

2017

“We Must Fight to Exist, To Be the Future That Happens”: Overcoming Contemporary Resistance to Feminist Utopian Visions in Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* and Joanna Russ’s *The Female Man*

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“We Must Fight to Exist, To Be the Future That Happens”: Overcoming Contemporary  
Resistance to Feminist Utopian Visions in Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*  
and Joanna Russ’s *The Female Man*

by

Ashley M. Evans

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

the Department of English

Lehigh University

May 5, 2017

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This thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in the Department of English.

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5/3/2017

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*I would like to thank:*

*My thesis director, Mary Foltz, for introducing me to Russ and Piercy, and for helping me establish a more meaningful relationship with my scholarship. Mary, without you, I wouldn't even have known where to begin, but I see m(an)y future(s) more clearly now that I ever had before.*

*My graduate advisor, Jenna Lay, for helping me organize my thoughts alongside my priorities this semester.*

*My friend, William Richardson, for every middle-of-the-night meltdown he sat through.  
And my mentor, Matt Chelf, for going before and still being there after.*

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the reasons why marginalized female characters living in fictionalized versions of 1970s America prove resistant to communal utopian visions through Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* and Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*. In both Piercy and Russ's texts, this thesis finds that contemporary characters are held back from feminist revolution by a deep discomfort with the breaking down of the gender and sexual norms around which much of cis-gendered women's identities are constructed. In *The Female Man*, this thesis further suggests that contemporary characters are also held back by radical communities' unwillingness or inability to reach out to, and frame their messages for, mainstream audiences in such a way so that they can understand. In this way, this thesis emphasizes how critical it is for radical communities to reach out to audiences that may prove reluctant to their visions for the future initially. In both Piercy and Russ's texts, this thesis argues that contemporary characters are helped to overcome their resistance to radical utopian visions through three varieties of non-coercive consciousness raising, including: (1) conversations between women who are not yet conscious of their suffering and women who are very aware of the nature of women's oppression, (2) women encouraging other women to take revolutionary action and providing them with a blueprint for how to get started, and (3) rapid juxtapositions of present violence against future social forms which would disrupt and do away with that violence. Finally, this thesis suggests that this kind of rapid juxtaposition between present oppression and future liberation is only really possible within literature and film

Works of speculative fiction like Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* and Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* represent a serious effort to imagine the capitalistic, patriarchal, and environmentally exploitative reality of contemporary America transformed by socialist, feminist, and environmentalist philosophy. Works like Piercy's and Russ's grew out of the feminist movement of the 1970s, and "expressed, in fictionalized form, the same issues that constituted the primary concerns of feminism in its second wave" (Gilarek 1), including concerns about the harmful limitations imposed by gender binarism. As Anna Gilarek suggests in her article "Marginalization of 'the Other': Gender Discrimination in Dystopian Visions by Feminist Science Fiction Authors," feminist science fiction writers frequently chose to set their stories in distant or unfamiliar settings in an effort to denaturalize pervasive twentieth-century power structures and provide the reader with a "new perspective on certain aspects of life they might otherwise take for granted, such as the inadequacies of patriarchy and women's marginality in society" (1). Both Piercy and Russ consider contemporary America to be "dystopian enough to be used as a setting for their novels," and underscore the shortfalls of our capitalist patriarchy by splitting the narrative between some version of 1970s America and a utopian and dystopian future (Gilarek 1).

Piercy and Russ establish the gender-based problems facing their contemporary protagonists and then introduce both protagonists and readers to a society in which those problems have been eradicated due to a breakdown of the gender binary and the introduction of new economic and social organizing principles. However, in both Piercy and Russ's texts, fictional characters from the 1970s like Jeannine, Joanna, and Connie do not immediately recognize the appeal of these transformed societies, but demonstrate



considerable resistance when faced with the future's practices, despite feeling dissatisfied or discriminated against in their present. In this thesis, I explore what exactly holds Jeannine, Joanna, and Connie back when confronted with the future, and what ultimately dispels their reluctance to participate in the realization of communal utopian visions. My work builds on Gilarek's by suggesting that it is through Piercy and Russ's unique juxtaposition of the trauma, violence, and mourning generated by systems of racial, gender, and class domination in the present with alternative social forms in the future that highlights, for readers and protagonists both, the inadequacies of patriarchy and the necessity of societal change.

For Connie in *Woman on the Edge of Time*, it's not the economic or industrial restructuring of society that incites the most resistance. In fact, such issues hardly seem to faze her at all. Instead, I argue that she becomes fixated on – and repulsed by – certain Mattapoietian cultural norms involving gender and sexuality. For example, Connie's initial revulsion towards Mattapoietian culture revolves around their revolutions in birthing and motherhood and gender and sexuality. This fixation on gender, sexuality, and motherhood is significant because it is through these lenses that Connie fashions her identity. Motherhood especially is of particular importance to Connie, as it is one of the few aspects of womanhood that is valued in the larger culture and brings pleasure and a sense of fulfillment to Connie. And since Mattapoiet has made live birth obsolete and the rearing of children a communal activity, Connie initially feels deeply unnerved by and directionless in Mattapoietian society, and proves reluctant to realizing Luciente's version of the future. She does, however, come around and accept Mattapoietian society as preferable to both contemporary America and its hyper-patriarchal, hyper-capitalist

dystopian legacy through her abrupt transitions between the present, its dystopian future, and Mattapoisett and the consciousness raising efforts of the residents of Mattapoisett.

In this thesis, I maintain that it is through Connie's time travel or mental journeys to Mattapoisett that she is able to identify the sources of oppression in her life in the present, and sever her attachment to the binary thinking and power imbalances they impose. For example, Connie is highly attached to her identity as a mother, but the way that mothering is conceived of in the present has made her feel like a failure. In the present, Connie is considered a "bad mom" because she found single parenting stressful, and succumbed to grief and depression while raising a child. Unfortunately, Connie internalizes this script, and believes herself to be a bad mother until she comes into contact with mothering on Mattapoisett, which ultimately cause her to reflect of her experiences of parenting in the present. Finally, she realizes that the Mattapoisettian iteration of mothering is more beneficial to the child and parents both, because the child gets a more stable support system, and the stress of parenting is spread out over multiple people, lessening the burden for all.

In this way, *Woman on the Edge of Time* seems to be suggesting that the key to overcoming resistance is to raise to consciousness the sources of an individual's oppression by juxtaposing those systems with images of alternative social forms that would put an end to or mitigate that suffering. Although Connie experiences this juxtaposition through her time travel, the citizens of Mattapoisett also take pains to underscore the shortcomings of the present by talking through – although not invalidating or disparaging – Connie's concerns about race, motherhood, and sexuality, and explaining why they've adopted alternative understandings. In doing this, the residents of

Mattapoisett not only explain how present understandings of sex, gender, reproduction, and parenting can be sources of oppression for women, but also provide a guide for how society can be rearranged in order to eradicate these sources of oppression. In my view, this blueprint or guide appears to be at least as important as the consciousness raising itself, as it allows Connie to identify what steps need to be taken in order to enact a feminist revolution, which goes a long way in mitigating Connie's feelings of powerlessness, and motivating her to take action.

In *The Female Man*, both Jeannine and Joanna are similarly bemused by the futuristic utopia they're exposed to. And like Connie, it's not the overhaul of the economic and industrial landscape that poses a problem for them, but the breaking down of gender norms and sexual taboos, which produces a culture shock and revulsion so deep that whatever benefits Jeannine and Joanna recognize in the Whileawayan way of life are overshadowed by the utter alienness of a non-binary world "lost to respectability and decency and decorum and dependency and all sorts of other nice, normal things" (Russ 148). However, unlike Connie, Jeannine and Janet are never fully convinced of Whileaway's desirability, and instead remain skeptical of and even hostile to Janet's utopia even after encountering its futuristic opposite. Instead, they appear sympathetic to Jael, a soldier in the future's fully realized "battle of the sexes," when she appeals to them for help in opening up their worlds to her violent revolution. This is because, unlike Janet, Jael is not asking Jeannine and Joanna to let go of binary thinking. Instead, she is appealing to their entrenched identities, and forging solidarity through shared experiences of oppression. She's also offering them a plan for enacting a future, rather than simply showcasing the finished result with no clear path to recreating it.

In this way, both *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Female Man* seem to suggest that, what holds individuals back from feminist revolution is a deep discomfort with the breaking down of gender and sexual norms, around which much of cis-gendered women's identities are constructed. The solution for this, in both texts, seems to be consciousness raising conversation, which can forge solidarity across perceived differences by finding shared experiences of suffering. However, if these sessions are to be successful, attempts to truly understand one another must be made. For example, the Mattapoisettians take pains to understand Connie and respect her position, even as they attempt to raise her experiences of oppression to consciousness in an effort to enlist her help in creating a better future. Janet, on the other hand, is never able to bridge that gap and forge a connection with Jeannine, Joanna, and Jael, because she did not take the time to educate herself about their situation, and so cannot understand their position.

