goods and human beings and all women are forced to become the kinds of people who can do both” (Hartsock 223). Without men, Whileawayans actually engage in near-constant labor, working throughout most of their lives, except for a five-year reprieve they receive after giving birth. While they create the next generation of women, they must also engage in duels, security work, and infrastructure development, hyperbolizing the range of activities that women not only contribute to their families but also to the fabric of society. Russ therefore frames the lack in American culture as our failure to acknowledge women’s labor and contributions to the public sphere.

Janet’s experiences in Whileaway are contrasted with those of Jeanine Dadier, a young librarian living in an alternate version of 1969 New York. In her world, resources are scarce and occupational opportunities for women are limited. In addition to these economic changes, in

Jeanine's world, gender norms have remained stagnant, reflecting the culture of the 1950s, presumably because the post-WWII economic boom never occurred, thereby preventing second wave feminism from ever transpiring. Jeanine is introduced as a dreamer who longs for more in her life. While working in the library, Jeanine "daydreamed about buying fruit at the free market" and "daydreamed about [her cat] Mr. Frosty curled up on the mantel, sleeping peacefully" (4). These musings about simple pleasures, such as being able to afford basic commodities and the enjoying the sight of her cat dozing, illustrate in a short space Jeanine's limited ambition for her life. Her desires are simple and involve security and tranquil domesticity.

Her thoughts about these quotidian matters strike a discordant juxtaposition from the experiences of Janet, whose narrative is less concerned with imagination than with lived experience. Jeanine's lived experiences, in contrast, revolve around her quiet work, her home, and her boyfriend, Cal, whom she does not love but tolerates for the sake of having a partner and security in a world that affords her few routes to financial stability. While Jeanine is at work at the library, Cal arrives, interrupting her, and insists that she join him for coffee, despite her repeated protests that she is too busy. It is while he attempts to persuade Jeanine that she finds herself daydreaming about a reprieve from patriarchy and the constraints it imposes, allegorically represented by Cal's imposition. Worn down by Cal's incessant requests, Jeanine eventually concedes and agrees to join him for a tryst in the middle of her workday:

"Oh, all right," said Jeanine hopelessly, "all right."
I'll watch the ailanthus tree. (4; italics original)

Jeanine's hopelessness reflects her inability to imagine a more generative future. As Soraya Chemaly has written in her overview of the functions of women's rage, women are generally conditioned to react with sadness, rather than anger, to unpleasant stimuli. Chemaly writes that

anger and power are inextricably linked, because anger often motivates one into action. Chemaly explains that anger functions as an “approach emotion” while sadness is a “retreat” emotion, meaning that anger inspires mobilization while sadness is more linked to passivity (23). Thus, while Janet uses anger to achieve particular goals, such as winning duels and killing a wolf in order to gain prestige in her community, Jeanine resorts to sadness and hopelessness, emotions that internalize one’s experience and lead to introspection rather than action. Jeanine’s hopelessness is also reflected in her thought that rather than refusing Cal’s request for a tryst, she will watch the ailanthus tree. Watching nature belies Jeanine’s own feelings of being silenced and constrained—rather than refuse Cal, which could prove dangerous, she agrees to have sex with him, though she is only able to tolerate such an act by gazing out of the window. This act of glancing outward, changing one’s vision from a constrictive domestic space to the outside world is reminiscent of Mrs. Mallard in Chopin’s “Story of an Hour.” Both women use nature, a nature that is nonetheless constrained by the domestic barriers of panes of glass, as a portal from which they can process their experiences and internal strife. Using nature as a template for contemplation, Jeanine and Chopin’s Mrs. Mallard also metonymically project their interior desires for freedom onto the outside world.

The ailanthus tree also signifies Jeanine’s attempts to cling to fortitude and strength during an emotionally tumultuous experience. Ailanthus trees are an invasive species that were imported from China into the United States in the 19th century. Also known as the “tree-of-heaven” due to their prolific growth and height, ailanthus trees are a hardy species that have adapted well to even the harshest of environments (Shah 21). Because of both their resilience and their appearance in such works as William Faulkner’s *Sanctuary* (1931) and Betty Smith’s *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1943), ailanthus trees have come to signify strength in the face of

difficult circumstances. When Jeanine imagines staring at the ailanthus tree during her excursion with Cal, she also longs to be like the tree—resilient, hardy, and able to flourish. So, despite her hopelessness, Jeanine quietly longs for a better world.

After Janet and Jeanine meet, they are eventually introduced to Jael, who appears out of the mist like a frightening witch. She is also the character most antithetical to stereotypical presentations of femininity, introducing herself as “a blond Hallowe’en ghoul on top of the S.S. uniform” (157). Jael’s body has been surgically altered to make her more efficient at killing; she is described as having “gray hair,” a “lined face,” a “macabre chin” with “teeth seemed to be one fused ribbon of steel” (158). She has also altered her fingers to accommodate implanted steel claws which she uses to slice and impale the men who dare to cross her. Jael’s given name is Alice Jael Reasoner and she jokes when she shares with the J’s that another nickname for her is “Sweet Alice.” In addition to these names, the narrator frequently calls her “J” (158). Jael’s myriad names make evident one of Russ’s central themes: surviving as a woman requires multiple identities. To the men she kills, Jael is a ghoul, but to the women she protects, she is “Sweet Alice.”

The name she ultimately adopts, Jael, provides context for the duality embodied in her person. Her name alludes to the biblical figure of Jael who, when the murderous general Sisera enters her tent, offers him hospitality and lures him to sleep before she “took a tent peg and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, and it went down into the ground. . . so, he died” (*New King James Version*, Judges 4.21). To assume the identity of Jael is to label oneself as an assassin and a woman capable of defeating those more powerful than herself. The name also carries with it the archetype of the black widow, she who lures men into bed only to devour them whole. Instead of repudiating this archetype, Jael

embraces it because in her world, which has been divided into Manland and Womanland, violent women are an asset, rather than a detriment.

As a Womanlander, she has been required to participate in a longstanding and literal war between the sexes, a war that originated because, as Jael frames, it “If there wasn’t one, there just was one, and if there wasn’t one, there soon will be one. Eh? The war between Us and Them” (163-4). When the rest of the J’s express confusion about to whom “Us” and “Them” refers, Jael clarifies “the Have and Have-nots, the two sides. . . I mean men and women” (165). In Jael’s world, as in ours, war is an ongoing backdrop to the events of everyday life. In this Hobbesian place, people are innately violent, innately greedy, and innately cruel. War operates as a mere expression of personhood, as a natural and predictable outcome to human beings existing, forming groups, and within and between those groups, developing hierarchies. For Jael, and presumably Russ, though, the ultimate wars are fought between those with resources and those who lack them. And ever aware of the cultural capital disparity between men and women, Russ literalizes the battle for gender equality into an actual war between the sexes.

In perhaps one of the most memorable scenes of *The Female Man*, Jael demonstrates what unchecked feminist rage and retribution looks like. As Jael shows the other J’s around Manland, she meets with a contact whose only given name is “Boss.” While they presumably meet to discuss terms for negotiating trade between their nations, the exchange between the Boss and Jael quickly deteriorates and provides an illustrative example of both the causes and results of feminist rage:

“I believe in equality. If we get back together, it has to be on that basis. Equals” [Boss said]
“But—” I said, meaning no offense.
“*It has to be on the basis of equality!* I believe that. . .”
“Well—” I began.

“Of course, of course,” (interrupted this damn fool once again) “you’re not a diplomat, but we have to work the men we have, don’t we?” . . .
 I nodded, picturing myself as Individual Man. . . .
 I rose from my feet. “Excuse me,” I said, “but business—”
 “Damn your business!” he said in the heat, this confused and irritable man.
 “Your business is not worth two cents compared to with what I’m talking about!”
 “Of course not, of course not,” I said soothingly.
 Numb, numb. With boredom. Invisible. Chained. . .
 “That’s the trouble with you women. You can’t see anything in the abstract!”
 He wants me to cringe. I really think so. . .
 “Don’t you appreciate what I’m trying to do for you?” [he asks]
 Kiss-me-I’m-a-good-guy. . .
 He goes into a long happy rap about motherhood, the joys of the uterus.
 The emotional nature of women . . .
 “So you like me a little, huh?” [he asks] . . .
 “Hello, go away,” I say.
 “Sure you do!” [he shouts] . . .
 “Get away,” I whisper. He doesn’t hear it. . . .
 “Kiss me, you dear little bitch,” he says in an excited voice, mastery and disgust warring with each other in his eyes. . . “You want me. It doesn’t matter what you say. . . This is what God made you for. . . You want to be mastered. . . All you women, you’re all women. You’re sirens, you’re beautiful, you’re waiting for me, waiting for a man, waiting for me to stick it in, waiting for me, me, me. . .”
 “OPEN YOUR EYES!” I roared, “BEFORE I KILL YOU!” and the Boss-man did. . .
 I reached around and scored him under the ear [with my nails], letting him spray urgently into the rug; he will stagger to his feet and fall, he will plunge fountainly to the ground; at her feet, he bowed, he fell, he lay down; at her feet, he bowed, he fell, he lay down dead. . . Boss is pumping his life into the carpet.”
 (176-182)

In Jael, we find both the caricature of the siren, who lures men to their deaths, as she is viewed from Boss’s vantage point, and the vengeance-seeking “Sweet Alice” who cathartically detonates in rage when presented with yet another instance of interruption, of mansplaining,⁶³ of

63. The term “mansplaining” derives from Rebecca Solnit’s essay, *Men Explain Things to Me*. Haymarket Books, 2015. The term “mansplaining” is not a blanket term applicable to men explaining concepts or tasks, but rather it refers to specific instances where men silence and/or interrupt women who have more knowledge about, expertise in, and/or personal experience with the given topic than the men do. In Solnit’s essay, for example, she recalls meeting a man who continually interrupted her to opine about a book,

microaggressions, of attempted sexual assault. The Boss's frequent interruptions underpin Jael's inability to communicate through any language other than violence. What is there to say to someone who views you as a place where he can "stick it in" and nothing more? And for Jael, the avenger of women, the alter ego and ghoul who refuses to be dominated, men like the Boss function as obstacles which must be overcome.

In this bloody scene, Russ not only positions Jael as an avenger, but also excoriates the lip service that equality is usually paid. While Boss densely assumes that equality means women will serve him, revel in the joys of motherhood, let men handle the "real" intellectual and political work, all the while being happy to do so, Jael, hearkening the power of her biblical namesake, destroys him. And her decision to do so is punctuated by her shifting from speaking in a whisper to roaring. Recognizing how gender roles are performative because they reify one's subject position, she anticipates the rhetorical moves Boss will make (Kiss-me-I'm-a-good-guy), Jael not only protects herself from Boss but abruptly shifts the dynamic of domination, offering a lens into the potential rupture that uncontained fury can channel. Rather than operating in fear or hopelessness, as Jeanine does, Jael embraces the rage Boss evokes and uses it to change the outcome of an interaction where, according to the cultural script she intuits, she would be the one who is assaulted or killed. In this exchange, the personal pronouns also shift from first-person to third-person. "I" becomes "she" and "me" becomes "her." This discursive move shifts Jael from being one particular woman, who has been designed to avenge, to a more generic woman, any woman, or every woman. And, lest we miss the hint that Jael represents some potentiality within us all, Russ writes: "I, too, am Everywoman. Every woman is not Jael. . . but Jael is

unaware that she was the writer. Once she was finally able to reveal this information, the man admitted that he had not, in fact, even read the book.

Everywoman” (212). For, like Jael, how many women have wanted to respond this way when faced with men like Boss? His name, too, is generic, his anonymity signifying his allegorical function as toxic masculinity, the masculinity which our culture adores and reveres for its cruelty, its assertiveness, its domination, its control.

Unlike Jael, whose corporeality is discussed in detail and whose very body functions as a finely-honed weapon, the final character Joanna, is a spectral narratorial presence. Joanna sometimes (but not always) seems to operate as an autobiographical stand-in for Russ herself. During Joanna’s sections, first-person narration is used and Russ’s (in)famous snark and satire is most apparent. Joanna’s first appearance occurs shortly after the introduction of Jeanine:

When Janet Evason returned to the New Forest. . . I sat in a cocktail party in mid-Manhattan. I had just changed into a man, me, Joanna. I mean a female man, of course; my body and soul were exactly the same.
So there’s me also. (5)

Joanna is alternatively described as a phantom and as the writer herself. She both interacts with the other characters, who frequently ask her questions, and becomes frustrated when they cannot see or hear her, affirming her presence as a strangely embodied, voyeuristic, spectral observer and commentator. She is both present and absent, man and woman, and her insistence on this blurring of boundaries pervades the novel. While providing details about Janet’s experiences, as she does above, she is simultaneously elsewhere—at a cocktail party in Manhattan. This play with narration, where the narrator is both present and absent, watching the action and somewhere else, inserting herself into while also maintaining distance from the action, not only blurs Russ’s intentions but also the genre of the sf, and even the novel more broadly. Indeed, part of *The Female Man*’s science fictionality derives from Russ’s authorial insertions during which she defies the logic of space and time, appearing in multiple places at once as quantum physicists have theorized is plausible.

Another way in which Russ engages in this disruption of binaries is by introducing herself as a “female man.” In her first several paragraphs, Russ introduces this term, using invented nomenclature, or what Istvan Csicsery-Ronay has termed “fictive neology,” to disorient the reader and challenge cultural norms and mores.⁶⁴ Since there is no language available to describe how Joanna has had to both conform to and subvert gender norms in order to exist within her patriarchal world, Russ creates her own language. She uses the figure of the “female man” to describe how women first learn that they are the Other to men’s universal subject, and then how they must learn to perform masculinity in order to be successful in a variety of domains. In other words, Joanna must repeatedly and willfully transgress gender roles in order to disrupt patriarchy. This requires a nuanced understanding of how masculinity functions as a segue into structures of power, which she can then begin to destroy as an insider. While, in the passage above, the process of becoming a female man is nebulous, Russ elaborates on how this is achieved in great detail later in the novel.

Indeed, Part Seven of *The Female Man* is dedicated to describing how Russ became the female man, which she describes as a painful but necessary transformation. This transition from female to female man is necessary because it is a way of gaining access to public discourses and spaces that attempted to exclude her. In one of the most frequently cited passages of the novel, in part because of its autobiographic resonance, Russ writes:

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 because if you walk into a gathering of men, professionally or otherwise,

64. In *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (2011; Wesleyan UP) Csicsery-Ronay identifies the distinguishing tropes of science fiction. In his chapter on fictive neology, Csicsery-Ronay traces how sf’s novel worlds and technologies necessitate new vocabularies, many of which serve a subversive function.

you might as well be wearing a sandwich board that says: LOOK! I HAVE TITS!
(133)

As an avid admirer of Simone de Beauvoir's work, Russ takes to heart Beauvoir's notion that one is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman. To become a woman, one is socialized into her gender. Much like Chemaly's analysis on how one learns which emotions are acceptable for each gender, Russ traces the process of becoming gendered from childhood to adulthood. As a child, the narrator describes themselves as "neuter," neither man nor woman, boy nor girl. Before puberty, most children look androgynous and the only markers of gender include socially constructed signifiers, such as clothing or the length of one's hair. Yet, once women go through puberty, their very corporeality is constituted as a signifier of femininity. For Joanna, this is analogous to holding up a sandwich board reading "I HAVE TITS!" And one's body, once it is interpreted as female, is particularly visible in "gathering[s] of men," or spaces where maleness is taken to be the default subject position, such as in corporate board meetings, government, academia, publishing, etc. In other words, as women enter professional and male-dominated context, their bodies become markers of difference, not only reifying the divide between men and women but also making salient the underrepresentation of women in these contexts.

