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The First Thing out the Window: Race, Radical Feminism, and Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*

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The feminist movement of the 1970s was plagued with fragmentation as it sought to produce a singular woman's identity under which all feminists were expected to unite. Women who felt that their interests were not represented by this primarily white, middle-class, heterosexual identity criticized the movement for not adequately addressing their needs. Marge Piercy's 1976 novel Woman on the Edge of Time exemplifies this tension within the radical feminist movement. Connie Ramos, the novel's protagonist, is an impoverished Chicana who is hospitalized after defending her niece from an act of domestic violence. While living in the hospital, Connie visits a utopian future world where gender, sexuality, race, and class are vastly different from in her own world. Through Connie's character Piercy explores the experiences of a marginalized woman's journey from victim-hood to political awareness. Although Piercy creates a fictional imagining of a particular theoretical moment in 1970s feminism, her work reflects and reinforces the radical feminist tendency to prioritize gender over race and class.
The First Thing out the Window:

Race, Radical Feminism, and Marge Piercy’s Woman on the Edge of Time

*Woman on the Edge of Time*, written in the midst of what historians refer to as the Second Wave of American feminism, is a feminist science fiction classic. However, although this feminist novel makes arguments for the elimination of sexism, racism, classism, and homophobia throughout, when contextualized as an artifact of 1970s feminism, we can see how it embodies many of the women’s liberation movement’s problematic aspects. In this thesis, I argue that by contextualizing, analyzing, and interrogating *Woman on the Edge of Time* with texts coming from the radical feminist movement, we can see how the novel reflects and reinforces the radical feminist tendency to prioritize gender over race and class.

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1 The novel received reviews from many major periodicals upon its release, including the *New York Times Book Review, Newsweek, Time,* and *Mademoiselle,* as well as several feminist publications like *Frontiers* and *The New Women’s Times.*

2 I call Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* a “feminist novel,” using the definition given by Judi M. Roller in her book *The Politics of the Feminist Novel.* In a feminist novel “the central character or characters … must be female and must represent women generally as well as a woman specifically;” “struggles between individuals, especially between individual men and women, illuminate or suggest the power relationships existing between groups;” and “the situations existing … are presented as dependent, at least to some extent, upon economic, political, and social systems” (4-5). Along with these criteria for a feminist novel, *Woman on the Edge of Time* also features a protagonist who is mad, and whose madness is a result of society’s treatment of her and her social circumstances. This is a characteristic of a feminist novel as well, but a “frequent” one rather than a universal (5-6). Finally, Roller also suggests that a feminist novel must imply that societal change (“progress”) is necessary – the conflicts within the novel between or among characters and/or society can only be solved through an “economic, social, and political restructuring of society” (6).
In the three following sections of this thesis, I show the connections between Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* and the radical feminist movement.³ In the first section, I examine several radical feminist texts coming out of the women’s liberation movement from 1967 to 1975. One of the texts that I analyze is *Sisterhood is Powerful*, an anthology of feminist writings from 1970. This anthology emphasizes the idea of “sisterhood,” which focuses on female solidarity through shared oppression and sacrifices. The language of inclusion and diversity which editor Robin Morgan uses to describe the collected works suggests that women from many backgrounds are included in its pages, which is atypical for radical feminist writings at this time. However, women are expected to identify through their gender before any other identity category; in other words, feminists and women of color should identify solely as women. Along with showing the radical feminist goal within those texts by white feminists – that the elimination of male supremacy will result in the eliminations of racism and classism – I will use feminist texts from this time that argue against this goal for being insensitive to race and class issues. As Martha Cotera bluntly puts it in *The Chicana Feminist*, “Forget sisterhood; that’s the first thing that flies out the window” (40).

³ Women’s liberation and the movement associated with it are distinct from women’s rights organizations like the National Organization for Women (NOW). Maria Lauret provides an excellent discussion of the differences between the two. The women’s liberation movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s held strongly to radical feminism for its theorizing, and consisted of many loosely affiliated groups (Lauret 52). NOW and the liberal feminism associated with it had a hierarchical structure and used more traditional lobbying methods to achieve its goal of equal rights for women (Lauret 52). From a theoretical viewpoint, “Women’s Liberation conceived of women as an oppressed caste or class, rather than a social group merely behind on its constitutional rights,” which was a part of liberal feminism and NOW (Lauret 53).
After showing the relevance of how radical feminists' rare attention to race is less than satisfactory through historical context and primary feminist texts, I move on in the second section to discuss *Woman on the Edge of Time*. In section two, I argue that the different temporal/spatial environments of the novel provide the necessary sites for ideological conflicts that reveal this novel as preoccupied with the concerns of many feminists of the 1970s. Through interacting with denizens of the utopia and dystopia, Connie Ramos recognizes her own present-day as in need of feminist changes. Tensions between Connie and her utopian saviors reflect a power differential and resulting racial tensions amongst participants of 1970s women’s activist movements. In the novel, the utopia’s denizens eliminate racial oppression through a genetics program emphasizing racial diversity, resulting in singular cultures for each town that have a mix of people of different skin colors. Through showing racism as easily solved through selective breeding, a methodology eerily familiar to that of racially motivated eugenics movements of the first half of the 20th century, Piercy not only minimizes race, but suggests that gender is the key form of oppression.

The third and final section of this thesis continues my analysis of race in the novel through Piercy’s treatment of racial and cultural assimilation.5 Throughout the scenes

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4 Daniel Kevles has an excellent overview of the history of eugenics in the United States and Europe in his book *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity*.

5 For a definition of assimilation, I used the entry from *The Mexican American Experience: An Encyclopedia* by Matt S. Meier: “A process, also referred to as acculturation, in which a person of a minor ethnic group adopts the cultural patterns of the majority society. The adaptation is usually gradual, and may vary in degree from surface acceptance to complete immersion. Typically the higher the socioeconomic level, the greater the degree of assimilation” (30). George Sanchez, in his book
taking place in the present, Piercy pays close attention to assimilation and its consequences. Most of the main characters of the novel deal with assimilation, as they do not fit the identity category of the U.S. hegemonic norm – the elite white heterosexual male. Piercy describes a complex picture in which race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class all are in tension with assimilation. The characters that I analyze from the present-day all either desire to assimilate or outwardly reject what they see as mainstream culture. However, such a nuanced approach to problems of assimilation merely serves to highlight a radically assimilationist project in which the utopian society engages.

Piercy’s utopia, in which all people are perfectly assimilated to their isolated cultures, suggests that the perfect world is one in which there are no margin spaces. The expectation of assimilation within the novel echoes that of radical feminists. As many feminists sensitive to race and class issues writing in the 1970s and early 1980s have noted, it is exactly white women’s expectation of women of color to organize around their gender and assimilate that is a fundamentally flawed understanding of oppression. As Martha Cotera argues, searching for or believing that there is one singular identity for a person is unwise. “Let’s not deal with that history entirely as if we’re searching for our identity. Let’s deal with it as a perspective on where we came from, where we are, and where we’re going” (37).

_Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945_ complicates previously used models of “cultural adaptation,” arguing that stressing “either cultural continuity or gradual acculturation has short-circuited a full exploration of the complex process of cultural adaptation” (13).
Race, the Radical Feminist Movement, and “Sisterhood”

Historian Alice Echols argues that the radical feminist movement lasted from 1967 until 1975, during which time it was the “dominant tendency” within the women’s liberation movement (5). Although radical feminism as a movement rose to prominence, then burned out quickly, being replaced by cultural feminism, it yielded many now-classic feminist works including books (e.g. *The Dialectic of Sex*), novels (e.g. *Woman on the Edge of Time*), and anthologies (e.g. *Sisterhood is Powerful*). In these texts, as I show in this section, women explored and developed an ideology of radical feminism that constructed male supremacy as the root cause of oppression. When radical feminists did address other forms of oppression, which was not common, it was usually cursory – they suggested that racism and classism either did not matter, or would disappear after the eradication of sexism. Members of the women’s liberation movement’s racism, or at the least, their insensitivity to race issues, in part led to the movement’s splintering into factions and shift into cultural feminism. As Echols notes, women from within and outside the movement criticized radical feminists, saying that they did not adequately acknowledge race, class, and sexuality differences among women (293-294).

In this section of my thesis, I give an overview of radical feminism in the late 1960s and 1970s, paying special attention to how its narrow focus on sexism resulted in an understanding of oppression that often resulted in an inattention to the diversity of women’s backgrounds. Perhaps Ellen Willis, cofounder of the Redstockings, a New York-based radical feminist organization, summarizes radical feminism’s relationship to ideas about race the best when she says, “our lack of attention to social differences
among women did limit and distort both our analysis and our practice, and it’s hard to see how that could have been avoided without reference to a politics about other forms of social domination” (122-123). Because radical feminists focused on gender as the foundational form of oppression, the very basis of radical feminism, “as a political movement to end male supremacy in all areas of social and economic life, and rejected as sexist the whole idea of opposing male and female natures and values,” they could not address women’s oppressions that were due to their race or class (Willis 117).