For this reason, Janet, unlike Jael, cannot provide Jeannine and Joanna with a blueprint for how to enact a feminist utopia on their earths. In both *The Female Man* and *Woman on the Edge of Time*, a blueprint or plan makes all the difference in recruiting others to join a cause. In this way, both Russ and Piercy's texts seem to suggest that no revolutionary movement will gain any ground with followers unless it can offer at least a rudimentary plan for getting a revolution started. Oftentimes this blueprint or guide lies within the utopian vision itself, as opposed to a concrete, step-by-step guide for enacting social change. Rather, a successful utopian vision is shown to inspire feminist praxis by showcasing what life might look like in a society transformed by feminist thought. Through these visions, individuals are able to determine for themselves what structures need to be changed in order to achieve the best possible future. That said, if these visions

of the future do not speak to present day oppressions, and if the feminists proffering them are not aware of or attuned to the entrenched identities that women have developed within oppressive structures and so cannot alter their pitch accordingly, than those visions may never gain enough traction within the larger population and so may never be realized. This issue of framing why Luciente's Mattapoisett and Jael's Womanland succeed where Janet's Whileaway does not. That is to say, both Jael and the residents of Mattapoisett are able to articulate how their respective visions will address issues plaguing modern-day women, but Janet lacks the historical understanding or personal experience of gender-based oppression to be able to that, and so her vision of Whileaway falls by the wayside with Jeannine and Joanna.

In both Russ and Piercy's work, time travel and the space/time continuum play significant roles in that it allows "disparate women, or version of the same woman, to connect... [and give] voice to their anger at women's lack of autonomy or women's lack of will to effect change" (Wheeler 101). According Pat Wheeler in her book chapter "That is Not Me. I Am Not that': Anger and the Will to Action in Joanna Russ's Fiction," this contact with the separate universes of probability is important because it provides Jeannine and Joanna with a promise for the potential emancipation of women in the future (101). It also helps highlight, through contrast, the extent of the gender-based power disparity present in 1970s America. In this way, both Russ and Piercy's texts suggest the kinds of consciousness raising needed to successfully combat contemporary characters' resistance include (1) non-coercive consciousness raising, (2) a rudimentary blueprint for starting a revolution, and (3) a rapid juxtaposition of an oppressive present

with a radically altered, utopic future such as the kind found through inter-dimensional travel in science fiction.

### **Resistance to Utopia in Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time***

Of all of the contemporary characters discussed in this piece, Connie enjoys the most widespread, sustained contact with the future. As such, she has the most opportunity to observe how Mattapoisettian society actually functions, in both social and economic terms. However, most of what she encounters either puzzles or repulses her initially, because Connie has not been privy to the kinds of consciousness raising that would enable her to start critically assessing her position in society. That is to say, unfortunately, as a working class, Chicana woman with a “bad history,” (Piercy 33) Connie would not likely have been a member of the target audience that the larger, second-wave feminist movement – a movement historically criticized for being “only or mainly focused on the interests of white, middle-class, heterosexual women” (Tong 43) – was trying to reach. In fact, Connie feels alienated by many of the middle-class, professional white women she meets, including her social worker Mrs. Polcari and her caseworker Miss Ferguson, who are both in some of the best positions to help her, but who appear to dismiss her as a “problem case” without ever really hearing her side of the story (Piercy 33). And aside from her largely superficial association with Mrs. Polcari and Miss Ferguson, Connie is isolated, and so she does not have much opportunity to build meaningful connections with other women of color who might have been able to help her realize the extent to which her racial, class, and gender identities are all socially constructed and play a role in her oppression. For this reason, when readers first encounter her, Connie espouses the belief that certain behaviors and proclivities

traditionally associated with men and women are biologically determined. Furthermore, she demonstrates a certain pride in doing femininity, and especially in performing motherhood. In this way, Connie has to a certain extent built her identity around her body – that is to say, her sex and race – and the behaviors that society associates with it. In this way, what makes Mattapoissett so initially unsettling to Connie is that as a society it has successfully “[severed] the connection between biology and identity,” (Burwell 142) particularly the connection between sex and gender and racial markers and cultural identity, and it is through these sites of difference that Connie constructs her identity. Therefore, Mattapoissett attempts to diminish racial and gender difference by severing the connection between “racial markers and cultural identification, and... between gender, reproduction, and sexual identity” (Burwell 142) are not only strange to Connie, but threatening, as they destabilize her understanding of herself and the world around her. And the threat this shift away from biology presents is what ultimately provokes the most resistance in Connie as she interacts with the citizens of Mattapoissett.

Before Connie even encounters Mattapoissett proper, she is confused and repulsed by its culture, and alarmed by this disconnection between biology and identity that she is exposed to through its citizens. For example, even in her earliest encounters with Luciente, a representative from Mattapoissett, she appears bemused and disconcerted by Luciente’s androgyny, which is indicative of the Mattapoissettian approach to gender. That is to say, in Mattapoissett (a literary example of the fully realized androgynous utopia that radical-libertarian feminists advocated for), it is widely understood and accepted that one’s biological sex has little to no bearing on one’s gender identity or sexuality, and masculinity and femininity are married so seamlessly within its citizens that Connie

initially has trouble identifying males from females. This is incredibly troubling to Connie, who has been living in 1970s America, and is caught up in thinking about people in terms of the gender binary, which our culture constantly reinforces through gendered messages about sex roles, traits, and performance cues.

In these early scenes, Connie cannot easily place Luciente into a single sex category based on appearance and behavior, and her inability to do so is a source of anxiety and suspicion for her. According to Sut Jhally in his documentary *Codes of Gender: Identity + Performance*, this drive to sort people into gendered categories and the anxiety that an inability to immediately do so produces is typical of our society, where “our ability to recognize someone as either male or female is absolutely fundamental to our ability to interact with them” (1). Drawing on the work of Erving Goffman, Jhally takes care to note that

there is nothing natural about that [gender] recognition. It's dependent upon certain signals being communicated that allow us to position people in categories – male/female – that make sense to us. If we can't properly understand or properly read those signals, or if they're not being sent out in ways we can understand, then it is almost impossible to proceed to any further social interaction. (1)

In this passage, Jhally explains that we are conditioned to look for cultural markers signifying a person's masculinity/maleness or femininity/femaleness before or as we begin interacting with that person. If, as he suggests, a person exhibits conflicting signals, the people around them get tripped up, unsure of how to treat them, and perhaps even uncomfortable. In her earliest interactions with Luciente, a time-traveler from Mattapoisett trying to establish contact with a “catcher” from the past like Connie,



readers see Connie undergoing this silent investigation herself as she immediately begins the work of sorting Luciente into a gendered category.

Connie first encounters Luciente in a dream. Even unconscious, she finds herself confused and troubled by Luciente's combination of masculine and feminine traits, and has trouble determining how to interact with her. At first, all she sees is the "face of a young Indio smiling, beckoning, curiously gentle" (Piercy 608). She immediately notes that Luciente "lacked the macho presence of the men in her own family, nor did he have Claud's massive strength, or Eddie's edgy combativeness. His hands as they clasped hers, however, were not soft" (Piercy 608). At this point Connie has little to no information with which to make a determination about Luciente's sex, but given that she does not appear overtly feminine in appearance, Connie automatically categorizes her as male, the default norm in patriarchal society. She finds "evidence" that confuses her (e.g., "'What should I call you?' the voice asked. High-pitched, almost effeminate voice, but pleasant and without any trace of accent" [Piercy 608]), but she persists in her conclusion because she still hasn't encountered anything overtly feminine enough to make her change her mind. Nevertheless, this as yet unacknowledged confusion trips her up, and she reflects that "She should not have drawn back timidly from the young man with his high, pleasant voice and his workman's hands. She should have sidled up to him and rubbed her fat breasts against his chest" (Piercy 608). Because Connie registers Luciente firmly as a man at this juncture, and because she recognizes that she is dreaming and that dreams can serve as outlets for sexual desire, she interprets the dreams as being sexual in nature, and berates herself for not following the expected script.

She grows much more discomfited by Luciente at their next meeting, and not just because she's meeting a "man" she's dreamt about in the flesh. She is, of course, initially suspicious of Luciente's character. From her perspective, a strange man has just approached as she's walking home. He appeared to be waiting for her outside her place of employment, and she fears he'll rob her, initially, so she takes in her surroundings as well as her companion. Again, she begins analyzing Luciente's mannerisms, which confuse her, in terms of gender. For example, as she watches Luciente, Connie concludes: "No, he didn't walk in a swishy manner. He had a surefooted catlike grace. He moved with grace but also with authority" (Piercy 695). In this moment, Luciente's confidence confuses Connie, because Connie, having grown up under gender binarism, associates self-confidence and a commanding presence with masculinity, and has trouble imagining any woman possessing the same aplomb that Luciente so readily exhibits. As they move forward, she doesn't dismiss her initial impression of Luciente as a man, but she does begin questioning Luciente's sexuality. "Really, he was girlish. Mariqueta?" (Piercy 690) she asks herself, because the only way she appears to be able to reconcile a man having so many feminine qualities is if they happen to be gay.

