***“Woman on the Edge of Time”: Queering & Decolonizing Normativities of ‘Difference’ in the University Classroom***

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WORK IN PROGRESS—PLEASE DO NOT CITE

Abstract

While teaching about diversity in educational preparation and leadership programs has been a topic of avid attention, “diversity” remains an add-on feature in much university curriculum. This was certainly not the intent or hope of feminist and race theory scholars whose work raises challenges not only for examining power and inequities in educational systems but also has the potential for a radical rethinking of those very systems, knowledges, structures and practices. So what happened to the epistemological and pedagogical promises of these theories? This paper explores this question and suggests that engagement with an embodied Queer Theory is necessary to potentially shift knowledge production in educational preparation classrooms. A pedagogical example—learning to see, rethink and queer (hetero)normativities through reading a feminist utopian science fiction novel, Marge Piercy’s 1976 *Woman on the Edge of Time*—is provided as a working exemplar of what queering of normativities might look like in theory and practice in a university classroom.

*“Nino? Niño?”*

*“NINO: Nonsense In, Nonsense Out—that’s the motto on every keener. It means your theory is not better than your practice…”* Piercy, 1976, 66

“…there do exist many forms of oppression that define certain things as the norm and all other things as queer.” Kumashiro 2003, 67

Fall semester, 1996, Greensboro, North Carolina and we—myself and a group of twenty-one graduate students in Education, some from Leadership and Policy Studies and others studying Social Foundations, the majority working as school teachers or administrators—are halfway through our course “Organizational Theory & Administration.” Having read historical overviews of approaches and paradigms of K-12 school organizational theories, we enter class to talk about a novel, a feminist utopian science fiction novel. It is my first time teaching this text and I am a bit nervous—trained in the social sciences what do I know about teaching literature? The resistance I encountered about the novel’s presence on the syllabus runs through my head: “Are we really going to read fiction?” “How is this book applicable to this class?” “What criteria do I use to evaluate this book?” As I opened class, conversation was slow and stilted until one student emphatically asked, “Could someone please, please tell me, is Luciente a man or a woman? What is up with that?!?” A damn broke as we turned to the text, read passages, and took up the many ways the author challenged everything we thought we knew or believed. Those who hadn’t read the novel, clearly some students did not take reading fiction seriously and were not prepared, wore expressions of bafflement and shock—what kind of book was this and what was it doing in an Education course?

In this paper, I reflect on my sixteen-year journey using feminist utopian science fiction writings in Education and Gender Studies courses I have taught at three different universities.[[1]](#endnote--1) Specifically I focus on the pedagogical possibilities of one novel, Marge Piercy’s 1976 *Woman on the Edge of Time* and demonstrate how the use of feminist utopian science fiction necessitates an engagement with Queer Theory in order to potentially shift knowledge production in educational classrooms. In 1990, Eve Sedgwick boldly pronounced: “An understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition” (1). In this way, Sedgwick argued, talking about sex—identifying sexual identity binaries and relationships, asking how these came to be and who benefits—is a necessary lens of analysis to any project seeking to have insights into and possibilities for rethinking discourses and projects of modernity such as patriarchy, racisms, science, and colonialism.

In this way, fore fronting sexuality as a lens into hegemonies is key to any critical deconstruction effort. As William Pinar (2003) unequivocally states: “It is queer theory that has enabled me to understand that the democratization of American society cannot proceed without a radical restructuring of hegemonic white male subjectivity” (357) and I have found this understanding to be what many of my students—regardless of their gender, racial and sexual identities—state as their experience. Tracing and facing the abnormality of a normalization of heterosexual and homosexual binaries continues to challenge the students I teach and offers the opportunity to further “queer” all else that seems normal around us. While I continue to think with and present racialized-feminist and post/de-colonial theories as tools in my courses, nothing pushes my students and my own thinking like the metaphor and methodology of “queering.” Queering then marks the epistemological and discursive work of rethinking and unthinking, learning and unlearning, to as Deborah Britzman (1995, 153) notes, “undress the drag of normal” in all its various tropes, including patriarchy and epistemological racisms (Sullivan & Tuana, 2007).

I am however conscious of David Halperin’s (2003) concern that queer theory has become normalized and accepted into university institutions in ways that “lesbian and gay studies never were” (341) and we could also add feminist/gender and race/ethnic studies. While Halperin states that this acceptance and resultant present day training of students in queer theory “is not a bad thing in itself” he concludes “if queer theory is going to have the sort of future worth cherishing, we will have to find ways of renewing its radical potential…quite concretely, reinventing its capacity to startle, to surprise, to help us think what has not yet been thought” (343).

Is an era of encroaching standardization, when the presence of police officers in schools is normalized, thinking the “as yet not thought” is a vital exercise for education. In pursuit of this I keep in play the capacity to queerly startle alongside womanist/feminist and decolonial calls to action and imagination. I argue that we need race, feminist, postmodern, queer, and decolonial theories in play with each other, what I term embodied queer theory,[[2]](#endnote-0) and that this need becomes apparent when reading a novel like Piercy’s.

I embrace the call of encouragement and risk to “work on different theoretical terrains, travel beyond…academic disciplines, and examine education in a manner that will enable [us] to understand education in relation to its discourses—of ‘good girls’,’ ‘equal opportunity,’ ‘standards,’ and ‘multiculturalism,’ for example” (Casellas, 1999, 120) and specifically discuss the importance of queer theory and pedagogy alongside Emma Pérez’s “decolonial imaginary” as necessary tools to see and confront prevalent forms of cooptation and resistance to difference and enact and imagine other narratives and lived experiences. This is a move that seeks to queerly witness the “burning edge of fleshy experience” (Martinez, 2003) existing in the “time lag between the colonial and the postcolonial” (Pérez 1999, 127).

