

## SEXUALITY AND REPRODUCTION IN DYSTOPIAN FICTION

SEXUALITY AND REPRODUCTION

IN

DYSTOPIAN FICTION

By

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the relationship between women and fictional dystopian societies. I study the effects of technology upon individual women who are forced to participate in the eugenic practices of repressive states by becoming “breeders.” I also trace the role of lesbians, and how their presence is pathologized and “ghosted.” My primary texts are Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Kate Wilhelm’s *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*, Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and Sheri S. Tepper’s *The Gate to Women’s Country*.

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## INTRODUCTION

A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not even worth glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias. (Oscar Wilde 34)

The study of utopian literature has a long and honourable history. The word, coined by Sir Thomas More in 1516 from the Latin *eutopos* meaning “good place,” and *outopos* meaning “no place,” has since come to be applied as an umbrella term for a genre of alternate visions of the human condition. As such, it incorporates utopian, eutopian and dystopian (or “bad place”) literature.

It is difficult to pin down what exactly a utopia is, making it equally hard to define a dystopia. Generally speaking, utopias are defined by their content, form and function (Levitas 4). However, every major utopian theorist appears to find different ways of addressing these categories in order to include or exclude particular works. While eutopias<sup>1</sup> have, in popular parlance, come to mean impossible or naive dreams, and dystopias the corresponding nightmares, Ruth Levitas suggests that a broader definition is important--even if that means that no one definition can be agreed upon: “One of the reasons why people work with different definitions of utopia is because they are asking different questions” (Levitas 179). She settles the question of definition finally with the

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<sup>1</sup>Though the term eutopia has become less popular, it is used here to clarify the difference between the utopian genre and the individual positive manifestation of eutopia.

broad statement that (e)utopias offer a vision of “a better way of being” (198), leaving dystopias, presumably, as a worse way.

Naturally, then, the line that theorists draw between eutopias and dystopias is a fuzzy one: the border between them depends on how one is choosing to address particular questions. Most classic eutopias may, if one chooses to address the status of women, be re-classified as dystopian, as many subjugate the rights of women in favour of men. Likewise, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, if one examines certain issues, may be seen as eutopian rather than dystopian (Levitas 22), despite the fact that it is viewed as a classic of the latter variety. Thus, the two terms are not necessarily oppositional, but form a continuum upon which works slide toward either pole depending upon the criteria being used to evaluate them at any given time. As a result, works like Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*, generally categorized as eutopian, may be examined as a dystopian work by simply changing the way one examines it (in this case, I have chosen to narrow my focus to a particular chapter where Piercy offers a dystopian counterpoint to her own feminist eutopia).

Though utopian studies find ample material in previous centuries, the turn of this century saw the introduction of a greater number of feminist utopias than any previous one (women were writing in the field earlier, though not always writing identifiably feminist texts). These feminist utopias offer visions of society that emphasize the role of women, exemplified by Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* and the lesser-known *Sultana's Dream*



by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain<sup>2</sup>. For the first time, women were the focus of alternative utopian societies, rather than existing on the margins of more male-centred visions. This trend has continued to the present: utopian literature of all varieties has been created that addresses the issues that concern women: personal freedom and reproductive choice among them. As more women (writers and characters) enter the field, it diversifies to include debates on racism, heterosexism and ageism.

Feminist writings have played an important role in utopian studies in the twentieth century, focusing attention on the roles and opportunities of women in eutopian and dystopian contexts. As Nan Bowman Albinski writes,

American writers produce . . . clear-cut images of their dystopian targets: militarism, patriarchal hierarchy, and the repression and exclusion of women in an aggressive, materialistic society. Established religion, which had been such a sustaining force for women in earlier periods, now becomes their enemy, as a religious fundamentalism adds justification to the military-industrial complex. Their dystopias usually result from nuclear accident or war. (7)

She goes on to note that “All the unwanted elements of our society -- aggression, pollution, sexism, ageism, alienation -- are the components of dystopia” (9). While these dystopian writings may rely on a variety of issues, one which underlies all seems to be a sense of warning--against gullibility, naivety, or even against eutopia itself, as many dystopias grow out of the attempt to craft a better place.

The publication of Joanna Russ’s ground-breaking feminist utopian novel *The*

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<sup>2</sup>Hossain published her work in English in India in 1905, envisioning among other things a male purdah that allowed women to participate more freely in all levels of society.

*Female Man* in 1975<sup>3</sup> solidified the genre's move to become even more inclusive of women's issues. That novel features four women from different futures: one developed from our own recent past, one from an United States that remained in the depression and where the Second World War did not occur, one from a time of open gender warfare, and the last from a future without any men. These women interact, shifting from time to time, illustrating the relative problems faced by each. Though the novel was dismissed by many male critics as a shrill polemical feminist text, it stands alongside Gilman's *Herland* as a benchmark in feminist utopian writing. While Russ was not the first to utilize an eutopian-dystopian comparative technique within a single text (Levitas notes that "recent novels frequently contain alternative dystopian futures as well as eutopian ones, as warnings", 172), she was the first to gain real recognition for her unabashed interest in the role of women within such comparisons.

Following the publication of that text, utopian studies have entered a period in which the writings of women offer a fresh and exciting way of looking at the genre. Among these texts are four which I feel are in some way representative of women's dystopian writings. Three focus primarily upon one woman's story, tracing her interaction with a repressive regime which limits her opportunities and attempts to assert control over her body and her offspring. The fourth also features a woman, though her story is framed by that of two different men. Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, published in

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<sup>3</sup>It was written in 1968 and had been read in unpublished form by a number of other influential writers.

1976, the year after *The Female Man*, has come to be recognized as an utopian classic. Featuring a time-travelling Hispanic woman named Connie who has been incarcerated in a mental institution, *Woman on the Edge of Time* explores two potential futures. One is a woman-friendly, egalitarian society which emphasizes personal freedom and opportunity. The other features a polluted world where neither men nor women appear in wholly-recognizable form, and where pollution has been allowed to increase unchecked. Connie, the narrator, moves between these times and her own, learning from each, seeing the warning signs which could irrevocably lead to the dystopian, rather than eutopian future. The status of the woman she meets in that dystopian future will be discussed in the first chapter.

The same year, Kate Wilhelm published *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*. That text demonstrates an important variety of utopian literature: the post-apocalyptic theme. As a result of increasing environmental degradation, humans and other mammals are rendered sterile. To cope, they perfect a cloning technique. As the novel progresses, Wilhelm explores this new species of humanity which should be able to live in harmony, but which proves unable to adapt to continued environmental change. Not surprisingly, she finds that its overtly communist underpinnings--an individual either finds strength in the collective, or surrenders his or her wishes to it--prove ultimately damaging to the very women on whom the collective depends.

Writing about utopian works of the 1970s such as Wilhelm's and Piercy's, theorist Tom Moylan uses the phrase "critical utopia" to describe the utopias produced during this

era. He describes critical utopias not as a form of anti-utopia, but rather as “expressions of oppositional thought, unveiling, debunking, of both the genre itself and the historical situation. As well as ‘critical’ in the nuclear sense of the *critical mass* required to make the necessary explosive reaction” (10). The distinction between critical and anti-utopian writing further underscores my point regarding the utopian continuum: utopian writings need not focus exclusively upon either eutopian or dystopian stances, but may deconstruct either scenario by sliding between the two poles, as both Wilhelm and Piercy do.

In the mid-1980s, Margaret Atwood explored a situation in which women were also restricted in order to satisfy the needs of the state in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985).

That state, Gilead, though borrowing a few Marxist maxims, is not a communist state; rather, it exploits the least powerful members of its society to achieve its goals.

Emphasizing the targets to which Albinski refers, the novel is important in its treatment of both reproductive choice and the role of lesbians in dystopia.

Finally, the most recent work considered here is Sheri S. Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country* (1988). It examines America in the aftermath of nuclear war (in this case, the devastation is some centuries past). Like Wilhelm, Tepper explores the creation of a new type of human condition, but unlike Atwood, she takes gender segregation to a further extreme by erecting a wall between most men and women. In this, the novel is an example of a sub-genre of utopian literature which posits such a divided future. Such segregations harken back to early twentieth-century works like *Herland*, but have recently been invested with a grimmer, more dystopian impulse: women can only survive if men

are either absent or fundamentally changed.

The inclusion of Wilhelm and Tepper, two authors known more for being writers of science fiction than utopias, recognizes a shift in the way contemporary utopian studies incorporates newer genres. While science fiction has not entirely entered the halls of academe, some talented writers have proven themselves worthy of study under utopian criteria. Certainly, these writers bring a more diverse background to the utopian field and approach the creation of a utopian society from a different perspective which offers a fresh way of viewing the genre; while the two fields are neither synonymous nor overlapping, science fiction provides a new insight into the way utopian principles have entered the popular consciousness.

Each of the four works to be discussed in this thesis--*Woman on the Edge of Time*, *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *The Gate to Women's Country*--exemplifies a particular subset of dystopian literature. *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Gate to Women's Country* do not appear at first glance to even be dystopian: the former is rarely examined in that light, while the latter seems to fit nicely into a staunchly feminist eutopian mode. Yet each represents in some way the negativity which has come to be associated with dystopian literature. Certainly from the position of women's issues that each explores, it is possible to examine them as dystopian texts.

Two of the numerous women's issues (so-called, with qualifying quotation marks at the ready) that these texts explore are the questions of sexuality and reproductive control. By sexuality, I mean the freedom to be sexually active (or not) with the

partner(s) of one's choice--male and/or female. Reproductive control clearly indicates the ability of each individual to choose when (or if) to conceive a child. In each of these works, sexuality and reproductive control are removed from the hands of individual women and legislated to some degree by the state. Growing from these two issues is the larger one of eugenic control; exercised by the state, it is the process whereby the biological direction of a population is manipulated to achieve a particular, specific end. As will be seen, the three issues become intertwined in these novels: sexuality is controlled, and biological determinism is implemented and enforced, producing a population to fit a preconceived plan. Although these issues represent only a few of the potential avenues of investigation within these texts, I feel that it is in these areas that some of the most visceral warnings about potential futures are conveyed. Unlike contemporary perceptions of sex and sexuality, which are for the most part personal and private, within this dystopian context who and what one is sexually becomes the single defining feature of one's existence. More importantly, who one is can be and is regulated by a governing body through physical force, removing personal choice and freedom, the acknowledged touchstones of American society (each of these novels is set in the United States), and determining how one will be sexual, with whom, and for what purpose. As will be seen throughout this thesis, once the state has wrested away the control that women have over these crucial issues, not only is personal choice removed, but the opportunities to change the species eugenically are a mere heartbeat away.

Although I have chosen to limit my discussion to four novels spanning only two

decades, there are numerous other works that also support my investigation. Writings by Suzette Haden Elgin and Suzy McKee Charnas, for instance, show futures for women that feature either rigid separation between the sexes, or bleak, biologically-determined destinies for women as breeders. John Brunner's novel *Stand on Zanzibar*, though not feminist in its approach, questions the drive toward eugenically creating a super-race. Ursula K. LeGuin predicts a bleak future for women in a number of her writings, as does Joanna Russ, while James Tiptree, Jr. (the pseudonym of Dr. Alice Sheldon) writes of destroying most men in order to protect the rights of all women in her story "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?". These are issues that span a number of texts; my decision to focus on such a small sample allows me to examine each in greater detail, as well as to illustrate the inter-connectedness of my three themes within the field.

This study, while necessarily limited in scope, represents a marked addition to the field. Although Margaret Atwood and Marge Piercy are unarguably the most well-studied writers I deal with, previous critics have neglected certain aspects that I feel are crucial. In Atwood's case, that neglect is primarily focused around her inclusion of the lesbian character Moira (a character, I will demonstrate, who is not fully realized, and whose role in the dystopia is essentially neglected), while in Piercy's, the attention that needs to be paid to her single dystopian chapter has been overshadowed by more pressing eutopian concerns. Kate Wilhelm and Sheri S. Tepper, recognized more as science fiction writers, have been virtually ignored in utopian criticism, despite the fact that each raises the same types of concerns as more recognized writers in this field. Wilhelm's use of cloning to

shape the future of humanity needs closer scrutiny, while Tepper's exclusion of homosexuality, as well as her secret state control of reproduction, are equally fertile areas of study.

As noted above, the themes of eugenics, reproductive control and sexual control as represented by absent lesbians are closely connected in these texts, and I will address each in a separate chapter. Chapter One, focusing on eugenics, will explore three uses to which that science is put, and more importantly, the impact that such uses have on women. Chapter Two focuses upon the role of women as "breeders" in the new order and the repercussion of such biological determinism. Finally, in Chapter Three, I address the issue of homosexuality: in feminist utopian writings, where is the lesbian? The ghosting<sup>4</sup> of lesbians as well as the pathologization of homosexuality will be discussed in the final chapter. Throughout, I hope to demonstrate that the construction of reproductive and sexual control over women is of fundamental importance in contemporary dystopian fiction. I also hope to underscore the need for more in-depth study of ignored utopian works within the science fiction genre. As more and more women enter the fields of utopian writing and study, there needs to be an increased awareness of the manner in which issues of vital concern to women are addressed.