Echols also addresses radical feminism’s blind spots to race and class. She points out that by 1970, “excoriations of the movement as racist, classist, and heterosexist became routine if not obligatory at feminist gatherings” (293). Radical feminists reacted to these critiques in varying ways, ranging from Robin Morgan and Kathleen Barry’s retort that “class was a male-defined category irrelevant to women” to members of the Redstockings who claimed that women criticizing the heterosexism were anti-liberationist women who hoped lesbianism would ruin feminism (293). In order to focus on the radical feminist movement’s attentive inattention to race and class, I have chosen to look at Robin Morgan’s *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement*, a key collection of writings published in 1970. *Sisterhood is Powerful* pays atypical attention to women’s diverse backgrounds by containing essays by women who did not identify as white, heterosexual and of the middle-class. However, while Morgan’s introduction touts the diversity of the anthology’s authors, it simultaneously emphasizes the idea of sisterhood and the radical feminist idea that sex oppression is the foundation form of oppression.
After discussing Morgan's introduction, I look at an essay within Sisterhood is Powerful that critiques white feminism by Chicana Enriqueta Longauex y Vasquez. Vasquez's essay calls for a greater attention to race and class within the women's liberation movement, and its presence in the anthology provides an interesting counterpoint to the overall narrative of sisterhood found within the collection. The inclusion of Vasquez's essay within Sisterhood is Powerful reflects a rare attempt by a radical feminist to move not only from an all-white perspective on feminism, but also beyond a black/white binary. As I show in section two, Woman on the Edge of Time also atypical for other texts of its genre, feminist fiction, because of its inclusion of themes of race, particularly through using a Chicana protagonist.

*Sisterhood is Powerful*, published in 1970, is one of the first anthologies of feminist writings from the women's liberation movement. Through its introduction, prefaces to individual essays and sections, and the essays themselves, the anthology crafts a narrative of female solidarity through shared oppression and sacrifices. The publication of *Sisterhood is Powerful* coincided with the publications of several other now classic feminist texts, including Germain Greer's *The Female Eunuch*, Vivian Gornick and Barbara Moran's anthology *Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness*, Shulamith Firestone's *Dialectic of Sex*, Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*,

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6 Radical feminist Shulamith Firestone, a member of the New York Radical Women, the Redstockings, and the New York Radical Feminists published *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* in 1970. In it, Firestone appropriates elements of Marx's theories in order to offer a theory of women's oppression, suggesting that women are the "underclass" in the "sex-class system" (Firestone 11). Following from that, she argues that in order to have a truly socialist revolution eliminating the class system, one must eliminate male supremacy (12-13).
and Celestine Ware’s *Woman Power* (Rosen xxii). An article in *The New York Times* from 1970 even goes so far to say, “Apparently, like student protest, black history and American Indians before it, the women’s liberation movement is about to have its ‘season’ in book publishing” (Lichtenstein 32). Along with several of the new, now classic books mentioned above, Lichtenstein also notes the reissue of “classics”: 1949’s *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir (albeit, a Bantam Books official says, without “the naked lady” on the cover), 1963’s *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan, and 1968’s *Born Female* by Caroline Bird (32). Also coming out in 1970 was a nascent version (a booklet) of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* by the Boston Women’s Health Collective, called *Women and Their Bodies* and the first edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* came out in 1973. *Sisterhood is Powerful* came out in an auspicious year for feminist texts.8

The two other major contemporary anthologies of the women’s liberation movement, the aforementioned *Woman in Sexist Society* and the 1973 collection *Radical Feminism* edited by Anne Koedt, Ellen Levine, and Anita Rapone, both self-consciously construct a unifying sisterhood. In Gornick and Moran’s introduction to *Woman in Sexist

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7 Kate Millet, a member of the National Organization for Women (NOW), wrote *Sexual Politics*, also published in 1970. Founded in 1966 with Betty Friedan as its first president, NOW was part of the liberal women’s movement, as opposed to the radical feminist movement which came later. In *Sexual Politics*, Millet argues that through analyzing literary works from the 19th and 20th centuries that “sex is a status category with political implications” (24). The examples she uses in the beginning of her monograph from Henry Miller’s *Sexus* and *Black Spring*, and Norman Mailer’s *An American Dream* are descriptions of sexual encounters that are profoundly misogynistic (3-22).

8 Also published in 1970 is Toni Cade’s collection *The Black Woman: An Anthology*. Although not a radical feminist anthology, it is an important counterpoint to collections like *Sisterhood is Powerful* because it contains writings by black-identified women, arguing that black women are a diverse group and that race and gender are both significantly oppressive forces in their lives.
Society, they deliberate on the concept of the woman as a "category of human." Gornick and Moran titled their anthology Woman in Sexist Society, not Women in Sexist Society, building solidarity of a singular women’s identity. Unlike Sisterhood is Powerful, Woman in Sexist Society does not tout and build its unifying sisterhood through the identity categorical diversity of its contributors, but through its emphasis on the wide variety of social (and temporal) spaces in which women have experienced sex discrimination. This anthology also is more academically oriented, with many of the authors who either worked in academia or were published authors, like psychologist Nancy Chodorow, art historian Linda Nochlin, literary critic Elaine Showalter, and writer Alix Shulman.

Radical Feminism, the other anthology produced by radical feminists in the early 1970s, also relies on building a universal sisterhood through providing writings on the movement that “reflect this basic feminist goal” of “the complete elimination of the sex role system” (vii). Most of the essays do not address race and the editors do not emphasize the diversity of their authors, as does Morgan. However, two essays discuss black women, the underwhelming “Black Feminism” by Cellestine Ware and “Jane Crow and the Law” by Pauli Murray and Mary O. Eastwood, and another engages briefly with anti-imperialist “Indochinese women,” “The Fourth World Manifesto,” in which Barbara Burris argues that all women are colonized by male domination and are therefore by nature “anti-imperialist” (322-323). Black-identified authors wrote neither of the essays on black women, and the essay on the “Fourth World” was written by a group of women’s liberationists from Detroit (none self-identified as women of color). Alice Echols suggests that “The Fourth World Manifesto” should be read as a transitional text,
one that bridges radical feminism and cultural feminism (246). Rather than ignoring women's differences, as radical feminists tended to do, it "defensively deni[ed] them" by suggesting that "the debates over class and race were nothing but a male invention" coming from "the male Left" (246). While, as Echols says, the authors of the Manifesto shifted their tone about race and class from the typical radical feminist non-engagement, their attitude was certainly not an improvement.

* Sisterhood is Powerful*, as opposed to the other two anthologies mentioned, is more frequently cited, and also constructs "sisterhood" through the diversity of its writers. Including self-identified women of color in its pages is atypical for a work coming from participants in the radical feminist movement. However, the inclusion of women of different backgrounds does not erase the radical feminist idea that male supremacy is the primary form of oppression. In her introduction, editor Robin Morgan uses a language of diversity and inclusion to frame her discussion of feminism, yet the text suggests a prioritizing of gender-based oppression over that of race or class. Morgan argues:

> Until recently, the movement seemed to be composed mostly of young white women from middle-class backgrounds... But this is beginning to change, partly because the general consciousness about the oppression of women is spreading through all groups and classes, and partly because the women's movement has set itself the task of analyzing divisions (race, class, age, hetero- and homosexuality)

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9 See notes on other publications from this time period, as well as the above discussion of the other anthologies.
that keep us apart from each other, and is working very concretely to break down those divisions. (xxix)

Morgan, unlike the editors of the collections mentioned above, does not ignore racism and classism as important issues; she openly claims that thus far the movement has consisted primarily of white, middle-class women. Race, class, and sexuality are all “divisions” that prevent women from forming a unified front. However, Morgan also argues that women should unify with each other rather than with racially organized groups: “We share a common root as women, much more natural to both groups than the very machismo style of male-dominated organizations, black, brown, and white” (xxix-xxx, italics hers). Seeking freedom from oppression, for women of color, must be done under the banner of the feminist movement Morgan describes, as it is more “natural” to unite as women. Identifying as a woman, for Morgan, is therefore a more important form of oppression.