I proceed by first returning to the impetus and need to turn to feminist fiction and provide an overview of feminist utopian science fiction as a literary genre. I then turn to the similarities of this work with the movement of queer readings and apply this to a reading of Piercy. I conclude with a discussion of the pedagogy of queer, fleshy, decolonial imaginaries—embodied queer readings—and the possibilities of this work to allow “reparative readings” of deconstructive hope.

Feminist Fiction as an Interruptive Tool

An avid reader of fiction, I only began to incorporate such work in my courses when early in my career I felt the course readings I chose were failing to illicit the kinds of critical embracings and deconstruction I hoped for and expected. As a new professor, I approached teaching with the tools and passions of Womanist feminist pedagogy[[3]](#endnote-1) and a commitment to diversify the methodological and epistemological lens utilized in Education courses. While these tools and commitments served me well, each class seemed to hit a wall; a wall that to me seemed problematically self-evident but that many students could not/would not see, negotiate, go around/over/or take apart.

Certainly I was not the first faculty to feel this; a rich body of work on feminist pedagogy and resistance exists and I did reflexively (re)turn to this work for insights, challenges, and supports.[[4]](#endnote-2) Such “walls”—the limits pedagogically of exploratory, explanatory and epistemological practices and theories to disrupt hegemonic power structures, discourses and relations within and outside of university classrooms—have been a topic of conversation and debate yielding a range of diagnostic insights and reflexive strategies.

Priya Kandaswamy (2007), for example, notes two common responses by students to the inclusion of “difference” in university curricula: “Either they try to reduce difference to sameness by immediately focusing on possible points of commonality to their own experience or they treat difference as fundamentally disconnected from their own experience” (9). In a now classic article, Beverly Daniel Tatum (1992) offered an explanation of why many students react defensively and protectively when faced with difference. She argues many students experience an encounter with difference as “cognitive dissonance”—a destabilizing that occurs when one’s core beliefs are questioned. Tatum outlines two predominant responses to the experience of cognitive dissonance: one can take up the destabilization and investigate it, or one can repeatedly deny and resist it.

Responses of denial and resistance can be particularly challenging and frustrating because they engender an entrenchment and rationalizing of ideologies that explicitly work against the goals and intentions of introducing difference into the curricula. Thus, Tatum demonstrates how around issues of race students can actively engage in a refusal of new knowledge and enact a “reshaping of their belief system to be more congruent with an acceptance of racism” (15). This allows, Tatum argues, transference of feelings of guilt into anger directed, in this case, against people of color.

Ian Bannard (2010) writes of another current and prevalent response to the inclusion of diversity, one I characterize as the “polite” response. He writes: “Most of my students’ responses to non-Western literature seem to emanate from a desire not to offend, from an intent to honor other cultures, from a genuine desire to learn about others” (52). While a desire to learn and honor may not initially seem to impede critical engagement, the niceties of this response can lead students to engage in a reflexive accounting of their privileges and/or guilt but the doing of this work can mask a continued unsettlement and critical analysis of hegemony and power relations. The irony is as Bannard notes that such responses are learned behaviors “born and shaped” by the “recent emergence of multiculturalism as a philosophy and practice in K-16 educational institutions and in U.S. society, and in the context of critiques of and the opening up of the canon of Western literature in school curricula across all grade levels” (52).

Faced with teaching students who have learned appropriate and expected responses to the “opening of the canon” coupled with the fact that many of our students have lived only amidst all the “posts” of our time—postmodernism, poststructuralism, postfoundationalism, post-Marxism, post-feminism, post-race, postcolonialism—yields new challenges to teaching with diversity. In a world seemingly inundated with images of mixed cultural identities and reality television shows displaying multi-sexualities, what does “diversity” mean and look like anymore? As my students challenge, “we are all different, we each have marginalities and privileges, and we shouldn’t rank these.”

This sentiment and attempt to create a space of “we are all the same in our differences” reads the “posts” of our theories and time inaccurately, as a sign of being “after”, “post” structures of patriarchy and racism and signals a desire for an end of the need to talk about diversity, a break from analyzing systems, discourses and relations of inequalities and oppression.[[5]](#endnote-3) Such readings result in predominant discourses of choice, such as “well now we can’t judge how someone else thinks or lives—so if someone decides to get their breasts done or go on ‘Girls Gone Wild,’ we shouldn’t judge because we each can now chose how to be a woman” or discourses of denial “we (America) elected a Black President, so race isn’t the issue it used to be.” These often repeated narratives neglect analyses of dominant systems and portray any critique of patriarchy or racism as the individual speakers individual problem and thus “inaccurate, alienating and counter productive to the achievement of social cohesion” (Lentin, 2011, 159).