Once Joanna, or presumably Russ herself, becomes a woman, she simultaneously learns disdain for herself and for femininity more broadly. This disdain derives from "the vanity training, the obedience training, the self-effacement training, the deference training" etc. that women learn via cultural messages (151). Particularly in the mid-twentieth century, media representations of women were quite limited and stereotypical, often enforcing women's place within the domestic sphere. Even today, Chemaly iterates how "every girl learns in varying degrees, to filter herself through messages of women's relative cultural irrelevance, powerlessness, and comparative worthlessness. Images and words conveying disdain for girls,

women, and femininity come at children fast and furiously” (8). This cultural training, which Russ frames as “deference,” “obedience,” and “self-effacement” training, teaches girls and young women that to be female is to lack power and cultural capital.

It is also evident in the range of characters Russ includes, from Jael the ghoul to Jeanine the quiet librarian who longs for life, that being a woman also requires us to confront the contradictory roles that our culture expects women to inhabit, such as a virgin, a siren, a wife, or a witch.⁶⁵ As she describes coming to understand her positionality as a woman, the narrator explains it requires knowing “beyond a shadow of a hope that to be female is to be mirror and honeypot, servant and judge. . . the vagina dentata and the stuffed teddy bear he gets if he passes the test. . .” (134). In becoming a woman, Russ acknowledges that more than anything else, a woman learns to consider and value herself in relationship to men. As his mirror, she can reflect his achievements. As a honeypot or teddy bear, she functions as the prize that he wins if he achieves success. And if she is not a prize, she is a threat, a dreaded figure such as the vagina dentata who, like the ghoul Jael, consumes and destroys.

In an attempt to avoid these archetypes and gain entrance into coveted public spaces, Russ then claims she had to become a man. The process is “slower and less dramatic” than becoming a woman and occurs because “to resolve contrarities” manifested by a binary sex/gender system, one must “unite them in your own person” (137-8). To adopt this “manhood,” the narrator describes a process of reclaiming human history and inserting herself into the social world by recognizing how “if we are all Mankind, it follows to my interested and

65. The witch is an archetype that, as I discuss in greater detail in Chapter Four on Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*, is also fraught with contradictions, often either depicted as a seductress with a dangerous and predatory sexual appetite or a solitary old woman who rejects domesticity. Both iterations, however, destabilize the patriarchal social order.

righteous and right now beady little eyes that I too am a man and not at all a woman” (180).

Thus, becoming a man has less to do with adopting stereotypically masculine traits but instead claiming one’s space within historiography and culture. Amanda Foulter interprets this transformation by arguing that the narrator’s “masculinity does not compromise her 'womanhood' but constructs it as a resisting identity subtending her performance. She is culturally positioned as female, and yet is able to swap her position by imitating male behaviour” (161). Or, as Susan Ayres has aptly put it, “she becomes a ‘man’ because man is the universal; man is human” (27). While both of these readings illustrate the gendered performances that Russ certainly evokes, I argue that critics have overlooked how deeply ingrained affect is to this performance.

Affect theorist Brian Massumi has long insisted that affect is a corporeal experience, one that highlights and informs the networks between subjects and their environments. Through his post-humanist lens, Massumi defines affect as “an identified intensity as reinjected into stimulus-response paths, into action-reaction circuits of infolding and externalization – in short, into subject-object relations” (*Parables of the Virtual* 61). For Massumi, affect originates as a bodily sensation, an “intensity” that a subject feels and may initially experience as mere biological feedback. Yet, affect differs from emotion in that the subject ascribes meaning to its presence, and this meaning extends beyond one’s personal circumstances into one’s social and cultural networks. In other words, the intensity of affect burgeons from being a subjective experience, what one feels, into feedback loops that reveal the interconnectedness between the subject and the contexts in which they exist.

For Russ, the feedback loop she encounters by becoming a female man originates from pain and anger. To be a female man is to occupy two discordant positions, an emotionally tumultuous process that requires seeing oneself as both self and other, victim and predator, man

and woman. It also involves, Joanna tells us, filtering “the perception of all experience through two sets of eyes, two systems of value, two habits of expectation, almost two minds” (137-8). As Hartsock has argued and the gendered performances in *The Female Man* reveal, entering public discourse and coveted spaces of privilege requires one to occupy two positions at once, to view one’s self simultaneously as subject and object. And Russ’s description of navigating these two selves, of becoming the female man, is laden with affect. The narrator emphasizes that transitioning into a man “had something to do with the knowledge you suffer when you’re an outsider—I mean *suffer*; I don’t mean *undergo* or *employ* or *tolerate* or *use* or *enjoy* or *catalogue*” (137; emphasis original). This suffering derives from years of being subjected to various iterations of sexism, to being excluded from conversations and professional opportunities, and from coming to the slow and painful realization that our culture just does not value women in the same way that it does men. In other words, affect can operate as a signal of underlying relations and power dynamics. The suffering that Joanna experiences both derives from cultural knowledge that women are “outsider[s]” and informs her need to transform from outsider to insider.

Being a female man does not mean embracing masculinity without question—it instead signifies inclusion and access to in those spaces where she has been excluded, regardless of how painful or unbearable this entrance may be. The impetus for this change, Joanna tells us, derives from “hopelessness,” “terror,” and “despair,” and deciding to become a female man requires a “ghastly strain” (138-9). This transformation requires tremense emotional labor, scrutinous introspection, and a range of painful emotional experiences. The terms used here also allude to tropes associated with women’s roles within fiction. In Gothic literature, for example, terror, despair, and “ghastly strains” are commonplace. In epics and space operas, women are often

hopeless and terrified, waiting for rescue. In deploying these descriptions, Russ not only depicts the emotional burden women face in attempting to enter public spaces and discourses, but also illustrates the limited range of affects which are acceptable for women, particularly within genre fiction.

Once she actually becomes a female man, Joanna's affective range shifts from retreat emotions, such as pain and sadness, into approach emotions, such as anger, a transition which is signified by a "roar," much like the one Jael verbalizes (139). Joanna embraces the necessity of becoming a female man because she "learned late in life, under my rain of lava, under my kill-or-cure. . . and in really dreadful pain, [*sic*] that there is one and only one way to possess that in which we are defective, therefore that which we need, therefore that which we want. Become it" (139). The lava symbolically iterates Russ's longstanding relationship with rage; an emotion that often simmers underneath sadness or terror—an empowered reaction to the realization that the conditions she has endured are unacceptable. Lava, like Russ's anger, may long simmer under the surface, but eventually it will explode, often resulting in rampant destruction. Russ's positionality in this section also shifts from being under a rain of lava to becoming that lava, internalizing that which has the potential to do so much damage. Yet lava also serves another function besides destruction—it forms new ground, new spaces that are free from the tethers of history and culture. Significantly, the passage ends with "Listen to The Female Man. If you don't, by God and all the Saints, *I'll break your neck*" (140; emphasis original). What begins as potentiality, a rain of lava, transforms into a direct threat, an acknowledgement of the violence that men have so frequently used against women and thereby one of the tools that the Female Man gains from her transition, a tool that Jael puts to extraordinary use. The threat also signifies

rupture, a metafictional explosion from the text that, like lava, can both destroy existing structures and provide new and uncharted possibilities.

What Can a Female Man Do?: Rage and Poesis

In her essay, “What Can a Heroine Do? Or, Why Women Can’t Write” (1972), Russ traces how the mythic structures and archetypes so central to fiction erase the existence of women. Russ argues that “our literature is not about women. It is not about men and women equally. It is by and about men” (81). Noting how most novels derive from forms of the epic, she writes that “you will find not women but images of women. . . who exist only in relation to the protagonist (who is male). Moreover, if you look at them carefully and you will see that they don’t really exist at all” (81). For Russ, the repeated plot structures that inform most novels, such as tales of conquest, finding one’s artistic or intellectual self, or the standard marriage plot, frame the presence of women in relation to men or not at all. Despite the influence of women writers on the development of the novel as a genre, early novels rarely depict women’s lived experiences outside of the domestic sphere and rely heavily on archetypes. Russ insists that most contemporary novels too, particularly those catalogued as canonical works, rely on and replicate these heterosexist tropes which results in a “lack of workable myths” for women to use in their own writing (89). As long as women are primarily characterized in literature as “modest maidens, wicked temptresses, pretty schoolmarms, beautiful bitches, [and] faithful wives,” Russ contends that women’s real lived experiences will continue to be absent from our national literature (81). Thus, according to Russ, writers who want to integrate women instead of “images of women” have often eschewed these conventional forms.

Rather than be constricted by the novel's complicated genealogy, Russ argues that women writers have experimented with genres, forms, and modalities which are not so deeply intertwined with the epic's heterosexist origins. She argues that one modality that women writers have adopted to evade the novel's traditionally masculinist narrative structure is the lyric. She characterizes the lyric mode⁶⁶ as not revolving around plot, but instead being organized by "discrete elements (images, events, scenes, passages, words, what-have-you) around an unspoken thematic or emotional center. The lyric mode exists without chronology or causation; its principle of connection is *associative*" (87; italics original). While Russ also heralds of a liberatory genre, one that allows women to imagine new worlds and ideas free from the mythic structures that she finds so constrictive, Russ's iteration of the lyric mode provides a particularly useful lens for her project in *The Female Man*. Rather than being structured by plot or characters, *The Female Man* instead revolves around an "emotional center" and, like lyric poetry, is distinguished by "the centrality of subjectivity coming to consciousness of itself through experience and reflection" (Culler 66). While the narrative threads of *The Female Man* intersect, the sections are also disparate and interspersed with expository sections, focusing on experiences and their impact on individual subjects, rather than on a coherent sequence of events.

The novel's structure, which, as I argue in my introduction, confused and angered many (male) critics, could also be conceptualized as a form of anarchy, an amalgamation of elements that is complementary to the lyric mode. Expanding on Russ's views of narrative, Amanda

66. It is important to note that Russ speaks here of the lyric as a mode, rather than a form. By describing it as a mode, she considers how the lyric might provide a general spirit, model, and tool for writing, rather than a specific format or structure. Defining the lyric has been a site of much critical conversation. For a good critical overview of the lyric, see *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, Johns Hopkins UP, 2014.

Boulter claims “the anarchic structure of *The Female Man* enabled Russ to articulate the contradictions within and between feminist perspectives without then reconciling them in a linear narrative” (155). In addition to enabling contradictory discourses, anarchy connotes a lack of order and a resistance to structure. Yet anarchy is also contingent on an underlying system of values, emotions, and/or concerns about the current structure, such as being dissatisfied or thinking a better alternative must exist. There is, through their shared desire for something else, an often-invisible tether that binds anarchists together. Like anarchy, the lyric mode as Russ has framed it, connects seemingly disparate elements in a multitudinous form through some shared and often invisible center. We can thus envisage the lyric mode as the connective tissue of a text. Like the connective tissues in our bodies that binds together our various muscles, nerves, and bones, the emotional or thematic center in a lyric text functions as the unseen structures holding it together.

Like the Virginia Woolf’s novels that Russ cites as examples of the lyric mode, *The Female Man* uses “various images, events, scenes, or memories” that circle an “unspoken invisible center” (“What Can a Heroine Do?” 87). This center, Russ argues, is ultimately “what the [lyric] novel or poem is about,” something that is “unsayable . . . in narrative terms” (87). For Russ, existing as a woman in a patriarchal world cannot be summed up through a linear narrative and thus the lyric novel, with its associative principles, provides a viable alternative. Patriarchy permeates nearly every facet of life and thus its representation might best be organized as an assemblage rather than a quest. The structure of the lyric, rather than following one character’s journey and growth as the epic does, instead reflects a multitude of connected realities and images that are associated with a state of being. And it is Russ’s associations with the emotions produced by patriarchy, including rage, which ultimately thread together the events in *The*

Female Man. We often think of rage as an emotional response that indicates a lack of control and, particularly for women, a state of hysteria or madness. Russ plays with this trope, illustrating through her intelligent and logical protagonists who must deal with a range of aggressive and dense men, how while we may conceive of rage (and emotion more generally) as the anarchic antithesis of logic, anger is in fact a logical result to being constrained by an oppressive system.

Like Le Guin, the narrative form of *The Female Man* resists the hierarchy so typically innate to novelistic discourse and plots. Rather than focusing on one story or voice, their works are polyvocal, presenting multiple vantage points and networks of related feelings. In Russ, this is quite evident in her “feast of J’s.” Through Janet, for instance, we see how a feminist utopia is always fragile, always contingent on an imagined state free from patriarchy, which eventually intrudes with anger and domination, like the colonists in “When It Changed” or the men who Janet Evason encounters in New York. Through Jeanine, we see how cultural conditioning leads women to rely on “retreat emotions,” often resulting in passive and introspective roles based on archetypal cultural scripts, such as settling for a man one does not love but who offers stability. Jael’s story reveals how “unsayable” women’s existence within patriarchy is—Boss literally silences her and threatens her with violence until her only recourse is an explosion of rage. And Joanna depicts the suffering women undergo when learning of their relative cultural worthlessness and when navigating gendered performances. The novel consists of scenes, anecdotes, individual experiences, diatribes, and conversations that, as a whole, present and evoke the emotions caused by the logic of patriarchy. By presenting a collage of women’s experiences, Russ’s focus or “unspoken invisible center” might most effectively be excavated

through an analysis of the emotional consequences and labor of merely being a woman, of having a body that is interpellated as a woman.

Given Russ's affinity for poetic language and its ability to dislodge and rupture gender norms, we might also consider how the poetic language Russ adopts itself provides a template for resistance. In her *Revolutions in Poetic Language*, Julia Kristeva explains that the semiotic chora has disruptive potential. Drawing from Plato's characterization of the chora as a maternal space, Kristeva defines the semiotic chora as the amorphous space or psychological apparatus where language has potentiality before we enter the symbolic order, or become interpellated into the system where language and personhood become inextricably linked. The semiotic chora, according to Kristeva, is "no more than the place where the subject is both generated and negated, the place where his unity succumbs before the process of charges and states that produce him" (118). She also writes that "the semiotic functions within signifying practices as the result of a transgression of the symbolic" (118). What *The Female Man* does, I argue, bears semblance to the transgressive discursive practices that Kristeva envisions here. Through her rage at the sex/gender system and the constraints it imposes on women, Russ attempts to challenge the symbolic order itself. Russ's play with the lyric mode, combined with the vast architecture that she enables and the rage that informs and results from women's lived experiences, is an attempt to evade the mythic structures that comprise the symbolic order, or the "process and states" that we associate with fiction.

The novel's conclusion is truly bizarre, shifting from the four J's eating together in a diner into a strange melding of the J's into one voice. Janet, Jael, and Jeanine's very existences dissolve into glimpses of "the great, gray might-have-been," their respective worlds collapsed into one New York City diner (160). Rather than being set in the future, the text employs

multiple contiguous worlds across spatial bounds. When, earlier in the novel, Jael explains how the J's were able to find and connect with one another, she explains how "current theory has it that one cannot return to one's own past, but only to other people's; similarly, one cannot travel to one's own future, but only to other people's, and in no way can these motions be forced to result in straightforward travel—from any baseline whatever. The only possible is diagonal motion" (160; emphasis original). Most sf is didactic; it tracks how a particular set of social and scientific conditions might engender a particular futurity. Often, this imagined future operates as a cautionary tale, warning us of the dangers of a particularly technology, ideology, or form of governance. However, *The Female Man* refuses this very premise, insisting that traversing temporal boundaries occurs not in a linear fashion, but a diagonal one. In other words, one cannot understand the experiences of women under patriarchy in a linear fashion, which obscures the contiguous factors at play at any given moment. And further, one can never see into her own future; instead, she can only which equates to a reframed vision of current social conditions and perhaps, some potential means of disrupting them.

