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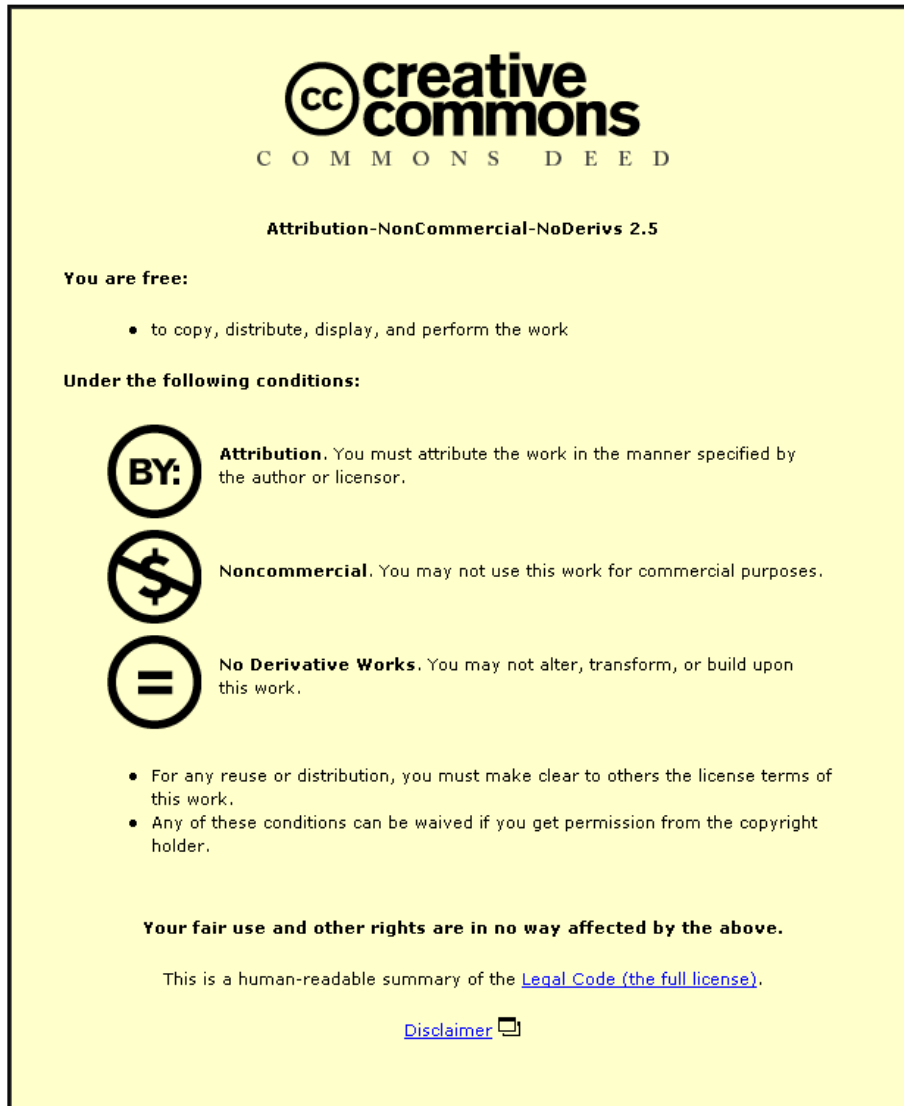
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
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Marge Piercy's non-Utopia in *Woman on the Edge of Time*

Deirdre O'Byrne

'Rocket ships, skyscrapers into the stratosphere, an underground mole world miles deep, glass domes over everything? She was reluctant to see this world' (68). That's what Harlem inhabitant Connie Ramos thought when she travelled telepathically to Mattapoisett 2137, and it echoed my own thoughts before first reading Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*. I hadn't been a fan of *Star Trek*, had never seen *Star Wars*, and assumed I'd be equally unmoved by a novel involving time-travel. I cannot defend this prejudice: I'd happily amble backwards into the worlds of Dickens and Austen, and sideways with any number of novelists, but had travel sickness at the thought of a readerly propulsion into the twenty-second century. 'What did I expect from the future Pink skies? Robots on the march? Transistorized people?' (73). I wasn't sure, but fairly certain I wouldn't like it.