There are a number of critics whose work has proven invaluable in this study. The writings of feminist Adrienne Rich on motherhood and "compulsory heterosexuality" have

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<sup>4</sup>This term, used by Terry Castle, will be defined at length in Chapter Three.



had an enormous impact on the way I analyzed these texts, while Terry Castle's work has provided the framework for Chapter Three. Nan Bowman Albinski and Marleen S. Barr have influenced my thinking on women in utopian literature. Ruth Levitas's basic work on the concept of utopia made recent utopian theory clearer for me, while Thomas M. Shapiro has strengthened my understanding of the politics behind eugenics and given me an entrance to that complex and controversial science. Though I do not rely upon any single critic to anchor my discussion of these texts, each chapter is informed by a hybridized form of feminism and queer theory which punctuates the patriarchal, heterosexist and exploitative manner in which the roles and rights of women are treated within these texts.

## Chapter One

### EUGENIC CONTROL IN DYSTOPIA

My feminist stories are all very pessimistic, in the sense that I see only a faint hope for us if we continue living on the same planet with men. I only think we could make it if some disease came along and wiped out 999 men out of every 1,000. Otherwise I fear that the moment some of the myriad things that are apt to go wrong happen, it will be blamed on our “freedom” and we will be back as property. (Alice Sheldon 68)

The utopian genre has, in recent years, witnessed a great concern for the shape, form and ability of humanity, asking questions about its appearance and behaviour and how those variables might be modified. In the texts discussed here, the novelists do not offer mere philosophical discussions on the nature of humanity, but rather a direct application of eugenic principles: creating (or attempting to create) the “perfect” human, the “useful” human and the “beautiful” human<sup>1</sup>. Of course, the classic of this genre, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, describes a world where every human is physically appealing to his or her fellow class citizens, perfectly designed to complete the work that

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<sup>1</sup>Longevity is not considered here, though it plays a part in the alternate history of *Woman on the Edge of Time*. Unlike the “super race” that other writers are interested in, *The Gate to Women’s Country* is more concerned with a race that is in some ways “less”--less violent, less destructive, and less negligent of its effect on the earth, as is also the case in Piercy’s eutopia.

needs doing, and without the urge to change the social order or disrupt social stability. In that way, eugenics can perhaps be viewed as having an eutopian effect on a society, as it encourages social harmony and enhances the happiness of individuals. Huxley also introduces what could be viewed as a more dystopian use of eugenics. His cloning process involves altering fetuses to meet the demands of particular economic classes and occupations, denying these individuals the opportunity to seek their own destinies and locking them forever into lives that are orchestrated by the state. This distinction between the eutopian and dystopian potentialities of eugenics is difficult to discern: if one is conditioned to work under dangerous conditions and therefore find no fault in that life, is that evidence of an eutopian application of eugenics (social harmony) or a dystopian one (limitation and degradation)? As suggested by Ruth Levitas earlier, changing the way one asks the utopian question alters the answers one receives. This chapter, then, will explore some of the specific manifestations of the eugenic impulse in contemporary utopian fiction, as well as some of the fundamental issues that are raised. In particular, I will demonstrate that eugenic and reproductive technologies, when viewed as acting in a dystopian fashion, serve to further repress and disempower women.

Thomas M. Shapiro, in his discussion of population control politics and their impact on women, writes:

Eugenics is a branch of the study of human heredity, applying general principles to the “improvement” of the human race. It has followed two general directions: (1) positive eugenics, which concentrates on means to increase the “breeding” opportunities of especially “fit” individuals (e.g. large families for the wealthy and sperm banks for Nobel Laureates), and (2) negative eugenics, which emphasizes

restrictions both on breeding for particularly “unfit” types and on immigration from certain countries. (33)

The first aspect of this definition will be more fully explored in my second chapter on breeders. The second, or “negative” eugenic principle is examined in greater detail here, as a tool of social stability, as a means of population “improvement,” and finally, as evidenced by specific or individual alterations, as each category affects women in particular.

### Eugenics and Social Stability

It is a common device in dystopian fiction to utilize eugenics as a means to control the stability of a population. By that, I mean that selective breeding or other tactics are utilized to ensure a population that embodies the political regime’s wishes: it is, for example, a docile public, easily accepting the wishes of its leaders. It may be racially homogeneous if that is deemed desirable, religiously uniform, or exhibiting a particular social trait that has been declared sound. Underlying such a tactic is the suggestion that the individual within that society has little or no value to the state except as part of the whole; that is, the focus is on the society and not the individual. Once individuals have been forced or encouraged to relinquish claims to “inalienable” rights and freedoms (whatever those may be; in these particular novels, growing from an American setting, one might assume them to be life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness), it seems easier to adapt and shape a population as a whole, rather than allowing the individual members to make

those choices for themselves. Again, using contemporary American ideology as a basis for comparison, a move to engineer a population in this way could be viewed as having a dystopian effect, even if the net result was greater social harmony.

Although Kate Wilhelm's dystopian society does not rely upon the same form of pre-natal conditioning that Huxley describes, there are still important examples of genetic manipulation in her novel *Where Late The Sweet Birds Sang*. It features a society that has grown to be very communal and non-individualistic, one which de-emphasizes the rights of the single in favour of the goals of the multiple. Divided into three sections, the novel introduces the Sumner family and their role in a world that is rapidly being altered by radiation and civil unrest. The clan draws together to perfect a cloning technique that will assure the continuation of humanity and address the infertility of its members. Wilhelm thus explores the concept of cloning, considering its advantages in terms of the social harmony it offers, while at the same time illustrating the manner in which a strictly uniform population excludes those who are unwilling or unable to fit into its strictures and represses those who can and do conform.

As the first generation of clones age, they begin to exhibit the traits which make them fundamentally different from their progenitors; these differences become more pronounced with each generation. They are empathically linked and demonstrate an aversion to the singular, insular lifestyles of their creators, becoming in effect a family with much closer bonds than that which created them. It soon becomes apparent that the clones desire and expect to supercede the sexually-reproduced society that preceded them,

saying:

“We're not like you, David. I think you know it, but now you must accept it...And we won't go back to what you are . . . [You are] assuming that diversity is beneficial. Perhaps it isn't . . . You pay a high price for individuality” (60).

The clones view individuality as one of the causes of the disaster that has devastated their world, and they see few benefits in trying to recapture it.

Eventually, the clones dominate the aging Sumner family, driving out or destroying all who oppose them, thus keeping the population controlled and goal-directed. The major weakness, argues Wilhelm, is that such a society sacrifices creativity, imagination and adaptability for social stability: the species that is unwilling, or unable to adapt to meet environmental, technological or other sudden changes soon finds itself succumbing to them. They discover this by accident when they realize that numerous younger generations of clones have lost an essential survival tactic, the ability to generalize, to extrapolate from the known and apply it to the unknown:

Within a week their fears were realized. The children under nine or ten could not identify the line drawings, could not complete a simple story, could not generalize from a particular situation to a new situation.

“So we teach them everything they’ll need to know to survive,” Barry said harshly. “And be grateful they seem able to learn whatever we teach.” (190)

As Helen N. Parker argues, the “clones are doomed to extinction because they are intellectually and biologically sterile and unwilling to admit their sterility” (57). Their strength rests on the technological innovation of a species that is perceived to be alien to them. At the end, they find that they are trapped: reliance upon technology that cannot be replaced gives them a precarious existence. While there are no longer misfits, neither are

there any geniuses (Wilhelm 160).

At the end of the novel, the cloned society faces extinction as it is unable to reproduce itself, while the renegade, reproductively viable group headed by Mark (himself the solitary, sexually-reproduced child of two solitary parents, outcasts from the clone group), though poorly equipped technologically, has the adaptability necessary to break its ties with the past and form a society based upon different values. The clones, resisting such a change, are “specifically choosing uniformity over diversity and risking therefore entropic decline” (Malmgren 86). Wilhelm thus asserts the superiority and desirability of the chaotic, unpredictable, natural order over the static one, concluding with an epilogue describing Mark’s return to the cloned colony some twenty years after his departure to find it destroyed and abandoned.

Wilhelm posits a society whose stability rests firmly upon the ideals of de-individuation, and scientific and psychological alteration. The process whereby individual members of this community lose their value in the face of the community occurs almost immediately within the story and is accentuated by the multiplicity of clones: each group of brothers or sisters is physically identical, and individual identity becomes immediately less important than that of the group. As Carl D. Malmgren notes, “the sacrifice of the individual for the group” (87) becomes a touchstone of clone life, a law by which all must abide. The clones acknowledge this, saying

We all know and agree it is our duty to safeguard the well-being of the unit, not the various individuals within it. If there is a conflict between those two choices, we must abandon the individual. That is a given. (100)

Abandoning the individual, or rather sacrificing him or her, perforce leaves a cohesive group which comes to recognize that survival is based solely upon the collective, which fears isolation from the “unit,” and which cannot act in any way that might be detrimental to the group. Those who cannot abide by such mores are driven out or destroyed--culled from the herd. They take with them the seeds of creativity, abstract thought and egotism (or self-awareness) that are necessary for the survival of the species<sup>2</sup>. This becomes particularly apparent in the case of Molly. Initially forced to experience her environment without the support of her cloned sisters, she cannot return to either the comfort of their constant company or the unchanging stagnation of the community. Instead, she seeks solitary experiences as a way of reinforcing her sense of self; that sense allows her to give birth and raise Mark away from the clones. She passes along her sense of self to Mark, encouraging his solitary interaction with nature. These two are the only ones to possess the ability to function away from the collective--a skill that the clones utilize while deploring its need.

The scientific and psychological alterations are inextricably bound up with this de-individuation process. Science has allowed the clones to develop a stable structure, by bringing about (perhaps as a side-effect) the telepathic connections between individuals. These connections are made firm by the culture which ritually mourns and excludes those

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<sup>2</sup>A further example of the value of egotism may be found in Ayn Rand's novel *Anthem*: though its citizens are not clones, they too participate in a collective that de-individualizes them. As in *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*, self-awareness provides the seeds of dissent, and ultimately, victory for the individual.



who die or who are sent off to become breeders. This technique is not uncommon in utopian communities, as noted by Annette Keinhorst:

The rejection of community is generally seen as deeply problematic, if not criminal. Outsiders have virtually no right to exist; they are either just barely tolerated, exiled, or even psychologically or physically eliminated. In a few individual cases, the outsiders' uniqueness is recognized after they become useful. (94)

Such is the case in *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*: Mark's solitary status, although threatening, is also viewed as useful, as he has the ability to lead the cloned expeditions in search of dwindling technological supplies. His mother Molly's rejection of the community as a result of an earlier expedition causes her to be isolated from the group, initially as a test case, and after Mark's birth (proving her usefulness), as a breeder. Both, however, become too rebellious to be allowed to continue as members of the community. Both Molly and Mark's self-awareness leads to their isolation from the group, eventually propelling them to abandon the cloned community.

Thus Wilhelm creates a society where obedience is the way of life, and where necessary character traits which would help to sustain the colony (such as imagination and individual initiative) are weeded out, de-selected. The individual loses significance in the face of the collective, a situation which discourages the kinds of heroism one might expect to find in a less communal environment, and which might have allowed the clones to progress, rather than remain static. In fact, these traits are rejected when the clones physically expel David Sumner, the man responsible for originating the cloning program. His absence (literal and metaphoric) brings about their fall.

## Eugenics and Population Improvement

The statement by Alice Sheldon quoted at the beginning of this chapter, pessimistic as it is, serves as a very useful introduction to this section on eugenics because it illustrates the fundamental question that writers like Sheri S. Tepper are trying to address: how secure can women feel while men hold power or its implied threat over us? For Tepper, as for Sheldon, it is an uncomfortable situation in which to be. Unlike some utopian writers who create worlds entirely without men, both Tepper and Sheldon have chosen another alternative: not a complete absence of men, but a vastly diminished presence. Tepper is particularly interested in the development of a community where the “disease” Sheldon refers to (here, selective breeding) has already begun to spread through the population.

From that perspective, Tepper may be seen to have created a feminist eutopia: a society where women control education, health, science and the means of production, enjoying the company of men, but without the need to sublimate their own ambitions to further their partners’. Following the nuclear destruction of much of America, groups of women have banded together to form semi-autonomous walled cities known collectively as Women’s Country. Inside, women practice life-long learning (each woman must practice one art, one craft and one science throughout her life so that skills will not be lost) and care for the social and emotional stability of their members with the assistance of a few selected men who have chosen that life. Outside the walls, men in Garrisons ostensibly protect them and generally lead the life of Warriors, supported by the products

of the women. Separated, the two groups carry out the acts of living<sup>3</sup>.

Yet this society may be viewed as deeply flawed: its very conception was founded upon a secret tool of statecraft that not only represses men, but deceives the women it seeks to protect. The men of the Garrison (the majority of the male population) are not privy to vital information and they are deceived into believing themselves fathers. Late in the text, Tepper reveals that children are in fact sired by the “servitors,” those men who renounce the Garrison and return to the women’s enclave. Surprisingly, the majority of women are similarly deceived into believing that they know the sires of their children:

“How many of the women know?”

“Very few, actually. The women on the Council, of course. Very few others. We put clues here and there, for those with the wits to see them. Most women don’t know anything about it. We can’t risk telling the ones who talk too much. Or the ones who drink a lot during carnival. Or those who are still young and silly. Who fall in love with warriors . . .”

“How have you kept it a secret? How can you?”

“We medical officers work very hard, Stavia. It’s all in our hands. Who bears, who doesn’t. And when. And by whom. Haven’t you noticed that almost all of the Council members are medically trained? Most of the women don’t know what we’re really doing.” (293-294)

The secretiveness of the Council of women (and selected male servitors) controls and directs the breeding program without sanction from those they serve. This policy was decided upon without the approval of those whom it would directly affect and is implemented by a Council that is not answerable in any way to its constituents. Though

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<sup>3</sup>As in Tiptree’s own classic story “Houston, Houston, Do You Read?”, one character asks, while speaking to a man from the distant past “As I understand it, what you protected people from was largely other males, wasn’t it?” (91)

the society distances itself from its American antecedents, it can be argued that this flaw provides an essential element of a dystopia: it denies individuals the option to choose whether a particular ideology supports their own conception of the future. In this case, the Council has decided to act in the best interests of its female members; that decision, however, does not restrict them from physically altering those women.