As they walk, Luciente tries to explain why she's so interested in Connie. "You're an unusual person. Your mind is unusual. You're what we call a catcher, a receptive" (Piercy 710). Connie's confused by her explanation, and initially takes offense, and Luciente explains that they "have been trying to get through for month before [she] chanced on [Connie's] mind. You're an extraordinary top catcher. In our culture, you would be much admired, which I take isn't true in this one?" Here, Luciente tries unsuccessfully to explain that in Mattapoissett gendered traits have undergone a

reevaluation, and certain aspects of femininity (e.g., receptivity and openness) are now highly prized and respected. Luciente herself is a “sender,” a position readers might identify as the more masculine of the two, which further suggests that in Mattapoisett, the division of traits or skills based on gender no longer exists, and that men can exhibit traditionally feminine traits and be better catchers than some women, and women can exhibit more traditionally masculine traits than men and be better senders. Of course, being a catcher or a sender does not preclude having masculine or feminine traits. Rather, all citizens of a Mattapoisett exhibit a unique blend of femininity and masculinity within themselves, although they no longer categorize the traits associated with those two states as such. This blending and de-gendering of traits is in keeping with radical-libertarian ideas about gender. For example, according to Rosemarie Tong in her book *Feminist Thought*, radical-libertarians believe that gender is “separable from sex and that patriarchal society uses rigid gender roles to keep women passive and men active,” and that the only way for women to “dispel men’s wrongful power over [them] is for both sexes first to recognize women are no more destined to be passive than men are destined to be active, and then to develop whatever combination of feminine and masculine traits best reflects their individually unique personalities” (Tong 51). The citizens of Mattapoisett have therefore achieved Kate Millett’s dream for an androgynous future, in that they have fostered only the best traits from either sex (e.g., Mattapoisettians encourage strength without arrogance, and compassion without self-sacrifice).

Connie first discovers Luciente’s sex the first time she transports her to Mattapoisett. When Connie first finds out, she doesn’t react well. As Jhally suggests, this simple discovery is enough to seriously freak her out as she tries to accommodate this

new information and adjust her perspective on her newfound friend. “Pressed reluctantly, nervously against Luciente, she felt the coarse fabric of his shirt and...breasts! She jumped back” (Piercy 1141). For several passages thereafter, Connie’s thoughts race as she tries to make sense of what she’s been told. Even as she concedes that Luciente’s features are more feminine in nature and takes stock of her “[s]mooth hairless cheeks [and] shoulder-length thick black hair” (Piercy 1115), Connie notes that Luciente is more muscled than most women, and is so unselfconscious in everything she does that Connie feels she couldn’t help but be confused. This sense of confusion becomes even more pronounced as Connie is guided into the future by Luciente, where she meets all her friends and sweetfriends, at which point she also has a lot of trouble identifying the gender of the people she meets. She still doesn’t understand, at this juncture, that gender and sex aren’t necessarily related, let alone that the concept of having a masculine *or* feminine gender identity has collapsed in this utopian future.

This collapse of gender roles and identities has some interesting side effects, including the collapse of the traditional understandings of sexuality and the transformation of traditional family units. In Mattapoisett, people have no trouble identifying themselves as male and female according to their anatomy, but do not subscribe to the notion that there are certain traits or behaviors that naturally follows from this biological information. The men and women of Mattapoisett do not separate people by gender, and do not procreate biologically, so traditionally gendered tasks like mothering are no longer assigned based on an individual’s sex, nor are they assigned to one person only. That is to say, in Mattapoisett, mothering is a shared duty, divided between three primary co-mothers or “coms” and the larger community. This

reconfiguration of motherhood, more than anything else, proves the most potent stumbling block to Connie's acceptance of Mattapoisett.

Connie, like most contemporary figure, is to some degree invested in "doing gender." As a result, she is deeply uncomfortable when others fail to conform to expected gender roles, and thereby destabilize the gender binary, which in turn complicates her understanding of what it means to be a woman, and thus her identity as a woman. And while Connie is committed to her performance of womanhood, she is most invested in her identity as a mother, which her status as a woman, which her status as a woman gives her unique access to in 1970s America. That is to say, although motherhood is itself a "major site of oppression for Connie, who has been sterilized against her will just as her mother was, whose sister was given fake birth control as part of an experiment, and whose daughter had been taken away by the courts" (Burwell 143), Connie nevertheless constructs her identity through motherhood, which is, in her time, intrinsically linked to her body. Connie has a very poor self-image, referring to herself as a "two-time loser," and is acutely aware of how society sees her: that is, as a "fat Chicana aged thirty-seven without a man, without her own child, without the right clothes," but with a police record and a psychiatric record (Piercy 26). In other words, Connie is aware that, as a poor, middle-aged Chicana woman in 1970s America, the only social value that the culture assigns to her is through her ability to mother, and it is through her status as a mother that she therefore constructs the most positive conception of herself.

The fear of losing that identity, which is rooted in the body, is why Connie responds with such revulsion to the artificial birthing process and multiple mothering in Mattapoisett. From Connie's perspective, locating motherhood in behavior instead of the

body delegitimizes what she sees as the visceral, transformative experience of giving birth, and calls her own status as mother into question. For example,

Angelina, child of my sore and bleeding body... The nurse said that I would have to show you, but you reached right for my breast. You suckled right away. I remember how you grabbed with your small pursed mouth at my breast and started drawing milk from me, how sweet it felt. How could anyone know what being a mother means who has never carried a child nine months heavy under her heart, who has never borne a baby in blood and pain, who has never suckled a child. Who got that baby out of a machine the way that couple, white and rich, got my flesh and blood. All made up already, a canned child, just add money. What do they know of motherhood? (Piercy 111)

In this passage, Connie locates the process of becoming a mother in the body, through the physical act of giving birth, and the tangible experience of pain that accompanies it.

In this way, Connie identifies Angelina as a product of her labor, of her “sore and bleeding body.” Through this identification, Connie claims ownership of her child, and does it in such a way as to make that ownership non-transferable. She further characterizes that claim as natural by describing the instinctual and effortless experience of breastfeeding that immediately follows Angelina’s birth and contrasting it with the artificial and machine-generated process employed in Mattapoissett. The naturalization and non-transferability of Connie’s conception of motherhood here is important given that her child Angelina was taken from her custody and placed with a well-to-do white suburban family.

Connie’s understanding of Angelina’s removal from her custody and subsequent replacement is heartrendingly complex. On one hand, she has internalized her social worker’s accusation of “unfitness” and blames herself viciously, because, in the throes of the severe depression that she experienced in the wake of her lover Claud’s untimely

death in prison, she self-medicated with drugs and alcohol, and ended up lashing out at her daughter during a withdrawal-induced hangover. However, on the other hand, she regards Angelina's adoption as a kind of theft. For example, in the passage above, Connie suggests that the rich, white couple that got the literal product of her labor, Angelina, actually bought her. And that the main reason they had a chance to do so is because the state exercises unfair control over the bodies and lives of working-class women of color like Connie. For example, according to Connie, "Most people hit kids. But if you were on welfare and on probation and the whole social-pigeonholing establishment 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 kid once" (Piercy 23). In this passage, Connie suggests that people who are dependent on the state for financial assistance are treated with inherent suspicion by a "social-pigeonholing establishment" who assumes the worst of them because they are poor, and so makes unfair value judgements against them (e.g., in Connie's formulation, when middle-class white people hit their kids, it's socially acceptable discipline, but when poor people of color do as much, it's abuse). And because of these preconceived notions about the moral integrity of welfare recipients, the state exerts patriarchal control over women receiving financial assistance by making home inspections a requirement for continued aid, leaving poverty-stricken women with little choice but to submit to these perceived invasions of privacy or risk losing what little benefits they receive.

Connie further highlights the lack of concern that the state expresses for her informed consent during the adoption process by noting that she would never have agreed to Angelina being put up for adoption, but "didn't understand what was happening! [She]

thought they were just going to take care of her!” (Piercy 22). In this way, Connie demonstrates the state’s lack of respect for individual autonomy as they deliberately mislead and withhold information from her in order to get her to sign off on Angelina’s adoption. Connie then describes the adoption in terms of an auction, recalling that the social workers “kept saying what a pretty child Angelina was... ‘It won’t be hard to place her, even at four,’ she heard the social worker tell her probation officer. ‘She doesn’t look—I mean she could be anything’” (Piercy 61). In this line, Connie highlights the ways in which the social workers appraise her daughter before adoption, and lingers on the ways in which they treat racial indeterminacy and physical beauty as features which help sell children of color to would-be foster parents. Connie then remains deeply unsettled by the thought of Angelina growing up to be that suburban family’s “beautiful exotic daughter,” (Piercy 63) with little to no memory of Connie herself as mother.

It is for this reason that there are undertones of anxiety in Connie’s rejection of the expansiveness of Mattapoietian motherhood, because Mattapoietian motherhood suggests that, although she is a genetic contributor to and carrier of Angelina, she may not be her (only) mother. This implication is devastating and offensive to Connie, who did not consent to co-mother, because it can further be used to further delegitimize her identity as a mother and her experience of mothering. In this way, Connie’s repulsion to Mattapoietian “brooders” and co-mothering, although certainly rooted in her understanding of what’s “normal” for one’s sex and gender, may be at least partially informed by her deep identification with motherhood (which contemporary society legitimizes via the birthing process, but not her behavior (which social services characterizes as “irresponsible and unfit,” and which results in her “parental rights



[being] terminated” [Piercy 22])). In this way, Connie fears that, if in the future biology is no longer a valid marker of motherhood, then she might have to accept that she is not Angelina’s only mother, because she will not be able to raise her child to adulthood. Therefore, in order to continue thinking of herself as Angelina’s true mother, Connie feels the need to reject the Mattapoissettian approach to motherhood for much of the text.