But I like a challenge, so I settled down to read it and was immediately unsettled. The opening scene is graphically violent, as Connie, a second-generation Mexican woman existing on welfare in a 1970s tenement, is attacked by Geraldo, her niece Dolly's pimp. Connie hits him in turn as he tries to force an abortion on Dolly, and ends up in a mental hospital, as the authorities take the word of the well-dressed pimp over that of a shabby woman with a past history of mental illness. Signed in by her brother Luis, Connie is thrown into seclusion, heavily drugged, in 'a hall with no door and no windows' (60) with 'four filthy walls' (65). So, yes, it turns out that this is a novel about space, but not in the way I'd expected; when we get a chance to temporarily escape

from Connie's present grim reality into the future with Luciente, it's a relief to find ourselves in a village where everyone has their own living space, and the salt-tanged air is filled with laughter and birdsong. Release from incarceration in Rockover in Connie's world would take her back to a life of loneliness and poverty in a tenement in El Barrio, Spanish Harlem, to a life which has been a 'dark journey' (30) so far. Luciente's Mattapoisett represents the kind of freedom she has never experienced and can barely imagine, where women have 'an air of brisk unselfconscious authority Connie associated with men' (67). Luciente, whose name means 'shining, brilliant, full of light' (36), is Connie's guide to the future world, but her body language at first leads Connie to perceive her as male. This is one of the many instances in which the novel shows how traditional femininity in the present hampers women, whereas in the future they develop in a more androgynous environment.

This contrast is key to Piercy's technique throughout the novel: the writer confronts us with a present which is obviously flawed, with restrictions which damage the characters we meet. Whether inside or outside an institution, people are shown to be trapped in unhappy lives. Connie, Dolly and Luis's third wife Adele resort to drugs at times of crisis. Many of the men in the present are physically violent, like Connie's father and her husband Eddie, or verbally cruel, like Luis. Inside the mental hospital, we encounter characters who appear to be social misfits, but it's the rigid categories into which people are expected to fit that are the problem, not the patients' refusal or inability to conform. As Luciente says to Connie, 'in truth you don't seem mad to me' (65). Rebellious Alice, Sybil the self-defined witch, and homosexual Skip are regarded as

'monsters' (90) but, especially in contrast to the hospital staff, appear comparatively sane.

Piercy makes it clear that the real time present of the novel is the same as her time of writing by referring to 1976 in chapter fifteen (289). This 1970s society which condemns people for following their natural inclinations is juxtaposed with a future in which some of the present's problems have been solved. Many of the solutions involve a change of attitude. For instance, the stigma around mental illness no longer exists: in Mattapoissett, Luciente explains, they do not use 'sick' and 'mad' interchangeably (65). Piercy does not suggest that madness can be eradicated from human experience, and we hear of episodes in which people retreat to heal themselves or be healed, but, as in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1964), there is a creative side to breakdown. Luciente declares herself too 'flatfooted and earthen' to go mad, whereas healer Diana and artist Jackrabbit 'go down' into themselves from time to time and emerge with renewed energies (65). In the cases we observe in Rockover, by contrast, time spent in a mental institution is neither creative nor restorative: 'The mental hospital had always seemed like a bad joke; nothing got healed in here' (194). Skip's parents, unwilling to accept his homosexuality, send him for treatment at the age of thirteen 'to be fixed' (144); he undergoes various programmes including shock therapy, leading him to repeatedly attempt suicide until he succeeds. In the future, we meet Jackrabbit, Skip's futuristic doppelganger, who enjoys sexual freedom and is admired and loved rather than rejected. Similarly, Sybil the witch has a 2137 counterpart in Diana the healer, who has high social status and a band of admirers. Piercy tries to show what a society might look like when people's characteristics and gifts are cherished rather than deplored or

ignored. Luciente compliments Connie on her telepathic abilities: 'You're an extraordinary top catcher. In our culture you would be much admired, which I take it isn't true in this one?' (42). Their telepathic abilities complement each other as Luciente acts as 'sender' to Connie's 'catcher'.

On first sight, Connie perceives Mattapoissett society as being back in 'the dark ages' (73), as the village which reminds her of her peasant uncle Tío Manuel's, with its vegetable plots and goats. In this aspect, Piercy's novel is an early example of eco-feminism, as the exploitation of women, as in the prostitution of Dolly, is paralleled by mistreatment of the earth. The book seems prescient too, in its championing of sustainable farming, composting, natural fertiliser and recycling. Piercy has drawn on many so-called primitive societies in her construction of the future, for example, teenagers go through an initiation ceremony, spending a week alone in the wilderness as transition into adulthood. She also draws on influential theories of the twentieth century. As Virginia Woolf recommends in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), each adult has their own separate living area. Luciente is shocked at the idea of living 'piled together' and explains that 'you have space of your own. How could one live otherwise? How meditate, think, compose songs, sleep, study?' (72). This is clearly the opinion of a writer. Piercy's Jewish background surfaces in the many similarities between the ideals of Mattapoissett and original kibbutzim, which aimed for collective, collaborative societies with sexual equality, communal child-rearing and socialist values. Kibbutzim in the early days were agrarian, and were kept deliberately small, echoing Luciente's declaration that 'we don't have *big* cities – they didn't work' (68; italics Piercy's).

