

WOMAN ON THE EDGE OF TIME:

OBSERVATIONS



by Miriam Rosenthal

Woman on the Edge of Time, by Marge Piercy, published in 1976, gives us vivid multiple pictures of lives lived in that present time and of possible futures, 150 years hence. It is a rich book that can be interpreted on many different levels. Throughout her narrative, Ms. Piercy shows us: the life of a poor Chicano single parent, struggling to provide some sort of a life for herself and her child; the plight of poor women in a society that doesn't really care, and the plight of economically disadvantaged women and men captured in the cruel web of the mental health [sic] system. We experience the struggle of a person helpless to extricate herself from the consequences of a diagnosis routinely applied to patients on admission to psychiatric institutions. As a contrast to those dour pictures, we are also given a vivid picture of a future society that provides hope for humanity and serves as the only positive refuge for our protagonist.

Who would *want* to be Consuelo Ramos, the woman on the edge of time? The only reason one might be willing to be her would be in order to have the grand discovery adventure of being transported, "caught," in time travel to a more loving and felicitous future time. At least, that is our initial view of the future. This future is a time in which humans have overcome some of the damage to the environment and society wreaked by our time.

One would certainly not wish to participate in Connie's life in her present, or to have lived through her immediate past. Her present is a life of oppression, degradation, and an almost mindless inconsideration for any rights she might have to live her life in a humane manner. After her lover dies of hepatitis, she engages in an effort to blot out the pain by indulging in a drunken binge which culminates in child abuse. Writhing in remorse and guilt, she is incarcerated in a mental hospital, is diagnosed a schizophrenic, a psychiatric catch-all diagnosis, and her career as a mental patient begins. That diagnosis, for "the system," becomes her identity and her entry card into a world of bleak horror. Relatives, not wanting to deal with her, collude with "the system" to continue to victimize her, all in the name of protecting her from herself and others from her actual and potential misdeeds.

Was *she* mad or was it her world that was mad? She was a woman on her own at a time when mothers were supposed to be best off with men to provide for them. She was poor. She was a woman on the edge: the periphery, the ultimate "other," the bottom edge of society, the edge of sanity. Most of the men in her history had used her and then disposed of her or disappeared. Her one successful pregnancy was the fruit of rape. Her fertility was taken from her by male residents at a hospital who used her as practice for hysterectomies. The only men who had treated her well were her first husband who was murdered by the police in the streets and the blind pickpocket, Claude, who ended up dying of hepatitis as part of a prison experiment. As far as Connie was concerned, the same system that had victimized her had also been responsible for extinguishing the lives of the only protectors she'd had. It was the male-dominated, patriarchal, Anglo world that seemed to cause her distress. Her femaleness and her brownness seemed to her to be a major causal factor for her problems, rather than her own specific behaviors.

Where did the world of the future, the world of Luciente and Bee and Jackrabbit come from? Did Connie's madness invent and then transport her to this other time or was there something special, an extra-sensitivity that made it possible for her to make the journeys back and forth over 150 years to a time that was more generous than her own. Connie's presence on the edge made it easier for Luciente, the person from the future, to contact her and for her to jump over into the other time. How could a person with Connie's lack of education and imagination have invented such a future? If that future was a hallucination, does that make it any less hopeful? If she would have invented it, wouldn't that be evidence of her superior mental state? Even saying that, there are still instances in the story when some people from the future bear resemblance to people from Connie's past or present life. This keeps us guessing. Is Luciente really a Connie of the future? We have no pat answer to this question and this gives a tension that points to Piercy's skill as a storyteller.

What is this future like? In Mouth-of -Mattapoissett, Luciente's place of habitation, people live very simply in what we would consider a sustainable manner. Every element of their lifestyle is crafted with care. From the moment a child is brought into being to the moment of death, all is covered by community practices and ritual and yet, there is also a great deal of room for independence and the exercise of free spirit. Nothing is predetermined.

Initially, we are led to believe that Mattapoissett is a typical type of community of the future. It is about the size of a village, Connie is told that big cities were deemed unworkable. It is bucolic, vegetables are grown and cows graze. Our first view even provides clothes drying in the sun. In many ways it reminds Connie of the Mexican villages of her childhood.