Through collapsing the J's and their worlds into one space, time, and place, Russ queers the logic of conventional fiction. Carla Freccero, in her analysis of how lesbian literature queers temporality, argues that some fiction is "queer because. . . the past retrieved will be, in Ann Cvetkovich's words, 'an archive of feelings,' rather than a record of what has occurred" (19-20). Freccero argues that this queer temporality, which involves tracking experiences rather than empirical facts, destabilizes our understanding of causal relationships. Indeed, as both Sheldon and Freccero have both argued, an insistence on genealogy, whether based on acknowledging the historicity of a particular genre, or characterizing events in terms of their individual pasts or futurities, bolsters a heterosexist vision of the future. Genealogies, are, after all, a process of

interpreting how the past can be used to describe the present and imagine the future. Instead, the past in *The Female Man*, represented by the four J's myriad experiences, operates as "an archive of feelings." And rather than providing futurity for any one character, Russ closes the book by shifting to the book's purpose and the critical reception she anticipates it will receive. In the final lines of *The Female Man*, the narrator encourages the book not to punch the reader in the nose for misunderstanding it, offering the consolation that "when the book is no longer understood" we "will be free" (214). The ending therefore might be understood to operate as a sort of a reader response litmus test to gauge the progress of gender equality. The freedom Russ envisages refers not only to cultural shifts, but also to a complete reconsideration of the universal human subject in literature. *The Female Man*, with its vibrant women and hollow men, presses us to think about women's continued contributions to our culture, history, and daily lives.

In her complicated presentation of sex and gender, Russ preempts Judith Butler's analysis that the sex/gender system consists of "the norms by which 'one' becomes viable, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility" (*Bodies That Matter* 2). For Russ, women can be, and already, are human subjects worthy of their own stories. And by centering women and insisting on the performative nature of gender, as she does with the female man, Russ positions women as the "culturally intelligible" heroes of their own stories. Toward the end of *The Female Man*, after the J's have converged and melded together into one presence, Joanna sums up her feelings about women in fiction: "We ought never be taught to read. . . I didn't and don't want to be a 'feminine' version or a diluted version or a special version or a subsidiary version or an ancillary version, or an adapted version of the heroes I admire. I want to be the heroes themselves" (206). Russ's women *are* the heroes, the agents of action, the ones who engage in romance and intimacy, and the thinkers who provide astute insights and moral

clarity. In contrast, the men in the book, such as Davy, Jael's automaton that she uses for sex and companionship, Jeanine's boyfriend, Cal, and the "Boss" in Manland, are all mere caricatures of masculinity. By employing the lyric mode, she reverses who is culturally intelligible in fiction and whose stories matter, imagining women, instead of men, as the universal human subjects.

Russ also recognizes how cultural scripts regarding gender are so deeply ingrained that to escape them, she must reconceptualize gender altogether. For the very concept of the female man is a paradox: it is both an attempt to rupture the sex/gender system and an acknowledgement, that during her lifetime, no language outside of this system exists. As Susan Martins has argued, *The Female Man* "sets out to expose and revise the operations of language that codify certain norms (such as the use of "man" or the male pronoun to refer to all human beings) as well as the conceptual binaries that reinforce and resonate with gender norms" (407). While Martins's analysis focuses on how the technology in *Whileaway* provides grounds for this revision, as I have argued, affect also mars the binary sex/gender system. Today, we might consider the female man non-binary, but prior to the development of this language, Joanna (the character) and Russ (the author) remained bound by the discursive constraints of gender. And these constraints ultimately produce anger—a desire to escape, to roar, and ultimately to punch the (male) critics who willfully ignore these constraints right in the nose.

The Female Man is an audacious, willful, and enraged(ing) text that ruptures our expectations of gender and provides insight into the discourses of the marginalized. Sarah Ahmed closes her book, *Willful Subjects*, by thinking about will and resistance as political instruments. She writes: "Feminist, queer, and antiracist histories can be thought of as histories of those who are willing to be willful, who are willing to turn a diagnosis into an act of self-description" (134). Ahmed traces the appearances of "willfulness," a term ascribed to those who

are perceived to be overstepping their limitations. This transgression is particularly important for Russ, who sought, in solidarity with so many other feminists, to radically alter the culture of the United States. Ahmed astutely notes that in some cases, willfulness is embraced as part of one's identity: we can have and become "claims to willfulness, claims to audacity, claims to creativity" (134). As Russ argued, part of the challenge of creating such a disruptive and willful text lies in escaping the genre conventions which have so frequently constricted women's writing. *The Female Man* reminds us that when our discussions of anger focus on describing it merely as an affective state, and one that is outrageous and counterproductive, we risk obscuring how willfulness, anger, defiance, and disobedience both result from and threaten legal, social, and cultural institutions.

Given the nebulous relationship *The Female Man* has with causality, form, genre, plot, and characterization, the critical tools with which we approach this text might also need to be queer(ed). Despite its slippery methodology, we must sometimes rely on the tactility of a text, on the sensations that it elevates and evokes. Maintaining a dedication to the affect that a queer text generates, can enable, in keeping with the ethos of that work, critics to continue the project of destabilizing the logics of genealogy and causality. And, as I have argued in this chapter and throughout this dissertation, locating the affective ranges and emotional centers of feminist sf works contributes to unearthing and unsettling hierarchical and causal relationships. In *The Female Man*, it is the simmering rage that bubbles underneath the surface of every scene that engages in this disruption. It is in this anger, this willfulness, this refusal that *The Female Man* embodies where we can locate not only an impetus for social change, but also a reconsideration of what women's writing is and can it be.

Chapter Four

Precarity and Institutionalism in Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*

Like Le Guin, Tiptree, and Russ, Marge Piercy's use of affect emphasizes how hierarchical logics, such as patriarchy, enable and perpetuate gender-based oppression. In Chapter Three, I traced how the framework of the lyric mode—in which a text is organized around an emotional center rather than a linear narrative—enables Russ to provide a heterogeneous explication of patriarchy's emotional consequences. I ultimately argued that the emotional center of Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*, rage, is instrumentalized to elucidate the impact of patriarchy as well as offer a means of disrupting frequently used literary archetypes. Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) also explores the ramifications of patriarchy, though Piercy is much more attentive to how the intersection of one's identity, such as gender, socioeconomic status, age, and ethnicity, all have bearing on one's autonomy within the purview of institutions. By using the affective modality of precarity, which may initially seem like the antithesis of rage, Piercy exposes how those with vulnerable identities reveal the human costs that are always extracted in the name of progress. Though its manifestation looks different, precarity, like rage, derives from the pain of living in a body that is not valued within dominant networks of power. In this chapter, I trace the ways in which precarity, a concept I borrow from Judith Butler, both exposes the extent to which institutions exercise control on vulnerable bodies, rendering their corporealities public, and can simultaneously function as a source of power in private contexts.

Piercy's protagonist, Consuelo (Connie) Ramos, is a poor 37-year-old Chicana woman whose experiences are inextricably linked to her precarity in the face of institutional powers. Jennifer Burwell, for instance, argues that “the mechanisms of social control in *Woman on the Edge of Time* manifest an obsessive concern for penetrating, defining, and controlling” Connie

(137). Her very corporeality is subject to and crafted by a number of institutional powers. She is beaten by men, restrained by doctors, and scrutinized by social workers so that in order to survive, she learns to shape herself according to their various demands. In this chapter, I consider how Piercy's rendering of precarity reveals how trauma signifies more than a fundamental change to one's subjectivity. The effects of trauma, the way that trauma permeates one's body, can also operate as a source of power and resistance. Piercy suggests that it is Connie's precarity, her relative worthlessness in the face of institutions, that grants her access to the feminist utopia, Mattapoissett, Massachusetts, circa 2137. Without the cognitive flexibility Connie acquires to survive the mechanisms of social control in her own world, she would be unable to envision or participate in this feminist utopia. I ultimately trace how *Woman on the Edge of Time* presents a complex matrix between embracing one's precarious identity and using that identity to carve out inclusive, non-hierarchical, and humanist spaces. Rather than suggest that an ethics of precarity necessarily results in peace, however, the novel demonstrates that to be constituted as an Other is also to possess a body that is laden with powerful and subversive potential—a weapon that can be wielded.

“Meat Registered for the Scales”: Institutionalized Bodies

In this section, I argue that Connie embodies the concept of precarity, a term borrowed from Butler's *Prearious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004) and expanded upon by critics such as Simon During and Ritu Vij.⁶⁷ By tracing how the media's coverage on the “war on terror” differentiated (white, straight, American) subjects from (Black, Brown, queer, and/or

67. For a generative close reading of both Butler and During's concepts of precarity, see Vij's article, “The Global Subject of Precarity” in *Globalizations*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2019, pp. 506-524.

Muslim) non-subjects, Butler explicates how certain lives and deaths are depicted as part of public discourse, and thus, are grievable within the national imaginary, while those designated as Others are deemed unworthy of public mourning. American victims of 9/11, for instance, became martyrs whose names were inscribed into a stone memorial. Meanwhile, the Iraqi and Afghani casualties of American imperialism predating 9/11 were rarely publicized or acknowledged. Butler writes that the “violence that we inflict on others is only—and always—selectively brought into public view,” and, when it is, it often serves a rhetorical or military function (39). Thus, to be constituted by the dominant culture as an Other, to inhabit a body that is raced, sexed, or classed, means that while your life and humanity remain private, the violence perpetrated against you will be strategically publicized. To iterate the might of the American military, the media might enumerate the deaths of “enemy soldiers,” for instance, but rarely does it provide the names or histories of the fallen. Thus, to be marked as an Other means that one’s subjectivity, one’s humanness, is obfuscated while one’s body, one’s fragile skin and organs, is put on display as a cautionary tale for transgressing cultural norms.

In *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Connie’s body is consistently marked as Other. Because she is poor, designated as “mad,” and a woman of color, Connie’s corporeality becomes a site of public discourse and a vehicle on which institutions exercise their authority, affirming Butler’s claim that “the body has its invariably public dimension” (26). Butler goes on to explain that “constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine” (26). Connie’s body is not only relegated to institutional powers, where she has little personal autonomy, but her body itself is irreparably damaged by her time within these spaces. She is forcibly sterilized, put on medications that alter her gait and appearance, and an implant is placed in her amygdala to change her reactions to stimuli. Those in power literally craft her body

without her consent in attempts to wrangle her wily femininity to make it better cohere to the realm of the social.

The opening scenes of *Woman on the Edge of Time* are steeped in poverty and violence. The novel opens *in medias res* as Connie hears her niece, Dolly, pounding on the front door. Dolly is attempting to escape her lover and pimp, Geraldo, who has impregnated her and insists that she obtain an abortion. Shortly after Dolly arrives, Geraldo breaks into Connie's home with a doctor in tow, assaults Dollie and then "h[olds] her pinned" while the doctor "fumble[s] for a bag he had set up beside the chair" (11). When Connie realizes "he would kill Dolly and her baby too," Connie smashes Geraldo in the face with a wine bottle (11). In retaliation, a "fist caught her" and Connie loses consciousness only to awaken in Bellevue Psychiatric Hospital, where she is involuntarily hospitalized (11). There, she endures non-consensual and invasive medical treatment for what the staff characterize as *her* "violent episodes and aggression" (416). Shortly after being admitted at Bellevue, Connie regains consciousness to the realization that "Man to man, pimp and doctor discussed her condition. . . she was a body checked into the morgue; meat registered for the scales" (14). When she discovers she has been transferred to a longer-term facility, Rockover, she is informed that her brother, Luis, has provided consent for her continued stay and treatment. The way her body is exchanged between men and institutions reveals how she any resistance she attempts is met with violence and punishment. Considering Geraldo and Luis's discussion to transfer her, Connie comes to the conclusion that a "truce had been negotiated between the two men over the bodies of their women" (28). The dehumanization that Connie repeatedly experiences, the feeling that she is little more than human meat, necessarily disconnects her from her contemporary society, in which she has little agency or power.

The exchange between her brother, Geraldo, and Dr. Redding at Rockover, makes evident, as Kim Trainor has noted, that “Connie is consistently presented as a commodity of exchange between men” (37). Yigit Sumbul has also suggested that Connie’s condition evokes “a dystopian sense of society, which is disturbingly harsh in consideration of a non-white working class woman” (175). While the conditions are certainly dystopian, there is also a gritty realism in Piercy’s work that explores the lived realities of many women of color who have been and continue to be dehumanized by institutions. In her introduction to the 2016 reissue of *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Piercy claims that one of the questions she sought to explore when writing this novel was “who gets to decide, and upon whose head and back are those decisions visited?” (xi). Her interest in who wields power and upon whose “head or back” it is wielded provides a through line to understanding Connie’s precarity in the face of various institutions.

Connie’s precarity early on in the novel illustrates how the intersections of socioeconomic status, race, and gender can transform one’s private body into a public good. During has written that the term precarity “effectively invokes the insecurity of all those who live without reliable and adequate income or without identification and/or residency papers. And it also applies to those with unstable, or no, access to the institutions and communities best able to provide legitimacy, recognition and solidarity” (20). While During goes on to argue that American culture often glorifies precarity because of how suffering tends to be revered in religious doctrines, I am more interested in tracing the rhetorical and corporeal *effects* of precarity. While Connie’s physical body is repeatedly violated and managed, it is only her mind that can (and eventually does) retreat into a private space. Simultaneously, her suffering is private, sequestered from public view. Therefore, her body is at times strategically constructed as a social platform while her sense of humanity, her suffering, her thoughts, and her feelings exist

only within the confines of private contexts. To illustrate their authority over her body, institutions relegate Connie's corporeality to the public sphere, where she remains under the scrutiny of doctors, social workers, judges, and other authority figures.

Since Connie is not considered her own autonomous subject, she and the other clients who have been forcibly institutionalized do not have access to consent. Many vulnerable folks, such as a patient named Skip who is diagnosed with a "deviant" sexuality, are therefore subjected to nonconsensual psychiatric treatment. Skip explains "I got a funny letter from my father, saying they're real proud I've been picked to be in a pilot project for special attention, and they hope I'll cooperate. . . What bothers me is that the hospital's been after them to sign a permission for something" (176). Definitions around consent have varied for centuries, but *Woman on the Edge of Time* was written during expanding definitions of informed consent. In 1972, the case *Canterbury v. Spence* resulted with the ruling that "it was not enough to provide patients with answers, but all relevant or necessary information has to be shared with the patient in order for the client to make an intelligent and well-informed decision" (Farinde 81). Those declared mentally incompetent might have an appointed guardian who can provide informed consent on behalf of the patient. However, not only are Skip and the other patients not in control of decisions regarding their bodies, but they are essentially denied personhood in the process by being declared unfit to make these decisions. Participation in medical trials has required explicit consent since the Nuremberg Trials. However, the visibility of human rights violations is simultaneously obfuscated and publicized. In medical trials, humans are obscured from public view in the recesses of institutional settings even as they also rendered public through the data that is produced, collected, and distributed about them.