However, technology is an important part of Piercy's fictional future. Repetitive jobs are automated, and Luciente works on genetic modification of plants. Homes have solar panels and transport is in 'floaters', a type of hovercraft. Piercy has also worked on the potential sexism inherent in language and in family structures, major concerns of the women's movement in the 1970s. The difficulties that Connie experiences in distinguishing some people's gender is exacerbated by the elision of gendered pronouns, to be replaced by the androgynous 'per'. Sexual couplings are free from prejudice and legal or religious bindings, whether one is drawn to one's own sex or another. Each child has three parents, of either sex, who co-mother it. As Piercy herself comments, three parents allows for eight-hour shifts, which gives everyone a reasonable chance of getting some rest.¹ Most radical of all is the future concept of birth. The reproductive system has moved out of the body and into the brooder: a 'space that looked more like a big aquarium than a lab' (101), where embryos grow into babies. Connie is disgusted by this 'baby factory', but Luciente explains that 'It was part of women's long revolution Finally there was one thing which we had to give up too the power to give birth. Cause as long as we were biologically enchained, we'd never be equal' (105). This reasoning is similar to that put forward by Shulamith Firestone in *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), in which she argues that women's childbearing abilities are responsible for biological determinism. Connie is initially resistant to what she regards as 'canned' babies, but comes to the realisation that her daughter, in a society like Mattapoisett, would have had a chance to 'grow up much better and stronger and smarter than I' (141). In 2012, we can see that Piercy's world now seems more achievable. The first test-tube baby was born in 1978, two years after *Woman on*

the Edge of Time was published. Aarathi Prasad's book, *Like A Virgin: How Science is Redesigning the Rules of Sex*, predicts that we'll see artificial wombs within forty years, if we overcome barriers of regulation and ethics alongside the technology.

Piercy herself does not see her created future as Utopian. In a 1977 interview, she says: 'There's almost nothing there except the brooder not accessible now. So it's hardly a utopia; it is very intentionally not a utopia because it's not strikingly new. The ideas are the ideas basically of the women's movement'.² Time-travel works in both directions in this book, as Piercy uses her imaginary future society to interrogate the present and the past. In flashbacks throughout the novel, we learn more about Connie, a second-generation Mexican who's determined to escape the fate of her mother. Aged fifteen, she declares: 'I won't grow up like you Mamá! To suffer and serve. Never to live my own life! I won't!'. Mariana's response, 'You'll do what women do' (46), suggests a fatalism about her gendered destiny. However, what the novel shows is that Connie's inability to move herself out of poverty is not just due to the fact that she's female. Her brother Luis is wealthy, but he has become so at a cost, shedding wives and humanity as he does so, changing from Connie's beloved sibling to a bully she barely recognises. Connie's gender is shown to be only one factor in her failing to achieve her ambitions, as she falls pregnant in college and has to abandon her studies. There are other issues that are class- and race-related. When Connie's beloved partner Claud dies in prison because he volunteers for a drugs experiment, she collapses into a haze of drunken grief in which she loses her temper and hits her daughter Angelina, who is taken into care and subsequently adopted. What Piercy makes clear is that Connie's anger is caused as much by poverty as by grief: Angelina had ruined her only pair of shoes,

which her mother could not afford to replace. Her rage against her daughter is also shown to be a product of self-loathing: 'to love you must love yourself . . . especially to love a daughter you see as yourself reborn', and Connie felt it was a 'crime to be born poor as it was a crime to be born brown' (62). The inference is that if Connie had been white and well-off, the authorities would not have been so quick to take her child from her, but she was powerless.

Most people hit kids. But if you were on welfare and on probation and the whole social-pigeonholing establishment had the right to trek regularly through your kitchen looking in the closets and under the bed, counting the bedbugs and your shoes, you had better not hit your kid once. (26)

Connie is hospitalized for eight months with a breakdown after Claud's death, and agrees to the adoption without fully understanding what she was doing. When she hits Geraldo, he and the authorities draw on Connie's previous record, which presents her 'history of child abuse' (26) and mental illness, so she is incarcerated again.

