The future in feminism: reading strategies for feminist theory and science fiction

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THE FUTURE IN FEMINISM:
READING STRATEGIES FOR FEMINIST THEORY AND SCIENCE FICTION

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
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by

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B.A., Sarah Lawrence College, 1995
M.A., Louisiana State University, 1997
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DEDICATION

For my dear late mother

Ama “Sugah” Ford Darr Norfleet Rogan
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ABSTRACT

Contemporary feminist theory, especially in its more dialectical manifestations, is read in this study as describing a relationship between present and future. In this reading, the work of feminist theory contains a “present;” that is, an articulation of the specific problem or question that it addresses. The work of feminist theory also contains a “future,” either implicit or explicit, and often both. An explicit “future” in feminist theory states a praxis-model or specific call-to-arms that claims political effectuality; claims that its implementation might help to ameliorate, in some way, the status quo of sexual politics. An implicit “future” in feminist theory is a more direct articulation of a praxis-model through its implementation within the work itself. In this case, the theory works as a heuristic device by enacting the critique that it suggests. For example, a work of feminist literary criticism might posit a mode of textual critique that it then implements by reading a given text in the suggested mode. The “future” in such a theoretical work is the implication that the enacted mode of critique is a praxis-model for further implementation. This study examines feminist theoretical work from the 1950s to the present, with an analytical emphasis on the ways in which the present/future dialectic operates in its structures and claims. I team this analysis with readings of feminist SF. Feminist SF speculates on the potential outcomes of women’s struggles with the oppressions of various ideological regimes, such as sexism, classism, and racism. The dialectical tension between present and future is a thematic concern and a structural feature of most feminist SF. I examine feminist SF that engages some of contemporary feminist theory’s presuppositions and positions. This study includes analyses of the theoretical work of Simone de Beauvoir, Juliet Mitchell, Kate Millett, Shulamith
Firestone, Katherine Hayles, Nancy Chodorow, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, Teresa de Lauretis, and many others. This study also includes analyses of the feminist science fictional work of Ursula LeGuin, Samuel Delany, Octavia Butler, Monique Wittig, Angela Carter, James Tiptree (Alice Sheldon), Tananarive Due, Nalo Hopkinson, Rebecca Ore, and Nicola Griffith, among others.
Introduction

“I shall speak about women’s writing: about what it will do [. . .]. Anticipation is imperative” (875).
   Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa”

“The political value of literary texts from the standpoint of feminism can be determined only by an investigation of their social functions and effects in relation to the interests of women in a particular historical context, and not by attempting to deduce an abstract literary theory of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine,’ ‘subversive’ and ‘reactionary’ forms in isolation from the social conditions of their production and reception” (2).
   Rita Felski, Beyond Feminist Aesthetics

Feminist theory, especially in its more dialectical manifestations, can be read as describing a relationship between present and future. In this reading, the work of feminist theory contains a “present;” that is, an articulation of the specific problem or question that it addresses. The work of feminist theory also contains a “future,” either implicit or explicit, and often both. An explicit “future” in feminist theory states a praxis-model or a specific call-to-arms that claims political effectuality; claims that its implementation might help to ameliorate, in some way, the status quo of sexual politics. An implicit “future” in feminist theory is a more direct articulation of a praxis-model through its implementation within the work itself. In this case, the theory works as a heuristic device by enacting the critique that it suggests. For example, a work of feminist literary criticism might posit a mode of textual critique that it then implements by reading a given text or texts in the suggested mode. The “future” in such a theoretical work is the implication that the enacted mode of critique is a praxis-model for further implementation.

But why read feminist theory as a present/future dialectic? If it is true that some feminist theory can be read in this manner, it is also true that other forms of theory can be
read in this manner as well. So, beyond the fulfillment of my own interest in feminist
theory in particular, what is it about “the future in feminism” that deserves scrutiny and
analysis? In academic feminist criticism there has always been a high degree of focus on
the relationship between feminist scholarship and its relevance to the experiential. This
focus has played a large part in shaping some of feminist scholarship’s major debates:
essentialism and constructivism, practice and theory, radicalism and institutionalization,
dialectical critique and deconstructive critique. All of these debates address the
relationship between a putatively concrete term and an abstract one, between practice and
theory, ontology and epistemology. All of these debates can also be seen as
problematizations of the “present/future” relationship that I describe above: they all
address the question of what, in echo of the passage by Cixous quoted above, feminist
theory will do. Thus feminist theory seems, like other theoretical modes that, as SF critic
Veronica Hollinger puts it, “insist on re-inserting the object of study back into the world,”
(“Contemporary Trends” 253), to have a preoccupation with the future—with the
viability of its applications to the world of lived relations. This study examines feminist
theoretical work from the second wave to the present, with an analytical emphasis on the
ways in which the present/future dialectic operates in its structure and claims.

I team this analysis with readings of feminist science fiction. Feminist SF
speculates on the potential outcomes of women’s struggles with the oppressions of
various ideological regimes, such as sexism, classism, and racism. The dialectical
tension between present and future is a thematic concern and a structural feature of most
feminist SF. I examine feminist SF that either implicitly or explicitly engages feminist
theory’s presuppositions and positions. My object is to use these texts to illuminate the
pitfalls and potentialities presented by various works of feminist theory. Each of the
works of feminist SF that I analyze presents a portrait of how some feminist theoretical
tenet might be enacted, and the problems that such an enactment might encounter. This
introduction will further describe why I chose to analyze feminist SF, via an exploration
of existing feminist analysis of the genre. I will also situate my work in relation to some
of science fiction criticism’s major presuppositions. Finally, I will describe the
organization of my chapters.

Feminist SF, unlike, say, magical realism, which engages *thematically* with
fantastic events, is *structurally* bound to take up the dialectical relationship between
present and future--to present a projected future world in which the fantastic events that
occur cohere with, rather than depart from, our present understanding of what is
psychically and physically possible.¹ Feminist SF is not the only feminist fiction genre in
which we might read articulations of feminist praxis, but it is conducive to the purposes
of this specific project; that is, the exploration of the tensions produced in feminist theory
by the present/future dialectic. The structural similarities between feminist theory and
feminist SF provide a solid ground on which to map the relationship between the future-
function in theory and its articulation in fiction.

Beside the fact that SF and theory share structural affinities, why choose SF, a
historically masculinist genre, to explore the praxis-oriented moments specific to feminist
theory? Feminist theorists of the genre provide several differing answers. In *A New
Species*, Robin Roberts argues that SF’s masculinist themes and characters often betray a

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¹ This definition of the structural quality specific to science fiction rhymes in spirit, if not in letter, to Darko
Suvin’s famous definition of science fiction as the literature of “cognitive estrangement,” a definition that
depends similarly on highlighting SF’s dependence on the dialectical tension between present and future. I
will return to this definition in the section of this introduction entitled “Presuppositions and Positions.”
strong undercurrent of male anxieties about female power and autonomy, most often associated with women’s reproductive capacities. Roberts produces feminist readings of even the ultra-macho “golden age” texts of SF, demonstrating the recuperative power available to feminist literary criticism through reading masculinist fiction as “coded.” Roberts demonstrates that feminist SF, instead of being an aberration, a rejection of SF’s classic themes and values, is indeed a logical extension and revision of feminine, potentially feminist, themes running under the surface of masculinist SF. Roberts’ work is in keeping with the second wave feminist literary critical tradition of recuperative methodology that continues to this day: in addition to the process dubbed by Elaine Showalter as gynocritics, (the valorization and recuperation of women’s writing), an important part of this dimension of the feminist literary critical project was also a re-evaluation of male authored texts, an effort that included both the exposure of phallocentric values within the text, and a deconstructive reading that exposed the ambivalences of the text’s putative male authority. For Roberts, SF is an ideal genre with which to perform a feminist recuperative critique, as well as to show how woman-authored SF texts are both a logical extension of, and revisionist reply to, SF’s masculinist tradition.

In Aliens and Others, Jenny Wolmark posits that SF’s recent feminist texts must negotiate, necessarily imperfectly, a decided break with SF’s generic traditions in order to resonate as feminist:

When generic narrative conventions are reworked from an oppositional point of view, assumptions about gender are openly confronted within the narratives, but this does not necessarily lead to an interrogation of the way
in which gender itself is constructed. On the other hand, rewriting the conventions from the unexpected and ‘alien’ perspective of the female subject can work towards providing a critical position from which such an interrogation could begin. It is not necessary, therefore, to think of the contradictions that are generated in the narratives in entirely negative terms, since the ambivalence and ambiguities of meaning in patriarchal structures can become more obvious when they come into conflict with feminist rewritings. (54)

For Wolmark, then, appropriating the SF genre for feminist ends involves both an attempt at radical revision of the genre’s themes and semiotics, as well as a recognition that the masculinist nature of SF is to some extent permanently embedded within the genre. I’d like to take Wolmark’s thesis to its logical limit; that is, to recognize that all feminist fiction, regardless of genre, must recognize and negotiate fiction’s traditionally masculinist tendencies. We should also keep in mind, when addressing the possibility of feminist rewriting within so-called genre fiction, that we are dealing only putatively with a special case scenario: all fiction is derived from at least one genre, and no fiction, including so-called genre fiction, derives from only one generic tradition.

In Feminist Fiction: Feminist Uses of Generic Fiction, Anne Cranny-Francis notes “Genre fiction is encoded with ideological discourses which articulate the socio-historical formation in which the particular text is written.” Although I have just stated that all fiction falls into specific generic categories, it is also true that most fiction, that is, those fictions which we do not refer to as “generic,” have achieved semiotic “whiteness” in the Derridean sense: we no longer perceive these texts as “generic” because, ironically, they
have attained a “generic” status in literary studies. Thus, those fictions such as the detective novel, the gothic novel, and the science fiction novel, are referred to as genre fiction because a strong sense of such fictions’ thematic and structural attributes has been retained. With this caveat, I agree with Cranny-Francis that that fiction which we continue to perceive as “genre” fiction does serve a special function in feminist literary studies. Because such fictions have not become “white” forms, we recognize all the more clearly when genre fiction fails to adhere to its script. Thus feminist SF carries with it a sort of built-in self-referentiality as a literary form: our attention is drawn more acutely to the pro-feminist revisionist work taking place within such texts because we recognize exactly to what extent feminist SF breaks out of its masculinist mold. By the same token, we also recognize more clearly those moments when implicit critique of SF’s masculinist presuppositions is taking place. In sum, then, feminist SF works well for this project because its structural property of present/future dialectic works in the same way as the presupposition/position structure of feminist theory. In addition, feminist SF’s highly recognizable generic properties serve to highlight the masculinist ideology of the generic form that it both appropriates and critiques.

**Presuppositions and Positions**

This study depends upon the conceptual categories developed by several critics of science fiction. In this section, I will situate my work in relation to theirs. First of all, I am indebted to the work of Darko Suvin. The title of this section references his book of essays on SF, ideology, and cognition, *Positions and Presuppositions in Science Fiction*. In the first chapter of this study, “For a ‘Social’ Theory of Literature and Paraliterature: Some Programmatic Reflections,” Suvin emphatically states “*History and society are not*
an external yardstick to be applied to the literary work: on the contrary they constitute its very structure and texture” (4). This position broadly articulates one primary presupposition of this study, (and a position primary to Marxist cultural studies), which is that there are some works of feminist SF that serve a hermeneutic function in their articulation of the potentialities suggested by feminist theory. This presupposition is related to another assertion of Suvin’s Positions: “Literature [. . .] can provide sets of manageable and explorable models of social existence” (50). This constitutes another of my work’s primary presuppositions: that feminist SF constructs models of social existence that can creatively render visible the ideologies of sexual politics that help to characterize our lived relations. Feminist SF can be read as an affective history of the social relations shaped by our sexual politics.

These two presuppositions reflect another of Suvin’s theoretical formulations on science fiction: that it is a literary mode, the mode of cognitive estrangement. The “cognitive” function occurs in the delineation of the workings of the future space posited in the work of SF. The “cognitions” proposed by the science-fictional work also support what I call its potentially hermeneutic function; that is, its function as a contained interpretive and didactic device. The “estrangement” of science fiction is its capacity to use the future space in such a way as to render a fresh consideration of some aspect or aspects of our current condition. In the case of feminist SF, the author uses estrangement to render freshly visible some aspect of how our social relations are shaped by sexual politics. For the “present/future dialectic” that I propose as a structural and thematic tendency of feminist SF, the “present” is shown through the mode of estrangement, and the “future” is shown through the mode of cognition.
This leads me to a consideration of another source to which I am intellectually indebted: Carl Freedman’s *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*, which posits that there are significant structural affinities between critical theory and science fiction. Freedman argues that science fiction is a privileged literary mode for critical theory, inasmuch as it has strong structural and generic tendencies towards critical and utopian expression. Freedman stresses critical theory’s dialectical tendencies, which he sees as being strongly present in Marxist and psychoanalytic critical frameworks. My study focuses on feminist theory as a dialectical critical mode; that is, a mode that theorizes the *contradictory* nature of the historical and material forces at work in the production of the object of critical appraisal. Certainly, this mode is not strongly present in all forms of feminist theory, a large and contested category in itself. My focus on dialectical feminist critique produces a strong bias towards feminist theory of a Marxist, socialist, materialist or psychoanalytic bent, as well as a bias towards the contemplation of a certain type of debate within the field. Part of my project when I began this study was to prove that feminist SF was a privileged genre for the expression of feminist theoretical concepts. However, the further I delved into the project, the more this claim seemed to stand in the way of my objects of study. Given the fraught history of feminist literary theory’s search for privileged modes of literary expression, as well as the fact that my insistence on the *privileged* nature of the feminist SF/feminist theory relationship brought out a repellently adversarial tendency in my critical voice, I decided to abandon this claim. The claim that unifies the chapters of this study is now much more modest, but also more fitting for the types of readings that I wanted to produce. My claim is that feminist SF and feminist theories that evince structural similarities in their figuration of the present/future dialectic
can be mined for mutual illuminations. Freedman’s study is what got me thinking about theory and SF as structurally complementary, and this idea is now a major presupposition of my own work.

The feminist critics of feminist SF whose work has had the greatest impact on my own are Marleen Barr and Sarah Lefanu. Barr edited the first collection of critical essays on the intersections of feminist theory and feminist SF, which was published in 1981 as *Future Females: A Critical Anthology*. She went on to author the first of several full-length studies of this intersection, her 1987 work *Alien to Femininity*. Sarah Lefanu’s *Feminism and Science Fiction*, originally published in 1988 under the title *In the Chinks of the World Machine*, quickly followed Barr’s pioneering works. Although the depth and breadth of focus of both of these works differs in some significant respects from mine, we all share the basic presupposition that feminist theory and feminist SF can be mutually illuminating. The main difference between these works and mine is that I enjoy the privilege, as a critic writing in the same field a generation later, of not having to do the work of trailblazing. That is, Barr and Lefanu’s work is rhetorically situated as a defense of the field that they are pursuing. But beside the difference in rhetorical strategy and scope, Barr and Lefanu are the theoretical foremothers of this project. Their thesis, that readings of feminist SF in conjunction with feminist theory can be as strongly illuminative as readings of any other contemporary feminist fiction genre, is one of the major presuppositions of this study.

**Organization**

This study is organized into five chapters, each with a specific focus on a feminist theoretical problematic, and an analysis of how that problematic is addressed in works of
feminist SF. In the first chapter, “The Politics of ‘Sex’: The Difference that Difference Makes,” I focus on an early debate in second-wave feminist theory, one that continues to this day: the relationship between biological sexual difference and sexual politics. First, I team an analysis of Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex with a reading of Anne McCaffrey’s novella The Ship Who Sang. My object here is to discover how the “future” in Beauvoir’s study, her insistence on the importance of women’s relationship to their existential identity, relates to the fictional character of the feminine spaceship Helva, a disembodied existential subject par excellence. Next, I analyze Juliet Mitchell’s Woman: The Longest Revolution, in which she describes the relation between women’s biological difference and their oppression as overdetermined. Mitchell brings the idea of women’s overdetermined relationship to their oppression to bear on Marxist theory—her object is to describe why Marxist theory cannot account fully for women’s oppression, because this relation can’t be explained as a strictly economic one. I team this analysis with a reading of Ursula K. LeGuin’s The Dispossessed, which, I argue, does not adequately account for the overdeterminations of women’s oppression in its attempt to render a socialist society. Finally, I team an analysis of Kate Millett’s Sexual Politics with Joanna Russ’s The Two of Them. I demonstrate how the “future” in Millett’s work, her call for a reevaluation of how literary Modernism shapes and reflects sexual politics, is taken up by Russ, whose work constitutes a major reexamination of women’s relation to Modernity.

In chapter two, “The Politics of Biotechnology and the Discursivity of ‘Sex’: The Female Body as a Science-Fictional/Factual Text,” I look at feminist SF as an anticipatory interrogation of the future of women’s relationship to biotechnologies. I also
describe feminist theory’s history of citing technoscientific advances as proof of the
discursivity of the category “sex.” In the first section, I discuss the early interventions
into this field by Shulamith Firestone, whose speculations on the field of biogenetics
were, at the time (1970) that she wrote her study The Dialectic of Sex, science fiction in
their own right. I team this analysis with a reading of James Tiptree, Jr.’s “The Girl Who
Was Plugged In,” a novella that describes a dystopian intersection of women and
technoscience. Next I move on to an examination of Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg
Manifesto,” which I team with a reading of Angela Carter’s The Passion of New Eve that
draws out the similarities between Haraway and Carter’s visions regarding the strange
utopian potential of the cyborg body. In the second section, I look at feminist critiques of
the field of scientific inquiry and production, such as N. Katherine Hayles’ How We
Became Posthuman. I team this analysis with readings of Joan Slonczewski’s A Door
Into Ocean and Octavia Butler’s Xenogenesis trilogy, two works that describe in detail
the kinds of feminist revisions of technoscience that the “future” in feminist critiques of
the field suggest.

Chapter three, “Alien Sex Acts in Feminist SF: Heuristic Models for Thinking a
Feminist Future of Desire,” takes a somewhat different tactic: in this chapter, I analyze
the feminist theoretical and science-fictional interventions of three theorist/authors:
Monique Wittig, Angela Carter, and Samuel Delany. I demonstrate how, for each of
these authors, the creatively fabulated alien sex act functions as a corollary to her/his
theoretical speculations. For each of these authors, the fictional work articulates a
“future” that is posited in the theoretical work. I describe how Wittig, Carter, and
Delany’s creative visions include a problematization of existing Oedipal models of sexual
relations. I also describe how the depiction of alien sex acts begs the question of the contingencies built in to the act of fictional representation. This chapter includes analyses of Monique Wittig’s Les Guérillères and The Lesbian Body; Samuel Delany’s Trouble on Triton and Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand; and Angela Carter’s The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffmann.

In chapter four, “Feminist SF on Race: The Legacies of the Past,” I examine the legacies of colonialism and U.S. slavery, analyzing how feminist theorists such as Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, Hortense Spillers and bell hooks have assessed the lingering impact of these legacies on the subjective and interpellated identities of women of color. I read Tananarive Due’s short story “Like Daughter” as an exploration of how race complicates black women’s relationship to the ruling epistemes of global capitalism and Oedipus. Next, I read Nalo Hopkinson’s Brown Girl in the Ring as a creative exploration of what I describe as the “international division of culture,” the reifications of the indigenous cultural space produced by the dominance of global capitalism. In both readings, I describe how the survival strategies endorsed by black feminist theorists function as the “future” in their works, and how these strategies are enacted by Due and Hopkinson’s heroines.

In chapter five, “Alienation and Estrangement in Marx and SF: A Feminist Analysis,” I perform a feminist analysis of Marx’s development of the concepts of alienation and estrangement. I demonstrate that the worker’s estrangement and alienation from both herself and the products of her labor remain important concepts for Marx throughout his career. That is, although Marx changes his metaphor for the alienations enacted by capitalism as an animalizing force to a mechanizing one, his concern for the
worker’s alienation from the self is a theme common to both the Hegelian and post-Hegelian writings. I read Rebecca Ore’s *Outlaw School* and Nicola Griffith’s *Slow River* as creative expositions of the animalizing and mechanizing alienations enacted by capitalism and patriarchy. This chapter also features incorporations of the Marxist feminist analyses of Christine Delphy, Jane Thompson, and Jacky Brine. I also explore the implications of the “feminization” of the workforce enacted by globalism for Marxist feminist critique through an analysis of Kaja Silverman’s work on masculinity.

Works Cited


Chapter One

The Politics of “Sex”: The Difference that Difference Makes

In this chapter, I focus on three works—Simone De Beauvoir’s The Second Sex, Juliet Mitchell’s Women: The Longest Revolution, and Kate Millett’s Sexual Politics—that theorize the relationship between sex difference and sexual politics. Although these writers differ from one another in important ways, the central question that each work explores is the same: what is the nature of the difference that sexual difference makes in the determination of sexual politics? Unlike feminist works that explore primarily the determinations of gendered identity on the politics of sex, each of these works seeks to address the impact of the material bases of sexual difference upon sexual politics.

These works differ as well from the work of such theorists as Luce Irigaray or Hélène Cixous, which, although also arising from the basic thesis that sexual difference makes a difference, is dramatically different in its conclusions regarding the nature of the difference that difference makes. These radically differing conclusions are due in large part to the important impact that deconstructive philosophy makes on these later works, namely their preoccupation with thinking sexual difference as productive of just one particularized and interiorized instance of alterity: the feminine. According to these works, the difference that sexual difference makes is the production of an implicitly universal feminine relationship to everything from language to technology, a relationship whose peculiar specificities are produced by female physiology. The works I examine here are more interested in exploring the ramifications of sex difference in relation to the material, political sphere: for an author such as Juliet Mitchell or Beauvoir, any psychological alterity in women arising from sex difference is a historically specific and
highly contingent product of the interpellations wrought by the ruling class of men—not to be confused with men per se. In other words, for the authors I will examine here, sex difference may produce differences in consciousness, but they are seen as historically contingent manifestations of oppressed consciousness, not as the necessary and universal consequence of women’s relationship to their reproductive selves. For these authors, sexual difference is a materially bound text that has been read, with repressive results for women, by the vast majority of ruling class males through the historical ages. The object of these studies is to theorize how and in what ways sexual difference is deployed in the field of power relations, as politics; and how these relations, once they are more perfectly understood by the oppressed class of women, might be changed.

The object of my critical explorations of these studies is to determine how they might be illuminated further by comparison with works of feminist science fiction that were being produced during roughly the same period, and that evinced similar concerns about “the difference that (sexual) difference makes.” As I describe in my introduction, feminist science fiction’s generic modalities of extrapolation and cognitive estrangement are complimentary to the project of reading such fictions both as “test cases” of the applications of feminist theories to the field of social relations, and as critical expositions of specific contemporary instantiations of oppression based upon the politics of sexual difference.

The work that I begin with, Beauvoir’s The Second Sex, is a special case in several respects. Not only is its scope much more broadly historical than the other three works that I examine, but it is also fifteen years older than them. It also arises, more self-consciously and consistently than any other of the works I examine here, from Western
*philosophical*, as somewhat opposed to theoretical, traditions; specifically, from the intertwined projects of existentialism and high Modernism. However, due to the historical and temporal peculiarities mitigating its reception, it predated the discursive field within which it is now most commonly received—post-Fordist feminist theory and social practice--by some fifteen years. As Ruth Evans notes in her introduction to a recent (1998) collection of new interdisciplinary essays on Beauvoir, the problem of *The Second Sex*’s complex temporality must inevitably impact its reception:

> Though often assessed retrospectively as a momentous book, *The Second Sex*’s impact on English speakers was not immediate, and it is not now accorded, either in France, Britain, or America, an assured place within philosophical, feminist, or literary history. Ironically, its status as a ‘cult book’ for the year 1966—a category Will Self (writing in the Observer Life magazine) defines as a ‘text that influences mainstream culture only after its slow diffusion through the traditionally thin ranks of the avant-garde’—was only recognized in 1996. And despite Le Doeuff’s assertion that Beauvoir’s thoughts ‘galvanized women’s movements pretty well everywhere and helped get them going’ it has never been an inaugural text for modern feminism. Largely unacknowledged by the French, by philosophers and by the women’s movement alike, *The Second Sex* erupts into the present in a manner that dislocates it from its ‘proper’ place within the scheme of things, confounding attempts to present the truth of its history or its place in history. (1)
In the light of these observations, it does not seem useful here to claim historical significance for Beauvoir’s work within a feminist theoretical “line of influence.” Indeed, although all the theorists whose work I address in this chapter are historical materialists, I am not going to concern myself here with placing the thesis that I have named “the (political) difference that (sexual) difference makes” within a developmental chronology of feminist discourse. To do so would not only impose a (phallically) triumphal linearity on “The” history of feminist theory, but a false one as well. For, as I will discuss in the third chapter of this work, Monique Wittig takes up this thesis with tremendous results a good ten years after the publication date (1970) of the latest work I will discuss in this chapter. The reason I am beginning this chapter on the politics of sex with Beauvoir is twofold: first, because she addresses a question that I have already outlined as the subject matter of this exploration; and second, because in Beauvoir’s The Second Sex one finds at least the seeds, and in some cases the full philosophical groundwork, of every major theme that contemporary feminist theory has yet treated. Of particular relevance for this chapter, Beauvoir’s discussion of the relationship between feminist politics and ontology remains a pressing question for feminist theory.

Beauvoir identifies women’s reproductive capacity and her inferior physical strength—or rather, men’s identification of these differences as weaknesses—as the original and persistent stumbling blocks to women’s development as existential subjects:

Certain passages in the argument employed by Hegel in defining the relation of master to slave apply much better to the relation of man to woman. The advantage of the master, he says, comes from his affirmation of Spirit as against Life through the fact that he risks his own life; but in
fact the conquered slave has known this same risk. Whereas woman is basically an existent who gives Life and does not risk her life; between her and the male there has been no combat. Hegel’s definition would seem to apply especially well to her. He says: “The other consciousness is the dependent consciousness for whom the essential reality is the animal type of life; that is to say, a mode of living bestowed by another entity.” But this relation is to be distinguished from the relation of subjugation because woman also aspires to and recognizes the values that are concretely attained by the male. He it is who opens up the future to which she also reaches out. In truth women have never set up female values in opposition to male values; it is man who, desirous of maintaining masculine prerogatives, has invented that divergence. Men have presumed to create a feminine domain—the kingdom of life, of immanence—only in order to lock up women therein. But it is regardless of sex that the existent seeks self-justification through transcendence—the very submission of women is proof of that statement. What they demand today is to be recognized as existents by the same right as men and not to subordinate existence to life, the human being to its animality. (64-65)

For Beauvoir, the political difference that the sexual difference of the reproductive capacity makes is the originary factor mitigating women’s oppression by men; it is this particular difference that has provided men with an opportunity to relegate women’s “existent” capacity to her capacity to give life. Thus, it is not difference that makes the difference, but rather “masculine prerogatives” that read this difference as an occasion to
exercise domination. Frustratingly—for this reader of Beauvoir, at any rate—the reason for the predominance of “masculine prerogatives” is also given as the potential solution that women must grasp in order to attain autonomy. Beauvoir believes that “masculine prerogatives” are a manifestation of the more general, indeed universal, prerogative of humankind: the prerogative of the “existent,” or the subject of existential philosophy. For, as Beauvoir makes clear, “[It] is regardless of sex that the existent seeks self-justification through transcendence” (65). And it is women’s life-giving capacity, the reproductive capacity, which she identifies as an “immanent” capacity, that woman becomes reduced to by the prerogative of transcendence exercised by males. This is a paradox that Beauvoir never does resolve, and it is a paradox that speaks to what is for me the major drawback of The Second Sex: its insistence on an a priori existential subjectivity that demands “justification through transcendence.”

Given this paradox, that women’s subjugation is a function of the human subject’s existential prerogative, how does she propose that women will ever be able to assert themselves as “existents” who do not have their drive towards transcendence subordinated? Beauvoir believes that, within specific societal conditions, the authentic or “natural” relations between the sexes will be revealed. Thus, despite her prolonged critique of the patriarchal “other-ing” of women, Beauvoir finally believes that woman truly is different from, and other than, man—but that this pure version of other-ness can only serve a mutually positive function after it ceases to be used as a tool for oppression. Note the uncomfortable hybrid of Marxist and existentialist philosophy in the final paragraphs of the text:
when we abolish the slavery of half of humanity, together with the whole
system of hypocrisy that it implies, then the ‘division’ of humanity will
reveal its genuine significance and the human couple will find its true
form. “The direct, natural, necessary relation of human creatures is the
relation of man to woman,” Marx has said. “The nature of this relation
determines to what point man himself is to be considered as a generic
being, as mankind; the relation of man to woman is the most natural
relation of human being to human being. By it is shown, therefore, to
what point the natural behavior of man has become human or to what
point the human being has become the natural being, to what point his
human nature has become his nature.” The case could not be better
stated. It is for man to establish the reign of liberty in the midst of the
world of the given. To gain the supreme victory, it is necessary, for one
thing, that by and through their natural differentiation men and women
unequivocally affirm their brotherhood. (731-32)

Here, Beauvoir’s interpretation of Marx is forced to fit her existentialist agenda: for
Beauvoir, the non-hierarchical relationship between men and women, created and
sustained by and through their “natural” differences, will be revealed in the light of men’s
evolution into existentially enlightened beings. To the justification of this circular
argument, Beauvoir applies Marx, whose thesis here has more to do with economic
conditions than with gender relations. Marx’s argument is that one might use the state of
relations between men and women as a gauge by which to measure a given society’s
corruption by capitalist institutions such as the codification of “private” property, or the
problems presented by exchange-value. What Marx’s argument actually has in common with Beauvoir’s is merely that both put the cart before the horse: Marx, like Beauvoir, underestimates the overdetermined relationship that woman bears to culture; thus, we have the oversimplification that economic conditions produce women’s social and economic disenfranchisement.

It is interesting that Beauvoir employs Marx in the interests of her feminist existentialism: both positions presume a “natural” state of gender relations that will be produced by some form of male (!) enlightenment. Beauvoir’s theory, that women’s equality will be a product of men’s enlightenment as to the requirements of true existential liberty, seems rather a bleak possibility to hold out for, especially given her earlier recognition of the relative intractability of power relations:

She is accused of being servile: she is always ready, it is said, to lie down at her master’s feet and kiss the hand that strikes her, and it is true that she is generally lacking in real pride [. . .] Woman wears herself out in haughty scenes, and in the end gathers up the crumbs that the male cares to toss to her. But what can be done without masculine support by a woman for whom man is at once the sole means and the sole reason for living? She is bound to suffer every humiliation. (604)

If it is indeed the man who must prepare the ground for any radical change in gender relations, there is no reason to believe that he would consider gender equity to be a natural condition of his existential liberty. It is also unclear how and why “difference” would cease to function in a hierarchic manner. In sum, Beauvoir’s prescriptive moment presupposes a “natural” state of equitable gender relations that would reveal itself under
the appropriate conditions. However, women’s oppression by men depends on their insistence that women’s lot is determined by her “natural,” “immanent” function of life-giving—so we have already seen that the “natural” state of things is not necessarily very good for women. Beauvoir’s “immasculated” version of an existentialist feminist utopia figures the second sex as the grateful recipients, rather than the agents, of change.

The central philosophical question of Beauvoir’s work is whether sexual difference need be hierarchic. Beauvoir, of course, believes that it does not—for her, “other-ing” takes place in a patriarchal context and thus functions negatively for women. In the absence of patriarchy—or, in her terms, in the presence of existential enlightenment—other-ing will continue to exist, but in a non-hierarchic manner. Since the broader question of whether the ethics pertaining to equality or difference should form the basis of feminist critique is not likely to be resolved in the course of Beauvoir’s study or mine, I will focus on exploring and mapping the *contradictions* within the prescriptive moments of her work through a reading of Anne McCaffrey’s (1969) *The Ship Who Sang*. McCaffrey’s novella, actually a collection of short stories that she developed from her popular, eponymously titled short story, works well as a fictional exploration of how sexual difference might signify in a putatively post-patriarchal society. It is also an exploration of what function embodied sexuality plays in the formation of consciousness, a point on which Beauvoir remains ambiguous. At some points, Beauvoir argues that the fact of women’s reproductive capacity is, insurmountably, part of the *grounds* of women’s oppression; at other times, she seems to argue that women’s embodied differences are socially constructed in negative terms, and can thus be overcome.
McCaffrey’s novella The Ship Who Sang, an early work of McCaffrey’s prolific career as a writer of heavily fantasy-tinged, woman-centered novels, is an exemplary text for feminist science fiction: it is an example of the revisionary work being carried out in a self-conscious manner by a number of women writing in the genre in the early-to-mid sixties. A major part of this revisionary work was the production of science-fictional texts that featured heroines instead of heroes. McCaffrey's text leads us to consider the extent to which role-reversal—in Beauvoir’s terms, the production of the woman-as-existent—might engender feminist consciousness. My argument is that in McCaffrey's work we find the same problem as in Beauvoir’s: the political limits for feminism of reading existential transcendence as a human prerogative that women will ideally have the opportunity to strive to attain, once they are no longer limited by men to their role as “immanent” providers of life. In her work Feminism and Science Fiction, Sarah Lefanu points out that

Women as protagonists do not necessarily interrogate the social and literary construction of women as gendered subjects. Creating a female protagonist simply seems to me an obvious stratagem a science fiction writer can adopt to offset the weight of books-by-men-for-men under which the reader sometimes feels herself squashed. My emphasis, then, is not on female characters as simple protagonists; but on the how and the why and the to what end. (25)

It is on these same questions that I focus in my consideration of the implications for Beauvoir’s theory on the future of feminist social practice; the specific question that I pose to both McCaffrey’s and Beauvoir’s texts is, What difference can the female
The Ship Who Sang is the story of Helva, one of an elite group of children with terrible physical deformities who, because their performance on intelligence tests confirms their capacity to live a meaningful life, is enrolled from infancy in a government training program instead of being terminated. Helva and her comrades are disembodied geniuses, children whose brains have been transferred from their devastated bodies into mechanical apparatuses through which they interact with their environment, which is in this exceptional case a training school for their future careers as spaceships. This form of disembodied consciousness is the reverse of the later cyberpunk concept of the computer AI, (artificial intelligence), an intelligence that begins its life as a mechanical entity and develops sentience later on. In The Ship Who Sang, the ship intelligence is a human brain that retains the concept of its former embodied consciousness to a remarkable degree, even to the point of strongly identifying with the traditional gender traits of its original sex. The challenge for the human ship consciousness is developing a sense of its non-organic “body,” and learning to manipulate it effectively.

From the outset of the novel, when Helva is transferred into the mechanical apparatus that serves as a training version of the ship that she will one day control, she is strongly identified with specifically “feminine” traits. The first of these feminine traits emerges in Helva’s childhood, when she learns that she is quite good at manipulating what serve as her vocal cords: in other words, she develops a taste for singing. In the short story version of this tale, Helva’s singing is limited in purpose to soothing and entertaining her crewmembers, scouts, and fellow ships. In the novel, however, Helva
uses her talent to avert serious disaster: thus, a trait originally coded as a container of
gender difference is used to serve both feminine and heroic (masculine) ends. The world
of The Ship Who Sang can be read as a version of De Beauvoir’s concept of
“enlightened” difference: although only a small section of the population leads Helva’s
type of disembodied existence, and sex/gender differences still operate, this society is
apparently non-discriminatory in terms of sex and gender difference. Women as well as
men hold positions of power, and planets where traditional, discriminatory sex and
gender roles are upheld are viewed as backwards and dangerous. Although the society
portrayed is not explicitly based on existential metaphysics, it is an enlightened,
individualist society in which sex/gender signifies in all traditional ways excepting
discrimination—women, for instance, still are the primary reproducers, but are not
discriminated against for being so (some, though not a majority, of children are
developed through in vitro fertilization, a technology that was still, at the time that
McCaffrey wrote, technically science fiction). However, the novel does not focus heavily
on the society that produces Helva—the society’s gender equity is presented as a fact
without explanation. It is a significant fact, though, in terms of how we read Helva’s
specifically gender-coded behavior.

The novel quite self-consciously figures Helva as a being with feminine
characteristics. Those critics who might claim that the novel fails as an attempt to re-
figure feminine sexuality would most certainly cite Helva’s unmistakably feminine traits,
traits that signify women’s inferiority in our patriarchal culture. But McCaffrey is up to
something more here than describing the exploits of a cute spaceship—the more pertinent
question, if we take for granted the fact that McCaffrey consciously styles Helva as
feminine, is whether or not she manages to convincingly portray a society in which sex
and gender difference are non-discriminatory. A closer look at the sexual politics of the
spaceship culture that McCaffrey develops will help to answer this question.