In her introduction, Morgan explicitly engages with the “worldwide revolution” of colonized peoples, but only to identify racism as secondary to sexism. “Third World peoples, black and brown peoples,” she argues, “are rising up and demanding an end to their neo-colonial status under the economic empire of the United States... How, we are asked, can you talk about the comparatively insignificant oppression of women, when set beside the issues of racism and imperialism?” (xxxiv, italics hers). Although Morgan brings up U.S. imperialism as an issue for women, she generally states this question as one that has no specific author or source. She words it herself, suggesting that all people of anti-imperialist movements worldwide believe that the oppression of women is insignificant compared to their oppressed subjectivities as colonized and/or people of
color. This question, Morgan says, “is a male-supremacist question” because it “dares to weigh and compute human suffering, and it places oppressed groups in competition with each other” (xxxiv). Morgan then argues that this is also a poor question because it “fails to even minimally grasp the profoundly radical analysis beginning to emerge from revolutionary feminism: that capitalism, imperialism, and racism are symptoms of male supremacy—sexism” (xxxiv, italics hers). Morgan’s argument is almost identical to that of the “Redstockings Manifesto.” The Redstockings were a Radical New York feminist group to which Morgan belonged. Their Manifesto argues that toppling male supremacy should be the target for all activists because “Male supremacy is the oldest, most basic form of domination. All other forms of exploitation and oppression (racism, capitalism, imperialism, etc.) are extensions of male supremacy: men dominate women, a few men dominate the rest” (579). By claiming that racism, along with capitalism and imperialism are symptoms of sexism, Morgan (and the Redstockings) trump any further discussion of whether racism or sexism is the “worst” form of oppression. Echols cites Lynn O-Connor, a Bay Area feminist, who “had initially embraced the pro-woman line,” and subsequently, “argued that it encouraged the suppression of conflict within the movement” (334). Since sexism is the disease and racism merely one of its symptoms, it does not matter anymore within this logic which one is more significant. Sexism must be addressed as it is the epicenter of all forms of oppressions.

The idea in Morgan’s introduction that gender oppression is more important than racial oppression assumes that racism and sexism are mutually exclusive. In her book *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, bell hooks rejects this idea and offers this critique of feminism in the 1970s:
If the white women who organized the contemporary movement toward feminism were at all remotely aware of racial politics in American history, they would have known that overcoming barriers that separate women from one another would entail confronting the reality of racism, and not just racism as a general evil in society but the race hatred they might harbor in their own psyches. (122)

While not written to address it specifically, bell hooks’ critique of the women’s liberation movement applies to the radical feminism foundational to *Sisterhood is Powerful*. Furthermore, as evidenced by Morgan’s introduction, Morgan acknowledges that racism may be an issue in the daily lives of black women and other women of color, but suggests that gender-based activism should take precedent over attempts to subvert racism.

Although *Sisterhood is Powerful* is well over 600 pages, containing over 70 essays, the voices of Chicana feminists appear only twice—once in an essay, and a second time in the introduction to that essay. By including the voice of “a Mexican woman,” *Sisterhood is Powerful* attempts to represent a diverse and politically active group of women. By examining Enriqueta Longauex y Vasquez’s essay “The Mexican-American Woman,” in *Sisterhood is Powerful*, along with critiques of white feminism that emerged later in the 1970s, specifically Cotera’s *The Chicana Feminist*, I show the internal tensions in the women’s movement resulting from radical feminism’s insensitivity to race and class.

In “The Mexican-American Woman,” Vasquez reveals a long history of Chicana feminism and relates it both to patriarchy and intercultural politics. Vasquez suggests

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10 These are two of three essays in a section entitled “Colonized Women: The Chicana.” The third essay in this section is perplexingly “Experiment in Freedom – China” by Charlotte Bonny Cohen (385-417).
that sexism within La Raza forced Chicanas to “go along with the feelings of the men” (427), but that the history of Chicanas reveals strong, albeit silent women. She observes, “[The Chicana’s] work must be three times as good as that of the Anglo majority. Not only this, but the competitive way of the Anglo will always be there. The Anglo woman is always there with her superiority complex” (429-430). Vasquez asserts herself and her observations of the Chicana’s position both in a racist society and a racist radical women’s movement. Vasquez’s essay confounds the overall celebratory construction of radical feminism in Sisterhood is Powerful—an anthology that trumpets the successes of the (white) women’s liberation movement and smooths over conflicts within the movement while calling the attention to the diversity of its authors. While condemning men within the Chicano movement for being sexist, Vasquez also contends that racism from white women is equally challenging for the Chicana.

Although Sisterhood is Powerful acknowledges racial diversity through including Vasquez’s essay, the emphasis on diversity in Morgan’s introduction resonates with the tokenism Alice Echols describes as occurring within the radical feminist movement:

Although quite a few white women’s liberationists were concerned about the relative absence of women of color in the feminist movement, their attempts at outreach too often remained token in nature. Indeed, the mad, last minute scramble for a ‘black feminist’ or a ‘woman of color’ that characterized many feminist conferences and gatherings suggests that discussions of race were seen as both obligatory and peripheral. (291)
By the 1980s, though, this had changed due to the increase in participation of women of color working to address the "movement's silencing of women's differences" (291). In the 1970s, however, the dominant trend in feminism — radical feminism — failed to adequately address the diversity of women.

Cotera, in The Chicana Feminist, highlights the tense relationship between Anglo and Chicana feminists seen in Vasquez's essay. Cotera argues that Chicanas have a long history of feminist activities and ideologies and that feminism needs to incorporate a more complicated view of liberation that encompasses issues of class and race. Cotera identifies three counterproductive, racist and classist avenues through which white feminists have viewed Chicanas and other women of color. First, Anglo women see themselves as saviors for women of color (who are apparently ignorant victims of sexism) (40). Second, women of color are treated as 'observers' rather than active participants in the women's movement (40). Third, white feminists lump all women of color into the 'lower classes' and have many attitudes that underlie their relationship with "women who [they believe] are lower class" (40). Cotera also suggests that women's liberationists implied a progression to the liberation of women. "The Anglo woman's chauvinistic attitude is: 'Look, we are achieving political status and we're going to

11 The increase in the number of publications by feminists that included analyses of the interlockings of multiple forms of oppression reflects the shift in ideology away from the privileging of sexism. In 1981, Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa edited and published This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color, a now-classic feminist anthology of the writings of women of color. This Bridge Called My Back seriously challenged the racism of white feminism. Following in 1986 is All American Women: Lines That Divide, Ties That Bind edited by Johnnetta B. Cole, an excellent anthology that seeks to move beyond the white racism within the movement of the late 1960s and 1970s (xiii). In 1984, Elly Bulkin, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Barbara Smith published a trio of essays on race and anti-Semitism in Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism.
liberate ourselves and then liberate Chicanas, Blacks, and all the women in the world.’
They always assume that the minority women’s plight is worse” (17). She continues to
indict women who may be responsible for discrimination against Chicanas, “It is often
painful to recall that majority women, through passive acquiescence or active
discrimination, have been accessories to our oppression” (34).12

Returning to *Sisterhood is Powerful* with Cotera’s critique of Second Wave feminism in mind, we can begin to see how *Sisterhood is Powerful* attempts to bring
women of diverse backgrounds into the orbit of the women’s liberation movement by
suggesting that they should privilege gender over class. According to Sutherland, a
former member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and
contributor to *Sisterhood is Powerful*, white feminists jettisoned the radical equality
movements of the 1960s because these movements did not include women’s issues.
Sutherland’s call disregarded traditions of Chicana feminism. According to Cotera,
“there has always been feminism in our ranks and there will continue to be as long as
Chicanas live and breathe in the movement, but we must see to it that we specify
philosophical direction and that our feminist expression will be our own and coherent
with our Raza’s goals in cultural areas which are ours. Chicanas will direct their own

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12 For an excellent discussion of Chicana feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, see Chapter 5, “La Nueva Chicana: Women and the Movement” in *From Out of the Shadows* by Vicki Ruiz. She outlines the tensions between the often male-dominated Chicano movement (the Movimiento) and feminists, describing the difficulties of dealing with a nationalist movement espousing the idea of “a Brown nation (or Aztlán)” that often limited Chicanas’ access to self-empowerment (105-06). For a compelling, recent literary work concerned with the heteronormativity and male-domination within a nationalist ideal of Aztlán, see Cherrie Moraga’s dystopian play *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* from 1995.
destiny” (12). *Sisterhood is Powerful* reveals the methodology by which white radical feminists of the 1960s and 1970s attempted to deal with issues of race and class.
Woman on the Edge of Time as a Feminist Text

At the end of Marge Piercy’s 1976 novel Woman on the Edge of Time, protagonist Consuela Ramos thinks:

If only they had left me something! Only one person to love. Just one little corner of loving of my own... For that... I would have agreed that I’m sick, that I’m sick to be poor and sick to be sick and sick to be hungry and sick to be lonely and sick to be robbed and used. But you were so greedy, so cruel! One of them, just one, you could have left me! But I have nothing. Why shouldn’t I strike back? (367)

From the first pages of the novel to this dark ending, Marge Piercy establishes that Connie faces oppression in many forms. Living in New York in the 1970s, she is a poor, unemployed, single Chicana. She has been the victim of male violence, her boyfriend killed by the government, and her only child taken away by social services. At the very beginning of the novel, we find Connie trying to protect her niece from her niece’s boyfriend/pimp – Connie hits him on the head with a wine bottle, and he and his friends beat her into unconsciousness. When she awakens, she finds herself in a mental hospital, where she remains for the rest of the novel.