For the most part, the use of fossil fuels is a thing of the past. Solar energy is primarily used. Each community tries to be "ownfed," i.e., self-sustaining. Each adult has a space of per own. The pronouns his and her are no longer used -- per, for person, is the correct term. Language, as we might expect, has evolved. Some of it, such as the word, "fasure," no doubt has its derivation from the expression "for sure" popular in the '70s. Fellow community dwellers are referred to as mems. even cats and other animals are conversational, persons communicate with them by sign language. People live in close contact with their environment.

By this time, reproduction of the human species is carefully controlled and a child is born only when someone in the community dies. People are not encouraged to live expanded numbers of years and most don't. While Connie is around, we experience the death of two people, one old respected woman who has reached the end of her days, and one young beloved man who is killed in defense of his community. The survivors mourn their loved ones and cherish their memories, but are also joyful to welcome new members into the community. There is a diverse mix of racial types, rather than a blending into uniformity. There are still blacks and whites, not merely light brown people. The parenting arrangement is not of our convention. Three mothers are chosen from men and women who have volunteered to mother. There is no mention of fathers. All mothers breastfeed and bond very closely with the child. Reproduction and parenting, as we know it, is obsolete. Since mothering is a matter of choice, all mothers are eager and joyful in their task.

This doesn't mean that children are perfectly behaved and are like little obedient robots. To the contrary, it seems that children are often headstrong and eager to fly from their comfortable nests long before a child of our time would. There is a feeling that children belong to the community, not to the mothers. Following a

week on their own in the wild, their official independence ritual that takes place when they are about 12, children often do not stay or settle in the communities of their raising, but move around. Youth is a time for freedom and experimentation, settling down comes in later years.

The social life of a person is also very different than in Connie's world. Men and women couple without great regard for the gender of their partner. They refer to each other as "sweetfriend." And most have multiple sweetfriends, although they have a "core." We are treated to evidences of jealousies that exist when one sweet partner may have a special relationship with another to the exclusion, or perceived exclusion, of a third. What we learn from this is that even though human social practices may change, there are basic human emotions that still exist. In the future, they are not swept under the rug, rituals are developed to resolved problems that may emerge.

How is madness perceived in the future world? Luciente says, "Our madhouses are places where people retreat when they want to go down into themselves -- to collapse, carry on, see visions, hear voices of prophecy, bang on the walls, relive infancy -- getting in touch with the buried self and the inner mind. We all lose parts of ourselves. We all make choices that go bad..... How can another person decide that it is time for me to disintegrate, to reintegrate myself?" (p.60) So, madness is seen as a normal part of life, not as something that makes a person wrong.

This world sounds so idyllic, where is the need for defense, and against whom? If most communities are like Mattapoisett, then how or why would someone be killed? We never find out exactly who the enemy is, but we suspect it is that other world, the world of the "multies;" New York, a world that is as carefully contrived and just the opposite of Mattapoisett. If we think of Mattapoisett as a tranformational scenario, New York is the scenario of continued growth (on its way to collapse), although a dark and cancerous growth. We see this world once Connie is operated on as part of a special experiment to try to control her "violent tendencies" and has machines and electrodes planted in her brain. Her guide to this world is a "fem," a woman-like creature, physically altered to accentuate her sexual characteristics, named Gildina. She is the apparent willing captive of a man named Cash who keeps her for sex. She lives in one room, with a holographic set for entertainment, a picture screen that substitutes for a window, and is under constant surveillance by a big brother-like organization. The "richies" are in control. Gildina and her ilk do not expect to survive their middle age when they are sent off to the "Geri" and then "ashed." Organ transplants and other gene modifications enable richies to live to more than 200. One does not go outside, the air is too bad. Richies do not live "on the surface," they live on space platforms. Poor people, "duds," are walking organ banks. They are born coughing and pass on to Geri coughing. Connie says that talking to Gildina is like talking to her niece, Dolly, on speed, or like talking to a poodle. Dolly is also a woman who is captive in prostitution by and for cash. If any world is a product of Connie's mind, it would seem to be the New York of this future.