Simultaneously surrounded by cultural productions of race, gender, and sexuality while being told we are living beyond such identities, I find present day students curiously unable to articulate a critique that engages material, structural and epistemological change. Current narratives inflate, deny, appropriate and reify ‘difference’ making it difficult to recognize hegemonic power relations or if recognized it feels seemingly impossible to re-speak and re-imagine ourselves otherwise. How can we talk about the persistence of “difference” and inequitable outcomes in a post-era where ‘new master-narratives have taken over’ (Braidotti, 2005, p. 169)? And although these new master-narratives look familiar, like reproductions of denial and resistance, a “return of different forms of determinism” (Braidotti 2005, p. 169) make them even more insidious to see, name and trace especially in educational classrooms.[[6]](#endnote-4)

Here then is the dilemma: even though we ask students to debunk stereotypes, see oppressions, be on the look out for and question hegemonies, and deconstruct binaries and we provide the theoretical tools we think necessary to do this work we, our students and potentially ourselves, continue to participate in and “read texts in the same problematic ways” (Bannard 2010, 45). Faced with this frustration, I have turned to the use of feminist utopian/dystopian/science fiction to provide students and myself places to think differently from and *queer* conceptions and ideologies of gender, gender roles, race, ethnicity, sex, sexuality, reproduction, family structure, labor, class, societal organization, education and governance.

Feminist Utopia Science Fiction & the Necessity of Queer Readings & Pedagogies

Like Elspeth Probyn (1993) I am interested in “a speaking position that entails a defamiliarization of the taken-for-granted” (80)—a looking “forward to what we do not know, that we transgress on what we do not know” (140). This stance takes up the challenges of what it means for each of us to engage with the wall my students his, “the places where thinking stops” (Winans 2006, 103). Science fiction “analyzes reality by changing it” (Russ 1981, xv) and thus offers ways to think beyond the places where our thinking stops. Utopia science fiction as a literary genre offers an imaging, a lens into a future that perhaps we cannot imagine. In this way, science fiction takes everything apart to see how things work and operates “on the very edges of what is known” (Russ 1995, 6). These novels provide a “speaking picture” of a good society, showing in concrete detail what it would be like to live in such a society, and can make us want to achieve it (de Jouvenel, 1973; Manuel, 1979).

While the term “utopia” in literature has been debated it is agreed that what ties this diverse body of literature together is a “representation of dreams of a better life” (Teslenko 2003, 2). The utopian portrait provide a diagnosis of the ills of the present society and asks “how do we look at the presently potential space that will be become the future” (Barr 1981, 3)? Chris Ferns (1988) compares the older, more traditional model of utopian discourse based on "dreams of order in a world of disorder" with a newer model based on "dreams of freedom in a world of oppression" (458). Reading a novel like Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* allows us all to enter as non-experts; typically in my courses no one has read the novel before, it is new to everyone, thus no one is better at this theory or more well versed in it than someone else. This equalizes dynamics in the classroom and allows anyone to potentially be “the expert.”

Feminist utopias occupy a unique conceptual space. They “envision a different time/place that allows for ideological change” (Teslenko 2003, x). Mainstream utopias often failed to address patriarchal status quo; feminist writers responded to this gap. The socio-historical and political context of feminist utopias of the 1970s offers another perspective for reading. As Marge Piercy (2003) states: “Utopia is work that issues from pain: it is what we do not have that we crave” (133). Carol Pearson (1981) argues “feminist utopian fiction implicitly or explicitly criticizes patriarchy while it emphasizes society’s habit of restricting and alienating women” (63). Feminist utopian science fiction writing clearly situates patriarchy as unnatural and damaging, but also extends this lens into corresponding and linking oppressions of domination such as racism, colonialism, able-bodisms, and heteronormativities.

Feminist utopian science fiction offers the opportunity to engage in “strategies of writing *and* reading” that can “turn dominant discourses inside out (and show that it can be done)” (de Lauretis 1984, 7). The purpose here is to deconstruct and trace how dominant discourses are built and reproduced, to show the “irreducible contradictions” and “challenge theory in it owns terms” (de Lauretis 1984, 7). Similarly crafting a queer pedagogy entails disrupting binary models of sexuality, and all other binaries, in ways that engage with power, rather than obscuring such models within a language of tolerance with which we might seek to “cure” students.

Here I am utilizing queer theory as both a poststructural tool, a lens of analysis, and as a pedagogical impetus to interrupt the common tropes in response to discussions of difference discussed above. Thus, in my courses I am not teaching students a history of queer theory, but rather introduce it as an embodied lens of analysis that helps create movement in our readings, thinking’s and discussions. ‘Queer’ then is “a practice or way of doing things that challenges the logic of the norm” (Douglas, et al, 2011, 108). In other words, when hitting the wall, the places where thinking seems to stop, students and myself utilize queer theory to ask questions about how this happens, why, where and what is produced by “stopping.” These questions explicitly pay attention to power and regulation, understood as occurring in multiple, overlapping forms and discourses and take into account context, broad historical context linked with the specificities of lived experiences.

Queer studies critique of the normative alongside race feminisms and postcolonial studies also demonstrates the production of uneven histories, the visible, and invisible and hypervisible. Queer pedagogy challenges all students regardless of their sexual identities[[7]](#endnote-5) because it calls into question the process of normalizing dominant assumptions and beliefs while at the same time it challenges instructors to question and to continue to test their own pedagogy. As Deborah Cohler (2008) states: “For me, a pedagogy informed by queer theory and transnational feminism locates acts, desires, and identities within geopolitics and history and constructs a classroom practice that insists on the integration, rather than the separation, of feminism, critical race studies and queer theory” (26).

Halperin (1995) echoing the quote at the start of this essay asserts “Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant…‘Queer,’ then, demarcates not a positivity, but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative” (62). A queer pedagogy draws attention to the parameters of questioning, thus highlighting the process of normalization as it draws attention to the places where thinking stops. Indeed, as Luhmann (1998: 151) argues, within the context of queer pedagogy, “learning becomes a process of risking the self,” because a central focus is on interrogating the discourses that construct the self and that function as the means through which the self is performed. Queer theory and pedagogy involves a “…radical questioning of social and cultural norms, notions of gender, reproductive sexuality, and the family” (Smith 1996, 280) with “the promise of new meaning, new ways of thinking and acting politically—a promise sometimes realized and sometimes not” (Dugan 1992, 11).