Each spaceship is comprised of two entities: the ship itself, controlled by the
human brain located behind a central panel within the ship, is called the “brain.” The
ship requires “brawn,” a male or female agent who interacts with the ship in carrying out
missions for the government. This reversal of the traditional association of female with
body and male with mind produces some interesting scenes, although this reversal is not
sustained throughout the novel. Helva, for instance, invariably prefers male brawns, with
whom she enjoys openly flirtatious relationships. This preference is clearly based on the
traditional terms of heterosexual desire, despite the fact that Helva is a disembodied
woman, and thus clearly unable to physically consummate her sexual desires. Male
brawns are more fun, nobler; they tend to have fewer emotional problems than female
brawns, and they pay Helva specifically courtly attention. Female brawns disappoint her:
“‘KH-834, your ‘brawn’ is on her way with assignment tape,’ Cencom alerted her. Helva
acknowledged the message, excitement stirring within her. It was almost a relief to
receive a double-initial call, the pleasure overriding her twinge of regret that her ‘brawn’
partner was feminine” (53-54). Although Helva eventually makes a friend of her female
brawn, compare this scene with an earlier assignment pairing:

‘This is XH-834. Would the unassigned scouts do me the favor of
coming aboard?’
Eight figures galvanized into action, grabbing pieces of wearing apparel, disengaging tape mechanisms, disentangling themselves from bedsheets and towels.…

Helva was engulfed in an unshell-like flurry of anticipation. No actress on her opening night could have been more apprehensive, fearful, or breathless. Unlike the actress, she could throw no hysterics, china objets d’art or grease-paint to relieve her tension. She could, of course, check her stores for edibles and drinks, which she did. (9)

Here Helva, a sixteen-year-old “virgin” ship, is “boarded” for the first time by prospective brawns, one of whom she will choose as a permanent partner. This scene, and her subsequent relationship with the brawn she finally does choose, are described in terms of traditionally gendered courtship, love, and consummation. The difference between this scene and human-human courtship is power: Helva is in absolute control of who she chooses as a partner. As a ship’s brain, Helva has developed intelligence far superior to any brawn, and is in almost full control of the huge ship that hosts her meager physical “shell life.” On the other hand, she is quite dependent upon the male brawns, who dominate her emotional life.

The Ship Who Sang is a deeply contradictory novel. In The Second Sex, Beauvoir’s analysis of the history of women’s oppression is couched, in keeping with her existentialist project, in highly individualist terms. This focus on the plight of the individual female psyche tends, unfortunately, to overwhelm consideration of the material bases of women’s oppression, so that, for instance, a consideration of women in a specific historical period often devolves into an unstructured consideration of female
character traits which, without adequate stress on the historical contexts in which they arise, come off as discussions of the varying types of universal female perversity. The Ship Who Sang suffers from the same problem—the novel focuses on Helva’s exceptional personality, her exceptional position in her culture as the disembodied feminine. Helva is the existential subject par excellence—she thinks, therefore she is, quite literally. The implication here is that, in order for female autonomy to be realized, women must transcend the limits of the body. And indeed, Helva is in many ways better off than an embodied woman in the mid-twentieth century: she has physical and intellectual power, she is immune to the vestiges of reproductive politics, and she has an important and rewarding job. On the other hand, she is the necessarily physically unfulfilled object of male desire. In this way, the novel is structurally quite similar to Beauvoir’s contradictory theories regarding embodiment (specifically, the capacity to reproduce) as the grounds of women’s oppression. Helva has transcended embodiment, so that the reproductive capacity can no longer be the grounds of her oppression. On the other hand, she continues to identify strongly with her former embodied sexual status, and she continues to be objectified as an embodied female subject—from mother to mothership. Helva is apparently incapable of being happy without a male partner, and she is faithful to her job as an employee of her paternalistic government’s “Central Command.” As a ship and a woman, Helva is quite plainly a site of overdetermined otherness, an otherness that paradoxically functions both as a source of power and as a source for Helva’s willing participation in her own objectification. Helva is in many ways the very ideal of a Beauvoirian woman “existent,” except for the fact that she isn’t a woman, she’s a disembodied female-identified consciousness. Helva signifies the
necessarily contradictory nature of Beauvoir’s prescriptive theoretical moment: she becomes the existential subject *par excellence*, but at the cost of a humanly embodied identity. Furthermore, we find that it isn’t just sexual difference that makes all the difference; as Helva’s relationships with her “brawns” indicate, philogyny recapitulates misogyny regardless of ontology.

Three years after the publication of *The Feminine Mystique*, which had a major impact on Americans’ consciousness of the issue of sexual politics, Juliet Mitchell published the long essay “Women: The Longest Revolution” in the *New Left Review*. In a 1984 preface to this important and radical essay, Mitchell explains her relationship to the work of Friedan and Beauvoir:

> Written before there was a women’s movement in Britain and before I was aware of feminist stirrings in the United States following Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, I found it satisfying that feminists thus made [my essay] retrospectively their own. It was widely translated. My interest in women arose negatively. As a student I had read Simone De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* and thought it brilliant but somehow applicable only to some inexplicable predicament of French women. I was active in the New Left, where we were then preoccupied with the countries of the Third World. It was Frantz Fanon’s argument from his Algerian experience that women—a conservative force—should be emancipated only after a revolution that provoked my indignation and tied in with my personal experience. (17)
Although she does not claim the influence of either Beauvoir or Friedan, Mitchell shares with both the distinction of producing pioneering, original feminist theory out of a vacuum of popular and institutional support. Friedan’s critical stance arises from the distinctly American preoccupations with democracy, equality, and individualism; Beauvoir writes out of the desire to frame issues of sex and gender within existentialism; Mitchell’s project is to introduce radical feminism into the critical framework of Marxism.

Mitchell’s work was inspired by her recognition of the fact that, even in the most politically radical circles, the circumstance of the systematic exploitation of half of the world’s population was not considered worthy of serious contemplation. Regarding this problem, she notes that “The problem of the subordination of women and the need for their liberation was recognized by all the great socialist thinkers in the nineteenth century [. . .] Yet today, in the West, the problem has become a subsidiary, if not an invisible element in the preoccupations of socialists” (19). An important part of Mitchell’s project in this essay is to re-assert the centrality of feminist critique to any socialist or Marxist reform movement. Mitchell uses the presuppositions of Marxist theory to illustrate why Marxism is not a sufficient framework within which to comprehend the plight of women. The essay is a critique of the Marxian “economist understanding of the position of women” (18). This essay demonstrates that the Marxist critical framework is incapable of satisfactorily addressing the “difference that difference makes” because it tends, finally, to absolutize all societal ills as arising from the problem of private property. Because of this tendency, women’s marginalization is seen as primarily a function of capitalist economy. When women’s plight is addressed at all in Marxist theory, her
marginalization is seen as resulting from her status as an object of property: thus, the implicit thesis of Marxist theory is that women will cease to be discriminated against when the problem of private property is resolved. The problem with this critique, posits Mitchell, following Althusser’s work on ideology and overdetermination, is that “Because the unity of woman’s condition at any one time is the product of several structures, it is always ‘overdetermined’” (26). Thus, as the case of Beauvoir’s existentialism and her application of Marx illustrate negatively, complex feminist critique must be capable of addressing the multiple and fragmented sites of women’s oppression.

In many recent accounts of the history of feminist theory, second wave feminists are accused of paying insufficient attention to the ways in which feminist issues are complicated by class, ethnicity, and race. In these accounts, feminism was until fairly recently an elite club of white, bourgeois, educated women who felt that speaking for the oppressed “other” woman was “the white woman’s burden.” But we see that Juliet Mitchell, quite early in the second wave era, recognized that women’s condition was necessarily overdetermined—that her condition was not only one of a certain universal level of oppression, but was also informed by multiple factors. This allows Mitchell to note that there are important distinctions between the types of sex-and-gender-based oppression experienced by white women in industrialized societies, Chinese mothers, and African field workers—just to name a few of the examples in the essay. Mitchell’s grounding as a reformer of late sixties leftist politics vitally informs her perspective as an international feminist theorist. Thus we see that the discussion about the polyvalence of

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2 See Susan Gubar’s “What Ails Feminist Criticism?” for an interesting critique of how the history of second wave-to-third wave feminist academic criticism is written, problematically, as both a triumphant teleological evolution of ideas and as disengagement with feminism’s commitment to the material conditions of women’s oppression.
women’s oppression is not a conversation invented by academic liberal feminist apologists in the wake of multicultural discourse and poststructuralist theory, but was, rather, introduced by some of the pioneers of the second wave.

For Mitchell, the ontological “difference” grounding women’s sexual difference from men is an important and importantly partial element of women’s oppression. That is, although Mitchell notes the important part that sexual difference plays in the formation and deployment of sexual politics, she is always careful to cast this difference as part of a complex of over determining structures. Also, as a historical materialist, she is ever careful to note how historical and material conditions mitigate the severity and the particularity of women’s oppression:

Because the unity of woman’s condition at any one time is the product of several structures, it is always ‘overdetermined.’ The key structures can be listed as follows: Production, Reproduction, Sex and Socialization of Children. The concrete combination of these produces the ‘complex unity’ of her position; but each separate structure may have reached a different ‘moment’ at any given historical time. Each then must be examined separately in order to see what the present unity is and how it might be changed. (26)

In her assessment of the impact of the reproductive capacity of women on their oppression, Mitchell points out that the seeming ahistoricity or universality of this capacity has tended to present a problem for Marxist or historical materialist critics. After all, one cannot deny that women’s reproductive capacity has remained a materially constant constituent of human experience since the beginnings of the species. Mitchell
does not deny this fact—she does concede that sexual difference must make a difference. But what sort of difference, and to what extent? She concludes, in this particular not unlike Beauvoir, that it is the reduction of women to their role as reproductive beings, and not their role as reproductive beings per se, that is the problem. “Unlike her non-productive status, her capacity for maternity is a definition of woman. But it is only a physiological definition. So long as it is allowed to remain a substitute for action and creativity, and the home an area of relaxation for men, woman will remain confined to the species, to her universal and natural condition” (34). Thus, the (political) difference that (sexual) difference makes is indeed based in part on the ontological dimension, but is ultimately dependent on how that difference is read, and the centrality that it is accorded.

My reading of Ursula K. Le Guin’s (1974) novel The Dispossessed reinforces Mitchell’s thesis that Marxist theory requires an integral engagement with women’s oppression in order to function as a more validly complex critique of ideology. Le Guin’s novel explores the functions and contradictions of two worlds and their very different political systems. One world, Urras, is a version of late capitalist society, one in which the oppression of women and the gap between rich and poor have become even more advanced. But Le Guin’s considerable powers of science-fictional “worlding” are primarily focused on Anares, the 170-year-old anarchist society founded by a pioneer group of disaffected Urrasti. The Annaresti follow the teachings of Odo, the late female anarchist philosopher whose poetic writings serve as their guide for enlightened anarchist existence.

3 I’m focusing here on Le Guin’s The Dispossessed instead of what may seem to be the more obvious work to scrutinize for the relationship between sex difference and the political, The Left Hand of Darkness, because the work I chose for this chapter relates more directly to Mitchell’s work on the intersections of Marxism and feminism.
Although Mitchell’s critique focuses on feminism and *Marxism*, and Le Guin’s novel focuses on the rewards and contradictions of an organized *anarchy*, (the cursory treatment of Thu, a Communist society in the novel, reveals Le Guin’s deep ambiguity—in some cases outright misapprehension—of Communism) the novel nonetheless works for the purpose of this critique, through which I hope to demonstrate that no radical, political restructuring of society can work without primary reconsideration of sexual as well as economic systems of oppression. This reading moves outward from Samuel Delany’s important 1976 critique of Le Guin’s novel, “To Read *The Dispossessed*.” Delany’s critique of the novel is based on what he sees as Le Guin’s inattention to the writerly capacities of science fiction as a discrete genre. Delany illustrates the disappointing extent to which Le Guin fails to actualize her claims about the radical restructuring of sexual politics on Annares. Delany ascribes this failure not only to Le Guin’s own obviously ambiguous relationship to the professed sexual politics of Annares, but, more importantly (for him), her failure to engage fruitfully with the kinds of estrangement and linguistic re-ordering of the fictional universe which he argues that science fiction is uniquely equipped to offer. He refers to the specifically science-fiction model which holds that the origin both of ideas and social behavior—especially when the author is free to speculate and invent what she cannot know—is of equal interest with the ideas and behavior itself. This concept, that ideas and behavior, however natural/moral/unquestionable, have effective social histories, is one of the indubitably significant messages that informs science fiction’s inchoate textus. (This message is *not* intrinsic to the textus of mundane fiction)
there is hardly an s-f writer who has not expended some considerable amount of whatever linguistic inventiveness she possesses on presenting a compressed, syntactic, or imagistic representation of [. . .] an ideohistory. (249-250)

Delany’s major concern, then, is with how Le Guin fails to provide an “ideohistorical” accounting of Anares’s sexual politics.

I agree with Delany that The Dispossessed falls short of the ideohistorical project that it sets forth, and I also agree with Delany that, despite this fact, the novel is nonetheless certainly worth scrutinizing. As an extension of Delany’s, my reading will focus specifically on what I see as Le Guin’s failed project of re-worlding sexual politics, and what this failure can tell us about the overdeterminations of sexual difference for women. Within the first 50 pages of the novel, Le Guin announces, once in specifically didactic terms and several times “parenthetically,” in what Delany calls science fiction’s fait accompli mode, (that science fictional mode in which an event that would be remarkable in our present tense experience is related without comment or analysis) that the anarchic Annaresti society is quite radically liberated in terms of its sexual politics. We are told that any manner of non-violent, consensual sexual behavior is condoned, in individuals of any age. Non-institutionalized, private “partnership” arrangements have replaced marriage. Children are raised in communal dormitories after they are weaned, at which point originary biological maternal and paternal claims cease to be necessarily significant. The hyper-capitalist Urrastis’ gross specularization of the female body is a turn-off for the Annaresti, who use film footage of shaved, oiled, and adorned Urrasti female bodies as anti-“propertarian” (market economy; in this case, advanced capitalist)
propaganda. Finally, we are told, no form of sex or gender-based discrimination exists. However, other than the careful portrayal of sexual equality in the workforce—and everyone works except for a few social outcasts—the novel manages to subtly and not so subtly undermine all of its promises about a liberated sexual politics.

What makes this systematic undermining of the novel’s own presuppositional framework so interesting is that it is obviously not the result of sloppy work: Le Guin’s portrayal of the subtle contradictions that inhere in Annares’ radical political system, as well as her comparison of Annares and the not-so-subtly contradictory Urras, are extremely sophisticated, both in terms of sheer writerly craft and in their dialectical interplay with political history. Nonetheless, it is as though Le Guin, for all of her deep comprehension of social and economic radicalism, is unable to conceive of a sexually liberated politics in detailed novelistic terms. I read this authorial failure as a mark of proof of Mitchell’s claim regarding the “difference that difference makes.” Mitchell iterates “production” as one of the key determining structures of women’s oppression. I identify Le Guin’s creative production, the novel under consideration here, as one specific illustration of the claim that the key structure of “production” is an overdetermined site of women’s oppression.

Although we are told that sex discrimination is nonexistent, Takver, the protagonist Shevek’s partner, notes that her earlier advice to Shevek to publish an important work of scientific theory with a propertarian colleague was clouded by her state of mind during her pregnancy:

“I’ll tell you what was wrong. I was pregnant. Pregnant women have no ethics. Only the most primitive kind of sacrifice impulse. To hell with the
book, and the partnership, and the truth, if they threaten the precious fetus!
It’s a racial preservation drive, but it can work right against community;
it’s biological, not social. A man can be grateful he never gets into the
grip of it. But he’d better realize than [sic] a woman can, and watch out
for it. I think that’s why the old archisms [forms of government] used
women as property. Why did the women let them? Because they were
pregnant all the time—because they were already possessed, enslaved!”
(332)

Although Le Guin has told us that sex discrimination does not exist, a late generation
Annaresti who could not possibly have internalized this pernicious brand of quasi-
biologic discrimination appears to take it for granted that fertility equals diminution of
intellect. The use of the term “possessed” here is significant as well, for the title of the
book references both the fact that Annares is a hardship culture of people who have
dispossessed themselves of the riches of Urras, as well as the concept that they are not
psychically “possessed” by the drive towards propertarianism. For Takver to posit that
women of childbearing years are a naturally “possessed,” propertarian race undermines
the hope for true anarchic society for over half the population. Finally, this scene
demonstrates the degree to which Le Guin herself must be “possessed” by the
overdeterminations of her own act of authorial production. The treatment of the politics
of reproduction has escaped one of the primary stated intentions of Le Guin’s creative
production.4

4 Gwennyth Jones, in her critical work Deconstructing the Starships, posits an interesting thesis in regard to
Le Guin’s own “possession” by the sexism that she purports to disavow. Jones argues that Le Guin’s
feminist politics are expressed in the landscapes of her fictions, which are idealized as feminine spaces. “In
The overdeterminations of the structure of female authorial production can also be seen in Shevek’s reaction to Urrasti sexual mores. Although Shevek has learned to react to the fetishistic specularization of women as not just distasteful but utterly alien, he reacts with titillation to Urras’s heavily commodified, sexist culture the moment he steps on board the ship that will transport him to Urras:

When first aboard the ship, in those long hours of fever and despair, he had been distracted, sometimes pleased and sometimes irritated, by a grossly simple sensation: the softness of the bed. Though only a bunk, its mattress gave under his weight with caressing suppleness. It yielded to him, yielded so insistently that he was, still, always conscious of it while falling asleep. Both the pleasure and the irritation it produced were decidedly erotic. There was also the hot-air-nozzle-towel device: the same kind of effect. A tickling. And the design of the furniture in the officer’s lounge, the smooth plastic curves into which stubborn wood and steel had been forced, the smoothness and delicacy of surfaces and textures: were these not also faintly, pervasively erotic? He knew himself well enough to be sure that a few days without Takver, even under great stress, should not get him so worked up that he felt a woman in every table top. Not unless the woman was really there. (19)

This scene serves well to show the level of awareness of political complexity and complicity operating in the text. The passage brilliantly exposes the hyper-commodified “sexiness” of late capitalist culture and its artifacts. Le Guin demystifies here the concept accepting this model feminist writers embrace an age-old tradition, in which ‘woman’ and landscape are one” (203).
of the apolitical aesthetic realm: we get a real feeling for how intertwined the economic and cultural modes of production are—even the tabletops speak of the complicity between sex and commodification. Shevek has a profound response to this principle: he feels the full force of how contrary his homeland Annares, with its survival-oriented, anarchistic mode of cultural production, is to Urras’s advanced technology and sexual fetishization. However, there is apparently no contest between the two cultures in terms of their relative sex appeal: propertarianism is sexy. The passage also further illustrates Le Guin’s inability to adhere to the radical sexual politics putatively operating on Annares. It is understandable that Shevek would recognize the sexual tenor of commodity-based cultural production, but there is no explanation for why he responds by being titillated. The response simply has no context within the ideohistorical pretensions of the novel, and thus it seems to undermine Le Guin’s critique of the relationship between the economic and the aesthetic by reifying the aesthetic productions of the free-market economy. There is no other explanation for Shevek’s response than that propertarian culture is somehow essentially, naturally, (and heterosexually) sexy.

Shevek’s relationship with his mother, Rulag, also betrays Le Guin’s inability to effectually render her a priori claim that childrearing is a communal process, that the social significance of biological maternity and paternity ends with the life stage of infancy. After this point, multiple parental figures become an integral part of the child’s life—so much so that the pronoun changes from the possessive “my” mother/father to the less specific “the” mother/father. However, Shevek feels that his birth mother’s decision to move away and leave him with his father when he is a young child constitutes an unforgivable act of abandonment. Delany’s concept of the ideohistorical dimension of
science fiction comes strongly to bear again here; for it is not as though the reader requires of Le Guin a certain type of sexual political episteme that she fails to deliver. One simply expects that the events that unfold in the novel will follow the author’s own map. Instead, Shevek feels profoundly abandoned by his mother—we also infer that he blames the later death of his father on his mother, that Rulag somehow failed in her (socially unprecedented) role as the domestic unifying force of the family.

The reader encounters Rulag in two contexts after she leaves Shevek during his childhood: once, when she cares for him at a hospital when he falls severely ill, and later, when she becomes one of the most vocal opponents of his plan to go to Urras, to break the reign of silence between the two worlds and facilitate the exchange of ideas and information. In the first scene, the fact that Rulag does not respond to her meeting with her biological son with remorseful emotional intensity is distressing to Shevek. In the final instance of their interaction, Shevek and his closest friends conclude that Rulag is emotionally petty and disturbed because of her opposition to her son’s plan to study at Urras, despite the fact that opposition to Shevek’s plan to break the 170-year silence between Urras and Annares is widespread. Her resistance seems to Shevek to be very much out of character with the sort of emotional support one might expect from a parent. We see here again that the novel is at conflict with its own presuppositions regarding sexual politics—the scenes that are designed to support the novel’s presuppositional framework vis à vis Urras’s egalitarian sexual politics invariably betray the terms of that framework. Within Mitchell’s Marxist feminist logic, which names production as one of the key structures regulating women’s oppression, LeGuin’s failure to actualize
egalitarian sexual politics in the science-fictional mode of the *fait accompli* can be read as a proof of the sexist overdeterminations of production.

Kate Millett’s work operates similarly to Mitchell’s in that it is also concerned with demonstrating the primacy of sex difference for sexual politics: in this case, in the formation of political discourse and the Western “literary” canon. Again, the fact of women’s oppression is not only *reflected* in political and literary discourses; these discourses also serve as a *productive* site of power and knowledge. Millett’s *Sexual Politics* (1970) was and continues to be a groundbreaking text in several ways. Its overall thesis, that sex difference functions as a *political* category, has deep implications for the connection between feminist theory and practice. Mitchell demonstrates how the category Women is overdetermined by ideological structures, not absolutes, and calls for the denaturalization of female sex *and* gender roles through the application of a Marxist theory re-formed by feminism. Millett takes this thesis a step further, demonstrating how *all* of the structures that make up a social formation—religion, science, literature, myth, educational practices—are structured, and function, to condone and promote the oppression of women. Millett’s critique can be seen as an expansion of Mitchell’s categories of Woman’s overdetermined status, in which we see that, not only does sex have a political dimension, but also that sex is, indeed, a political category. This concept, that the sexual is political, was and continues to be the single most important development for feminist theory, because it opens up all aspects of culture, from advertising to medicine to philosophy, to denaturalization: the oppression of women can be read as a polyvalent text of cultural discourses, all in need of examination and revision.
Sexual Politics was also a breakthrough text because of the audience it reached—it received a large amount of both popular and academic response, much of it virulently negative. Millett was branded as a demon, a Communist, an emasculator: the level of anger that she inspired matched the radical intensity of her thesis. The praxis orientation of Millett’s work is embedded within her entire critique—if sex is a political category, then it is also subject to change. If oppression is written into our literary tradition, then it can be re-written. Millett’s analysis of the literary tradition of misogyny drew fire not only from academic circles, which was, after all, to be expected, but from the popular press as well. Although the concept that the aesthetic has a political function was certainly not new, it took an analysis of the politics of women’s oppression underpinning the literary aesthetic to make this critical commonplace a subject of popular concern.

Millett’s rhetorical savvy is apparent in the very organization of the text, which opens with a sexually explicit scene from Henry Miller’s Sexus, followed by a condensed version of the type of in-depth analysis that constitutes the second half of her study. Henry Miller uses pornographic images to titillate the reader and to glorify misogynist ideology. Kate Millet deploys Henry Miller’s putatively transgressive themes and language to generate interest in her critique, to demonstrate from the outset in the most overt manner possible the connection between literature and the politics of sexual oppression. Millett defines politics as “power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another” (23). Within a theoretical framework that defines politics as an unequal system of power relations, Millett shows that patriarchy is both a universal and primary system of political oppression. This definition allows Millett to theorize how different power structures in different
communities produce differing levels and types of sexual oppression. Sexual politics is a system that is perpetuated by the necessity of women’s consent to and participation in their own oppression.

Betty Friedan’s earlier prescriptive moment locates the possibility of women’s liberation in her participation in and eventual assimilation to masculinist culture. Millett contends that such assimilation would be impossible, because the politics of sexual oppression is a constitutive dimension of every conceivable aspect of our culture. In this case, the practical goal is not to join the game, but to change the rules of the game itself. Uncritical participation in patriarchal culture is a losing game for women: as Millett points out, the ideological structure of sexual oppression, at least in the case of the U.S. and Europe, has a (necessarily limited) capacity for women’s participation built into it. This dimension of ideological sexual oppression functions in the same way as institutionalized racism—token positions of power are allotted to people of color as a means of putatively demonstrating the potential for equal representation. Such a scheme conveniently places the burden of representation on the oppressed themselves, who, it is implied, might gain power if they were capable of doing so. Millett’s exposure of this ideology problematizes the possibility that we might use the master’s tools to take apart the master’s house. For Millett, sexuality is a politically constructed text that requires exposure and revision.

Millett’s work is also groundbreaking because it provides the first sustained feminist critique of the Western literary canon, specifically the culture of high Modernism, by feminism’s second wave. Millett was the first literary critic to show that, not only does Modernist literature have a marked bias towards masculine authorship and
themes, but it is also complicit, much more so than the earlier texts of F.R. Leavis’s “Great Tradition,” in the perpetuation of women’s subjugation. From Lawrence to Miller to Mailer, Kate Millett illustrates that one of Modernist literature’s primary ideological themes is the naturalization of the subjugation of women. Whether the mode is Lawrence’s glorification of the “natural” feminine and masculine characters, Mailer’s figuration of sex relations in terms of warfare, or Miller’s transparent equation of masculinity with the violently physical subjugation of women, each author’s work serves to reinforce a politics of oppression. What Millett posits, and draws out through her favorable appraisal of Genet’s work on the connection between masculinity and homosexuality, is that literature and literary criticism are important sites for feminist revision.

Millett conducts a historical paradigm shift study that depends on the articulation of two broad time frames: the “sexual revolution,” dated 1830-1930, and the “counterrevolution,” dated from 1930-1960. Although she cites neither of their works, Millett’s project is similar in some important respects to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s critique of the perversion of Enlightenment values, most succinctly sustained through their co-authored work, The Dialectic of Enlightenment. Like Adorno and Horkheimer, Millett describes the “counterrevolutionary” period as that period in which potentially utopian, although by no means unproblematic, aspects of Enlightenment ideology were perverted by historical circumstances which catalyzed the return of a barbaric myth-as-epistemology that was the original object of the Enlightenment’s reform. For both studies, Nazi Germany is the epitome of the betrayal

5 Theodor Adorno’s articulation of the problematic of reification of the “natural” attributes of the sexes in Minima Moralia rhymes neatly with Millett’s critique of Lawrencian sexual politics: “Glorification of the ‘feminine’ character implies the humiliation of all who bear it” (96).
of Enlightenment values—although Millett’s equally astute treatment of this shift in the ideology of the Soviet Union is notable. This betrayal is enacted, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, by a historical philosophical shift that privileges the dominance of reason over nature. Millett draws out the implications for feminism of this paradigm shift; namely, the equation of women, as reproductive beings, with nature—which must necessarily be dominated by the male ruling class’s “reason.” For Millett, then, the projects of literary and social scientific Modernity are necessarily ideologically dependent on a counterrevolutionary stance with regards to women’s rights.

Millett’s thesis regarding the specifically sexual revolutionary potential of the Victorian era is echoed by Michel Foucault’s subsequent work on *The History of Sexuality*, which posits famously that, contrary to popular analysis of the prudery of that period, the Victorian era was in fact awash in discursive preoccupations with sex. Millett is in fact the pioneer of this thesis, which she sets forth in her chapter on the “first phase” of the sexual revolution:

What are [this period’s] claims to have made a beginning at sexual revolution? One might object, that since the Victorian period was so notoriously inhibited, the era between 1830 and 1930 could accomplish nothing at all in the area of sexual freedom. Yet it is important to recall that as sexual suppression in the form of “prudery” reached a crisis in this period, only one course out of it was possible—relief. The last three decades of the nineteenth century as well as the first three decades of the twentieth century were a time of greatly increasing sexual freedom for both sexes. This in particular meant the attainment of a measure of sexual
freedom for women, the group who in general had never been allowed much, if any, such freedom without a devastating loss of social standing, or the dangers of pregnancy in a society with strong sanctions against illegitimate birth. The first phase achieved a good measure of social freedom and/or equity by struggling toward a single standard of morality. The Victorians worked rather illogically at this in two ways. While they strove to remove the onus from the “fallen woman,” they tried with a frequently naïve optimism to raise boys to be as “pure” as girls. However humorous a spectacle they present in these efforts, theirs was the first period in history that faced and tried to solve the issue of the double standard and the inhumanities of prostitution. A superficial knowledge of the reactionary era which succeeded the first phase might lead one to imagine it to be the more significant era of sexual freedom. Such is not in fact the case, for the liberalization of this period is hardly more than a continuation or diffusion of that begun before it. Often subverted for patriarchal ends it acquired a new exploitative character of its own. (62-63)

Millett traces the “new exploitative character” of the counterrevolutionary period towards women through several root causes, noting among the more prominent causes the Great Depression, the rise of fascist power structures in several key European countries, and a general trend towards conservatism that seemed to mark the inter- and post-World Wars’ years in America and abroad. But the developments that she focuses on primarily are the social sciences, specifically both the vulgar and clinical interpretations of Freud’s
pathology of the “feminine;” and some of the late stylistic and thematic developments of literary Modernism. In these two structures of oppression, to borrow a key concept from Juliet Mitchell, Millett traces the resurgence of a myopic barbarism that the revolutionary period’s proponents of Enlightenment rationality attempted, however problematically, to derail. The difference Millett focuses on between pre-revolutionary and counterrevolutionary barbarism is the latter’s perniciously effective mobilization of various discourses of rationality: for the social sciences, the discourse that rationalizes women’s oppression as a necessary and natural form of domination; and within literary Modernism, the development of an allusive, neo-mythical style that drew attention to the ahistoricity of (sexual) relations, as well as a tendency towards the incorporation of emergent anthropological and psychological “discoveries” regarding sexual roles. In the case of literary Modernism, these late developments subverted that general artistic movement’s original rejection of bourgeois values by both creating and reflecting the “silent sexism” that came to pervade this historical era’s new bourgeois liberal ideology.

It is important to note that Millett does not claim that a thoroughgoing sexual revolution took place in what she delineates as the revolutionary period. The important distinction between the two eras in terms of their sexual politics is that, in the revolutionary period, ideas related to revolution and social reconstruction were being taken seriously on a large scale; and that, furthermore, even the reactionary models of sexual politics being suggested by the leading artists, intellectuals, and politicians of this era were less pernicious than those of the counterrevolutionary period that followed. This is because even the reactionary models proposed in this period were not cloaked in the legitimating and dominative discourses of scientific reason. Millett argues that this level
of discourse represents a threat much more dire than the chivalrous or gothic discursive modes of the revolutionary period’s reactionary political models. The legitimation of sex-based oppression through social scientific discourse virtually stopped the conversation regarding the reform of sexual politics in its tracks. Why argue for women’s equality when science was proving the necessity of their oppression? The particular discursive “cloaking devices” of the counterrevolutionary period initiated an unprecedented ubiquity and transparency for bourgeois liberal ideology’s sexist values.

Joanna Russ’s *The Two of Them* can be read as a novelistic problematization of both the pre- and counterrevolutionary era’s ideologies of sexual politics. Russ is a major contemporary feminist novelist, essayist, short story writer and literary critic. Her novels *The Female Man* (1975) and *The Two of Them* (1978) must both be classified as major late-twentieth century Modernist fictions. A major fictional work must both exemplify, and in some respect present a crucial modification of, its particular form(s); and these features must be expressed not only in the work’s themes, but in the execution of those themes through writerly craft as well. Both of these novels meet the criteria of major fictions, for what Russ undertakes and achieves in these novels is nothing less than a creative revision of literary Modernism in *radical* feminist interventionary terms. In *The Two of Them*, Russ renders visible the ubiquitous sexism that is necessarily embedded in modern bourgeois liberal humanism, especially in its putatively “progressive” contemporary manifestations, thus providing a much-needed exposition of the sexual politics of the dialectic of Enlightenment. At the same time she interrogates the limits of bourgeois liberal feminism by placing her white American protagonist in a fabricated future culture whose sexual politics echo those of a generically Arab country. At first
Irene, our white heroine, is both fascinated and disgusted by this strange culture, which is not in fact based upon an unbroken line of influence from its ancient roots but is, rather, a self-consciously stylized enactment of the culture described in *The Arabian Nights*, and is at the time present of the novel only in its third generation of existence. However, the longer Irene remains in this culture with her business and personal partner Ernst, the less grotesque the juxtaposition of the two cultures’ sexual politics becomes. Finally, what began for Irene as an exercise in white liberal compassion for the downtrodden women of Ka’abah becomes a profound moment of self-recognition as she comes to comprehend her own captivity in the insidiously transparent threads of oppression that bind her within her own “enlightened” culture.

Irene is recruited from her boring mid-Western petit bourgeois family by Ernst, the novel’s male protagonist. Ernst is an agent and recruiter at Trans-Temp, which is never described in too much detail, but is understood to be a sort of interplanetary diplomatic corps with military intelligence capacities. Although Irene and Ernst are supposedly equals in their job status, there is an obvious imbalance of power that derives not only from their Western culture’s incipient sexism, but more specifically from the circumstances of their partnership: Ernst takes Irene away from her home and family—at her insistence—when she is still a teenager, albeit a precocious one. He quickly becomes her lover, her trainer for Trans-Temp, and also her surrogate paternal figure. Although at the time present of the novel they’re both adults, these circumstances collude to make the power imbalance undeniable. In the following scene, Russ describes the Trans-Temp agents’ first interface with the Ka’abaite patriarch who is hosting them during their mission. Although he is trying to be carefully obsequious (he’s not sure what Trans-
Temp is doing on Ka’abah, but he knows they’re a powerful force), he cannot contain his incredulity when he discovers that one of the agents is in fact female:

He bows toward Younger Brother [Irene].

“Forgive me.”

The woman says nothing. Then she says, “I’ll think about it.”

‘Alee [their host] has recovered enough to say, “Don’t misunderstand, please. I admire offworld customs. To take a woman for a pupil, that is admirably broad-minded. I admire it.”

“I have not been a pupil for ten years,” says the thing.

“I mean…to have done so,” he says lamely. “But you said you were her ruler?” This appeal is to Elder Brother [Ernst], as the sight of that smooth, hairless face still scandalizes him. Clean-shaven is bad enough.

“He damn well did not!” says the person.


“Think no more of it,” says Elder Brother.

“You will undoubtedly think no more of it,” the pupil echoes. (30-31)

Although Ernst and Irene have already explained the nature of their partnership, ‘Alee cannot bring himself to think of Irene as a woman—notice how he thinks of her as “Younger Brother,” “the thing,” “the person” and finally, “the pupil.” This particular scene is from ‘Alee’s point of view—in a manner typical of the novel’s self-consciously
Modernist style, Russ switches the point of view of the narrative multiple times; often, as here, to great comic effect. Although he tries to save face by referring to Ka’abah’s “broadening horizons,” ‘Alee remains genuinely flabbergasted: we are to understand that in his culture, which is entrenchedly and unabashedly patriarchal, the presence of a woman in the parlor during a business meeting is a threatening and unwelcome encroachment of decadent Western values. ‘Alee hopes that their stay will be short and uneventful, but Irene soon finds and befriends the women of his household. She develops a special relationship almost immediately with the pre-adolescent Zubeydeh, the youngest daughter of the household, who is having a power struggle with her father over her budding intellectual aspirations. Zubeydeh wishes to become a poet, a position of great honor in her culture—but, as her father explains and as she herself well knows, the position of poet is completely inappropriate for a female.

Irene finds out about Zubeydeh’s aspirations, and becomes quite caught up in sympathy for the young woman. Meanwhile, Ernst’s reactions to his partner’s uncomfortable position in the repressive culture of Ka’abah are beginning to sound like warning signals to Irene, who apparently had never before seriously contemplated the sexual politics of her work or romantic relationships. This part of the novel’s power—its exposure of the ubiquitous sexism of liberal bourgeois ideology—lies in Irene’s, not our, coming-to-consciousness of Ernst’s sexism. Ernst’s sexism is notable from the very outset of the novel. In every one of Irene and Ernst’s interactions, the imbalance of power becomes more and more maddeningly clear, and tension builds around one crucial question: When is Irene going to start noticing what’s going on here?
Notably it is Zubeydeh, not Irene herself, who leads Irene in the direction of her feminist epiphany regarding Ernst. In this scene, Irene and Zubeydeh have been discussing the politics of the young woman’s relationship with her “Uncle Ernst.” At this point in the novel, Irene—with the grudging co-operation of Ernst—has managed to smuggle Zubeydeh off her planet and onto the spaceship that is now carrying them all to Earth:

“Irene?” she says.

“Yes?” Irene is snapping the tether round her own waist.

Zubeydeh says softly, “Irene, why did you tell me to stand up to him?”

“Because you should,” says Irene, reaching above her to re-set the wake-up call. “Everyone should stand up to everyone.”

“But you don’t,” says Zubeydeh, wriggling under the sheet, which action makes her rise and fall as under a drumhead; “You don’t really. You always give in.”

Irene starts to answer, but the little girl is fast asleep. (164)

Of course, it makes perfect sense that Zubeydeh should recognize the nature of the relationship between Ernst and Irene better than they themselves do; after all, she has been well-schooled in the area of male/female power dynamics through the phenomenon of her own tragic oppression. The origins of Zubeydeh’s lessons are significant also—her culture’s sexual politics are based on a weird, futuristic reading of The Arabian Nights’ Entertainments. Millett contends that the counterrevolutionary period’s Modernist literary politicians engaged in a general “wholesale defection of literary and critical minds from rationality into the caverns of myth” (177) that had theretofore
characterized pre-Enlightenment thought. As an oppressed member of a culture whose foundations are in pre-Enlightenment mythic folktales, Zubeydeh recognizes the regressively mythical nature of Irene and Ernst’s culture’s sexual politics.