In addition to expanding access to mothering, another major source of resistance for Connie includes Mattapoissett’s efforts to “[break] the bond between genes and culture” by selectively breeding “a high proportion of darker-skinned people and [mixing] the genes well through the population,” (Piercy 108) in an effort to prevent racial prejudice. In other words, according to Bee, Mattapoissettians voted to maintain separate cultural identities, but chose to sever the association between particular cultural identities and particular races through a process Edward L. Chan refers to as “de-signification” in his article “Utopia and the Problem of Race: Accounting for the Remainder in the Imagination of the 1970s Utopian Subject.” In his article, Chan suggests that “in order to imagine a utopia that can accommodate race, [Dorothy Bryant, Samuel Delaney, and Marge Piercy all disrupt] the signification of race” in their novels. According to Chan, Piercy, Bryant, and Delany all attack the problem of race at the level of the visible because, “[i]n a world dramatically conditioned by both the visible and by a perduring discursive formation of old (and doubtless mistaken) racial enunciative statements, such gross features [like hair, bone, and skin] always make a painfully significant difference” (Baker qtd. in Chan 468) in that they allow individuals to be marked and categorized. And, according to Chan, this marking and categorization makes them “susceptible to systems of hierarchy,” or exclusion from and inclusion in certain

groups (469). Therefore, in Piercy, Delaney, and Bryant's minds, "it makes a kind of obvious sense that once the historical linkage between racial signifier and racial signified is disrupted, we are then able to escape from historical systems of racial oppression" (Chan 469). Piercy, for her part, makes it so that in Mattapoissett race no longer bears any connection to cultural identity by describing a process where a higher proportion of darker-skinned people were bred into the population of each individual tribe. The result is that, although there is a community that identifies with the culture of Harlem, that community is not comprised solely of dark-skinned individuals.

However, while this method reportedly proved successful in ending racial discrimination throughout Mattapoissett, Connie is nevertheless disturbed by it. From Connie's perspective, this severing of race and culture seems "artificial" and "invented," and she struggles with the concept of "black Irishmen and black Jews and black Italians and black Chinese" (Piercy 109). And instead of viewing this separation of culture from phenotype as a huge step forward in engendering a society without uneven power structures based biological difference, Connie sees this process of de-signification as a step back in terms of racial pride. For example, in response to this discussion between race and culture, Connie notes that in her time "black people just discovered a pride in being black. [Her] people, Chicanos, were beginning to feel that too. Now it seems like it got lost again" (Piercy 108). However, it makes sense for Connie, a woman who grew up during a time where people were categorized into groups based on physical and sexual characteristics, to feel deeply connected to her racial and cultural identity, and to feel suspicious of any practice which opens that culture up so that people of all backgrounds can participate in it. That is to say, for someone like Connie, who did not get a choice and

who has suffered in part because of her cultural identity, the Mattapoissettians' ability to freely move between only the most idealized versions of modern day cultures must chafe. In fact, this kind of easy movement between cultures probably feels like a form of cultural appropriation to her. Furthermore, Connie's confusion over how Mattapoissett's calculated mixing could have so easily resulted in a color-blind utopia is not unfounded, as Luciente and company never actually explain how the cultural attitudes towards certain racial markers actually changed, or how it came to be that each culture had the same social distinction as the next.

That said, although Connie's reservations about the Mattapoissettian approach to racial difference are understandable given her personal experiences and limited access to Mattapoissett's history, it's worth noting that, as with gender and motherhood, Connie also roots her racial identity in the body. As Jennifer Burwell suggests in chapter four of her book *Notes on Nowhere: Feminism, Utopian Logic, and Social Transformation*, this is troubling because, although these sites of difference can serve as positive sources of identity for people like Connie, it is nevertheless through physical difference that uneven power structures tend to be created. Troubling or not, Connie's especially ardent responses to these separations of gender from sex and culture from race seem to suggest that one of the biggest sources of resistance to a feminist utopia for the contemporary subject is the fear and anxiety they feel when their identities are threatened by attempts to sever the connection between biology and identity.

### **Overcoming Resistance in *Woman on the Edge of Time***

Connie's resistance to Mattapoissett is carefully broken down over the course of the text as she engages in consciousness raising sessions with the residents of the future,

experiences rapid shifts in awareness between the present, the future, and its hyper-patriarchal, hyper-capitalist alternative which help punctuate their lessons, and finally builds a tentative blueprint and enough motivation to incite a revolution. Of all of the methods listed above, the residents' attempts at conversational consciousness raising is the most familiar (and most easily reproduced). That is to say, the residents chip away at Connie's resistance by engaging her simple conversation about the changes between their present and hers. However, instead of evangelizing like well-intentioned but overeager advocates are sometimes wont to do, each member of the Mattapoissett community that Connie engages with insists on a dialogue, and listens patiently and attentively to Connie's reservations about the future, before trying to explain the rationale for why certain changes were implemented, instead of simply insisting that their way of life is the "right" or only way. Take, for example, the scene in which Connie encounters the brooder for the first time. At first glance, Connie is nauseated by the notion of artificial gestation and birth, and enraged by the idea that, once the babies are born, they will be cared for by multiple, genetically-unrelated mothers, some of whom will be men. However, although Connie is very vocally repulsed by and resistant to what she sees as the unnatural displacement of a once sacred biological process, Luciente patiently and respectfully offers an explanation for the move away from biological birth. According to Luciente, this shift was

part of women's long revolution. When we were breaking from all the old hierarchies. Finally there was that one thing we had to give up too, the only power we ever had, in return for no more power for anyone. The original production: the power to give birth. Cause as long as we were biologically enchained, we'd never be equal. And males never would be humanized to be loving and tender. So we all became mothers. Every child has three. To break the nuclear bonding. (Piercy 110)

In this exchange, Luciente takes care to acknowledge that the source of Connie's resistance stems in part from her fear of losing "the only power [women] ever had" and the feelings of encroachment that result from seeing what she sees as men's appropriation of women's power and position even as she attempts to explain the reasoning and necessity behind Mattapoissett's alterations to birthing process and family unit in order to convince Connie of their necessity. This respect for other people's perspectives is crucial because, although the citizens of Mattapoissett are engaged in an effort to raise contemporary figures like Connie to consciousness in the hopes of inciting a revolution and ensuring that their reality (which is not fixed but exists in "flux") comes to fruition, forceful or stringent attempts to argue her into adopting a new position would only serve to alienate her further. For this reason, as well as a deep-seated respect for individual choice, they are invested in helping visitors like Connie pinpoint the sources of oppression in their own lives by drawing comparisons between Connie's past and their present, and by explaining snippets of Mattapoissett's history so visitors get a sense of what needs to be changed in order for the America of Connie's time to one day become the collection of communities that currently characterize Luciente's present. In this passage alone, Luciente espouses several radical-libertarian notions about birth and motherhood, including the belief that the "the original class distinction is rooted in men's and women's differing reproductive roles" (Tong 75) and the belief that men as well as women needed to embrace their nurturing sides and become more involved in child-rearing. And although this initial explanation had little to no effect on easing Connie's repulsion, her continued exposure to Mattapoissett, contrasted with her rapid shifts

between the future and the present, make her realize the value in the communal mothering that Mattapoissett proposes.

Although Connie is most taken aback and repulsed by the Mattapoissettian reconceptualization of motherhood in her initial encounters with the future, it is ultimately the thought of her daughter Angelina being raised in such an environment that first weakens her resistance to Mattapoissett's future. That is to say, Connie's first revolutionary impulse comes during her exploration of the children's house, after which she realizes that she would rather see Angelina raised by the residents of Mattapoissett, who she still finds strange and repulsive, than reared in the present.

Suddenly she assented with all her soul to Angelina in Mattapoissett... Yes, you can have my child, you can keep my child. Even with your obscenities... She will be strong there, well fed, well housed, well taught, she will grow up much better and smarter than I... 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. She will have pride. She will love her brown skin and be loved for her strength and her good work. She will walk in strength like a man and never sell her body and she will nurse her babies like a woman and live in love like a garden (150).

This passage is significant because it signifies a shift in Connie's priorities, as she realizes that, despite the "strangeness" of the future, it can provide Angelina with opportunities that she, as the daughter of a poor, uneducated, and unemployed woman of color, could never have in the present. In this passage, Connie is drawing specifically from her own experiences as poor, Chicana woman living in the 1970s to identify the sources of oppression in her life, and acknowledges that Mattapoissett, despite its strangeness, has eliminated the conditions of her suffering almost completely. This juxtaposition of her experiences in the present with life in the future is significant because it is one of the primary awareness raising strategies in the text. It helps to raise Connie to

consciousness because it forces her to think about her state of affairs in the present, and contemplate how much better her and her daughter's life would be if they lived in a future transformed by feminist, socialist, and environmentalist thought. For example, in the text, Connie acknowledges that, in the future Angelina would have "pride. She [would] love her brown skin and be loved for her strength and her good work" (Piercy 150). This focus on the pride to be found in the future is significant because her life in the present is categorized by shame. That is to say, every time Connie is jettisoned back to her own time, she feels ashamed of herself. This is largely because her situation in the present is a constant reminder of her "failings." However, much of the misfortune that Connie suffered is as a result of her racism, sexism, and socioeconomic status. Connie already understood that racism and sexism affected her life in negative ways, but she never had an alternative model until she arrived in Mattapoisett. And even still, the alienness of the future prevented her from really seeing it for what it was, until the rapid fire transitions between past and present forced her to acknowledge the ways in which Mattapoisett's social forms satisfy her needs.