The science fictive aspects of this novel appear in the form of Luciente, a person who claims to be from the future utopian society Mattapoisett – Massachusetts in the year 2137. Luciente teaches Connie how to project herself into the future, visiting there while her body remains in the hospital. In true utopian fashion, Connie explores various aspects
of the future society, and she finds that the peoples of the future have eliminated all forms of social inequality. Sexism, racism, homophobia, and classism have all been excised.

As Connie increasingly enjoys being in the future, her existence in the hospital becomes more and more terrifying. She and her fellow patients/friends become subjects of an experimental treatment, and the doctors invade her brain with implants with which they try to control her emotions. When she reacts poorly to the implants, the doctors remove them and plan to cauterize the amygdalae, the emotion-controlling nuclei found in the medical temporal lobes of the brain. By the end of the novel, Connie believes that she must stop these experiments in order to allow the utopian future to come to pass. To do so, she decides she must kill the doctors in charge, knowing that she will no longer be able to contact Luciente, but not explaining how she knows this. She poisons the doctors' coffee and watches as paramedics take away four bodies.

*Woman on the Edge of Time* has played no small part in reinforcing the ideas of the women's liberation movement in the 1970s. Most scholarly books discussing "feminist fiction" coming out of the 1960s through the 1970s mention *Woman on the Edge of Time* as part of this literary genre. In *Liberating Literature: Feminist Fiction in America*, Maria Lauret argues that "Feminist fiction emerged in the mid to late 1970s, on the crest of the Second Wave Women’s Movement...feminist writers inverted the logic of a literary-critical establishment which had regarded the ‘lady-book’ as, at best, a sub-literary genre of its own and at worst as an upmarket version of popular romance" (1). Among several other women writers of the mid-20th century, she lists Marge Piercy as a writer of this genre. In *Feminism and its Fictions*, Hogeland also identifies Marge Piercy as a writer of feminist fiction. Specifically, she singles out *Woman on the Edge of Time*
as an example of 1970s consciousness-raising (CR) fiction. The CR novel in the 1970s is one that “crossed established genres, and crossed as well divisions between ‘literary’ and ‘popular’ fiction” (x). The CR novel, she argues, “enabled a wider circulation of ideas from the women’s liberation movement by moderating those ideas” (ix).

Hogeland also argues for the important role feminist reading practices in the 1970s played in building a consciousness about feminist ideologies. Because members of the feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s became defined not by whether or not one belonged to an organization, but because one considered oneself a participant, feminism itself from this period becomes difficult to define (Hogeland 3-4). In order to get around the “problem of the definitional question,” Hogeland suggests that instead of depending on a “subjective membership” in the movement for a definition, one should look at ‘being a feminist’ as a question of literacy (4). She explains, “rather than seeing allegiance to the women’s liberation movement in terms of activity, we should see it in terms of a set of reading and interpretive strategies that people who identified themselves as feminists applied both to texts and to the world around them” (4). An awareness of the practice of reading feminist texts (what Hogeland calls “feminist literacy”) as a critical part of the methodology of feminist activism helps to emphasize the importance of reading (and writing) feminist fiction as a key part of the feminist movement.13 Woman on the Edge of Time played a role in building a feminist consciousness and therefore is a rich text with which to ‘read’ 1970s radical feminism.

13 For a thorough discussion of feminist activism’s dependence on textuality, see Jaqueline Rhodes’ Radical Feminism, Writing, and Critical Agency: From Manifesto to Modern (2005).
Scholars of feminist fiction of the 1970s suggest that these texts come from a wide range of traditional genres, including science fiction, fantasy, utopias, detective fiction, and romance (Cranny-Francis 1). By using "'popular' literary forms," feminist writers can not only break into the popular fiction markets, but engage with foregrounded conventions of various genres and make their "ideological framework" more visible than in non-genre fiction in which the lack of conventions can obscure "encoded ideological statements" (Cranny-Francis 1-3). *Woman on the Edge of Time* is most-often identified as a work of feminist utopian fiction.14

Hogeland categorizes *Woman on the Edge of Time* as the "post-apocalyptic utopian/dystopian" subset of the feminist science fiction genre. Along with Piercy's novel she also identifies *The Female Man*, *Benefits* by Zoe Fairbairns (1979), *Walk to the End of the World* by Suzy McKee Charnas (1974) and *Motherlines*. She suggests that "These novels emphasize the political choices in the present moment that are necessary to bring about the utopian or prevent the dystopian future, and this link highlights the political messages of the novels" (115). By creating a dependence on present acts in order to build a specific future, "these novels lay out agendas for organized feminist

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political activities" (115). Of Piercy’s novel she says its “attention to race and culture along with gender is extremely rare in the utopian fiction of the decade” (116). What novels of this sub-genre do have in common, according to Hogeland, is that, except for *Woman on the Edge of Time*, they tend to be monocultural and any implied racial or ethnic diversity is “purely cosmetic” (116).

The need for political actions in *Woman on the Edge of Time* appears in Connie’s present, and with the present’s juxtaposition with a utopian future. Within Connie’s dystopian present, Piercy includes feminist issues relevant to both the women’s health and reproductive rights movements and the radical feminist movement, as well as attention to issues of sexuality, race and class within radical feminism. Piercy’s novel nods to the women’s health movement through her female characters’ struggles to have control over their bodies’ reproductive capabilities via abortion, oral contraception, and involuntary sterilization, all of which occur in the novel’s present. The majority of *Woman on the Edge of Time* takes place in Connie’s present—both starting and ending in 1970s New York City. M. Keith Booker argues that Piercy's America "is already a dystopia for marginal members of society like her protagonist" (339). However, Booker sees this dystopia as important because Piercy intervenes in a literary genre that is not often sensitive to gender systems. By using the conventions of “classic dystopias” (341), such as using them in tandem with a corresponding utopia, Booker suggests that Piercy is able to disrupt the static nature of utopias. In other words, Piercy’s utopia provides readers with a space in which they can consider and critique their current society rather than simply serve as a dream or ideal for which readers could hope (338-339).
While it is important to recognize how Piercy’s negotiation of dystopia/utopia provides a space for readers to think critically about social issues, I also explore the specifics of the present-day dystopia. The experiences of Connie and her female family members in this dystopian present highlight Piercy’s attention to the women’s health movement and women of color’s needs for a reproductive rights campaign more broadly defined than access to abortion and oral contraceptives. By focusing on the underpinnings of this dystopia in Second Wave feminism, I will be able to reconfigure our understanding of both Piercy’s utopia and, ultimately, the negotiation of race and gender in 1970s feminisms.

Piercy writes many female characters in Connie’s present that face issues of control over their own reproduction. Piercy defines reproductive rights more broadly than just the right to an abortion or access to oral contraceptives, which reflects a knowledge of and attention to reproductive issues important to women and feminists of color. In her history of reproductive politics, Rickie Solinger points out that “Women-of-color organizations expressed the need for reproductive rights against a history of reproductive exploitation of an entire people” (182). ‘Reproductive rights’ entail having the choice and opportunity to control one's own body, and the right to choose not only when, or if, to be a mother but to be free of institutional policies infringing on women’s abilities to have children.15

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15 For discussions of population control issues with regards to reproductive rights, see Dorothy Roberts’ *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction and the Meaning of Life* and Andrea Tone’s *Controlling Reproduction: An American History.*
Piercy wrote *Woman on the Edge of Time* during the newly developing women’s health movement, which, according to Ruth Rosen, started in 1969 with a group of women in Boston participating in a workshop about “women and their bodies” (176). Afterwards, “they studied anatomy, physiology, sexuality, venereal disease, birth control, abortion, pregnancy, and childbirth” and began giving courses on women’s health to other groups of interested women (Rosen 176). These health activists’ goals were to “disseminate biological knowledge. A critical text coming out of this movement was *Our Bodies, Ourselves* by the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, published in 1973.16 *Our Bodies, Ourselves* covers a wide range of women’s health issues, including sexuality, women’s anatomy, contraceptive techniques, abortion, and pregnancy. As Ruth Rosen says, women “questioned why doctors controlled women’s reproductive decisions” (176). The Boston Women’s Health Book Collective researched the information themselves because “We had all experienced similar feelings of frustration and anger toward specific doctors and the medical maze in general, and initially we wanted to do something about those doctors who were condescending, paternalistic, judgmental and non-informative” (11).