Once the seeds of Zubeydeh’s “reading” of her relationship have been planted, Irene quickly begins to comprehend her situation as she never had before. Throughout the novel, Ernst has subtly and not-so-subtly undermined her authority: his two favorite tactics seem to be to manipulate her into apologizing to him, and suggesting that they sleep together instead of talking through what Irene sees as problems in their relationship. When Irene finally confronts Ernst, she does so with several tragic realizations: first, that Ernst cannot be expected to understand her rage because she has heretofore been effectively colonized by the ideology that has oppressed her; second, that he will respond by exercising what she suddenly understands to be his superior power within the agency; and third, that he will attempt to undermine her project of rescuing Zubeydeh out of spite for her insubordination:

It makes her unhappy to analyze him. To see his age and stubbornness, the way he insists on her weakness. She starts to talk about how Women know or Women understand and then stops. That’s bad manners. She learned it was bad manners in high school. It’s polite to pretend there’s no difference, at least in your speech. If you don’t, you may find yourself forced to admit that women are good for nothing, even now, even here, even she herself. She says, coming out of the hood: “You’ve stood in my way whenever it inconvenienced you. Yes, you have. That means small things, but small things mean all the time. Ernst,
you don’t listen. And you like me being aggressive as long as I don’t cross you. Then you don’t mind. Hell, Rose [Irene’s mother] always told me I’d have to find a man who didn’t mind.’”

He says, “Why are you dwelling so on the personal?’”

“Zubeydeh’s mother—“

“Irene, if you keep coming back to—“

“It’s feminine!” says Irene. “Right? Dwelling on the personal! That’s why I feel so abjectly tied to you even though we’re both free, right? That’s why I’m always the one who feels like a fool and who always gives in.” (178-79)

Here Irene directly references Ernst’s, and her own, assumptions regarding her culture’s “silent sexism” for the first time. Talking about the (political) difference that (sexual) difference constitutes is “bad manners” in a culture that is not supposed to be inflected by such differences—or, more to the point, in a culture which has supposedly provided empirical explanations for women’s oppression, thus closing off the conversation. Irene recognizes the double bind that this cult of silence places her under; for, under such conditions, to describe the terms of one’s own oppression is to admit that one is unequal to the task of rising above one’s own “scientifically proven” limitations. Finally, as Ernst accuses her of “dwelling on the personal,” Irene realizes that, as far as Ernst and his culture are concerned, the cards will always be stacked against her in any conversation that attempts to address her political oppression in personal terms. In a culture that fetishizes the domination of the rational over nature, describing the impact of one’s
oppression on the personal realm of experience is always “irrational,” and as such, is “feminine.”

It is for these reasons, I think, and not for self-defense in any immediate sense, that Irene decides to kill Ernst. After the conversation described above, Ernst begins to manifest what turns out to be his institutional power over Irene. Both Trans-Temp and Ernst—the primary political and the personal aspects of Irene’s life—have been misrepresenting Irene’s job status. Her authority is not, as she painfully discovers, equal to Ernst’s at Trans-Temp: he has merely been taking up the gentleman’s burden of offering her the lie of their equal authority to make her feel better. As Ernst begins to systematically undermine her authority on board the ship, Irene realizes that she has entered into a conversation that can only either lead to her eventual contrition or to the destruction of her self, and since she has Zubeydeh with her, she cannot choose the latter option. Irene begins her confrontation with Ernst by attempting to fight him, but finally she decides that simply beating him in hand-to-hand combat will not solve what has become the chronic problem of their struggle: “She’s coming out of a thirty-years’ trance, a lifetime’s hypnosis. She used to think it mattered who won and who lost, who was shamed and who was not. She forgot what she had up her sleeve. Sick of the contest of strength and skill, she shoots him” (203).

For her depiction of this one act of violence, as well as the depiction of three female-on-male acts of violence depicted in The Female Man, Russ has been denigrated by some critics as being an emasculating, fearsome writer who advocates the destruction of all males. This anxiety-ridden assessment of a female author’s work is yet another angle from which to view the relationship between Millett and Russ: both have been
accused of being “emasculators” because they challenged accepted truths about women’s freedoms in “enlightened” cultures. Russ addresses this issue in an early critical essay on “Recent Feminist Utopias;” the paragraph directly preceding the one I cite below is a discussion of the tendency of feminist SF to be less focused on violence than masculinist (which is not to say male-authored: Russ includes Samuel Delany’s work in her discussion of feminist SF writers) SF. But this does not change the fact that Russ continues to be described as a fear-inspiring author, while the many acts of violence depicted in celebrated male-authored works of SF, such as in Kim Stanley Robinson’s Mars trilogy, do not lead reviewers to consider Robinson to be a fearsome author.

Indeed, it is inappropriate to describe either of these authors as angry or fearsome, as neither author features the gratuitous depiction of violent acts in their respective works.

it may well be that the feminist books, because their violence is very often directed by women against men, are perceived as very violent by some readers. For example, The Female Man contains only four violent incidents: a woman at a party practices judo on a man who is behaving violently towards her and (by accident) hurts him; a woman kills a man during a Cold War between the sexes after provocation, lasting (she says) twenty years; a woman shoots another woman as part of her duty as a police officer; a woman, in anger and terror, shuts a door on a man’s thumb (this last incident is briefly mentioned and not shown). A male reviewer in Mother Jones quoted at length from the second and fourth incidents (the only quotations from the novel he used), entirely disregarding the other two. Ignoring the novel’s utopian society, which is
one of four, he called the book “a scream of anger” and “a bitter fantasy of reversed sexual oppression,” although the only fantasy of reversed sexual oppression in the novel appears to be the reviewer’s. (144)

To put it another way, Russ’s scared male reviewers simply can’t be responding to the violent content of her work, as it is practically non-existent, especially in comparison with her the work of her male peers. What’s being responded to here is the violence wrought upon the silent sexism of bourgeois liberal ideology, an ideology which often expresses itself in literary Modernism through the exclusion, if not the outright degradation, of female characters. By depicting Ernst’s death, Russ is describing a necessary step in the Modern female protagonist’s bildung—that is, the recognition of her own complicity in the oppressions of silent sexism, and the removal from her developmental path of those who would remain silent in the face of such oppressions.

Russ’s novel ends on a positive, if somewhat mixed, note: Irene and Zubeydeh escape to an anonymous existence in New Mexico. Zubeydeh, of course, represents the future, but what kind of future becomes the question in the last segment of the novel, written as an elegiac authorial entreaty reminiscent of the final paragraph of Joyce’s “The Dead:”

And the whisper comes again, but louder this time—Shall these bones live!—and it stirs the edge of Zubeydeh’s veil where she sits brooding over the abyss [. . .] It is nothing living but only the memory of another voice [. . .] It is the voicelessness [. . .] that passes like a sigh from wall to wall of the valley of dry bones and shivers faintly over the multitude of the dead. It has no Word. It has nothing to say. It whispers its crazy
nonsense thoughtlessly and hopelessly to nothing at all, but where it
passes, throughout the length of that still, gray place, there is the barest
shiver, the faintest stir, the dimmest, most imperceptible rustling. You can
barely see it. You can barely hear it. From autumn leaf to autumn leaf
goes the message: something, nothing, everything. Something is coming
out of nothing. For the first time, something will be created out of
nothing. There is not a drop of water, not a blade of grass, not a single
word.

But they move.

And they rise. (226)

Although the vagary of these final images suggest any number of readings, it seems clear
that Russ is in part describing her plight as the author of this text, which has tried to
create something out of nothing in its radical feminist revision of late literary Modernism.
The insistence that something will be created out of nothing is also an insistence upon
hope, on the scientific irrationality of origin-less beginnings (“It has no Word”) and on
the necessity of imagining such beginnings nonetheless. These final images insist that we
might, as Millett exhorts at the close of Sexual Politics, “[create] a world we can bear out
of the desert we inhabit” (363).

Each of these authors insists, in her own critical language and with her own set of
philosophical and theoretical preoccupations, that sexual difference makes—is engaged
in the formation of—a political difference. The “politics of sex” depends on the latter
category’s perennial availability for the construction of ideology. Thus, the fact that
“sex” makes a difference appears to depend not so much on the ontological differences
manifest in the human female form—all the authors in this chapter appear to agree on what these are—as it does on how these differences are used to express and maintain power relations. But this agreement, this central notion that the general differences between male and female bodies make a difference, albeit a difference heavily inflected by ideological practices, becomes very much the issue as this study shifts into an exploration of feminist theoretical and science-fictional texts being produced in the late seventies and early eighties, when biotechnologies come to dominate “first world” markets and imaginations. This shift is marked in feminist theoretical work by an increasing preoccupation with the discursivity of seemingly ahistorical material categories, particularly the category of “sex.” Similarly, feminist science-fictional work being written around this period of transition of an entire field of scientific inquiry from science fiction to science fact begins to focus increasingly on the female body as a dynamic and re-writable entity.

In this chapter I have tried to show that, even for feminist science fiction writers who attempt to imaginatively intervene and reconceptualize the political difference that sexual difference makes, this difference continues to signify in crucial ways—in the case of McCaffrey and Le Guin, as I argue, this difference signifies despite their intentions to the contrary. Insisting on the difference that difference makes has gotten the bad rap of being tantamount to an insistence on “essentialist” epistemology, deeply rooted in the very ideology of “counterrevolutionary” liberal humanism that Millett and Russ set out to critique. A very large amount of feminist criticism has been written on the problem of “essentialism” and its relationship to the category of sex difference, and I will address some of this criticism in the chapters to come. For now, I will focus on the critique of
feminist theory’s “sex/gender” problem offered by Katherine Hayles, a writer who has professional expertise in both the sciences and the humanities:

Embodiment has been systematically downplayed or erased in the cybernetic construction of the posthuman in ways that have not occurred in other critiques of the liberal humanist subject, especially in feminist and postcolonial theories. Indeed, one could argue that the erasure of embodiment is a feature common to both the liberal humanist subject and the cybernetic posthuman. Identified with the rational mind, the liberal subject possessed a body but was not usually represented as being a body. Only because the body is not identified with the self is it possible to claim for the liberal subject its notorious universality, a claim that depends on erasing markers of bodily difference, including sex, race, and ethnicity [4-5]. I view the present moment as a critical juncture when interventions might be made to keep disembodiment from being rewritten, once again, into prevailing concepts of subjectivity. I see the deconstruction of the liberal humanist subject as an opportunity to put back into the picture the flesh that continues to be erased in contemporary discussions about cybernetic subjects.

As Hayles goes on to point out, the body simply must be considered as an attribute of the human subject that has claims on the constitution of the “self,” if feminists are not to reinscribe the mind/body dualism so anathematic to them. This point is similar to the point that Juliet Mitchell makes when she notes that biological difference is one of the sites of the (female) subject’s ideological overdetermination. Beauvoir and Millett make
similar points as well, in their insistence that different male and female physical attributes undoubtedly exist, and undoubtedly have material ramifications for male and female subjectivities. For these theorists, this fact becomes problematic when the claims of biology on women’s subjectivities are presumed to overshadow any other aspect of their subjectivity, or to constitute it entirely. In the “essentialism” debate, it is useful to remember that the issue is not whether biology has claims on the formation of subjectivity, but rather to explore to what extent, and in what ways, these claims are interpreted within a patriarchal framework that reads them as asymmetrical.

Works Cited


Chapter Two

The Politics of Biotechnology and the Discursivity of “Sex”: The Female Body as a Science-Fictional/Factual Text

In his article on the history of science fiction criticism, Edward James notes that, especially before the mid-to-late 1960s, many SF writers and critics gave credence to the concept that science fiction was principally a literature of ideas, a literature whose primary merit resided in its capacity to demystify science and to be predictive:

It is in fact interesting how many of the outside commentators on science fiction in the 1950s [...] were actually accepting the criteria for science fiction criticism laid down by the science fiction community itself: that is, they privileged the ideas which were expressed in science fiction, and often commented, both in praise and in denigration, on the ideas rather than the literary ways in which they were expressed. (27)

Since this time, due in large part to Darko Suvin’s interventions into the field, critical focus on science fiction’s prophetic and didactic functions has been downplayed. Science fiction is now more often taken seriously as literature, and not merely as a quirky genre with occasionally predictive functions. As James notes, “SF has grown, and has introduced new forms of cognition to the purely scientific. Within this genre, the consistency of extrapolation becomes an aesthetic factor; the cognitive element becomes a measure of the aesthetic quality and pleasure to be found in science fiction” (30). But despite this shift in focus to science fiction’s cognitive estrangements as a literary mode, rather than a clumsy engine for a set of ideas with varying degrees of scientific veracity or applicability, advances in biotechnology over the past three decades have begged the question, both in the popular imagination and for feminist theorists, scientists and SF
writers, of the relationship between science fiction and science fact. As technologies that have the capacity to rewrite the female body continue to advance, theories regarding the discursivity of the body have become potentially less abstract. The question becomes, what is the relationship between technoscientific advances that have a transformative effect on the female body, and the politics of sexual identity?

I will examine how this question is taken up in feminist theory in two ways: both as a critique of the relationship between science as epistemology, and sexual politics; and as a critique of the ways in which the female body is figured as technologically demarcated in cultural terms—how, in other words, sex difference itself can be seen as “the product and the process of a number of social technologies, of techno-social or biomedical apparatus” (Lauretis 3). I will examine both of these theoretical modes (which are themselves, as Teresa de Lauretis points out, technologies of sex and gender: “the construction of gender is also effected by its deconstruction; that is to say, by any discourse, feminist or otherwise, that would discard it as ideological misrepresentation” {3}) in terms of how they bear upon feminist science-fictional constructions of the female body as a discursive entity.

First I will describe a working definition of “technoscience” that addresses its recent development as a specifically feminist problematic. The term “technoscience” is an amalgam word meant to call attention to the (usually obfuscated) sense in which science and technology both inform and produce one another. Feminist critique of the technoscientific enterprise exposes the putative purity (as in “pure” science), rationality, and progressivism of the so-called “hard” and social sciences as imbued with sexist ideology in some of their basic epistemological presuppositions. In “Subjects, Power,
and Knowledge: Description and Prescription in Feminist Philosophies of Science,”

Helen Longino notes,

The sciences become even more suspect as analysis of their metaphors [. . .] reveals an acceptance (and hence reinforcement) of the cultural identification of the male with activity and of the female with passivity [. . .] feminists have drawn a connection between the identification of nature as female and the scientific mind as male and the persistent privileging of explanatory models constructed around relations of unidirectional control over models constructed around relations of interdependence. Reflection on this connection has prompted feminist critics to question the very idea of a scientific method capable of adjudicating the truth or probability of theories in a value-neutral way. (265)

Feminist critics of standard models of scientific inquiry challenge the seemingly incontrovertible methods and conclusions of a variety of scientific fields. Their contention is that, not only are the languages of the social and hard sciences complicated by political ideology, but the very methodology of scientific inquiry is also sex biased. These critics advocate the creation of new methods of scientific inquiry, such as Naomi Scheman’s call for scientific inquiry to take place in a context of recognition of the ways in which the scientist and the object of her study are (de) formed by institutional inequalities. Biologist and feminist SF writer Joan Slonczewski’s novel A Door Into Ocean addresses the sexual politics of traditional scientific epistemologies by representing creative ways of discovering, knowing, teaching, and implementing science that both reflect and problematize feminist critiques of technoscience. Octavia Butler’s
Xenogenesis trilogy features the figuration of “technology” as apparati that grow out of, and exist in harmony with, the organic environment. In Slonczewski and Butler’s visions, the very category “technology” is challenged and reconceptualized as a relationship between bodies and their surroundings. In these works, our normative conceptualization of “technology” as a concrete, wo/man-made product of the application of scientific theory to the physical world is turned on its head. The development of technology in these novels takes place through the social body’s interaction with and shaping of its existing environment.

Another dimension of the intersection between feminism and technoscience that I will address here is that body of feminist theory that takes as part of its delineation of the instability of sex and gender categories emergent developments in technoscience that serve to potentially confuse sex/gender semiotics, from genetic engineering to the internet chat group. Even among feminist critics whom we would not identify as being substantially concerned with or engaged in critique of the technoscientific enterprise, such as Judith Butler⁶, or Elizabeth Grosz⁷, there is a growing tendency to cite technoscientific developments—especially in the areas of molecular genetics (genetic engineering, cloning) and reproductive technologies (fetal imaging, in-vitro fertilization)—as proof of the instability of the category “sex.” There is an interesting parallel present between the growth of the biotechnology market, which has enjoyed a

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⁶ In part three of her 1990 study Gender Trouble, entitled “Subversive Bodily Acts,” Butler connects Foucault’s “philosophical project to expose the regulatory production of identity-effects” to “recent developments in cell biology” that serve as “an example that inadvertently confirms the continuing applicability of a Foucauldian critique” (106).

⁷ In both Volatile Bodies and her collection of essays, Space, Time, and Perversion, Grosz explores the relationship between developments in neurophysiology and biology and the fluidity of the category of “sexual” difference.
surge of cultural and economic significance since the mid-1970s, and the shift in feminist theoretical debates from critiques of sexual politics to a critique of the identification of “Women” as a group that can be fruitfully delineated as a unitary biological entity. The growing economic and social significance of biotechnologies which (implicitly or explicitly) cast serious doubt on the inviolability of the corporeally delineated self have provided timely evidence for third wave feminists’ claims that the category Women is not necessarily a cultural universal. Hybrid female aliens, the “foreign bodies” of feminist SF, posit a challenge to the model of inviolable corporeality that scientist Katherine Hayles describes as rooted in Cartesian epistemology. Creative visions of female aliens can also provide us with speculative models of the kinds of problems that the coupling of female bodies and biotechnology might produce. Feminist SF reveals and deconstructs myths and assumptions about sex as a fixed category of identity, replacing these myths with its own story, the story of the body as a site of contingency and contestation. The extrapolative capacity of this genre is particularly useful for articulating various means and modes of technological inscriptions of the female body, the original alien space. I will examine this area of feminist inquiry in relationship to two works of feminist SF that take as their primary theme the re-engineering of the female body: James Tiptree Jr.’s “The Girl Who was Plugged In” and Angela Carter’s The Passion of New Eve.

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8 See José Van Dijck’s Imagenation for an excellent history of the social impact of recent genetics research developments. On the impact that feminist discourse has had on these developments, Dijck notes that “[Feminist] science fiction novels can be viewed as responses to the monopolization of genetic knowledge by scientific experts. Like environmentalists and ethicists, feminists attempted to negotiate an expansive definition of genetic engineering. Environmentalists forced scientists to face the potential dangers and ecological consequences of DNA-experiments in the lab; bioethicists challenged them to address social and ethical implications of the new biology; and feminists called attention to the relation between science and society, nature and nurture, and genes and gender. The three contenders that entered the theater of genetics in the 1970s had one common intention: to redefine genetics as a social and political issue, and symbolically to ‘open up’ the laboratory to public scrutiny” (89-90).
The feminist deconstructions of “sex” difference that I examine here all mark a convergence with or problematization of the central thesis of Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*: that sex, not just gender, is a discursively constructed category. For Foucault, sexualities are a product of the symbiotic machinations of power/knowledge, a conceptual apparatus that figures all knowledge, scientific and otherwise, as being inseparable from, and in fact contingent upon, the machinations of power. In *Foucault and Feminism*, Lois McNay writes that

The engagement between feminist theory and the thought of Michel Foucault has tended to centre around the work of his middle years, most notably *Discipline and Punish* and the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. In these works, Foucault presents a theory of power and its relations to the body that feminists have used to explain aspects of women’s oppression. Foucault’s idea that sexuality is not an innate or natural quality of the body, but rather the effect of historically specific power relations has provided feminists with a useful analytical framework to explain how women’s experience is impoverished and controlled within certain culturally determined images of female sexuality. Furthermore, the idea that the body is produced through power and is, therefore, a cultural rather than a natural entity has made a significant contribution to the feminist critique of essentialism. (3)

The fictional space provided by feminist SF also lends itself to genealogical critique, a Foucauldian methodology that seeks to establish such hegemonic categories as gender and sexual identities as the effect of discursive practices. The two outstanding features of
the genealogical critique are its exposure of a way of knowing and writing history that results ultimately in a politically factional and falsely linear view of history as a series of great events enacted by individuals, and a critique of the tendency of traditional forms of historical inquiry to seek, as their grounds for veracity, a fixed point of origin, which point either implies or makes explicit the existence of a trans- or a- historical event or actor arbitrarily imbued with history-shaping power. In feminist critiques of Foucault’s genealogy, the teleological, heroic construction of the past is theorized as a specifically phallocratic conceptualization of history. Because the creation of an other, alien world that somehow parallels our own (or exists within our own) is a common feature of science fiction, it is thus capable of revealing, through an exposition of the creation and history of the alien space, how societies create their own myths of origin and heroism. (For instance, Suzy McKee Charnas’s Holdfast series includes descriptions of how easily history-telling can result in the transformation of fanciful descriptions of events into accepted historical fact). Furthermore, by postulating an other world with an alternate history and alternate physical laws, science fiction can serve to expose myths built on assumptions of historical linearity and the centrality of the bourgeois individual as the primary agent of history. (In Doris Lessing’s Shikasta, for instance, all of human history is revealed to be under the control of a race of aliens). Feminist SF that takes for its subject the relationship between bodies and the technologies that produce and augment them provides us with a genealogical critique of female sexuality.

I begin my analyses of feminist SF and feminist theories of technoscience, scientific epistemology, and bodily discursivity with a discussion of the early phase of feminist theoretical work on the sexual politics and potentialities of biogenetics. I
concentrate on two influential pioneers in this field: Shulamith Firestone, whose 1970 study *The Dialectic of Sex* describes a feminist future that depends upon the reproductive capacity’s removal from the human body; and Donna Haraway, whose 1985 essay “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” describes the union of the female body and technology—the cyborg—as a corrective concept-metaphor for feminism’s (for her, necessary) “essentialism” problem. Although these two essays share similar conclusions regarding the liberating potential of technoscience for the female body, these conclusions are arrived at through two radically differing theses. Firestone’s analysis obviously predates the influence of poststructuralist theories of bodily discursivity. Firestone’s point is that technoscience has potentially liberating functions precisely because of the essentially overdetermined nature of women’s biological functions. Haraway’s point, on the other hand, is that technoscience has potentially liberating functions because technologies that rewrite or augment the female body prove the limits of thinking of subjectivity as a function of embodiment. Each of these early works reveals “essentialism problems” that arise from their different, but nonetheless importantly connected, historical moments. I discuss these founding texts and their relationship with two early works of feminist SF that take up similar themes: Angela Carter’s 1977 *The Passion of New Eve* and James Tiptree Jr.’s¹ 1973 long short story or short novella “The Girl Who Was Plugged In.”

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¹ James Tiptree Jr. was a pseudonym for the late Alice Hastings Bradley Sheldon, a woman whose extraordinary life included careers in the CIA, at the Pentagon, as a visual artist, as a Ph.D. in experimental psychology; as a psychologist, as a distinguished writer of realistic fiction, and finally as a prolific and highly celebrated science fiction writer. She was exposed as a female SF writer in 1977, ten years after she began writing under her male pseudonym. She also occasionally employed the pseudonym of Raccoona Sheldon.
In *The Dialectic of Sex*, Firestone proposes ectogenesis as the solution to what she argues is the inevitable inscription of women’s disenfranchisement at the site of their (specifically, reproductive) bodies. For this second-wave theorist, women’s reproductive capacity is the ground zero, incontrovertible difference between men and women. Firestone’s contention is that, although women’s capacity to reproduce is no doubt natural, it is by virtue of this capacity that women are, naturally, relegated to their status as the second sex. In fact, Firestone posits that women’s sexual difference guarantees their marginalization; and that, furthermore, this dialectic forms the basis for all other forms of discrimination. In the fourth chapter of her study, “Down With Childhood,” Firestone contends that

Women and children are always mentioned in the same breath (“Women and children to the forts!”). The special tie women have with children is recognized by everyone. I submit, however, that that the nature of this bond is no more than shared oppression. And that moreover this oppression is intertwined and mutually reinforcing in such complex ways that we will be unable to speak of the liberation of women without also discussing the liberation of children, and vice versa. The heart of women’s oppression is her childbearing and childrearing roles. And in turn children are defined in relation to this role and are psychologically formed by it; what they become as adults and the sorts of relationships they are able to form determines the society they will ultimately build. (81)
For Firestone, “sex” forms the basis for women’s discursive gender construction. Thus, it is the reproductive system itself that reproduces the Oedipally configured subject. Only by eliminating the irreducible difference of childbearing and the cycle that it perpetuates will women have the potential to escape this otherwise inevitable, and inevitably degraded, social role. An important part of Firestone’s thesis is the role that ectogenesis will play in facilitating the corporeal, and eventually social, equality of the human race.

Firestone focuses on the potentially liberatory role of technoscience for feminism. Her assertion that women’s marginalization is corporeally inscribed includes an explicit denial of the possibility that women’s reproductive capacity could ever undergo semiotic recuperation. This sort of materialist reductivism, which amounts to a rejection of the notion that “sex” cannot be usefully distinguished from its semiotic significance, has since been compellingly complicated by feminist theories of the body, most significantly Elizabeth Grosz’s *Volatile Bodies*, which I will bring into this discussion shortly.

However, I’d like to make a case for the usefulness of Firestone’s general approach to the feminist problematic of sex/gender; that is, of thinking about the corporeal self in terms of its reducibilities and irreducibilities. Making a case for the usefulness of Firestone’s work entails viewing *The Dialectic of Sex* as a historical document written in the context of a specific rhetorical occasion. Firestone’s critique of women’s role in reproduction depends on her deconstruction of the term “natural.” In a general sense, the critique of “natural” responds to two gender-inflected ideologies that continue to dominate discourse about women’s reproductive issues: first, the notion that “natural” somehow equals “good” or “inevitable”; and second, the related conflation of “nature” with the feminine. This conflation, as many ecofeminists writing after Firestone confirm, has served
historically to reinforce women’s powerlessness over their own bodies, and to justify their marginalized position as inevitable. Also, Firestone seems to be responding to the 1960’s student counterculture’s reinscription of the “natural” origins of the feminine mystique. The 1960s countercultural project of eschewing the commodified, militarized terms of “first” world culture and “getting back to nature” had a substantially different significance for women than for men. Men experienced their communion with nature as a voluntary transition from their traditional, hegemonic position in the gendered version of the Cartesian mind/body split as mind/male. Women, on the other hand, experienced a mere reinscription of the terms of their inferior subject position as essentially unintellectual, reproductive, and nurturing beings--naturally. Thus Firestone’s strategy of constructing women’s reproductive capacity as both natural and unacceptable is clearly a rhetorically charged response to the sexist justificatory function of the term “natural.”

The potentially utopian, prescriptive moment in Firestone’s theory—the demand for reproduction to be divorced from women’s bodies—is also, of course, the most problematic. After all, how can we determine the ways in which what we perceive as corporeal inequality might signify under radically different discursive conditions? Furthermore, is not Firestone’s acceptance of the degraded nature of the childbearing role a reinscription of patriarchy’s degradation of that role? But despite these critiques, Firestone’s work remains relevant, for even though we cannot determine beyond doubt whether sex/gender discrimination is reducible to the reproductive function of women’s bodies, it remains the case that men’s sanctioned legislative, social, economic, and religious control over women’s reproductive bodies is a particularly barbaric, widespread perpetuation of male domination. Because this type of discriminatory practice continues
to thrive, the relationship between women’s rights and their status as embodied subjects remains relevant. Firestone’s work is also useful because it allows us to think the feminist problem of sex/gender as a technological one: technoscience may not be an unproblematic feminist panacea, but the (existent and potential) interface between sex and technoscience plays an increasingly important role in women’s relationship to the semiotics of their corporeal identity.

Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” was written in the heyday of science fiction’s “cyberpunk” boom, and it both implicitly and explicitly responds to this subgenre’s major themes. Like Firestone’s work, Haraway’s essay is written in a highly rhetorically charged mode that announces its discursive status as a corrective to existing feminist theoretical debates. In this case, the debate that Haraway is responding to is the then-emergent binary in feminist theory between essentialist and deconstructive theories of the category “Women.”\(^\text{10}\) Haraway’s figure of the cyborg provides the reader with a useful conceptual model for the potential fragmentary, non-Oedipal, non-unitary interfaces produced by a figure that cannot be usefully distinguished as primarily man, women, or machine. The cyborg is also “An Ironic Dream:” Haraway chooses irony because, for her, utopian potentiality is a recapitulation of patriarchal myths of unity and authority.

“The transcendent authorization of interpretation,” we are told with regards to the time

\(^{10}\) In her recent essay on the historicization of feminist theory, “Making History: Reflections on Feminism, Narrative, and Desire,” Susan Stanford Friedman identifies two “framework[s] for problematization” (21) that arise as feminist theoretical debates in the late 1970s and early 1980s. One, which I will return to in the fourth chapter of this study, is the emergence of feminist voices of alterity, which served to challenge, as an episteme arising from the presumptive framework of white, bourgeois theorists, the idea that gender discrimination was always or primarily the ultimate determining factor in women’s oppression. The other framework, at issue in this discussion, is identified by Friedman as “poststructuralism. Beginning sporadically in the late 1970s, especially in French departments, and accelerating in the 1980s throughout the humanities, the arrival of European poststructuralist feminism, which emphasizes the theoretical and linguistic meanings of sexual difference, focused particularly on the role of language in the construction of femininity” (21). Haraway’s “Manifesto” can be read as marking a saturation point in the “acceleration” of poststructuralist feminism across academic disciplines.
present, “is lost, and with it the ontology grounding ‘Western’ epistemology” (427).

Whereas Firestone’s work assumes the future-tense potentialities suggested by the critical category “utopia,” Haraway is careful to distance herself from any such totalizing vision. In fact, the cyborg is, in many ways, not about the future at all, but rather serves as a device for the then-youthful feminist project of deconstructing Enlightenment epistemological stances.

The cyborg is the interface between humans and biomedical technologies; it is an ironic myth; it is the lived relations between women and the machines that they build and enter data upon; it is a figure for the increasingly feminized and specialized nature of the workplace in capitalist democracies; it is a figure representing the “third world” subjects who assemble computer parts; it symbolizes at once the potential for and putative existence of subjects who are an indistinguishable hybrid of human and machine; it is meant to evoke the economic disparity between the “first” world’s technoscientific culture and the profoundly less sophisticated cultures that support it; it is a creation of feminist theorists; it is a creation of feminist science fiction writers. Regarding this last function, Haraway’s essay includes a brief discussion of several feminist SF writers whose work includes cyborg figures. Although she rejects the idea that her essay operates out of the mode of the utopian, she privileges the extrapolative work of feminist SF as “liminal transformation” (448). In this, as in many other respects, Haraway’s essay is overzealously committed to having everything both ways. As the cyborg’s catalog of meanings suggests, this essay suffers somewhat from its constant categorical denial of any positivist epistemological stance. As with Firestone’s assessment of the “natural”
basis of women’s oppression, this essay’s binarism can be ascribed to its announced
discursive status as “corrective” rhetoric.

For example, Haraway overstates the case that “Late twentieth-century machines
have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and
body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to
apply to organisms and machines” (427). Perhaps this is so in isolated instances at a lab,
or in the case of surgical procedures available to a small fraction of “first“ world women,
but for the overwhelming majority of people in the world, (then and now), distinguishing
between machine and human is neither a difficult task nor an important one.
Conceptualizing the significance of the figure of the cyborg for feminisms requires that
we take quite seriously the problem of historical materialism: the cyborg might suggest
some utopian forms of hybridity and boundary confusion for feminist praxis, but when
we speak of the practical applications and manifestations of technoscience for feminism,
we must do so with the understanding that technoscience is presently controlled by and
thus overwhelmingly serves the ends of Western capitalist patriarchy. Technoscience
overwhelmingly serves the interests of those who develop and finance it; in other words,
it tends to serve the interests of the white, male, “first” world subjects who underwrite
and oversee its production. In historical materialist terms, figuring the cyborg’s feminist
future must involve working through the masculinist, capitalist ideological “residue”
adhering to technoscience. Haraway’s essay juxtaposes the distinctly non-feminist, often
anti-feminist function of technoscience in contemporary culture with speculations about
its potentially feminist functions, but she fails to articulate how the cyborg might undergo
such a radical shift in significance. “Irony” is the conceptual apparatus with which we are to bridge the gap between the cyborg’s realities and its potentialities:

Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. Irony is about humor and serious play. It is also a rhetorical strategy and a political method, one I would like to see more honoured within socialist-feminism. At the centre of my ironic faith, my blasphemy, is the image of the cyborg. (424)

Women’s bodies, as Haraway is careful to illustrate, have already become sites for the perpetration of patriarchal capitalist technoscience. Haraway is unclear on how irony might function as a political method for the reversal of such perpetuations except in her analysis of feminist SF which deploys irony as a literary device. As my analysis of two such works of feminist SF will suggest, what this genre seems capable of as a political method is the exposition and complication of such perpetuations, not their reversal.¹¹

In Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism, Elizabeth Grosz surveys a wide range of feminist responses to and constructions of the body, and in so doing argues for a feminist methodology which she terms “corporeal feminism”--a feminism which situates the female body, along the same general lines as Haraway’s cyborg, as a hybrid entity. Grosz notes that

¹¹ In fact, it is because of the binaristic tendencies of cyberpunk, the SF subgenre that Firestone and Haraway’s work might most obviously be compared to, that I use works which slightly predate cyberpunk to explore the relationship between the body and technology in feminist SF. The works that I chose are amenable to analyses of the relationship between the female body and technology suggested by Firestone and Haraway’s less rhetorically binaristic moments. In Aliens and Others: Science Fiction, Feminism, and Postmodernism Jenny Wolmark concludes, in her analysis of “what, if anything, cyberpunk has to offer feminist SF,” (108) that ultimately “it would seem that cyberpunk is marked above all by an unresolved anxiety about gender relations, and that, despite its potentially radical insights into the possibilities of the interface, and its postmodern concern with subjectivity, it cannot escape from a predominantly patriarchal view of social relations, no matter how contradictory that view might be” (126).
The body is not open to *all* the whims, wishes, and hopes of the subject 
[…]. On the other hand, while there must be some kinds of biological limit 
or constraint, these constraints are perpetually capable of being 
superseded, overcome, through the human body’s capacity to open itself 
up to prosthetic synthesis, to transform or rewrite its 
environment...supplementing and supplemented by the ‘organic body’ (or 
what passes culturally for it), surpassing the body, not ‘beyond’ nature but 
in collusion with a ‘nature’ that never really lived up to its name, that 
represents always the most blatant cultural anxieties and projections. 

(187-88)

Grosz’s conclusion hints that the female body’s anti-utopic construction as volatile or 
incomplete may be reconceptualized and actualized by what she calls “prosthetic 
synthesis,” an opening up of the body whose hybridity might serve to confuse the 
relationship between biological capacity and subjectivity. Unlike Haraway, who uses the 
figure of the cyborg to posit an ironic feminist vision that depends, problematically, on 
the unexplained universal cultural primacy of “first world” scientific technologies, Grosz 
posits a model of the hybrid body that has somewhat broader and more immediate 
relevance. The technologies (prostheses, implants, medicines) that render only a 
percentage of first world women’s bodies “hybrid” are for Grosz only the most obvious 
examples of the many ways in which female bodies are transformed and transformable 
entities. Thus hybridization through the application of, say, a prosthetic device, serves in 
an allegorical fashion here, as an instance of what can be more broadly conceptualized as 
the body’s tendency to exceed its discursively produced limitations in a variety of ways.
In the sense that Grosz invokes, theorizing the hybridity of female bodies is not a practice that dismisses the significance of the body in the construction of social norms and practices. It is a practice that allows us to see bodies as transformed and therefore *transformable* entities, and therefore has important implications for feminist praxis.

Feminist SF that takes up the theme of the hybrid female body serves as an implicit critique of masculinist, xenophobic science fiction. Much science fiction assumes a predatory relationship between the protagonist and the infiltrating alien: dramatic tension often revolves, for instance, around the human protagonist’s survival of an alien invasion. The encounter with the alien or alien/foreign technology is either resolved in such a way as to uphold the human subject’s inviolability, or his/her infiltration by the alien force is seen as a violation or defeat of humanity. From Heinlein’s *Starship Troopers* to the *Planet of the Apes* movies, to the cyberpunk subgenre, the antagonistic relationship between alien and human protagonist mirrors cultural anxieties about race and gender relations, immigration, and the encroachment of non-white cultures. In cyberpunk, the alien force is computer technology, which often threatens to establish its own intelligence and outwit the human protagonist. The protagonist (as in William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* and Neal Stephenson’s *Snowcrash*) does not reject the alien force of computer intelligence, but learns to control and manipulate it for (his, almost invariably) own ends. The alien space of the computer intelligence is often figured in blatantly sexist terms: the AI (artificial intelligence) within the computer matrix is mystical, multiple, feminine, and threatening. It requires the special skills of a “console cowboy” to “jack into” the matrix and tame the AI to his individual will. Whether technology is portrayed as a force for good or ill in masculinist SF, it invariably requires
control by human beings. The possibility of hybridity, of melding with the alien force or being, is conceptualized as a threat to individuality and to the capitalist democratic way of life. Maculinist science fiction (which is not to say male-authored science fiction: see my introduction) is anti-utopic and anti-genealogical, because it posits a future world in which nothing but the trappings change while the founding myths remain the same: alterity is a threat, and technology is something to be mastered rather than incorporated. In both its early, imperialist and expansionist phase (a thematic trend exemplified in the 1936 science fiction film Things to Come) and its later (post 1950s) preoccupation with exploring “the alien within,” masculinist SF upholds the anti-historical myth of a transcendental teleology which presumes the centrality of the inviolable human subject and the alien as threatening Other. James Tiptree Jr.’s “The Girl Who Was Plugged In” postulates a dystopic future world in which the always-already ideologically violated female body is suppressed and recreated through sophisticated technologies as the ultimate object of ruling-class male desire. Technology often functions in masculinist science fiction as a reification of such desire. In Tiptree’s work, however, the female protagonists serve both as a limit case of the masculinist appropriation of both technoscience and women’s bodies, and as a crystallization of the relationship between technology and desire in science fiction.