In addition to helping her realize what the sources of oppression were in her own life, the travelling through time and conversations with the residents of Mattapoisett also helped Connie gauge what social changes needed to be wrought by the revolution. It also gave her hope that such a revolution could occur – and succeed. That is to say, before Connie met Luciente and company, she undertook a brief stint as an activist, and felt politically disillusioned and frankly disheartened by the experience. According to Connie, when she was living in Chicago, she got involved, and attended meetings, but later found that "it was just the same political machine... [and] ended up right back where [she] was"

(Piercy 165). However, Luciente reassures that “Poor people *did* together,” and it implies that it was successful (Piercy 165). From that point on, Connie becomes increasingly interested in the prospect of revolutionary insurgence. This is, of course, in large part due to the total lack of bodily autonomy that Connie and the other patients experience at the hospital, but it is also due to the fact that Connie becomes increasingly convinced of the vision of the future that Mattapoissett proffers (which is especially true as she witnesses its hyper-patriarchal, hyper-capitalist alternative). As her confidence in Mattapoissett grows, she continues seeking Luciente out, and Luciente broaches the topic of revolutionary action again. She notes that, although time may appear fixed and immutable, the future that contains Mattapoissett is uncertain. According to Luciente, Mattapoissett was only possible because the people of Connie’s time “fought hard for change,” although they often had “myths that a revolution was inevitable” (Piercy 191). Luciente takes care to note that nothing is inevitable, that “[a]ll things interlock,” and that Mattapoissett is “only one possible future,” (Piercy 191) in order to emphasize the importance of people like Connie taking action in the present.

Bee later backs this point up by informing Connie that the people of her time hold all of the power in determining which future comes to exist. He does this in part to convince Connie of her individual importance as an ambassador to the future, and of her individual responsibility as someone with a vision to act to mitigate the suffering she perceives in the present by raising awareness about and attacking the harmful social structures that perpetuate that inequity. In this passage, Bee says to Connie: “You may individually fail to understand us or fail to struggle in your own life and time. You of your time may fail to struggle together... We must fight to exist, to remain in existence,



to be the future that happens. That's why we reached you" (Piercy 213). And when Connie tries to protest that she of all people is powerless, Sojourner contends that "The powerful don't make revolutions" (Piercy 213). At first Connie confuses this revolutionary impulse with pure violence, but Otter is quick to correct her, noting that it's the "people who worked out the labor-and-land intensive farming we do. It's all the people who changed how people bought food, raised children, went to school!" (Piercy 214). In this way, Otter emphasizes both the effort of the individual and strength of, and necessity for, a collective, a collective in Connie's time. As it were, Connie is in an isolated position, and she has limited access to other people, so she can't reach out to others or start conversations. What she can do is push back against the tyranny of the doctors who have, against her and her fellow patients' will, impinging on their patients' bodily autonomy.

Although it's unclear in the book itself whether or not Connie's experiences of the future are reliable, the text nevertheless advocates for certain kinds of consciousness raising, including conversational consciousness raising and the juxtaposition of representations of trauma, violence, and mourning generated by systems of racial, gender, and class domination against social forms which would allow us to break the often cyclical nature of that trauma. Conversational consciousness raising can occur between individuals and in groups, as well as in or with books, but the juxtaposition of trauma and violence against new social forms is something that seems to occur uniquely in film and literature. In this way, in addition to making a statement about the sources of resistance that prevent contemporary figures from fully participating in communal utopian visions and suggesting what forms of consciousness raising are best suited to reach a reluctant

audience, Piercy also seems to be making a case for the unique value of art in this process. In many ways, her own novel, as a work of speculative fiction, is particularly well-suited to the task, as speculative fiction, which oftentimes involves time travel or cross-dimensional communication, is perfect for showcasing a character in a bleak situation transported to a world where economic or social advances have made their oppression at thing of the past.

### **Resistance to Utopia in Russ's *The Female Man***

Unlike Connie who is mentally transported to Mattapoisett with increasing regularity during the first half of the book, Jeannine and Joanna's exposure to Whileaway is largely limited to what they learn through Janet. But unlike Luciente, Janet does not have a stated mission for seeking out Jeannine and Joanna, and appears to be more interested in performing an anthropological study of their two cultures than converting them to a cause. Jeannine and Joanna express more initial ambivalence towards Whileaway than Connie does towards Mattapoisett, in that they are immediately both attracted to and repulsed by Whileawayan culture. However, unlike with Connie, their ambivalence does not appear to lessen over time. This is probably due to the fact that, unlike Luciente, Janet has not studied Jeannine and Joanna's cultural customs and historical context, and is not prepared or trying to convince them to enact a version of her society on their earths, and so is not trying to educate them or mitigate their repulsion. Jael, however, is trying to recruit Jeannine, Joanna, and Janet to her cause, and is making an active effort to connect with the three emotionally. Her efforts are much more successful with Jeannine and Joanna than with Janet, because her society, which is locked in a literal battle of the sexes, resembles theirs more closely than Janet's single gender

utopia. In this way, Jael is able to tap into a shared emotional experience of being othered and exploited to generate a mobilizing anger in Jeannine and Joanna (this anger is not present in Janet because Janet has never been on the receiving end of gender inequality, and cannot truly understand the profound rage that this kind of othering can produce), which turns them towards her cause.

Of the two contemporary figures in the text, Joanna is more accepting of Janet and intrigued by Whileaway. Her open-mindedness is probably due to the fact that, of the two contemporary characters in the text, Joanna occupies the world that most clearly resembles our own. That is to say, unlike Jeannine who grew up in an alternate history during which the Great Depression never ended, Joanna lives in a 1970s New York analogous to our own. In this way, Joanna, unlike Jeannine, has been exposed to a burgeoning second-wave feminist movement, which allows her to better understand and appreciate Whileawayan culture and its ambassador, Janet. In fact, Joanna describes Janet as having a profoundly positive impact on her life on several occasions throughout the text. For example, in part three, section I, Joanna reflects that, before Janet arrived on her planet, she was

... moody, ill-at-ease, unhappy, and hard to be with. I didn't relish my breakfast. I spent the whole day combing my hair and putting on make-up. Other girls practiced with the shot-put and compared archery scores, but I—indifferent to javelin and crossbow, positively repelled by horticulture and ice hockey—all I did was... live for The Man (Russ 29).

In this passage, Joanna describes a deep depression, characterized by feelings of discontentment and dejection, and a loss of interest in the outside world, which prevents her from taking joy in the everyday circumstances of her life and forming meaningful connections with other women. For all intents and purposes, Joanna's sense of alienation

from herself and from the world around her seems to stem from the fact that she was not living for herself, but for “The Man.” For example, according to Joanna, before she met Janet, she did not have a sense of who she was or what she liked (as she had few intellectual pursuits or hobbies outside of “combing her hair and putting on make-up” (and even this was not done for herself, but was a ritualistic part of “[dressing] for The Man”)), and so could not build any meaningful connections with other women. This same sense of listlessness as resulting from women’s relationship to men is echoed in the Radicalesbians’ manifesto, “The Woman-Identified Woman.” According to the Radicalesbians, women like Joanna have “internalized the male culture’s definition of [them],” and this definition “consigns [them] to sexual and family functions, and excludes [them] from defining and shaping the terms of [their own] lives” (3).

Furthermore, although fulfilling the socially prescribed role for women affords women like Joanna with a kind of social legitimacy, the internalization of such a role can produce a profound confusion about personal identity and a sense of self-hatred in the women who enact this male-given identity (“Woman-Identified Woman” 3). According to the Radicalesbians, this self-hatred and confusion may be experienced as “discomfort with [their] roles, as feeling empty, as numbness, as restlessness, as a paralyzing anxiety at the center,” or as a “shrill defensiveness of the glory and destiny of [their] roles,” but it is always present and keeps them alienated from themselves and from other women (3).

Joanna, for her part, certainly appears to be experiencing this empty numbness as well as some form of frustration and discontentment, which “makes [her] hard to be with,” and prevents her from forming meaningful relationships of any kind.

However, after coming into contact with Janet, Joanna recalls a “new interest [entering] her life” (Russ 29). According to Joanna, “[a]fter [she] called up Janet... [she] began to gain weight, [her] appetite improved, friends commented on [her] renewed zest for life, and a nagging scoliosis of the ankle that had tortured [her] for years simply vanished overnight” (Russ 29). She then describes the joy and sense of purpose that forging a connection with another woman brings her. Joanna, in some ways, takes an immediate liking to Janet, who, from her very first dealings with the men of Jeannine and Joanna’s time, defies traditional femininity (which is defined by its gentleness, sensitivity, sweetness, compassion, tolerance, nurturance, and deference to others). Instead, Janet, like Luciente and the residents of Mattapoisett, exhibits a variety of stereotypically masculine and feminine traits. But unlike with Connie, this amalgamated identity is incredibly attractive to Joanna, who identifies two warring natures within herself. The first is other-focused and very traditionally feminine. According to Joanna, when in this state, she “[likes] doing housework, [she cares] a lot about how [she looks], [and she warms] up to men and [flirts] beautifully” (Russ 110). The second state, however, is more self-centered, direct, and dynamic. When in this state, Joanna “[gets] into quarrels, [shouts], [frets] about people [she doesn’t] even know... [works] like a pig, [strews her] whole apartment with notes, articles, manuscripts, books, [gets] frowsty, [doesn’t] care, becomes stridently contentious, [and] sometimes [laughs] and [weeps] within five minutes together out of pure frustration” (Russ 110). In this way, in this second state, Joanna describes herself as wildly emotional and “very badly dressed,” (Russ 110) but notes that she relishes her food and takes pleasure in her body and her life in a way that she simply can’t when she’s enacting traditional femininity. And, according

to Joanna, until she met Janet, she had been struggling to reconcile these two warring natures with herself.