Still, the result is a humanity that is perceptibly altered from “Pre-Convulsion” days. Fewer men choose to remain warriors every generation, while more return to Women’s Country to participate in some way with the goals of the Council, thus justifying their eugenic practice. It is worth noting, however, that selective breeding is, according to John Maynard Smith, “an extremely slow and inefficient method of altering the genetic properties of a population” (150). Smith also argues that, over a period of years, the effect would theoretically be negligible (157): after a time, reintegration would slow, rather than speed up, as Tepper suggests. Yet, combined with other eugenic practices, as Smith writes, the predicted results may occur:

speed can be increased only by increasing the intensity of selection; a bigger change is produced in the properties of the next generation if ninety-nine percent of the males in the present one are selectively slaughtered or sterilized than if one per cent are so treated. (150)

Since that is the plan that the Women’s Country Councils have in mind, it seems theoretically possible that they might achieve their goals.

The alteration becomes even more noticeable when compared to the rigidly patriarchal mind set of the Holylanders, an isolated religious enclave that survived the

nuclear holocaust. There, based upon biblical precepts, men are placed firmly in power over women, and the status of women is greatly diminished. However, generations of breeding without the infusion of new genetic material has made them, like the clones of *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*, unable or unwilling to adapt and grow to meet new challenges. This is further exacerbated by the Holyland practice of polygamy which narrows rather than expands the gene pool<sup>4</sup>. The Holyland episode, where protagonist Stavia is captured and held hostage as a potential new mate, demonstrates a difficulty that feminist utopian writers often face; as noted by Keinhorst, “[f]aced with the task of portraying men as non-oppressive and as whole human beings, their imagination fails” (97). In fact, there is only a handful of non-oppressive males in the text, none of whom is in a powerful position. Further, these few are overshadowed by the presence of men portrayed as sulky (Chernon), sexually frightening (Vinsas), power-hungry (Michael) or manipulative (Barten).

Additionally, the Women’s Country Council (calling themselves, with full respect for the irony, “the Damned Few” [291]) makes decisions regarding more than who is a fit sire: it also chooses who among the women is an unfit mother (290). This becomes

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<sup>4</sup>In some ways, the Holylanders are practicing the same form of polygamy as the Women’s Country citizens, though without any plan in mind, nor any skill in the breeding program. In fact, the disastrous results of Holyland only underscore the delicate balance that the Women’s Country Council must achieve: fewer sires (but of the highest quality) and with greater mix in the breeding pool (that is, by siring out to other towns) to ensure the highest quality offspring as a result, unlike the Holylanders. As Smith writes, “societies seem much more likely to be workable if they contain individuals with a wide range of genetic capabilities” (160).

apparent in the text when Staviva the narrator learns that her flighty, complaining, demanding sister has had a hysterectomy as the result of an “infection”: this infection, of course, is a ruse that allows the Council members to prevent her from bearing more children. She has proven to be an unstable individual, a trait which is not desired among a future generation. Shapiro, in his book discussing the politics behind the eugenics movement in the United States, cites a 1927 Supreme Court case that demonstrates a marked parallel between the thinking of those who advocate eugenics and the manner in which it is manifested in this novel:

It is better for all the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, or let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from breeding their own kind. (in Shapiro 3)

The ostensibly eutopian ideal of *The Gate to Women's Country*, when considered in the light of such classist, elitist rhetoric, seems particularly perilous. Though *Women's Country* grows out of a post-apocalyptic, post-Constitutional milieu, one must ask whether the rights of the state outweigh the rights of the individual in this instance. Clearly, that is what has happened in *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*, and Wilhelm shows the folly of such a move. Tepper, on the other hand, views selective breeding as the only possible way to ensure not only a future that is woman-friendly, but one where humanity as a whole faces the best possible chance, and the least chance of extinction by its own hand.

Shapiro goes on further to note:

Fertility control has appealed to policy makers because fertility appears to be the

most easily manipulated variable with which to alleviate problems, such as poverty and inequality. Furthermore, it offers a solution to social problems through altering the behavior of the poor rather than redistributing power or resources. (17)

Although there is no class of poor in this novel (even disenfranchised sex providers receive free medical care), there is a great deal of discussion about the distribution of resources in a time when manufacturing is sharply curtailed. For instance, Stavia enters into debates on the availability of glass and medicines, and everyone recognizes that certain products may always be in short supply. In such an essentialist situation, then, it might make sense to limit breeding opportunities, through the sterilization of those who have proven unfit by community standards, rather than allocate scarce resources to them.

However, as Gisela Bock notes, speaking in regard to the attitudes prevalent among many states at the turn of the century, many “reasons” for sterilization have less to do with improving the race than with economics: how cost efficient is it to educate, motivate, feed, and employ these people when they can be eliminated by the second generation?

[S]uch sterilization was widely and passionately recommended as a solution to urgent social problems: shiftlessness, ignorance, and laziness in the workforce; deviant sexual behavior such as prostitution and illegitimate births; the increasing number of ill and insane; poverty; and the rising cost of social services. (274)

It must be noted that there are a number of differences between the solutions advocated by eugenic groups of the time and those enforced in this text. Fitness to conceive a child is, in this work, not limited to those of a particular intellectual capacity; nor is there concern with illegitimacy. However, the decision to sterilize Stavia’s sister rests entirely on her

inability to accept the social ideals of her community, further supported by her unwillingness to participate fully and enthusiastically in the three-fold career of her fellow citizens and her general tendency toward frivolous pursuits. Yet, Bock's statements serve here as a reminder of some of the non-medical political reasons behind sterilization. When examined in light of this historical context, the seemingly valid reasons that the Council members have for justifying sterilizing women like Stavia's sister appear far more sinister. In Nazi Germany, for instance, as Bock goes on to note, "inability to respond 'properly' to 'general ethical concepts' that were consistent with the ideology of the state" (281) could result in sterilization, a political decision comparable to that of Women's Country. Even as a young woman, Stavia's sister is criticised for questioning the inclusion of the servitors within the walls of Women's Country and the general Ordinances which guide the community, perhaps targeting her as a potential candidate for sterilization even before the birth of her first child.

Although Tepper is clearly in favour of the elimination of masculine violence, one might argue, as Peter Fitting does, that "the absence of men functions not as a call for a world without men, but as a metaphor for the elimination of male values" (102). Though Fitting is speaking generally of feminist utopian literature, his is a useful distinction to keep in mind. Yet, it seems too simple. Can one argue, using the same logic, that altering a woman to embody a physical/sexual ideal is not really an attempt to dehumanize women, but is meant only to enhance the physical differences between the sexes? Or that the grotesque bodies described by Marge Piercy are mere metaphors for the need to free the



minds that move them? Using such a nebulous phrase as “male values” seems to cloak the violence which underlies the decision to eliminate an identifiable group of people.

Fitting’s argument, however, is instructive, though perhaps inaccurate when applied to the novels under discussion here. The metaphor he refers to, at least in Tepper’s novel, would seem to take the form of the actual elimination of the majority of men. Those left, it is true, do not exhibit the “male values” to which he is referring (assuming those values have to do with violence), since they espouse a non-violent doctrine<sup>5</sup>, becoming help-mates to their assigned partners, and displaying not possessiveness but affection for the women. Nevertheless, I find it problematic to ignore the eugenic principles underlying this society with a statement dismissing the values of a particular gender.

Fitting later goes on to say “[i]t is not men who have been excluded from these visions of an alternate human future, but male values and male roles” (103), and this statement, I believe, comes closer to Tepper’s vision. If one categorizes violence (or, fighting for the sake of honour) as a “male” value, then it is surely one of the few such values remaining in this text; the “male roles” to which he refers, and which our society traditionally has ascribed to men (medicine, agriculture, manufacturing) have here been taken on by women. Women and servitors work at the tasks that need accomplishing without overt division of labour based upon gender. The situation is somewhat different in the Garrison: there, no men practice medicine, farming or industry. Instead, they play

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<sup>5</sup>Both men and women are of course still capable of violence, but use it only in self-defense.

sports and train for war.

Fitting concludes by noting:

I am concerned about arguments which distinguish between male and female roles and behavior through reference to nature, because these arguments have been used--and are still being used--to legitimate the oppression of women, particularly in explaining women's functions and roles in terms of biology. (104)

With this statement, Fitting's opinions are more directly applicable to Tepper's creation, as she portrays the horrifying and demeaning Holyland community where biological determinism as described above is used to justify the degradation of women. Through comparison with the Holyland community, the eugenic rationale behind Women's Country becomes clearer: women's lives are safer when they put biology to work for them, rather than allowing it to be used to subjugate them.

Clearly, then, biology is shown to be a double-edged sword in this text: it is used to control women in the Holyland enclave, diminishing them to little more than sentient animals. These women are denied rights and status and live their entire lives serving men. In Women's Country, however, women are safe from the predations of violence and free to choose careers which interest them. Yet, their safety is purchased at the expense of the Garrison men who are denied the opportunity to sire children, and whose very lives are in the hands of Councils which may ruthlessly choose to destroy them. The women are also deceived by the policy which keeps them safe: unwittingly, they carry the children of unknown servitors, pawns in a game to alter the very nature of humanity. This paradox makes it profoundly difficult to categorize the novel as either a simple eutopia (as many

critics have) or a dystopia (as presented here): if a state manipulates its citizenry for its benefit, for an admirable goal, but without its knowledge, where can it be placed along the utopian continuum?

### Personal Genetic Alteration

Perhaps the most chilling eugenic issue to be explored here is that of specific individual alteration of humanity, simply because it represents the smallest possible leap from our own consensual reality into fiction. By specific alteration, I mean the purposeful (perhaps cosmetic) alteration of women in order to meet some pre-determined standard of beauty, desirability or function<sup>6</sup>. This may involve cosmetic surgery (beyond that practiced for restructuring after a disfigurement) or pre/post-natal tinkering in order to achieve an ideal.

The idea of purposeful enhancement or alteration of the female form is not a new one: cosmetic companies, hair salons and “total make-over” packages address this contemporary compulsion to appear somehow better or more (or rather, less) than one is. This has also led to a trend in cosmetic surgery: rhinoplasty, tummy-tucks, liposuction, face lifts, not all of which are permanent changes, but which bring the recipient closer to

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<sup>6</sup>In Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*, men are being altered as well as women: they are changed into cyborg creatures, modified with prosthetics to turn them into assassins. While Piercy describes these modifications in some detail, I am limiting my discussion here to the alterations of women, as these changes disempower and limit women, while those made to men add great prestige and power.

lost youth (with its connotations of firm bodies and resilient skin) or glamorous beauty (often directly associated with success, finding love, and happiness). Who we are as women has, for better or worse, had a lot to do with how we look--or how we think we look.

Marge Piercy's novel *Woman on the Edge of Time* presents an alternate-time "future" where nearly all women have been reduced to the role of sex workers. Though the novel is generally classified as an eutopia (much of Connie's time travelling occurs between our own time and a future one where personal liberty and freedom are valued, and power and domination are not), Piercy affords a brief glimpse of a truly dystopian future, where pollution makes it impractical to leave one's building, where "multis" (multinational corporations) own people, food is made of petrochemical byproducts, and "cybos" and "sassins" protect the elite. There are, among the middle class, no families, nor working women (except in the most vulgar sense of the word). Motherhood is taken care of by hidden breeders, while the woman Connie meets has been permanently altered physically to enhance her in her role as a concubine.

The term concubine conjures up useful images. Chinese concubines are irrevocably connected in the Western mind with the practice of footbinding; the act leaves the women irreversibly crippled but was once viewed as intensely stimulating. Similarly, Gildina is described as a "cartoon of femininity" in the following passage:

her body seemed a cartoon of femininity, with a tiny waist, enormous sharp breasts that stuck out like the brassieres Connie herself had worn in the fifties--but the woman was not wearing a brassiere. Her stomach was flat but her hips and

buttocks were oversized and audaciously curved. She looked as if she could hardly walk for the extravagance of her breasts and buttocks, her thighs that collided as she shuffled a few steps . . . She stomped to and fro on small--ridiculously small--feet. She looked as if any minute, she might fall over through imbalance, the small feet and tiny ankles and wrists, the tiny waist, the small head with the tower of Pisa on top . . . She batted her eyelashes, fully an inch long...Her eyes had the tendency to droop, the lids pulling down under the weight. (288)

The physical alterations described in this passage mark Gildina as a sex provider, while at the same time, bind her more firmly to her male partner. They have a “contract”: an institution that is initiated by males and which has replaced marriage (contracts may be of varying pre-arranged durations). Since walking appears difficult for her, it is unlikely that any woman so altered could participate meaningfully in any other economic niche.

Though Gildina is encultured into this role and ironically finds status in it, it is not inconceivable that the first women so altered were unhappy with their new role; if so, an alteration that inhibits walking would usefully prevent them from escape, while visible alterations to breasts, hips and eyelashes would make finding an escapee in a crowd much easier.