As others have argued, simply adding materials about “the other” does not challenge our pedagogy or conceptual framework in meaningful ways; thus simply adding in a feminist utopian science fiction novel may not impact pedagogy and learning. It is the combination of using feminist utopian science fiction with what I term an embodied queer readings focus that has the potential to radically shift discussion in the classroom. By “embodied” queer reading, I am referring to two major facets: one, surrounding the reading of the feminist utopian science fiction novel with other key readings that lend the theoretical tools, discourse, and history to critically employ a queer reading and two, bringing these readings explicitly to the novel as well as creating space for student’s experiential, embodied responses to the novel. Over the past few years, I have specifically included and turned to transnational, racialized decolonial theories with queer theory. This inclusion is necessitated both by the needs, interest and identities of the students in my courses and the exciting body of work coming out of these areas. As Gopinath (2005) observes if “ ‘diaspora’ needs ‘queerness’ to rescue it from its genealogical implications...‘queerness’ also needs ‘diaspora’ in order to make it more supple in relation to questions of race, colonialism, migration, and globalization” (11).

In example, when reading Piercy, I introduce and read deeply within feminist, race, lesbian studies, and poststrucutral and postcolonial paradigms, histories and theories. The readings and texts used vary based upon course content but provide a foundational understanding of modernist structures of hegemony and how to begin to see and rethink such structures.[[8]](#endnote-6) These readings interrupt “epistemologies of ignorance” and marks claimed spaces of not knowing as produced, not innocent (Sullivan & Tuana, 2007). With these readings I am interested in laying a foundation for remembering and acknowledging histories and voices that have often been strategically obscured.

Towards this goal I have utilized other works of fiction, narratives, or testimonials offering first person accounts or fictionalized accounts of living with difference. I find when using these works a common reader response that Rosemary Hathaway (2004) names “’touristic reading’: the fallacious practice whereby a reader assumes, when presented with a text where the writer and the group represented in the text are ethnically different from herself, that the text is necessarily an accurate, authentic, and authorized representation of that “Other” cultural group” (169). Hathaway further explains that “touristic reading is fraught with ambiguity”—it can have some tangible effects of “awakened interest” and result in thinking more critically, but it can also be “one-dimensional” and readers return to the safety of their own worldviews without disruption (169-70).

In addition to “touristic readings” another common, safe space students occupy is the empathetic reader/knower. As Megan Boler (1999) explains, what we usually call “empathy”—the imaginative projection of one’s subjective state into characters—is problematic, not only because it implies an ability to fully imagine the suffering of others, but also because it allows readers to passively consume the text’s emotional experience without also examining their social responsibilities. Boler acknowledges, reading may stimulate emotions, such as empathy, but a change in one’s feelings and awareness may not lead to social activism or a critical rethinking of normativities—in fact, empathic reading may function as a form of passive consumption. Boler suggests that passive consumption must be replaced by testimonial reading. She explains, “The primary difference between passive empathy and testimonial reading is the responsibility borne by the reader. Instead of a consumptive focus on the other, the reader accepts a commitment to rethink her own assumptions, and to confront the internal obstacles encountered as one’s own views are challenged” (164).

While I agree with Boler’s assessment, I have also found that student attempts to take responsibility through testimonial readings can also collapse into ready narratives of guilt, pain, acknowledgment and recovery. As noted above, these narratives have been learned and practiced and thus are a challenge to interrupt and displace. Embodied queer readings and pedagogy interrupt the conventions and problems of touristic readings; reduction of differences to commonalities disrupts authenticity, and readings of erasure and exoticization.

And as I argue, the specific use of feminist utopian science fiction fits with and extends queer reading and pedagogy allowing readers to engage in complex discussions of the systems and discourses that define us all without feeling the awkwardness of misspeaking or offending someone else. By turning our lens of analysis onto what is clearly fiction, students are freed from a fear of speaking and get to try out ideas and stances on fictional systems, places and characters. I have found Marge Piercy’s 1976 *Woman on the Edge of Time*, an important but often overlooked exemplar of feminist utopian science fiction, particularly challenging and impactful; it is a text that requires and pushes embodied queer readings and pedagogy.

To the Edge of Time: A Queer Decolonial Imaginary

Marge Piercy’s gripping portrayal of downtrodden racialized femininity, in the story of a Mexican American woman Consuelo Camacho Ramos, or Connie as we are introduced to her, offers a reading of the body politic through the female body. Connie is poised between two opposites—being abusively treated by family and official and institutionalized in a mental asylum and her otherworldly visits to the utopia of Mattapoisett, in the company of her “sender” Luciente. For most of its narrative, *Woman on the Edge of Time* moves Connie back and forth between the all-too-realistic world of New York City, Rockover State Psychiatric Hospital and the pastoral utopia of Mattapoisett. In Connie's world of 1976, women are abused, battered, betrayed and violated by men—her father, her brother, her nieces ‘boyfriend’, cops, doctors, landlords—and by patriarchic systems and those who worked in them—caseworkers, health aide, schools, society.

This is a skillful move by Piercy; the violence and oppression and dehumanization of Connie’s present time, and ours, is repeatedly shown to be not a problem of men, but a societal problem; from its opening pages the novel forces a systemic analysis, not an individual one.