Piercy’s addressing of not just pro-choice and abortion rights politics but women’s reproductive issues in her novel reveal an attentiveness to the women’s health issues brought up by the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective. In the second edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, from 1976, they specifically discuss health issues for women of color. Health care, they argue, “is in addition [to sexism] is often pervaded by racism

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16 Although the first edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* was published in 1973, earlier versions of the book existed in booklet form, the first being *Women and Their Bodies* from 1970.
— in the poor quality of care, the unavailability of services, and the alienation of the largely white medical personnel they have to deal with” (337). They also identify population control methods employed by the United States as well as internationally, with the goal of “reducing the numbers of Third World people” (338). Providing women of color with contraceptives, while leaving other medical care largely unavailable is one of the specific methods of population control (338).

The differing definitions of reproductive rights during the 1960s and 1970s provide an example of how race and class diversity among women can affect the differences of political needs between white middle-class women and women of color. According to Jennifer Nelson, feminists began a national campaign to legalize abortion in 1968, but “Redstockings and other feminists active in abortion rights…alienated black and Latino men and women from the feminist abortion rights movement by limiting their political goals to the legalization of abortion” (13, 18). Black women and Latinas did not see reproductive rights as only about obtaining legal access to abortion and contraception, but as a battle against population control methods of involuntary sterilization (Nelson 18). Historically, as Jael Silliman, Marlene Gerber Fried, Loretta Ross, and Elena R. Gutiérrez note, the United States has pursued methods to reduce or, less often, increase the numbers of people of color. These methods have ranged from giving blankets with smallpox on them to Native Americans during colonization to increasing the numbers of slaves owned through rape and forced marriages of black women (Silliman, Fried, Ross, and Gutiérrez 7). In the 20th century, the United States government has employed “Eugenics laws, immigration restrictions, sterilization abuses, targeted family planning, and welfare reform” in order to reduce the population of people of color (Silliman, Fried,
Ross, and Gutiérrez 7). For people of color, reproductive rights often became about the right to control their own reproduction rather than submit to institutional population control politics. White women, unless they were working class women, did not have the personal experiences with racist eugenics-style policies on which to base their push for reproductive rights.

The differing ideas about the issues surrounding reproductive rights polarized and separated white feminists from women of color in the early 1970s. Unfortunately, the Redstockings, being mostly white and middle-class women "took their experiences [with reproductive issues] to represent the experiences of women, in general; they did not recognize that women of color and poor women had different experiences and, thus, different problems that needed to be addressed by another set of demands" (Nelson 23). Although, as Linda Gordon points out in her history of birth control, "Abortion legalization was one of the most clear-cut and concrete among many women’s-rights victories of the 1970s" (400), more broadly construed reproductive rights remained a contested political arena. Eventually, in 1977, women founded a large organization that sought to improve reproductive rights rather than just abortion rights (as in the pro-choice movement) – the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse (CARASA) which "placed opposition to sterilization abuse on a par with support for abortion rights" (Silliman, Fried, Ross, and Gutiérrez 33).

Through Connie's niece Dolly, whom readers meet in the opening pages of the novel, readers are exposed to a struggle over a Chicana’s reproduction that inverts the
narrative of the illegal abortion. Dolly’s relationships with men and other women highlight what is at stake in this misogynistic dystopia and the ways in which other people and institutions attempt to control her body and reproduction. Dolly, a sex worker whose labor is exploited by her boyfriend/pimp, Geraldo, tries to use her ability to reproduce in order to escape this oppressive situation. She “had tried to get pregnant, believing that Geraldo would let her quit whoring” (6). However, the power she believed was offered to her through her pregnancy is thwarted when Geraldo forces Dolly to have an abortion. While refusing to acknowledge his own complicity in Dolly’s situation as a sex worker, he also seizes this opportunity to further disenfranchise her by denying he is the father because she sleeps with so many men. This situation exposes the limits of female agency in a feminist dystopia by showing how women are not able to control their own bodies, sexuality, and reproduction. Even when a woman attempts to break free from a man’s control over her body, she is met with an additional instrument of male oppression. As a result, Piercy creates a totalizing system from which women cannot escape.

Connie also finds herself in an unwinnable situation where her lack of control over her body leads to further oppression from men. After finding out that her husband Eddie cheated on her, Connie has an abortion. As in the example of Dolly’s situation, Piercy shows a woman attempting to gain power through controlling her own reproduction, but by having an abortion rather than getting pregnant. However, her

17 Before the Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade* in 1973 declared laws prohibiting abortion unconstitutional, many women sought out illegal abortions. For two examples of personal stories of illegal abortions, see *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, pp. 235-38. *Sisterhood is Powerful* has an appendix with instructions provided by NOW for finding abortion services and counseling (584-88).
attempt is punished as Dolly's was; when Eddie finds out, he beats her, and Connie finds herself in the hospital. While in the hospital, "Unnecessarily they had done a complete hysterectomy because the residents wanted practice" (37). Connie’s experience resonates with the 1975 court case Madrigal v. Quilligan, in which Dolores Madrigal and eleven other Chicanas sued the University of Southern California-Los Angeles Medical Center for sterilizing them without their informed consent (Hernandez 4-5). While at the Medical Center to deliver her second child, Madrigal signed consent forms “Under the severe pain of labor, and after being assured that the operation could be easily reversed” (Hernandez 5). Although doctors sterilized Connie via a hysterectomy and due to a botched abortion, the problem of involuntary sterilization of a Chicana is the same. As Hernandez suggests in her 1976 article, the involuntary sterilization of Chicanas and other women of color was not just a single wayward doctor or hospital, but a pervasive, institution-wide eugenicist phenomenon which stretches from the medical association to the practices of federal and state governments (3-4). The resonance between Connie’s fictional experiences and the experiences of the plaintiffs of Madrigal v. Quilligan suggests that Piercy’s work seeks to connect the socio-political landscape to the

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18 For more information about the history of the eugenics movement and involuntary sterilization in the United states, see Daniel J. Kevles’s *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity*, Stephen Jay Gould’s “Carrie Buck’s Daughter,” and Paul A. Lombardo’s *Three Generations, No Imbeciles: Eugenics, the Supreme Court, and Buck v. Bell.*

19 Vicki Ruiz argues in *From Out of the Shadows* that although the judge ruled in favor of the Medical Center that the case helped bring to light sterilization abuse issues in the Mexican and Mexican American community (113-114). Ruiz also cites Madrigal v. Quilligan as an example of “feminist commitment to community” (114).
personal fictions of her character. As a popular slogan of radical feminism says, “the personal is political.”

Connie used an abortion to gain power over her husband; however, with depressing irony, she is then unable to become pregnant ever again. Not only is she subjected to an unwanted surgical procedure that leaves her unable to have children, her mode of accessing power is eliminated as she can never again use her control over her reproductive body to gain agency. Finding out about her hysterectomy, Connie’s father tells her that she is “no longer a woman. An empty shell” (37). The ultimate patriarchal figure, Connie’s father, deems her nothing. Her identity as a woman as defined by her father, is based in her ability to have children, and without that ability she serves no purpose. As in the case with Dolly, Connie is trapped within a system of domination from which she cannot escape, as she is both defined by and subject to the whims of her male oppressors.

A third way in which Piercy shows women’s failures in their attempts to gain power in a feminist dystopia is through Connie’s sister Inez’s choice not to get pregnant. Dolly chose to get pregnant, Connie chose to get an abortion, and Inez chooses to use oral

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20 According to Rosen, Carol Hanisch, a member of New York Radical Women, coined the phrase “the personal is political” (196). The idea behind this phrase is “that there were political dimensions to private life, that power relations shaped life in marriage, in the kitchen, the bedroom, the nursery, and at work” (Rosen 196).

21 See *Wake Up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race Before Roe V. Wade* by Rickie Solinger for a discussion of unwed motherhood, race, and reproductive/abortion policy. Also, see Leslie Reagan’s *When Abortion was a Crime: Women, Medicine, and Law in the United States, 1867-1973*. 
contraceptives to prevent pregnancy. However, as with Dolly and Connie, Inez’s choice to control her own reproduction is also foiled, and with the example of Connie, her experience resonates with a prominent issue for Chicana women in the 1970s. After Inez’s sixth pregnancy, which was particularly difficult, she decided to use the pill so that she would not get pregnant again. Unfortunately, the doctor “had his scientist cap on and he was experimenting” (269). He gave her a placebo instead of the contraceptive, and Inez had a seventh child, who “was born dim in the head… [Inez and her husband are] supposed to give him pills and send him to a special school, but it costs” (269). Inez’s experience is very similar to experiences of seventy-eight women reported in 1974. According to Our Bodies, Ourselves, the medical profession tends to target people of color as subjects of experiments (337). One such experiment, done by Dr. Robert Goldzieher: “in which seventy-eight multiparous chicano women [sic] were given placebos, or ‘dummy’ pills, without their knowledge, in a Texas birth control experiment, with the result that ten of the women became pregnant in the first four months of that experiments” (Boston Women’s Health Book Collective 337). This description of the experiment obviously provided Piercy with inspiration for her characters’ experiences. And, as with the other women’s attempts at choosing to control their reproduction, Inez’s also runs up against problems. A male doctor decides that his “experiment” is more important than his patient’s medical decision not to become pregnant and Inez and her


23 For more on women of color used as experimental subjects without their knowledge, see Annette B. Ramirez’s Catholicism and Contraception: A History of Birth Control in Puerto Rico.
family suffer for it. Further, the resonance of both Inez and Connie's experiences with real-life accounts suggests that the medical institutions responsible for women's health have failed them, not only because they are women, but also because they are Chicana.²⁴

While the examples of Dolly, Connie, and Inez reveal Piercy's attention to the women's health movement, they also show that Connie's present is a feminist dystopia. Piercy's broader definition of reproductive rights than that of most other radical feminists also reveals a need for feminist change that includes issues of race. Through looking at Piercy's constructions of sexuality, particularly that of lesbians, readers encounter another aspect of radical feminism.