The intersection of the female body and technoscience serves to complicate the opposition of human, or the “organic,” and technology, the inorganic infiltrator. If the central drama of science fiction is the fate of the subject in the presence of that which is alien or other, then the central drama of feminist SF must be the complication of this relationship by the fact of the always-already alien, alienating, and alienated status of the
female subject. Like the alien in the science fiction novel, the female subject is both threatening and hopeful: she is the constitutive, constituting other who both threatens and promises to transform. Thus the portrayal of the female subject in the alien space, in the presence of alien technologies, is complicated by the radical affinity between foreign and exotic technologies and the foreign body of the female subject, who functions in our culture as the native alien. In the case of “The Girl Who Was Plugged In,” the heroine’s monstrous fulfillment of male desire is ironically liberatory, signifying the end of male desire by its ultimate achievement. The breakdown of this binary serves to reveal women’s necessarily contingent status and the liberatory potential of her contingency. The figure of the female cyborg body, even when, as in Tiptree’s story, it is figured as dystopic, provides us with a model, not only of the feminine as the receptacle and purveyor of male desire, but also of the female body as a partially written, and therefore re-writable entity. I feel that Tiptree’s story is an important place to begin this discussion because it serves as a limit case for the distinction I make between masculinist and feminist science fictional deployments of technoscience. For while Tiptree’s story takes up the same subject matter as masculinist cyberpunk--the alienation of the human subject through technoscience--she also reveals and critiques the uses of technoscience as capitalist patriarchal mystification.

In Tiptree’s story, the protagonist P. Burke, an extremely unattractive and desperately unhappy young woman, is rescued from an attempted suicide by a team of scientists and advertising executives who offer her the chance to be the animating force of Delphi, a beautiful and vapid girl-woman engineered specifically for audience appeal. In a future when advertising is against the law, attractive young actors are hired to
consume products in television dramas—an extreme version of product placement. In a new twist on this method of advertising, one agency has decided to experiment with using androids instead of human actors, a move which guarantees not only the physical perfection of the actor/model, but also his/her captivity and complicity. Rescued from the brink of self-destruction, P. Burke agrees to be the animating force behind the beautiful Delphi. The ad company entices P. Burke into this role with the promise that she will be able to fulfill, albeit indirectly, all her fantasies of fame and fortune through the engineered icon so overwhelmingly “feminine” that she could only be made by design. Thus P. Burke becomes the controlling force behind Delphi: she is stuck in a cabinet underground and washed, fed, and exercised, while Delphi sells products to the masses:

Now let’s get one thing clear. P. Burke does not feel her brain is in the sauna room, she feels she’s in that sweet little body. When you wash your hands, do you feel the water is running on your brain? Of course not. You feel the water on your hand, although the ‘feeling’ is actually a potential-pattern flickering over the electrochemical jelly between your ears. And it is delivered there via the long circuits from your hands. Just so, P. Burke’s brain in the cabinet feels the water on her hands in the bathroom. The fact that the signals have jumped across space on the way in makes no difference at all. If you want the jargon, it’s known as eccentric projection or sensory reference and you’ve done it all your life.

Clear? (184)

P. Burke falls in love with Delphi, whose beauty and proximity to material wealth imbue her with the sort of power that the monstrous woman who animates her could only dream
P. Burke, locked away in her holding pen, thinks and feels for Delphi. She is a stripped-down version of the desiring subject: beyond the fulfillment of her most immediate physical needs, her primary function is to create, through her own desire for everything which Delphi represents, an other, iconic manifestation of that desire—and Delphi in turn rearticulates that desire in her thousands of viewers.

The marriage, or unequal partnership, of Delphi and P. Burke is an allegory for the contradictions that adhere to the cultural constitution of the feminine—for perfect Delphi could not exist, could not exercise such a powerful control over her culture’s imagination, were it not for the cultural construct of the feminine subject as she who can only yearn and seek to become, but never actually be. P. Burke/Delphi also articulates reservations about the potential appropriations of the technologically hybridized body by capitalist patriarchal culture. In Tiptree’s story, the cyborg does not fulfill Haraway’s ironic myth about the feminist potentialities of hybridity, but serves rather as a limit case for technoscience’s anti-utopic fetishization.

Among several technical glitches, Delphi is incapable of orgasm—certain parts of her body never do get “plugged in.” Meanwhile, P. Burke becomes increasingly bored with animating Delphi. What she really wants is to become Delphi, body and mind—which is, of course, impossible. Paul Isham, one of the “real” actors in the advertising scheme, falls in love with Delphi, finds out that she is a remotely animated cyborg, and devises a plot to find and rescue the “real” Delphi: thus, Delphi/P. Burke is again created out of the force of male desire. The constitutive force of desire is made quite explicit: Paul is not in love with Delphi but rather with the idea of Delphi—the-“real”-woman, the idea of what he can make her become. Delphi, who is designed by men to be the most
attractive specimen of her sex, nevertheless becomes a victim (and agent) of woman’s necessarily fragmented status, woman-as-becoming. At the same time that Paul begins to fall in love with Delphi, P. Burke begins to create/infiltrate, ever so subtly, Delphi’s unconscious—something nobody ever suspected she had: “Most of her sleepy-time Delphi’s just a gently ticking lush little vegetable waiting for P. Burke to get back on the controls. But now and again Delphi all by herself smiles a bit or stirs in her ‘sleep.’ Once she breathed a sound: ‘Yes’” (195).

Paul falls in love with Delphi, but it is P. Burke, not Delphi, who falls in love with Paul. Eventually, P. Burke forgets that she and Delphi are separate in any way, and looks forward to Paul’s rescue of what in actuality is her cabineted, electrode-studded body, which has been “performing” Delphi from a basement. And although Paul also understands, empirically, the circumstances of Delphi’s plugged-in existence, he is blinded from this fact by his desire. He is determined to “free” Delphi from herself, and so is P. Burke:

inside that cabinet is a prisoned carcass to whom something wonderful, unspeakable, is happening. Inside, P. Burke the real living woman who knows that HE is there, coming closer—Paul whom she has fought to reach through 40,000 miles of ice—Paul is here!—is yanking at the Waldo doors—The doors tear open and a monster rises up. (211)

P. Burke, of course, is not what Paul had in mind when he set out to rescue Delphi. He recoils in horror, and P. Burke, recalling her self, is heartbroken by his response. At the end of the novella, P. Burke, whom the head scientist in this experiment refers to as a “cybersystem,” dies, Delphi is reanimated by another host, and Paul makes a career out
of designing new and ever more sophisticated girl-androids. Delphi the animated pod emerges triumphant as the “real” woman—it is she, not P. Burke, who lives on to seduce her audience with the empty promise of wholeness and fulfillment through consumption. Tiptree’s novella is, finally, an exploration of the topoi of the category woman. In what way is Delphi “real?” In what way is P. Burke not? Delphi survives because she has the capacity to perform femininity in a way that P. Burke does not, to become for the men who design and employ her. Women are also implicated in the imperative to perform themselves, for Delphi’s existence is dependent on P. Burke’s desire to become her—a necessarily unfulfillable desire that ultimately kills her.

In The Passion of New Eve, Angela Carter playfully and subversively addresses the libratory potential of the interface of technoscience and sex and race categories through the use of myth, allegory, and what I will term a politics of the grotesque. Science-fictional representations of the encounter between the human race and the alien other often either explicitly or implicitly echo the confrontation between European colonizer and colonized. Early European explorers included in their (generically non-fictional) accounts of newly discovered landscapes accounts of the native population as a race of inconceivably savage and inhuman beings. These accounts included descriptions of cannibalism and random, unwonted violence, as well as descriptions and pictures of men and women without heads, with extra limbs, and/or possessing the physical qualities of animals such as dogs. Obviously, such phenomena did not actually exist: the mingled disgust, fear, and fascination felt by these early explorers produced grotesque and alien bodies. The production of grotesque bodies became a way for the colonizer to express his/her anxiety about, and fascination with, the unknown. In the same way, the grotesque,
overdetermined, multi-sexed and/or multi-gendered bodies in Carter’s novel function as both expressions and reflections of our (in the case of this novel, late twentieth century American and European) anxieties about the desire for sex/gender and racial role stability, and how that desire for stability ironically produces alien, alienating bodies.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s discussion of the grotesque as an exchange between the body and the world in which it lives and with which it interacts is a useful vantage point from which to read Carter’s grotesque bodies:

[The grotesque body] is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breast, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation. This is the ever unfinished, ever creating body. (26)

For Bakhtin, the human body is an entity that regularly exceeds its own apparent limitations. The grotesque body, in the Bakhtinian sense, is one that challenges the separation of the body and its environment. Similarly, the grotesque bodies of Carter’s fiction exceed their own limitations and undergo transformations that call our notional bodily inviolability into question. In The Passion of New Eve, the means of
technoscientific production and inscription have been hijacked by a group of radical feminists. The bodily transformations that they enact are designed to force the unwilling recipients of their technological interventions to encounter firsthand the relationship between female subjectivity and embodiment.

Carter’s novel relates the story of a man, Evelyn, who is transformed into Eve, a beautiful young woman destined to join a paramilitary group of feminist women and ex-men in the destruction of California. Evelyn, a London expatriate, comes to America to teach English literature, only to find that the university system here is in a state of general upheaval:

When I presented myself at the university where I had been engaged to teach, the combat-suited blacks who mounted guard with machine guns at every door and window laughed uproariously at me when they heard my cut-glass vowels and prissy English accent and let me go. So now I had no job; and my reason told me to scurry back, quick as I could, to festering yet familiar London, the devil I knew. But: ‘The age of reason is over,’ said the old soldier, the Czech who lived on the floor above me. He was, God help us, an alchemist and distilled a demented logic in his attic in stills of his own devising. (13)
The alchemist’s shadowy science of transformation and his pronouncement of the death of the “age of reason” reflect the instability of the world of the novel, and the displacement that Evelyn feels within that world. The novel is set in the would-be present of early 1970s America, where the forces of social unrest, particularly the women’s liberation and black power movements, are making a serious bid to wrest power
from the state. The American landscape functions for Evelyn as a trope of hybridity and instability (America as a failed alchemical experiment) and Evelyn himself, a white, male, upper-class English academic, is a figure of social stasis and entrenched power.

Evelyn settles in New York, where he meets and eventually impregnates Leilah, an impossibly erotic, gorgeous black woman who caters to his every desire:

She was black as the source of shadow and her skin was matt, lustreless and far too soft, so that she seemed to melt in my embraces [...] her speech contained more expostulations than sentences, for she rarely had the patience or energy to put together subject, verb, object, and extension in an ordered and logical fashion, so sometimes she sounded more like a demented bird than a woman, warbling arias of invocation or demand. I was lost the moment that I saw her. (18-19)

Like the early European explorers for whom black bodies became a fraught repository for the grotesque in desire, Evelyn describes Leilah as a bird, a fox, a barbarian: her blackness functions as a slate of shadowy indeterminacy, a backdrop upon which Evelyn erects, so to speak, himself through her. The affair ends in disaster: Leilah almost bleeds to death after receiving a hack job of an abortion, and Evelyn abandons her in a panic, placing a perfunctory phone call to her nearest relatives and fleeing the scene.

Evelyn heads West to find himself, blaming his abominable behavior towards Leilah on the corrupt atmosphere of New York: “I would go to the desert, to the waste heart of that vast country [...]. I thought I might find that most elusive of all chimeras, myself. And so, in the end, I did, although this self was a perfect stranger to me” (38). Evelyn runs out of gas in the desert and is picked up by a cult of feminist warriors who
live in a cave in the desert, a land that they refer to as Beulah. Evelyn is kidnapped by the Beulah cult, surgically transformed into the beautiful young woman Eve, and initiated into the mysteries of the cult. The cult of Beulah is presided over by a woman who has herself undergone surgical transformation, the performance of which complex, technologically mind-boggling process is regarded by the cult participants as a cleansing rite of passage: “Mother has made herself into an incarnated deity; she has quite transformed her flesh, she has undergone a series of painful metamorphoses of the entire body and become the abstraction of a natural principle. She is also a great scientist who makes extraordinary experiments and I was destined to become one of them” (49).

Mother has self-consciously styled her body as an archetypally grotesque manifestation of Woman: enormous belly, multiple lactating breasts, exaggerated genitalia, and so forth. The truth that the body represents for the members of the Beulah cult is to be found only through the dynamic and grotesque transformation of the flesh; thus the supreme matriarch of Beulah is a woman who has undergone surgical transformation in order to attain the purest state of womanhood. Beulah, as Evelyn/Eve points out, is indeed “the place where contrarieties exist together.” In the operating room where Evelyn undergoes his transformation into Eve, he notes that

Everything in the room had a curiously artificial quality, though nothing seemed unreal, far from it; Beulah, since its blueprint is a state of mind, has an unimpeachable quality of realism. But it is a triumph of science and hardly anything about it is natural, as if magic, there, masquerades as surgery in order to gain credence in a secular age. (49)
The cult of Beulah revels in woman’s status as a vessel of contradictions--alchemy, the science of transmutation, is the religion of the feminist warrior. In the cult of Beulah, “real” women are literally made, not born.

Shortly after her transformation, Eve escapes Beulah and is kidnapped by a poet named Zero, a sadistic maniac who lives in the desert with a harem of sex slaves whom he treats as chattel. Eve’s repeated rape by Zero constitutes her fall from innocence and her psychic transformation into womanhood. Eve notes, “although I was a woman, I was now passing for a woman, but, then, many women born spend their whole lives in just such imitations” (103). Thus Bakhtin’s conceptualization of the grotesque body as the “ever unfinished, ever changing body” is descriptive of the psychic and biological contours of woman, who is always-already a grotesque imitation of the perceived desires of patriarchal culture. Eve’s former status as a man draws out, as the alchemist draws a pure metal out of a mixture of alloys, the humiliations she suffers as a woman:

And more than my body, some other yet equally essential part of my being was ravaged by him for, when [Zero] mounted me [ . . . ] I felt myself to be, not myself but he; and the experience of this crucial lack of self, which always brought with it a shock of introspection, forced me to know myself as a former violator at the moment of my own violation. (101-102, italics mine)

Beyond the shock entailed by the loss of male sexual identity, what Eve experiences during her rape by Zero is the sense in which woman is always-already estranged from her own identity; so that Eve has not only taken on a new sexual identity, but an identity which entails an ongoing sense of loss, the “unfinished” body of the grotesque.
Eve’s only other sexually consummated relationship occurs shortly after this point in the narrative. During her tenure as Evelyn, Eve was obsessed with the figure of Tristessa, a movie starlet who, for Evelyn, is the embodiment of all his desires, the very essence of female sexuality. This icon of feminine beauty turns out to be a man in drag. Eve joins forces with Tristessa during a showdown at the aging movie star’s desert home: Zero sieges Tristessa’s mansion because he is convinced that she, who turns out to be he, has rendered him infertile and thus incapable of siring the new Messiah on his desert harem. As the mystery of Tristessa’s identity is revealed, Eve reflects that

*That* was why he had been the perfect man’s woman! He had made himself the shrine of his own desires, had made of himself the only woman he could have loved! If a woman is indeed beautiful only in so far as she incarnates most completely the secret aspirations of man, no wonder Tristessa had been able to become the most beautiful woman in the world, an unbegotten woman who made no concessions to humanity.

(129)

Eve helps Tristessa to destroy Zero and his harem and escape to the desert. The revelation of Tristessa’s sexual identity is not revolting to Eve, who is in the best position to understand conflicting sexual identities. In the most blatantly erotic passage in the novel, Eve and Tristessa consummate their relationship. Eve’s brief love affair with the dying, pathetic yet regal figure of Tristessa in the barren desert is the most lyrical passage of the novel. The contrarieties and monstrosities of gender and sexuality are united and dissolved in the figure of this grotesque couple:
we peopled this immemorial loneliness with all we had been, or might be, or had dreamed of being, or had thought we were--every modulation of the selves we now projected upon each other’s flesh, selves--aspects of being, ideas--that seemed, during our embraces, to be the very essence of our selves; the concentrated essence of being, as if, out of these fathomless kisses and our interpenetrating, undifferentiated sex, we had made the great Platonic hermaphrodite together, the whole and perfect being to which he, with an absurd and touching heroism, had, in his own single self, aspired; we brought into being the being who stops time in the self-created eternity of lovers. (148)

This “Platonic” union of bodies articulates Carter’s politicization of the grotesque: through the intermingling of unfinished bodies we perceive the potential for the alien body to produce a new, liberatory, and utopic version of sexual desire. The frankly erotic content of this passage attests to the monstrous erotic and psychic potentialities of the hybrid body for feminism, a body whose very indeterminacy promises to destabilize the hierarchical dimensions of desire.

In the denouement of the novel, Tristessa and Eve are found by a white Christian paramilitary youth group. Tristessa is executed but Eve is spared: she is rescued eventually by Leilah, once the exotic sex toy, who has herself been reborn as Lilith, and is now literally the protector of the dark race. Lilith is helping to organize blacks, Hispanics, and women in their civil war against the state of California. Lilith’s mother, as it turns out, is the Great Emasculator herself, the grotesque matriarch of Beulah. The narrative of this fabulously strange novel ends with Eve pushing off in a boat from the
shore--returning, in her words, to the ocean, from whence she came: “The vengeance of the sex,” Eve remarks as she sets off for the unknown, “is love” (191). Thus Eve finally sees her mutilation at the hands of the cult of Beulah not as a simple revenge for the abandonment of their daughter Leilah, but as a gesture of generosity and love.

Furthermore, the implication of Eve’s acceptance of her new status as woman is that it is only in this form, albeit a grotesque, wrought form, that Eve can hope to accomplish what she set out to accomplish as Evelyn; that is, to “find himself.” Evelyn could not have found himself because one cannot set out to find that which is not lost. Evelyn-as-Evelyn, a white, male, educated middle class European, occupied the most privileged subjective space in his culture. Through his transformation into a woman, “he” found “himself” through the recognition that “she” has nothing to lose. The consummation of this recognition is her relationship with Tristessa, through which she recognizes the erotic possibilities of the grotesque, or unfinished, body.

I have concentrated so far in this chapter on analyses of early, highly speculative and ironic feminist visions of the future of women’s interface with technology. Now I turn to an analysis of two later works, Joan Slonczewski’s 1986 novel A Door Into Ocean and Octavia Butler’s (1987-89) Xenogenesis trilogy, that take up more concretely the issues raised by feminist critiques of the politics of biogenetics. Both of these works reflect a more advanced comprehension of the potentialities of biogenetics than Carter and Tiptree’s, especially Slonczewski’s—she is a biology professor at Kenyon College. Katherine Hayles’ critical category the “posthuman” affords an illuminating view of the implications for feminist theory and practice of emergent developments in cybernetics.
and biogenetics. Hayles uses the category posthuman to describe the latest historical phase in the development of cybernetics and information theory. The posthuman describes what Hayles calls the “third wave” of cybernetics, which begins to emerge in the 1980s: the shift from second (1960-1980s) to third (1980s to present) wave cybernetics is the shift, broadly speaking, from modeling information systems on the same principles that govern organic systems—as self-organizing and autopoetic—to the goal of developing information systems that have the capacity to evolve. The objective of third wave cybernetics research is “to evolve the capacity to evolve” (11); thus, to evolve what Hayles terms posthuman intelligences. In the following paragraph, Hayles describes the theoretical implications of posthuman systems theory for the future of scientific inquiry:

In the posthuman view [. . .] conscious agency has never been “in control.” In fact, the very illusion of control bespeaks a fundamental ignorance about the nature of the emergent processes through which consciousness, the organism, and the environment are constituted. Mastery through the exercise of autonomous will is merely the story consciousness tells itself to explain results that actually come about through chaotic dynamics and emergent structures. If, as Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, Evelyn Fox Keller, Carolyn Merchant, and other feminist critics of science have argued, there is a relation among the desire for mastery, an objectivist account of science, and the imperialist project of subduing nature, then the posthuman offers resources for the construction of another kind of account. In this account, emergence replaces teleology;
reflexive epistemology replaces objectivism; distributed cognition replaces autonomous will; embodiment replaces a body seen as a support system for the mind; and a dynamic partnership between humans and intelligent machines replaces the liberal humanist subject’s manifest destiny to dominate and control nature. Of course, this is not necessarily what the posthuman will mean—only what it can mean if certain strands among its complex seriations are highlighted and combined to create a vision of the human that uses the posthuman leverage to avoid reinscribing, and thus repeating, some of the mistakes of the past. (288)

Like Firestone and Haraway, Hayles sees science-fictional accounts of the future implications and possible configurations of third wave cybernetics as a vital dimension of the development of its methodologies and technologies. The fictional works that I examine in relation to this thesis both describe and place in socioeconomic context the development and use of technologies that are autopoetic and emergent, organically self-replicating and wo/man-made, thus suggesting new directions for the development of a feminist technoscientific epistemology.

_A Door Into Ocean_, Slonczewski’s second novel, is a study of the rewards and dangers of a culture that privileges the development of exclusively organically-derived technologies. The action of the novel is set primarily on Shora, an isolated planet covered entirely with water. The inhabitants of this satellite planet are an all-female race of humanoids called Sharers. The Sharers have developed “breathmicrobes,” symbiont microbes that store oxygen, that allow the women to breathe underwater for short periods of time. Webbed toes and fingers help them to swim. Another salient physical difference
between Sharers and land-bound humans is the Sharer’s capacity to enter “whitetrance,” a deeply meditative state that cuts off communication with the outside world. Whitetrance has a variety of pragmatic functions: a Sharer might enter whitetrance in order to handle pain, severe mental distress, or irresolvable conflict. The central conflict of the novel is the Shorans’ reaction to the invasion of their watery planet by Valedon, a powerful planet that is attempting to colonize Shora by force in order to insure its allegiance to the land world’s ruling Patriarch, and to exploit its natural resources. In the context of this conflict, whitetrance is used by the Shorans as a means of non-violent resistance. Whitetrance is one of many elements of an intricate system of technologies developed by the Sharer culture. These types of technologies, which are at once widely dispersed and controlled by individual will, are a particular threat to the militaristic Valedon culture, which cannot fight effectively against a people whose technologies cannot be taken away from them.

The Sharers are an all-female, lesbian separatist community with pacifist values. At the time present of the novel, however, the Sharer culture is being threatened by the encroachment of the patriarchal Valedon. Slonczewski puts an interesting spin on this story of colonialist expansion by representing the struggle for economic and cultural dominance as a showdown between conflicting modes of technology. What the Valans initially perceive as the Sharer’s primary weakness—their self-sufficient relationship with their ocean environment—turns out to be their greatest strength. Every aspect of Sharer life, from their homes to their biomedical apparatuses, is informed by and intertwined with their environment. The Sharers live in large, loosely connected family groups. Each group builds its living and working spaces on a system of what can best be
described as large lillypads. They use seasilk and seaweed to construct the walls and ceilings of their homes. By using the materials that the ocean provides for them instead of imposing foreign, wo/man-made materials on their environment, the Sharers maintain a symbiotic relationship with their surroundings. This relationship also guarantees their long-term survival and independence, as they are not dependent on land-based technologies. The raft system accommodates the ever-changing nature of the ocean environment: when one family raft is destroyed by a storm, the group relocates to a neighboring raft until it can begin the process of building a new home.

A major achievement of this novel is the representation of a non-primitive culture that does not exploit its own environmental resources or require foreign technologies. Communal life is organized around work and the sharing of knowledge. The Sharers are particularly advanced in the development of biological sciences. Sharer scientists, or “lifeshapers,” have learned to encode the organic matter that makes up their raft system with their data, thus ensuring that the destruction of an individual raft’s laboratory will not result in the loss of information. In one scene, Realgar, the Valan military general overseeing the colonization of Shora, discusses the potential for infiltration of Sharer laboratories with his staff scientist:

The main thing [Realgar] wanted to know was, were these lab warrens genuine laboratories or not?

“Oh, they’re genuine, yes.” [. . .] “There’s work space, there’s plumbing. No glassware, bottled chemicals, or autoclaves, much less recognizable analytic hardware. But those vines you saw, they form galls whose cavities can be inoculated with pure cultures of microorganisms.”
Other vines are specialized secretors for enzymes, organic reagents, acids, you name it.”

Realgar was relieved. “Then their labs are not hidden.”

“I couldn’t swear to that,” Siderite cautioned.

“Come now, there’s always uncertainty.”

“Oh, I don’t mean that.” Siderite’s eyes defocused, and he stared into space. “In a sense one might say…the whole planet is their laboratory.”

“What’s that?” An entire planet? Sweat broke out on Realgar’s forehead.


The scientist Siderite’s function as a military informant is complicated throughout the novel by his personal and professional interest in the Sharer culture. Significantly, it is the scientist who understands, better than any other member of the Valan military installment, the depth of sophistication of the Sharer’s social structures and technologies. Realgar is suspicious of the scientist, not only because his allegiance to the project of colonization is increasingly unclear, but also because of his unabashed admiration of the Sharer’s scientific culture, which is vastly more sophisticated than Valedon’s. Again, it is the dispersed nature of Sharer technologies that presents such a threat to the Valedon military. The patriarchal Valan culture is at a disadvantage in their conceptualization of technoscience as the domination of nature. Thus, the military scientist Siderite’s job is to find the labs and the “chief” scientists of Shora. However, the organization and
distribution of scientific knowledge on Shora reflects one of the culture’s basic epistemological presuppositions: that knowledge is for sharing, not for controlling. A culture that refuses to use its knowledge as domination will not be easily dominated.

As a pacifist culture, the Sharers have no technologies of destruction. When the Valans begin to occupy Shora, they believe that their mission is fairly straightforward—after all, what could be easier than establishing military control over a small group of naked, unarmed women? But the decentralized nature of Sharer power and technology, which the Valans interpret as a weakness, becomes their main source of strength. For instance, the Valan troops arrive on Shora equipped with sophisticated, expensive communications systems and weaponry. Their first objective, as in all colonialist expansion projects, is to infiltrate the Sharer’s communal gatherings and force them into isolation. But even when the Sharers are forbidden to gather, they are nonetheless capable of communicating with each other. The Sharers use clickflies, a type of insect native to Shora, as a means of delivering messages across the ocean. Once they are “programmed” with a message, clickflies quickly transmit their message to each other and to neighboring rafts by rubbing their legs together. The Valans, who can only conceptualize communications systems as elaborate technoscientific apparatuses, are stumped when they realize that the Sharers are somehow communicating with each other even though they are no longer allowed to gather in groups.

When a Sharer raft refuses to comply with Valan orders to allow inspection of their laboratories, three of their group are taken in for questioning. Colonel Jade attempts to break down her prisoners through the use of a “mindprobe,” a Valan technology that allows inquisitors to forcibly enter their victim’s minds in order to retrieve information.
Jade eventually kills one of the Sharer prisoners, who enters whitetrance in order to avoid inquisition. The Sharer prisoner feels the probe enter her mind and immediately initiates a “deathblock,” a fatal reaction that prevents Jade from carrying out her infiltration. Once again, the Valan military, with its sophisticated technologies of destruction, is unable to fathom, much less fight against, the pacifist Sharer culture: “Mental deathblocks were illegal on Valedon. To find one so absolute, among supposedly peaceful people, was a surprise. What could such a block be aimed against? The technique must have been developed long before Valan troops arrived” (218). The Sharer deathblock is, of course, not “aimed against” anything, but functions as part of an intricate and highly evolved system of psychic self-awareness that contains within it the means of self-destruction. The death of a Sharer prisoner represents a disgrace for the Valans, who have been instructed to establish a firm but peaceful presence. The death of the Sharer prisoner also inspires her surviving sisters to redouble their efforts towards peaceful resistance to the Valan takeover.

Typically, it is the deployment of military might, in the form of advanced technologies of destruction, which gives the colonizing nation the final advantage over the colonized. In this neat science fictional reversal, however, the very technologies that are designed to overpower the helpless native result in the defeat of the colonizers. The same logic that dictates the military takeover of a helpless native population also dictates that military force cannot be used against a population with no visible means of defending itself. Here, the Sharers’ closeness to nature, a trait usually associated with femininity and weakness, is represented as their greatest strength. The Sharers’ ultimately triumphant use of peaceful resistance, their decentralized dwellings, their free
and willing exchange of information, and their development of organic “lifeshaping”
technologies all suggest new directions for the “subjectification” of the process of
scientific inquiry and development. Although the peace achieved at the end of the novel
does not signal unambiguous triumph for the Sharers, it does force the Valans to
temporarily withdraw their military forces. General Realgar is publicly disgraced when
his final frustrated efforts at retaliation end with the violent deaths of several Sharer
women. Meanwhile, the Sharers begin the process of rebuilding their planet through the
careful shaping of its natural life forms.

Slonczewski also complicates the Sharer’s dependence on organic, emergent
technologies: the Sharers are susceptible to a disease that they call “stonesickness,” an
addictive and sometimes fatal dependence on stones, with which they have a strange
fascination. Before the Valan invasion, a small number of Valan traders established
trading posts on Shora. They brought with them stones, which the Shorans had never
seen before. Stones disturb the Sharers because they are both organic and dead, and thus
have no place in the Sharer culture’s intricately balanced relationship with their living
surroundings. In the following scene Lystra, one of the main protagonists of the novel,
mourns the loss of her companion Rilwen, whom she discovers shopping for stones in a
trader’s store:

*Rilwen!* The cry from her mind seemed to echo throughout the store. In
fact, not a sound escaped her throat. The time for that, Lystra knew, was
long past. She had tried, everyone had tried, to help cure Rilwen’s
growing obsession with those inconceivable, unnamable objects from the
Stone Moon. At last there was nothing left but to leave her Unspoken, like
a psychotic, alone on an offshoot rafting until she came to terms with herself. Unspeaking was not a sure cure for the stonesickness—Lystra knew that, but neither lifeshapers nor wordweavers had yet found a better way for those afflicted by this illness unheard of before the Valans came.

(73)
The phenomenon of stonesickness is indicative of a larger problem that Slonczewski explores throughout the novel: the inevitable risk of provinciality for a small, lesbian separatist planet with little to no contact with the outside world. The stonesickness apparently evolves from the addict’s fascination with an object whose properties she cannot understand. Recalling Hayles’ description of the potentialities for feminist scientific praxis of the epistemological category “posthuman,” we see that in almost every respect, the Sharers’ scientific culture reflects the practice of this new type of knowledge acquisition that she describes: “emergence replaces teleology; reflexive epistemology replaces objectivism; distributed cognition replaces autonomous will” (288). However, in the case of the stones, it seems that liberal humanist ideology’s fascination with the model of knowledge acquisition through domination has infected Shora, albeit in a reversed form. Unable to comprehend the stones or fit them into their way of life, the Shorans become susceptible to domination by the idea of the stones: an addict can apparently think of nothing else. The stones inspire in their Shoran addicts a type of autonomous will foreign to their social structure—stonesick Shorans slowly lose their desire to interact with the community, wanting nothing more than to be left alone with only their stones for company. Significantly, stones are central to the patriarchal
Valan culture’s social and economic structures—they trade them, use them as charms, wear them as personal talismans, and are even named after stones.

Recognizing this phenomenon as indicative of the more pervasive problem of isolationism on Shora, some elder Shorans convince a young Valan boy, Spinel, to join them as an apprentice. Despite the initial, disturbing presence of a “malefreak” among them, the Shorans eventually learn to trust Spinel, whose presence among them during the trial of their conflict with the Valan military serves as a valuable resource for the comprehension of a race of people who would willfully “share death.” Feminist SF critic Marleen Barr notes that the theme of male inclusion in A Door Into Ocean serves as an implicit revisionary critique of feminist separatism in both feminist SF and feminist theory: “Rather than being an end product, Shora is a separatist world from which a new world for women and men can be made” (170). Through the character of Spinel, Slonczewski describes the difficulty and inherent necessity of allowing existent malefreak cultures into the creation of a feminist scientific epistemology.

Octavia Butler’s Xenogenesis trilogy also features a future humanoid race that has learned how to effectively integrate technoscience with their environment. Like the Sharers, the alien Oankali’s survival depends upon their capacity to acquire and share knowledge. The Oankali’s ships, land, ground transportation and life support systems are all complex living organisms which ingest, dispose of waste, and feel pain. The Oankali must maintain a respectful and reciprocal relationship with nature in order because nature is both their technology and their sole means of life support. Butler is concerned with the details of the Oankali’s daily life: she illustrates how the aliens deal with their garbage, bodily waste, personality conflicts, sexual tensions, and issues of reproduction. Not only
do the Oankali have a complex and interdependent relationship with their physical surroundings, which are constituted almost entirely of living organisms; they also have a directly interdependent relationship with one another. The Oankali collect information about their surroundings by tasting objects with their tongues and storing the information in their bodies. They share this information with each other in intensely pleasurable exchanges, “plugging into” each other’s bodies with sensory tentacles. As one Oankali explains,

We trade the essence of ourselves. Our genetic material for yours […]
We do what you would call genetic engineering. We know you had begun to do it yourselves a little, but it’s foreign to you. We must do it. It renews us, enables us to survive, to survive as an evolving species instead of specializing ourselves into extinction or stagnation. (39)

Thus the Oankali body is eternally supplementing and supplemented by the exchange of information. Because the exchange of knowledge is a sexually stimulating and mutually gratifying experience, there is no sense in which knowledge, or for that matter, the body itself, is regarded as private property. The Oankali do not “attain” autonomy or become subjects to and of any symbolic order: they are in a permanent state of becoming. Butler’s Xenogenesis trilogy is a heterotopian vision of the positive possibilities of an organic alien technology in the absence of gender, race, and class hierarchies.

Butler also challenges the opacity of scientific empiricism by re-writing human biology. At the time present of the novel, the Oankali have saved the few remaining members of the human race from the planet Earth, which has been effectively destroyed by World War Three. The Oankali have revoked the reproductive rights of humans
because they recognize that humans are genetically hardwired to create hierarchical structures. It is this flaw which inevitably leads to our destruction as a race, and which informs all of our actions, including the production and reproduction of bodies within rigidly hierarchical paradigms. *Dawn*, the first book of the trilogy, relates the history of the rebirth of the human race. The Oankali save the remaining survivors of the holocaust, and encourage them to integrate their species by reproducing “construct,” or mixed, Oankali/human children. In the first book, Earth’s survivors are reintroduced to their planet, where they begin to form uneasy alliances with the Oankali, and rebuild their lives on Earth. The Oankali have chosen Lilith, a young black woman, to lead the group of surviving humans through the process of assimilation with the alien race. Although she remains wary of the Oankali throughout the novel, she also understands that hybridization with the aliens is the humans’ only means of survival. Through her interactions with the group of humans whom Lilith is charged with “awakening” out of the state of suspended animation that they have been placed in since their rescue from Earth, we come to see how Lilith’s former marginal status as black female in her now-defunct culture allows her to effectively deal with the humans’ sense of radical alienation.

Throughout the *Xenogenesis* series, Butler portrays characters whose gendered and sexual identities are created and re-created by discursive practices. *Imago*, the third book of the trilogy, features a construct child named Jodahs. He/She/It is the son of Lilith, of two Oankali sexed mates--Oankali sex is determined after a series of metamorphoses--and of an Ooloi mate, a species whose sex remains forever indeterminate. At this point in the history of the Xenogenesis, many Oankali/human constructs have been produced, but Jodahs is the first Ooloi/human construct. For the
first 20 or so years of his life, Jodahs appears to be a human male with only a few minor Oankali physical attributes. But during his first metamorphosis, Jodahs discovers that it is an Ooloi construct, attracted sexually to both humans and Oankali, and capable of morphing its physical attributes to conform to the desired sex of its various human objects of desire. The figure of Jodahs provides us with a fictional representation of Foucault’s concept of discursively produced sexuality, or Grosz’s proposed model of libidinal hybridity. Jodahs, the product of an alien reproductive technology, has a body that conforms to the desires produced by its surroundings: we might read this figure as a sort of miniature, individualized genealogy.

The mutability of human/alien sexuality is a theme also developed in the second book of the series, Adulthood Rites. In the following scene, Akin, (pronounced “Ah-keen,” the name is also certainly meant to evoke association with the word “akin”) Lilith’s Oankali/Ooloi/human-born child, recalls his first moments outside of the womb. Unlike human children, constructs have the capacity for memory the moment they are born; speech comes shortly thereafter:

“He’s beautiful,” one voice said. “He looks completely Human.”

“Some of his features are only cosmetic, Lilith. Even now his senses are more dispersed over his body than yours are. He is...less Human than your daughters.”

“I’d guessed he would be. I know your people still worry about Human-born males.”

“They were an unsolved problem. I believe we’ve solved it now.”

(4)
Although Akin is not fully human, he identifies strongly with the plight of a group of human resisters, who refuse to integrate with the Oankali and long to reproduce their own race. He is abducted by a group of resisters when he is still an infant, and during this time he becomes fascinated with them. With his help, the Oankali devise a plan to allow the resisters to start a new human colony on Mars. Despite the fact that Akin knows that the humans will not survive on their new planet--that their hierarchical gene dooms humanity to destruction--he nonetheless feels compelled to recruit for the new planet, to give the humans at least one more chance. Like Jodahs in Imago, Akin’s physical appearance changes drastically after his final metamorphosis. By the end of the novel, most of the resisters reject him completely: they only allow him in their presence because he is organizing force behind their migration to Mars. The resister’s refusal to hybridize is a powerful indictment of humanity’s internalization of scientific racism, and our attendant obsession with racial as well as sexual “purity.” The fact that the resisters are willing to risk their lives in a fruitless effort to retain their hierarchical sexual identity structures serves as proof of how embedded the drive to reproduce traditional “technologies of gender” really is.