The novel quickly opens with Connie opening her apartment door to let in her pregnant niece, Dolly, who has just been beaten up by her boyfriend, who is also her pimp. A minute or so later, Geraldo, the boyfriend, bursts into the apartment, goes after Dolly and an aggressive altercation between knocks Connie into unconsciousness. The next words in the book demonstrate Connie’s downward spiral into institutionalized systems that strip her of voice, power, and control: “She lay tied with straps to a bed, staring up at a bare bulb, shot up with meds. Thorazine? It felt worse, heavier” (16). Literally trapped, ribs broken, knowing that Dolly had “sold her into Bellevue” Connie attempts to be heard but is talked over, ignored: “They had pushed her into restraint, shot her up immediately. She had been screaming—okay! Did they think you had to be crazy to protest being locked up? Yes, they did. They said reluctance to be hospitalized was a sign of sickness, assuming you were sick, in one of these no-win circles” (17).

With explicit detail of Connie’s running thoughts and absolute helplessness, Piercy takes the reader into this space of despair. We hear and feel Connie trying to communicate but “they acted as if they couldn’t hear you” (19). After hours of being restrained, Connie “could see in their faces disgust, boredom. She smelled bad, She stank! They hauled her along the hall like a bag of garbage and they paid no attention to what she tried to say. “Please, I beg of you, listen. I was beaten before they brought me here. My rib hurts so much! Please listen!’” (20). The attendants talk over and about Connie as if she is not there, judging and making assumptions about her life: “She wanted to scream that she washed as often s they did, that they had made her smell, make her dirty herself. But she did not dare. First, they would not listen, and second, they might hurt her. Who would care?” (21).

Often when beginning this novel, students remark that at first they read “about” Connie; she is the “other,” not them and for many her experiences are foreign and at the same time relating an expected story about a poor Mexicana living in an urban city. Further as we learn through Connie’s flashback memories of how she lost custody of her daughter and of her second husband’s death, reading in this distant, “touristic” way seems reinforced and many students report “not liking” Connie. At this point in the novel, I see students responding and analyzing Connie as an individual problem; she is in the situation she is in because of the choices she made and surely they or their family members would never be in such a position.

Yet each course I see and hear a shift occur in students readings as we discuss the opening chapter alongside our historical and structural analyses and as we begin to queer Connie’s experiences, peel apart the layers of de-humanization and make visible the ways most of us, in schools, participate in similar taken for granted patterns of power, authority, discipline. It is at this point, that readers begin to break down the arms-length-distance from Connie and with the skill of Piercy’s prose take up seeing and experiencing through Connie. The reader is absolutely dependent upon Connie—she is our eyes and ears and translator. This position offers the first queering for many readers; depending upon Connie, an impoverished Mexicana, who has a troubled history as a daughter, sister, Mother and mental patient, is a first step of discomfort and conflict for many readers who find themselves loathing but also at times liking and even admiring Connie and become invested in her fate and future.

Piercy creates this dependency as the novel takes Connie and the reader into the utopia of Mattapoisettian. Connie in these sections of the text clearly is the authority and translator for the reader into the queer world of Mattapoisettian; we are dependent upon her for what we see, know and question. This shift is important; the reader moves from seeing Connie as an object and victim, to experiencing her as someone with unique abilities, an expert knower and a trusted recorder. Issues of power, representation, subjectivity and voice are ever prevalent in Piercy’s novel and allow for complex analysis and discussion for a queering of how and why we think what we think and do what we do, in our ideologies and practices.

The opening scenes, set in contemporary, urban America, give Piercy many

opportunities to comment on the economic, political and cultural ills of that world. These are ills that feel all to recognizable to the reader and as noted above while student’s report they may start the book by “othering” Connie, they soon succumb to Piercy’s narrative style and evidence. Consider Piercy’s description of Connie’s encounter with her social worker (25-26):

“How can we help you if you won’t let us?” Miss Ferguson glanced at her wristwatch, shuffling the papers in the folder. Her folder. “Three years ago you were admitted to Bellevue on the joint recommendation of a social worker from the Bureau of Child Welfare, your caseworker from welfare, and your parole officer. You were then hospitalized at Rockover State for eight months.”

“They said I was sick and I agreed. Someone close to me had died, and I didn’t want to live.”

“You have a history of child abuse---“

“Once! I was sick!”

“Your parental rights were terminated. Your daughter Angelina Ramos was put out for adoption.”

“I should never have agreed to that! I didn’t understand what was happening! I thought they were just gong to take care of her.”

“It was the clinical judgment of the court psychiatrist that your daughter would be better off with foster parents.”

Interspersed with this exchange Piercy gives us Connie’s thoughts: “ The social worker was giving her that human-to-cock-roach look” and we learn that Connie had spanked her daughter once. “…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. The abused and neglected child, they had called Angelina officially” (26). By shifting the point of view, Piercy allows readers to recognize themselves in the alternative roles of surveyor and the one being under surveillance and our productions within these roles. The novel contains the official discourse on Connie, including her psychiatric notes at the end of the book, but interrupts the official story with Connie’s point of vies: “They trapped you into saying something and then they’d bring out their interpretations that made your life over. To make your life into a pattern of disease” (26).