Beyond simple cosmetic alteration, Gildina also mentions shots and treatments that lighten skin:

Nobody would take you [Connie] for a contracty. You’ve never even had your first grafts. If you ever had a beauty-op, you’re reverted. They’d never leave you with that hair and that skin! You’re as dark . . . I mean I’d have been on that side myself. But of course I had a full series! When I was fifteen, I was selected, and I’m still on the full shots and re-ops. (288)

In a few short lines, Piercy manages to introduce into this world more than inequality between the sexes; in fact, she touches on an area of prime concern among feminists of

colour--the valorization of pale skin. Not only does beauty in this future world imply caricatured breasts and hips, but it means pallor. Piercy has tackled the beauty industry head-on with such statements--the assumption that lighter skin is indicative of quality, class and status, while darker skin must be denigrated and ridiculed even, as in Gildina's case, when it means distancing herself from her heritage and childhood, since treatments began during her teen years. Piercy also seems to fundamentally question the necessity for any type of cosmetic enhancement by making Gildina a gross caricature of the "ideal" woman.

By implying that whole classes of women have been so altered, selected for a destiny which limits their movements as well as opportunities, Piercy questions contemporary trends toward surgical alteration. She, like Tepper, demonstrates that these practices serve to limit women, even while being desirable. Gildina finds status in her position, and in comparison to the life led by those not chosen, it may represent an improvement in lifestyle. Though this particular dystopian future is typically overlooked by critics who study Piercy's larger eutopian vision, it is nevertheless important to understand the implications for women that it presents. Gildina, like the Holyland women of Tepper's dystopian vision, is reduced to her biological functions, denied the opportunity to explore other possibilities that may exist. Her cosmetic "additions" serve only to diminish her.

These three texts offer different views of the eugenic debate. Kate Wilhelm's examination of cloning and goal-directed humanity mirrors Marge Piercy's vision of

humanity: though Gildina has not been altered *in utero*, she too has been constructed for a specific purpose. Unlike Molly, however, she does not consciously recognize the limitations that have been imposed upon her, nor does she attempt to fight against her culturally-imposed strictures. In that respect, Gildina is much like the average female of Sheri S. Tepper's *Women's Country*: unaware of the manipulation being perpetuated upon (or through) her flesh, she cannot seek change.

In each novel, the manipulation of citizenry is conducted by a state which is not responsible to its populace. Tepper's Councilmembers are selected by their peers, rather than being elected; Piercy's "multi's" are economic dynasties who use surgically-altered males to carry out their wishes; Wilhelm's clone council rules without consulting its fellows, confident that their decisions are the best for the group as a whole. Regardless of the specific manifestation of eugenic control in these texts, those affected seem, surprisingly, to accept eugenics as a beneficial, rather than a repressive form of control; none of the manipulated individuals discussed here seek to change the system which has repressed them. Even Stavia, while questioning why selective breeding was initiated, comes to accept it and participate actively as a Councilmember.

That accepting view of eugenic manipulation, as emphasized earlier, makes it difficult to claim that the texts are examples of dystopian fiction. However, if one compares these visions to our present (as the authors do), it becomes easier to make the distinction. *Women's Country*, for instance, is less violent and less overtly harmful to women, in direct contrast to both the degradation of Holyland women and the status of

many women in our own time. Yet, contemporary North American society holds freedom and personal choice in high regard, and in this respect, the selected breeding of *Tepper's* vision can only be viewed negatively. Wilhelm's clones, though functioning as a unit and generally pleased with the result, can be compared to both the pre-cloned community and Mark's post-clone one. Both of these frame societies prize individuality, while the cloned one does not, offering the opportunity to claim its practices as dystopian by contrast. *Piercy*, too, offers two visions which contrast with the dystopian one discussed here: *Matapoissett*, an egalitarian society, and contemporary America. Though that second society (our own) is not a pleasant one for *Connie*, it is nevertheless positive in comparison to *Gildina's* world. Through contrast, one may glean a truer understanding of the dystopian worlds portrayed here.

Each text contributes to the eugenic debate in utopian literature. Cloning technology, for instance, may one day be available in our own society: demonstrating the pitfalls to which its use may lead, warning us of its dangers, makes Wilhelm's text important. She reminds us of the dangers of conformity: no misfits, but no geniuses. Likewise, *Piercy's* vision demonstrates the utopian concern over the shape and function of the human body. We are perilously close to perfecting the surgical techniques she describes, and her extrapolation from this trend serves to warn us against the dangers inherent in such a move. Women are particularly at risk, as they are insecure about their ability to attract a mate without enhancement; already, surgical alteration proliferates among women. *Piercy* offers a chilling view of the way this trend can be used to literally



prevent women from achieving any success beyond plying their sexuality.

Tepper's text, more subtle than the others in my view, warns her readers about the ramifications of altering humanity, even to protect women. Though she presents a feminist eutopia, one cannot help but read it as a warning: if men can be selected out, removed from the breeding pool, diminished to their potential to breed non-aggressive sons, then it is possible to view women in the same light. Reducing any section of the population to its biological or reproductive capacity diminishes that group: to do so in the name of women's defense does not justify this practice.

The issue of eugenics is not an easy one to deal with: it roils the waters of the debate on rights and privileges, stirring up hatred for the powerful who infringe upon the freedoms of the masses, adding howls to the chorus of right-to-lifers and those who deny humanity's need to continue evolving. It crosses economic and class barriers: who has the right to choose what the future looks like, and whose genes (or blood line) will traverse time to that point? What role will technology play in this scheme?

Yet, the debate cannot simply be ignored, as we move closer to the horrific futures envisioned by utopian writers. As Helen N. Parker argues,

the link between man's future as a species and the development of his society becomes increasingly important, and increasingly complex as his technological capability grows. The success with which humanity can realize the evolutionary or genetic goals that its science suggests are possible depends directly and inevitably upon human society's ability to identify these long-range goals and move in concert toward them. (80)

Without the ability to recognize the role that technology has upon the future of the

species, or without the identification of those long-range goals to which Parker refers, humanity is at the mercy of its leaders. As the writers discussed here demonstrate, if average citizens refuse to involve themselves in this debate over humanity's future, they must trust their leaders to make these decisions. What is decided may not always be to our benefit. Women are particularly vulnerable in these situations because they are least likely to have means or opportunity to affect the decision-making process. And it is they who will inevitably suffer.

## Chapter Two

### BREEDERS IN DYSTOPIA

The writing of women's dystopian . . . fiction is intimately related to the realities of reproductive technologies and their threat to women's autonomy. The battle between the sexes over the control of women's fertility and, correspondingly, infertility . . . should serve as a warning. These texts are not only stories. (Marleen S. Barr 93)

The previous discussion of eugenic practices and their impact upon women becomes even more important when one realises that eugenic principles are enacted through the bodies of women. Thomas Shapiro writes that eugenics is goal-directed improvement of humanity that may be classified as either negative (as discussed in the previous chapter) or positive, "which concentrates on means to increase the breeding opportunities of especially 'fit' individuals (e.g. large families for the wealthy and sperm banks for Nobel Laureates)" (33). Yet, that distinction tends to ignore the women who are required to carry out the political decision to reproduce--the breeders. In the process of enacting political decisions, the role and value of individual women decreases. As women, they are important only in terms of the function they fulfil: they are reduced to their biological capacity to reproduce, becoming little more than walking wombs. Women are forced to relinquish control over reproductive decisions in order to satisfy the needs of

the political state. They are diminished to one-dimensional pawns, a permanent under-class which has little or no control over the future of self or state. They become breeders. As breeders, I will argue, they are at the mercy of those who seek to control them biologically to perpetuate a political system; the result is the formation of a new class, and a further repression of women. The breeder class, so vital to the success of the political regime, is least valued, and most likely to be denied basic rights and privileges in order that its biological capacity to reproduce might be controlled.

A note on terminology: the term “breeder” is used here to categorize a woman whose prescribed destiny is to reproduce, without thought or complaint, the children who will literally and metaphorically continue the political practices which allowed or ensured their birth. The term is meant to convey an element of dehumanization. Just as the term is used in contrast to “mother” (both as experience and institution), so is “sire” used in contrast to father, in order to separate the biological process of creating a child from the cultural process of parenting. This distinction helps to explain and underscore the powerlessness of breeders and sires in the face of societally-approved parents.

### Biological Control

In three of these texts, Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Kate Wilhelm’s *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang* and Sheri S. Tepper’s *The Gate to Women’s Country*, biological control over women is of vital importance to the continuation and perpetuation of a particular political ideology. In Atwood’s text, declining birth rates have been

coupled with environmental degradation to bring about a political coup. One of the results of that revolution is the decision to coerce all fertile women into becoming breeders in order to increase population, although it is apparent that there are motives which are not biologically driven as well. Population has decreased due in part to increased sterility, but the Commander instead attributes it to the over-availability of sex, rather than widespread infertility (“the sex was too easy. Anyone could just buy it. There was nothing to work for, nothing to fight for . . . Men were turning off on sex, even” [198]). Yet infertility, it must be noted, definitely contributes to the problem, as Offred writes,

The air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules, all of that takes years to clean up, and meanwhile they creep into your body, camp in your fatty cells. Who knows, your very flesh may be polluted, dirty as an oily beach, a sure death to shore birds and unborn babies . . . Women took medicines, pills, men sprayed trees, cows ate grass, all that souped-up piss flowed into rivers. Not to mention the exploding atomic power plants, . . . and the mutant strain of syphilis no mould could touch. (106)

Similarly faced with environmental degradation, in Wilhelm’s novel, the Sumner family has resorted to cloning techniques as a means of combating sterility. They utilize sexual and asexual reproductive techniques in combination to increase the birth rate and ensure the continuation of the species. As time passes, however, the clones alter the original goal of the program; rather than reverting to sexual reproduction after the fertile population increases, they continue to use breeders to produce individuals who are then cloned. Finally, in Tepper’s text, set three centuries after the nuclear destruction of much of America, the Women’s Council exercises a secret state mechanism--selective breeding--to alter the population, seeking to create men who are less aggressive and more able to live

children: as Offred notes, “There is no such thing as a sterile man any more, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that’s the law” (57). This medical explanation represses women and increases their feelings of guilt and inadequacy if they cannot reproduce<sup>1</sup>, encouraging them to equate their own value with their fertility.

In these two novels, the breeders are denied the basic rights which accrue to men; they are valued or denigrated based upon a biological ability that has little to do with their personal wishes or attributes. The underlying breeder rhetoric permeates every aspect of these two novels. Adrienne Rich, in her important work on mothering, writes:

Motherhood--unmentioned in the histories of conquest and serfdom, wars and treaties, exploration and imperialism--has a history, it has an ideology, it is more fundamental than tribalism or nationalism. My individual, seemingly private pains as a mother, the individual seemingly private pains of the mothers around me and before me, whatever our class or color, the regulation of women’s reproductive power by men in every totalitarian system and every socialist revolution, the legal and technical control by men of contraception, fertility, abortion, obstetrics, gynecology, and extrauterine experiments--all are essential to the patriarchal system, as is the negative or suspect status of women who are not mothers. (33-34)

What Rich is addressing is fundamental to the issue of breeders. Viewed as extensions of their wombs, these breeders are manipulated by reproductive technology and a medical community that victimizes them emotionally, if not physically. In each text, that technology is used in a different way, but in each, the result is the same: women are

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<sup>1</sup>This tactic of blaming the victim is also used in the Red Centre’s Testifying indoctrination process (671).

defined by their reproductive capabilities and controlled by those in power.

In both Tepper's and Wilhelm's texts, there is a clear indication of the manner in which artificial insemination may be used to diminish the rights of women. In the first, artificial insemination is used to create the children who are to be less violent; few of the women, however, are aware that they are being so inseminated. The technology, though used for a potentially eutopian reason, is instead, I would argue, the means by which a secret state policy is enacted without the knowledge of those it purports to help<sup>2</sup>. Writes Albinski, "There is nothing intrinsically wrong with modern reproductive technology; it is the politics of its use that matter" (179). Here, I would argue, the secret political agenda makes the use of such technology questionable and demeaning to women.

More clearly, however, it is evident that artificial insemination is a demeaning process for the breeders in Wilhelm's text. As described below, Molly's body is used to produce future clones, a process she recognizes as dehumanizing:

Four times they had put her in the breeders' hospital ward and installed a constant temperature gauge, and when the temperature was right, Nurse had come in with her tray and said cheerfully, "Let's try again, shall we, Molly?" And obediently Molly had opened her legs and lain still while the sperm was inserted with the shiny, cold instrument. "Now remember, don't move for a while," Nurse then said, still cheerful, brisk, and left her lying, unmoving, on the narrow cot. And two hours later she was allowed to dress and leave again. Four times, she thought bitterly. A thing, an object, press this button and this is what comes out, all predictable, on cue. (140-141)

As Marleen S. Barr writes, "Like so many women, she is victimized by the

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<sup>2</sup>The sterilization of Stavia's sister is another example of reproductive technology being used against women without their consent.

institutionalized power to deny her the control of her own body” (84). She is, in her own words, “a thing, an object,” both separated from the workings of her body and held captive by them, unable to assert her independence or deny others access to her reproductive ability.

Once the qualitative decline in the clones is noted and accepted by the clone council, they decide to begin cloning particularly intelligent individuals and implanting them in the breeders. Once again, technology will be used against these women, as they will be forced to become surrogate mothers to clones who are not related to them. Writes Barr, “These breeders are doubly dehumanized. They are powerless sperm receptacles as well as receptacles for clones who are not genetically their own” (84). Though Mark’s mother Molly is eventually forced into breeding, while he is a child, she mothers him and recognizes (unlike her sister breeders) that other options exist, that she need not accept a life of degradation for the sake of the community. Unable to reconcile her self-aware persona with her new role as a breeder, she overcomes her conditioning and abandons the colony. Once Mark has, much later in the novel, removed the breeders from their enclosure and established his countercolony, the breeding women are allowed the opportunity to participate in the mothering experience. Though their reproductive capabilities are vital for the continuation of the community, they are not dehumanized by Mark: rather, they are able to participate in the lives of their children, as well as in the community. While Wilhelm does not introduce her audience to one of these post-clone women, she does allude to their freedom through Mark’s perspective, and one can only



assume that in comparison they are freer, without the restrictions technology and conditioning had imposed upon them earlier.