The story does not end on a hopeful note. Connie cannot be saved by the future and she also cannot seem to save her friends in the future. War is waged all out on all fronts: present and future. One of the messages we might take form the book is that the seeds of the future are in the present, but when you start to modify the biosystem (or any system), as Luciente and her mems say, "In biosystems, all factors are not knowable." One never knows what the outcome will be from one small change. Monkeying around with Connie's brain ends up creating death for some of those doctors and a long-term incarceration for Connie. Treating Connie as a violent person creates a person who can only use violence as a way of combating her treatment. Perhaps the electrodes accidentally stimulated her violent tendencies. Her choices seem to be capitulation/resignation or warfare/affirmation of herself as a living being. Being allowed to live on her own terms does not seem to be an option for her. She did not create the war, she is placed in the perceived position of fighting or dying.

What meaning do we find in the story of Consuelo Ramos, the *Woman on the Edge of Time*? What special meaning might there be in this tale, especially for futurists? As stated earlier, when a person is thought of as an object and dehumanized, it is possible to do all sorts of inhumane things to them. One can even treat them as laboratory animals, as if we treat laboratory animals in anything other than an inhumane fashion. One of the things we can get from this book is that we must redefine our treatments for those we classify as mentally ill, or poor, or maladjusted to our society. There ought to be other options besides institutionalization or total neglect. It means that coming up with more positive ways to deal with people with problems takes time and attention and money and most importantly, creativity, patience, generosity, and a willingness to persist despite failures. We have learned that throwing money at problems doesn't work; we have also learned that starving the problem doesn't make it go away either.

One of the things a futurist might contribute to a discussion about our dysfunctional society is a new picture of the future and a vision of what it might look like if it was fixed. It was written about Alvin Toffler in *Wired* , "successful futurists make their fortune by interpreting the present in a new way -- a way that makes more sense and seems more conventional the further into the future one goes." Piercy uses her book as an opportunity to take a look at the underclass, as well as the structure of our society, and make a new picture of it.

What meaning might futurists get out of Connie's story? Any and everyone is a potential futurist, it is the type of thinking a person does that is more important than their title. They may be reminded that there are any number of possible futures "out there." The seeds of all those futures are here in the present. That even in what seems to be a utopia, a good place, there comes the threat of the dystopia. Is that what we want? Do we have any idea of what we want? Is there a way to create positive futures without those seeds of destruction? Can we get the cooperation of those parties who's participation is necessary to move things along? How would one obtain that cooperation? Is everything a matter of self-interest? If so, doesn't that make every situation a zero-sum game? Is there a way of creating win-win situations? Perhaps the question should be is there a way of getting people to move away from the desire to get theirs' first? How do we empower a sense of community amongst all these disparate entities? This seems as if it would be an unlikely and certainly an unpopular question in an age celebrating the "free market," competition, and all the "me-firsting" this entails.

One important step could be the development of clear and powerful scenarios that could be inspirational and embraced, not only by those in a position to make things happen, but also by most other citizens. Another step might have to do with participatory democracy -- create ways to reach out beyond "decision makers" to enable most citizens to become decision makers. Or, perhaps there are other ways to create a change in direction yet to be developed. No matter which scenarios are chosen, or which methods of economic/social development are followed, it is imperative that someone, whether it be futurists or policy makers, or whatever, be brave enough to outline the possible consequences of the actions taken. The surprises we seem to be dumbfounded by, such as the growth and spread of international organized crime in the countries of the former Soviet Union, might be mitigatable by some foresight and a willingness to take preventative action.

To tie this back to our book, when we look at the seemingly dystopic future of the "multi's" and New York City, we see a society that rollerbladed into being by allowing scientific advances and social disadvantages to follow their trend lines. Our utopian future of Mattapoisett is a purposeful creation designed to repair the physical and social environment wrecked by our time. Both futures are possible. Do we want to choose or are we content to wait and see what happens? Are we powerless or powerful? Are we reactors or initiators? Is there something in the middle? Ultimately, I don't know the answers to those questions, but I feel we are always searching for that middle ground, as well as being depressed or elated over our responses to the two ends of that continuum. Can we choose, or are the structural forces of our modern/post-modern/ante-post-modern worlds too much for us?

I think Marge Piercy would tell us that for Connie, and for her sweet future, the answer is that structure and the bad guys (who seem to be connected) are the winners this time, but that by asking the questions, there is the *hope* for agency, the possibility for the actions of a person or persons to make a difference. And I conclude that it is *that* hope that inspires us to keep going, sometimes even when we despair of positive outcomes.

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