First, she tried to embrace her more feminine side by enacting a more traditional form of femininity, but this rejection of self deadened her, as she realized she was living her life in order to please strange men and not herself. Next, she tried to erase her femininity by pretending to be “One Of The Boys” (Russ 133), but realized that this approach could only ever be partially successful as it took time and continuous effort to convince a relatively small group of people that, despite her appearance, she is a “man with a woman’s face” or a “woman with a man’s mind” (Russ 134). Because, for all her efforts to subdue herself, Joanna finds that strangers still treat her in expected ways. She then realizes that all this time she has been waiting for masculine validation from someone outside herself, noting that “[f]or years [she has] been saying *Let me in, Love me, Approve me, Define me, Regulate me, Validate me, Support me*” (Russ 140). But then she realizes that she herself can serve as the self-assured and aggressive validating force. In the tradition of liberal feminism, Joanna then emphasizes her rationality and demands similar treatment to men based on her similarity to them, noting that “If we are all Mankind, it follows... that I too am a Man... you will think of me as a Man and treat me as a Man until it enters your... head that *I am a man*... Listen to the female man. If you don’t, by God and all the Saints, *I’ll break your neck*” (Russ 140).

Joanna’s realization that she can serve as her own validating force provided she exhibits only the best masculine traits causes her to admire Janet, who, like Luciente and the citizens of Whileaway, can exhibit a unique blend of masculine and feminine traits within herself without having to alter her conception of self. However, although Joanna

expresses fascination with and admiration for Janet and Whileawayan culture more broadly throughout the text, her and Janet's interactions are also characterized by a deep-seated frustration on her part, because Joanna is deeply engaged in the cultural exchange that Janet professes to care about, but Janet does not seem anywhere near as invested in coming to understand Jeannine and Joanna's societies fully. This lack of gravitas grates on Joanna, who at one point accuses Janet of being a "rotten fake" (Russ 32) after she catches her crank calling the hotel staff during her initial stay there. Joanna, in many ways, appears to be interested in finding someone to educate her and introduce her to a cause. Janet, however, has little interest in guiding Jeannine and Joanna to enlightenment. In fact, Janet does not seem to have a clearly identifiable purpose for inter-dimensional travel like Jael does, and she did not volunteer for or design the program that she travels for. Instead, the experimenters at the pole station selected Janet for travel because they could spare her, and sent her through space and time with little to no direction, other than to experience other universes of probability. In this way, Janet has no stated objective to meet, and no precedent or training for how best to approach Jeannine and Janet, and so behaves like a brazen but culturally illiterate tourist for most of her time in Jeannine and Joanna's present. This lack of cultural sensitivity and importance causes Joanna and Janet to clash, as Joanna desperately tries to understand Janet's culture and purpose for contacting her world, and Janet asks Joanna to help her make sense of certain cultural artefacts and customs while showing no indication that she's taking Joanna's explanations seriously. For example,

She scrubbed my back and asked me to scrub hers; she took the lipstick I gave her and made pictures on the yellow damask walls. ("You mean it's not *washable*?") I got her girlie magazines and she said she couldn't make

head or tail of them; I said, “Janet, stop joking” and she was surprised; she hadn’t meant to. She wanted a dictionary of slang. One day I caught her playing games with room service; she was calling up the different numbers on the white hotel phone and giving them contradictory instructions. This woman was dialing the numbers with her feet. I slammed the phone across one of the double beds.

“Joanna,” she said, “I do not understand you. Why not play? Nobody is going to be hurt and nobody is going to blame you why not take advantage?”

“You fake,” I said, “You fake, you rotten fake!” (Russ 32)

In this passage, readers see Joanna seriously engaged in an effort to expose Janet, an ambassador from a female-dominated future, to her culture, as she runs herself ragged getting her magazines and dictionaries and period-appropriate clothes. However, readers also see Janet, who has little knowledge of Joanna’s time period, unable to comprehend the artefacts she brings forward. In this moment, Joanna sees Janet’s lack of comprehension as ridicule, as opposed to culture shock and a lack of historical context, and gets frustrated with and accusatory towards Janet. Janet, in all fairness, is not taking her position as emissary seriously, but her confusion about the gender binarism and sexuality of Joanna’s time is not contrived. Joanna nevertheless becomes enraged by Janet’s actions, because she, like Janet herself, cannot understand the other’s cultural perspective, and is severely disappointed that the time traveler from the future is not advancing her society through her contact with it, but is instead as perplexed by it as Joanna is herself.

Although Joanna *is* attracted to Whileaway, she is also perturbed by its breach of taboos. That is to say, Joanna, like Jeannine, grew up in a heteronormative society, and while she is more likely to keep an open mind in her dealings with Whileaway than Jeannine, Joanna still expresses some discomfiture in regards to Whileawayan



expressions of gender and sexuality. For example, when Jeannine finds Janet's vibrator laying out on her bed and asks Joanna what it is, Joanna feels the need to lie to her about it.

“But what *is* it?” said Jeannine.

“A Whileawayan communications device,” I said. “Put it back, Jeannie”

...

“Is it dangerous?” said Jeannine. I nodded—emphatically.

...

“What it does to your body,” said I, choosing my words with extreme care, “is nothing compared to what it does to your mind, Jeannine. It will ruin your mind. It will explode your brains and drive you crazy. You will never be the same again. You will be lost to respectability and decency and decorum and dependency and all sorts of other nice, normal things beginning with a D. It will kill you, Jeannine. You will be dead, dead, dead.” (Russ 148).

In this passage, Jeannine, a fully grown if somewhat sheltered woman, approaches Joanna and asks her to explain what Janet's device is, only to have Joanna treat her like a child by deliberately misinforming her, “for her own good.” Instead of educating Jeannine, Joanna “shields” her from the truth, and instead paints a perfectly harmless personal massager as a dangerous weapon, capable of corrupting the user/victim's mind. This is because, on some level, Joanna really does believe that Whileawayan sexuality is a dangerous, corrupting influence. For example, Joanna first describes the sex toy as a “Whileawayan communications device,” which suggests that she believes that sexual knowledge is capable of corrupting the character and opening the mind to dangerous ideas (e.g., she even compares the device to the forbidden fruit from the Garden of Eden). And when the threat of a trans-dimensional walkie-talkie doesn't put the fear of God into Jeannine, she switches tactics, and tells her it's explosive. But again, what it “blows up” (or expands out, as it were) isn't the body, but the mind. According to Joanna in this

passage, autonomous and/or same-sex sexual desire is mind-expanding but poisonous, and once experienced, the individual is “lost to respectability and decency and decorum and dependency and all sorts of other nice, normal things beginning with a D” (Russ 148), because she can no longer be satisfied in performing the sex role laid out for her by society.

Joanna’s fear and revulsion towards Whileaway is about more than principles or “protecting” the innocent. It is deeply personal, as well, and speaks to her individual struggle to come to terms with her own desires in the face of societal taboos. This struggle is perhaps most poignant in the scene in which Laur and Janet make love. Throughout the whole episode, Joanna is steadfastly trying to convince Janet that she should walk away from the situation, and that transgenerational relationships are always, incontrovertibly wrong. She cites popular reasoning in support of her standpoint by claiming that “*everyone knows* that if you start them young they’ll be perverted forever and *everyone knows* that nothing in the world is worse than making love to someone a generation younger than yourself” (Russ 70). However, even as Joanna rails against Janet, she reflects on her own desire, and feels complicit; for example, “Poor Laur, *defeated by both of us*, her back bent, glazed and stupefied under the weight of a double taboo” (Russ 70, emphasis added). But Joanna keeps inserting herself into the scene by projecting herself onto Janet, until “the weight of [this] double taboo” finally crushes Joanna’s resolve, and she flees the room, shrieking. Once alone, she reflects:

There is no excuse for putting my face between someone else’s columnar thighs—picture me as washing my cheeks and temples outside to get rid of that cool smoothness (cool because of the fat, you see, that insulates the limbs; you can almost feel the long bones, the *architectura*, the heavenly

technical cunning. They'll be doing it with the dog next.) I sat on the hall window frame and screamed (Russ 74).

In this passage, we see Joanna struggling with her heretofore latent same-sex desire, which she, having grown up under compulsory heterosexuality, sees as inexcusable. We also see her struggling against the fact that the object of her and Janet's desire is decades younger than them. Nevertheless, Joanna finally owns her desire in this passage by fully distinguishing it as hers, and not Janet's. Unfortunately, the acknowledgement of that desire comes with a deep-seated ambivalence as Joanna tries to come to terms with it in the face of the two severe sexual taboos it violates. That is to say, according to Gayle Rubin in *Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality*, same-sex sexual desire occupies an "area of contest" within the sexual hierarchy, while transgenerational relationships like Laur and Janet's are represented as "abnormal," "unnatural," "sick," and "sinful" (Rubin 154). In this way, the taboos that Joanna has come up against are so strong, that she dismisses her desire as "inexcusable," before implying that Laur and Janet's relationship might be a slippery slope to "worse" behaviors. Joanna is then reduced to tears as her own ambivalence overwhelms her.