Although not artificially inseminated, the handmaidens of Gilead are forced to reproduce with assigned Commanders, while the medical community submits to the political whims of the regime, denying them access to prenatal surgery and the opportunity to abort abnormal fetuses. This suggests once again that they are at the mercy of a political ideology which first uses their bodies as reproductive vessel, and then denies them access to the technology which could make the process safer. Biblical precepts also allows a different form of reproductive technology: surrogate motherhood. In practice, it becomes clear that the handmaidens are not allowed to mother, thus remaining breeders (they are separated soon after the children are weaned). The children born of this system are expected to go on to become Wives and Commanders in their turn, thus perpetuating the system.

The use of technology to regulate childbirth is an issue of vital concern to feminist dystopian writers, and not a question that is easily resolved. While the use of anaesthetics, for instance, can be viewed as beneficial, the over-use of caesarean sections to deliver babies, as well as induced labour to make delivery more convenient for doctors are generally viewed by feminists as examples of the manner in which the medical community discounts the experience of women in order to accommodate the needs of the attending

physician<sup>3</sup>. One can clearly see technology working against the personal freedoms of the breeders of *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*, as well as in *The Gate to Women's Country*, where artificial insemination is practiced, as is involuntary sterilization in the latter text. To a lesser degree reproductive technology may also be seen in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Though the women are not permitted access to conventional forms of technology, as Marleen Barr notes,

Handmaids [are] . . . forced to function as a juxtaposition of the human and the mechanistic. Their bodies become birth machines, reproductive technology composed of female flesh. The dehumanized handmaids result from an extreme version of equating fertility with powerlessness. (92)

This novel approach to viewing the breeders as machines of flesh helps to inform the discussion of state control of women's reproductive "output," while further emphasizing the degrading methods of these political factions. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, in particular, the role of the breeder not only disappears following the birth, but the birth process itself is taken over by those in control. As Helen Callaway notes, this is particularly distressing as it serves to transform an act of nature "into a cultural ceremony in which the woman [in this case, the handmaid] becomes an anonymous and inferior object" (153) while the Wife, sterile though more powerful, becomes "the symbolically significant, life-sustaining agent" (153). Also on this issue, though not speaking directly about its literary manifestations, Julie Murphy writes,

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<sup>3</sup>Elizabeth Baines has written a mainstream British novel, *The Birth of the Machine* which describes with the manner in which doctors take control of the birth process and, in doing so, dehumanize and disempower the women giving birth.

Women are defined by patriarchy as “reproductive bodies.” Our bodies are regarded as potential carriers of unborn generations . . . We are constantly discouraged, forbidden to use our bodies for ourselves...Reproductive technology, in the service of patriarchy, assumes that women’s bodies are fertile fields to be farmed . . . commodities with vital products to harvest: eggs. (68-69)

Murphy’s words are particularly apt in connection with the way Atwood’s Gileadeans treat fertile women, reducing them to commodities which may be utilized, products to be distributed where power is greatest. Technology is used to increase the efficiency with which these societies produce new citizens; in the process, it allows political decisions to be enacted through the bodies of women, reducing their value to their reproductive capability.

### Politics and Reproduction

As discussed, the use of women as breeders in these texts occurs as the result of political decisions to change society. In *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*, that change reduces fertile women to their biological capabilities, while in *The Gate to Women’s Country*, the political decision to eugenically alter humanity remains secret. Yet, I would argue that the politicization of reproduction involves the reproductive colonization of women: it is not enough to merely commodify women and their bodies (as Murphy writes). Instead, women are expected to participate fully in this political degradation of their humanity by assuming breeder values. In order to enact this political agenda, breeders are subjected to an indoctrination process to encourage them to accept their repression as a beneficial or “natural” event. Later, they face a constant

barrage of breeder propaganda designed to reinforce their reactions to a new political reality. Not surprisingly, both indoctrination and propaganda take the form of sexist, biologically-deterministic rhetoric.

In *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*, the indoctrination process that new breeders undergo is intense. Each is psychologically conditioned to accept her new status, and conditioning is aided by the administration of drugs. Molly, entering the breeder compound at a later age, finds the process more difficult, but remarks of the others: “They had been children, easy to condition into breeding machines who thought it really wasn’t that bad a life” (138). She wonders, “How else had they conditioned her? To spread her legs obligingly when they approached her with their instruments, with the carefully hoarded sperm?” (137). Because of her self-awareness, Molly is able to recognize the degradation of conditioning which forces her to accept her new role and which requires her to cheerfully accept artificial insemination. She also learns that the women are conditioned to remain within the breeder compound (140); separated from their families, the other women have no impetus to escape, nor anywhere to go if they did. Only Molly is able to break her conditioning and escape. She alone of all the breeders desires autonomy over herself and refuses to tamely submit to the clones’ political machinations.

Though she too recognizes that she has been barraged with indoctrination, Atwood’s Offred cannot help but feel its effects. After an indefinite period spent in the Rachel and Leah Centre, Offred finds that the time has had a noticeable impact on her

thinking. She says, "Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfil the expectations of others, which have become my own" (69). This statement reveals the manner in which she has adopted Gileadean standards of acceptability as her own: producing a child is the only way she sees to prove herself to her oppressors. Even though she is aware enough to recognize her absorption of these harmful ideals, she is unable to distance herself from them. Because of this susceptibility to Gileadean conditioning, I would argue that her suspected pregnancy by Nick, the Commander's chauffeur, could be an example of a more empowering situation: she has chosen both father and child, and escapes with both; alternatively, it could merely demonstrate the manner in which she has come to view pregnancy as the greatest gift she could give to her lover and the fulfilment of her destiny as a Gileadean woman. Patricia Danelle Moos sees Offred's consumption of eggs (particularly after Offred's discourse on their symbolic significance) to be a small act of rebelling against the repression of Gilead life, and against motherhood (64). I disagree with such a reading. Rather than rebelling, Offred looks at the egg and asks "what more can I want?" (104), then literally eats it up: she swallows the metaphoric representation of motherhood. Just as she cannot physically reject the egg without causing problems in the household, neither can it, as a symbol of her role in Gilead, be turned aside or refused: it must be consumed if she is to stay alive. Both literally and metaphorically, the act of swallowing keeps Offred alive. Thus, what could be read as positive, powerful acts (pregnancy and childbirth) are co-opted by the state and used to disempower handmaids.

The success of Offred's indoctrination is due in large part to the constant reinforcement she receives. The repressive regime, like others in these texts, relies on various forms of propaganda to discourage rebellion and encourage its citizens to participate in the state's ideology. There are a number of parallels between the propaganda used by Gilead and another repressive regime: that of the Nazis, which also utilized propaganda and de-humanizing treatment of its citizens. Moos points out these connections as she compares Atwood's treatment of the copulation Ceremony with Nazi rhetoric when she quotes Jost Hermand who writes, "every woman 'who has not given birth' will have to be denounced as 'dishonourable' . . . [women] will be subjected to 'compulsory copulation.'" (660, quoting from Bergman's *The Spirit of Learning and the Spirit of Motherhood: A Sociology of the Sexes*, 1932). While it is not my intention to indicate here the many parallels between the Gilead and Nazi regimes, the similarity in their treatment of women, as evidenced here, certainly has a bearing upon the discussion. Atwood deliberately incorporates certain Nazi traits into this text in order to further underscore the debasement of women, the ease with which the political transformation occurs and the state's use of propaganda to achieve its goals (certainly, the connections emphasize the horror with which we should regard Gilead). Offred, the narrator, writes of entering the Rachel and Leah Centre and being indoctrinated into the expected patterns of behaviour required of a handmaid. Some of the more obvious forms of propaganda mirror those propounded by Adolf Hitler, who writes in *Mein Kampf* that "the goal of female education must invariably be the future mother" (414). This goal is certainly achieved by

the teachings of the Red Centre, which include child-birth (Gyn-Ed) training in its curriculum (Atwood 66). The biologically deterministic manner in which Hitler views women of reproductive age is certainly echoed by the Gileadean state, though it cloaks its rhetoric in the Bible. Gileadean propaganda achieves its most deadly form in its adoption of the biblical passage “give me children, or else I die” (Atwood 57): that death is a literal one. This slogan, embedded into the educational system for women (the Rachel and Leah Centre, for instance) is a constant reminder of the seriousness of propaganda in a dystopian regime.

Although propaganda is also apparent in *The Gate to Women's Country* (the Ordinances, one might argue, serve that function for the women) the warriors also utilize a form of propaganda to reinforce their position in society. There, the warriors have the saying “‘In bearing a son for a warrior, a woman earns her life.’ That’s the way the indoctrination for boys went. ‘Your mother earned her life so’” (143). In effect, that means that without the constant production of sons and their ransoming into the hands of their putative fathers, the men would see no reason to guard the women. Although their role in reproducing children is negligible, they believe themselves to be in a position of power over the women. Consequently, they have developed a system of indoctrination and propaganda which codifies their importance and which stresses the subservient role of women. Though not in positions of real power, the warriors have adopted a set of stock phrases that illustrate their intent to dominate women and use women for reproductive purposes. Chernon, a young warrior notes,

Even though everybody knew that women cheated about other things, it was generally agreed that they were honest and sensible about warriors' sons because it was in their own best interest to do so. Women knew the warriors protected them only because women bore them sons, so it was in the women's interest to see that sons were produced and brought to the appropriate father. (143)

This statement makes it clear that the business of reproduction is held by the warriors to be very important and suggests that the women remain honest simply because of the threat the warriors represent to them should they lie. From this perspective, the women are seen as meekly submitting to the warriors' demands not only because they have to, but because they *want* to, clearly suggesting an trend toward the sort of reproductive colonization evidenced in Atwood's Gilead.

The warrior saying "There's no use or excuse for a childless woman" (143) is equally suggestive of the low value placed upon women by these soldiers, even though the women have single-handedly resurrected a culture which was nearly destroyed through nuclear war. The warriors do acknowledge that there is indeed a use for a childless woman, usually while toasting each other with beer produced from grain grown by old women, but there is no corresponding dogma to support such thankfulness. Young men grow up believing that childless women are of no value; even convincing a girl to move into the Gypsy encampment (home of sex providers) is considered dishonourable, "as it unfitted her for breeding" (142). Only the production of sons is recognized by the patriarchal men as justification for the women's existence. The bi-annual Carnivals encourage them to develop behavioral codes that are not the same as found within the walls of Women's Country. This distancing from the lives of women beyond the bedroom



allows them to continue in their sexist beliefs regarding reproduction as women's sole value and their phallocentric insistence, supported by their own propaganda, upon their own importance in that society.

In both novels, the attitudes of the male population regarding the reproductive capabilities of women are not unusual, as Rich writes,

Patriarchy has told the woman in labor that her suffering was purposive--was *the* purpose of her existence; that the new life she was bringing forth (especially if male) was of value and that her own value depended on bringing it forth. (159)

Such an assertion is also a form of indoctrination: repeated often enough, it seems true, becoming a part of an individual's consciousness, until it becomes difficult for men or women to debate its truthfulness. Rich captures the attitude which the Garrison men have toward the mothers of their children and the biblical precedents used to justify the pain of childbirth in Gilead, as well as Holyland. To these men, women have no intrinsic value: only through children (preferably male) do they 'earn their keep,' and the pain that comes with childbirth is merely an expression of the value of that life (and not their own).

Atwood's Gilead also expresses this belief that childbirth must be painful, as Offred notes,

Once they drugged women, induced labour, cut them, sewed them up. No more. No anaesthetics, even. Aunt Elizabeth said it was better for the baby, but also: *I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and they conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children.* (108)<sup>4</sup>

The use of the Aunts to transmit the political ideology to the handmaidens is a further

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<sup>4</sup>Later she cites a portion of the marriage service, "[woman] shall be saved by childbearing" (207) which concurs with this belief.

example of colonization: using women to condition women, to teach them what they need to know, makes it more difficult for the handmaids to resist the indoctrination process. The biblical quotations that are used to emphasize this teaching lend credibility to the doctrine while emphasizing women's relationship to breeding and pain. There are no indoctrinating slogans used to encourage women to be good scientists or politicians: the rhetoric used ignores all other avenues of potential contribution.

### Reproduction and Class

It is apparent in this discussion that the creation of a class of women defined by their reproductive abilities has important ramifications, not the least of which is the status of these classes within their societies. As evidenced here, breeding women, though deemed important to carry out political and eugenic goals, are not as esteemed as they might be.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood uses a number of phrases to suggest that the handmaidens are treated like animals. She refers to the Aunts as wielding cattle prods, and the handmaids themselves bearing tattoos to identify them. Of the tattoo, Offred writes, "It's supposed to guarantee that I will never be able to fade, finally, into another landscape. I am too important, too scarce for that. I am a national resource" (60-61). The irony in this statement is evident: resources are not (or should not be) treated in the manner she describes. Livestock is branded (or tattooed), and so are slaves: those whose values are recognized, but only in terms of the commodification of their bodies. The

handmaidens, holding little individual status, are a class of slaves with only one chore: reproduction. The practice of naming women after their Commanders (Of-fred), casually de-individuizing otherwise anonymous women, further demonstrates their status as property. These examples help to illustrate the contempt with which the Gilead state, though professing to believe that through childbirth a woman finds value, treats the very women who are to create its new citizens.