Scientist Evelyn Fox Keller inquires into the relationship between science and sex/gender, and notes that what this relationship comes down to is the always problematic relationship between knowledge and power:

Just as the engendering of culture in general has shown itself as a way of ordering the power structures of our social and political worlds, the engendering of knowledge, and of scientific knowledge in particular, has served to order the sphere of epistemic power. Knowledge is power—in
many senses of the term. With the rise of modern science, knowledge came to be understood as a particular kind of power—namely, as the power to dominate nature. In this history, we can see the construction of gender as the construction of exclusion—of women, of what is labeled feminine, and simultaneously, of the alternative meanings of power that knowledge might engender. (42)

In both Slonczewski and Butler’s visions of the future, power is not conceptualized as the ability to conquer nature; on the contrary, “power” as it is constructed in masculinist scientific discourse is represented as a woefully inadequate, and finally self-destructive, form of knowledge. For Octavia Butler, it is the male/female gender hierarchy that must be deconstructed: thus the “evolution” of the human species is not marked by its increased ability to mediate the forces of nature with technology; rather, evolution is the destruction of the human race as we know it. In other words, our ability to evolve is reconceptualized as our ability to hybridize. And for Slonczewski as well as Butler, scientific knowledge is acquired by developing an interactive relationship with nature. In both novels, the attempted domination of nature, particularly through the development and use of technologies of destruction, inevitably leads to the defeat of those who attempt it.

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Chapter Three

Alien Sex Acts in Feminist SF: Heuristic Models for Thinking a Feminist Future of Desire

“[A]ll the aliens we know so far speak human. They speak our human predicament, our history, our hopes and fears, our pride and shame. As long as we haven’t met any actual no kidding intelligent extraterrestrials (and I would maintain that this is still the case, though I know opinions are divided) the aliens we imagine are always other humans in disguise: no more, no less” (108).

Gwyneth Jones, “Aliens in the Fourth Dimension”

“What it is all about is the fact that love is impossible, and that the sexual relation founders in non-sense, not that this should in any way diminish the interest we feel for the Other” (158).


“Only he [sic] who is willing and whose mission it is to create the future can see the present in its concrete truth” (204).

Georg Lukács, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat”

In the Lacanian formulation, the subject-in-language attempts to make up for his/her necessary and inevitable inability to attain phallic mastery and wholeness through the attempt to satisfy desire. One way in which the desiring subject attempts to make good his/her lack is through sexual relationships, wherein the erotic object of desire functions as the missing constitutive link, that Other who promises to fulfill the subject’s desire. The impossibility of the Other to fulfill or make whole the desiring subject guarantees the subject’s status as primarily and necessarily fragmented. The alien in the science fiction novel tends to function as a sort of exaggerated version of the Other,12 whose (imaginary) conquerability seems to guarantee wholeness for the human protagonist. In a sense, as Gwyneth Jones points out in her essay “Aliens in the Fourth

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12 The idea that the science-fictional alien signifies as the “Other” in Lacanian terms is now a basic one for SF criticism, and a well-documented one: therefore I will assume it for the purposes of this chapter. For an excellent and detailed discussion of the function of the alien as the Other in works of science fiction, see Jenny Wolmark’s Aliens and Others. Iowa City: U. of Iowa Press, 1994.
Dimension,” all science-fictional representations of aliens must necessarily function as a version of our human Otherness—for, as she points out, we have as yet no “really” alien beings upon which to model such representations. It stands to reason, then, that all science-fictional representations of sex acts involving aliens are bound to reinscribe the epistemological and ontological lineaments of the human sexual experience. For some science fiction writers, this impasse becomes an occasion for thinking through its implications as a figure for the limits of fictional and political representation. In this chapter, I will analyze the work of three science fiction writers who describe acts of alien sex in such a way that calls attention to both the limitations of the all-too-human Oedipal model of sexuality, and the feminist heuristic potential of gesturing towards radically alien sex acts.

All of the writers whose work I address in this chapter—Monique Wittig, Angela Carter, and Samuel Delany—are writers not only of science fiction but of theory and/or literary criticism as well. I will explore the sense in which each of these writer’s creative representations of alien sex acts function as dialectical corollaries to their theoretical investigations into the limits of representation. The phrase “limits of representation” describes the epistemological limits of speculative thought, be it dystopian or utopian; a limit “built in,” so to speak, to science fiction as well as much of Marxism, feminism, and any other dialectical discourse that utilizes the idea of the future as part of its conceptual apparatus. Such dialectical inquiry must engage the contrary nature of signification itself; that is, the unsignifiable nature of the Real, or in political terms, that which remains after the asymmetricality of power relations, of their oppressions, is felt by those who are oppressed. Inasmuch as any dialectical theoretical enterprise engages the tension
between present and future, between a problem and a gesture towards its solution, we might say that *all such theory is a more or less constrained exercise in speculation*, because the gestured-toward or projected models exist, strictly speaking, only in the future tense, as possibilities. In his essay on Kim Stanley Robinson’s speculative Mars trilogy, Frederick Jameson describes the creative utopia’s relationship to the limits of representation: “[U]topia as a form is not the representation of radical alternatives; it is rather simply the imperative to imagine them” (231). It is in this sense that I see the potential for representations of alien sex acts to function as feminist heuristic models: in the works that I discuss in this chapter, these representations function as part of each author’s fictional and theoretical imperative to imagine radical alternatives for the future of sexual politics.

These writers are feminist “moral pornographers,” to borrow a phrase from Angela Carter’s *The Sadeian Woman* because their representations of alien sex confront the problem of the unrepresentability of a non-Oedipal desire. For Deleuze and Guattari, as well as in my own argument, Oedipus is a major structuring principle of every aspect of our existence. Deleuze and Guattari argue that the structuring principle of Oedipus serves the hegemonic economic and ideological interests of our (in this case, nuclear, capitalist, “first”-world) society. Although I take issue with what I see as *Anti-Oedipus*’s failure to engage with “Oedipus” as a feminist problematic, I find their idea of Oedipus as a hegemonic, specifically capitalist, structuring principle to be useful. “Oedipus” describes a set of power relations that is born, in our cultural context, within the nuclear family as the Oedipus complex. This complex metastasizes, moving outwards from the family unit to inform all our social, economic, and political relations, so that all such
relations become infected by the politics of domination and capitulation that we have learned from our earliest days to operate within and to recapitulate. The “Oedipal model of sexuality” describes the tendency of sexual relations to be carried out, whether through straight or gay sexual practices, as a struggle that recapitulates the power politics of the Oedipal structure. It is the female, or in the case of the homosexual relation, the feminized, participant in the sexual relation who takes the position of capitulation within the Oedipal power struggle. Therefore, the writers whose work I explore here are feminist moral pornographers because they describe the Oedipally configured sexual relation as one in need of cognitive estrangement and revision.

I begin my excurses with the fictional and theoretical work of Monique Wittig, a writer whose work addresses the problem of sex difference as a power relation requiring revision by a third term which would break up the binary of male/female upon which, as she argues, all forms of oppressive power relations are based. This third term is the figure of the “lesbian,” which I place in quotes here because, confusingly, although the term relates loosely to the subject position of lesbian in the present tense, she does not yet exist. The lesbian describes an alien form of sexuality, one that requires the context of science fiction to be fully mapped, as Wittig’s theoretical writings can only delineate this figure in terms of what it is not, or what it opposes. In the following passage, the futuristic Amazons of Wittig’s first SF novel, _Les Guérillères_, describe the reason for their war against men:

The women say, the men have kept you at a distance, they have supported you, they have put you on a pedestal, constructed with an essential difference. They say, men in their way have adored you like a goddess or
else burned you at their stakes or else relegated you to their service in their back-yards. They say, in doing they have always in their speech dragged you in the dirt. They say, in speaking they have possessed violated taken subdued humiliated you to their heart’s content. They say, oddly enough what they have exalted in their words as an essential difference is a biological variation. They say, they have described you as they described the races they called inferior. They say, yes, these are the same domineering oppressors, the same masters who have said that negroes and women do not have a heart spleen liver in the same place as their own, that difference of sex difference of colour signify inferiority, their own right to domination and appropriation. (100, 102)

In this passage from her science-fictional account of sex/class warfare, Wittig describes how, for white Western patriarchy, sex difference signifies the right to “appropriation and domination.” Wittig interrogates patriarchal constructions of difference and finds that sex difference—in our case, the construction of female sex as different than male--functions as the primary, arbitrary signifier of inferiority in an entire constellation of differences in relation to white male normativity that collectively constitute patriarchal domination. A radical departure from Luce Irigaray’s insistence on the liberatory function of sexual difference, Wittig’s critique of patriarchal domination names difference—its construction and maintenance—as the most powerful weapon available to the oppressor. In an approach that might be described as deconstructive feminist dialectics, Wittig insists that sex conceived as difference can only ever be interpreted in a hierarchic manner. Whatever it is that we conceive of as constituting difference between
the sexes, including biological difference, is sexist ideology. In fact, because difference is always-already hierarchic in the constitution and maintenance of a social normativity, —be it matriarchal, patriarchal, or otherwise—“difference” of any kind is the master signifier in the semiotic arsenal of ideology. The work that feminist theory and fiction is therefore obliged to perform is the deconstruction of sexual difference—but this work can only be performed via the tactical reconstruction of sexual difference, so that a strategic space outside of sexual difference can be carved out and defended. This strategic space, the product of the dialectical, tactical reconstruction of difference, is lesbian sexuality. This is the context in which I place Wittig’s famous contention that “Lesbians are not women” (32).

In her 1980 essay “The Point of View: Universal or Particular?” Wittig writes “A text by a minority writer is effective only if it succeeds in making the minority point of view universal” (64). Using this concept as a means by which to critique Wittig’s own fictional/theoretical apparatus, we see that what Wittig advocates here is not merely a flattening out or erasure of difference. It is, rather, an attempt to estrange the reader from the epistemological violence performed by what she calls “the straight mind.” In her science fiction, Wittig attempts to render as universal the “minority point of view” the category she names “lesbian.” But here we return to the confusion that the term “lesbian” necessarily engenders, for it would seem that in a sense Wittig privileges the practice of lesbianism as an a priori non-ideological subject position. According to this reading, Wittig contradicts her own professed project of deconstructing difference by reinscribing lesbian difference. However, this reading fails to take two key considerations into account: firstly, Wittig’s constant problematization of the mimetic, representational, (de)
constructive function of fiction—and, indeed, of language itself; and secondly, the role of
the science-fictional tenor of much of her fiction, its allegiance to the construction of an
alien sexuality. In *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire*, Teresa
de Lauretis notes that

[T]he original lost object, the one that was never anywhere, can be
conjured up and recathcted only in the signifying or the representing of
desire itself. This would account for the centrality, the apparently
necessary repetition, of the figure of loss and dispossession that yet
sustains subjectivity and desire in *The Lesbian Body* [. . .]. If the wound
and the scar, castration and the fetish, are the twin elements of a fantasy
that is represented—inscribed or reenacted in different scenarios—in
lesbian writing and in lesbian eros, it may well be because that fantasy is
not only representative but in effect constitutive of perverse desire. (253)

Wittig can only represent the possibility of alien sexuality, of a sexuality that exists
outside of lack and appropriation, in the context of a future space. De Lauretis observes
that there is a seemingly constitutive relationship between the representation of lesbian
desire and lesbian desire itself, and that this relationship reinscribes the containment of
lack and appropriation particular to lesbian subjectivity. If this is indeed the case, then it
is also true that the representation of the future of lesbian desire enjoys a constitutive
relationship with the future of lesbian desire itself. The science-fictional context in
which the female body is de-constructed in *The Lesbian Body* is important because the
“not-yet,” future space is the only place within which we might currently imagine the
existence of a sexuality alien to the vicissitudes of the symbolic order.
For Wittig, the practice of lesbianism in our historical and political context does not guarantee access to some sort of refuge from patriarchal oppression. Lesbianism is, instead, a sort of signpost that points, more compellingly than any other current sexual practice, to the possibility of a sexuality that is not defined in relation to the reproduction of the heterosexual sex/class hierarchy. Wittig is careful to avoid the re-mystification of the category “woman,” however: the ultimate goal of identification with lesbian sexuality is to suppress the sex/class distinction, not to reify it:

Our fight aims to suppress men as a class, not through a genocidal, but a political struggle. Once the class “men” disappears, “women” as a class will disappear as well, for there are no slaves without masters. Our first task, it seems, is to always thoroughly dissociate “women” (the class within which we fight) and “woman,” the myth. For “woman” does not exist for us: it is only an imaginary formation, while “women” is the product of a social relationship. We felt this strongly when everywhere we refused to be called a “woman’s liberation movement.” Furthermore, we have to destroy the myth inside and outside of ourselves. “Woman” is not each one of us, but the political and ideological formation which negates “women” (the product of a relation of exploitation). “Woman” is there to confuse us, to hide the reality “women.” In order to be aware of being a class and to become a class we first have to kill the myth of “woman” including its most seductive aspects [. . .]. But to become a class we do not have to suppress our individual selves, and since no individual can be reduced to her/his oppression we are also confronted
with the historical necessity of constituting ourselves as the individual subjects of our history as well. (15-16)

What Wittig advocates here is a seemingly paradoxical response to the problem of hierarchy: the simultaneous identification with the category “women” and the rejection of the category “woman.” This approach has a great deal in common with Gayatri Spivak’s concept of strategic essentialism, which advocates identification with those categories through which we find ourselves interpellated as disenfranchised subjects for the purpose of political action: “The strategic use of an essence as a mobilizing slogan or masterword like woman or worker or the name of a nation is, ideally, self-conscious for all mobilized. This is the impossible risk of a lasting strategy” (3). The problem is, of course, how to sustain such an identification for the sole purpose of political action, how to keep such an identification from turning into a positivist reinscription of the sex/class hierarchy. For Wittig, the answer to this problem seems to lie in our capacity to sustain the universal and the particular as the simultaneous twin loci of identity. Wittig’s use of the term “lesbian” evokes this sense of simultaneous universality and particularity, because the term signifies both the individual’s subjective, libidinal experience of lesbian sexuality, as well as the social and political experience of lesbian identity as a rejection of “The Straight Mind’s” libidinal and epistemological apparatus. The alien couplings described in Wittig’s science fiction novels describe the rearrangement of human sexual desires necessary for the constructive deconstruction of the Oedipal nexus.

Wittig is interested in crossing the borders that separate the categories of theory and fiction. Consider her prefatory note to The Lesbian Body:
*Le Corps Lesbien* has lesbianism as its theme, that is, a theme which cannot even be described as taboo, for it has no real existence in the history of literature…. The descriptions of the islands allude to the Amazons, to the islands of women, the domains of women, which formerly existed with their own culture. They also allude to the Amazons of the present and the future. We already have our islets, our islands, we are already in process of living in a culture that befits us. The Amazons are women who live among themselves, by themselves and for themselves at all the generally accepted levels: fictional, symbolic, actual. Because we are illusionary for traditional male culture we make no distinction between the three levels. Our reality is the fictional as it is socially accepted, our symbols deny the traditional symbols and are fictional for traditional male culture, and we possess an entire fiction into which we project ourselves and which is already a possible reality. It is our fiction that validates us. (9-10)

The Amazons of the novel are meant to refer to the mysterious Amazon women of classical mythology, but Wittig also locates the famously elusive tribe within a space/time continuum by insisting that the Amazons can be found not only in the legends of the past, but also in the present and as part of our future. The Amazons are synonymous with present-day lesbians, those women who, in the tradition of their mythological sisters, carve out an embattled existence within the unlikely context of “traditional male culture.” “Amazon” is also synonymous with Wittig’s (necessarily) future tense conceptual category “lesbian,” that category which describes the successful
defiance of “The Straight Mind’s” currency as an epistemological framework. The collapse of “Amazon’s” specificity of signification is performed in defiance of “traditional male culture,” as an implicit interrogation of the male-authored ethos of unified subjectivity. But the collapse of the term “Amazon” is also effected by “traditional male culture,” for which the category “lesbian” is, as Wittig puts it, “illusionary.” The gap between myth and reality, between the mythic Amazon women of Greek mythology and their present day lesbian counterparts, is always-already effaced by “traditional male culture,” which constructs both Amazons and lesbians as illusionary. Furthermore, Wittig argues, the lesbian’s illusionary status radically challenges her relationship to language, so that, herself a social fiction, fictional representation itself becomes a viable reality: “we possess an entire fiction into which we project ourselves and which is already a possible reality” (9-10). Wittig invites us to read her science fictional texts as an extension of her theoretical work into feminist praxis, to read her fiction as a constitutive delineation of the future of a “lesbian” identity.

Les Guérillères describes a group of Amazon women who are successfully waging war against their male oppressors. The novel is structured like a series of prose poems, interspersed at frequent intervals with long lists of women’s names. The name lists underscore the sense in which naming—the radical re-appropriation of language—functions as a form of warfare. The novel often lingers over painfully detailed descriptions of mutilated male bodies. The cumulative effect of these descriptions is demystification, not glorification, of violence: the exposure of the male body to intimate description de-mans its authority and power. But the primary focus of the novel is the Amazon women, whose most important victory is not the slaughter of men, but the
capacity to re-name themselves. The detailed descriptions of the women’s bodies, especially their genitals, has a radically different effect than the descriptions of the male bodies—it reinforces the women’s authority rather than diminishing it:

The women say that they expose their genitals so that the sun may be reflected therein as in a mirror. They say that they retain its brilliance. They say that the pubic hair is like a spider’s web that captures the rays. They are seen running with great strides. They are all illuminated at their center [...]. (19)

The intense focus on women’s sexual organs serves both to critique the terms with which female sexuality is linguistically appropriated by men, and to invest the women with a sexual authority that does not derive from its relationship to male sexuality—note the focus in this passage on “illumination,” a focus that suggests that women’s bodies require interpretive reappropriation. Thus the construction of non-Oedipal sexual relations is based on women’s ability to challenge and re-order their relationship to the symbolic order. Alien sex is represented not so much through descriptions of fantastic or grotesque sexual acts, but through the linguistic construction of a female sexuality that does not depend upon its relation to or alienation from the phallus:

The women are seen to have in their hands small books which they say are feminaries. These are either multiple copies of the same original or else there are several kinds. In one of them someone has written an inscription which they whisper in each other’s ears and which provokes them to full-throated laughter. When it is leafed through the feminary presents numerous blank pages in which they write from time to time. Essentially,
it consists of pages with words printed in a varying number of capital letters. There may be only one or the pages may be full of them. Usually they are isolated at the centre of the page, well spaced black on a white background or else white on a black background. (14-15)

Interestingly, what Witting is describing here is the layout of the text of *Les Guérillères*: the capitalized words printed on the center of the page describe the format of the name lists; the intense, poetic paragraphs that constitute the bulk of the text are represented as being written by the Amazons collectively. The “feminary” is referred to throughout the novel: its pages are filled with descriptions of female genitalia that both mock the terms in which female sexual organs are represented by the male imagination and reappropriate those terms as a means of empowerment:

As regards the feminaries the women say for instance that they have forgotten the meaning of one of their ritual jokes. It has to do with the phrase, The bird of Venus takes flight towards evening. It is written that the lips of the vulva have been compared to the wings of a bird, hence the name of bird of Venus that has been given them. The vulva has been compared to all kinds of birds, for instance to doves, starlings, bengalis, nightingales, finches, swallows. They say that they have unearthed an old text in which the author, comparing vulvas to swallows, says that he does not know which of them moves faster or has the faster wing. (44)

The feminary describes how “he,” the anonymous and communal patriarchal author of female sexuality, has written female anatomy. Significantly, the women have made a joke of the phrase, discarding its original meaning and disremembering its origins in male.
authorship. But it is also significant that the Amazons, the collective authors of the
feminaries, have retained a careful and specific record of the male-authored metaphorical
descriptions of their sexuality. In effect, the reader is asked to remember that which the
Amazons themselves have disremembered; and it is precisely through the act of
remembering the origins of their dismemberment that the lesbian body is re-membered as
alien to the authority of heterosexist logic. The caresses that the Amazon women
exchange are not particularly remarkable for their transgressive quality as such, but they
become radically transgressive acts of alien sex in the discursive context that Wittig
creates in the novel.

Alien sex is a theme central to the fictional and theoretical work of Samuel
Delany, one of very few contemporary male SF authors who consistently and persistently
dresses feminist issues. Like Wittig, Delany posits the hierarchic tendencies latent in
the constitution and maintenance of difference as the central philosophical problem of
feminism. Also, like Wittig, Delany self-consciously styles his fictional works as both
corollary to and extension of his theoretical work. For Witting, as we have seen, the
problem of difference as an always-already hierarchic episteme can be come to terms
with through the construction of a category (“lesbian”) which cannot be reduced to either
its deconstructive function or its dialectical one. In other words, Wittig insists, a
theoretical approach adequate to the reprisal of hierarchic categorization must both
deconstruct the terms upon whose problematization it depends, and contextualize itself as
a political/dialectical response to those same terms; thus, the term “lesbian” deconstructs
male/female, but the political necessity of the term itself inevitably refers us back to the
very binary it rejects. Delany locates the possibility of non-hierarchic difference in the
experience of sexual desire, which functions both to reify “difference” through the maintenance of the category “Other,” (inasmuch as the Lacanian formulation of desire posits that desire is the desire for the Other) and to deconstruct difference through transgressive play and communal gratification.

In Appendix B of Delany’s novel *Trouble on Triton*, “Ashima Slade and the Harbin-Y Lectures,” we are presented with the findings of the fictional mathematician and philosopher Slade, whose most significant final philosophical remarks before his death, we are told, included the following observations:

45) The problem of the modular calculus, again, is: How can one relational system model another? This breaks down into two questions: (One) What must pass from system-B to system-A for us (system-C) to be able to say that system-A now contains some model of system-B? (Two) Granted the proper passage, what must the internal structure of system-A be for us (or it) to say that it contains any model of system-B?

49) There is no class, race, nationality, or sex that it does not help to be only half. (301-302)

The philosophical problem addressed by Slade’s observations is one that Delany addresses throughout *Trouble on Triton*—the problem of “the modular calculus” is essentially the problem of discursive representation: how can experience be translated into discourse, and how does this act of translation challenge or change the ontological status of signified and signifier? Reading Slade’s 49th proposition as a sort of incomplete answer to the problem of “the modular calculus,” we find that for Delany, the deconstructive presumption that signifier and signified enjoy an exclusively constructive
and constitutive relationship is complicated by the problem of identity. If it is indeed true that there is no politically constituted identity that it “does not help to be only half,” this is because identity bears heavily on the constitution and maintenance of meaning—or, as Foucault more elegantly puts it, there is a significant relationship between power and knowledge; to wit, they generate and sustain one another. Wittig’s solution to this problem is the construction of a category that rejects the constitution of identity within the binary male/female; thus lesbians are not women because they reject the constitution of their identity in relation to men. As a result, the sexual practices described in Wittig’s SF constitute “alien sex” because the participants in the acts themselves are alien to the prevailing social order, the “straight mind.”

Delany problematizes the politics of identity by placing his SF novels’ protagonists in a landscape in which “difference” dizzyingly proliferates. For Delany, radically alien or non-Oedipal sexual relations are those unions in which sexual desire, not sexual “identity,” is the fulcrum that supports difference. For example, Trouble on Triton allows us to consider the meaning of sexual identity in a future society where one can elect to undergo a sex change with relative ease. The potential for non-hierarchic difference is realized in a society that allows sexual identities to proliferate, seemingly endlessly. Bron, the novel’s protagonist, becomes increasingly less sympathetic as his adventures on Triton (a moon at war with Earth, which is too socially conservative to allow the kind of sex changes that Triton embraces) reveal that he is incapable of negotiating the proliferation of sexual identities available on his adoptive planet without recourse to essentialism. After an unsuccessful attempt to woo the female object of his affections, Bron finds it easier to conclude that the problem he faces is not the product of
conflicting desires, but rather of conflicting identities. In the following passage, Bron’s gay friend Lawrence attempts to explain to him the nature of his mistake:

“[Women] don’t understand about men—Not you, Lawrence. I mean ordinary, heterosexual men. They can’t. It’s just a logical impossibility. I’m a logician and I know.”

Lawrence laughed. “My dear boy! I have observed you intimately now for six months and you are a sweet and familiar creature—alas, far more familiar than six months should make you. Let me tell you a secret. There is a difference between men and women, a little, tiny one that, I’m afraid, has probably made most of your adult life miserable and will probably continue to make it so till you die. The difference is simply that women have only really been treated by that bizarre, Durkheimian abstraction, ‘society,’ as human beings for the last—oh, say sixty-five years; and then, really, only on the moons; whereas men have had the luxury of such treatment for the last four thousand. The result of this historical anomaly is simply that, on a statistical basis, women are just a little less likely to put up with certain kinds of shit than men—simply because the concept of a certain kind of shit-free Universe is, in that equally bizarre Jungian abstraction, the female ‘collective unconscious,’ too new and too precious.” (212)

In his reading of Delany’s SF novel *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*, Carl Freedman asks us to consider “how desire functions as cognition in the comprehension (in some sense) of difference” (161). This seems to me to be an excellent framework
within which to consider *Trouble on Triton* as well; for, ideally, the sorts of sex change operations available on Triton (which are not limited to simple sex reversals—a male parent, for instance, might elect to lactate in order to breastfeed his child) serve to create a social environment in which people may pursue their sexual desires without fear of reprisal from the state or their neighbors, and in which one’s sex/gender performance does not signify within a *hierarchic* structure of identities. In an interview about this novel, Delany explains the root of Bron’s inability to allow desire to function as cognition:

You have to remember, what Bron usually does to justify his behaving in the selfish and hateful ways that make him such a hateful man is manufacture perfectly fanciful motivations for what everyone else is doing—motivations which, if they were the case, would make his actions acceptable [. . .]. Well, Freud and Lacan both have brought us the unhappy news that this is, in effect, the way we *all* move through our lives. (335)

A large part of Bron’s problem is that he is an immigrant from Earth; and, as Lawrence points out, the hierarchic structuration of sexual identity is not easy to forget. As Delany suggests above, Bron is, like everyone else on Triton, engaged in the world-making act of transference; the difference is that, for natives of this particular moon, sexual essentialism is not part of their psychic vocabulary. There is not an adequate context for Bron’s presumption that men and woman are somehow essentially different—therefore he is, quite rightly, regarded as a philistine. Here we see the problem of the modular calculus at work in the thematic structure of the novel—Bron is unable to reconcile his experience of
sexual nonidentitarianism with the epistemological framework that he inherited from Earth. For Delany as well as for Wittig, power/knowledge is a constitutive force to be reckoned with: discourse creates its own reality. “Alien sex” is at least as much a function of discourse as of experience.

This concept is most elegantly expressed in Delany’s 1984 novel *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*. The novel centers on protagonist Marq Dyeth, who is as sympathetic as Bron is reprehensible. Although the novel’s primary focus is Marq’s home planet Velm, it describes a universe of incredibly vast proportions, filled with planets, cultures, creatures, and languages that are literally too numerous to count. Velm is home to two principle species: humans and its native evelmi, which are large, dragon-like creatures with claws, wings, multiple tongues, and fully developed consciousness. “Families” on Velm are electively rather than biologically structured “streams” which include both humans and evelmi, who enjoy social and sexual relationships. What marks human/evelmi sex as radically alien is not only the strangeness in the juxtaposition of human and evelmi bodies, but also, and perhaps most importantly, the epistemological milieu of Velm that constitutes human/evelmi sex as normative. In the following scene, Marq and his lover Rat Korga visit a “run,” one of many tunnel-like structures on Velm that cater to a variety of sexual tastes. The “runs” of Velm recall Delany’s autobiographical descriptions of the (thousands of) sexual encounters that he experienced in the pornographic movie theaters of Times Square in the post-Stonewall, pre-AIDS years of the New York gay scene. The most obvious difference between the two worlds is, of course, the fact that sexual encounters in the runs of Velm are not illegal or socially stigmatized. The other difference is the presence of evelmi:
“Excuse me.” The hand on my shoulder, from weight and heat and texture, was not his. I glanced back; so did Korga. The other hand was on Korga’s shoulder. The male (human) said, mostly to me: “Could I interrupt you two long enough to take your friend to my friend…” He gestured with his tongue at a purple-black evelm, standing a few meters down the run, foreclaws off the ground; darting long and short tongues from his jaw, creating no sound in anticipatory lust.

I said: “you must ask my friend.”

Korga said to me: “Will you watch if I go? Please?” And to the human: “Is it all right if Marq watches?”

The human, surprised, smiled and shrugged at once: “Yes. Certainly. Of course.” And to Korga: “You have come from very far away, am I right?”

Korga glanced at me.

“But that’s no matter.” The human hand dropped from my shoulder but remained on Korga’s.

About ten meters up, there was a large ceiling vent that let in its dozen trapezoids of light. I stood at the shadow’s edge, joined—before the three of them, Korga, the human, and the evelm were through—by a dozen others, their cool scaled haunches and warm fleshed shoulders jostling mine. (240-241)

“Rat” is the name that Korga inherited from the acronymic appellation RAT, which on his now-destroyed home planet (of which Rat is the sole survivor) stands for “Radical
Anxiety Termination.” RAT is administered to misfits, junkies, lunatics, and other fringe elements of society who do not fit into Rhyonon’s social structure. Rats are lobotomized and then exploited as slaves. By accident, Rat Korga is illegally sold to a wealthy ne’er-do-well who, in addition to enlisting Korga in sexual servitude, also allows him access to a device that allows him to acquire knowledge—in this case, a vast library of literary works—almost instantaneously. Thus Rat is radically other, both as the sole survivor of an entire culture, and as a sort of lobotomized savant. His physical features and sexual preferences make him an ideal erotic object for Marq, who, as a member of a well-respected stream and an accomplished diplomat, has very little else in common with Rat, at least superficially. But, to reiterate Freedman’s point about the function of desire in *Stars in My Pocket*, desire fulfills a cognitive function in the comprehension of difference. Rat and Marq do not become any less different because of their sexual encounters, any more than evelmi become more human through their sexual experiences with humans. But desire does allow for the dialectical interplay of radical difference. On a planet without specie, gender, or sexual hierarchy, the consummation of sexual desire is, by definition, alien sex.

As in Wittig’s novels, Delany’s account of alien sex is not just a deconstructive treatment of the limits of desire—it is not, in other words, merely a catalogue of strange and wonderful beings and their various interactions, a celebratory treatment of difference as such; although it certainly is also this. The inhabitants of Velm do not interact in a hermetically sealed universe of cultural interaction and acceptance; Velm’s “multiculturalism” is complicated by its relationship to other planets and species, many of which regard the evelmi as exotic animals. Note Rat’s confusion about the social
status of evelmi—because they look like “animals,” he is not sure how to converse with them, and must ask Marq for guidance. Evelmi, it is darkly hinted throughout the novel, are objects of abuse and extermination by less enlightened cultures. Nor is the fulfillment of desire as such necessarily cognitive or potentially utopian, as Rat’s tenure as a sexual slave illustrates. Rat’s confusion regarding the evelmi is typical of the novel’s constant and ongoing estrangements—gestures, diction, silences, noises, and other forms of interaction signify in radically different ways depending on cultural context, so that even a well-trained, highly intelligent diplomat such as Marq Dyeth has difficulty remembering differences in signification structures among cultures.

Within this dialectical interplay of difference, Delany does tend to privilege male homosexuality—in this way, a politically informed estrangement between our culture and the culture of Velm is also at work. Velm’s language reflects this privilege: all intelligent beings, regardless of sex, are referred to as women. The one exception to this rule is that one whom the speaker regards as an object of sexual desire is referred to as a man. In addition to being a radically estranging device for the reader, who must continually re-orient herself as female “he’s” and male “she’s” abound, this technique also serves to underscore the constitutive relationship between language and desire. Desire replaces biology as the basis of sexual differentiation, and this discursive practice explodes the hierarchic connotations of sex difference. If this linguistic practice privileges male homosexuality—as all objects of sexual desire are “he”—it also privileges feminist consciousness, as the “default” gender is female. Thus this technique is also a politically informed estrangement from our own socially normative default gender, which presumes maleness—“mankind,” “chairman,” etc.—even in those cases in which the subject of
reference is female. But the most radical estrangement provided by this technique is the reorientation of the entire structure of sex/gender signification, so that desire, not biological attributes, functions as cognition in the comprehension of sexual difference.

Like Wittig and Delany, Angela Carter is both an SF writer and a writer of critical theory. Like Wittig and Delany also, Carter’s fictional work is self-consciously styled as a corollary to her theoretical work; which, also like Wittig and Delany’s, takes representation and sexual desire as two of its major themes. In her critical feminist work *The Sadeian Woman* and *The Ideology of Pornography*, Carter explores the relationship between pornography and literary representations of sexual desire. She concludes that pornography has a potentially radical demystificatory function, a capacity to re-write the terms of desire itself:

> It is fair to say that, when pornography serves—as with very rare exceptions it always does—to reinforce the prevailing system of values and ideas in a given society, it is tolerated; and when it does not, it is banned…. When pornography abandons its quality of existential solitude and moves out of the kitsch area of timeless, placeless fantasy and into the real world, then it loses its function of safety valve. It begins to comment on real relations in the real world. Therefore, the more pornographic writing acquires the techniques of real literature, of real art, the more deeply subversive it is likely to be in that the more likely it is to affect the reader’s perceptions of the world…. There is a liberal theory that art disinfects eroticism of its latent subversiveness, and pornography that is also art loses its shock and its magnetism, becomes “safe.” The truth of
this is that once pornography is labeled “art” or “literature” it is stamped with the approval of an elitist culture and many ordinary people will avoid it on principle, out of a fear of being bored. But the more the literary arts of plotting and characterization are used to shape the material of pornography, the more the pornographer himself is faced with the moral contradictions inherent in real sexual encounters. He will find himself in a dilemma; to opt for the world or to opt for the wet dream? Out of this dilemma, the moral pornographer might be born. (18-19)

Carter concludes that, although pornography’s typical function is to underwrite and reinforce the status quo ante of sex/gender relations, literary pornography with a social conscience is capable of deploying representations of sexual acts as a means of revising and critiquing existing sex/gender relations. The “moral pornographer” would be one who, like Wittig and Delany, exploits the relationship between representation and desire in such a way as to rewrite the terms of sexual desire itself: to posit, through a critique of Oedipal sexual relations, a sexual relation alien to the terms of Oedipal desire. Carter’s own fictional representations of sexual desire reveal, through bluntly grotesque imagery, pornography’s dependence on the violation and brutalization of women for the effect of titillation. Carter also investigates the constitutive, constituting relationship between representation and desire.

Carter’s 1972 SF novel The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman relates the story of Desiderio, a hapless Englishman “of Indian extraction” (Desiderio is the bastard son of a slum-dwelling Indian gypsy prostitute, an origin that gives him a unique and ironic minority standpoint in relation to his post-colonial home) whose grasp on reality—
his version of it, anyway—allows him to save the world. The novel is set in a version of
a contemporary city where an evil scientist, Dr. Hoffman, has created and set into motion
a machine that destroys the stable space/time dimensions of the universe, thus
precipitating a state of affairs in which every living person’s experience of reality is
wholly informed by their unconscious desires. The following passage describes the
beginnings of the city’s slow descent into madness:

We did not understand the means by which the Doctor modified the nature
of reality until very much later. We were taken entirely by surprise and
chaos supervened immediately. Hallucinations flowed with magical speed
in every brain. A state of emergency was declared. A special meeting of
the cabinet took place in a small boat upon so stormy a sea that most of the
ministers vomited throughout the proceedings and the Chancellor of the
Exchequer was washed overboard. My minister dared walk on the water
and retrieved his senior dryshod since there was, in fact, not one drop of
water there; after that, the cabinet gave him full authority to cope with the
situation and soon he virtually ruled the city single-handed. (17)

The Minister, whose new title under the city’s siege by unreason is “Minister of
Determination,” enlists Desiderio, the one who desires, in his battle against Dr. Hoffman.
Desiderio is assigned to assassinate Dr. Hoffman—but in order to do this, he must
negotiate the world of unreason, a world that he, as one who desires, is complicit in
creating. Dr. Hoffman has a daughter, Albertina, who haunts Desiderio throughout his
adventures in the world of unreason. Albertina is real, but she is also shaped by
Desiderio’s unconscious desires. The world has broken down, under the Doctor’s
dominion, into two “versions”: one is the world structured on the reality principle, on the repression of unconscious desire. This world, which Carter makes no claims for being any more or less constructed than that created by the doctor, is nonetheless that which constitutes the base reality to which the Minister of Determination, as well as most of his constituency, wishes to return. The other world is equally a product of the imagination, but it is fueled by the unrepressed desires of its inhabitants. Although the novel can be read in more general terms as an exploratory critique of the Enlightenment development of Cartesian epistemology, I read it as an exposition of the problems that the Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalytic novum presents for feminism. In keeping with many feminist critiques of psychoanalytic theory, Carter reveals the unconscious to be the repository of patriarchal values. The violent sexual images that collectively constitute Desiderio’s unrepressed fantasies bear witness to the misogyny of Oedipally constituted sexuality. Through her expositions of the patriarchal structure of the unconscious, Carter establishes her position in the text as a moral pornographer, one who engages in “the total demystification of the flesh and the subsequent revelation, through the infinite modulations of the sexual act, of the real relations of man and his kind” (19). Carter’s descriptions of Desiderio’s sexual encounters can be usefully conceptualized as depictions of alien sex acts because they describe sexual acts through a point of view from which we are normally, necessarily, alienated: that of unrepressed desire. In this way, Carter reveals Oedipal sexuality’s roots as a brutal process of Other-ing, of the construction of the feminine as the construction of a grotesque, alien figure.