Under the official discourse, Connie is systematically infantilized: “You say it hurts you. Where do you believe you feel pain?” (27); “You’ve been a bad girl again, Mrs. Ramos.” (30). Piercy also works in examples of Connie’s internalized racism—“After Mrs. Polcari left she stared in the mirror over the sink, touching her cheeks. How did they stay so young? Did they take pills? Something kept them intact years longer…” (35)—her recognition of external racisms—“Connie guessed partly they were expressing surprise that her child was so light. ‘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” (61)—a history of birth control testing and sterilization on women of color—in addition to Connie’s mothers forced hysterectomy we learn of Connie’s loss: “She too, she was spayed. They had taken out her womb at Metropolitan when she had come in bleeding after that abortion and the beating from Eddie. Unnecessarily they had done a complete hysterectomy because the residents wanted practice” (45).

All of these examples provide spaces to tie in racialized, colonial histories and necessitate queer readings to trace and rethink power and Connie’s subjectivity.

Returning to the narrative—despite Connie’s attempts to communicate her position, she is labeled as a threat to society and sent to a psychiatric institution, Rockover. Ultimately the reader learns that Connie and other “inmates” will be subjected to an experimental surgical implantation of a device (a "dialytrode") into the brain to control behavior electronically. In between Connie’s visits to the utopia, we witness Connie’s detailed experience of life inside the institution and her attempts to resist and claim humanity for herself and others. Connie performs a final act that is left up to the reader to decipher the meaning and morality of.

What allows and forces a queer reading however is Piercy’s move into a utopian space. In this way Piercy offers another angle of seeing Connie’s grim present, and our own, and takes readers to two other worlds, one (utopian) where people no longer abuse each other, physically or psychologically, and one (dystopian) where such abuses have been taken to a frightening extreme.

The Utopian world of *Woman on the Edge of Time* is the village of Mattapoisett, in the year 2137. Here even language reflects a revision of the gender roles: "he" and "she" have been replaced by "per." Mattapoisett is challenged by the consequences of the excesses and follies of Connie's era. The villagers (and the larger community in which they participate) have made a better world, albeit not a perfect one. Among their notable accomplishments, they have greatly reversed the effects of pollution, prejudice, and poverty. For Connie and the reader everything in Mattapoisett is foreign; nothing is recognizable. All structures and discourses of identity and control in Connie’s world and ours are deconstructed, gone, under erasure, and replaced with something different, something new.

Piercy re-imagines and rearranges all forms of social relations across gender identities, sexual relations, family, mothering, work and labor, education, childhood, leisure, friendships, social governance and control. Here is where I find Piercy’s book to be outstanding: she provides enough explicit detail about how each of these present day categories work, sometimes under different names, that the reader can truly engage with the possibilities of such a future. In this way, Piercy pushes the reader to take seriously this utopian future and this push aligns with queer readings, constantly asking “how” and “why not.”

Again, importantly, we witness utopia through Connie and her experiences. We find out that Connie has the gift of being a strong “receiver” to a “sender” from the future, Luciente. When we first meet Luciente through Connie, she assumes she is hallucinating him but soon comes to trust that he is from the future and agrees to travel with him to Mattapoisett.

Pressed reluctantly, nervously against Luciente, she felt the coarse fabric of his shirt and….breasts! She jumped back.

“You’re a woman! No, one of those sex-change operations.

“If you hop around, we’ll never get it right…Of course I’m female.” Luciente looked a little disgusted…

A dyke, of course. That bar in Chicago where the Chicana dykes hung out shooting pool and cursing like men….

“You seem surprised that I am female?”

Feeling like a fool, Connie did not choose to reply….Connie no longer felt in the least afraid of Luciente.” (66-67).

Like Connie the reader also feels surprise and confusion at the reveal of Luciente’s gender. At this point the reader however can still feel comforted that there are recognizable and familiar gender identities, female and assumable male, in 2137, but along with Connie the reader is exposed to just how different “gender” is defined and experienced in Mattapoisett.

Clothing, language, appearance, sexuality, sexual activity, work/labor, education, leisure, family and community roles—none of these are marked by gender in this future utopia. At first disgusted by and judgmental about the lack of definitions, Connie comes to appreciate and benefit from many of these unmarkings. For example, she quickly accepts their participatory democratic councils and collective labor policies. Even their cultural tolerance of homosexuality and bisexuality takes her only a while to get used to, and although at first she is put off that she can't immediately tell if a Mattapoisettian is male or female, she makes friends, takes a lover and feels at home in Mattapoisett.

However there is one change, one erasure that Connie cannot understand and accept—in Mattapoisett birth and mothering, including breastfeeding, is not linked to being a woman. Children are sown in a mechanical brooder, “all a mixed bag of genes” (100) and then raised by three adults who agree raise the child together. Two of the adults agree to breastfeed, regardless of their gender, and every aspect of childcare is shared. No one “owns” a child, living arrangements are fluid and at age 15, the “child” graduates from the care of the three adults and goes on something like a vision quest.

Connie, who suffers from having her daughter removed from her, cannot understand why the people of Mattapoisett would ever willingly give up the bonds of birth and life-long mothering. Connie’s first glimpse of the brooder left her feeling nauseous:

"Here embryos are growing almost ready to birth. We do that at ninemonth plus two or three weeks. Sometimes we wait tenmonth. We find that extra time gives us stronger babies." He pressed a panel and a door slid aside, revealing seven human babies joggling slowly upside down, each in a sac of its own inside a larger fluid receptacle.

Connie gaped, her stomach also turning slowly upside down. All in a sluggish row, babies bobbed. Mother the machine.” (102)

In the brooder, Piercy has moved one of this century's major dystopian images—the test-tube baby—into a pastoral, utopian world, a technology in the service of gender egalitarianism and links the necessity of the removal of birth and childcare from gender as the only way to have a foundation for an egalitarian society.