The ease with which even diminished status is removed is clearly demonstrated in this text. Those handmaids who, after three failed attempts to procreate, are unable to bear are declared Unwomen and sent to the Colonies where they face a short and brutal life cleaning toxic waste. The term further solidifies the notion that Gilead women are classified based upon their reproductive status or ability. Without children, then, a handmaid literally relinquishes her claim to womanhood--as an "unwoman" she loses the fragile rights allotted her; as far as the state is concerned, she does not exist, nor does she have any value. More importantly, without children, she is not even a woman--she is defeminized (de-classified?) in the manner suggested by Rich, a judgement which further punishes a victimized female. If reproductive ability defines the breeder class, then to be incapable of belonging (that is, to be infertile) means relinquishing ties to one's peer group (the handmaidens) as well as one's identity as a woman.

This type of (de)valuing structure is one of the defining features of the dystopias discussed in this study, though the value ascribed to breeding women varies from text to text. The tendency toward creating a society that features a "regression of the liberation

of women” (Patrick D. Murphy 88), indeed turning them into a distinct under-class, may be traced in each of the dystopias discussed here: in both Holyland and Gilead, for example, women’s abilities are denigrated and their status sharply curtailed from pre-novel periods. Atwood further shows women whose physical movements are sharply limited, whose options are negligible, who are considered strictly in domestic terms, and whose worth is determined solely by the rank and status of the man to whose household they are attached. As David Ketterer summarizes,

All women who were not officially recognized as Wives, widows, or lower-class Econowives were sorted into four groups: (1) women with viable ovaries become . . . nuns of fertility known as Handmaids . . . each, after a period of training, was assigned to a particular Commander and his sterile Wife; (2) post-menopausal or unmarried women called Aunts, whose job it was to indoctrinate the Handmaids . . . (3) a . . . servant-class known as Marthas; and (4) women who could not or would not belong to either of these groups and who were not hanged as subversive “criminals” became Unwomen, who were usually given the job of clearing toxic-wastes. (209)

Although this makes clearer the connections between women’s roles and the men from whom they derive their status, Ketterer’s summary ignores the sex-provider hidden class known as the Jezebels, women enacting the fantasies of the Commanders and other dignitaries. The Jezebels are kept separate from the other classes of women. They are also sterilized to prevent pregnancies: an odd move, considering the regime’s supposed need for children. Gileadeans recognize a strict dichotomy between the ‘holy’ task of the Handmaidens and the profane necessities of the Jezebels and maintain a distance between the two classes. The sexual woman is not a breeder. Breeders need not orgasm.

As well, one must consider the ramifications of newly created classes of women.

In *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*, notes Malmgren, the clones have created a classist society through their exploitation of breeders and calmly anticipate further schism between the powerful and powerless with the introduction of a new worker class:

the community is evolving from a class society (clones and breeders) into a caste society, with the most intelligent clones making all the decisions, using the breeders to ensure “a continuing population of capable adults to carry on affairs” [Wilhelm p. 187], while cloning *en masse* virtually mindless hordes of expendable workers. (90)

As one clone notes, “If we need road builders, we can clone fifty or a hundred for this purpose, train them from infancy, and send them out to fulfil their destiny” (132) and thus enhance that system of beliefs. Rather than view this as a perversion of the equality of the clones (an equality that is shared by all but the breeders), the statement is met with great cheer, though Malmgren refers to it as the “ruthless exploitation of a breeder class... [kept] docile with drugs and conditioning” (89). However, as individuals, divorced from the community’s collective, the breeders receive little concern from their masters.

This further degradation of human rights is justified by the clones’ belief that no individual is of more value than the future of the collective: to ensure its survival, they are willing to risk any single member (or members). Wilhelm uses such a ruthless de-emphasis upon human rights to illustrate the manner in which the clones can so callously use their former sisters as mindless breeders<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup>In Joanna Russ’s novel *We Who Are About To* (1977), she explores a situation in which women are coerced into breeding in order to increase the population. Rather than accepting that as the means necessary for racial survival (as in Wilhelm’s novel), Russ’s heroine chooses not to participate and kills those who tries to force her. Like many male

While Atwood's Gileadeans are not as individually cruel to their breeder class, the result is virtually the same. In addition to servant and sex-provider classes, the introduction of nameless, faceless handmaidens forms an interchangeable parade of walking wombs. The women take on the names of their Commanders, changing names when they change households, and have their identities further obscured by their winged hoods. Depersonalized, they are easily treated as sub-human, needing constant tending, watched over like children. De-individualized, they recede into the background, forming a silent class whose sole purpose is dictated by the viable ovaries that they themselves cannot see. Similarly, Wilhelm's breeders are silenced by the simple act of conditioning them to remain out of sight and by the administration of drugs.

The connection in these texts between biological determinism, political manipulation of breeders and the creation of new classes is clear. It is also chilling. The use of propaganda, as evidenced by these texts, can become a powerful tool in influencing the way the lives of individuals are controlled by a state, forcing them not only to submit physically to degrading treatment, but requiring them to believe the rationale for their oppression. In Tepper's text, the use that political indoctrination has is shown by the conviction of the warriors' beliefs that the women are inferior to them, simply because they tell themselves it is so: believing it to be true, they act in accordance with those beliefs. Reproductive technology, used for or against women, can make these political

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protagonists (and unlike the breeders of these novels), this character ruthlessly defends her personal autonomy.

decisions a reality, denying women the opportunity to exercise complete control over their bodies and reproductive capabilities.

It is important to study the manifestations of the breeder in utopian literature in order to more fully understand the roles that women play in these fictive worlds. It is particularly important to trace the changes that these writers see happening in the move from our present to a potential future. These particular novels all posit a near-future dystopia set in a country hailed for its commitment to personal freedom: thus, the regression of women's rights and the creation of new classes and castes of citizens stand out starkly as examples of the dangers which may lie ahead. As Adrienne Rich makes clear, the seeds of oppression are not fantastical; in fact, many of the underlying tenets of these new societies may be found in contemporary North America. Margaret Atwood and Sheri S. Tepper look to the bible for the inspiration of their vision of patriarchal oppression of women's rights, and for the justification of women's status as breeders. Kate Wilhelm utilizes a technology that is not far distant (cloning) to question the nature of individuality and personal rights, reminding us that reproductive technology is a double-edged sword that could easily limit rather than empower women. Each shows a society that has separated motherhood from sex: Wilhelm's clones are artificially inseminated, while Atwood's handmaids experience sex for reproductive purposes only, and then are quickly removed from the resultant children. Tepper's Holyland women are to be 'used' for reproductive purposes only (the vagina is referred to as the 'duty place'), and male children are mostly reared by their fathers, while the Gypsy women outside the walls of

Holyland are considered unfit mothers (their children are taken from them by their pimp, and even the soldiers consider them unworthy to “breed” children). While this type of futuristic breeder/mother philosophy permeates the texts, it is not unlike the rhetoric of sexual studies of earlier decades of this century, which proclaimed men’s need for multiple sexual outlets and the thrill of the chase, while viewing women either in terms of their desire to procreate (else why have sex?) or their multi-orgasmic potential (Jackson 46). The authors considered here have attempted to question such attitudes by exploring the issues within dystopian contexts that are frightfully similar, in the last analysis, to our own. They have demonstrated the simplicity with which women’s reproductive and personal rights can be withdrawn, and biology touted as destiny. The speculative nature of this variety of fiction cannot be ignored nor discounted, and the authors’ incorporation of contemporary eugenic and patriarchal rhetoric offers a chilling warning for those who do.



## Chapter Three

### INVISIBLE LESBIANS IN DYSTOPIA

How vital is sex to lesbian identity and what kinds of sex at that? What do you have to do, sexually speaking, to be a 'real' lesbian? Do you have to *do* anything? (Diane Richardson 188)

In the previous two chapters, I explored the manner in which state mechanisms assume control over elements of human sexuality and reproduction. Such control, it becomes evident, is exercised primarily (though not exclusively) over women, as states move toward “reproducing” model citizens and doctrine. When the needs of the individual are insignificant in the face of the collective, it is invariably the individual who suffers. When women are viewed as mere extensions of their capability to reproduce, those who refuse to participate in the state’s plans represent a threat to the social order. Particularly important is the consideration of homosexuality within a biologically deterministic state: lesbians are dangerous because their sexuality does not rely upon men and because they pose a threat to the transmission of doctrine to a new generation. Theirs is a sexuality which does not neatly fit into an essentialistic mode; thus, they are a problem which these states need to deal with.

In two of the texts I am examining, *The Gate to Women’s Country* and *The*

*Handmaid's Tale*, lesbians are removed from the principal narrative in a number of ways. Primarily, lesbians are removed through a pathologization of homosexuality and through “ghosting” (as discussed by Terry Castle, below), which removes lesbians from the sight of society and distances them from the narrative. By examining each method of erasing the lesbian presence, I intend to demonstrate that these two texts dilute the potential impact of their utopian message by removing lesbians, further illustrating the limitations placed upon women in dystopian fiction. While neither author has created what may seem to be an overtly queer text, it is my contention that a queer reading of each is essential to fully explore the ramifications of biological limitations upon women. Just as Ruth Levitas reminds us that utopian definitions may be changed by the particular focus of the theorist, so too may a text be read in a way that seeks to explore different issues and answer different questions. Here, I seek to address the absence of lesbians.

Throughout this chapter I discuss lesbians; in doing so, I rely upon Adrienne Rich's excellent discussion of the “lesbian continuum” (“Compulsory” 650). That term suggests that the definition of a lesbian is more inclusive than genital sexual contact would imply; I therefore use the term lesbian to mean a woman's identification with other women emotionally, physically and psychologically. Rich's continuum is perhaps more inclusive than my own, but it is a useful base from which to begin a consideration of the lesbian presence, and absence, within these texts.

Pathologization in *The Gate to Women's Country*

Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes,

Heterosexism is the DEFAULT position for people who haven't had a reason/opportunity to think or feel for themselves about homo/hetero issues. (In this it is different from homophobia, which is an active thing, not a default position.)

Insofar as heterosexism is systemic, and arrives in people's lives already embodied in the structure of so many institutions and discourses, one needn't have ANY antigay ideas, opinions, or even feelings to be heterosexist--one just has to have NOT questioned, NOT imagined, NOT thought in certain areas, which is the easiest thing in the world. (par. 1-2, emphasis original)

Using this definition, it is clear that Women's Country is a heterosexist space.

Heterosexuality is assumed to be normal and natural by the women, and there is no evidence that Tepper intends her readers to consider any other form of sexuality<sup>1</sup>. The only option open to those women who find the strictures of Women's Country too confining appears to be the Gypsy encampment beyond the enclave's gates. There, sexuality is even more obviously dictated by heterosexuality, as the women serve as prostitutes to the Garrison males.

There does not appear to be any overt homophobia (to use Sedgwick's distinction) within this text, although the lack of attention paid to differing sexualities substantiates a claim to heterosexism. Early on, children learn about heterosexual sex, as noted by Stavia: "She had started women's studies at ten; she had had classes in physiology and sexual

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<sup>1</sup>Although it is beyond the scope of this study, these other forms might include bisexuality and other varieties of non-heterosexuality that are categorized by queer theorists as transgendered, transsexual or intersexual.

skills” (238). Initially, this type of training may seem eutopian: by demystifying sex, an element of fear is removed. Incorporating it into an academic sphere allows correct, factual information to be passed on, reducing the risk of erroneous information being absorbed from one’s peers. It also ensures that each woman knows the language of sex, making it easier to communicate between health professionals and women, and between generations.

However, it also means that there is a strong element of heterosexual enculturation: only one type of sexuality is taught and thus accepted. Alternative choices (except for abstinence) are non-existent. Thus, in a woman’s culture, loving women (in this case, sexually) is not permissible; there is no opportunity to learn from a “community,” nor does experimentation appear possible. Such a heterosexist practice, then, limits the possibilities of the women who spend most of their lives in direct contact with each other, but who are denied the opportunity to form physical or romantic relationships.

The enculturation is further reinforced by the society’s idealization of heterosexual romance: warriors are romanticised in song by young women (80-81), and the biannual Carnivals further cement the connection between heterosexual sex, romance and celebration. Heterosexual love is also part of the education process, as evidenced by the young Stavia who recites the definition of infatuation: “Infatuation makes otherwise reasonable women behave in unreasonable and illogical ways. It is a result of biological forces incident to racial survival” (41). This definition makes it clear that love (or

infatuation) is a result of forces which drive a woman to sustain the species, a precursor to coitus and reproduction. Infatuation that is not reproductively driven (as in lesbian love) is not addressed by Stavia's recitation.