Connie's visits to the future can be seen as a series of ideological confrontations with her own internalized values and beliefs learned from a hostile patriarchal society. One of the main sources of discomfort for Connie in her initial interactions with people of the future is their liberal attitude about gender and sexuality. The moments of discomfort are places where Piercy's feminist work happens. Connie's confrontations with patriarchy, for instance, stress the importance of "sisterhood" in the rejection of patriarchal ideologies.

The first moment in the text that exposes Connie's discomfort with the sexuality/gender of the person from the future comes when she discovers that she mistakenly believes Luciente is a man. When she discovers otherwise:

In anger she turned on her heel and stalked a few paces away. A dyke, of course.

That bar in Chicago where the Chicana dykes hung out shooting pool and cursing

²⁴ For a thorough analysis of the roles of women of color in the 1970s women's health movement, see historian Jennifer Nelson's *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement*.
like men, passing comments on the women who had walked by. Yet they had never given her that sense of menace a group of men would — after all, under the clothes they were only women too. (59)

Connie's first reaction to the androgynous appearance of Luciente is one of anger. She uses a homophobic slur to describe Luciente, but already her interactions with the utopia have begun to unravel her beliefs about sexuality. Right after thinking of Luciente as a "dyke," she begins to deconstruct the discomfort she has with Luciente's androgynous appearance. She draws a distinction between "dykes" and men, noting with dogged biological essentialism that the women are women regardless of outward appearance or sexual behavior, and therefore not as dangerous as men. In this passage, Connie's exposure to the utopia's acceptance of queer sexualities (via Luciente) lead her to embrace the values of "sisterhood" which allow her to disavow, at least partially, the homophobic ideologies instilled in her by her patriarchal environment. She looks for allies in women regardless of perceived differences while identifying men as a common threat. Seeing Luciente as an ally because she is female regardless of her not gender 'coding' as a woman reflects the ambivalence women had towards men in the radical feminist movement.25

25 In Feminism and its Fictions, Hogeland points out that radical feminists had a range of opinions about men and the male role in a feminist movement (see Chapter Four: "Men"). The problems of an identity-politics-based political movement like that of women's liberation appear in the above cited passage. Women, including queer women, are not menacing because of an investment in an essentialist notion of gender. Hogeland notices that within the 1970s CR novel, "the alienness of men appears everywhere" (114), which also suggests a biologically-based difference between men and women.
Later in the novel, Connie has adjusted to Luciente's appearance, saying she "now looked like a woman. Luciente's face and voice and body now seemed female if not at all feminine; too confident, too unselfconscious, too aggressive and sure and graceful in the wrong kind of totally coordinated way to be a woman: yet a woman" (91). Connie has learned that to be a woman is not the same as being feminine, and her ideas about gender and sex have been broadened beyond the narrow sex/gender, female/feminine assumption she had been using before. Luciente is a woman and confident, unselfconscious, and aggressive. However, Connie’s acceptance of Luciente is connected to an observation that Luciente now looks like a woman because she knows that she is female. Connie, although accepting of a queer womanhood, still attaches gendered values to particular personality attributes, revealing an essentializing gender system. Luciente is a woman, but one that has, if not explicitly ‘masculine’ characteristics, not ‘feminine’ ones either.²⁶ With this new conception of gender and womanhood, learned from the utopia, Connie shows a greater awareness of an existence not defined by her own patriarchal society – a female identity can exist that is not passive, unsure, and complacent.

Serving as an alternative to the future utopia while reinforcing the critique of patriarchy, the future dystopia Connie visits represents what her world will look like if it continues on its current path. Luciente tells Connie that if the doctors continue their

²⁶ In Patricia Duncker’s *Sisters & Strangers*, she argues that the “framing narrative” of Connie’s present world “plays out the realities of our lives with all the savage clarity of a radical feminist tract” (102). However, Duncker also believes that the portions of the utopian sections of the novel that deal with sex are decidedly not radical due to the “clichés which surround the delights of heterosexuality” that match “unthinking anti-Lesbianism” (103). Lesbianism was an important issue in radical feminism. For a discussion of lesbianism as a political identity choice, as well as splintering among radical feminism due to contested ideas about lesbians, see Echols, pp. 210-228.
experiments on Connie and others, the possible future of the dystopia will come to be, rather than the utopia of Mattapoissett. Connie only visits this dystopia once, and for a brief time, but it is enough to see that it is a place where feminism has failed, and no feminist goals have been realized. It is a nightmarish place where the problems of Connie's world are magnified and compounded. Women and men are both genetically and surgically altered to be grotesque caricatures of femininity and masculinity. The gap between the rich and the poor is unfathomable, and the rich and the poor are completely segregated. People's skin color is lightened with shots. Food comes in packets, made from coal, algae, and wood by-products, and the environment is so polluted that the air is thick, yellow and opaque. Entertainment is experienced through a "Sense-all" which is "like dreaming, only you're awake" – the catalog of programs includes pornography which depicts "mass rapes, torture," cannibalism, murder, and bestiality (287). When Connie reads this catalog, she remarks, "Men and women haven't changed so much" (288). Connie's visit to this future reconfigures how she critiques her own world. Unlike her visit to Mattapoissett where her world was critiqued by the differences between it and Mattapoissett, in this dystopian future she is able to see the similarities between this world and her own. She critiques her world through the continuities between it and the future dystopia.
Cultural Assimilation and Diversity in *Woman on the Edge of Time*

Connie's visits to a future where gender, sexuality, race, and class are all conceived differently than in Connie's present, allows her to gain self-awareness and recognize her world, and her position in it, as oppressive. Utopian Mattapoisett at first glance seems to be a culmination of radical feminist activism. Different gender roles do not exist, marriage has been eliminated, no one is rich or poor, and everyone recycles everything. However, in order to eliminate racism, Piercy sets up a relationship between race and culture in Mattapoisettian society rooted in the racial tensions in 1970s radical feminism.

Along with her preconceived notions about gender and sexuality, Connie's views about the relationship between race and culture are also disrupted, and this, like many of her discussions with Luciente in Mattapoisett, leaves her shaken. When discussing the different villages of the area, Bee, a man of the future, tells Connie:

> decisions were made forty years back to breed a high proportion of darker-skinned people and to mix the genes well through the population. At the same time, we decided to hold on to separate cultural identities. But we broke the bond between genes and culture, broke it forever. We want there to be no chance of

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27 Eco-feminism, a trend that came out of women’s liberation in the mid- to late-1970s supports a notion of female difference – Alice Echols points out that eco-feminists argued that “women by virtue of their closeness to nature are in a unique position to avert ecological ruin” (288). Hogeland argues that Sally Miller Gearhart’s 1978 feminist utopian/dystopian novel *The Wanderground* relies on constructing a sisterhood that goes along with women’s connection to nature (114); the bucolic setting, like that of Percy’s Mattapoisett is in opposition to the dystopic urban settings in both novels.
racism again. But we don't want the melting pot where everybody ends up with thin gruel. We want diversity, for strangeness breeds richness (96).

Not only is race purposefully disconnected from culture in Luciente's time, but it is also dismantled in a way that bothers Connie. She finds it "invented," "artificial," and ultimately shocking (97).28 As a Chicana subjected to racism in her own time, she has difficulty conceiving of a world where "black Irishmen and black Jews and black Italians and black Chinese" exist as a matter of course (97). A eugenics program with a goal of racial diversity has yielded an end to racism.29 Mattapoisett's race/culture relationship is very similar to what historian Peggy Pascoe calls "modernist racial ideology" – she points out that under this ideology, which the Supreme Court supported, "the best way to eradicate racism was the deliberate nonrecognition of race" (482). After the 1920s, Pascoe argues, for people in support of what became modernist racial ideology, "the important point was not that biology determined culture (indeed, the split between the two was only dimly perceived), but that race, understood as an indivisible essence that included not only biology but also culture, morality, and intelligence, was a compellingly

28 For a discussion of the historical constructions of race, see Recovering History, Constructing Race: The Indian, Black, and White Roots of Mexican Americans by Martha Menchaca.