In between these flashbacks into Connie's miserable past and present, we travel with her to Mattapoisett, for lessons in what an alternate life could be like. Each visit brings a new revelation: she observes how relationships work, enjoys a celebration, and witnesses a death. Luciente becomes the avatar of Piercy, showing us how society could function if we chose, and Connie becomes our mouthpiece, voicing questions and objections. In effect, Piercy's novel is her way of 'sending' a message to us, hoping we like Connie will choose to be 'catchers' and realise that we need to modify our behaviours to create the society we want. To drive the point home, Connie accidentally arrives in chapter 15 in a dystopian world. She meets Gildina, a silicone-enhanced 'cartoon of femininity' (288), who occupies a windowless apartment in a New York of the

future, in which poor people function as 'walking organ banks' for 'richies' (291). She is on short-term sexual contract to a man called Cash, paralleling Dolly's involvement with a series of pimps. She eats processed food, takes drugs, and relies on technology for entertainment, a life which she depicts as privileged in comparison to others, but which mirrors many of the circumstances of life in Rockover, the mental hospital.

Connie thinks 'This could not exist simultaneously with Mattapoissett. Could not' (293). As Luciente tries to explain to her 'We are only one possible future . . . Alternate universes exist. Probabilities clash and possibilities wink out forever' (177). This is the basic message of the novel, that we need to actively make positive choices. Piercy, a long-time activist, strives to politicise her readers, as Connie's new friends encourage her to recognise her potential for resistance: 'There's always something you can deny your oppressor, if only your allegiance. Your belief. Your co-oping' (328). Luciente refers to Connie's life in 1976 as 'the Age of Greed and Waste' (55), and 'fat, wasteful, thing-filled times' (69) contrasting it with their careful husbanding of resources in Mattapoissett, and heralding the urge for conservation that is now common ecological discourse.

There are several other features of Piercy's Mattapoissett which have become part of our twenty-first-century lives. The 'kenner', a computerised 'memory annex' used to contact people and to access information, which Luciente wears on her wrist, is similar to a smartphone. Luciente confesses that she feels 'naked without my kenner. It's part of my body. I only take it off to couple or to sleep' . . . For some it's only convenience. For others part of their psyche' (327), which reflects many of our contemporaries' attitude to their i-phone. For a book that emerged before we became

dependent on mobile communication gadgetry, this is an extraordinary feat of foresight on Piercy's part. There's one amusing example of a neologism in the book, when Jackrabbit is discussing his intention to go on active defence, a sort of voluntary national service. He explains to Connie that he is going out of a sense of social duty, and tells her 'I don't twitter to go' (268), meaning that he's not all that keen. Nowadays, a contemporary Jackrabbit would undoubtedly express his reluctance online in 140 characters.

Piercy's insistence that her Mattapoisett is not a Utopia because it is possible echoes Margaret Atwood's assertions about her own novels *A Handmaid's Tale* (1986) and *Oryx and Crake* (2003), that they are not science fiction but rather speculative fiction, because they depict events that have, or could, actually come about. It is predictable that Atwood and Piercy have produced insightful reviews of each other's work. Writing about the Mattapoisett sequences in *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Atwood commented: 'Some reviewers treated this part of the book as a regrettable daydream or even a hallucination caused by Connie's madness. Such an interpretation undercuts the entire book'.³ It's an interpretation which is undermined by the determined realism of the opening chapter, in which Dolly finds that the chair Luciente has vacated is still warm. Just after an initial meeting, Connie detects on her own arm traces of Luciente's characteristic smell, which comes from the chemical she works with. In Connie, whose viewpoint we share throughout the book, Piercy presents a consistent and understandable consciousness. Luciente, a character represented as equally consistent, repeatedly tells Connie that she is not hallucinating.

What appears in the narrative as unrealistic is the future Connie fleetingly imagines when she hears that her niece is pregnant: 'Like figures of paper, like a manger scene of pasteboard figures, a fantasy . . . she and Dolly and Dolly's children would live together. She would have a family again, finally' (14). This book is Piercy's call to arms, a warning and a manifesto. Luciente tells Connie, 'I can't interfere in the past . . . but I can give you advice' (223). She calls Connie 'my rose', and given that she lives in Spanish Harlem, I am reminded of the song:

There is a rose in Spanish Harlem. . .
It's growing in the street
right up through the concrete
But sweet and soft and dreamin'.⁴

The novel puts the onus on us as readers to enable women like Connie to grow 'up through the concrete', to contemplate a different way of being, a society with shorter work-hours, a chance to choose to work at interesting tasks, and life-long learning. I'd go for that.

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2. *ibid.*, p.100
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