The character Sybil, like Connie, who is also involuntarily committed at Rockover, is subjected to invasive medical examinations and frequent electroshock therapy. She urges Connie to escape the ward with her before a nonconsensual operation is performed which permanently alters the amygdala's response to fear (331). Drs. Redding and Argent are piloting an experimental treatment on "violent" patients, such as Connie and Sybil, that involves inserting an implant in the amygdala, or emotional response center of the brain. This implant, Burwell argues, "function[s]. . . to collapse the division between physical body and consciousness altogether and to detach social control from any outside agent" (139). While Connie has been physically restrained and assaulted, this procedure would literally internalize the institutional control to which she has been subjected. Rather than having an "outside agent" enforce cultural norms, this procedure would cast Connie as her own regulated subject.

Dr. Redding presumes that because Connie and Sybil, whom he considers deviant women, view themselves as autonomous human subjects, their delusions must have a biological basis that can be remedied. In several studies with primates, abnormal amygdalas were found to be associated with hypersexuality and negligent parenting, indicating that this portion of the brain has been linked to tropes we associate with bad mothers (Butchers, Myers, and Southwick). By operating on the amygdala, the doctors hope to "correct" Connie and Sybil's deviant forms of femininity and also nullify the emotional components to human nature which are so often associated with femininity. As Sumbul has suggested "the doctors, nurses and attendants working in the mental hospitals view it as their right to tame women who have gone wild in their actions by using experimental drugs and surgeries on them" (177). Ultimately, there is no experiment too dangerous, including brain surgery, to ensure women cohere to their gender norms.

The way that Piercy treats Connie's gender within the novel hearkens back to longstanding sf tropes in which women are subjected to various experiments by a mad scientist figure.⁶⁸ Since sf's origins, women's bodies have often served as the rhetorical grounds against which male power and desire can be visualized and exercised. In her analysis of monstrosity in *Frankenstein* and *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Marcia Seabury traces how the figure of the mad scientist functions as a powerful and dangerous force in both novels. Seabury writes

The scientists in each novel, of course, have great power to define and to act. In each text the scientist is both target and cause of the violence. . . Piercy's scientists are [Dr. Frankenstein's] successors in their experimenting on the literal female: 'cold, calculating, ambitious, believing themselves rational and superior, they chased the crouching female animal through the brain with a scalpel' (Piercy 282). (138-139)

Like Frankenstein's creature, Connie's body provides a template for measuring humanist and empiricist values against one another in fictional flesh. Both Piercy and Shelley frame the subjects of scientific experimentation as sympathetic characters. Connie, like the creature, is fundamentally misunderstood and assumed to be malicious. Yet, to Dr. Frankenstein and Dr. Redding, the bodies they have crafted and managed represent sites of potential new knowledge.

In contrast to *Frankenstein*, however, Connie's repeated violations at the hands of medical doctors and "mad scientists" illuminates how raced, sexed, and classed bodies are particularly precarious and most likely to be the subjects of such experimentation. In *Frankenstein*, Elizabeth and Justine are both murdered by the hands of, or as a result of, the creature's abandonment and failure to understand social mores. However, through their deaths, they are preserved as innocents and martyrs whose subjection to violence is meant to provoke

68. For example, proto-sf stories such as Hawthorne's "The Birthmark" (1843) and "Rappaccini's Daughter" (1844) both feature women who have been experimented on by a mad scientist figure. This phenomenon also shares origins with the Gothic, where women's terror was a central trope in novels such as *The Castle of Otranto* (1764).

horror. When Justine is coerced into confessing she killed William, Victor explains that her sacrifice “bore a hell within me, which nothing could extinguish” (57). Meanwhile, no one besides the reader is horrified by the violence that Connie endures, in part because the doctors who operate on her represent institutional powers and are thus, normalized. She is also a poor woman of color, one whose suffering is unlikely to bear “a hell within” anyone with the power to end her abuse.

While Victor Frankenstein is an aberration who designs his creature in the privacy of his laboratory, Connie’s “mad scientists” experiment on her in broad daylight using public funds. Frankenstein operates outside the realm of normalcy and institutional guidelines, keeping his dark project a closely guarded secret. In contrast, Drs. Redding and Argent have secured federal funding for their project to “cure” violence in psychiatric patients. Connie overhears Dr. Argent telling the medical staff that “our funding is specific. Within those perimeters [of studying violence], of course, we have some latitude to fool around” (287). In other words, as Susan Iverson has suggested, “Connie is subject to the institution, its power and control, exercised *through* experts (doctors)” (98; my emphasis). The power of the “mad scientist” in *Woman on the Edge of Time* is anything but power yielded by a single individual trying to attain god-like status—instead, Piercy seems interested in how experts often use their status to create categories that dehumanize certain people. Connie tells Luciente, the utopian intermediary of the novel, that doctors “like to try out medicine on poor people. Especially brown people and black people. Inmates in prisons too” (299). These people, of course, are also the folks who have the least power to resist such treatment and are those who have already been designated as inherently flawed. The institutional labels that Connie encounters, such as “schizophrenic,” also undermines her voice and claims to truth (413). To be a woman, and brown, and poor, and a schizophrenic

ensures that Connie's experiences can only be interpreted through experts since she is characterized as an unreliable narrator of her own life. Piercy's novel is grounded in social realities—Connie's experiences are not isolated within the novel's fictional frame, but instead reflect commonly shared horrors that many poor women of color, particularly those who have been labelled with a mental disorder, have endured in the United States.

Connie not only has her freedom excised by male authority figures, but her very ability to be a mother is taken from her by institutional powers after she is labelled as a non-deserving "welfare queen." We learn through a series of flashbacks that three years prior to the opening scene, Connie lost custody over her daughter, Angelina., following a two-week period of drug use after the death of her husband, Claud. In her grief, Connie neglects her daughter, leaving her in a high chair for several days, awakening to the realization that Angelina has been screaming for some time. In her drug-induced haze, her first reaction was thinking "Maybe those bastards who had spayed her for practice, for fun, had been right. 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" (62). Following this realization, Connie takes out her anger out on her daughter, striking her "too hard" and breaking Angelina's arm (62). Once she takes her daughter to the hospital to receive treatment for her arm, social workers remove Angelina from her care.

As a poor woman with limited resources, her violent outburst not only reflects her anger and grief, but also her lack of social support. Connie has no one to help care for her daughter so she can process Claud's death. In other words, Piercy explores the causality of violence and how it is perpetuated by poverty. A mother with more resources may have chosen another caretaker for her child until she had recovered from the worst of her grief. But Connie, who has no one, is put into a position where she cannot adequately care for her daughter and then is permanently

punished for her failure. After Angelina is removed from her care, Connie pleads with a social worker for custody, arguing ““They were wrong to take my daughter!. . . I hurt her once. That was a terrible thing to do, I know it. But to punish me for it the rest of my life!”” (22). Because she has also been “spayed,” this means she is no longer able to mother children at all. Connie cannot afford quality legal representation and because she receives state benefits, her actions are closely monitored. This means that one mistake, however egregious, results in her very identity as a mother being permanently stripped from her.

As Piercy knew, poor women and/or women of color have often been subjected to eugenic practices (54). In her extensive research on women’s reproductive health, Jeanne Flavin found that in the early twentieth century, eugenicists “aspired to sterilize nearly 11 million Americans. . . giving priority to those million or so who were institutionalized in poorhouses, mental hospitals, and prisons” (33). Flavin goes on to explain that the “fact that certain racial and ethnic groups were overrepresented in prisons and institutions for delinquents was touted as evidence of these groups’ inherent inferiority rather than reflective of selective law enforcement or economic disadvantages” (35). Psychologists refer to this phenomenon as “stereotype threat,” or the “situational predicament[s] in which individuals are at risk, by dint of their actions or behaviors, of confirming negative stereotypes about their group” (Inzlicht and Schmader 5). This means that not only is Connie’s agency being repeatedly violated in the novel, but she must also bear the burden that public officials will misconstrue her personal failures as evidence that all Chicanas are innately bad mothers. Though in her view, Connie exists as an individual who has made specific choices due to her unique circumstances, medical practitioners, such as the ones who “spay” her, ascribe Connie’s parenting mistakes to her race, using it as further evidence to continue this practice on other women.

Because of her painful awareness that her behavior will be misconstrued, Connie carefully manages her performances with medical professionals. During her assessment at Rockover, Connie initially tries to give an honest account of what happened between her and Geraldo, but she is discouraged from being candid by those in power who have always already pathologized her behavior and body as abnormal. Over and over, in the face of medical authorities, Connie shuts down and performs the part of a willing automaton in the hopes that it will accelerate her release. In myriad encounters, she reads the social cues of the staff and attempts to perform her part correctly: “Her face slammed shut,” (23). “Swallow all insults. Keep quiet” (26). “Be cagey for a while” (98). “She bit hard on her cheeks to keep her face immobile” (99). When entering these discursive spaces where emotion can be pathologized and human facial expressions can imply resistance, Connie attempts to behave as the passive recipient of “care” that doctors expect her to become.

The stereotypes that Connie attempts to avoid confirming, but are nonetheless present in both her quotidian and extraordinary experiences, derive in part from the mythos of the welfare queen. In her analysis of the “welfare queen” trope in American culture, Ange-Marie Hancock judiciously argues that underpinning this epithet are stereotypes grounded in the logic of white supremacy. She traces how the “stereotype of Black women as bad mothers dates to slavery, when the terms “Jezebel” and “Mammy” represented oversexed and asexual women respectively (White 1985) who shared in common neglect of their own children, in favor of having sex (the “Jezebel”) or tending the master’s children (the “Mammy”)” (26). While Connie identifies as Chicana, her body is similarly raced and sexed, and her ability to mother is repeatedly called into question. Connie is deemed a “bad mother” at least in part due to the doctors and social workers she encounters having always already interpreted her that way.

Recognizing how institutions mete out particularly harsh punishments for “bad mothers” who are poor or who have been incarcerated, Connie reflects that “Most people hit kids. But if you were on welfare and probation and the whole social-pigeonholing establishments had the right to trek regularly through your kitchen, looking in the closets and under the bed, counting the bedbugs and your shoes, you had better not hit your kids once” (18). This “infinitely scrupulous concern with surveillance,” Michel Foucault argues “is expressed in the architecture of innumerable petty mechanisms” (*Discipline and Punish* 173). Particularly for those with precarious individuals who have a history with the legal system, there is no place in one’s life that remains private. Social workers operate as another form of institutional power and have the right to investigate Connie’s kitchen, bedroom, shoes, and closets for evidence of her criminality. Not only has Connie’s body been subjected to various intrusions, but her poverty, too, is public—her home her home is rendered a public space where various officials can enter and exercise power over her at any time.

Connie recalls, after Angelina is taken from her, how judged and shamed she felt:

All those experts lined up against her in a jury dressed in medical white and judicial black—social workers, caseworkers, child guidance counselors, psychiatrists, doctors, nurses, clinical psychologists, probation officers—all those cool knowing faces had caught her and bound her in their nets of jargon. . . She was marked with the bleeding stigmata of shame. (52)

The jury that judges Connie not only intimidates her because of their “expert” statuses, “cool knowing faces,” and “nets of jargon,” but also because they represent official bearers of discipline. Lined up and testifying about her inability to care for her child, these experts represent state power and, like the state, they ensure they are unsettlingly visible in their “white and judicial black,” markers of their elevated status. As a united front, they judge Connie’s ability to be a mother. Meanwhile, their testimony reminds Connie that she has been constantly

surveilled and that, even now, in the courtroom, she is an object of analysis. The range of experts present also reiterate to Connie how, as Foucault observes in his analysis of how disciplinary agencies aim to produce docile bodies, “the perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, [and] excludes” (183). The judgment Connie faces, in other words, is as much a reflection on her unique circumstances as it is a referendum on how she, and women like her, must adhere to social norms in order to deserve the status of mother.

The tendency to permanently punish “bad mothers” or “welfare queens” has a long and racialized history in the United States. Flavin cites a litany of examples of how factors such as poverty, race, and mental illness have been used to remove children from purportedly “bad mothers” in the United States. Using the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution as the grounds for her claim, Flavin argues that “incarceration, drug abuse, [or] mental illness. . . simply should not be treated as proxy indicators for the permanent inability to parent” (140).⁶⁹ Each of the states that Flavin lists are temporary conditions that often result in permanent punishments. One can be released from jail or prison, quit using drugs, and/or seek treatment for their mental illness. Yet, under the eyes of the law, these conditions are often treated as irreparable and permanent.

69. Flavin goes on to argue that motherhood is in fact an innate human right, arguing “A mother has a well-established and fundamental right to raise her children without undue interference from the government. . . To be sure, a woman’s right to parent is not absolute. . . If the state has a compelling need to protect a child, and there is no less restrictive means to accomplish this, then a child may be removed from a parent. This does not mean, however, that states have the right to take a child away or terminate a woman’s parental rights just because someone else would do a better job or because it would be less complicated from an administrative standpoint. (141)

Like Piercy herself, who felt “invisible” as a 23-year-old Jewish divorcee trying to subsist on a part-time writing income, the characters at Rockover embody precarious subjects, those whose very existences are fraught with danger while the violence they encounter is simultaneously normalized and disregarded (McManus, “Biography”). Piercy too felt that her background made her vulnerable. She grew up in a lower-income Jewish household in Detroit and recounts in her memoir how, as a child, she found herself in numerous fights with bullies, often carrying a knife with her to school as she befriended African-American children who, like herself, were ostracized and in physical danger from the white, middle-class, upper echelon at school.

Beyond identifying with other marginalized groups, Piercy also found herself at odds with her family—never quite pleasing her father and disappointing her mother, who thrived on gossip and enforced rigid gender roles out of fear for her daughter’s safety. Despite her parents, who insisted that Piercy’s primary goal should be making herself marketable to men, Piercy grew up to become an avid feminist. She recounts her first introduction into existentialism, which she found in the works of Camus, Sartre, and Beauvoir, and claims “the source of my fiction is the desire to understand people and their choices through time” (*Sleeping With Cats* 82). Piercy’s curiosity regarding how choices are made manifests in numerous fictive situations that explore how one’s heritage, gender, socioeconomic status, language, and upbringing align with their identity, access to resources, and (in)ability to make decisions.

Given her feminism, it is unsurprising that Piercy is suspicious of the power institutions and ideologies hold over our bodies. She writes, for instance, that marriage “seemed to me a kind of death for a woman, in which she lost not only her will and her power but even her name” (71). Her sense that power is repeatedly stripped from women is also evident in her experiences with

toxic masculinity. As a teen, Piercy had already “fought off three rape attempts, never mentioning them to my parents, for they would have blamed me” (55). Given her personal experience with the corporeal repercussions of unchecked patriarchy, it is no wonder that she recalls how “being wary of men when I was alone [became] second nature” (51). In *Woman on the Edge of Time*, these concerns are often manifested in characters such as Dr. Redding, who has unchecked power over the bodies he manages at Rockover. Piercy’s sense that one’s body may be a liability, rather than an asset, because of how it is gendered, raced, or interpreted within cultural contexts, makes salient how precarious identities are often subjected to violent cultural and institutional forces, particularly when one is sequestered from public view.