Jeannine, like Joanna, struggles to reconcile very traditional scripts about femininity with her own wants and needs, only her hang-ups are even more pronounced than Joanna's because Jeannine comes from an alternate history where the Great Depression never ended and gender roles are even more entrenched. For this reason, Jeannine was not exposed to an early feminist movement, or its attempt to define the "problem that has no name," and so has no frame of reference that can ease her culture shock upon encountering Janet. Instead, Jeannine grew up in the cult of domesticity. As

such, Jeannine is very invested in her performance of femininity. In part, this investment is because there aren't as many opportunities to play with gender as there are in Joanna's time, and so her performance of femininity becomes central to her identity. Furthermore, Jeannine, more than any other character in the book, is judged most harshly for her adherence to that performance. In this way, Jeannine's profound attachment to femininity, and her comparatively conservative cultural milieu, are why she demonstrates such a profound repulsion to Whileaway and the figure of Janet.

As mentioned, Jeannine, who grew up in a world where gender norms were even more rigidly codified than Joanna, has no precedent for understanding a person like Janet, who combines both feminine and masculine traits within herself. In this way, Jeannine is intensely shocked by Janet's behavior upon encountering her, and this shock causes her to want to withdraw from Janet and Whileaway, and creates a kind of hostility in her towards Janet. What's more, Jeannine, perhaps more than any other character in this text excepting Jael, is the most adverse to the masculine (because Jeannine's life, more than any other character in this text aside from Jael, has been most restricted by masculine desire). She doesn't realize her adversity because she has no concept of a life without men/a female-identified life, but her attachment to femininity is as much about an aversion to all things masculine as it is a devotion to a high-stakes performance (e.g., on some level, Jeannine loathes her lover, Cal, who she goes out of her way to avoid, and her brother, Bud, who pushes her to conform without giving a thought for her happiness). At one point, Jeannine claims that she "[likes] being a girl," and that she "wouldn't be a man for anything. Not for *anything*" (Russ 86), and readers are meant to assume that she's kidding herself, because who wouldn't want that freedom? But this exchange takes

place right before Jeannine and Joanna meet up with Janet and “visit” Whileaway, where the gender binary has ceased to exist, and all people have become, in effect, androgynous.

In Whileaway, Jeannine is repulsed by the expressions of same-sex sexual and romantic desire, and the personalities and bodies of the women themselves. In part, this discomfiture is stemming from her cultural conditioning (i.e., Jeannine, like Joanna, is only uncomfortable with homosexuality because she was raised under compulsory heterosexuality). While, on the other hand, some of the repulsion is due to the perceived androgyny of Whileaway, in both the bodies and spirits of its residents. For example, when Jeannine and Joanna first meet Whileawayan women, Jeannine takes exception to Vittoria, because she’s “too stocky for Jeannine’s taste” (Russ 90). Jeannine’s also repulsed by the “rationality” of Whileawayan women because that rationality is so closely associated with the masculine in Jeannine’s time that she cannot separate the trait from the gender, and so sees Whileawayan critical thinking and debate as evidence that women have become more like men in this future. In this way, Janet and the women of Whileaway are so removed from Jeannine that they are hardly recognizable as women to her. And because they are so removed from one another, and so ill equipped to appeal to each other for understanding, Jeannine and Janet are never able to make any meaningful connections or form any significant bonds which could perhaps have softened Jeannine towards Whileaway. Jeannine and Janet’s inability to understand each other is a shame because Jeannine, like Joanna, was attracted to Whileaway after a fashion, and dreamed about it incessantly. However, her resistance would have been even harder to surmount, and would have required much more patient guidance on Janet’s part for her to overcome.

### **Revolutionary Action in Russ's *The Female Man***

By the end of the book, neither Jeannine nor Joanna are moved to take revolutionary action by way of their exposure to Whileaway. Although Joanna does cite Janet's influence as transformative in her understanding of herself and in her dealings with others, it isn't until she and Jeannine come into contact with Jael that the prospect of revolution is even broached. In this way, Jael is able to connect with Jeannine and Joanna in a way that Janet, a representative of the novel's utopia, never could. Jael is more successful in connecting with Jeannine and Joanna than Janet for two reasons: (1) she hails from a once patriarchal society *in the process of being transformed* and so can better understand and relate to Jeannine and Joanna's experience of oppression and (2) she is actively trying to recruit Jeannine and Joanna to join her cause and is both willing and able to provide them with a blueprint for achieving social change. In this way, Jael succeeds where Janet fails because she, like Luciente, is able to articulate how her vision of the future could address problems in her audience's lives. Jael and Luciente's success, compared with Janet's failure, highlights how critical it is for radical communities to reach out to mainstream audiences that may prove reluctant to their visions initially, because both novels suggest that it through community-building and collective effort that real social change occurs and radical futures are secured. In this way, communities like Mattapoisett and Womanland are actively trying to eradicate harmful social structures on a widespread or universal basis, while communities like Whileaway, which seem outwardly radical, remain insular, and do little to effect widespread social change.

Jael, like Janet, is from the future, except her future is locked in a literal battle of the sexes. As a result of this decades-long battle, half the earth's population is dead and

the environment is so severely polluted that people are forced to live underground to avoid the lasting fallout from the "bacteriological weaponry" used in earlier skirmishes (Russ 164). What's more, the remaining half of the population has become homogenized into two separate, biologically determined camps which compete for resources, territory, and the power to enslave the other half. And still Jael, who hails from and had a hand in creating this war-torn, inhospitable environment, is able to convince Jeannine and Joanna of the validity of her society's vision in a way that Janet is just not able to. Because, despite the harshness of her life and environment, Jael has the advantage in that her world is more familiar to Jeannine and Joanna than Janet's is, in that her world is still divided along gender lines and beset by binary thinking. For example, when Jael describes her society to her visitors, she emphasizes a fundamental division between the sexes, noting that "When I say Us and Them, of course I mean the Haves and the Have-Nots, the two sides, there are always two sides, aren't there? I mean the men and the women" (Russ 165). Furthermore, Jael can recall the time before the war when she and her mother lived a "conventional life" in a male-dominated community (Russ 193). In this way, Jael is better able to understand Jeannine and Joanna's experience of gender-based oppression in the present, and uses that shared emotional experience to create a sense of solidarity between the three of them.

Anger is by far the most important emotion that Jael taps into and shares with Jeannine and Joanna. According to Pat Wheeler in her book chapter "'That is Not Me. I Am Not That': Anger and the Will to Action in Joanna Russ's Fiction," "[a]nger is a unifying force in Russ's fiction," (100) and readers can certainly see this emotion serving as a point of connection for Joanna, Jeannine, and Jael. In fact, Jeannine, Joanna, and

Jael's anger over their shared experiences of alienation and othering is perhaps their *only* point of connection, but Jael powerfully uses it to move Jeannine from "unconscious passivity into clarity and the will to act" (Kantrowitz qtd. in Wheeler 100). For example, after meeting with Jael, Joanna notices a marked change in Jeannine: "Later I caught Jeannine by the door as we were all leaving; 'What did she talk to you about?' I said. Something has gotten into Jeannine's clear, suffering gaze; something had muddied her timidity. What can render Miss Dadier self-possessed? What can make her so quietly stubborn? Jeannine said: 'She asked me if I has ever killed anybody'" (Russ 165). During their talk, Jael taps into Jeannine's repressed anger, and makes her question, perhaps for the first time, if someone else is to blame for her unhappiness, before asking whether that someone else should pay. Jeannine has, of course, questioned the source of her unhappiness before in an exchange with her brother, her brother's wife, and her date. For example,

"What do you want out of life, Eileen? Tell me!"

Oh, honey," said Eileen, "What should I want? I want just what I've got." X came out of the men's bathroom. Poor fellow. Poor lay figure

"Jeannine wants to know what life is all about," said Bud. "What do you think, Frank? Do you have any words of wisdom for us?"

... X laughed nervously. "Well now, I don't know," he said.

*That's my trouble, too. My knowledge was taken away from me.*

"Do you think," she said very low, to X, "that you could know what you wanted, only after a while—I mean, they don't mean to do it, but life—people—people could confuse things?" (Russ 124)

In this passage, Jeannine recognizes that she is unhappy because she is frustrated with the state of her life. She also has a sense that the knowledge of how to be happy was "taken from [her]," and that other people, either consciously or unconsciously, have prevented her from knowing herself. Later in the book, Jeannine remembers that she was "a very



good student when she was a little girl and [she] liked school tremendously, but then when [she] got to be around twelve, everything changed” (Russ 149). She notes that she still loves reading and thinking, but that, after she reached adolescence, people started dismissing those things as “daydreaming,” and started emphasizing the importance of other things, like dating and marriage (Russ 150). In this way, Jeannine recognizes that other people have prevented her from realizing her dreams, but doesn’t actually, fully acknowledge the ways in which being a woman in a patriarchal culture is inherently limiting. At this point, Jeannine is more likely to turn her anger and depression in on herself than out on the wider culture where it belongs. This is in large part because, like Connie, she has no culturally critical women to talk to. Instead, her sister-in-law Eileen firmly maintains that she “[wants] what [she’s] got,” and refuses to even consider that there might be more to life than marriage and motherhood, which leads Jeannine to assume that the problem is with her. It isn’t until Jeannine meets Jael that she realizes that patriarchal society is inherently oppressive to women, and that as long as this system exists, she will never be happy or feel fulfilled. Jeannine then realizes that lingering unhappiness she’s felt her entire life has been owing to this system, and becomes intensely angry. This anger is ultimately what propels Jeannine towards Jael’s cause. For example, when asked if she is willing to join Jael officially, Jeannine says: ““Oh, sure... *I* don’t mind. You can bring in all the soldiers you want. You can take the whole place over; I wish you would.’ Jael goes admiringly tsk tsk and makes a rueful face that means: my friend, you are really going for it. ‘My whole world calls me Jeannie. You see?’” (Russ 211)