Desiderio’s assignment to kill Dr. Hoffman brings him first to a small seaport town, where he visits a circus peepshow tent on a bleak pier. The peepshow, which
features “THE SEVEN WONDERS OF THE WORLD IN THREE LIFELIKE DIMENSIONS” (42), can best be described as a garish paean to desublimated heterosexual desire. The “Seven Wonders” are a series of tableaux carved in wax that describe women in various violent, sexualized poses:

Exhibit Four: EVERYONE KNOWS WHAT THE NIGHT IS FOR

Here, a wax figure of the headless body of a mutilated woman lay in a pool of painted blood. She wore only the remains of a pair of black stockings and a ripped suspender belt of shiny black rubber. Her arms stuck out stiffly on either side of her and once again I noticed the loving care with which the craftsmen who manufactured her had simulated the growth of underarm hair. The right breast had been partially segmented and hung open to reveal two surfaces of meat as bright and false as the plaster sirloins which hang in toy butcher’s shops while her belly was covered with some kind of paint that always contrived to look wet and, from the paint, emerged the handle of an enormous knife which was kept always a-quiver by the action (probably) of a spring. (46)

As this passage, along with the rest of the “Seven Wonders” indicates, Carter has a rather bleak view of what unrepressed Oedipal sexuality might look like. As moral pornographer, Carter is concerned with interpreting how the heterosexual male gaze constructs the object of desire. In the universe of Dr. Hoffman, the object of desire is constructively deconstructed through the act of gazing—that is, the image that Desiderio perceives is one whose content reveals the politics underlying its construction. The very title of the “Fourth Wonder” is significant: the phrase “Everyone knows what the night is
for” has special resonance for the feminist political sphere. Women have long known that the night is not for them, that the night often functions as a cover for men’s brutality: this is why women rally to “Take Back the Night,” why women do not travel alone at night, why young women are advised to learn self-defense when they start dating, and so forth. The night challenges women’s autonomy, her wholeness—thus Desiderio’s unrepressed desire constructs a woman whose wholeness has been irreparably violated: her breast is sliced open. Her headlessness underscores her lack of subjectivity. The clothing that the figure wears is typical of hardcore pornography, and this fact is significant because it is pornography that is being deconstructively rewritten here.

As Desiderio proceeds through this landscape of unrepressed desire, we find that each chapter of his adventure centers around the brutal sexual subjugation of a woman or group of women. The “moral” of this succession of increasingly disturbing pornographic images and encounters seems to be that it is only our repressions that separate us from the dictates of an unrelentingly brutal patriarchal unconscious. Even more disturbing than the images themselves is the maintenance of an ambiguity in the text that often makes it impossible for the reader to determine with certainty whether the images and acts portrayed are taking place in the pre-Hoffman reality of the novelistic landscape or are the products of the desire machine. This estranging technique brings the reader face to face with her/is familiarity with and inurement to the representation of sexual desire as appropriation and domination. If we have to wonder whether the brutal subjugation of women is a product of the unrepressed consciousness of the narrator—whom, we are to understand, is an average, likeable fellow—or his faithful description of the non-Hoffman version of reality, then does the answer really matter?
In chapter five, “The Erotic Traveler,” Desiderio is given a lift in the carriage of a man who turns out to be a Count of Lithuania and a connoisseur of sexual debaucheries. During their travels, the Count, whose autobiography is meant to be a grotesque exaggeration of the life and times of the Marquis De Sade, regales his guest with exotic tales of sexual conquest, each more bizarre than the last. As the Count observes at the outset of his confessions, “‘The universe itself is not a sufficiently capacious stage on which to mount the grand opera of my passions. From the cradle, I have been a blasphemous libertine, a blood-thirsty debauchee. I travel the world only to discover hitherto unknown methods of treating flesh’” (126). The Count brings Desiderio to a whorehouse where, despite the house’s name, “The House of Anonymity,” they eventually find Albertina—Dr. Hoffman’s daughter and the object of Desiderio’s desire. Because Albertina has a strong presence both in the non-Hoffman reality of the novel and in Desiderio’s unrepressed desire-scape, she tends to foreground the ambiguous nature of the reality status of the scenes in which she appears. The following is Desiderio’s description of the denizens of the House of Anonymity:

There were, perhaps, a dozen girls in the cages in the reception room and, posed inside, the girls towered above us like the goddesses of some forgotten theogeny locked up because they were too holy to be touched. Each was as circumscribed as a figure in rhetoric and you could not imagine they had names, for they had been reduced by the rigorous discipline of their vocation to the undifferentiated essence of the idea of the female. This ideational femaleness took amazingly different shapes though its nature was not that of Woman; when I examined them more
closely, I saw that none of them were any longer, or might never have been, woman. All, without exception, passed beyond or did not enter the realm of simple humanity. They were sinister, abominable, inverted mutations, part clockwork, part vegetable and part brute. (132)

In The Sadeian Woman, Carter describes the way in which the subjects of the pornographic text are at one and the same time both reduced to the level of graffitic images and elevated to the status of myth. In both cases, the female subject of pornography loses her identity to a set of visual and linguistic clichés that reinforce the extent to which she is a vessel that both contains and conveys the idea of feminine sexuality as constructed by the consumer of the pornographic text. In the scene described above, Desiderio discovers, through close examination of the prostitutes arrayed for the fulfillment of the Count’s desires, that the women are not really women at all (or, in Wittig’s terms, they are not women, but woman): they are, rather, the banally grotesque articulation of female sexuality effected by patriarchal desire—specifically, by an exaggerated version of the pornographer De Sade. Throughout the novel, Carter uses the estranging device of desublimated desire to reveal the alien nature of the Oedipally constituted object of desire. The Women who populate the landscape of Dr. Hoffman’s desire-scape are represented as Earth’s native aliens. Unlike Wittig or Delany, Carter does not posit a parallel vision of society in which potentially utopian cognitions of desire might emerge (she does do this in The Passion of New Eve; see chapter two of this study). Her contribution to the cognition of alien sex is the dark revelation that the maintenance of Oedipal sexual relations depends upon the construction of the female subject as an oppressed figure.
At the outset of this essay I describe a problem engendered by the representation of alien sex acts: that such representations bring us closer to the unsignifiability of the Real. In Lacanian terms, the Real is only ever dimly represented or gestured towards, as through the illusionary plenitude suggested by the master signifier. Then I went on to describe how, “in political terms” this problem becomes an issue for all theoretical methods that presuppose what Georg Lukács problematically describes as “false consciousness”: that is, those methods that presuppose that there might be a way of apprehending situations that have inspired the imposition of ethically unacceptable levels of psychic and/or material privation, obscured by the very conditions of oppression that necessitate their apprehension, that will allow the oppressed subject to understand her condition as one imposed by ideological structures. This political Real is implicated in the representation of alien sex because to describe a sex act involving creatures or circumstances that don’t really exist cannot really describe alien sex; that is, such representations cannot ever be totally alien to an Oedipal model of sexual relations, because the imagination of the one doing the representing is always-already deeply informed by this model. Plus, there aren’t any aliens from other planets—they are figments of our imagination, or, (a less respectable but possible, if not probable, position), they haven’t chosen to reveal themselves to us. Either way, they don’t exist for us, which is all that matters if one is a historical materialist.

As Jameson points out, representations of a utopian or future space can only ever represent the imperative to imagine them. They cannot, alas, be blueprints. We can only speculate on what the content of such imagined spaces can tell us about ourselves, or about social relations, or aesthetics, or what have your topic for investigation. This is
similar to the quandary of one who believes in the political Real, (what else would one believe—that the predicament that the oppressed find themselves in unproblematically reflects the laws of God, or gods, and/or Man?) but who also understands that to represent the oppression of the oppressed to the oppressed is impossible, because there is no unmediated representation that will allow a magical act of simultaneous internalization and comprehension to take place: “It is true that reality is the criterion for the correctness of thought. But reality is not, it becomes—and to become the participation of thought is needed” (Lukács 204). Yes, but…how is this need to be fulfilled? My own struggle with this problem created a first draft of this manuscript in which I tried to theorize a way in which feminist science fiction—its study, its explication—could somehow redress a problem that is Real—the problem of women’s oppression. It was important to me that the work that I have chosen to do—to write literary criticism—be connected meaningfully to ideas that my training as a feminist literary critic had taught me to take seriously. As a result of this struggle, my first draft was polemical, adversarial, and offensively strident. I sincerely hope that I’ve weeded those parts out.

What I’ve learned from studying alien sex: only that its more dialectical representations gesture towards the possibility of feminist possibilities:

As long as man [sic] concentrates his interest contemplatively upon the past or future, both ossify into an alien existence. And between the subject and the object lies the unbridgeable ‘pernicious chasm’ of the present. Man must be able to comprehend the present as a becoming. He can do this only by seeing in it the tendencies out of whose dialectical
tendencies he can make the future. Only when he does this will the present be a process of becoming, that belongs to him. Only he who is willing and whose mission it is to create the future can see the present in its concrete truth. (Lukács 204)

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Chapter Four

Feminist SF on Race: The Legacies of the Past

I will begin this chapter by briefly outlining two distinct yet interimplicated historical moments—colonialization and U.S. slavery—in which race serves as an important mediating factor in women’s experience of capitalist patriarchal domination. I will discuss the work of several black SF writers, paying particular attention to how these works integrate and/or problematize feminist theory on race. In previous chapters, I have described women as Earth’s “native aliens” in order to highlight the overdeterminations at work in representations of women in the speculative alien space. In this chapter, I reverse the formulation with regards to black women and women of color, who are interpellated as Earth’s alien natives. The reversal is meant to highlight the different yet related overdeterminations that female racial “Others” bear in relation to their historical interpellation and oppression as “natives” in relation to white cultures. This has been true of both black women and women of color since the beginning of the European colonialist enterprise, and it becomes increasingly true of women who are located outside of the “first world” socioeconomic matrix.

Frederic Jameson names postmodernism the “cultural logic of late capitalism:” published in book form in 1991, this celebrated work identifies the multinational corporation as the primary economic paradigm of late capitalism. However, in the time since this work was published the MNC has been incorporated—with the ever-increasing

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13 I make reference to this concept’s appearance in “book form:” the title long essay of the book was developed from an eponymously titled article in *New Left Review* in 1984. I underscore this fact to point out that Jameson’s identification of the present moment of capital as multinational capital needs to be revisited, that the dialectical expansion galvanized by the moment of global capital, a cultural moment that I would term “the international division (of int’l labor’s division) of culture,” is our current cultural logic. Gayatri Spivak’s voice has been the most influential so far in the development of a Marxist aesthetic critique of economic globalism.
efficiency of which Marx warns us in *Capital*, vol. 1—into globalization, an economic paradigm in which the MNC is but one factor in the organization of the major countries of the globe into entities called “blocs.” Although in strictly economic terms this practice has resulted in consolidation,—the increasing hegemony of the capitalist democracy over all other forms of political and economic enterprise—it has also resulted in the reification of “cultural” multiplicity. The new international division of labor has, in other words, produced a dialectical expansion in cultural form: the international division of culture. By the logic of the *supplement*, the Oriental, Indian, or African female subject is colored by, “third-worlded” by, the position of subservience that is necessarily accorded to her by her entry into the white, male-dominated nexus of global capital. This international division of culture—the patriarchal reification of the indigenous cultural space—is accompanied by the third-world female subject’s unprecedented movement into the economic sphere, overwhelmingly as factory workers or prostitutes.14 As in the years surrounding the expansions of the industrial revolution, when women’s’ movement outside of the home and into the economic public sphere was accompanied by an aggressive promotion of the feminized domestic sphere, the international division of culture has produced its own globalized, highly visible “angel in the house.” Gayatri Spivak notes that “When a cultural identity is thrust upon one because the center wants an identifiable margin, claims for marginality assure validation from the center. It should

14 In her analysis of the gendered division of the international labor market, Jacky Brine elaborates on Swasti Mitter’s research on the sexism of the transnational corporation: “Mitter describes the late twentieth-century use of free trade zones and export processing zones within newly industrialized countries, and also the enterprise zone sweatshops and outworking systems of the increasingly deregulated industrialized countries. Common to both is the exploitation of working-women’s labour, and their gendered economic, political, and sexual oppression. The occupational, physical, and sexual exploitation and abuse of women working in free trade zones has also led to early prostitution and drug dependency… Women are the cheapest and most ‘flexible’ source of labour within the industrialized colonizing countries, and even more so within the newly industrializing postcolonized countries” (40).
then be pointed out that what is being negotiated here is [. . .] an economic principle of identification through separation” (55). I would extend this argument and note that women are used in this equation as the “place-holders” of cultural identity. In this way, the Western capitalist “democratic” hegemony effectively interpellates its non-white subjects as “colored,” and effectively emasculates them as depoliticized containers of the cultural sphere.

This state of affairs is complicated in the case of the woman of color, who finds herself relegated to the status of “minority” despite her formal statistical status as majority: both as woman and as person of color. At home, through the commodification of a depoliticized African-American identity, as well as abroad, through the gendered division of the international labor market, globalization spurs the reification of the “cultural” space, inspired by anxiety over the encroachment of economic homogenization and its attendant putatively democratic social ethic into the traditionally woman-dominated private/domestic sphere. Of course, such encroachment is inevitable, and it is not therefore coincidental that practices detrimental to women’s dignity and freedom (such as female genital mutilation) are vociferously defended as traditional cultural practices, while the homogenization of that same culture’s economic and political practices is not seen as a violation of cultural traditions. As the primary maintainers and vessels of the “cultural,” then, women of color under globalization are both exploited for their low-paid labor and are at the same time increasingly pressured to conform to their culture’s dictates of feminine normativity. The contradictory nature of these two positions has been well-documented by critics of the Anglo-American ideology of “having it all”, which dictates that (default-white, educated, middle-class, and married)
women are now free to pursue their jobs or careers (for 30 cents less on the dollar that their male counterparts earn) and to continue to perform the lion’s share of childcare and housework. I will investigate how the problem of cultural reification informs feminist SF through a reading of Nalo Hopkinson’s Brown Girl in the Ring.

In the U.S., black women assume the burden of institutionalized sex/race discrimination, as well as sex discrimination within their own families and communities. A recurrent theme in black feminist intellectual work is the argument that the black woman’s relationship to her self and her family must be constantly reevaluated, historicized as a relation degraded by the legacy of her slavery-era status as the literal site of the reproduction of white-owned property. In the case of the U.S. black woman, the reproductive female body’s status as the site of the reproduction of Oedipus is compounded by that body’s historical relationship to the reproduction of capital. In the context of this relationship, the entire structure of Oedipus is rearranged, as the black man’s role as father is supplanted by the white master: thus the black woman’s relationship to the central formative trope of the culture in which she lives was, and continues to be, necessarily different than the white woman’s.

Historian Paula Giddings documents evidence that black slave women fought to reject their position as brood stock for their white masters. The available evidence demonstrates that a large number of women were forced by this circumstance to abort; others killed their young children rather than allow them to grow up as property. The

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15 See Heidi I. Hartmann’s “The Family as the Locus of Gender, Class, and Political Struggle: The Example of Housework.” Although her statistics are outdated (the article was originally published in Signs in 1981) her basic feminist analysis of the mutually reinforcing relationship between the sexual politics of the family and the state unfortunately has remained current.

16 See Paula Giddings, When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America. See especially chapter two, in which Giddings documents extensive evidence of slave women’s
legacy of this dreadful necessity can be seen in black and white women’s quite different relationships to the feminist issue of abortion rights. In the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the practice of doctors performing tubal ligation on black women and women of color without their informed consent, as well as the vilification of black motherhood in politics and the media, has complicated the issue of “choice.” In Women, Race, and Class, Angela Davis describes how the fight for safe and legal birth control—a cause universally central to the empowerment of women—is colored by the legacy of slavery and the rhetoric of racism:

The abortion rights activists of the early 1970s should have examined the history of their movement. Had they done so, they might have understood why so many of their Black sisters adopted a posture of suspicion toward their cause. They might have understood how important it was to undo the racist deeds of their predecessors, who had advocated birth control as well as compulsory sterilization as a means of eliminating the “unfit” sectors of the population. Consequently, the young white feminists might have been more receptive to the suggestion that their campaign for abortion rights

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17 Angela Davis, in her article on “Surrogates and Outcast Mothers: Racism and Reproductive Politics in the Nineties”: “While poor women in many states effectively have lost access to abortion, they may be sterilized with the full financial support of the government. While the ‘right’ to opt for surgical sterilization is an important feature of women’s control over the reproductive functions of their bodies, the imbalance between the difficulty of access to abortions and the ease of access to sterilization reveals the continued and tenacious insinuation of racism into the politics of reproduction. The astoundingly high—and continually mounting—statistics regarding the sterilization of Puerto Rican women expose one of the most dramatic ways in which women’s bodies bear the evidence of colonization. Likewise, the bodies of vast numbers of sterilized and indigenous women within the presumed borders of the US bear the traces of a 500-year-old tradition of genocide. While there is as yet no evidence of large-scale sterilization of African-American and Latina teenage girls, there is documented evidence of the federal government’s promotion and funding of sterilization operations for young black girls during the 1960s and 70s.” (217).
include a vigorous condemnation of sterilization abuse, which had become more widespread than ever. (215)

Although black and white feminists are generally equally concerned with the need to gain control over their own reproductive lives, the crucial differences in black and white women’s experience of institutionalized control over the female body were not sufficiently accounted for by the overwhelmingly white and middle-class second wave feminist movement. Tragically, a cause with the capacity to unite women across race and class boundaries instead became an occasion for reinscribing the battle lines drawn by capitalist patriarchal institutions onto relations between and among women.

Thus, “the legacy of the past” that the U.S. black woman must contend with is her status within the slavery system as both object of property and as the hyper-sexualized site of the reproduction of the slavery system. These roles continue to haunt black women to this day, although they manifest themselves in different ways. We might read the overrepresentation of black women in low-paying, part-time work, as well as her position at the bottom of the wage gap scale, as indicators that the white capitalist patriarchy has not completely discontinued its slavery-era practice of exploiting black women’s labor for economic gain, but of course, the difference between slavery and the exploited laborer under capitalism is meaningful and multi-faceted. In her SF novel *Kindred*, Octavia Butler¹⁸ addresses this difference through Dana, the novel’s protagonist. Dana, a young black woman living in the late twentieth century, is being

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¹⁸ I have included Octavia Butler in this chapter because she is the founding voice in black feminist SF, and the themes she addresses are often significantly parallel to those addressed by Tananarive Due and Nalo Hopkinson, the authors I focus on here. I have not made Butler a focal point because the racial implications of her work have been explored already in several studies of feminist SF: see Marleen Barr’s *Lost in Space*, Jane Donawerth’s *Frankenstein’s Daughters*, and Sarah Lefanu’s *Feminism and Science Fiction*. 

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inexplicably transported back through time to the slavery-era South. Dana and her white husband Kevin, who is transported along with her, must learn to pass as slave woman and master in order to survive this dangerous environment long enough to solve the mystery of their sudden shifts between the 1860s and the 1970s. As Dana travels back and forth though time, she bears scars from the whippings of her master that do not go away when she returns to the twentieth century: in a quite literal sense, then, Dana bears the history of upper-class American white men’s violence towards black women into the present, where she must contend with the psychic and physical ramifications of this legacy of violence. Early on in the novel, Dana compares slavery to the menial wage labor she is forced to perform in the years before she establishes herself as a writer by profession:

I was working out of a casual labor agency—we regulars called it a slave market. Actually, it was just the opposite of slavery. The people who ran it couldn’t have cared less whether or not you showed up to do the work they offered. They always had more job hunters than jobs anyway. If you wanted them to think about you, you went to their office around six in the morning, signed in, and sat down to wait. Waiting with you were winos trying to work themselves into a few more bottles, poor women with children trying to supplement their welfare checks, kids trying to get a first job, older people who’d lost one job too many [. . .]. (52)

Marx addresses this difference similarly in *Capital*, vol. 1, noting that “the slave works only under the spur of external fear but not for his [sic] *existence* which is *guaranteed* even though it does not belong to him. The free worker, however, is impelled by his wants” (1031). However, as Butler notes, this change in what Marx calls “the relations of
supremacy and subordination” (1031) wrought by the subsumption of labor under capital does not change the position of the black woman as subordinate. In her essay “Women and Capitalism: Dialectics of Oppression and Liberation,” Angela Davis illustrates the inevitability of the Black woman’s subordination under capitalism, demonstrating how this position is institutionally guaranteed:

Within the existing class relations of capitalism, women in their vast majority are kept in a state of familial servitude and social inferiority not by men in general, but rather by the ruling class. Their oppression serves to maximize the efficacy of domination. The objective oppression of black women in America has a class, and also a national origin. Because the structures of female oppression are inextricably tethered to capitalism, female emancipation must be simultaneously and explicitly the pursuit of black liberation.” (185)

Exacerbating the conditions of familial servitude is the state of black and working class women’s work outside of the home, whose features include the institutionalized gender and race wage gap, as well as the degrading nature of the work typically available to such women, especially single parents, who must find work that does not interfere too much with their parenting responsibilities: often this means taking minimum wage jobs at anti-social hours. Also, since such jobs are overwhelmingly service oriented--janitorial work, childcare, geriatric care, and the like—there is a sense in which the black female worker is often re-domesticated as the “mother” in an Oedipal configuration that, as we have already seen, replaces the black man with the white man as “father.” Thus, the master/slave dialectic can, in some senses, be seen to reinscribe itself in the relation of
the black woman to capitalist patriarchy, for the black woman finds herself once again the victim of white male paternalism, only this time around she is victimized by institutionalized neglect rather than by the close scrutiny she bore as an object of property.

At the same time that black women are heavily marginalized in their role as participants in the U.S. economic system, they are also, ironically, rendered highly visible. Black feminist analyses of the influential 1965 Moynihan report reveal that black women are scapegoated as the primary precipitators of the “dire” state of the black American family. The Moynihan report cites the high instance of black woman-headed households as a cause, not a symptom, of blacks’ social and economic disenfranchisement. According to the logic of the report, which we see repeated in the rhetoric of government welfare policies, the black American family suffers from an identity crisis, spurred not by such factors as wage inequity and the incipient racism of the prison industrial complex, but rather by black women’s usurpation of the black man’s role as head of household. In this way, collective anxiety about black women’s leadership role in the family is rationalized—her power within the black family is vilified, reconstructed as proof of her perverse desire to consolidate power and reproduce it in her offspring. Black women’s status as the hyper-sexualized site of reproduction is reinscribed in myriad ways: in the language of political debates over welfare policies, by the news media’s promotion of the image of the black mother as “welfare queen,” and in the entertainment media’s representation of the black woman as exotic sex object. This status also bears itself out, with tragic results, in the history of black women’s exploitation by reproductive healthcare providers.
The internalization of these forms of social and economic discrimination—specifically, how they manifest themselves as a particular sort of love/hate relationship to the self and to other women—is the subject of many works of theory and fiction by black women. In an essay about the destructive power of language and its deployment as mastery in the U.S. slavery system, Hortense Spillers describes the lasting effects of this brutal system on the black woman’s subject formation. Spillers particularly underscores the sense in which kinship is a necessarily fraught issue for black women, whose relationship to their offspring under slavery was a constantly threatened one:

In the context of the United States, we could not say that the enslaved offspring was “orphaned,” but the child does become, under the press of a patronymic, patrifocal, patrilinear, and patriarchal order, the man/woman on the boundary, whose human and familial status, by the very nature of the case, had yet to be defined. I would call this enforced state of breach another instance of vestibular cultural formation where “kinship” loses meaning, since it can be invaded at any given and arbitrary moment by the property relations [. . .]. It seems clear [. . .] that “Family,” as we practice and understand it “in the West”—the vertical transfer of a bloodline, of a patronymic, of titles and entitlements, of real estate and the prerogatives of “cold cash,” from fathers to sons and in the supposedly free exchange of affectional ties between a male and a female of his choice—becomes the mythically revered privilege of a free and freed community. (68)

Spillers traces the “crisis” of U.S. black women’s identity to their founding role within the economic system as property, and as the unwilling reproducers of property. It is this
role, Spillers contends, that guarantees the black family’s marginality within a socioeconomic system that privileges a definition of “family” that is based on the inheritance of patronymic legitimacy and attendant property rights. The “Law of the Father” that dictates the structuration of the “legitimate” family is thus not applicable to the black family, which has historically been denied the power to name and to own. The Moynihan report seeks to locate the socioeconomic disenfranchisement arising from this historical inequity within the black family itself. By this logic, the black man is disenfranchised by the aberrant psychology of his familial structure, wherein he is marginalized by the overweening presence of the black matriarch:

According to Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s celebrated “report” of the late sixties, the “Negro Family” has no father to speak of—his Name, his Law, his Symbolic function mark the impressive missing agencies in the essential life of the black community, the “Report” maintains, and it is, surprisingly, the fault of the Daughter, or the female line. This stunning reversal of the castration thematic, displacing the Name and the Law of the Father to the territory of the Mother and Daughter, becomes an aspect of the African-American female’s misnaming. (57)

The bourgeois white woman’s daughter becomes an object of exchange in the perpetuation of patriarchal “legitimacy,” but the black woman’s daughter guarantees the perpetuation of an aberrant, illegitimate bid for matriarchal power. It is within this context, argue feminist critics Audre Lorde and bell hooks, that the U.S. black woman’s necessarily fraught relationship to her self and to the symbolic perpetuation of her self—
her daughters—must be understood. I will explore the theme of the racialized “reproduction of mothering” in Tananarive Due’s short story “Like Daughter.”

**Excurses**

In her short story “Like Daughter,” Tananarive Due explores one possible future of the black mother/daughter relationship. In the first scene the story’s narrator, Paige, is asked by her best friend since childhood, Denise, to come and take her six-year-old child away from her. Denise’s child, whom she has named after herself, is a clone, the product of a short-lived, near-future government initiative program to offer cloning services to acceptable candidates. Little Denise is one of only about 230 clone babies that were created before the U.S. Supreme Court reversed the country’s cloning policy:

> In the end, I’m not sure how many copycat babies were born. I read somewhere that some of the mothers honored the Supreme Court’s ban and were persuaded to abort. Of course, they might have been coerced or paid off by one of the extremist groups terrified of a crop of so-called ‘soulless’ children. But none of that would have swayed Denise, anyway. For all I know, little Neecy might have been the very last one born. (96)

The story does not directly address the political connotations of the racial dimension of Denise’s “acceptability” as a candidate for the cloning experiment. However, the story’s reference to reproductive technologies and their control by the state must be contextualized within black women’s historical relationship to reproductive technologies. Within such a contextualization, I read the cloning project’s failure—the individual project of Denise’s efforts to create a version of herself who is not mitigated or compromised by the Laws or Abuses of the Father—as an exposure and indictment of the
lasting legacy of such Laws and Abuses in Denise’s own life. As the story demonstrates, there is a dimension to the legacy of self-hatred that racist capitalist patriarchy produces which cannot be alleviated by simply removing the Father from the picture through the uses of technology. The Father’s destructive capacity, in other words, is shown up as a complex ideology that cannot be blamed on, or alleviated through the removal of, the individual man from the site of reproduction. In this way Due substantiates Davis’s claim that black women suffer damage at the hands of the ruling class—a ruling class that is in large part constellated as male supremacy, but cannot be reduced to the individual man. This is, of course, because maleness does not guarantee supremacy, although the ideology of the Law of the Father is an enduring trait of ruling class supremacy.

Due’s story unfolds to reveal the tale of two inseparable friends, Paige and Denise. Although the two girls grow up right across the street from one another, they come from very different households. Paige’s parents are able to provide her with a stable and loving environment. Denise, on the other hand, lives with her mother, who is an alcoholic, and her father, who beats both Denise and her mother. Denise is also sexually abused, from the time she is nine years old, by her young uncle. Even though they are contemporaries, Paige takes on a motherly role in their relationship from their childhood:

“Paige, promise me you’ll look out for Neecy, hear?” Mama used to tell me. I couldn’t have known then what a burden that would be, having to watch over someone. But I took my role seriously. Mama said Neecy needed me, so I was going to be her guardian. Just a tiny little bit, I couldn’t completely be a kid after that. (92)
From the outset, then, Due’s story is concerned with addressing questions of sameness, difference, and the impact of the past—childhood and young adult identity formation—upon the future of the self and succeeding generations. For, although the two girls are marked as quite similar in many ways—they wear the same clothes, enjoy the same games and books, share secrets—Denise’s home life dictates that she will always be at a socioeconomic and psychic disadvantage in comparison with her friend. As the excerpt above illustrates, Paige burdens herself with a caretaking role that she, a child herself, cannot possibly fulfill. As the story develops, it becomes heartbreakingly clear that Denise is not going to be able to overcome the huge obstacles that her abusive upbringing presents for her. With depressing inexorability, Denise acts out the consequences of her upbringing while Paige observes, sympathetic but powerless to change the course of events:

What I didn’t understand, as a child, was how Neecy could say she hated her father for hitting her and her mother, but then she’d be so sad during the months when he left, always wondering when he would decide to come home. And how Neecy could be so much smarter than I was—the best reader, speller, and multiplier in the entire fourth grade—and still manage to get so many Fs because she just wouldn’t sit still and do her homework. And the thing that puzzled me most of all was why, as cute as Neecy was, she seemed to be ashamed to show her face to anyone unless she was going to bed with a boy, which was the only time she ever seemed to think she was beautiful. She had to go to the doctor to get abortion pills three times before she graduated from high school. (93)
“Like Daughter” can be read as a historical materialist critique of the social conditions that all but ensure Denise’s trajectory as a victim of, and replicator of, the same mistakes that her mother has made. Indeed, despite Denise’s acute perception of how different her life could have been under different circumstances—a perception expressed in infrequent envy of Paige (“‘Girl, you’re so lucky,’ Neecy told me once” {94})—she cannot seem to enable herself to change. Paige also often meditates on the differences that separate her from her friend, searching for a logic that would explain the blatant inequality of their positions: “I often asked myself what forces had separated us so young, dictating that I had grown up in my house and Neecy had grown up in the other”; “Was it only an accident that my own father never hit me, never stayed away from home for even a single night…?”; “If only Neecy had been my real-life sister, not just a pretend one, I always thought. If only things had been different for her from the time she was born” (94). Due refuses to pigeonhole an “essential” Black woman’s experience, instead pointing to the ways in which Black women’s lives are shaped by the material conditions of institutional disenfranchisement and specific familial experience. However, Due’s choice of the material influences that negatively shape Denise’s life—poverty, physical and sexual abuse, the mother’s survival strategy of denial and alcoholism—is not arbitrary, but rather constitutes a critique of the most serious material inequities that black women are facing in the U.S. today.

In her essay “Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired: The Politics of Black Women’s Health,” Angela Davis contends that the political contextualization of U.S. black women’s emotional and physical health is an important and often overlooked component of black feminist praxis. Written in 1988, at the end of Reagan’s presidency,
the essay assesses the damage wrought by that administration upon black women, the working class, and social welfare programs: the numbers are devastating. “Of all the groups in this country, Black women have the highest rates of admission to outpatient psychiatric services”; “Two out of three poor adults are women, and 80 percent of the poor in the United States are women and children” (56); “Afro-American women are twice as likely as white women to die of hypertensive cardiovascular disease, and they have three times the rate of high blood pressure. Black infant mortality is twice that of whites, and maternal mortality is three times as high”; “This cycle of oppression is largely responsible for the fact that far too many Black women resort to drugs as a means—however ineffective it ultimate proves to be—of softening the blows of poverty” (58); “Black women [. . .] are twelve times more likely to contract the AIDS virus than white women”; “Four times as many Black women as white women die of homicide” (59). As the statistic concerning all women and children’s poverty rates in comparison to men’s demonstrates, none of these problems is specific to the Black community per se: these problems are the result of the vicious combination of poverty and patriarchy, and as such poor white women and children suffer from the same material constraints as black women and their children. However, just as women and children fare worse than men within any given U.S. socioeconomic group, blacks fare worse than whites within any given U.S. economic group. The compounded problems of patriarchy and racism in this country guarantee that black women are over-represented in any set of statistics concerning the impact of poverty.

Although Denise escapes her impoverished past by marrying into middle-class respectability, her desperate phone call to Paige is precipitated by her husband’s
departure—a turn of events that one can easily infer will lead to Denise’s re-
proletarianization. Denise also suffers from alcoholism and mental illness, ailments that
she has inherited from her family. As Paige describes it, Denise’s adulthood has been
one long series of failed plans and unfulfilled expectations: each time a plan fails, a crisis
ensues, and Denise scrambles to find a new scheme upon which to pin her hopes for the
future. In the following passage, Paige describes her friend’s decision to have a cloned
child:

> She actually had the whole thing charted out. We were having
> lunch in a Loop pizzeria the day Denise told me what she wanted to do.
> She spread out a group of elaborate charts; one was marked HOME, one
> FATHER, one SCHOOL, all in her too-neat artist’s script. The whole
time she showed me, her hands were shaking as if they were trying to fly
away from her. I’d never seen anyone shake like that until then, watching
Denise’s fingers bounce like rubber with so much excitement and fervor.
The shaking scared me more than her plans and charts.

> “Neecy, please wait,” I told her.

> “If I wait, I might change my mind,” Denise said, as if this were a
logical argument for going forward rather than just the opposite. She still
hadn’t learned that *doubt* was a signal to stop and think, not to plow ahead
with her eyes covered, bracing for a crash. (97)

Denise’s decision to have a cloned child is a bid to construct a version of herself who will
not inherit the legacy of poverty and abuse that she suffered in her own family. Not
surprisingly, Denise finds herself unable to care for the child any longer the moment that
the latest trappings of stability she has constructed for her own life begin to fall apart.

Her child becomes a mirror—exaggerated in this case because of its striking likeness to her—in which her self-hatred is reflected: “Sean’s gone. Come up here and get Neecy. Take her. *I can’t stand to look at her*” (Due 91, italics mine).

In her influential study of mothering and object-relations theory, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Nancy Chodorow describes the consequences arising from the fact that social relations dictate that the mother typically acts as primary caregiver to infants of both sexes. Her thesis is that mother and daughter share a unique relationship of narcissistic identification that, unlike in the case of the male infant, remains unbroken. While the male child identifies early on with the father, thus precipitating an “active” attachment to the mother as an object of desire, the girl’s Oedipal drama comes later, and, because she shares the perceived “lack” of her mother, precipitates a passive, negative identification with the mother as a continuation of her self:

Because they are the same gender as their daughters and have been girls, mothers of daughters tend not to experience these infant daughters as separate from them in the same way as do mothers of infant sons. In both cases, a mother is likely to experience a sense of oneness and continuity with her infant. However, this sense is stronger and lasts longer, vis-à-vis daughters. Primary identification and symbiosis with daughters tends to be stronger and cathexis of daughters is more likely to retain and emphasize narcissistic elements, that is, to be based on experiencing a daughter as an extension or doubling of the mother herself, with cathexis
of the daughter as a sexual other usually remaining a weaker, less significant theme.

According to Chodorow, the relationship between mother and daughter is both strengthened and complicated by the intense identification inspired by the sameness of their bodies. The strength turns into weakness when the daughter, because of her strong sense of identification with the mother, fails to develop the same sense of individuation and autonomy that the son develops quite early. As a result, while the son goes on to define himself positively in relation to an appropriate mother-substitute, the girl, who identifies strongly with the perceived lack of the mother’s body—and later, with the perceived lack of her position within the symbolic order—goes on to define herself in negative relation to an appropriate father-substitute. Because of the cultural value placed on the male-identified model of development-as-autonomy, the reproduction of mothering guarantees that the typical girl child will grow up to define herself in a negative relation to her culture’s privileged construction of selfhood: the reproduction of mothering becomes the reproduction of Oedipus. This configuration is of course complicated further in the case of the U.S. black family, in several ways. First of all, little cultural value accrues to black male or female subjectivity in a racist society. Black men and women must contend with their historically skewed relationship to the Oedipal configuration, wherein, as Spillers points out, the white master replaces the black male as father—whether literally or figuratively—and the black mother is forced into a reproduction of mothering that guarantees her own and her daughter’s identification both

19 Nancy Chodorow’s work is often critiqued for its overly-totalizing claims and its failure to describe the implications of race, class, and nationality for her thesis. For an overview of this issue as it relates to the charge of “essentialism” in white feminist theory, see Marilyn Frye’s article “Ethnocentrism/Essentialism: The Failure of the Ontological Cure.” Frye sees the constructive critique of Chodorow as useful and necessary, and her rejection as “essentialist” to be an oversimplification.
in negative relation to the white male and as property of the white male. Thus, in the white, Western, propertarian sense of “family,” the black family cannot be said to meaningfully qualify as family.