Piercy’s focus on the vulnerability of people such as Connie also suggests a concern with how institutions decide who is worthy of making their own decisions. In her analysis of how we become invested in ethics across national and cultural borders, Butler writes

every political effort to manage populations involves a tactical distribution of precarity, more often than not articulated through an unequal distribution of precarity, one that depends on dominant norms regarding whose life is grievable and worth protecting and whose life is ungrievable, or marginally or episodically grievable and so, in that sense, already lost in part or in whole, and thus less worthy of protection and sustenance. (“Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation” 148)

For Butler, political rhetoric and actions often divides people into two categories: those who are “worthy of protection and sustenance” and those are “ungrievable.” Those in the “ungrievable” category are, by the very nature of this binary logic, unworthy of basic human rights, such as food, shelter, or safety. Butler, like Piercy, is interested in how social markers, such as race, ethnicity, class, and gender inform the extent to which institutions and governments determine whether one is deserving of not only these rights, but also of public care and concern, which Butler frames as being “grievable.” Within a capitalist system, it is assumed that to be poor is to

fail despite the numerous opportunities with which one is presented. Therefore, according to this line of thinking, poverty makes one ungrievable since being poor is presumed to be a choice or a reflection of one's character. Similarly, Butler notes that precarity is based on "dominant norms" in one's society. Since Connie is not only poor but also a woman of color who suffers from mental illness, she has already been deemed unworthy of public concern, even prior to any particular choices she has made.

Inknowing, Outknowing, and Precarity as a Form of Power

Given Connie's trauma and limited autonomy in New York, it is not surprising that when a spectral presence offers to whisk her away into a utopian future, Connie agrees. Connie cannot recall the exact moment when Luciente⁷⁰ first appeared, instead asking "The first time. Was there a once?" (30). While Connie originally assumes Luciente is male, which, in her experience, equates to a threat, she finds that person⁷¹ is welcoming and warm, and reaches for her with "hand outstretched" (30). Luciente offers, but does not force, contact. The gesture of reaching out, instead of grabbing, pushing, or shoving, is wholly foreign to Connie based on the sheer number of physical assaults she has survived. In other words, Connie is given an opportunity to consent to Luciente, a concept rarely available to her within her own world and initially frightening because it is so contrary to the way that she has been treated within other contexts.

70. In Spanish, "luciente" means "light" and in a dream, Connie recalls Luciente as being "shining, brilliant, and full of light" (34). The name also seems to be a play on Lucifer, the angel who falls from heaven.

71. In keeping with the pronoun usage in the novel, I will use person and per to refer to characters in Mattapoissett, which refer to the nominative and genitive cases, respectively.

In this section, I consider how Connie's precarity not only informs the extent to which her identity is (un)valued within institutional apparatuses and discourses, but also how it enables her to access innovative epistemologies and relations.

When Luciente invites Connie to Mattapoisett, person claims that Connie was selected because her "mind is unusual. [She] is what we call a catcher, a receptive" (40). After Connie asks Luciente to elaborate, person explains that Connie "a being with many sores, wounds, undischarged anger but basically good and wide open to others" (57). These sores and wounds are, as I discuss in my last section, a central part of Connie's identity, particularly in relation to how she is defined by institutions. Experiencing trauma often results in hypervigilance, an analogous phenomenon to what Luciente terms being "wide open." Trauma researchers have studied how trauma affects perception, noting that "individuals with PTSD and hypervigilance frequently report a tendency to scan the environment for potential dangers in anticipation of some negative outcome" (Kimble & Hyatt 237). Just as one who receives a burn from a stove might be more aware of the danger in the future, Connie has learned to become especially attentive to potential threats. In other words, the sores and wounds she has endured have made her more aware of possible danger as well as to the inner workings of the society which has engendered such violence. Indeed, when Connie first senses Luciente, Connie first interprets per arrival as a threat which conjures up "childhood scary tales of brujos, spells, demons" (38). For Connie, whose life experiences have taught her to associate novelty with violence, she is more adept at identifying threats than recognizing kindness.

Yet, Luciente's formulation of receptiveness is specific: it is not only linked to trauma (sores and wounds) but also tied to remaining hopeful (being good and wide open). Luciente's logic suggests that being "wide open" can derive *from* precarity and result *in* receptivity, a trait

associated with imagination, versatility, and social change. Connie's tendency to be "wide open" is also connected, as Luciente notes, to her being outside of "the hierarchy that made decisions" (52). Since Mattapoisett is essentially anti-hierarchical, Connie's peculiar perception enables her to see what others do not want to see: alternatives to her capitalist and hierarchical society. When Bee tells Connie that she must "fight" to ensure that Mattapoisett "continue[s] to exist, to be the future that happens," Connie replies, "Who could have less power? I'm a prisoner. A patient. . . You've chosen the wrong savior" (213). Luciente's friend, Sojourner, turns to Connie and smiles, telling her "The powerful don't make revolutions" (213). Those who are satisfied with the status quo, such as the doctors she encounters and her brother, Luis, who goes by the Anglicized Lewis, and has settled into a cozy domestic life in the suburbs, are not the ones motivated to disrupt the current system. Instead, it is the poor, the people of color, and/or the institutionalized, those whose bodies bear the brunt of capitalist violence, who will overturn the social order.

In other words, Connie's precarity and receptivity make her especially open to the idea of utopia, an alternative future and "no where" that can remedy the social ills of her time. As Butler argues, being receptive is key to activism because it enables sentiments to move from temporary aesthetic experiences into genuine desires for change. She writes "receptivity is not only a precondition for action but one of its constituent features" ("Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation" 136). Prior to engaging in empathy, which, as I argue in Chapter Two, Le Guin frames as the basis for cross-cultural understanding, Piercy suggests that one must first be receptive to new experiences. Just as Genly must "unlearn" his prior misconceptions prior to developing meaningful empathy for the Gethenians in *LHD*, in order to access utopia, Connie must rely on her "wide open" perceptual practices.

In the utopia of Mattapoisett, this receptivity is a cultural value and is taught through the practices of “inknowing” and “outknowing.” Children in Mattapoisett practice this self-awareness through activities such as yoga, meditation, and biofeedback, processes requiring intimate knowledge of one’s physical and mental state (148).⁷² The English language itself proves to be a barrier to Connie recognizing inknowing or its importance. Luciente explains to her that “Your vocabulary is remarkably weak in words for mental states, mental abilities, and mental acts. . . . By your language, I mean that of your time, your culture” (40). This lack of language, of course, reflects the relative unimportance of self-awareness in Connie’s own culture. Inknowing, like the unlearning that Genly adopts among the Handdarata, consists of contemplative reflection on one’s internal state of being, outside of material wealth or community relations. It emphasizes “states of consciousness” and “types of feelings,” knowledge of one’s inner self and reflection on one’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (149). Mattapoisett also carves out space for “mad” people who need additional time to engage in inknowing.

Rather than holding pejorative views of madness, Luciente explains that nearly all people use the “madhouse” as a retreat at some point “when they want to go down into themselves—to collapse, carry on, see visions” and practice “getting in touch with the buried self and the inner mind” (67). For the utopians, these reflections serve a purpose within the community. Luciente describes the significance of inknowing, explaining to Connie that “we want to get used to knowing exactly what we feel, so we don’t shove on other people what’s coming from inside” (148). While the practice of inknowing is individualistic, allowing people to process their own thoughts and feelings, it also has communal benefits, ensuring that one’s personal journey does not interfere with interpersonal relationships or group goals. Carter Hanson compares inknowing

with prescience, writing “Piercy amplifies in Connie the capacity for prospection – the mental representation of the future – and her awareness of how prior behaviors predict the future” (289). While Hanson convincingly traces how the temporal shifts in the novel emphasize the causality of particular actions and attitudes over time, I am more interested in how Connie’s precarity makes her the ideal candidate for the thought experiment of utopia. Connie, unlike those in power, longs for an imaginative space where her pain and dehumanization can be negated. Inknowing has practical value in Mattapoisett. The practice helps to ensure wellness, which is viewed as an attribute to ensuring peaceful community relations. It is also antithetical to capitalist logic, which attributes value only to those activities which generate wealth. These social revisions provide hope for Connie, who has little autonomy in her own life.

Inknowing and outknowing form the very basis of Mattapoisett’s ethos and political philosophy, providing a substitute for the individualistic mythos of the American dream. When defining outknowing, Magdalena tells Connie that it is “to feel with other beings. To catch, where the ability exists” (148). For Connie, this feeling with others, which we might label as empathy, comes naturally. Her precarity, which has resulted in hypervigilance and awareness of threats, enables her to be especially attentive to the feelings and thoughts of others. In Mattapoisett, outknowing, too, serves a communal function. Luciente explains that “We have limited resources. We plan cooperatively. We can afford to waste. . . nothing. You might say our--you’d say religion?--ideas make us see ourselves as partners with water, air, birds, fish, trees” (132). This “religion” combines ecological knowledges, feminism, and cooperative ideals. To truly cooperate, the utopians claim that one must recognize how one’s motives and actions interact with and affect a network of other entities. In other words, it is through the abolishment

of capitalism that much of the novel's utopian ideals are realized. One cannot value water, air, and trees as strategic partners if those resources are commodified and sold or used for profit.

Mattapoisett also uses relies on a gift economy where the exchange of goods between people is not based on transactional logic or the accumulation of wealth. At holidays, the utopians frequently exchange homemade gifts, such as textiles and art, which are either kept or passed along to others who might need or appreciate them. Private property as a concept no longer exists. While we might be tempted to align Mattapoisett's communal ideals with Marxist ideology, Luciente clarifies that the dismantling of capitalism can instead be attributed to the beliefs and customs of indigenous peoples.⁷³ Despite the fact that everyone in this utopian enclave is a "mixed bag of genes," each small community, or village, bases its political and economic philosophies on a particular culture (105). Luciente's "sweet friend," Bee, tells Connie that "Wampanoag Indians are the source of our culture. Our past. Every village has a culture (108). When Connie expresses distaste with this idea, Bee goes on to explain "we broke the bond between genes and culture, broke it forever. We want there to be no chance of racism again. But we don't want the melting pot where everyone ends up with thin gruel. We want diversity, for strangeness breeds richness" (108-9). To separate race from culture, is for Connie, unthinkable. Connie self-identifies as a Chicana but also frequently refers to herself as a "brown" woman. For her, these signifiers are deeply related and, for the white people who hold power over her, are

72. While indigenous tribal cultures obviously vary, many American Indian Studies scholars have articulated trends in Native ontologies, political systems, and economies in order to highlight the disparities between the beliefs of indigenous people and the beliefs of white colonial settlers. For instance, Ronald Trosper writes "In proposing the existence of a Pan-Indian viewpoint, one does not want to assert that it fits exactly with any one tribe. Diversity among American Indians is well known. But if one listens carefully to Indians presenting a "Native" viewpoint to non-Indians, certain commonalities can be identified" (309).

indistinguishable. Race and culture both mark her as an ethnic other to members of the white dominant culture.

While choosing to identify as Wampanoag Indians might strike us as a form of cultural appropriation, the designation also pays homage to the original inhabitants of Mattapoissett. Even the city's name, Mattapoissett, is Wampanoag for "resting place," revealing how the Wampanoag people's culture and language has long influenced settler colonialist's conceptualization of this place. And Mattapoissett is framed as a place of rest, not only for Connie who frequently escapes there in her mind, but for the inhabitants themselves who value healing, rest, and play. While Piercy, like many authors, might be said to romanticize indigenous practices, rather than engage in specific cultural acknowledgement, her idea of a place-based ontology nonetheless has some value. For instance, American Indian Studies scholar J. Baird Callicott writes that white writer's interest in Native ecologies and economies generates "hope that Euro-Americans that contemporary Euro-American society will emulate the traditional Native American ideal of a fitting relationship between humans and nature," thus rethinking their propensity toward environmental violence (35). And, for Luciente and Bee, preserving the culture of individual peoples while eradicating the fictional signifiers of race suggests an appreciation of place-specific customs and beliefs.

To solidify bonds with one another, community members exchange gifts on the "tens" of holidays held each year. Some of these festivities are familiar, such as Mother's Day, while other holidays are invented or adapted from other cultures, such a festival which celebrates the "domes ticking of corn and wheat" (126). Property is freely given and exchanged without the intermediary of currency—gifts are given between friends, neighbors, and partners, but most inhabitants keep a few sentimental items in their homes. For example, Luciente has a

handkerchief from per child, Dawn, that person wears with pride. However, the logic underpinning these gifts differs from our own conception of accumulating objects. In her analysis of “indigenous wisdoms,” Robin Kemmerer writes “That is the fundamental nature of gifts: they move, and their value increases with their passage” (27). Kemmerer goes on to explain

From the viewpoint of a private property economy, the “gift” is deemed to be “free” because we obtain it free of charge, at no cost. But in the gift economy, gifts are not free. The essence of the gift is that it creates a set of relationships. The currency of a gift economy is, at its root, reciprocity. In Western thinking, private land is understood to be a “bundle of rights,” whereas in a gift economy property has a “bundle of responsibilities” attached. (28)

Like the practices of inknowing and outknowing, gifts help solidify community bonds. They create and foment relationships and reify the social responsibilities between neighbors and friends. Rather than be assessed for its monetary value, gifts are tied to the intrinsic value of human relationships. For Connie, who is constantly struggling to accrue enough money in the asylum to afford basic needs, like the ability to contact her brother or buy clothing, money is equivalent to having basic human rights. Without money, she cannot obtain housing, food, or dignified healthcare. Meanwhile, in Mattapoissett, gifts operate as an extension of outknowing—thinking of others and their needs, which are viewed as everyone’s responsibility to provide.

Despite the prevalence of gifts, Mattapoissett’s utopians value practical objects rather than luxury items. Status symbols have been replaced by “flimsies.” Instead of spending time and labor creating and hoarding jewelry, cars, or name-brand clothing, people in Mattapoissett luxuriate by creating single-use, compostable, costumes to wear during festivals to help them celebrate important persons, seasons, or events (188). These costumes serve aesthetic and symbolic functions, but once they are composted, they are ultimately rendered back into more practical forms, such as soil that can help produce more food for the community. All luxury

items “fall into two categories: circulating and once-only. . . circulating luxuries pass through the libraries of each village--beautiful new objects get added and some things wear out or get damaged. . . we pass around the pleasure” (189). This communal based system of property ensures that not only does everyone have equal access to essential needs, but also to cultural, artistic, and literary artifacts, which are equally valued in Mattapoissett. Circulating luxuries provide opportunities to provoke thought or inspiration to everyone in the community.

Mattapoissett provides for all basic needs, such as food, shelter, and education, to eradicate socioeconomic barriers that have long plagued American society. Everyone eats together in great halls, which are decorated by art projects that various community members have created. Food is viewed as communal, as is housing, making it so that everyone has equal access to the most pressing necessities. All children are housed and educated within social systems that provide enriching activities and comfort. Those who wish to be caretakers “work” at these facilities, spending their days breastfeeding, reading, and leading the children through various forms of inquiry. In Mattapoissett, the elderly often choose to spend their time with children because they are both open, curious, and social at those times in their lives. At an early age, children are taught the rudiments of inknowing and outknowing so that they, too, can become empathetic and conscientious members of the community (148). In Mattapoissett, inknowing and outknowing enable subjects to gain greater insights into human behavior, reduce needless interpersonal conflicts, and identify the most integral needs of the community. Inknowing, for instance, helps to remediate crime, since criminals are not imprisoned but instead are surrounded by community members to help persons recover their sense of worth. Similarly, the process of “outknowing” requires knowing others in an intimate way—understanding their motivations, desires, and limitations. As Connie learns about these practices, she becomes more

adept at recognizing what she and others need as well as the disparities in power she consistently faces.