In this exchange, Jeannine is clearly enraged, and appears to want revenge for her perceived mistreatment. In her article “Reflections on the Desire for Revenge,” Sandra L. Bloom provides two definitions of revenge. The first, by Stuckless and Goranson, describes revenges as the “infliction of harm in righteous response to perceived harm or injustice,” (Stuckless and Goranson qtd. in Bloom 2) and the second, by Elster, as “the attempt, at some cost or risk to oneself, to impose suffering upon those who have made one suffer, because they have made one suffer” (Elster qtd. in Bloom 2). The suffering or harm that Jeannine identifies in the exchange above is a consistent misnaming (i.e., “My whole world calls me Jeannie. You see?” [Russ 211]), which at first glance hardly seems like any sort of justification for interdimensional invasion, but actually sums up the experience of being a woman in a patriarchal society pretty well. That is, in consistently shortening her name, the people in Jeannine’s life consistently co-opt her identity (by telling her who see is), infantilize her, ignore her stated wishes, and assume an unwanted and undeserved intimacy with her. “Now you must know that Jeannine is Everywoman,” (Russ 212) so when Jeannine says that her “whole world” treats her in such a way as to make it impossible for her to claim her own identity, what she is in effect saying is that it is impossible for any woman to live a self-directed life in a patriarchal society, and that is why people like Jael are needed. According to scholar Marongiu and Newman, “all acts of vengeance arise from an elementary sense of injustice, a primitive feeling that one has been arbitrarily subjected to a tyrannical power against which one is powerless to act,” (Marongiu and Newman qtd. in Bloom 14) and “when justice is not forthcoming from a higher authority, people will and do take justice into their own hands” (Bloom 14). In her article, Bloom is using Marongiu and Newman to talk about vengeance in interpersonal

relationships, but Jeannine, having been disrespected and treated unfairly her whole adult life, is taking revenge against the world on behalf of all women.

Although it is never clearly stated whether or not Joanna is on board with Jael's proposed invasion (i.e., she and Janet remain uncomfortably silent when Jael asks for their support), readers do see Jael's rage-filled rhetoric have an impact on Joanna. For example, just after the three Js meet Jael and she delivers her infamous "Us and Them" speech and asks for their support, they are all sent back to their respective worlds to think about the need for an invasion. Readers then enter the "Book of Joanna," and see her reflecting on the nature of her society in a series of vignettes showcasing masculine aggression and egocentrism and the ways in which women are marginalized by men, before doubting whether or not any progress can be made by merely talking to one another:

When I speak now I am told loftily and kindly that women just don't understand, that women are really happy that way, that women can better themselves if they want to but somehow they just don't want to, that I'm joking, that I can't possibly mean what I say, that I'm too intelligent to be put in the same class as "women," that I'm different, that there is a profound spiritual difference between men and women of which I don't appreciate the beauty, that I have a man's brain, that I have a man's mind, that I'm talking to a phonograph record (Russ 202).

In this passage, readers see Joanna making repeated attempts to reach out and talk to men about women's satisfaction with and perception of their role in the public/private divide, only to be shut down time and again with some trite line. Common strategies include dismissing a woman's concerns as uninformed or ignorant, dismissing a woman's knowledge or her own mind, and dismissing the statement altogether. Other strategies includes offering a kind of conditional privilege if the outspoken women will just keep

her mouth shut and settle down. Eventually, after repeated attempts at conversation, Joanna begins to feel as if she's not engaging a person at all, but a repeated, rehearsed party line. And this inability to be heard produces frustration and anger, especially as she looks around herself and sees the gender disparity in the workforce, and reflects on her experiences growing up as girl in a patriarchal society. Finally, readers learn that Joanna

committed [her] first revolutionary act yesterday. [She] shut the door on a man's thumb. [She] did it for no reason at all and [she] didn't even warn him; [she] just slammed the door shut in a rapture of hatred and imagine the bone breaking and the edges grinding into his skin. He ran downstairs and the phone rang wildly for an hour after while [she] sat, listening to it, [her] heart beating wildly, thinking wild thoughts. Horrible. Horrible and wild. [She] must find Jael. (Russ 203).

In this passage, Joanna suggests that she lashed out at that man for "no good reason," and while it is true that that man did nothing to provoke her and that shutting the door on him was most likely an act of displaced aggression towards a larger system of inequality, experts suggest that "all violence is an attempt to achieve justice, or what the violent person perceives as justice, for himself or for whomever it is on whose behalf he is being violent" (Gilligan qtd. in Bloom 15). It is for this reason that Joanna identifies her small act of aggression as an act of revolutionary violence in her account. Nevertheless, Joanna recognizes that her "first revolutionary act" was in actuality a "petty" act of violence, and concludes that she is "[operating] on too small a scale" to make any real change, before deciding to seek out Jael (Russ 203). In this way, collective anger becomes a mobilizing force for revolutionary action and social change within Russ's text, which is hardly surprising given that "anger is seen as *the* prototypical protest emotion," and that group-based anger in particular is viewed as an "important motivator of protest participation" (Stekelenburg and Klandermans 6). According to Wheeler, within Russ's texts,

protagonists are “frequently angry, even downright unpleasant,” but it is this anger that prepares them to “risk conflict and even kill in order to make transgressive crossings to new spaces, to new areas of representation” (Wheeler 99). For example, according to Jael, “murder is my one way out” (Russ 195).

Although Jael’s pitch to end women’s oppression is perhaps shocking and even repulsive to a contemporary reader for its violence and its proposed inversion to the system of gender dominance, it is important to note that, for Jeannine and Joanna, the mere presence of someone with a concrete, step-by-step plan for ending male domination is a powerful motivator. Certainly, Jael’s promise of a feminist utopia is more successful in mobilizing Jeannine and Joanna than Janet’s fully realized one is, and this is because, in addition to the alienness of Janet’s Whileaway, Janet cannot or will not provide Jeannine and Joanna with a blueprint for how to achieve Whileaway on their earths. For example, she cannot promise them that such a plague will occur on their planet, and will not teach them how to engineer one. And she can offer no advice for how to peaceably enact gender equality over time, because the women of Whileaway may not have been fully liberated until after the plague, for all that anyone can remember. But Jael, unlike Janet, can and does make promises. According to Jael, the Whileawayan plague was really a genocide enacted by Janet’s ancestors and then covered up for posterity’s peace of mind, so if Jeannine and Joanna really wish their worlds were more like Janet’s, then all they have to do is join up with hers, and they can enact an interdimensional, female-dominated utopia. In the end, readers can’t really determine if Joanna invites Jael’s soldiers into her world, but Jeannine, primed by anger, certainly does. Janet, “whom [they] don’t believe in and whom [they] deride but who is in secret our savior from utter despair, who appears

Heaven-high in our dreams with a mountain under each arm and the ocean in her pocket,” (Russ 213) walks away, refusing to believe that Whileaway could have been built on genocide and lies. And while she may not have left behind any blueprints, she does provide Jeannine, Joanna, and Jael with the promise of a peaceful future after the successful emancipation of women, and that, it appears, is the greatest motivator of all. Because that promise motivates Joanna’s second revolutionary act or decision to transcribe her and her counterparts’ stories and release them to the world (a slow revolution, as it were, liberating one reader at a time).

### **Conclusion**

In the end, what is so revolutionary about feminist speculative fiction and about Joanna Russ and Marge Piercy’s work in particular is that it is engaged in a process of imagining a world transformed. It is taking feminist, socialist, and environmentalist theory, and writing it into the world, in that it is envisioning with earnestness what a radical-libertarian socialist feminist utopia might look like if actualized. It is putting aside practicality and feasibility and all of the other niggling doubts and lingering questions we have in the classroom and inviting us to ask, really ask, what a world transformed might actually look like, and whether we might like to live there, which can help readers determine which school of feminism they actually identify with.

It is also asking what holds contemporary characters back when they encounter feminist utopian visions, and highlighting the ways in which entrenched ideas about gender and sexuality prevent those characters from seriously considering the benefits an androgynous society brought on by radical schools of feminist thought. It is helping readers work through their own anxieties about radical feminism by having characters

who look and sound and live like them voice their concerns and carefully addressing those concerns through conversations between characters in the text itself. In this way, it both models what effective, non-coercive consciousness raising looks like, and performs that consciousness raising itself. In the text, this consciousness raising takes three forms, including conversations between women who are not yet conscious of their suffering and women who are very aware of the nature of women's oppression, women urging other women to take revolutionary action and providing them with tips for how to get started, and rapid juxtapositions of present violence with social forms which would disrupt and do away with that violence. Of the three, only the first is easily replicated in the world around us; the second and third are a little more complicated. Therefore, by using time or interdimensional travel as a consciousness raising device, both Russ and Piercy make a powerful statement about the social justice potential of art, and of feminist science fiction in particular, as it is one of the only forms of literature which would allow for this kind of comparison between an oppressive past and a utopian future, which proves especially effective in getting readers to pinpoint how oppressive structures in the present might be addressed by certain social changes in the future.

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## VITA

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