More problematic than the heterosexist enculturation process is the brief notice that is paid to homosexuality. In this passage, Stavia reacts to the idea that one of the Garrison warriors has had sex with younger boys<sup>2</sup> and introduces the primary evidence of the pathologization of homosexuality into the text:

Even in preconvulsion times it had been known that the so-called "gay syndrome" was caused by aberrant hormone levels during pregnancy. The women doctors now identified the condition as "hormonal reproductive maladaptation," and corrected it before birth. There were very few actual HNRMS--called HenRams--either male or female, born in Women's Country, though there was still the occasional unsexed person or the omnisexed who would, so the instructors said, mate with a grasshopper if it would hold still long enough. If the warrior had indeed "forced one of the boys," it had almost surely been done out of viciousness and dominance, not from any libidinal need. Libidinal need was fully accepted as a normal and useful fact of life. Viciousness was not. (76)

This passage is a particularly loaded one. First, it suggests that homosexuality is the result of a hormonal imbalance: something which can be (and has been) corrected. That statement alone negates the possibility of the creation of a flourishing lesbian community:

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<sup>2</sup>This is the only example of same-sex contact within the text, and by including it, Tepper equates the horror of pedophilia with other forms of homosexual contact. Surprisingly, she acknowledges that such a practice (pedophilia) has less to do with sexual desire than it does with the need to exert dominance over those weaker than oneself; what she does not do, however, is make it clear that consensual same-sex contact need not contain that element at all. She also introduces a parody of lesbians when Stavia enters the Gypsy camp: there the women make lewd come-ons toward the young girl for shock value.

attempting to do so would be understood to be merely the acting out of a unhealthy individual. This pathologization further outlaws homosexuality and removes it from the sphere of normal sexual and emotional behaviour.

As well, the assertion that there are very few who are actually born with this maladaptation serves to undermine the possibility that one's neighbour (or sister, mother, or daughter) could be so "afflicted"; one could read that statement as a psychological reinforcement of the cure. If there are only a few individuals born with this problem, then there is no need to adapt the social conditioning of children to accommodate the minority, nor is there need to accommodate their sexual and emotional needs within the community. In this way, the primarily female enclave maintains its heterosexist practices without the need to become more inclusive. In fact, by learning that aberrant individuals exist only in small numbers, the children are less likely to be accepting of variant sexualities within their midst. Pathologizing homosexuality denies these individuals access to respect (they are, after all, not *normal*); it also requires them to keep their sexual and emotional preferences hidden if they wish to be treated as well-adjusted members of their society.

The acronym used to designate these individuals, "HNRMS" or HenRams, is an example of callous disregard for the self-esteem of homosexuals. It becomes merely another way to exploit the differences of these individuals for the amusement of the mainstream, heterosexual society, further marginalising them by labelling them in an amusing fashion (combining male and female animal names). It also relies upon stereotypical behaviour patterns of effeminate gay men (as "hens") and aggressive lesbian

women (“rams”); though without a homosexual presence, one might wonder how such stereotypes exist. The label also suggests that the reverse (men as rams and women as hens) is the more normal, “adapted” behaviour. The result of this labelling further discourages young girls from exploring a facet of their sexuality: they see that women who are “different” are not held in favour, but are instead gently mocked (as in the comment about mating with a grasshopper [76]). I say gently, because overt disapproval might make them seem attractive and dangerous to rebellious teens (young girls are also kept distant from transients for that reason). The girls are led to believe that there are no problems with the Women’s Country system, but that those falling outside its bounds are instead somehow deficient. The net result of these implications further discourages young women from exploring alternate sexualities or modes of expression, while marginalizing the experiences of those who are deemed deviant.

As mentioned above, heterosexual intercourse occurs exclusively during the enclave’s biannual carnivals. During these carnivals, women have “assignments” with warriors in specially-designated public houses. Each liaison is carefully documented by the Council, ostensibly to keep track of which warriors have sired children. The concept of the “public record” has a negative implication for those women who are not interested in an assignment with a warrior: an absence of heterosexual contact is an (unwritten) part of the record. It implies that the Council has access to this unwritten record of heterosexual contact. This has some important implications.

First, there appears to be no confidentiality in matters of individual sexuality. This

becomes apparent when a young Stavia discusses another child's mother:

“Michy's mother is a very strange person. Morgot says she almost never takes part in carnival. She doesn't like sex at all!”

“Some women are like that. You know what I heard? I heard some men are like that, too. Do you believe that?”

“Not like sex?”

“Can't do it or something.”

“Oh well, sure. That's physiological. Or sometimes psychological.” (58)

This discussion between two children illustrates the lack of confidentiality. The Morgot referred to here is Stavia's mother; she is also a doctor and a member of the Women's Council. For a doctor to discuss a woman's sexual history with a child indicates a lack of concern about the nature of that information; it also further ties this woman's sexuality to the medical establishment. I would suggest that “Michy's mother” might be a lesbian character. Her lack of interest in a heterosexual liaison does not automatically mean that she is not a heterosexual, but opens the door to the possibility. If she is, then she is effectively rendered invisible. Not only is this the only mention of her within the text, but she is not even named and exists only through her relationship to heterosexuality--her daughter.

To read this as more than a childish discussion of sexual difference one needs to connect “Michy's mother” to the passage cited earlier regarding “unsexed” women. I suggest that the term “unsexed” as used here can indicate the difference between heterosexual (‘sexed’) and homosexual (‘unsexed’) sexuality. If an entire culture is based upon the belief that heterosexuality is the norm, and homosexuality is pathologized and cured, then perhaps one who does not exhibit signs of heterosexual interest could be



termed unsexed by that culture. Unsexed is, however, used in opposition to “omnisexed,” which may or may not include bisexual women. That distinction might seem to diminish the direct correlation between it and homosexuality, but I feel that the term unsexed, when read as an indication of homosexuality, makes clear the state’s desire to marginalize those women who are not obviously heterosexual and acting within the sexual parameters set out by community standards. If one returns to Rich’s lesbian continuum, one might more firmly situate “unsexed” women within its scope, as she sees a great latitude in defining what it means to be a lesbian (651): some of the historical terms she includes lend credence to the reading of “unsexed” as a potential lesbian presence in this text. Thus while it is difficult to determine exactly where this group might fall (as the term is used once and not directly applied to any individual within the text), and dangerous to assume a simple, direct correlation, my suggestion that it supports a homosexual reading is not too great a leap. Knowing that there is neither a queer culture nor community, it is not too difficult to understand that three centuries of institutionalized heterosexuality might cause one to view homosexuality as a form of un-sexuality.

Further, if one reads the term unsexed in the same way earlier portrayals of women diagnosed some as “frigid,” then it becomes possible to view both the term and the pathologizing practice as an attempt to marginalise lesbians, to make woman-identified women seem “sick” and in need of “treatment”<sup>3</sup>. Writes Margaret Jackson:

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<sup>3</sup>See Adrienne Rich’s discussion of frigidity in “Compulsory Heterosexuality.”

The opposition to women's refusal to participate in the sexual colonization of our bodies has taken many forms, from defining us as pathological--'frigid', 'lesbian' etc.--to the latest form of sex therapy, based on the techniques developed by Masters and Johnson. (49)

Further, if such a sexuality is identified as an illness, and there is no possibility of participating in or drawing strength from a community, one could argue that the "unsexed" woman is merely a woman who has lived her life in the closet, unable to display her emotions for fear of ridicule and homophobia.

Of equal importance is the assertion that Michy's mother has only rarely participated in "carnival": that is important as it demonstrates an additional way in which lesbians in this community are violated by the heterosexist Council. In order to conceive, a woman is artificially inseminated following heterosexual contact at a carnival. For a lesbian, that means that childbearing can only come as a result of (unwanted) heterosexual intercourse, even though that same intercourse is not required to produce a child. The odd logic victimizes all women who are unaware of the system in place to create children; lesbians are, however, especially victimized. Women's Country's need for secrecy requires lesbians to participate in unwanted sexual contact, though the technology exists to allow them to bear children without it. This requirement demonstrates the lack of concern Women's Country has for its lesbian citizens who choose to mother children. Kathleen Barry describes this situation in her work entitled *Female Sexual Slavery*, writing that lesbian women like these are, in effect, "internalizing the values of the colonizer and actively participating in carrying out the colonization of . . . self and . . .

sex” (172)<sup>4</sup>. Lesbians are forced to assume the practices of heterosexuals in order to realize a desire to procreate.

It becomes obvious upon investigation that the heterosexist Women’s Country has little concern for those members of its society who are not heterosexual. Women who are “unsexed,” if read to be lesbian, are definitely “other”: they are not killed or persecuted, but they are indeed marginalised by their difference. After one brief passage discussing “Michy’s mother,” no other female sexual deviants (if a celibate woman may be classified as such, given the nature of this text) are discussed within this context<sup>5</sup>. Thus lesbians (or potential lesbians) become invisible, disappeared from the woman’s community, reminding us, as Monique Wittig does, that “Matriarchy is no less heterosexual [or heterosexist] than patriarchy: it is only the sex of the oppressor that changes” (10). The pathologization of homosexuality within Women’s Country, as suggested by Rich’s historically-based argument, not only removes the presence of lesbians, but refuses to question the fundamental heterosexist assumption that women are innately heterosexual. Rich writes,

The assumption that “most women are innately heterosexual” . . . remains a tenable assumption, partly because lesbian existence has been written out of history or catalogued as disease; partly because it has been treated as exceptional rather than intrinsic; partly because to acknowledge that for some women heterosexuality may not be a “preference” at all but something that has to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force, is an immense step to take if

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<sup>4</sup>This is also the situation in *The Handmaid’s Tale* when Offred finds herself anxious to conceive, knowing that she has internalized goals which were not her own.

<sup>5</sup>That excludes Gypsies whose entire existence is marginalised and beyond the bounds of “acceptable” or “normal” behaviour.

you consider yourself freely and “innately” heterosexual. (650)

When Michy’s mother, or any other potential lesbian character is removed from the text of what has been seen as a feminist eutopia, it can only underscore a societal attitude toward the management of women’s sexuality. It also makes it clear that the maintenance of a uniformly heterosexual society comes at the expense of those women for whom heterosexuality is not an option.

#### Ghosting in *The Handmaid’s Tale*

Terry Castle has examined the portrayal of lesbians in literature and finds that many have the characteristics of a ghost: shadowy, spectre-like, haunting a text only to be exorcised (6-7). She reminds us that lesbians are usually treated, politically speaking, as “nonperson[s]--without rights or citizenship--or else as . . . sinister bugaboo[s] to be driven from the scene at once” (5). This is, Castle continues, because lesbians represent a threat to heterosexist and homophobic culture:

Why is it so difficult to see the lesbian--even when she is there, quite plainly, in front of us? In part because she has been “ghosted”--or made to seem invisible--by culture itself. It would be putting it mildly to say that the lesbian represents a threat to patriarchal protocol: Western civilization has for centuries been haunted by a fear of “women without men”--of women indifferent or resistant to male desire. Precisely because she challenges the moral, sexual, and psychic authority of men so thoroughly, the “Amazon” has always provoked anxiety and hatred. (5)

This passage captures the manner in which I have chosen to read the lesbian character in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, as it demonstrates the contradictions inherent in the portrayal of Moira. She is introduced as a lesbian character and then oppressed by

the Gilead regime, making her important in the early narrative, only to disappear without a trace. In Castle's terms, she is "ghosted." She is not really *there*; even when she appears in the text, she is intangible and quickly exorcised.

Moirra presents a particularly interesting example of ghosted lesbians. Semiotician Frank Proschan suggests that the (un)presence of Moira might be defined as "dysphemism," or inverted euphemism. He defines this as "where something would be made manifest and explicit in order to minimalize or trivialize it" (par. 1). He goes on to suggest that "Atwood [seems] to affirm what is really ignored . . . [she] is in fact passing over something by pointedly seeming to emphasize it" (par. 1). This terminology helps explain the shifting and intangible nature of my reading: Moira exists and thus seems important, but at the same time, she is distanced from the focus of the narrative and her experiences are less important than Offred's, suggesting that Moira's presence is less important to Offred than one might originally expect. In fact, as I will argue, it is possible to read Moira as a non-actualized, stereotyped lesbian character before she is removed from the discourse by both Gilead and her friend Offred.

Adrienne Rich has written about the tendency in literature to include a "token lesbian" ("Compulsory" 632), and I would argue that, in some respects, Moira serves that role in this text. We learn through Offred's recollections that Moira is an "out" or self-declared lesbian, and that seems to raise important questions in the text: how would an outed lesbian be treated by the Gileadeans, and what would her particular experience be like? In the early passages describing the relationship between the two women, they

appear to be close friends; presumably, then, Offred is (or would be) very concerned about Moira once she becomes aware of the punishment for homosexuality. Their friendship is important to both women.

Yet, at the same time, there is evidence that Offred has difficulty, at least initially, in coming to terms with Moira's "outlaw" status. She recalls:

We both laughed then, and when she left we hugged each other as usual. There was a time when we didn't hug, after she'd told me about being gay; but then she said I didn't turn her on, reassuring me, and we'd gone back to it. (161)

This passage gives evidence of the kind of stereotyping that I will discuss further below: that lesbians are automatically attracted (and predatory, thus dangerous) to all women.

Even to her best friend, Moira represents an area of uncertainty at the moment she declares herself to Offred: she is both friend and potential sexual aggressor, which makes physical contact uncomfortable for Offred. Blurring these lines seems to make Moira's story secondary to the discomfort of Offred, as Moira is forced to reassure her friend that there is no sexual tension between them.

Another method of distancing Moira from the narrative is the manner in which Offred discusses their friendship and Moira's relationship to Offred's life. Although Offred discusses her relationship with Luke and suggests that Moira participates in that aspect of her life (that is, has a friendship with the couple), these memory sequences appear to occur only on Offred's own "turf": that is, while Moira seems to take part in Offred's family and lifestyle, the reverse does not appear to be true. Moira comes to

dinner, but Offred does not attend a march<sup>6</sup>. Offred at various times in the novel recalls situations from early childhood to pre-Gilead, snippets of her life that are important and trivial, called into her memory through external stimuli. None of these memories deals with her excursions into Moira's domain, only Moira's incursions into her own.

Significantly, nowhere does Offred indicate that Moira is herself part of a relationship.