“A Horizon of Hope”: Utopic Interventions

Piercy’s focus on the myriad and complicated factors that influence one’s agency not only reveal the constraints of twentieth-century American culture, but also provide the basis for the alternative she imagines in Mattapoissett. While we should be cautious not to conflate utopias with prophetic texts, it is clearly not a coincidence that very issues Piercy’s feminist activism focused on are the same concerns that are resolved in the utopia to which Connie escapes. Just as Fredric Jameson has suggested, utopias such as Mattapoissett tend to “aim at the alleviation and elimination of the sources of exploitation and suffering, rather than at a composition of blueprints for bourgeois comfort” (12). But further, Connie’s very receptivity towards the dream of utopia emerges as a solution to the trauma and dehumanization she has experienced. In this section, I trace how Mattapoissett offers us a “horizon of hope” for dismantling harmful institutions (Baccolini and Moylan 6). Mattapoissett’s revolutionary hope reflects Piercy’s investment in 1970s feminism, which focused on healthcare, community outreach, and consciousness raising efforts. Piercy juxtaposes the institutional power of Connie’s world with the community-driven Mattapoissett, where individuals form connections through family units and storytelling.

The human connections that Connie forges in this utopian enclave originate in part from its linguistic system. Rather than constantly reinforcing the division of the sexes through gendered pronouns and articles, Mattapoissett uses gender neutral language. For instance, the pronoun “person” roughly corresponds to the nominative and accusative case (he/she) while

“per” is used for the genitive case (his/hers). By emphasizing the humanity of all subjects in *Mattapoisett*, the binary sex/gender system in 1970s America becomes less intelligible. The development of a novel language system that obscures gender also emphasizes the estrangement upon which *sf* is grounded. As I discuss in Chapter Two, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay argues that fictive neology is one of the distinguishing tropes of *sf* and the creation of novel signifiers coheres with *sf*'s imagined worlds and technologies.⁷⁴ In a culture where gender is not a significant factor in one's identity, the division between masculine and feminine necessarily erodes, revealing the extent to which our own culture magnifies the importance of gender in nearly all domains of life, including language.

In addition to revising its linguistic system, Piercy's *Mattapoisett* reimagines the sex/gender system more broadly. Children do not belong to individual family units, but instead are generated and raised in communal environments. In her reading of *Mattapoisett*, Donna Bickford remarks that “Piercy has pushed readers to ask. . . What is the social value of gendered motherhood and live birth? Do we have to be mothers to be real women? Do we have to be women to be real mothers?” (72). In *Mattapoisett*, pregnancy and birth no longer require individual labor or female bodies, but are instead achieved through technoscientific advancements. While in Connie's world, technology often functions as a means of oppression, such as the cutting-edge brain operation she is scheduled to have, in *Mattapoisett*, technology is used to reduce labor that can easily be mechanized. For instance, embryos are housed in “brooders,” a space that “looked more like a big aquarium than a lab” (93). Connie is initially horrified by this method of incubating embryos, as is evident in her first reaction when she sees them: “All in a row, babies bobbed. Mother the machine. Like fish in the aquarium at Coney

73. See pp. 96-97.

Island” (94). Comparing feminist utopias with their dystopian counterparts, Robert Shelton has noted that the concept of the brooder baby has evolved over time, noting “What was, for Huxley in 1923, a technology that creates an insanely stratified society has become, for Piercy in 1976, a technology in the service of gender egalitarianism” (170). Connie’s horror at the machination of pregnancy, of course, is matched by Luciente’s shock that mothers in 1970s New York were expected to bear the brunt of domestic and childcare labor. The industrialization of pregnancy not only subverts long standing myths that often associate women’s bodies as mere receptacles, but it also prioritizes technologies that can alleviate oppression, rather than simply produce luxury goods.

Mattapoisett’s society also revises the very concepts of work and family. Each child is delegated three parents, termed “comothers,” who do not necessarily have any genetic relationship to their parents or siblings (66). Instead, children are created in communal laboratories and comothers, or “coms,” volunteer to raise them. A child’s three coms are also not lovers, which helps to preserve the sanctity of parenting without the turmoil of a nuclear family gone wrong. Regardless of gender, each parent uses the designation of “com,” a signifier that emphasizes parenting as a collaborative act. This distrust of nuclear families as well as treating family as private property reveals how Piercy saw the institutional pressures women face as permeating beyond domestic boundaries and into the fabric of the state itself. Bickford notes how Mattapoisett’s society is “structured by reflecting on deep, philosophical questions that impact daily life, such as what does it mean to work?” (71-2). In Luciente’s world, work is a source of joy while menial labor has been relegated to the machines. People in Mattapoisett find work that satisfies their intellectual curiosities and many become artists, scientists, or childcare

workers, depending on their individual interests. Since money does not exist in this world, work is not tied to survival, but rather to one's desire to pursue knowledge and make meaning.

Piercy's utopia reveals how the concepts of family and work often derive from public discourses that permeate private spaces. Louis Althusser recognized that schools, homes, religious and cultural centers, and workplaces all function as ideological state apparatuses, writing

Ideological state apparatuses function massively and predominantly *by ideology*, but the function secondarily by repression, even if ultimately, but only ultimately, this is very attenuated and concealed, even symbolic. . . Thus Schools and Churches use suitable methods of punishment, expulsion, selection, etc. to discipline not only their shepherds but also their 'flocks.' The same is true of the Family. The same is true of the cultural IS [Ideological State] apparatuses. (145)

In Mattapoisett, these ideological and cultural discourses are recognized as such, unlike in Piercy's (and Connie's) contemporary world, which safeguards the supposed neutrality and wholesomeness of the nuclear family. Luciente explains how heteronormative assumptions about family structures should be distrusted because traditional domestic dynamics breed insularity and restrict autonomy. When Connie first visits Luciente's home, person explains that "We each have our own space! Only babies share space. . . How could one live otherwise? How meditate, think, compose songs, sleep, study?" (64). In Mattapoisett, the home itself has become a place of personal freedom and one with generative creative energy, far different from the public and constantly surveilled spaces where Connie resides. Each citizen lives alone and domestic spaces are not shared. Dierdre O'Byrne points out that the space carved out for individual women in Mattapoisett literalizes the basic premises of freedom Virginia Woolfe explores in *A Room of One's Own* (4). Mattapoisett's emphasis on personal space also echoes Piercy's own memories of the first time she had her own room. She writes "I had a real room of my own, upstairs away from my parents with a door that shut" (62). Piercy associated this room not only with privacy

but as the place where she “became who I was to be, [and] began to write both poetry and fiction” (69). For Luciente and Piercy alike, personal space outside of the space relegated by ISAs are necessary for producing generative energy and maintaining a sense of autonomy.

Beyond the creative force of one’s own room, ensuring individual space also undermines the system of domestic labor that has long disadvantaged women. This individual space, as both Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir have argued, undercuts the tradition where women are delegated immanent tasks, activities that must be repeated over and over with meager results. At the end of each day, the labor of immanent tasks is rendered invisible—it is only apparent when the work is undone: the laundry piled, dirty dishes in the sink, dust on the mantle. Beauvoir writes that “Because housework alone is compatible with the duties of motherhood, she is condemned to domestic labor, which locks her into repetition and immanence; day after day it repeats itself in identical form from century to century; it produces nothing new” (98). In contrast, men are generally socialized to perform and assign themselves transcendent tasks, activities that only need to be completed occasionally and have visible results. When one fathers a child or chops firewood, there is evidence of the task being completed (a pregnant partner or a stack of firewood), a sense of completion, and the knowledge one’s labor was generative. Further, the evidence of performing these transcendent tasks is often visible in public spaces—one can see and acknowledge these outdoor activities or the man’s virility, unlike the domestic work of motherhood and housework, which so often remains unseen.

In contrast to the predominantly gendered division of labor in the United States, particularly when Piercy was writing, Mattapoissett trains all genders equally to complete a variety of tasks, undermining gender as the basis on which labor is assigned. Each domicile has its own caretaker and it is no one person’s responsibility to tidy anyone else’s domestic space.

Similarly, schools in Mattapoisett focus on individual strengths and interests, allowing children to freely explore various subjects. Without the background pressures of conforming to gender-based labor in the workplace, children are free (and do) choose a variety of careers. Luciente herself studies the genetic makeup of plants (45). What all of these revisions suggest is that Piercy's novel not only acknowledges and grapples with the presence of cultural and ideological state apparatuses, but she also reframes these institutions so that their presence within the home becomes visible. Luciente's labor, both inside and outside of the home, can be seen and is valued equally to that of her mothers and neighbors. Making this labor more apparent was a common concern among second wave feminists. Marge Piercy was no doubt familiar with sentiments, such as the famous mantra "the personal is political," which derives from Carol Hainisch's 1969 essay of the same name. Hainisch emphasizes that

personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution. I went, and I continue to go to these meetings because I have gotten a political understanding which all my reading, all my "political discussions," all my "political action," all my four-odd years in the movement never gave me. I've been forced to take off the rose colored glasses and face the awful truth about how grim my life really is as a woman. (n.p.)

These very grim realities of womanhood, particularly as they existed during the 1960s and 1970s, are the very issues which are addressed in Mattapoisett. Piercy reflects that while writing the novel, feminist utopias derived from "a hunger for what we didn't have at a time when change felt not only possible but probable. Utopias came from the desire to imagine a better society when we dared to do so" ("Introduction to 2016 Edition" viii). Rather than beginning with broad legislative processes, liberation in Piercy's utopia originates within the home and within other ISAs, where unequitable labor is the most intrusive while simultaneously the least visible.

Indeed, correcting gender inequality, especially as it is capitulated within patriarchy is a central concern of Mattapoissett. Luciente explains that during the women's revolution, which involved "breaking all the old hierarchies," women had to both sacrifice and share the identity of mothers with the rest of the community (97). Person identifies biological sex as the culprit of gender inequality, explaining "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" (97). While in contemporary American culture, the nuclear family has functioned as a rhetorical vanguard for stability and "family values," to revolutionize gender roles, Piercy borrows from numerous indigenous cultures to explore how a communal parenting network might be the key to balancing the labor of child-rearing.

Connie is further disturbed to learn that both male and female persons in Mattapoissett can breastfeed, a phenomenon many modern mothers would likely celebrate. When she first sees Barbarossa, who is described as having "the face of a sunburnt forty-five-year-old man," breastfeeding, her reaction is that of disgust and horror. She feels the essence of motherhood has been lost and in an internal diatribe, she wonders "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" (126). Yet, after a tour of the nursery where she witnesses well-loved and healthy children learning and playing together unburdened by the stressors of her own childhood, Connie's opinion shifts. She suddenly wishes her own daughter could live in Mattapoissett where "she will never be broken as I was. She will be strange, but she will be glad and strong and she will not be afraid. She will have enough" (133). Underpinning Connie's change of heart lies the realization that the more equitable labor and parenting become, the more

attention a child might ultimately receive. An exhausted single mother, such as Connie, who is solely responsible for childcare might simply be unable to provide her child with adequate resources, stimulation, and care. By more equitably distributing the labor associated with child-rearing, inequities in childcare perpetuated by gender and socioeconomic status are reduced.

This trope, of using science to reduce the labor of pregnancy and motherhood, has a long history in feminist sf. From Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915), in which an all-female society reproduces using the process of parthenogenesis, to Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), where humans are unsexed until entering *kemmer*, the mating process that could impregnate either partner, one of feminist sf's primary aims is to make motherhood more equitable. During the 1960s and 1970s, generative discussions about sexual politics and motherhood were being widely circulated. In her research on *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Kathy Rudy concludes:

Piercy's vision relies heavily upon the observations and insights of Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*. First published in 1970, that book reflected the language and values of the left while transposing them into a feminist register. Firestone . . . suggested that romance, love, motherhood, the biological family, and childhood itself were institutions used primarily to keep women oppressed. (29)

Piercy's feminism, like that of Russ's, is present in each of her novels, and particularly so in *Woman on the Edge of Time*. Like Connie's abortion and subsequent forced sterilization, which echo Piercy's own fraught encounters with unwanted pregnancy, discourses about the role of women's bodies permeate feminist sf, each showing traces of larger cultural narratives governing reproductive rights and women's healthcare.⁷⁵

74. Piercy's focus on reproductive rights in *Mattapoissett* also hearkens to the historical origins of 1970s feminism. Following the Civil Rights Movement, many feminists began borrowing the movement's rhetorical tactics and strategies to help broaden the discourse of human rights. Both white feminists and feminists of color insisted that broadening the

In the 1970s, as national conversations about women's healthcare raged on, using heated language and moral arguments about whose lives are most valuable, community centered approaches provided much-needed solutions for poor neighborhoods in crisis. What eventually resulted was a recapitulation of healthcare that extended to include one's mental and physical well-being, instead of merely a lack of sickness. In her thorough accounting of the origins of the women's health movement, Jennifer Nelson writes "Demands to satisfy basic needs cannot be separated from reproductive politics, because a right to reproductive control is hollow without a right to live free of hunger, racism, and violence and without the dignity that facilitates real choices for one's own future and community" (14). In Mattapoisett, health is treated as a communal issue. Everyone receives access to healthcare, food, and support from the community. These fundamentals provide a stable bedrock for people of all genders, ethnicities, and backgrounds to equally flourish.

While the formation of women's health communities in the 1970s did alleviate some barriers to accessing healthcare, underlying this discourse of "access" lies myriad other historical and cultural obstacles. In her analysis of human rights discourses, Wendy Brown reminds us that "the promise of rights to enable the individual's capacity to choose what one wishes to live and die for does not address the historical, political, and economic constraints in which this choice

notion of healthcare to include contraception and abortion would enable women to have greater access to choices that were previously unavailable to them. Like Civil Rights activists who understood political momentum often germinates most effectively within communities, rather than on a national scale, feminists began using storytelling and community outreach to reconstruct the parameters of women's healthcare. Feminists established abortion databases where women could call and get in touch with providers in their area. They also started forming local health centers, who not only provided abortions and prenatal care, but also addressed myriad other health concerns, such as protection from malaria-carrying mosquitos and unreliable access to clean water (Nelson 30-35). Community centers put up screens on windows, dig wells, and started teaching classes on breastfeeding and nutrition (40-41).

occurs—agency is defined as choice within these constraints and thus largely codifies these constraints” (455). For Piercy and Connie both, these codified constraints include limited access to comprehensive sex education, the inability to purchase or use contraception, pervasive social and legal repercussions for being pregnant and unmarried, and little discussion of or opportunities to engage in consent. Many women also cannot afford reproductive care, further reifying the links between race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status to one’s ability to control not only their reproductive futurity but their very well-being. Connie’s experiences with social workers and doctors alike confirm their bias towards poor women of color. When Connie meets with a social worker, the employee regards her with “that human-to-cockroach look” while trying to trick her into admitting her “life [was] a pattern of disease” (18-19). In institutionalized settings, such as mental healthcare facilities, change was far slower than in community outreach centers where doctors, nurses, and patients all lived in the same communities and often shared ethnic, religious, and regional ties.