Connie cannot accept this profound revision, this most fundamental effort by Mattapoisettian society to break “the bond between genes and culture” (104) and "all the old hierarchies" of male-production and female-reproduction (105). As Luciente explains:

Finally there was 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…So we are all mothers. Every child has three. To break the nuclear bonding. (105)

Yet Connie, gripped by anger and longing for her daughter, "hated them, the bland bottleborn monsters of the future, born without pain, multi-colored like a litter of puppies without the stigmata of race and sex" (106).

By providing explicit details of organization, thoughts, and technologies Piercy allows each reader, like Connie to find places of comfort, joy, confusion, and major discomfort in the utopian world. Each reading of Piercy with students, I appreciate the ability of the text to engender queer readings; in fact students find they cannot make sense of the novel without thinking queerly and being open to investigate and trace where this takes them. I also each time appreciate how the text and queer reading pushes each of us to our limits, the places where thinking stops, but places where we had not imagined and can see but are not ready to embrace. For some this limit place is sexuality, family structure. For others ethnic/racial identity; while for others the brooder, a removal of childbirth from women. The text allows each of us to feel challenged at different places and discuss and trace these challenges removed from a fear or critiquing another’s experience. Centering our discomfort and queering on Piercy’s fiction allows each reader to risk digging deeper and asking critically questions about where we reach our limits and why and what this means for each of us in practice. Once we have this knowledge, there is not a turning away, a turning back…Piercy does not allow us to avert our gaze from the differences between Connie’s and our own present and the utopian and to make this point further, she gives a brief glimpse of yet another potential future for women.

In Chapter 15 of *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Connie trying to reach Luciente finds herself instead, not in Mattapoisett, but in another time, where she encounters a mutated woman-of-pleasure named Gildina. Gildina's body speaks volumes about the economic, political, and cultural ills of her male-dominated, patriarchical future world. When Connie materializes in Gildina's room,

[Gildina] popped off the bed and stood facing Connie, quivering with anger. They were about the same height and weight, although the woman was younger and her body seemed a cartoon of femininity, with a tiny waist, enormous sharp breasts that stuck out like the brassieres Connie herself had worn in the fifties—but the woman was not wearing a brassiere. Her stomach was flat but her hips and buttocks were oversized and audaciously curved. She looked as if she could hardly walk for the extravagance of her breasts and buttocks… (287-88)

Connie finds out that Gildina is a kept woman “contracted to a fourth-level SD” (288) selected when she was fifteen; she is “still on the full shots and re-ops.” (288). In case it is not clear, Piercy makes sure the reader knows that racism is also alive and rampant in this world—“If you ever had a beauty-op, you’ve reverted. They’d never leave you with hair like that and that skin! You’re as dark…I mean I’d have been on that side myself. But of course I had the full series!” (288). Gildina also reinforces a strict discourse of normative heterosexuality calling Connie a “lesby” when Connie suggest she touch her to prove she is not a hallucination.

In her short encounter with Gildina’s world, Connie learns that cosmetic surgery and organ transplants have become the symbols of White social status. Only the wealthy receive organs and the only route out of poverty for (young) women is through silicone, skin treatments and the surgeon's knife. This future is also toxically polluted; Gildina describes the sky as “a gorgeous pale gray color” (295) and reports that only the wealthy have access to light and the sun. Housing consist of high rises, the higher up the wealthier the man, and food consists of “transparent packets” that were “tasteless and gummy” (296).

The hyper femininity, "a cartoon of femininity," tied to systems of oppression against women and women of color, and polluted caste hierarchy of Gildina's extreme dystopia awakens deep fears in Connie. The prospect of her own world continuing, accelerating, down its sexist, racist, and class-biased decline is indeed cheerless. “So that was the other world that might come to be. That was Luciente’s war, and she was enlisted in it” ( 301). Connie’s call to activism, and thus the reader’s own imperative for action, is the function of this brief chapter in Piercy's book. Through it, she makes inaction—doing nothing about the present world's global oppressions, economics and politics—deeply frightening.

By adding this dystopian vision, Piercy enriches *Woman on the Edge of Time* and makes its diagnoses of contemporary American society's ills all the stronger. For the first fourteen chapters, she sends readers back and forth between the urban blights of contemporary New York City and the pastoral promise of Mattapoisett. The Gildina chapter shows readers a nightmare that might be ahead unless contemporary society turns toward the collective, actively anti-oppressive, ecologically sound behavior of Mattapoisett. Students repeatedly state how much the dystopian vision feels more similar to our present than Piercy’s utopia and voice amazement at what feels like her prescient read of a future from her 1976-point of view.

Here then readers can begin mapping and imagining their own queer utopia and dystopian futures. Using Piercy and embodied queer readings, we trace what we thought we could not think or imagine in order to think otherwise about our present discourses, knowledges and practices.

Queering Fleshy Decolonial Imaginings

I have argued that a queer reading of Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* allows “a reading that *produces* rather than *protects*” (Spivak 1976, p. lxxv) and is effective in supporting a queer pedagogy that seeks to name, trace and unmask the (hetero)normativities of everyday events, hegemonies and structures of oppression, raising new questions and ways of thinking about educational epistemologies, discourses, policies and practices. Embodied queer readings of Piercy’s novel, alongside additional readings that situate and pull in “fleshy” histories and “decolonial imaginings” have allowed students and myself to “think difference together, outside of a binary logic” (Probyn 1993, 140) and “elaborate a mode of enunciation that transgresses the limits of difference. It is to speak with attitude; an ethical and caring mode of saying, thanking, and doing, inspired by a historical ontology of what and who we are and what and who we hope to become” (140).