Though, as I discussed earlier, one need not be sexually active to be a lesbian (nor is it the only "proof" of a lesbian presence in a text), Moira's lack of relationship suggests that she is either celibate or that she does not share that aspect of her life with her best friend. In my reading of the relationship, I suggest that Moira's "celibacy" may be a result of her wish not to jeopardize her friendship with Offred, since that woman seems uncomfortable with Moira's sexuality. As a result, Moira is diminished. If, however, Moira is involved in a relationship and Offred does not choose to convey that information to her audience, then it suggests that such information is not important to her, although her own pain and loss over Luke's disappearance is. That would suggest that the importance of Moira as a lesbian (with an emotional commitment to women) is not worthy of her consideration.

Either potentiality results in Moira's experiences as a lesbian, suffering loneliness and deprivation under the Gileadean regime, being devalued and essentially disappeared from

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<sup>6</sup> There are some assumptions underlying such a statement. While not every lesbian is or should be assumed to be politically active, Moira herself is, as evidenced by her involvement in the Women's Collective. Moira in many ways typifies a politically active lesbian, thus to point out Offred's lack of involvement in her best friend's activities demonstrates not a gross over-generalization on my part, but a curious one-way relationship between the two women.

the discourse.

Moirra is further marginalised and stereotyped by Offred's portrayal of her as an incredibly strong woman and by their experiences at Jezebels. As Offred relates more of their shared history, Moirra begins to take on the appearance of an "Amazon" who can tackle any feat. Her heroic attempt at freedom, for instance, becomes a talisman for the other women to hold onto. I do not wish to suggest that lesbians are neither strong nor heroic, but I am suspicious of the tactic used here simply because Moirra appears as a "token" lesbian in the text. Moirra becomes both more and less human in this process: she begins to serve as an alter-ego to Offred, particularly in the fan incident: "They've given me a small electric fan . . . its blades encased in grillwork. If I were Moirra, I'd know how to take it apart, reduce it to its cutting edges . . . If I were Moirra, I could do it without a screwdriver" (160). In the process, Moirra loses touch with the narrative as she becomes more a part of Offred's consciousness and less an individual. As an Amazon, she is first described as heroic (the escape attempt), only to have that power denied to her (she is caught). This is a typical, patriarchal reaction to Amazons, as Sarah Lefanu writes:

As a general rule . . . Amazons must be punished, nominally perhaps, for their presumption in assuming 'male' characteristics, such as strength, agency, power, but essentially for their declaration of Otherness. (33)

Once punished, an Amazon disappears; as Lefanu goes on to note, "she must be denied through death, or forced into submission to a male-dominated heterosexual practice which then becomes the norm" (33). This is certainly the case with Moirra: she is portrayed by Offred as a rebel, and as such must be controlled by the regime and forced into a



heterosexual extreme of prostitution before being disappeared from society at Jezebels, and finally, made invisible within the narrative.

Moira is further stereotyped in her reactions while at Jezebels. Although she is definitely being repressed and controlled by the heterosexual contact she has chosen over death, she still feels the need to reassure her friend that she is unchanged. Offred unconsciously demands that Moira remain strong and in control though she clearly is not. As when Moira reassured her friend that she did not find her attractive (thus removing her from the sphere of dangerous, predatory lesbians), here she must placate Offred with reassurances that her ordeals of attempted escape and prostitution have not altered her:

She is frightening me now, because what I hear in her voice is indifference, a lack of volition. Have they really done it to her then, taken away something--what?--that used to be so central to her? But how can I expect her to go on, with my idea of her courage, live it through, act it out, when I myself do not?

I don't want her to be like me. Give in, go along, save her skin. That is what it comes down to. I want gallantry from her, swashbuckling, heroism, single-handed combat. Something I lack.

"Don't worry about me," she says. She must know some of what I'm thinking. "I'm still here, you can see it's me . . . "

. . . Now she's teasing, showing some energy, and I feel better. (234)

This insistence that her friend remain unchanged denies that Moira has, by virtue of her sexuality, suffered hardships Offred has avoided, and it is further enhanced by the defiantly cheerful tone that the conversation takes. The conversation, as Offred reminds us, is a reconstruction (126) designed to sound like Moira as a way of "keeping her alive" (228): Moira's words are not heard as spoken, but instead are filtered through the consciousness of a woman who does not accept the possibility of a profound change in Moira.

The suggestion that many of the other Jezebels are lesbian and have their sexuality used to titillate the Commanders is a particularly troublesome one (“Butch paradise, you might call it . . . they encourage it . . . women on women sort of turns them on” 234). Once again, it demonstrates the homophobic nature of the Gilead regime. The Gileadean power structure is threatened by the existence of homosexuality, and as a result, kills or exiles all gay men; lesbians, though they are also a threat to the highly-ordered family structure, can serve a purpose by plying their sexuality. By prostituting themselves, lesbians are allowed to remain within Gilead, though hidden from the sight of average citizens. In that respect, all Jezebels are shadowy figures in the text: only Offred’s direct contact with them makes their existence known to the reader and to the historians, who do not discuss the significance of the Jezebels scene, nor the role lesbians played in its operation. The women there are not described openly as lesbians (with the exception of Moira, who identifies her sexuality clearly within the text when she comes out to Offred in pre-Gilead circumstances), though they are, in Moira’s own words, “not too fond of men” (234). Moira also notes that for the women serving as Jezebels, homosexual contact is not prohibited, but is encouraged or ignored, as is their alcohol and drug use. It is also the place where the marginalization of homosexuality begins: by (re)locating this sexual practice within the realm of the brothel, a place of moral decay, decadence and vice, Gilead has firmly established it as the practice of the “other”: a practice that cannot be sanctioned within the mainstream.

After the Jezebel scene, Moira essentially disappears from Offred’s tale, but she

does not disappear without assistance from Offred. Though faced with what Moira's life must surely be like, Offred cannot help but wish that,

Moira escaped, for good this time. Or if I couldn't tell that, I'd like to say she blew up Jezebels, with fifty Commanders inside it. I'd like her to end with something daring and spectacular, some outrage, something that would befit her. But as far as I know that didn't happen. I don't know how she ended, or even if she did, because I never saw her again. (234)

Offred is attempting to pay tribute to the carefree spirit of her friend, but I believe she does Moira's memory a disservice. Instead of recognizing that Moira did the best she could under incredible circumstances, Offred wishes for Amazonian heroism from a marginalised woman. When the desired event does not occur, Moira fades as though she has disappointed her friend.

Moira and the other lesbians at Jezebels are not only hidden from the sight of the general community, but they must efface their sexuality in order to maintain their position within Gilead and avoid the penalty of ending up in the Colonies. Writing of effacement for the purposes of maintaining one's existence, Michel Foucault argues:

To deal with sex, power employs nothing more than a law of prohibition. Its objective: that sex renounce itself. Its instrument: the threat of a punishment that is nothing other than the suppression of sex. Renounce yourself or suffer the penalty of being suppressed; do not appear if you do not want to disappear. Your existence will be maintained only at the cost of your nullification. Power constrains sex only through a taboo that plays on the alternative between two nonexistences. (84)

Moira, as an outed lesbian, faces exactly this situation: efface herself and her sexual preferences or be erased by becoming an Unwoman. Closeted lesbians in this society maintain their existence by remaining invisible. Remaining hidden, given the indoctrination

process, is itself a situation fraught with danger. There are no safe zones for those identified as traitors against the state.

As indicated previously, the presence of Moira as a lesbian in Offred's tale suggests that her role is important to the narrative; yet, beyond serving as a sort of conscience for Offred, she is quickly and easily removed from the text. Although her presence might be read as an attempt to affirm the lesbian experience in a repressive, dystopian setting, by stereotyping and eventually ghosting Moira, Offred has effectively trivialized the experience that she attempted to affirm. Marginalised, Moira's experiences are not included in the "Historical Notes" section: though this section is not to be read as a summary of only the most significant facets of the Gilead era, the lack of concern for Moira's experience suggests that academics have also missed its significance.

Reading these two texts from a queer perspective has its problems: obviously, Moira cannot speak directly to the audience, as the narration appears to take place within Offred's mind, while the minor mention of Michy's mother may be explained by the simple fact that she is not an important character in comparison to those who command a greater share of the text. Yet, it is important to realize that neither of the societies presented here is open to homosexuality: both societies have chosen to diminish or disappear those women who are, or who may be lesbians. By reducing homosexuality to a medical condition and trivializing the situation of Moira, both texts shy away from the potential impact homosexuality has upon their dystopian warning.

These two states display a heterosexist bias when it comes to dealing with the

sexuality of women. Women's sexuality is controlled and regulated in order to fit predetermined ideas of what a woman should be, how she should be sexual, with whom, and for what purpose. The absence of lesbians within these texts is evidence of political doctrines which deny women control over their own sexuality. The very existence of lesbians within an ordered society, argues Rich, "comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is also a direct or indirect attack on male right of access to women" (651). The repressive societies examined here are uncomfortable with the concept of women without the need for men and respond by sharply limiting their role within the state.

It is important to realize that, while these two texts deny homosexuality a place within the mainstream, other texts offer different visions of the role lesbians might play. Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, for instance, demonstrates a real freedom of personal sexual expression within her eutopian future, though certainly not within the dystopian future or the present. Similarly, Kate Wilhelm's *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang* does not discriminate against same-sex relationships, although in that society homosexuality is not the result of personal freedom, but mutual ownership of each clone. In both, homosexuality is not used as a rallying call for repression, but viewed as a normal fact of life--not to be pathologized or ghosted--but accepted.

## CONCLUSION

As Nan Bowman Albinski writes, technology is neither positive nor negative in itself. Only its application by individual humans can be seen to be helpful or harmful (179). That ambiguity is apparent within these texts: the artificial insemination used by Sheri S. Tepper, for instance, is intended to have an eutopian result, but, as I argued in Chapter Three, the policies cloaking its use deceive women and treat them as if they were incapable of making reproductive decisions on their own. Kate Wilhelm's use of the same technique, again as a means of perpetuating a positive political decision, becomes another way of repressing fertile clones, rather than simply ensuring the continuation of humanity.

In each instance, the fundamental tensions between the rights of individuals and the needs of the state are evident. That tension manifests itself as political forces, driven by individuals, attempt to reconcile the needs of the many with the repression of the few. Each of these texts deals, in some manner, with the oppression of women and the control of women's bodies by a political entity. Removing control over reproductive and sexual decisions from the hands of individual women, even for the most eutopian of reasons, opens the door to all manner of repressive tactics. Women's bodies become commodities to be used by the state in efficient fashion to produce a desired population. Women are relegated to the position of sex-providers in order to maintain their existence. They are

controlled by reproductive technology, losing the ability to decide when and how to conceive and deliver a child. As seen in these texts, that lack of control, whether recognized as such by the women or not, does little to enhance their status within their community: instead, they face the loss of civil rights and privileges; they lose the freedom of movement they once enjoyed; they are altered into forms barely recognizable to a contemporary reader. They are changed, and not for the better.

The political decisions enacted in these societies spring from reasonably high-minded necessity. Tepper's Council attempts to alter men in order to make society safer for women and children. Margaret Atwood's Gileadeans and Wilhelm's clones attempt to redress a population decline and widespread infertility. Even the alterations evident in Marge Piercy's dystopian future grow out of the desire to achieve physical beauty. None of these goals are inherently dystopian. It is, however, the manner in which these policies are enacted, on and through the bodies of women, that is. The result is oppressed and silenced women who are classified strictly in terms of their reproductive or sexual capacity, and who are denied the opportunity to explore other possibilities within themselves and their societies. The question that each text raises: what price is too high? When do the rights of individual oppressed women equal the requirements of a political doctrine? How important is continuing the species if it means losing our humanity? The novels examined here peer into the darkest corners of this emotionally charged arena and make some interesting speculations about how a political entity can take charge of the most intimate and private aspects of its citizens' lives. The texts address the horrors of

biological determinism, considering what it means to be enslaved by the flesh that the state holds so dear and the effects such emotional bondage have on individual women. The novels also raise questions about the future of humanity and the motivation behind taking control of that future eugenically: whose genes are fit and whose are not? What will the future look like? How does the state enforce these decisions?

The relationship between the state and the women who embody its policies is a delicate one. Not only must the state balance the needs of a population against the marginalisation of a few individuals, but it must rationalize the choices it makes. If women are being protected, although lied to, and men are fundamentally changed, though slaughtered on occasion, is that evidence of an eutopian society in which women are in control of their own destiny, or a dystopian one in which only the political leaders are aware of the reality of their situation? The possible answers to these questions help to place the societies along the utopian continuum. Through the eyes of the women who view these worlds, we can see that both the state and the people operating in its name are not always held accountable for their actions. Though cloaking its decisions in rhetoric designed to present its decisions in a favourable light, it is clear that the state is quite ready to ruthlessly sacrifice any individual who threatens its chosen path. In its wake, it leaves women whose lives are altered by political decisions beyond their control, women whose basics rights and freedoms, held dear today, are erased, oppressed and controlled tomorrow.

Marleen Barr writes that dystopian texts are more than stories (93): they are



warnings of potential futures too devastating to contemplate. That is true. These stories are warnings of the possibilities of technology, the uses of eugenics, and the control of human flesh. They are utopian tales that urge us to consider how we will view the future, and ask difficult questions about the policies of the present. They remind us, as Ruth Levitas does, that one need only change the questions asked of these possibilities to alter our perceptions. Political necessity, or individual freedom? Neither is inherently positive or negative. Only by viewing each through the eyes of those affected can one decide.

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