29 Although Mattapoisett's eugenics program has an inverse goal of that of the United States during the 20th century (racial diversity rather than reductions in the numbers of people of color, poor people, and people who have developmental or intellectual disabilities), it is still a genetics program with a specific racial demographic result in mind. For a discussion of birth control and involuntary sterilization as population control and eugenics policy, see Thomas M. Shapiro's Population Control Politics: Women, Sterilization, and Reproductive Choice. Also, Rickie Solinger's Pregnancy and Power: A Short History of Reproductive Politics in America provides an excellent, if disturbing description of the sources of inspiration United States' eugenics policies, some of which came from 1930s Germany and the Nazis. See pages 114-115.
significant factor in history and society” (467). And although this way of thinking is supported as the “nonideological end of racism,” it is “a racial ideology of its own, whose history shapes many of today’s arguments about the meaning of race in American society” (467).

Connie asks Luciente and Bee, “You saying there’s no racism left? Paradise on earth, all God’s children are equal” (96)? To which Luciente replies, “Different tribes have different rites, but god is a patriarchal concept” (96). The utopia attempts to solve social inequality by deemphasizing the importance of race-based communities. Through a deft succession of words – from race to tribe to rite to god and finally to patriarchy – Luciente transforms race into a patriarchal concept and therefore dismissible in the utopia. In a conversation about race, Bee and Luciente emphasize the importance of gender equality at the expense of racial identity. Alone, after Connie finishes talking to Luciente and Bee, she begins to cry because "She hated them, the bland bottle-born monsters of the future, born without pain, multicolored like a litter of puppies, without the stigmata of race and sex" (98). Connie has difficulties being confronted with a world "without pain," since her existence in her own world is so contingent on the pain (at least in part) caused by her marginalization as a woman of color. It is hard for her to deal with this conception of race because her beliefs about race and sex are foundational, and given to her by a society that punishes her for being Chicana.

In order to better understand Piercy’s formulations of race in the novel, I turn again to the novel’s dystopic present, and Piercy’s attention to several characters’ methods for dealing with the obstacle of assimilation and Americanization. The feminist and anti-assimilation/anti-racist notions that Piercy espouses in the novel’s present,
however, conflict with the utopian depiction of the ‘solution’ to racism. The creation of a future without spaces for borderlands and cultural hybridity conflicts with her critique of cultural assimilation/Americanization.

*Woman on the Edge of Time* reflects the race-based tensions with the women’s liberation movement in the 1970s through its use of the utopia in two ways. First, as I argued in the previous section, feminist fiction like Piercy’s novel contains elements of radical feminism as well as a nuanced depiction of the necessity for reproductive rights. In the present day, Piercy uses Connie’s character as a victim to show the necessity for feminist change. However, Connie’s visits to the utopia eventually lead her to privilege gender-based solutions to inequality over solutions rooted in her racial/cultural identifications. Second, the utopia in *Woman on the Edge of Time* reflects race-based tensions within 1970s radical feminism through the idea of assimilation. The concept of assimilation runs throughout the entire text because all major characters must negotiate the issues associated with assimilation. By looking at Connie’s brother Luis, Connie’s niece Dolly, Connie’s fellow patient Skip, and Connie herself, I will discuss how characters in Connie’s present deal with the pressures of cultural adaptation. Because Piercy establishes assimilation as a major theme in Connie’s present, we must continue to examine the multiple worlds Piercy creates through the lens of assimilation. Even though the future utopia of Mattapoisett purportedly eliminates racism and promotes diversity by using elements of “sisterhood,” it in fact accepts some differences while espousing the institutionalized elimination/erasure of others. Resonating with the radical feminist movement’s inability to deal with race and class adequately, the utopia de-emphasizes margins as important spaces for critical inquiry.
Connie's brother Luis is an example of someone who desires to assimilate in order to gain power. Her first description of him is as a "Prick! My brother the Anglo" (26). Connie’s animosity towards her brother is based both in his wielding of male privilege, as well as the way he treats people who do not share his desire for assimilation. Luis attempts at assimilation starts when he is a child, through policing his and his siblings’ pronunciation of English words. Connie remembers, "Luis had mastered that Anglo sound and taught it to the rest of them, hitting them with his fists until they said it as he did" (99). Assimilation for Luis even at a young age involved controlling the behavior of his siblings and using physical violence. Luis sees assimilation as a way to have power over others, and largely accessible through wielding male privilege. The importance of language and the assimilation of Mexicans and Mexican Americans also cannot be understated. As George Sanchez points out, “The most potent weapon used to imbue the foreigner with American values was the English language” (100). Not only does Luis use violence to control his siblings, but also through enforcing Anglo pronunciations of English words. Here, Luis uses a method of the oppressor himself.

In addition to monitoring his use of language, Luis attempts to assimilate by embracing a suburban lifestyle. Coming from an impoverished childhood in El Paso, he has achieved his white middle-class dream of a house in suburbia and owns his own business in suburban New Jersey. Part of this trajectory towards suburbia encompasses his multiple marriages. Luis marries three times, first to a Mexican American like himself, second, to an Italian American woman, and third, to a white woman whose ethnicity Connie does not mention. While this progression is not inherently about assimilation, Connie’s narration of his relationships casts these marriages as an
assimilationist project. Connie notes that "each one was fancier and had a higher polish. Each one was lighter. Each one spent more money. Carmel had been for hard times.

Shirley was for getting set up in business. Adele was for making money in bushels and spending it" (347). According to Connie, becoming assimilated for Luis means simultaneously becoming wealthier and forming relationships with women who increasingly fit his assimilationist dreams. Having an Anglo wife suggests that Luis himself, fully invested in assimilation, sees becoming more American through what type of women he is able to marry.30

Through the bodies of women, either through his violent enforcement of the "correct" English language pronunciation or through his access to their race-based privileges, Luis attempts to gain wealth and power to assimilate into what he sees as white mainstream American culture. His attempts also extend to his control over his daughter Dolly's body. Luis attributes Dolly's size to her heredity and her mother, who was Luis's Chicana wife. Dolly is incredibly thin and using methamphetamines in order to maintain her weight, yet Luis harasses her about her size. During Thanksgiving dinner, a celebration of the United States' colonial origins, Luis announces that Dolly "doesn't need to eat to get fat. She just looks at the potatoes and she gains weight" (350). Dolly says that she's not fat, and Luis replies, "It won't last. It's heredity. Look at your mother. If I didn't work as hard as I do, I'd be as fat as she is" (350). A discussion of body size anchored in Dolly's female body, apparently not thin enough, quickly turns to

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30 For a discussion of women as culture bearers, see Patricia Hill Collins's From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism, pp. 154-155. See Gabriela F. Arredondo's Chicana Feminisms for Maylei Blackwell's essay "Contested Histories" where she suggests that the Chicano nationalism relied on a idealized femininity based on constructing Chicanas as the "bearers of tradition, culture, and family" (66).
an issue of control over the racialized body.\textsuperscript{31}

Luis criticizes the women in his family for not fulfilling his assimilationist ideals. He "wanted his women to be thin for him," Connie observes (350). Their bodies are his business, and although Dolly has already succumbed to society's demands on the thinness of her body, Luis continues to mock and criticize her. Controlling women's bodies is a way that Luis asserts his male privilege, and maintains power over them. However, this control does not extend to Luis's son. By contrast, twelve-year-old Bob cannot be controlled through his body. He "ate more and more dark meat, steadily ignoring everyone" (351) while Luis harasses Dolly about the potatoes. Bob "raised a screen of strong protection between his father on his right and himself...Luis seemed to sense the barrier and he pretty much left Bob alone" (352). At his father's insistence, Bob attends an "Italian parochial school" but keeps a poster of Cesar Chavez on his wall, a symbol of his refusal of his father's cultural values as well as his refusal to assimilate. Luis's power is limited as he attempts to assimilate by controlling the women in his life by eroding their self-esteem and attributing their failings to "heredity."