These realities are why Mattapoissett presents such a cultural shock to Connie. It is rife with intimacy, precarity, and empathy—human connections forged with, rather than threatened by, contact with cultural outsiders. Unlike her utopian predecessors, Connie does not merely observe and report what she finds. Instead, she begins living life as a member of Mattapoissett, even imagining that her daughter could live there too. After learning about their culture, Connie “assented with all her soul to Angelina in Mattapoissett, to Angelina hidden forever one hundred fifty years into the future. . . Yes, you can have my child, you can keep my child. . . She will never be broken as I was” (133). Contrary to most utopian and science fictions, not only does Connie want to remain in the feminist enclave she discovers, but she is so confident in their superior culture that, given the opportunity, she would make the ultimate sacrifice: relinquishing

her child so that she could have a better life. The intimacy and emotional vulnerability at work in *Woman on the Edge of Time* reflects its position within the canon of feminist sf. Striving to reject the masculinist narratives based on violence and conquest that had for so long dominated science fiction, Piercy, like Le Guin, instead embraces intimate relations between individuals, rather than large-scale invasions and multi-generational conflicts⁷⁶ that blur the individual subject from any social context. For Piercy, the social context requires our close attention and scrutiny. To understand oppression, Piercy illustrates, we must understand the myriad networks of influence on each person: the institutions that hold power over them, the families in which they were raised, and their access to basic necessities, such as food, healthcare, and housing.

The entire society of Mattapoisett is based on the refusal of capitalism and money more broadly, resulting in a society where humans are innately valued, beyond their productivity or labor. Fredric Jameson has claimed that one of the essential indicators of postmodern utopias is that “the anxiety of individual death is. . . ‘recontained’ as a collective destiny. . . easily assimilable to a whole rhetoric of collective sacrifice in the service of mankind” (291). Similarly, Piercy frames Connie’s individual traumas as the very inequalities which the utopian Mattapoisett has sought to remedy. In Mattapoisett, gender inequality has been resolved, trauma is rare and immediately handled through communal healing practices, and inequities in housing and income have been eradicated. Simultaneously, and conversely, it is this very specific individualization of Connie’s “individual death” that reveals the fissures around the edges of Mattapoisett, the moments where utopia is revealed as wish fulfillment rather than prophecy. As

75. For instance, Isaac Asimov’s fiction, some of the most famous from the so-called Golden Age of sf, often features dozens of characters who, over the course of several generations, continue fighting in the same conflict. See his *Foundation* series or the short story cycle, *I, Robot*.

Tom Moylan has suggested, critical utopias such as *Woman on the Edge of Time* “reject utopia as a blueprint while preserving it as a dream” (10). Regardless of how much time Connie spends in Mattapoisett, she must always awaken to the reality that in her contemporary society, her individual death is not only metaphorical, but imminent.

Wily Women and Witches

Woman on the Edge of Time emphasizes that gender norms are not only exercised by institutions but are also enforced through family and cultural units. Connie recalls conversations with her mother, Mariana, during which she is told “You’ll do what women do. You’ll pay your debt to your family. . . There’s nothing for a woman to see but troubles” (38). This framing of womanhood as a debt to be repaid and as a burden one inhabits for life necessarily informs how Connie comes to view her place within the world. Because of both her gender and her Mexican-American heritage, Connie remains caught between conflicting impulses and desires. Her mother encourages her to pursue a traditional form of femininity that is primarily confined to domestic spaces and the context of family relations while Luciente provides an alternative world where gender matters very little. As Connie matures and loses her mother, she reflects that as a teen, she had “screamed at her mother as if the role of the Mexican woman who never sat down with her family, who ate afterward like a servant, were something her mother had invented” (39). Connie eventually recognizes that her individual relationship with her family is symptomatic of a much vaster cultural phenomenon. While as a child, Connie does not recognize that her mother had always already been interpellated into the sex/gender system, as an adult, Connie begins to trace the signs that she, too, has been marked, gendered, and interpellated within the same system. In this section, I consider the archetypal gender roles that Connie is expected to inhabit

and how she resists them. I ultimately argue that she adopts the identity of the witch to engage in war against the institutions that oppress her.

In tracing the ways that gender is enforced through family and culture, Piercy emphasizes gender is not just an individual act or decision, but a series of repeated performances that cohere to a script that was written long before any particular woman enters the stage. As Butler has written, tracing Beauvoir's famous work, *The Second Sex* (1949), "to be a woman is to *have become* a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of "woman," to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to a historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project" ("Performative Acts" 522). At Rockover, the repercussions women face for transgressing gender norms is indeed horrific, including physical restraints, forced medication, electroshock therapy, and the implantation of devices in the brain. Connie recognizes that these punishments are often effective, noting how "Sometimes a woman was finally more scared of being burned in the head again, and she went home to her family and did the dishes and cleaned the house" (83). Since our culture associates femininity with motherhood and domestic work, resisting these acts means that women, as Butler notes, are "fail[ing] to do [their] gender right" ("Performative Acts" 522). And these violations often incur violent corporeal consequences.

Connie repeatedly articulates how social forces have shaped her self-image and relationship with her daughter. She explains to Luciente:

In a way, I've always had three names inside me. Consuelo, my given name. Conseulo's a Mexican woman, a servant of servants, silent as clay. The woman who suffers. Who bears and endures. Then I'm Connie, who managed to get two years of college-till Consuelo got pregnant. Connie got decent jobs from time to time and fought welfare for a little extra money for Angelina. . . Then I'm Conchita, the low-down drunken mean part of me who gets by in jail, in the bughouse, who loves no good men, who hurt my daughter. . . . (114)

Based on the stereotypes and repercussions she encounters for performing her gender “wrong,” Connie’s conception of femininity is inherently connected to both race and socioeconomic status. When she identifies as Consuelo, her sense of self is racialized in a way that Connie is not. Connie is an Anglicized version of her name, and in using it, she is able to pass as white. In Sigmund Freud’s formulation of how the mind is divided,⁷⁷ the name of Connie might best be conceptualized as the Superego—an internalization of society’s values. As Frantz Fanon has astutely argued in *Black Skin, White Masks*, people of color who live under hegemonic white culture often begin to internalize the social fabric of the dominant society. Fanon explains that “the young Negro subjectively adopts a white man’s attitude” due to his proximity to dominant white culture and the myriad ways in which it is enforced (147). By obscuring her heritage through this Anglicized name, Connie hopes to limit the otherness she so frequently experiences. In contrast, when she identifies as Conchita,⁷⁸ the identity most closely resembling the Id, her experiences are predominantly negative. Despite this identity being a source of strength that she can draw from during difficult circumstances, Connie associates “Conchita” with stereotypically negative features associated with poverty, such as imprisonment, drug addiction, and violence. Finally, when she is Consuelo, she is made of “clay” and silent. This malleable self most clearly exhibits the form of femininity she associates with her mother, who she recalls as the “Mexican servant” who always puts others’ needs before her own. It is also this part of herself, an identity that is perhaps most essentially her—her Ego, which Connie most associates with being institutionalized and with having her rights violated.

76. See, for instance, Freud’s essay, “The Ego and the Id,” W.W. Norton, 1923.

77. In Spanish, “conchita” can variously refer to a seashell, a maternal figure, or a derogatory term for a woman’s reproductive organs.

Woman on the Edge of Time was written during the height of 1970s feminism, when reproductive rights were at the forefront of cultural consciousness. *Roe vs. Wade* (1973) was decided a mere three years before the publication of the novel. As an avid activist, Piercy was continuously interested in exploring how factors such as socioeconomic status, race, and gender ultimately impact one's choices and autonomy. In her memoir, *Sleeping with Cats* (2005), Piercy recalls that "If I did not stay within the strict gender roles with which [my mother] was familiar, I would be punished, I would be killed" (32). This threat of violence for failing to adhere to gender norms refers not only to the punishment exercised on one's body by authorities, but also to the self-inflicted pain one must endure to ascribe to these norms. For instance, Piercy was intimately familiar with the horrors that transpire when one does not have access to contraception or safe abortions. When Piercy first went to college, she was impregnated by an older man who denounced the use of contraception and promised he would be careful not to impregnate her.

Piercy found herself in quite the predicament: she was the first in her family to attend college, was a star student, and was also pregnant during an era before abortion could be safely obtained. Consulting with her mother, who reluctantly offered advice, Piercy attempted to abort the fetus herself. She tried "all the folklore of the time, mustard baths, harsh douches, jumping off the porch, quinine pills" (90). She finally succeeded in terminating her pregnancy by "opening up [her] womb" and the pain was so severe she blacked out (90-1). She nearly bled to death but was warned not to tell anyone because the stigma associated with abortion was deemed far worse than her risk of infection or death. While Piercy struggled with terminating an unwanted pregnancy, she also recognized that her position was at odds with how women of color's reproductive systems were managed. Piercy, as a white-presenting woman, was encouraged to bear and have children, even if she personally did not want them. Meanwhile,

women of color, like Connie, were forcibly sterilized because the wider dominant culture did not want them.

Partly due to the dualistic and unrealistic expectations of femininity Connie encounters, she suffers from deleterious mental health and is unable to find or maintain a regular income. Her depression and addiction also correspond with her age; once she reaches 30, she recounts being no longer seen as feminine enough or worthy of opportunities. She laments that in her youth “she had been young and succulent as a roasting chicken. Now she was what Geraldo always called her, a bag—a bag full of pain and trouble” (33). This description of herself as a “bag” denotes her sense of inherent emptiness, a vacancy which she seems unable to fill given the constraints of her own world. Connie’s sense of self as a form of vacancy, or amorphous non-form, bears semblance to Ursula K. Le Guin’s reformulation of heroism. Le Guin has described herself as a proponent of Fisher’s carrier bag theory of fiction.

In this rendering of the storytelling’s origins, Le Guin rejects the “hero’s quest” model and instead proposes that “If it is a human thing to do to put something you want, because it’s useful, edible, or beautiful, into a bag, or a basket, or a bit of rolled bark or leaf, or a net woven of your own hair, or what have you, and then take it home with you, home being another, larger kind of pouch or bag, a container for people,” then a container functions as an apt metaphor for stories (151-2). In this reconceived version of narrative action, the quest, like Connie herself, becomes a textualized container, a space for storing various signifiers of value. Through Connie’s initial reliance on others to assign value to her, she embodies this form of heroism, becoming a vessel for various desires, actions, and signifiers. Indeed, *Woman on the Edge of Time* exposes how the values we carry with us are not necessarily our own, but are rather the product of social relationships and culture.

Connie's lovers, friends, and family all place conflicting expectations on her so that her sense of self functions like a fractured mirror—reflecting back disparate and often unfulfilled expectations. While Althusser frames subject formation as the recognition of one's self within ideology, in *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Connie's understanding of herself as a woman is also crafted by her contact with different powerful women, such as her mother, Luciente, and Sybil, a fellow resident of Rockover who proclaims herself a witch. Sybil encourages Connie to accept the identity of the “witch,” a longstanding literary archetype that Sybil⁷⁹ uses to normalize her psychosis and trauma. This alternative to domesticity and passivity, however dangerous, provides Connie with an alternative form of femininity, one that embraces female solidarity and resistance. The word “witch” permeates the novel, appearing in a variety of contexts to describe different women. Connie is called a witch by Geraldo when he breaks into her home at the beginning of the novel and Connie recounts that her husband, Eddie too, “had called her a witch more than once” (10, 42). Men describe her as a witch (which, of course, rhymes with “bitch”) when she fails to perform her femininity correctly. For instance, Geraldo calls her a witch when Connie is trying to protect Dolly from him. In Mattapoissett, the elderly Sappho is called a “witch” for asking a younger person to cut off her hair so that Sappho can be buried with it (167). This cutting of hair is also a way of refusing traditional femininity since long hair is a cultural signifier of womanhood. While Luciente is never directly called a witch, she uses what Connie perceives as magic to escape the constraints of her own space and time. It is Sybil, though, who self-identifies as a witch and reiterates the witch's power over and over again.

78. Sybil's name almost certainly alludes to the famous dissociative identity disorder patient, Sybil Dorsett (a pseudonym for Shirley Ardell Mason), whose anguishing story had recently been made public by her psychiatrist, Flora Schreiber. The book *Sybil* (1973) has been highly controversial since its publication and modern psychologists disagree about both the accuracy and ethics of Sybil's diagnosis and treatment.

Sybil's witchcraft primarily takes the form of maintaining female friendships and rejecting heteronormative constraints. When she and Connie are reunited at Rockover, Sybil clarifies that "We're two witches, I mean. With a coven, think what we could do!" (86). Sybil also takes issue with heterosexual relationships, which she views as a form of passivity. She asks Connie, "Who wants to be a hole? Do you want to be a dumb hole people push things in or rub against?" (87). Through her repudiation of heterosexual sex acts, Sybil embodies the witch archetype, a woman who reforms the myth of the nurturer by evoking symbols of predation, such as "the devouring insect, the praying mantis, the spider. . . .the rank octopus, the carnivorous plant, abyss of convulsive darkness; within it lives a serpent that insatiably swallows the male's strength" (Beauvoir 245). In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir goes on to explain "Such a dialectic turns the erotic object into female black magic, turns the female servant into a traitor, Cinderella into a witch, and changes all women into the enemy" (245). By refusing the sexual role expected of her, Sybil symbolizes the possibilities of a dangerous and non-compliant femininity that threatens patriarchal institutions through her very existence.

These binary versions of femininity—the role of the "Mexican woman" and Sybil's non-compliant witch that Connie is pressured into becoming reveal the antithetical roles and archetypes that women have traditionally been allowed to access. Beauvoir reminds us that stories position women as mothers, lovers, or dangerous witches, but always as the "Other," a figure that exists through opposition to male subjectivity. Never fully satisfied with these limited roles, Connie longs for human recognition, romantic love, acceptance, financial stability, and a family to call her own. Yet, even though Sybil encourages resistance against being filled by men, obviously a symbolic gesture as well as a sexual one, her agency in this decision-making process is really a simulacrum, an illusion of choice that neither Sybil nor Connie seem able to access

through their self-identification alone. Even though Connie acknowledges that “Sybil really did think she was a witch,” it is clear that this designation allows Sybil to embrace the idea of power in a place where she otherwise has little (86). Because Sybil and Connie have both always already been interpellated as non-subjects, and often as objects or commodities, their resistance seems initially futile.

Sybil views their treatment at Rockover and at the New York Neuro-Psychiatric Institute, where both she and Connie are eventually transferred, as a form of persecution because of their status as witches, or non-compliant women. Whenever Sybil learns about new treatments that the doctors aim to perform on her, Sybil equates it to witch-hunting. In one instance, she asks “Are they hunting witches with needles today?” and she later tells Connie that everyone on the ward will be massacred, or “burned at the stake” for their transgressions (89, 372). Sybil uses the analogy of the witch because it has dual implications. Witches represent a form of power and resistance. Yet they are also hunted and persecuted for operating outside the norms of traditional femininities. Ironically, Connie recognizes that “Sybil *was* persecuted for being a practicing witch, for telling women how to heal themselves and encouraging them to leave their husbands” (86; emphasis original). These acts, which both Sybil and the medical staff construe as witchcraft, are actually acts of love and solidarity, acts that are normalized in Mattapoisett but result in persecution and punishment in her own world.