Chodorow concludes that the Oedipal mother/daughter continuum of narcissistic identification produces a particularly fraught, love/hate relationship wherein the daughter recognizes her self in the mother, and thus recognizes the position of negatively defined subjectivity that she herself can “look forward to” attaining. Audre Lorde and bell hooks argue that this state of affairs produces an even more fraught relationship between Black mothers and daughters, for the daughter recognizes in the mother not only the position of lack dictated by Oedipus, but also the position of lack dictated by her culture’s racism. In her essay “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger,” Audre Lorde writes of black women that

We do not love ourselves, therefore we cannot love each other. Because we see in each other’s face our own face, the face we never stopped wanting. Because we survived and survival breeds desire for more self. A face we never stopped wanting at the same time as we try to obliterate it. Why don’t we meet each other’s eyes? Do we expect betrayal in each other’s gaze, or recognition?

In Due’s story, the issue of the recognition of self in the other is underscored by the fact that Denise’s daughter is a physical replica of herself. When Paige arrives in Chicago to take Denise’s child, Due carefully sets a scene in which the gaze, the reflection, and eye contact are centrally featured. When Paige calls Chicago to let Denise know that she is coming, Denise refuses to turn on the video link that would allow her friend to make eye
contact with her—at the same time, she assures her friend again that she cannot bear to look at her own daughter. In the following scene, Paige sees Denise for the first time since her breakdown:

Denise looked like a vagrant in her own home. As soon as I got there, I knew why she hadn’t wanted me to see her on the phone; she was half dressed in a torn T-shirt, her hair wasn’t combed, and the skin beneath her eyes looked so discolored that I had to wonder, for a moment, if Sean might have been hitting her. It wouldn’t be the first time she’d been in an abusive relationship. But then I stared into the deep mud of my friend’s irises before she shuffled away from me, and I knew better. No, she wasn’t being beaten; she wouldn’t have tolerated that with Neecy in the house. Instead, my friend was probably having a nervous breakdown.

(97)

Denise avoids Paige’s eyes because she fears that Paige will recognize her own failure in that of her friend’s—after all, she has spent a lifetime trying, without much success, to “look after” Denise. The look of recognition and desire for obliteration which Lorde describes is not one that Paige and Denise share, but is rather the gaze that Denise casts upon her own daughter. This is a significant point because the “eye to eye” phenomenon that Lorde describes depends on a mutual self-hatred spawned by internalization of sexism and racism. Due reinforces the fact that this look is not an essential part of a black woman’s experience of racism, but is rather dictated by social and material circumstances that many, but not all, black women share. Due achieves this complexity by presenting us with two black female contemporaries, one whose material
circumstances all but guarantee her disenfranchisement, and one whose careful upbringing and exposure to educational opportunities offer a way out of the cycle of self-loathing.

In her essay “Revolutionary Black Women,” bell hooks also addresses the problem of black women’s internalized self-hatred, and how those feelings are passed on as violent behavior towards other women and girl children: “There is little feminist work focusing on violence against children from a black perspective. Sharing our stories, we [single black parents, mostly women] talked about the ways styles of parenting in diverse black communities support and perpetuate the use of violence as a means of domestic social control” (41). Although hooks sees the same phenomenon in the mutual black female gaze that Lorde does, she is critical of Lorde’s use of the word “we.” She points out that not all black women are likely to experience this phenomenon or respond to it in the same way: “To some extent Lorde’s essay acts to shut down, close off, and deny those black female experiences that do not fit the norm she constructs from the location of her experience” (43). hooks appreciates Lorde’s recognition that black women, like all other race, gender, and socioeconomic groups that are interpellated in U.S. culture as inferior, cannot but internalize the hatred directed at them by the culture in which they live. However, she argues that more emphasis should be placed on the process of black women’s recovery, and calls on “revolutionary” black women to share their life stories as a means of conveying forms of praxis.

Written in the early 1990s, at a time when poststructuralist critique of identity politics was heavily informing both white and black women’s feminist discourse, the essay warns against the pitfalls of constructing a counter-discourse to implicitly white
feminist theory that serves to re-marginalize the black woman’s experience as essentially Other. hooks’ essay describes an impasse that all praxis-oriented theoretical discourses are bound to contend with. The question becomes, at what point does a theory based on a given group’s interpellated position within a culture become a set of essentializing—and therefore limiting—claims about that group’s identity? Also, at what point does black feminist theory threaten to become subsumed by the (often implicitly white) academic feminist discourse that it set out, in the early 70s, to interrogate and decenter? Hazel Carby, one of the most influential black feminist academic critics in America (Carby is currently the chair of the African-American studies program at Yale University), asks in her influential *Reconstructing Womanhood* that “black feminist criticism be regarded as a problem, not a solution, as a sign that should be interrogated, a locus of contradictions. Black feminist criticism has its source and its primary motivation in academic legitimation, placement within a framework of bourgeois humanistic discourse” (15). Of course, the assertion that the “primary motivation” of black feminist discourse is academic legitimation is somewhat problematic—one might well argue that this assertion, coming from one in Carby’s position, serves to promote the production of the deconstructive methodology that has guaranteed Carby’s own academic legitimation.

Due addresses the contradictory nature of black women’s experience in two ways: first, as I discuss above, Due presents us with two very different portraits of the future of black womanhood. Secondly, Due ends the story on another note that contradicts our expectations of both Paige’s and little Neecy’s future. By taking on responsibility for Neecy, Paige is getting a second chance at saving her friend:
Tears found my eyes for the first time since I’d arrived.

“I don’t know. I don’t…care,” Denise said, her voice shattered until she sounded like a mute struggling to form words.

“Look at me. I can’t stand to be near her. I vomit every time I look at her. It’s all ruined. Everything. Oh, God— “ She nearly sobbed, but there was only silence from her open mouth. “I can’t. Not again. No more. Take her, Paige.” (99)

Again, Due chooses to focus on the power of the look—it is the act of looking at her child that scares Denise more than anything, for her child’s face is a mirror that reflects her own internalized rage, fear, and hate. Arguing with Denise about Neecy, Paige recalls her promise to her own mother to look after Denise. As Paige contemplates Neecy, she understands for the first time what Denise’s motivation was in having a clone, and finds herself implicated—“I hadn’t known how the years would melt from my mind like vapors, how it would fill my stomach with stones to end up staring at my childhood’s biggest heartache eye-to-eye” (100). Due provides a socially realistic portrait of a woman caught in the trap that her socioeconomic and material background has set for her—Denise, we are told, has indeed been driven to madness through her failed project to instantiate a loved and loving version of herself. But she also presents us with the potential for hope through the young Neecy, who gives Paige a second chance to fulfill the doomed promise that she made to look after Denise. The legacy of the past, once its tragic social implications and consequences are adequately understood, has the potential to positively impact the future of black women’s experience:
“Neecy? It’s all right this time,” I heard myself tell her in a breathless whisper. “I promise I’ll watch out for you. Just like I said. It’s all right now, Neecy. Okay? I promise.”

I clasped my best friend’s hand, rubbing her small knuckles back and forth beneath my chin like a salve. With my hand squeezing her thumb, I could feel the lively, pulsing throbbing of Neecy’s other heart. (102)

At the end of her essay on “Revolutionary Black Women,” hooks offers her prescriptive for the future of black feminist resistance: “The crisis of black womanhood can only be addressed by the development of resistance struggles that emphasize the importance of decolonizing our minds, developing critical consciousness” (60). Due articulates the future of the legacy of the past as the development of a critical consciousness that might allow black women to use the knowledge of their own oppression to shape a decolonized gaze towards the future.

The legacy of the past is not always a wholly negative force in black women’s SF. Nalo Hopkinson, a new but already influential presence in SF, explores the place of past cultural history in the future in both her short fiction and in the two novels she has published to date, Brown Girl in the Ring and Midnight Robber. An Afro-Caribbean woman who moved to Canada in her teenage years, Hopkinson deploys the discourses of Afro-Caribbean culture, white “first world” late capitalist culture, and contemporary SF in her fiction. In Brown Girl in the Ring, Hopkinson explores the racial and sexual politics of the uneasy relationship between margin and center that the integrated metropolitan space creates. Making specific reference to canonical black “global”
Hopkinson announces her revisionist project with the introduction of her Afro-Caribbean female protagonist Ti-Jeanne, a feminization of the lead character’s name in Derek Walcott’s Afro-Caribbean magical realist play *Ti-Jean and His Brothers*. In Walcott’s play, Ti-Jean and his brothers each do battle with the “devil,” an allegorical instantiation of colonialist forces who can only be outwitted by the title character. Ti-Jean’s victory over the devil depends on the fact that he alone has mastered both the discourse of the white Western philosophical and intellectual traditions that inspire the devil’s attempt to colonize the minds and bodies of his brothers, as well as the discourse of Afro-Caribbean culture’s folkloric resistances to colonization. Ti-Jean’s capacity to translate both of these knowledges into a survival strategy guarantees his victory over the devil: in Hopkinson’s feminized version of this tale, the survival strategies inspired and necessitated by the protagonist’s position as a single black mother in an apocalyptic urban setting are the ultimate means of her victory. Ti-Jeanne is a single black mother living in the near-future urban wasteland of Toronto with her “Mami” (grandmother). Hopkinson describes a situation of post-industrial urban blight brought on by the ruthless
and short-sighted co-optation of the “first world” landscape by global capitalist economic and political governance—the future of Tony Blair and George W.’s “managerial” politics:

Imagine a cartwheel half-mired in muddy water, its hub just clearing the surface. The spokes are the satellite cities that form Metropolitan Toronto…the Toronto city core is the hub. The mud itself is vast Lake Ontario, which cuts Toronto off at its southern border [. . .]. Now imagine the hub of that wheel as being rusted through and through. When Toronto’s economic base collapsed, investors, commerce, and government withdrew into the suburb cities, leaving the rotten core to decay. Those who stayed were the ones who wouldn’t or couldn’t leave. The street people. The poor people. The ones who didn’t see the writing on the wall, or who were too stubborn to give up their homes. Or who saw the decline of authority as an opportunity. As the police force left, it sparked large-scale chaos in the city core: the Riots. The satellite cities quickly raised roadblocks at their borders to keep Toronto out. The only unguarded exit from the city core was now over water…. In the twelve years since the Riots, repeated efforts to reclaim and rebuild the core were failing: fear of vandalism and violence was keeping ‘burb people out.

(3-4)

From the outset, Hopkinson evokes the race- and class-based nature of the relationship between margin and center. The center—in this case the urban center of Toronto, “the Ring,”—depends for its existence upon a docile and marginalized class of urban poor:
among whom, as in the U.S., persons of color are extremely over-represented. When markets for cheaper wage labor outside of the metropole are found, industry’s wealthy white owners pull out, leaving the marginalized class to the city’s core. Thus the margin moves to the center, and the asymmetrical power relations between margin and center become brutally apparent as the urban poor of “the Ring” shift their attention from survival under capitalist exploitation to survival, period. Although money and police protection have been pulled out of urban Toronto, the center still makes its presence felt, in much the same way as ex-colonialist forces still control the “new” national space through the installation of puppet governments. In the less formal arrangement described in Brown Girl, exploitative thugs control the two trades that the power structure deems as profitable in the Ring: drugs and organs.

The novel begins with a startling request from the controlling power structure: Canada’s Premier Uttley requires a human heart. With public opinion running high against porcine donor farms, and with human volunteer donors at an all-time low, the Canadian Premier enlists the thugs of the Ring to procure a healthy human heart at any cost. The Premier’s request for a heart from Toronto epitomizes SF’s capacity to literalize the symbolic. Vonda McIntyre’s novel Superluminal features a similar moment of symbolic estrangement that Hopkinson may well be playing off of here. The opening line of the novel, in which space pilots must undergo extensive organ replacement surgery in order to survive interstellar travel, is “She gave up her heart quite willingly” (1). This statement proves to be true not only literally but also in its familiar, symbolic sense, as the heroine “gives up her heart” in a love affair. In a similar linguistic/contextual maneuver, the Premier’s request for a heart from the Ring
concretizes both the heartlessness of capitalist political and economic interests \textit{and} the sense in which the life of the inner city is constantly threatened by the invisible power structures that contain it.

However, there is an opposing power structure within the Ring, one that does not rely on allegiance to the white capitalist patriarchal system that rules from the margins. This power structure is exemplified by Ti-Jeanne’s grandmother Mami. Mami is a healer woman, the Ring’s resident alternative health care provider, as well as a powerful practitioner of Caribbean-influenced religious rites. Although the rituals that she performs are closely related to what her granddaughter is tempted to name “obeah,” Mami refuses the appellation of obeah-woman, preferring to ascribe her supernatural talents to the Western image of God: “Mami shook a finger in front of Ti-Jeanne’s face. “Girl child, you know better than to call it obeah. Stupidness. Is a gift from God Father. Is a good thing, not an evil thing. But child, if you don’t learn how to use it, it will use you, just like it take your mother” (47). The history of the relationship between colony and metropole is evoked in Mami’s description of her powers: the idea of “God Father” as it was professed by white missionaries and colonialists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did not replace Afro-Caribbean religious practice, but rather augmented it. As (a generalized set of) polytheistic practices, obeah or voodoo/voodoo had the capacity to accommodate a Western God, thus enacting a subversive marginalization of the figure that Western colonial forces considered to be the center of their spiritual life. However, lest we romanticize Afro-Caribbean religious practices as the locus of the Ring’s “traditional” or “authentic” spiritual life, a cultural antidote to the ways of the white man, Hopkinson references the hybridity of Mami’s religion, its
complex relationship to the socioeconomic forces that have historically attempted to control it. This hybridity becomes more apparent as the plot unfolds to reveal the fact that Mami’s religion does not operate exclusively in the interests of the marginalized—it can also be used to further the interests of the absent center. This fact underscores Hopkinson’s project of problematizing the relationship between the legacy of the Caribbean colonial past and that legacy’s translation to a future wherein the Diaspora is, ironically, re-colonized in the first world urban space.

In his essay on the missionary’s problematic role as cultural and spiritual translator, “The Translation of Cultures,” James Clifford concludes, “For the missionary, in any event, there were no final versions. Authenticity was a process—the translation of cultures, creatively and humanly indeterminate” (692). Brown Girl in the Ring, a title that evokes Ti-Jeanne’s alien/outsider status in relation to the first world urban center, is about the process of cultural translation as a life-or-death matter. Ti-Jeanne serves as a sort of missionary for the international division of culture, one whose translation of obeah from its Afro-Caribbean roots to Toronto’s inner city entails an implicit revision of its sexist and capitalist reifications at the hands of her thug grandfather, Rudy. Ti-Jeanne’s supernatural powers first manifest themselves as dreams, and Ti-Jeanne’s ability to successfully translate these dreams as moments of prescience will determine whether she takes control of her powers or descends into madness, like her mother. The cultural legacy of Afro-Caribbean religious practices, manifested in Ti-Jeanne’s family as supernatural abilities, must be translated into survival strategies for the future or they will become destructive forces. In this way, Hopkinson postulates one vision of the future of the legacy of the past.
Another complicating factor of Mami’s religion is the indeterminate relationship between her religious rites and science-fictional discourse. Mami’s, and later Ti-Jeanne’s, rites produce tangible results: Mami casts a spell, and Ti-Jeanne and her baby’s father, Tony, are rendered invisible; Mami performs a ritual, and is suddenly inhabited by the spirit of an ancestor; Ti-Jeanne’s battle with her grandfather Rudy for control of her soul is waged on a battleground of supernatural powers. The text constructs these powers as real, but do these powers depend upon some effect of the future context in which the novel takes place? Are these seemingly “supernatural” powers, in other words, a function of this particular version of the future, or are they a continuation of the powers that have always been available to successful practitioners of “obeah”? Since they have the power to affect people outside of Ti-Jeanne’s family, and since the active souls of the dead include people outside of the family, these powers cannot be explained as merely a “family affair.” Hopkinson’s choice not to provide an explanation for these phenomena is, I believe, a significant one: the result is a new hybrid of past and future discourses, one that challenges the traditional, preservationist spatio-temporal dimensions of the international division of culture through its translation into the future space. Just as Walcott’s Ti-Jean becomes Hopkinson’s Ti-Jeanne, Mami’s gift from “God Father” translates into Ti-Jeanne’s survival strategy for the future. In the following scene, Ti-Jeanne must figure out how to enlist help from her spirit ancestors in order to fight Rudy, the drug-dealing thug whom the Premier has hired to take a human heart from the Ring. Rudy, as it turns out, is Ti-Jeanne’s grandfather, Mami’s estranged husband. The man whom he hires to take the heart is Tony, the estranged father of Ti-Jeanne’s baby and an addict of ‘buff, the drug that Rudy peddles in the Ring. Tony chooses Mami as his
victim, leaving Ti-Jeanne alone to avenge the death of her grandmother and save herself from destruction at the hands of her grandfather:

She had to figure out how to stop Rudy herself.

She remembered her grandmother’s words: *The center pole is the bridge between the worlds*. Why had those words come to her right then?

Ti-Jeanne thought of the center pole of the palais, reaching up into the air and down toward the ground. She thought of the building she was in. The CN tower. And she understood what it was: 1,815 feet of the tallest center pole in the world. Her duppy body almost laughed a silent *kya-kyaa*, a jokey Jab-Jab laugh. For like the spirit tree that the center pole symbolized, the CN tower dug roots deep into the ground where the dead lived and pushed high into the heavens where the oldest ancestors lived. The tower was their ladder into this world. A Jab-Jab type of joke, oui.

She was halfway into Guinea Land herself. She could call the spirits to help her. She wouldn’t have to call very loudly. (221)

This passage describes an act of translation, if not transubstantiation: the “spirit tree,” which Mami has taught Ti-Jeanne to think of as the conduit that transports souls from one world to the next, is translated in the future, first-world urban context to a contemporary building that once held the promise of urban economic growth and expansion. Now deserted by the monied interests that owned and controlled it, the building serves, appropriately enough, as a conduit that translates the victims of the ruthless expansionism that the building itself emblematizes from their spirit world into a context of militant intervention on Ti-Jeanne’s behalf.
Brown Girl describes many other instances of cultural translation, most memorably the Ellisonian underworld of the subway system, which has been co-opted by street urchins. The Invisible Man’s pointedly political co-optation of power from the electric company—an enterprise of the white male power structure—serves, ironically, to illuminate for the reader the curious invisibility of black subjectivity in a white world: “I have been carrying on a fight with Monopolated Light and Power for some time now. I use their service and pay them nothing at all, and they don’t know it. Oh, they suspect that power is being drained off, but they don’t know where” (5). Similarly, the street urchins’ co-optation of the abandoned subway system illuminates one of the most tragic consequences of this future-world’s urban decay: its abandoned children. In a key scene, the street urchins, whom Ti-Jeanne and Mami have previously fed and given medical attention, rescue Ti-Jeanne from Rudy and his thugs. They pull Ti-Jeanne into their underground world, whose labyrinthine obscurity allows them to create the illusion of power in numbers. Although the street children survive in small, fragmented packs, they appear, through innovations of their own ingenious design, to be as legion as the masses that once packed the subways of the city. In the following scene, Josée, the leader of her pack of orphaned children, explains how the children create the illusion of power:

“Josée,” Ti-Jeanne asked, “is what allyou do? To fool Rudy, I mean?”

Josée’s grin was feral. “That was Mumtaz,” she replied.

A girl of about twelve returned the grin, flicking a hank of black hair out of her eyes. Her brown face was difficult to see in the dark of the tunnel. Her teeth gleamed. Mumtaz was carrying some sort of jury-rigged
Like the Invisible Man, the street children use stolen power to counter their own vulnerability and invisibility. As they reveal in this scene, the children are the regular victims of Rudy’s thirst for blood, a thirst inspired by the capitalist and sexist uses of his powers of obeah. Unlike Mami, Rudy uses his powers for personal gain. Rudy has kept himself alive and powerful beyond his years by keeping his daughter, Ti-Jeanne’s mother Mi-Jeanne’s, soul in limbo. Mi-Jeanne, unable to comprehend the special powers she has inherited from her mother, turned her soul over to her father in Ti-Jeanne’s childhood to ensure its protection. Her contained soul, called a “duppy,” requires a steady diet of human sacrifices in order to empower Rudy. As the least visible, least valued, and therefore most dispensable group in the Ring, the street children provide an ideal source
for Rudy’s duppy’s diet. But, like Ellison’s Invisible Man, the children find some
strength in the position of dispensability accorded them by the absent center—embodied
in their case by the figure of Rudy, the agent of the (literally) heartless Premier. As
Ellison’s hero puts it, “It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, though it is most often
rather wearing on the nerves” (3).

Rudy’s translation of obeah into the future’s urban wasteland provides Hopkinson
with another occasion to riff on SF’s capacity to literalize the symbolic: for, as the Ring’s
primary drug dealer and pimp, as well as a powerful practitioner of “black magic,” Rudy
both literally and symbolically co-opts the souls of the disenfranchised urban minority.
Although the Premier is appropriately vilified for her greed at the expense of the people
of the Ring, it is Rudy who stands head and shoulders above the Premier as the Ring’s
primary source of destruction. As a nominal member of the underclass that he exploits,
Rudy understands the desires and weaknesses of his community, and is therefore able to
infiltrate and control the Ring in ways inaccessible to the absent center, despite its
considerable power. The insidious nature of Rudy’s controlling capacities is exemplified
in Tony, whose addiction to ‘buff guarantees his ultimate allegiance to Rudy, at the
expense of his own family and his own health. Under Rudy’s command, Tony must
procure a heart for the Premier: in desperation, he chooses the heart of Mami, the
community’s healer.

Brown Girl explores and critiques the impact of globalized patriarchy as it is often
translated in the black urban population. Rudy, an ageless, physically powerful, and
charismatic force, is exemplary of the patriarch’s particular powers of manipulation and
control over the family and the community. A wife-beater and a pimp, a child-killer as
well as the controller of his daughter’s life, Rudy’s destructive potential is heavily
informed by his maleness. Under the patriarch’s influence, even sympathetic black men
such as Tony become pawns in a game of power consolidation, a game inspired by
Rudy’s thralldom to the absent center that he at once emulates and reviles. Rudy, with
his immense power, his black magic, and his exploitative agelessness, recalls the
charismatically masculine figure of Octavia Butler’s *Wild Seed*, Doro. Through Doro,
Butler describes the ways in which patriarchy and colonization—especially through the
figurative and literal deployment of rape--exist as mutually productive and mutually
sustaining ideologies. It falls to Anyanwu, the novel’s heroine, to find a way to destroy
the seemingly indestructible Doro. Like Ti-Jeanne, Anyanwu discovers that her
intelligence—in this case, her powers of mind control-- is her key defense against the
brute strength of her oppressor.

In both novels, a supernatural power is accorded to both the male and female
protagonist. And in both novels, the abuse of that power by the male follows a
depressingly familiar Oedipal pattern, one that Frantz Fanon describes succinctly in *The
Wretched of the Earth*: “The look that the native turns on the settler’s town is a look of
lust, a look of envy” (39). The thesis of the first chapter of Fanon’s book, “Concerning
Violence,” includes a masculine version of Lorde’s and hook’s theses regarding the
mirrored internalized sexism and racism that black women sometimes tragically share:

The colonized man will first manifest this aggressiveness which has been
deposited in his bones against his own people [. . .]. The settler’s world is
a hostile world, which spurns the native, but at the same time it is a world
of which he is envious. We have seen that the native never ceases to
dream of putting himself in the place of the settler—not of becoming the settler but of substituting himself for the settler. This hostile world, ponderous and aggressive because it fends off the colonized masses with all the harshness it is capable of, represents not merely a hell from which the swiftest flight possible is desirable, but also a paradise close at hand which is guarded by terrible watchdogs. (52-53)

Such is the paradoxical nature of the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor—the oppressor flaunts his power conspicuously, both at the expense of the oppressed, as well as in a manner calculated to inspire his respect and envy. However, as Hortense Spillers points out, the capitalist patriarchal imperatives of legal property ownership and the transferal of that property through the development of kinship lines (which of course necessitates the female’s status as property) are not available to the black man. And disenfranchised men under patriarchy, of any race or nationality, are liable to act out their feelings of powerlessness through abuse of their own families, as well as through more generalized bids for control within their own communities. Butler’s Doro recapitulates his people’s colonization by attempting—through force when necessary—to sire a kinship line that shares his supernatural abilities. Rudy reinscribes his people’s marginalization in the first-world urban sphere by attempting to destroy the women in his own family, and by holding sway over his community through his elicit drug trafficking. Both protagonists seem to be engaged in the same process of attempted “substitution” that Fanon describes above, and in both cases the attempted substitution involves the subjugation of women: in Doro’s case, through the use of women as
breeding stock; and in Rudy’s case through the murder and prostitution of women. Such is the eminently *translatable* nature of capitalist patriarchal ideology.

Ultimately, Ti-Jeanne attributes her ability to outwit Rudy to her skills of survival and bravery, and not exclusively to her supernatural power—which, after all, both she and Rudy posses. Like the children of the memorable underworld of the Toronto subways, Ti-Jeanne’s most profound strength is her capacity to adapt, to translate the legacy of her past into a strategy for survival in the near-future dystopia of the first world urban wasteland. Through the figure of Ti-Jeanne, Hopkinson illustrates how the survival skills of the single black parent, well honed through her exposure to the tyrannies of institutionalized racism and familial sexism, might translate into her best hope for the future. In *Sister Outsider*, Lorde makes the now oft-quoted observation that “One cannot use the master’s tools to take apart the master’s house.” She goes on to describe how the alienated class must create its own strategies for change by drawing on its own strengths and abilities. By valorizing the strengths and abilities available to a single, black, inner-city dwelling mother, Hopkinson strongly suggests that it may well be the present day’s “survivor,” as Lorde puts it, who will be best equipped to survive the future.

In closing, I return to the image of the “alien native” that I suggested as a figure for the overdeterminations of sexual and racial “Othering” at the beginning of this chapter. In her essay on the relationship between science-fictional aliens and race-based alienation, Octavia Butler muses fancifully on the impact that “real” aliens might make on our globally divided culture:
New siblings to rival. Perhaps for a moment, only a moment, this affront will bring us together, all human, all much more alike than different, all much more alike than is good for our prickly pride. Humanity, *E pluribus unum* at last, a oneness focused on and fertilized by certain knowledge of alien others. What will be born of that brief, strange, and ironic union?

(416)

The idea that a “real” alien presence might bring humanity together in opposition to the alien is at once liberating and sobering. By suggesting such a configuration, Butler highlights the arbitrary nature of the divisions that our Oedipal “sibling rivalry” seems to continually compel us to. Despite the simplifying clichés that the sentiment “we’re all the same, under the skin” seems to be productive of, Butler takes the risk of expressing just this sentiment in order to consider the awesome potential of challenging the divisions that have been thrust upon us. That’s what I find “liberating” about this suggested configuration. The sobering quality of this configuration—us, as in Humanity, vs. the Aliens—is Butler’s suggestion that our unity as a human race will still be predicated upon the presence of an Other. Thus one can easily imagine a situation in which the human race configures the aliens as the new oppressed class. Given our track record to date on the use of “divide and conquer” as a strategy of oppression, it might be just as imperative as it is fanciful to imagine Humanity’s “certain knowledge of alien others,” if only to recognize the potential for a collective response on the part of the oppressed to all repressive ideological systems.


Chapter Five

Alienation and Estrangement in Marx and SF: A Feminist Analysis

In this chapter I perform readings of two feminist SF novels that describe near-future worlds in which the estrangements of class stratification and an increasingly globalized economy have become dystopically exaggerated. Rebecca Ore’s *Outlaw School* and Nicola Griffith’s *Slow River* highlight the ways in which class and sexual politics intersect to produce alienated and estranged subjects. “Alienation” and “estrangement” are two concepts that I have referred to throughout this study. I have described the sense in which a number of dominant ideologies interpellate female and feminized subjects as “native aliens,” and thus depend on strategies of alienation as a means to ensure dominance. I have also described how feminist SF deploys the mode of estrangement, the use of an other, fabulated world which gestures towards the future as a means of achieving critical distance on some aspect of our own world. Both alienation and estrangement are also important concepts for Marxist analysis, and both also take on added significances for feminist critique of Marxist analysis. I will begin this chapter with a feminist reappraisal of some of Marx’s descriptions of “alienation” and “estrangement,” followed by readings of the particular ways in which these concepts signify in their feminist, science-fictional, and Marxist connotations in the work of Ore and Griffith.

In the Paris manuscripts, Marx describes capitalist commodification as a process of estrangements: primarily, the estrangement of the worker from the product of his [sic] labor, and the estrangement of the worker from himself that occurs when the worker’s
labor power is sold, and the worker then manufactures the products that guarantee and sustain his own alienation. In this way, the worker is engaged in what Marx calls the “activity of alienation” (110). Marx’s use of the term “alienation” is but one of the many discursive similarities between science fiction’s contemporary critical discourse and Marx’s descriptions of the estrangements of labor power. For Marx, one might say that the science-fictional reality is not contained in a vision of the future, but was brought to us by the industrial revolution: capitalism is a process of estrangements that render the worker alien to his own world. Look no further; *capitalism* is breeding aliens:

> When we ask…what is the essential relationship of labor we are asking about the relationship of the *worker* to production.

> Till now we have been considering the estrangement, the alienation of the worker only in one of its aspects, i.e., the worker’s *relationship to the products of his labor*. But the estrangement is manifested not only in the result but in the *act of production*, within the *producing activity*, itself. How could the worker come to face the product of his activity as a stranger, were it not that in the very act of production he was estranging himself from himself? The product is after all but the summary of the activity, of production. If then the product of labor is alienation, production itself must be active alienation, the alienation of activity, the activity of alienation. In the estrangement of the object of labor is merely

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20 I am not the first critic of science fiction to note this similarity. In this chapter I’ll be focusing on some specific uses of the concepts of “alienation” and “estrangement.” For a more wide-ranging appraisal of the similarities between SF and utopian literature and Marxist analysis as interimplicated modalities or methodologies, see Darko Suvin’s *Positions and Presuppositions in Science Fiction*. 189
summarized the estrangement, the alienation, in the activity of labor itself.

(110)

Within a critical framework that conceptualizes the wage laborer’s position within the capitalist economy as “feminized,” I argue that the male wage laborer is an alien native to capitalist production in the same profound sense that women are the alien race native to patriarchy. I use this comparison to underscore two points: first, that maleness does not by any means guarantee a stake in the complex of power loci that I term “white capitalist patriarchy” throughout this study; and second, that both women under patriarchy and laborers under capitalism are engaged in the activity of their own alienation—in other words, the reproduction of one’s alienation under these conditions is a built-in element of both of these subject positions.21 Patriarchy and capitalism produce aliens, outsiders—and although these systems produce estranged subjects, they are uncritical (as opposed to cognitive) estrangements, because they uphold a regressive status quo rather than interrogating it.

Another element of this equation is the cognitive estrangement produced by these same positions, the way in which the systems of capitalism and patriarchy produce subjectivities in excess of the logic of the systems that contain them. This is by no means a symmetrical equation: the uncritical estrangements produced by these ideological apparati are part of their basic design elements, whereas the critical estrangements that they have the capacity to produce are less frequent offshoots. However, these critical

21 In her study on masculinity and culture, Male Subjectivity at the Margins, Kaja Silverman points out that “The male subject’s aspirations to mastery and sufficiency are undermined from many directions—by the law of language, which founds subjectivity on a void; by the castration crisis; by sexual, economic, and racial oppression; and by the traumatically unassailable nature of certain historical events” (52). In the case that I describe here, that of the worker, the male subject is feminized by “economic oppression”, his position within the labor market. I will return to this observation when I discuss the character of Paolo, a teenaged minority male worker in Griffith’s Slow River.
estrangements are related to the built-in structural obsolescence of capitalism, which we perceive glimpses of through Althusserian moments of “rupture,” which occur sporadically as “a result of the intense overdetermination of the basic class contradiction” (For Marx 104). Under certain, seemingly unformulatable conditions, the worker under capitalism or the woman under patriarchy can attain a critical comprehension of her oppression. The question of why this happens is important for a Marxist feminist analysis of novels in which the protagonist attains a heroically critical stance in relation to her oppression: for, if this issue is not theorized in the text, then it would seem that the author privileges an anti-historical, individualist model of subject-formation. But what exactly is the nature of these critically estranging factors? How does the machinery of these particular ideologies create them, and why? For the contradictions of these ideological systems do not, unfortunately, automatically or necessarily create moments of what Althusser calls “rupture.” This question will be central to my readings of Griffith’s and Ore’s novels, both of which feature a heroine who, due to a conjunction of circumstances, attains a cognitively estranged comprehension of the terms of her oppression while others confronting the same problems do not.

This question relates to another point of inquiry for my readings of these texts, the conjunction of the science-fictional and Marxist resonances of the concept of “alienation.” A major question that Marx’s idea of the activity of alienation presents us with is, who exactly is this “self” that the laborer is alienated from through the process of his labor? The received critical wisdom on this issue is that the young Marx, still concerned with the immediate project of standing Hegel on his feet, is at this point in his
career not yet divorced from the Hegelian terms that he is in the process of critiquing. Thus, although Marx wishes to critique the dialectically contemplative metaphysical self posited by Hegel, a metaphysics of self implicitly carries over into his materialist critique, which names labor under capitalism as that which estranges man from himself. This is because labor conceived and enacted as labor power is dehumanizing; therefore, the act of performing said labor is an activity of alienation. The problem with seeing the worker as necessarily alienated from himself is that in such a case the worker is always-already, through his activity of alienation, in a permanent state of metaphysical alienation. This philosophical stance does not allow for the possibility of the worker to effect change—its presuppositional framework still depends on a bourgeois philosophy of the worker, and has not yet developed into a radical philosophy for the worker. Furthermore, this formulation does not take into account the (first-world) worker’s increasing share of “leisure-time.” However, Marx’s conception of labor under capitalism as the activity of self-alienation provides a problematic but ultimately useful framework for considering the particular—not to say individual—alienation- or estrangement-effects that the worker under capitalism suffers. It does not violate the spirit of the letter of Marx to revise the animalistic—in the later works mechanized—alienated self so that “self” is understood to mean the necessarily fragmented subject that Lacan delineates and Althusser assumes.

22 Victor Zitta, in his 1964 study Georg Lukács’ Marxism: A Study in Utopia and Ideology, describes the critical consensus on this view of the bifurcated Marx: “It was and still is customary to distinguish between two periods in the intellectual life of Karl Marx: the young and rather messianically oriented pre-manifesto Marx (1842-1848), perturbed about the fate of man, was and is distinguished from the mature and post-revolutionary Marx (1849-1883), the strictly ‘scientifically’ oriented economist, sociologist, and social historian of capitalism. The latter’s messianic proclivities, reduced to footnotes, are considerably dampened, even though he appears to keep a certain continuity with his former Hegelian inspiration. This is the author of Das Kapital” (119).
Operating under this revisionist assumption, I find that the alienated self of Marx’s Paris manuscripts articulates an important dimension of patriarchal capitalist praxis—namely, its capacity to produce alienation-effects, the intensities of which are felt more strongly than other alienating outcomes of the condition of the subject’s fragmentation. In this formulation, the subject of these alienations is a potentially empowered subject, because the alienation-effects of global capital and patriarchy represent only part of a complex network of effects and intensities that can be revised under certain conditions. A term or concept capable of addressing the subject’s particular experience of alienation—without either reifying the subject as metaphysical or essentializing her—might prove to be an important missing link in the discursive constitution of the contemporary subject under global capital and patriarchy. It is in this conceptual vein that I would like to pursue a literary analysis of the ways in which late capitalism and its instantiations of patriarchy produce alien subjects: animals and automatons.

First I would like to briefly establish what I see as a meaningful relationship between Marx’s conception of the laborer as alienated animal in the Paris manuscripts, and the laborer as alienated automaton in the appendix to Capital, vol. 1. In the early essay “Estranged Labor,” Marx describes the estranged laborer as specifically animal in his alien-ness:

so is the worker’s activity not his spontaneous activity. It belongs to another; it is the loss of self. As a result, therefore, man (the worker) only feels himself freely active in his animal functions—eating, drinking, procuring, or at most in his dwelling and in dressing-up, etc.; and in his
human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal.

What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal.

(111)

The most problematic aspect of this formulation is Marx’s attribution of the enjoyments of the body, of the animal, to the worker. This formulation plays directly into an ideology that names those I have constellated as Earth’s “native aliens,” women and workers, as basically animalistic beings, beings closer to nature, beings without human agency, and therefore without human desires. Furthermore, this formulation describes an early period in the formation of capitalist subjectivity—as capitalist nations become more wealthy, they require less and less of the type of intensive labor that so utterly alienates the worker. This frees the worker up to develop a commodified relationship to his leisure time—the development of which has become a significant source of wealth for first-world countries. However, Marx’s early critique of the “human become animal” is assuming new relevance as a fairly accurate description of emergent globalized divisions of labor. What I find interesting about this passage is the reversal that Marx asserts is being enacted through the alienations of the labor activity, one that renders the human being as alien to humanity, where humanity is defined as that which exceeds the realm of human needs. Of course, the laborer’s relationship to the consumption and production of culture, which is related to the increase in leisure-time available to laborers in advanced capitalist countries, (as well as to the third-worlding of culture as capital which I pointed to earlier) has since proven to be only one of the many ways in which the laborer can be meaningfully said to exceed his “animal” function. But even in his later works, wherein
the relation of the worker to culture begins to be accounted for in some detail, Marx’s image of the worker as alien remains, albeit in a more conceptually advanced critique:

The objective conditions essential to the realization of labour are *alienated* from the worker and become manifest as *fetishes* endowed with a will and a soul of their own. *Commodities*, in short, appear as the purchasers of *persons*. The buyer of labour-power is nothing but the personification of objectified labour which cedes a part of itself to the worker in the form of the means of subsistence in order to annex the living labour-power for the benefit of the remaining portion, so as to keep itself intact and even to grow beyond its original size by virtue of this annexation. (1003-1004)

By incorporating living labour-power into the material constituents of capital, the latter becomes an animated monster and it starts to act ‘as if consumed by love.’ (1007)

Using the same language of alienation and estranged animation, Marx here describes the *commodity*, not the laborer per se, as the animal-being: specifically, as “an animated monster.” Thus a reversal has taken place: the worker is not reduced to the animal through his labor, but the products of his labor, through the estrangements effected by commodity fetishism, become animated. The commodity, not the worker, is the alien; or, to put it another way, the alienated laborer produces aliens in the form of commodities that, through the mechanics of a human desire now deeply informed by the repressions enacted by the estranged nature of his labor (labor as labor-power), now act like living beings. In both formulations--the idea of the worker as an animalistic alien, and the idea
of the worker as a maker of animated aliens, monsters—the worker is the creative force behind the science-fictionalization of society under the capitalist mode of production. It is in this way that capitalism can be meaningfully said to breed aliens, both in the form of alienated workers and in the form of commodities that the worker and the owner collude to animate, so that they “act as if consumed by love.”