Dolly has to deal with pressure to assimilate outside of her father's house also, as her work as a prostitute puts other demands on her body. When she finally visits Connie in the hospital, she has dyed her hair red, and lost weight since Connie saw her last. She is no longer dating her pimp Geraldo, and is a self-employed sex worker. Connie fixates on Dolly's physical changes, constantly remarking on how thin Dolly looks. When Connie asks her about these changes, Dolly tells her that "it pays more to look Anglo"

\textsuperscript{31} For a fascinating discussion of popular culture's production of female body ideals and race, see feminist philosopher Susan Bordo's \textit{Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body}. 
Realizing that Dolly's pupils look overly big and shiny, Connie asks her what drugs she's on, and Dolly replies, "I got to stay skinny, carita. The money is with the Anglos and they like you skinny and American-looking" (211). Dolly alters her physical appearance in order to look more Anglo, but not necessarily because of a direct motive to assimilate. She does so explicitly in order to make more money for the work that she does, which includes conforming to what she sees as the white beauty standard demanded by white johns. What may appear to be assimilation motivated by a hegemonic cultural pressure is in actuality, from Dolly's perspective, a calculated move that reflects a complex understanding of race, sex, and money.

In addition to narrating her family's stories of assimilation, Connie also tells her own story of an earlier desire to assimilate. While walking through the suburbs of New Jersey after escaping from the hospital, she imagines what might be going on in each home she passes, reminiscing about her late twenties when she had "strived to become one" of those women in the suburbs (249). She had married Eddie, hoping for his regular paycheck and the middle-American life it would bring. She "had done all those things she had always been told to do...Anything to be safe. Anything to belong somewhere at last!" (249). When Connie was younger, assimilation for her was about attaining a particular gendered cultural ideal, and that equated to being a housewife to a working husband in the suburbs. Instead of getting a white picket fence and a dishwasher, however, Connie got an abusive husband who was unemployed and drunk most of the time.

32 See Joan Jacobs Brumberg's *Fasting Girls: the History of Anorexia Nervosa* for an excellent discussion of the history of women and body size ideals.
time. Where Luis’s attempts to assimilate and become more white were successful, Connie’s were not.

It is when Connie does not try to assimilate that she is the most content. Instead of finding a sense of belonging in some version of suburban domesticity, she finds it with a new partner, Claud. Her most fondly remembered times are after she left her abusive husband and moved to New York, where she met and settled down with Claud, a blind Black pickpocket. He treated her respectfully and they lived in relative prosperity, but by no means in a life that resembled an American suburban ideal. However, this life did not last long, as Claud was arrested and sent to prison where he died after a Mengele-esque experiment left him infected with hepatitis. When Connie finds her place to belong, very much on the margins, it is destroyed by the most powerful of U.S. institutions – the legal and penal systems of the government.

In order to understand how the utopian portion of the novel reflects race in second-wave feminism, I argue that the feminist undercurrents of Piercy’s novel are undermined by the way that she imagines culture as without margin spaces in the novel’s utopian society. Assimilation, while largely about race in Connie’s present, is the result of the ways that the utopian people have ‘solved’ race issues. Great variety of sexualities and genders exist and are celebrated, but the separation and eradication of race and culture underline and highlight the limiting nature of a feminist theory based solely on the eradication of sexism.

The inhabitants of Mattapoisett are open to variations of sexual and gendered behavior. A person is free to have partners of either sex, and monogamy is not the focus of a sexual relationship. Luciente behaves differently than Connie expects from a
woman, and as we saw earlier, when first meeting her, Connie thinks that she is a man. Another character, Erzuila, “has tens of lovers. Person never stales on anybody, just adds on” (141). Furthermore, the Mattapoisettians no longer use gendered pronouns – they say ‘person’ instead of he or she and ‘per’ for the possessive pronoun.

During one of Connie’s visits to the future, Luciente brings her to the "brooder," the place where embryos in tanks are grown into infants. While there, Connie learns that women no longer give birth, men as well as women are mothers, and children are not genetically related to their "co-mothers." Luciente explains the reasoning behind the tank pregnancies through the rhetoric of sacrifice. In order for women to disrupt patriarchy and become men's equals, "there was that one thing we had to give up too, the only power we ever had, in return for no more power for anyone. The original production: the power to give birth. Cause as long as we were biologically enchained, we'd never be equal" (97). In the utopia of Mattapoisett, women’s liberation realizes the dream of gender equality through the oppressed group sacrificing the very thing that makes them biologically different.

Later on her tour of Mattapoisett Connie witnesses another consequence of gender equality achieved through the sacrifice of women’s “original production.” While stopping at the nursery, Connie sees a man sit “down with the baby on a soft padded bench by the windows and unbuttoned his shirt. Then she felt sick. He had breasts…Then with his red beard, his face of a sunburnt forty-five-year-old man, stern-visaged, long-nosed, thin-lipped, he began to nurse” (126). Connie is furious and upset because, “These women thought they had won, but they had abandoned to men the last refuge of women. What was special about being a woman here? They had given it all
up, they had let men steal from them the last remnants of ancient power, those sealed in blood and in milk” (126). Women gave up what they had owned in order for the project of gender equality to become complete. The Mattapoisettian way of life requires women, men, and institutions to share in the work of reproduction in order to maintain equality. Connie, however, sees it as having to sacrifice one of the few pleasures uniquely available to women.

Connie’s reaction to Mattapoisettian reproductive practices shows her discomfort with the ways in which the utopian society attempts to address social inequalities. Connie’s uneasiness with the utopia stems from the assumption that differences in people correspond to adverse power relationships. The solution to the gender-based power systems is for Connie to give men access to something unique to her – her ability to breastfeed, the physical pleasure it gives, and the close relationship to the infant it creates. The solution to diverting reproduction to asexual machines is familiar to radical feminism, as Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex* proposes a shift in the site of human reproduction as the only way to fundamentally change a sexist world. In her Marxist analysis, Firestone argues that “to assure the elimination of sexual classes requires the revolt of the underclass (women) and the seizure of control of reproduction: the restoration to women of ownership of their own bodies, as well as feminine control of human fertility, including both the new technology and all the social institutions of childbearing and childrearing” (11). Piercy puts this radical feminist theory into literary practice, showing what a society would look like if Firestone’s proposal came to pass.

The methods used in the utopia to level out power relationships also extend to eliminating racial and cultural discrimination. Connie's friend Bee explains:
I have a sweet friend living in Cranberry dark as I am and her tribe is Harlem-Black. I could move there anytime. But if you go over, you won't find everybody black-skinned like her and me, any more than they're all tall or all got big feet...we broke the bond between genes and culture, broke it forever. We want there to be no chance of racism again. But we don't want the melting pot where everybody ends up with thin gruel. We want diversity, for strangeness breeds richness. (95-96)

For residents of the utopia, physical attributes exist in a space free from judgment and discrimination. Because “genes” are no longer connected to “culture,” essentialism can no longer exist. By claiming to not be a homogenized “melting pot,” the utopia posits that this severing of genes and culture and the subsequent elimination of racism allows for greater diversity of its peoples. Connie finds this disturbing. She tells Luciente, "In my time black people just discovered a pride in being black. My people, Chicanos, were beginning to feel that too. Now it seems like it got lost again" (95). Connie’s critique of the utopia highlights the fundamental problem with attempting to bring about a truly equal society by leveling the differences among its peoples. Like her objections to the solution to gender inequality, Connie contends that equality for the larger society is gained at the expense of the oppressed. By attempting to eliminate racial differences the utopian society removes the ability to organize and build communities around shared identities.

While cultural assimilation in Connie’s present is a constant, pressing issue for Piercy, the utopia she presents is a world where all people in each community are perfectly assimilated to their town’s culture. Mattapoisett’s culture is Wampanoag Indian,
“Harlem-black” people live in Cranberry, and Tejanos live in their own town near El Paso. Each of these towns’ cultures reference a race-based identity from Connie’s present. The cultures of the utopia are without context or explanation – we learn little about their distinctiveness, if any exists – and as a result they merely function as symbols of diversity and acceptance. They are examples of successful assimilation because they keep their names but not much else. Furthermore, these communities no longer serve as places where oppressed peoples can develop bases from which to empower themselves. These cultures now belong to everyone and in Connie’s words are “lost again.” As Audre Lorde argues in *This Bridge Called My Back*, “Advocating the mere tolerance of difference is the grossest reformism. It is a total denial of the creative function of difference in our lives. For difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic” (99).

Lorde’s point is well taken. Difference is in and of itself a great source of creative energy, and focusing on its tolerance, rather than its inherent ‘electricity,’ results in a great loss. Piercy’s utopia goes a step further than advocating the tolerance of difference – Mattapoisettians suggest that homogenized genetic diversity is the source of “strangeness” and “richness,” and advocates dealing with difference through the erasure of its meaning. Skin color is no longer a source of discrimination, and racism no longer exists, but at the expense of the significations of genetic difference.

Such a static representation of culture, necessary for the project of eliminating racism, also eliminates the possibility for “cultural hybridity.” The margin spaces through which Piercy critiques the center during the novel’s present cannot exist in the novel’s utopian future. As well as being a creative space for Piercy’s novel, margin
spaces in the real world provide places for creative work and transformation. Becoming visible from these margin spaces is a way for people to gain the power to act politically, but eliminating these spaces in a text silences these voices.
Works Cited