Chandra Mohanty (1989-90) reminds us however that radical pedagogy “involves taking responsibility for the material effects of these very pedagogical practices on students” (192). Reading feminist utopian science fiction is a commitment and for some a challenge in and of itself. Over the years of teaching with feminist fiction, I have learned to develop and discuss a reading guide for the book early in the semester, devote several class periods to discussion of the book, and incorporate and refer to the novel throughout the semester, using it as a theoretical apparatus or example like any other reading. In this way students and I cannot simply cordon off the fictional work as an aside but have to engage it on-goingly as a major part of our pedagogical, methodological and epistemological work of the semester. Certainly I have had students struggle with the queer readings and discussion of Piercy’s novel and occasional a student has refused to read the book due to religious convictions. However, I have also observed that the students who struggle with queer readings of Piercy tend to also lack critical engagement with the social science research and theoretical readings.

Repeatedly students say how much “safer” it is to explore, question, be angry, sad, exhilarated about the issues we discuss when we do it through Piercy’s novel. My students echo Katy Mahraj’s (2011) declaration that: “It is confusing to be a feminist student. Deconstruction is de rigueur; reconstruction less so. Awareness rises while answers recede. We feminist students seek out learning experiences that disrupt, empower, and make us feminist students not only by what we learn, but also by how we learn, by the pedagogy in which we engage” (1). Hearing this, I am moved by Eve Sedgwick’s (1996) discussion of queer reading practices that might shift from “paranoid” to a “reparative position.”

Primarily concerned with questions of “how…is knowledge performative, and how best does one move among its cause and effects” (277), Sedgwick credits critical, suspicious readings while at the same time wanting to question the status quo and limits of such readings and reopen places to be pleasantly surprised: “Because there can be terrible surprises, however, there can also be good ones” (279). Placing both suspicion and reparative readings alongside each other, Sedgwick details how “Hope, often a fracturing thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates. Because she has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did” (279).

This is the desire and hope that first drove me to utilize feminist utopian science fiction in my courses and why I continue to find it useful to include novels like Piercy’s on my syllabus. While I want students to “get lost” when they first begin to see and name the queer abnormality of normativities, I also want to provide spaces if not for reconstruction, then for energized rethinking, work that seems especially important for further educational practitioners. Embodied queer readings of feminist utopia science fiction offer a respite from, spaces from our everyday lives while challenging each of us to see and imagine differently.

It is fitting to end with Connie, read through a reminder of Marge Piercy’s (2003) sentiment that: “Utopia is work that issues from pain: it is what we do not have that we crave” (133):

“In a way I’ve always had three names inside of me. Consuelo, my given name. Consuelo’s a Mexican woman, a servant of servants, silent as clay. The woman who suffers. Who bears and endures. Then I’m Connie, who managed to get two years of college—til Consuelo got pregnant. Connie got decent jobs from time to time and fought welfare for a little extra money for Angie. She got me on a bus when I had to leave Chicago. But it was her who married Eddie, she thought it was smart. Then I’m Conchita, the low-down drunken mean part of me who gets in jail in the bughouse, who loves no good men, who hurt my daughter…”

When she stopped short, the others were silent but did not seem scared or

judgmental. As usual, Luciente spoke first. “Maybe Diana could help you to

meld the three women into one.” (122).

1. I have used feminist fiction in a range of courses from graduate level courses in Organizational Theory; Policy Studies; & Poststructural Feminist Theories to undergraduate courses in Feminist Theories and Histories of Sex, Love, & Race. [↑](#endnote-ref--1)
2. Similarly see Wenshu Lee (2003) who develops the phrase “*kuaering* queer theory” as a way to make a “race-conscious, womanist, and transnational turn” with queer theory. [↑](#endnote-ref-0)
3. My use of the phrase “Womanist feminist pedagogy” centers gender and gendered, sexualized racialization in all forms, including colonization’s, as central to feminist theory and practice. Feminist pedagogy highlights feminist processes in classroom interactions: it focuses on “consensual, collaborative, non-hierarchical processes of learning/teaching” (Donadey, 2002). Crucial tenets of feminist pedagogy include the need to value experiential knowledge (hooks 1994), the question of teacher authority in the classroom (Friedman 1985; Nnaemeka 1994), the classroom as a safe space (Ellsworth 1989; Lewis 1990; hooks 1994; Nnaemeka 1994), the use of democratic dialogue (Ellsworth 1989), and empowering student voice (Ellsworth 1989; Mohanty 1989–1990; hooks 1994) while at the same time acknowledging the limits and complexities of each of these tenets. For an overview and critique of feminist pedagogy see Lyn Yates 1994. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
4. See for example listings in Note 3 [do further listing] [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
5. See St Pierre & Pillow (2000) for a discussion of the posts of humanism and specifically endnote 3 delineating why “post” should not be associated with “past.” [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
6. Consider for example recent demands to end multiculturalism in curricula and ban multicultural literature in K-12 public schools in the US. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
7. Here however I am conscious of retaining spaces for ‘queerness’ as “experienced by particular bodies (e.g. gender non-conforming or sexually-dissident subjects” (Douglas et al. 2011, 108). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
8. I have found it particularly powerful to read Cherrîe Morraga & Gloria Anzaldüa’s *This Bridge Called My Back* alongside Piercy. While very different in genre, both volumes come out of a similar time period and impetus for voice, representation and radical change.

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