Since Connie lacks the power to single handedly alter the ways in which institutions and culture operates, she is left with few options when Drs. Redding and Argent secures permission from her brother, Luis, to perform the experimental procedure on her amygdala. Using gaslighting techniques to quiet Connie’s reasonable concerns, Redding assures her that “you’ll realize your fears are as irrational and as much a part of the pattern of your illness behavior as

your hospital episodes” (369). Since no one in the hospital will listen to her, Connie resorts to violence to protect her own life. She adds a toxic chemical to the staff’s communal coffee pot and walks away to wash her hands, saying to herself “I just killed six people. . . I murdered them dead. Because *they* are the violence-prone” (370). Through her use of violence, Connie also makes a symbolic sacrifice. She relinquishes her access to utopia. In the last few pages of the novel, Connie thinks of those who have influenced her, including the witchy Sybil and those who had been murdered by institutions, like her lover Claud. She also “thought of Luciente, but she could no longer reach over. She could no longer catch. She had annealed her mind and she was not a receptive woman. She had hardened” (370). This hardening suggests a transformation in how Connie perceives her own identity—no longer a source of precarity and empathy, but instead capable of great harm and retribution. As Sam McBean argues, despite the trauma she endures, Connie’s “loss becomes a creative subject-forming force” rather than a barrier to self-attainment (45). While she originally thought of herself as a container for other people’s desires and needs, she symbolically fills herself with a new identity, the witch, as she adds poison to the coffee container. Through this transformation, Connie accepts the ephemeral nature of utopia and negates her own belonging within Mattapoisett, acknowledging that it was always something she could only be accessed by fighting back in the war against her in her own time.

Once pressing physical threats to Connie’s very being are no longer avoidable, she must choose between a permanent retreat into utopia’s wish fulfillment or instigating war against those who have assailed her. The forms of human nature she encounters in Mattapoisett are simply incompatible with her own contemporary world. Instead, Connie ultimately embraces the most subversive form of femininity available to her—embodying the witch archetype in earnest. Some of Connie’s last thoughts are of Sybil, lingering on the rich and dynamic power witches

claim simply by operating outside of their prescribed gender norms. It is no surprise, then, that Connie chooses poison as her weapon, since potions are a staple of that trope.

The Limits of Utopia

Despite Connie's ultimate sacrifice, the novel closes not with her story, but with medical records, a reminder of how human subjects are characterized within institutional logic. The final chapter is comprised of "Excerpts from the Official History of Consuelo Camacho Ramos," and includes hospital notes on her presenting problems, history, diagnoses, and treatment plans (412-7). She is diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic who, during her hospitalization, had "been mute and withdrawn with occasional violent outbursts" (415). In closing the novel this way, Piercy reminds us of the inherent unreality of utopian fiction. It is always preserved as a daydream, a fantasy, a just-out-of-reach phantasmagoria. After we experience it, we must awaken, close the book, and face the harsh reality that our dreams of equality are often crushed by institutional powers. Ideas with revolutionary power are construed as fantasy or pathologized as madness. Just as in Piercy's other sf novel, *He, She, and It* (1990), the extent to which visions like Connie's are given credence frequently depends on who is in power. In *He, She, and It* the narrator, Malkah, reflects that

The ability to see visions is one of those human talents that flourishes when rewarded by a society and withers in most of us when punished by society. That is, whether the ability to see the hand of ha-Shem writing on the wall secures you pleasant notice for your religious and prophetic acumen, or whether it gets you locked up in the local nut bin, will determine how many people in a society form the habit of seeing what other people are wont to think is not really there. (28)

Connie's very institutionalization reveal the difficulty in imagining an alternate reality where people are empowered and capitalists and institutions no longer exist. Within the "local nut

bins,” where Connie is contained, there is no way to interpret her visions of the future but as a dangerous madness that must be remedied.

Whether Connie actually visits Mattapoissett or the entire experience is imagined is entirely beside the point. The revolutionary forms of femininity and humanity that she locates in this thought experiment reveal a deeply embedded need for alternative forms of existence. The loving relationships and support she finds in Mattapoissett are simply untenable for Connie in her own world. To resist the tethers that bind her to her precarious reality, she must engage in acts of disruption and violence. As Luciente repeatedly reminds Connie, Connie is at war and her freedom and future is at stake. Shortly after she poisons the communal coffee pot, Connie reflects on her actions, thinking “Theirs are the powers of life and death. I killed them. Because it is war” (410). Through the astute senses that she has learned to cultivate in Mattapoissett, such as inknowing and outknowing, and the power she finds in the archetype of the witch, Connie does resist the systems that oppress her and feels relieved that she “did fight them” and “tried” to preserve the possibility of Mattapoissett becoming, someday, a reality instead of a dream (410). Connie’s story reminds us that through knowing ourselves and being open to others, we can move beyond empty, reductive, and damaging institutional labels and instead reclaim ourselves as precarious subjects. While the Mattapoissett of Connie’s dreams will likely never come to fruition, Piercy’s utopian framing suggests that social change is entirely possible, should we be brave enough to dream it and fight for it.

Coda

In *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (2005), Fredric Jameson writes that New Wave feminist sf “not only produce[d] a whole new generation of women writers in the SF field, but even more significantly determine[d] a whole renewal and reinvention of the Utopian text itself” (94). While he does not clarify what exactly about the form was renewed or reinvented, I nonetheless found Jameson’s statement to be provocative and this project was partly inspired by the questions his claim elicits. In writing this dissertation, I aimed to answer the following questions: What *did* New Wave feminist sf writers contribute to the genres of sf and utopian fiction? What were their formal and thematic interventions? How did their writing affect the literary landscape? And, what exactly makes their work feminist?

It became clear to me that, considering sf’s position as a genre which has long been dominated by male publishers and writers, New Wave feminist sf writers, through their very acts of writing, exposed and broadened the limits of what sf is and can be. Their concerns with the institutions and norms governing sex and gender produced a new set of thematic concerns that sf, because of its temporal structure and affinity for thought experiments, is uniquely positioned to address. I also trace how the works of Ursula K. Le Guin, James Tiptree, Jr. (Alice Sheldon), Joanna Russ, and Marge Piercy center radical acts of inclusion and belonging in their plot and ethos, often forgoing or minimizing the violent conflicts so endemic to male-dominated sf. They do so, in part, through their focus on affect, which is framed in their fiction as both a way of understanding others and as a means of subject formation. Rather than featuring vast conflicts, their works explore human relationships, which they use to question and challenge the institutions and ideologies that (often invisibly) uphold structures of oppression.

This dissertation examines a narrow range of texts, feminist sf works published between 1969-1976. However, the trends identified in this project likely did not emerge only in *The Left Hand of Darkness* or vanish after the publication of *Woman on the Edge of Time*. Selecting texts for a project of this nature has necessarily been a process of exclusion as well as inclusion. The texts I have selected are frequently cited and canonical examples of New Wave feminist sf. Therefore, they serve as apt examples of the trends which I sought to identify and explicate. However, 1970s feminism is infamous for having been a movement that centered white feminists and their concerns and this is as true in the field of sf as it is elsewhere. A more comprehensive study of affect in late twentieth-century feminist sf would include discussion of Afrofuturism and its contribution to, and complication of, the affective modalities discussed in this dissertation. Indeed, the narrow scope of this project has left ample grounds for further study. In particular, there are generative lines of inquiry concerning Afrofuturist novels and their treatment of neoliberal logic. More recently, in the twenty-first century, a range of feminist sf writers have emerged onto the sf scene, including Rebecca Roanhorse, Nnedi Okorafor, and N.K. Jemisin. These writers, representing a new generation of feminism, offer us a new “renewal and reinvention of the Utopian text,” that merits our critical attention.

At around the same time as the publication of the works in this dissertation, prolific works by Black women such as Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) and Toni Morrison’s *Sula* (1973) were also circulating in the cultural zeitgeist. In 1974, the Combahee River Collective was also formed, revealing how, despite the ways in which they have been often excluded from the literary canon, Black women have long been attentive to issues of sex and gender. Yet while Black women writers have always been necessary and formative contributors to American literature, very few were engaged in the sf tradition until the

latter half of the twentieth-century. In part because of sf's ties to racist discourses and literary traditions, such as how it frequently analogizes non-humans (robots, aliens, etc.) as racial others and its adoption of the colonial travel narrative structures, sf was not a particularly appealing or welcoming genre for Black writers.⁸⁰ The sf industry, like so many industries, was also dominated by white writers and publishers, making entrance into sf particularly difficult for writers of color. While the Afrofuturist writer, Samuel Delany, began publishing in the 1960s, it was not until the late 1970s and early 1980's that Black women writers fully emerged onto the sf scene.

The Afrofuturist Octavia E. Butler, for instance, became a literary phenomenon in 1979 with her publication of *Kindred*, an sf novel that integrates the novum of time travel to confront the generational trauma of the transatlantic slave trade. Most of her works, from her Lilith's Brood series (1987-1989) to the short stories collected in *Bloodchild and Other Stories* (1995), explore the intersections of race and gender through thought experiments that feature the lived experiences and historicity of Black women. Butler's work, too, reveals how affect serves as a useful tool for reimagining hierarchical logics and engendering social progress. In her *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), often referred to as her *Earthseed* series,⁸¹ the protagonist, Lauren Olamina, suffers from a congenital affliction known as hyperempathy syndrome, which is also known as "sharing." This condition forces her to experience the pain of those she perceives to be suffering and thus renders her an apt vehicle for giving voice to the disenfranchised. Olamina explains that "sharing is a weakness, a shameful secret. A person who

79. For a wonderful explication of how anti-Black racism has permeated American sf, see: Isiah Lavender III's *Race in American Science Fiction*. Indiana UP, 2011.

80. A third novel, in the series, tentatively titled *Parable of the Trickster*, was planned but never completed or published prior to Butler's death in 2006. Fragments of the novel are housed in the "Octavia E. Butler" collection at the Huntington Library.

knows what I am can hurt me, betray me, disable me with little effort” (*Sower* 178). While her hyperempathy remains visible only episodically and, at times, borders on the absurd, particularly in scenes where she witnesses others being shot and she, too, falls down, her condition literalizes the central premise of empathy: being profoundly moved by another human’s suffering.

While the *Earthseed* series is often characterized as dystopian—it depicts California as a wasteland—it is also a story grounded in hope.⁸² It, like Le Guin’s *LHD* and Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*, emphasizes how empathy and vulnerability can be revelatory acts. The *Earthseed* series is thus contrary to its contemporary dystopian counterparts. Empathy and change, the core tenet of the Earthseed religion that Olamina founds and proselytizes, are substitutes for the masculinist stoicism, grit, and violence generally valorized in the post-apocalyptic turn, ever-present in works like Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) and the television series *The Walking Dead* (2010-present).

Part of what Olamina’s hyperempathy reflects is that the sociality of her world is contingent on sensory experiences and immediate contact with others, rather than interactions under and within institutions. While Olamina is the central character, she also begins to recognize and band together with other “sharers.” Her hyperempathy thus engenders connections between characters, reaffirming the ways in which affect functions as a relational phenomenon. The centrality of this condition in the series indicates that, while burdensome for the characters in the novels, compassion and empathy ultimately function as affective structures capable of eliciting social change, particularly if we are to read Butler’s series as the titles suggest we should—as parables. Both in *Earthseed*, the religion that Olamina develops, and in her

81. Peter Stillman, for example, has suggested that Butler’s *Parable* series “links dreams and nightmares, showing how future dystopias result from current utopian dreams (and political power) of certain segments of American society” (15).

interpersonal experiences, Olamina privileges anecdote and individual stories over the official metanarratives provided by authority figures. State structures in the story world, such as the oppressive Christian Church of America, operate as façades that use the discourse of morality to obscure ulterior motives. Undergirding their rhetoric of saving people from their sin are corporations who aim to reap the benefits of forced labor. This is visible in the resurgence of indentured servitude and the renewed view of women as mere reproductive vessels. Earthseed's form of sociality, in contrast, places little value in state sanctioned discourse and instead promotes building communities that are flexible and meet the needs of all of their members. Interpersonal connections and communal needs frame and inform Earthseed's doctrine.

In a 2000 interview, Octavia Butler argued that inequality is often a “result from our having inherited characteristics that don't work and play well together, especially since the wrong one is in control. The two characteristics are intelligence and hierarchical behavior, with hierarchical behavior dominant” (“A Conversation” 338). Earthseed, unlike Christianity in its conventional forms, encourages discussion and enquiry, change and collaboration, debate and democratic participation. Thus, though Earthseed uses parables as a means of conveying lessons, those lessons can be adopted and modified to best suit the characters (and presumably, the reader) and do not rely on the formal institutions that Butler associates with hierarchy.

Rachel Greenwald Smith has aptly argued that, while affect has often been characterized as an individual enterprise, illustrating the public and intersubjective dimensions of feelings can help to destabilize neoliberal ideology. Smith suggests that within neoliberalism, feelings are considered private assets that must be individually regulated, and therefore, to engage in transgressive modes of reading, we might consider “refiguring feelings as unpredictable forces that are modified, intensified, and transmitted through interpersonal and interobjective

relationships that exceed the capacities of any individual to manage them” (24). While Smith is interested in taxonomizing personal versus impersonal feelings in formal textual structures, clearly Olamina’s characterization operates within this transgressive space as well. Olamina literally cannot contain the emotional experiences of others, and therefore relies on a community to help her manage these affective experiences. On several occasions, when violence erupts between travelers on her journey north to Acorn, Olamina must rely on others to stand guard when she is suddenly incapacitated from witnessing violent acts unfold, which she in turn also experiences. For the characters in this world, these connections often defy conventional market logic: Olamina must now share resources with those who have less than she does and her vulnerability is a risk to those with whom she travels. So, as Florian Bast has noted, what hyperempathy denotes in the novels is “a fantastic illustration and intensification of the interconnectedness of subjects, a relationality that, the novel hereby insists, cannot be ignored in a discussion of agency” (124).

Sower’s sequel, *Parable of the Talents*, is comprised from textual fragments compiled and editorialized by Lauren Olamina and Bankole’s only daughter, Asha Vere, who obtains her PhD in history and breaks the cycle of poverty that her parents endured. The series’ focus on hope and futurity emphasizes the use of utopian processes which privilege optimism, even in the face of the wasteland that was once the United States. This optimism runs parallel to Lauren Berlant’s characterization of cruel optimism, which she defines as “affective attachment to what we call the ‘good life,’ which is for so many a bad life that wears out the subjects who nonetheless, and at the same time, find their conditions of possibility within it” (27). Olamina’s decree that “If you want a thing—truly want it, want it so badly that you need it as you need air to breathe, then unless you die, you will have it” operates as an example of Berlant’s

characterization (*Talents* 405). At the utopian enclave of Acorn, Olamina does achieve a brief respite from chaos of the outside world and at the end of the *Talents*, she has gained notoriety and wealth. More significantly though, Olamina fulfills her dream and destiny of sending Earthseed to the stars, passing away in old age only after “she saw the first shuttles leave for the first starship assembled partly on the Moon and partly in orbit” (404-5). While Olamina’s (cruel) optimism is rewarded once she achieves her goals, her attachment to the mythos of the American dream, a construct that has apparently persisted even in the apocalyptic aftermath of the United States, also reveals the limits of utopia to escape dominant ideologies.

Like the iconography of the phoenix with which *Parable of the Sower* opens, Olamina reconfigures herself and her immediate community to better adapt to her surroundings. She uses the material world to craft her own future, instead of relying on preexisting hierarchies or ideologies. While she can never fully escape the ideologies of the present, such as the fantasy of the American dream, she combines various civic and religious traditions to craft something new and produce hope. To do so, Olamina must recognize her own position of power as a “sharer” to institute a civic philosophy of empathy within her community. According to the worldview of the book, the way to envision a more hopeful future is increased affect—a renewed attention to the senses and how they connect us as subjects. Like the biblical parables of the sower and talents cited at the end of each respective novel, reformulating human relations so that they hinge on connectedness, rather than hierarchy, is only possible by planting seeds of revolution which will germinate in the ever-distant but pressing future.

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