In the two SF novels that I will examine, historically specific instantiations of patriarchy and capitalism operate as critically estranging factors that inspire, and ironically facilitate, the heroine’s (partial, variously compromised, but nonetheless present) subversion of the systems that control her. Both novels use images that suggest Marx’s concept of the “animalized,” “mechanized” worker, images complicated by issues of sexual identity. I wish to look specifically at how the “science-fictionalization” of the female protagonists enacted by the context of global patriarchy in these novels serves as both a limiting and an ironically empowering alienation-effect.

Nicola Griffith’s 1995 novel Slow River tells of the transformation of one wealthy white woman’s point of view that occurs as the result of a life-changing event. Lore van de Oest is the youngest daughter of the van de Oest family, whose vast fortune derives from the invention and sale of the only existing foolproof water cleaning treatment—a commodity more valuable than gold in a near-future world in which sources of untainted drinking water have all but disappeared. Lore is kidnapped on the eve of her eighteenth birthday and held in squalid conditions while her two male kidnappers attempt to collect ransom money from her family. Unable to collect their ransom, the kidnappers eventually remove Lore from her hiding place, at which point she succeeds in escaping, although she is badly wounded in the process. She ends up on the streets of an
unidentified city, bleeding and disoriented. Although it turns out that Lore’s kidnapping was engineered by her jealous half-sister Greta as an elaborate ruse for her eventual murder, Lore does not learn this until much later in the novel. Meanwhile, she believes that her father has deliberately abandoned her by not paying her ransom, and she is left without recourse to help. Lore is found on the street and taken in by a young woman named Spanner; at which point her real troubles begin.

The novel is structured as a series of recollections that culminate in its time present. Alternating between accounts of Lore’s coming-of-age in the van de Oest household and the anonymous and marginal existence that she embarks on after escaping her kidnappers, Griffith conveys the alienations specific to two very different class positions. The result of this technique, when paired with the estranging factor of the future space, is that we get two entirely different versions of reality: the future of the rich, and the future of the working class. These two realities merge in our heroine, who must learn to “pass” for poor in a series of subterfuges that call to mind narratives of racial “passing.” For instance, in the van de Oest reality, the entire family has gray hair from the time of their birth. This is because the van de Oest matriarch, Lore’s grandmother, learned of a then-recent medical discovery: people with pigmentless hair, such as albinos, were much more prone to develop cancers of the scalp. Once this discovery was made, albinos and people with gray hair began to dye their hair a darker color, to block the rays of the sun. But the van de Oest matriarch used this discovery as an opportunity to flaunt her wealth, and had the color-producing alleles in her and her family’s line deactivated. She was able to do this safely because she could also afford the very costly genetic treatment available to prevent cancer. Recalling the statistics concerning the intersections
of health with race, gender, and class that I described in chapter four, it seems quite likely
that the consumption of health care will have the capacity to function as conspicuous
consumption in the near future. The ugly twist to this form of conspicuous consumption
is that the van de Oests’ hair becomes a visible reminder to those with cancer that their
illnesses could have been prevented.

In the world that Lore comes to occupy with Spanner, however, her gray hair
becomes a liability, a highly visible sign of Lore’s wealth that will attract predators
whom she can no longer afford to keep at a distance with private security. In one scene,
Spanner must explain to Lore that the evidence of her good health and constant medical
attention must be masked by artificial means:

Spanner’s skin was big-pored over her nose and cheekbones.

There was a tiny scar by her mouth. Her teeth were uneven, her neck thin.

Her complexion had a grayish tinge, like meat left just a little too long.

Lore thought she looked a lot better than Spanner.

Spanner was nodding at her in the mirror. “Exactly. You see the
difference? You’re too damn…glossy. Like a racehorse. Look at your
eyes, and your teeth. They’re perfect. And your skin: not a single pimple
and no scars. Everything’s symmetrical. You’re bursting with health. Go
out in this neighborhood, even in rags, and you’ll shine like a lighthouse.”

(42-43)

Although Spanner’s hard-earned knowledge about the mores of the poor and working
classes helps Lore to survive, Lore’s position of total dependence on Spanner leads her to
make choices that she had never even considered having to make. Spanner and Lore’s
relationship becomes the occasion for Lore’s first lesson in the abjections of poverty, one that Lore’s rarefied upbringing could not have allowed her to learn.

After Lore recovers from the injuries that she sustained at the hands of her kidnappers, Spanner introduces her to a highly addictive drug that, like ecstasy, inspires feelings of sexual desire and a relaxation of inhibitions. Although Lore had some experience with the drug through watching the progress of her older sister Stella’s addiction, she learns that the experience of drug addiction, like everything else, is quite a different matter when you’re poor. Scared and disoriented by her new position, Lore quickly becomes addicted to the drug. Soon, she and Spanner must engage in prostitution in order to support their habit. For Spanner, the act of prostitution is easily defensible because the trajectory of her life has placed her in a series of compromises that she feels she can only control through acts of total surrender. Within the logic of entrenched poverty and its legacies of violence and drug dependence, prostitution becomes a way for Spanner to take control of her body’s abjection as a sort of pre-emptive maneuver. Lore’s experience of this terrible logic does not become an occasion for Griffith to moralize about the horrors of drug dependence and prostitution. On the contrary, Lore’s experience comes to function, in the context of her growing knowledge about herself and about survival, as a reminder that abjection is a circumstantially imposed condition of poverty which must be vigilantly fought against, and not simply a “bad choice” that immoral people make.

Lore establishes two different relationships to disenfranchisement: first, the relationship to the underworld, the “survival mode” that she undergoes with Spanner; and second, the anonymous “subsistence mode” that she takes up as a factory worker when
she tires of her life with Spanner. These two relationships express the estrangements of
class in a manner quite similar to the way in which Marx describes them: first, in the
Paris manuscripts, as an “animalizing” alienation of self; and second, in Capital vol. 1, as
the “automatization” of self through the mass production of goods that seem to take on
the character of the sensuous humanity that is necessarily denied to the mechanized
producer of those goods. The peculiarly “animalizing” function of the “survival mode”
of the underworld is brought out in Slow River through scenes and images that
underscore the dehumanizing aspects of Spanner’s furtive mode of subsistence. Marx
describes this “animalizing” function thus:

> It is just in his work upon the objective world, therefore, that man first
> really proves himself to be a species being. This production is his active
> species life. Through and because of this production, nature appears as his
> work and his reality. The object of labor is, therefore, the objectification
> of man’s species life: for he duplicates himself not only, as in
> consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he
> contemplates himself in a world that he has created. In tearing away from
> man the object of his production, therefore, estranged labor tears from him
> his species life, his real objectivity as a member of the species and
> transforms his advantage over animals into the disadvantage that his
> inorganic body, nature, is taken away from him. Similarly, in degrading
> spontaneous, free, activity, to a means, estranged labor makes man’s
> species life a means to his physical existence. (“Estranged Labour” 114)
Although Marx couches our relationship to nature and to animals in language that seems to me to be problematically positivistic and flowery, I nonetheless agree with the kernel of the point that he is making here. After all, it is not necessary or even possible to locate, through some universal formulation, what one’s ideal and unestranged relationship to “nature” might be. This relationship would have to be dependent on specific historical and political circumstances. But Marx’s primary object here is to establish the fact that the (although not perhaps the only) objective circumstance that separates us from animals, our capacity for symbolic language and self-consciousness, expresses itself through our productive manipulations of nature. When these productive manipulations of nature are commodified, the worker/manipulator is removed, or estranged, from the product of her labor, as her labor is transformed from an end into a means through the machinations of the capitalist mode of production. In this way, the laborer whose activity must be sold as labor power is necessarily estranged from the productions of the very activity that separates her from animals.

It is in this context that I view prostitution as the degradation of an activity that has the capacity to be spontaneous and free into an estranged means of physical existence. In a sense, the activity of prostitution can be read as a laying bare of the conditions of the marriage-market, the knowing manipulation of the condition of women’s sexual subservience into an activity that can at least profit her financially. This is, in fact, part of Spanner’s justificatory “reading” of her relation to prostitution, one that Lore cannot bring herself to accept. The difference between Lore and Spanner’s relation to the activity of prostitution can be partially explained by their radically differing formative relationships to the means of production. But the overdeterminations of sexual
politics must also be implicated here, for an upbringing free of material privation does not guarantee a certain type of relation to prostitution. This difference begs the question that I set out at the outset of this chapter: what are the implications for feminist and Marxist critique of the fact that certain seemingly arbitrary factors can inspire, in a small number of individuals, cognitive estrangement from the conditions of her oppression? Christine Delphy’s observations regarding the nature of oppression are illuminating:

Oppression is one possible way of conceptualizing a given situation; and this particular conceptualization can originate only from one standpoint (that is, from one precise point in the situation): that of the oppressed. It is only from the point of view and life experience of women that their condition can be seen as oppression. This coming consciousness takes place neither before nor after the struggle. In other words, it is a question of two aspects of the same phenomenon, not of two different phenomena. (“For a Materialist Feminism” 64)

Here we come to a critical impasse of Marxist/feminist analysis, for it is, paradoxically, only through women’s own active recognition of themselves as oppressed that they can gain the critical consciousness that is a necessary condition for changing the conditions that insure their oppression. This means that one cannot usefully “inform” women of the situation of their oppression—although women might be given the respect and attention necessary for them to come to their own consciousness of their situation. Or, as is the case illustrated in Slow River, a woman might come to consciousness of her oppression through the repeated experience of oppression in her own life (the “school of hard knocks” method), which she eventually begins to compare unfavorably with her
fragmented experience of, or hope for, a life unfettered by that particular form of oppression. Consider Lore’s painful recognition of her and Spanner’s prostitution as a self-animalization achieved through the alienation of sexual activity into a means rather than as a mutually gratifying end unto itself. The dialogue begins with Spanner’s point of view:

“No. It’s a job, just like any other. You don’t begrudge [. . .] Chileans a good chew of coca leaf to get them up the next mountain trail where the air’s too thin for anything except their goats. So why deny yourself?”

“Because I hate what we do.”/“You just said you enjoyed it.”/“I do, at the time.”/“Then you’d rather not enjoy it?”/“I’d rather not do it at all.”/“And you’d rather not eat, too?”/“There has to be another way! We could use a fake PIDA, [an implanted identification device] a good one, to get a job. We could—”/“We have a job.”/“I hate it! It makes me feel ashamed, and I’m sick of being ashamed.”/“There’s nothing to be ashamed of. You haven’t hurt anyone.”/“I’ve hurt myself. This is my body, my”/“Temple, right?” Spanner shook her head. “It’s not a temple, it’s a sack of meat.” She slapped herself on the thigh. “A tool made of muscle and skin and bone, to be used the same way we use any other tool.”

“No.” Lore was horrified. “Your body isn’t just a tool like a…a screwdriver. It is you. What it does and feels makes you who you are. Don’t you see that?”
“You are who you fuck?” Spanner’s eyes were challenging. “Then who does that make you?”

“Someone I’m ashamed of.” [. . .]. To be used like a receptacle, a commodity, and to *know* it, to be helpless before it…every time she saw herself in the mirror. There would never be any way to escape that kind of shame [. . .]. “What happened? What happened to you, to make you feel you have to do this?” (291-292)

This is a moment of breakthrough for Lore, a breakthrough into the comprehension of the nature of oppression. As Delphy notes, oppression is one way of conceptualizing a particular situation, and this way of seeing must be internalized by the oppressed party in order for it to register as oppression. The experience of oppression and the point of view that conceptualizes oppression as such cannot be mutually exclusive categories, if oppression is to be experienced as such. Lore comes up against this critical impasse when she fails to “convince” Spanner that prostitution constitutes oppression. Since, in Spanner’s reality, prostitution is a viable means to an end, Lore can do nothing to convince Spanner that she is oppressed. As a means of survival, Spanner has chosen to convince herself that oppression is “reality;” an inevitable, and a non-negotiable, element of her lot in life. The overdeterminations of patriarchy and capitalism have, in Spanner’s case, produced a body and mind that efficiently regenerate into instantiations of those ideologies. Thus, Spanner sees her body as a “sack of meat,” a useful survival “tool.”

After this confrontation, Lore decides to move out of Spanner’s apartment and begin a new life for herself. She secures a fake I.D. and begins a blue-collar job as a worker in a water processing plant. From this position, Lore begins to experience the
estrangements of capitalist patriarchy as a peculiarly “automatizing” force, as opposed to
her earlier experience of these estrangements as “animalizing” forces. This
automatization is illustrated most powerfully through Lore’s relationship with a young
Venezuelan man, Paolo Cruz. From the moment that Lore is introduced to Paolo, she
recognizes in him manifestations of an intense alienation that she cannot yet put her
finger on: “[Paolo] was just a teenager, with jet black hair and brown eyes. Something
about the way he held himself, a strange mix of ramrod back and careless limbs, bothered
me” (77). Lore is assigned to train Paolo in his work duties, and she finds herself
increasingly driven to scrutinize his body language: “When he finished with the
readings, I held out my hand to help him climb out of the trough. He pretended not to see
it, and climbed out unaided. I could tell by the hunch of his shoulders that he was
embarrassed about deliberately avoiding my hand, and wondered why” (79). As she
continues to work with him, Lore recognizes a great gulf between the jerky, automated,
and distrustful attitudes of Paolo’s body, and the nature of his personality: “this time,
when he waded out to the edge, I made sure that I held out the clipper handle for him to
grab. He accepted without hesitation. His smile was warm and very young-looking,
completely at odds with the message sent by his stiff, almost disdainful body” (79).

As Lore continues to work with Paolo, she recognizes that his standoffish-ness
masks intellectual curiosity. Once she realizes that Paolo is eager to learn, Lore takes
him on as a friend and protégé. However, their burgeoning friendship is often marred by
Paolo’s internalized feelings of inferiority, feelings that are regularly re-affirmed by the
prejudicial attitude of their shift boss towards a poor, young, minority worker. In the
following scene, Lore tries to explain how the water treatment system works. Although
Paolo is interested in learning, he often has difficulty overcoming his feelings of inferiority:

He turned away and I wanted to reach out to him, put an arm around his hunched shoulders. I remembered just in time that he didn’t like to be touched.

“I’m sorry. It’s my fault for starting in the middle instead of at the beginning.”

“You just didn’t expect me to be stupid,” he said bitterly.

“You’re not stupid.” [. . .]. You can learn. I can teach you.”

He looked at me over his shoulder for a moment, then turned all the way around. “Can you?”

“Yes.”

He studied me. By his expression, he didn’t know whether to believe me or not. Hope could be dangerous. (166-167)

Lore and Paolo’s relationship is shown to be constantly threatened by each party’s internalized feelings of inadequacy, despite their growing feelings of mutual regard and trust. These threats to their relationship come to a head when Lore attempts to defend Paolo against his boss, who exploits Paolo’s position of marginality as a minority teenager by forcing him to perform work tasks that are blatantly unsafe. As a result of her interventions, Paolo’s boss attempts to fire him. Paolo yells at Lore and runs away. At this moment, Lore realizes why Paolo has been inspiring strange recollections about the van de Oest family business. Lore recalls, at the age of fifteen, watching the outcome of a class-action suit that the citizens of Caracas pressed against van de Oest Enterprises.
The lawsuit claimed that a van de Oest water treatment plant in Venezuela had malfunctioned, causing the dismemberment—and in some cases, death—of hundreds of people who drank the polluted water. The van de Oest family successfully defended itself against the lawsuit by claiming fault on the part of substandard government-contracted work. Nonetheless, as Lore recalls, the van de Oest family “generously” offered to pay for prostheses for the hundreds who were disfigured by the polluted water. Lore recognizes Paolo’s automaton-like movements as those of a prosthетized quadriplegic.

Lore follows Paolo to the water influent source at the plant, where her worst suspicions are confirmed:

And why, I wondered, were people who were about to kill themselves so compulsively neat?

Paolo’s [uniform] was beautifully folded, collar top-and-forward the way shirts are sold in their cellophane packages. I had never been able to fold clothes like that. His limbs were piled just as neatly next to the [uniform], all except one arm, which lay on its own to the side. I wondered idly how he had managed to take off that last arm, the right, I think. I supposed the designers had worked out a simple push-and-twist method.

Paolo was belly-down at the corner of the open trap, torso balanced over the chasm, lowering his throat toward the buzz razor jammed into the space between cover and floor. (186)
Lore talks her friend out of committing suicide, and then listens to his story. Paolo is indeed one of the victims of the Caracas incident, and he and his family have been trying to battle the court decision for many years, but to no avail. Finally, facing the loss of his job and his failure to attain justice, he tries to kill himself in such a way that will destroy, or at least seriously damage, the water treatment plant’s works and its reputation. Paolo is a victim of the automatizing machinations of advanced globalism: his dismemberment is the direct result of corporate and political greed. In addition, Paolo’s clumsily prosthetized body presents a stark contrast with Lore’s genetically engineered, glowing health. In much the same way as in the scene in which Spanner compares her unhealthy body with Lore’s healthy one, the disenfranchised Other functions here as a mirror in which Lore can see the radical estrangements upon which her former existence depended.

Paolo’s body can be read as instantiating the concept of capital as a productive “science-fictionalizing” force. However, it can also be read as a trope for the specific type of class estrangement produced by the intersections of capital and mechanizing technologies. Consider the following passage from Marx’s Grundrisse:

No special sagacity is required in order to understand that, beginning with free labour or wage-labour for example, which arose after the abolition of slavery, machines can only develop in opposition to living labour, as a hostile power and alien property, i.e. they must, as capital, oppose the worker. But it is equally easy to see that machines do not cease to be agents of social production, once they become, for example, the property of associated workers. But in the first case, their means of distribution (the fact that they do not belong to the workers) is itself a condition of the
means of production that is founded on wage-labour. In the second case, an altered means of distribution will derive from a new, altered basis of production emerging from the historical process. (152)

The machine in the service of capital acts as an agent of social production, inasmuch as it depends more upon objectified than living labor-power. However, under the capitalist mode of production, machines can only ever “develop in opposition to living labour;” in the dismembered Paolo, we have a tropological figure for the brutal ontology of the worker under mechanized capital.

Paolo’s representation in the text as an alienated automaton also underscores the sense in which the male wage laborer is a feminized alien native to capitalist production. In her description of the factors mitigating men’s relationship to socially normative conceptions of masculinity, Kaja Silverman notes that the threat of castration can function to throw this relation into crisis (Male Subjectivity at the Margins). Certainly the figure of the dis-membered, “mulcted” body of Paolo suggests just such a crisis. Silverman also names the threat “constituted through the representational and sexual practices of feminism and gay liberation” (52) as another factor mitigating men’s relationship to masculine norms. As far as “gay liberation” goes, Paolo is not privy to the fact that Lore is a lesbian. This is not an aspect of her life that she goes out of her way to hide from him; it just never comes up in the context of their work relationship. After Lore breaks things off with Spanner, her automatonized existence and the preservation of her fake identity do not allow her the free time to develop romantic relationships, at least not until much later in the novel. However, Lore does spur Paolo’s anxiety over the feminist re-ordering of gendered divisions of labor. In one scene, Lore offers to ask their
female shift supervisor to defend Paolo against their (white, male) boss’s unreasonable
demands. He replies, ‘’I don’t need a woman to fight my battles!’ His voice was clotted
and violent and I could not have been more surprised if he had hit me” (172). Paolo’s
comment reveals that he associates the indignity of his “feminized” position with his
subservience to women. This is an association that he later recognizes as misplaced,
when it becomes clear to him that he and his fellow workers and his shift bosses,
regardless of sex, are all being exploited by the company owners.23

One problem that Paolo and Spanner present us with is that, in Lore’s case, as I
hinted at the outset of this discussion, the estrangements of class can and sometimes do
function as ironically liberating phenomena. Are we to read Lore’s personal
development as a phenomenon dependent on the abjection of others? How do we
account for Lore’s ability to overcome the limitations that the estrangements of class
have imposed upon her? On “free individuality,” Marx notes that

Since the single individual cannot shed his personal limitations, but can
surmount external circumstances and master them, his freedom appears to
be greater in the second case. Closer investigation of these external
circumstances and conditions shows, however, how impossible it is for the
individuals forming part of a class, etc., to surmount them en masse

23 Paolo’s recognition that his anger towards women as usurpers of power in the labor market is misplaced
bears a meaningful relationship to current trends in the gendered division of the global marketplace. For,
although it may appear initially that the women are usurping men’s place in the labor market, the reality of
the situation is more complicated. Jacky Brine points out that “the service sector, usually dependent on
women’s part-time, low skilled, ‘flexible’ labour, has increased, particularly in Europe, the US, Canada,
New Zealand and Australia. This can be seen as a trend towards an apparent ‘uniformization and
convergence’ (Women of Europe 1992). This trend in which the gap between the economic activity of men
and women is, allegedly, narrowing, is often referred to as the ‘feminization’ of the labour market.
However, the Women of Europe (1992) report on women in the labour market argues that this process is far
less a result of women taking men’s jobs than of increased job creation in women’s traditional sectors of
work combined with the lower labour costs involved in employing women […] This apparent increase in
women’s employment and decrease in male employment has nevertheless barely touched the occupational
gendered segregation of the labour market or its more contentious hierarchical segregation” (39).
without abolishing them. The individual may by chance be rid of them; but not the masses that are ruled by them, since their mere existence is an expression of the subordination to which individuals must necessarily submit. So far from constituting the removal of a ‘state of dependence’, these external relationships represent its disintegration into a general form; or better; they are the elaboration of the general basis of personal states of dependence. (The Grundrisse 72-73)

In the context of this observation, we can see how Lore’s “free individuality” is represented by Griffith as constitutive of “an elaboration of the general basis of personal states of dependence.” This is because Lore’s freedom is predicated on her recognition of her interdependence with the “masses” who once supported her opulent existence. Throughout Slow River, (as the title suggests) the van de Oests’ relationship to water—their commodification of water fit for consumption, especially in a time of widespread shortage—is shown to be destructively dysfunctional. Lore begins her adult life with a theoretical comprehension of water’s importance in the functioning of society. This comprehension is deepened through her ground-floor level work at the bioremediation plant where she trains Paolo. Through the exposition of Paolo’s horrible experience with polluted water, as well as a dramatic scene at the end of the novel in which Lore leads a team of workers to head off a potentially deadly situation at the plant—which is, as in the Caracas case, caused by corporate greed and governmental complicity—commodification is shown to be ultimately hostile to the well-being of the feminized and female mass labor market. By the end of the novel, Lore has recognized how her former life of privilege was dependent upon the abjection of the once faceless “masses,” the very
people among whom she has found friends to love and respect. Thus, Lore’s disavowal of her alias and of her former life in the following scene is particularly significant: “‘My name,’ I said to the wind, to the river rolling to the sea, ‘is Frances Lorien van de Oest. I live here.’ I would spend the rest of my life by the river, being visible” (342). Lore’s vow to remain “visible” announces her intention to dispose of the alias that has functioned to hide her own highly visible public identity as an heir to the van de Oest empire. But it also announces her intention to disavow the obfuscating estrangements produced by class privilege, an obfuscation that would separate corporate economic interests and their impact on private lives.

Visibility is a major theme of Rebecca Ore’s Outlaw School, another feminist SF novel on the intersections of sex and class. In this near-future dystopia, institutionalized forms of class and sex discrimination are no longer obfuscated and denied by the media and governmental structures that implement them. Rather, these forms of discrimination have been transformed from implicit ideological structures to explicit and rigorously enforced laws. Thus the implicit connection that presently exists between class and educational opportunities is explicitly enforced through laws that dictate this relationship. The protagonist’s father is of a generation that was the last in which one might move upwards in class status based on I.Q. testing. His daughter, Jayne, is less fortunate: her superior performance at school—specifically, the fact that she outperforms children of higher class status—guarantees that she will be a recipient of “school drugs” that dull her ability to perform scholastically. The only two ways available for her to escape taking school drugs are to become pregnant, or to become a “Judicious Girl.” The “Judas Girls,” as they are colloquially appelled, are future-tense realizations of the nineteenth
century’s “angel in the house” ideology, complete with rigid bourgeois class stratification, as entry into their ranks requires middle-class social and economic standing. Judicious Girls relinquish their rights to privacy in return for the protection of their reputation, which is ensured by the installation of a surveillance eye through which everything they view is monitored on closed-circuit television screens by a middle-class male protectorate.

Like Griffith, Ore uses images of the alienated mechanized and animalized worker to illustrate the estrangements of capitalist patriarchy. Children who prove themselves to be too smart for their class rating are animalized by the school drugs, a practice that removes them to an acceptable distance from their cognitive ability, the very thing that separates them from animals. Girls elect to mechanize their own bodies in order to be accepted by their male and female peers. Prostitutes undergo operations to get their voices altered so that they can continue on as “virtual girls” past the years when their bodies begin to age. Criminals are tracked by implants that electrocute them if they go beyond a certain range. Marx’s observation that “machines can only develop in opposition to living labour, as a hostile power and alien property” (Grundrisse 152) in the context of capitalism rings as true for this text as for Griffith’s. Both authors envision a radically dystopic version of the future in which machines are used in ever more invasive ways to discipline the polity.

After a short time on “school drugs,” Jayne can no longer bear this option and she decides to get pregnant. She confesses her scheme to her parents before her pregnancy has been confirmed, and her mother convinces her to go to a meeting of the Judicious
Girls with her conformist sister Carolyn. At the meeting, Jayne is confronted by Sidna, Carolyn’s best friend and the leader of her local group of Judas Girls:

Sidna said, “If you got yourself pregnant, you did a terrible thing to your sister.”

“I didn’t know I had any other options for getting off school drugs,” Jayne said.

“Perhaps the baby will prove at first amniocentesis to be defective,” Sidna said. “Then your initiation will be only $10,000 instead of the $25,000 plus surgical costs for tightening you up and inserting a hymen.”

Jayne said, “I don’t have that kind of money.”

Sidna said, “We don’t care. You’re not really one of us.”

“I don’t want to lose an eye.”

“My parents didn’t force me to trade an eye for this sisterhood. I traded an eye for a better version of who I could be.”

Just as Jayne understood why women joined the Judicious Girls, she realized she couldn’t. *Acceptance, friends bound to you for life by dead eyes—wave it away, Jayne, they’ll destroy what’s unique about you.*

(30-31)

The Judicious Girls are roving panopticons, literal instantiations of what Judith Fetterley calls “immasculated” (*The Resisting Reader* xx) consciousness, a term she uses to describe the point of view shift that the female student of “Literature” undergoes in order to establish readerly identification with male-authored, male-centered texts. Judas Girls’
“readings” of the male-authored reality that this version of the future provides are (supposedly) scrutinized by their suitably marriageable male counterparts, who offer punitive protection from the girls’ wayward tendencies. Judas Girls, in other words, elect to be protected from themselves. In a society in which the ideological state apparatus has re-emerged as the primary means of social control, it is not surprising that so many young middle class women elect to pre-emptively surrender their autonomy before they are forced into making other, potentially more dangerous choices.

Jayne, however, cannot bring herself to make this choice. As a dangerously intelligent pupil and a school drug recipient, Jayne’s trajectory is already radically alien to her society’s expectations of her. In addition, Jayne has begun to learn of a world outside of the estrangements of middle class respectability: “The world beyond Jayne’s focus group and guarded town had strange fringes and margins, people who didn’t agree with the system and helped each other evade the laws. Jayne wished she knew how to find them, the real ones, not the decoys the police set up to lure in people who needed behavior-mod summer camp and school drugs” (33).

After a half-hearted attempt at escape to a nearby city, where she finds that a marginal existence and a minimum wage job await those without education or connections, she returns home to try and work things out with her family. Meanwhile, however, her family has arranged for Jayne to be admitted to a mental institution, which is still that last respectable recourse for the middle class’s wayward youth.

While Jayne bides her time in the mental institution, waiting out the birth and adoption of her “illegitimate” child, she meets Ocean, the woman who becomes her introduction into the “real” underworld that she always knew existed. Ocean works as an
in-house tutor at the mental institution, which serves as a convenient clearinghouse for young adults who don’t “fit in” at their high schools, either because they are genuinely insane or, as is more frequently the case, too smart. Ocean covertly culls likely candidates for “outlaw school,” an informal training and placement network for outlaw teachers. In order to pass tests that allow entry into a higher employment status rating, the lower classes require instruction of the type that has been strictly forbidden them. Outlaw teachers subvert the government’s attempts to dictate class stratification, thus rendering them dangerous criminals in the eyes of the law. Jayne begins a four-year college program on a scholarship arranged by Ocean’s underground network. Her first outlaw teaching job begins the summer after her freshman year, at a whorehouse in Charleston, South Carolina.

Although most of the women at the House appreciate Jayne’s help, she also becomes an object of envy and disgust for some of the women, who are torn between jealousy of the intellectual gifts that have allowed her to reinvent herself at the margins of society, and uncomprehending anger at her decision to reject the role of Judas Girl. The estrangements of class have prevented these women from attaining either a college degree or middle-class stability. And although estranging technologies of gender are not specific to either the middle or lower classes (the difference is merely between Judas girl and virtual “girl,” a sort of e-prostitution sideline to the old-fashioned option), class difference endures as a major source of strife between Jayne and the workers at the House. In the following scene, Jayne contemplates the vast gulf that class difference creates between herself and her present clientele:
Suddenly, Jayne felt total moral and intellectual vertigo. She didn’t know anything about this whoring business, about these people. She was just there to teach them some skills to make their lives go more smoothly. Just because she’d had a baby out of wedlock didn’t mean she understood these women at all. “I feel out of my depth suddenly. You’re really a madam. Suzanne beats men for a living.”

“Puts leashes on their dicks,” Brandy said. “You’re not a virgin, either. Are you attracted to Suzanne?” Brandy asked. She sat upright in her chair, her eyes on Jayne.

“I’m afraid of that,” Jayne said. “I haven’t even masturbated since I came here.”

“I’d advise a less complicated first girl.”

“I’m going to leave at the end of the summer, and you’ll still be here. This is just an adventure for me. It’s your whole life. And it’s just like everybody else’s, and it’s not … I didn’t mean to be critical.” The isolation intensified even when Jayne said that. Or because of it. (157)

What Jayne is facing here is a symptom of what Jane Thompson, in her study on *Women, Class, and Education*, characterizes as an under-explored contradiction of Marxist feminist analysis: the radical feminist teacher’s presumption that exposition of sex-class contradictions will miraculously result in raised student consciousness. As Jayne’s “moral and intellectual vertigo” illustrate, her noble motives for educating “these people” do not, in the language of psychoanalysis, inspire either a transference of knowledge or a counter-transference of comprehension of the Other. Thompson does not reject the
insights of Marxist feminist analysis, but she does advocate a post-structuralist-inspired recognition of the complications that arise from the contradictory nature of teaching and learning structures of oppression. Thompson implements her own contribution towards recognizing and working through this contradiction, an autobiographical critical approach that situates epistemology in the context of subjective experience:

It seems stunning to me in retrospect, being well practiced in both the enlightenment and Marxist intellectual traditions myself, that I could, at the same time, consistently repress major contradictions in my own life and in my analysis of life, which quite escaped my notice or my consciousness for years [. . .]. My self-defined responsibility as a cultural worker, helping to democratize education, to identify “really useful knowledge” and to develop the capacity for critical thinking among those most socially and politically oppressed, was kept alive on the presumption that such obvious contradictions must fuel consciousness for change, in which radical education can play its part in assisting liberation. (93)

Thompson goes on to point out the ways in which her own life, despite her knowledge of structures of oppression, has been fraught with contradictions that betray her inability to consistently act within the logic of that knowledge. She concludes that a Marxist feminist political stance needs to take into account the fact that consciousness-raising, political action, and education cannot be the last word on combating structures of oppression for women and feminized subjects under global capital (that is to say, a growing majority of all of us at this point). Thompson advocates the recognition of the overdeterminations produced by individual circumstance and by the conflict between
knowledge and desire: in this way, Thompson brings the insights of poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theory to bear on the formation of a radical feminist praxis:

Meanings, articulated with the assistance of critical thinking and reason, or common sense, also find expression in the unconscious, in forms that can be contradictory and inconsistent. Understanding and identity are both complicated and dynamic, and operate as a continuous process of becoming. Not ‘better’ in a linear sense, but shifting, and subject to reconstitution and renegotiation, in a relational and social sense. Class, gender, and ethnic identities can also be described as ‘shifting,’ in ways that reductionist or heavily deterministic definitions about socio-economic status, ‘race’ and sexual difference do not adequately address. (97)

Ore addresses the contradictory, shifting nature of subjectivity in relation to political identity throughout Outlaw School. Ocean, Jayne’s mentor, has compromised her own mental health in order to continue her recruiting processes at the institution—she is an alcoholic and a depressive, conditions that her political actions serve to exacerbate. The people who are attracted to the outlaw’s marginal existence are not only there because they wish to do good: they’re also there because they can’t fit in where they came from, often because of serious emotional and psychological deficits. In the following conversation with her friend Heightfield, Jayne discovers how difficult it is to sort out political motivation from the contradictions of subjective desire. Heightfield asks Jayne, “‘Why are you a political?’ ‘I’m more a teacher than a political.’ ‘Well, why do it for politcals? Couldn’t you test out?’ ‘If we tested out, the law would expect us to get real teaching jobs and teach what’s prescribed.’ ‘People don’t need politcals to beat the
system. I beat the system without any politics at all” (211). Jayne’s uneasy relationship
to what she tries to bracket off as “politics” is a symptom of the problem that Thompson
describes above. Jayne eschews the label “political” because she doesn’t want to be
pigeonholed into a predetermined set of assumptions and beliefs.

As Jayne matures and takes on more clients, she comes to understand that her
students have lives and motivations of their own, and that attempting to either deny their
subjectivity or to knowingly “relate” to them are both highly problematic pedagogical
strategies. She becomes more cognizant of the impact that the estrangements of class and
subsequent differences in education level have on her students’ lives, and on her own.

Ore creates a portrait of a society in which outsiders of all kinds, from ex-rich kids to
squatters to poor outlaw students, have been forced into truncated and secretive
existences. This future society’s rigid class stratifications begin to create an ironic sense
of solidarity among outlaws of various stripes who would never have interacted if not for
the exigencies of their common struggle for survival. A new class stratification begins to
develop, one that separates the outlaws from the law-abiding. However, as the following
scene reveals, education level and social background remain fraught issues for teachers
and students alike:

Her students couldn’t test out without a mastery of Standard [English]
[. . .]. The street called Standard English “proper.”

“You here to learn Proper?” Jayne asked the class. They all
shrugged. No getting away from it.

“I don’t call it Proper,” Jayne said. “It’s just another way of
speaking, no more or less. Just that people with some power speak it.
They make the language proper. Not the other way around. You never want to be using Proper with your people, but if you speak with Proper-speaking people, it’s like matching manners to talk their talk at them.”

The faces looked, *oh, shit, another social worker who thinks we’re just fine as we are but don’t know it.* One, then three grins appeared. They’d heard her trying to talk like them.

Jayne said, “What you really want to do is pass, of course.”

The class laughed a little, and Jayne started in on possessives.

(205)

Jayne is on solid pedagogical ground as long as she is only delivering her lecture on the politics of “Proper.” However, the moment that she attempts to show solidarity with the oppressed class by trying to co-opt their language, she loses her audience. Jayne’s “want to be using” jars on the ears of her students, who, in recognizing this failed attempt at “passing,” are displaying a more comprehensive understanding of the politics of language than their teacher. Jayne then recognizes her mistake and recovers by imputing their consciousness again, only this time on safer ground: “What you really want to do is pass, of course.” And of course this is correct, in more senses than one.

Jayne’s interventions into the lives of her society’s poor and disenfranchised are not, in and of themselves, particularly radical. Although she does learn some important lessons about pedagogical strategy, her curriculum serves the limited scope of her student’s needs: thus, she teaches computer literacy and “Proper.” Jayne’s students are aspirants to the ranks of the middle classes, that same social rank that Jayne has spent a lifetime risking life and limb to escape and subvert. However, in a fictional future where
the battle lines of class are so starkly drawn, the act of teaching to illegals is in itself a radical act.

By the end of the novel, the political tides have turned, and Jayne is portrayed by the media as a folk heroine. She knows better than to be flattered by this portrayal, however—she understands that the political tides could change again at any minute. Jane Thompson’s observation that political praxis always takes place in the complicating context of subjective particularity is once again apropos for this novel, in which Ore describes the complex interimplications of “free individuality” and mass oppression.

Works Cited


VITA

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