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Space Pregnancies

Putting the Other in the Mother

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Abstract

Science fiction and feminist theory have a lot in common. They are both grounded in contemporary times, but envisions another. This essay looks at how women writers have used science fiction to talk about central themes in feminism, namely motherhood and pregnancy. These two are interesting because they are experiences based in the cis-female body. With the assumption that these experiences are part of the Othering process of women in a patriarchal society, how these are portrayed/reflected in science fiction texts become interesting.

The essay analyses the progress of the view of motherhood and pregnancy in four novels; Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (originally published 1818), Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (originally published 1915), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (originally published 1976) and Octavia E. Butler's *Lilith's Brood* (originally published 1987-1989). The historical aspect follows the progression of the feminist movement, namely the suffragist, the second wave feminism of the 70's and the third wave feminism of the 90's.

How these books have portrayed motherhood and pregnancy, and how science fiction elements are used, strongly follows the development of the feminist progress.

“Women cannot write—using the old myths.

But using new ones—?”

Joanna Russ

“There is nothing new under the sun,

but there are new suns”

Octavia E. Butler

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Introduction

Science fiction and feminist theory make a spectacular pairing. Several critics have emphasized the possibility to highlight contemporary issues, as well possible solutions to these, in making use of the science fiction genre¹. Critics and writers alike have lauded the genre for its vision-building possibilities, much needed in the long term work in feminism and struggles for a new, more equal world. The genre is especially apt when writing about estrangement, partially since the alien, a common staple in science fiction, is quite literally the embodiment of the Other. One important topic that women have written about subversively, using science fiction, is the embodied difference of pregnancy.

This essay will look at four seminal novels from the history of science fiction which all touch on motherhood in some way. The essay will first look at how Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) can be read as a birth myth, and how using a male creator of life, far removed from the womb, provides the opportunity to write about the horror of childbirth. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915) gives ample room for discussing the meaning of creating a women only utopia, where men are not needed for becoming pregnant. From this, the discussion goes to Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), which depicts a whole other sort of utopia that relies on technological advances for procreation to create an equal society. The analysis will conclude with Octavia E. Butler's *Lilith's Brood* (1987-1989), where the whole of mankind, and its reproductive ability, is put under the sovereignty of an alien race.

Joanna Russ, in her article "What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can't Write", states that culture is "male" (80). This is also her definition of patriarchy. She elucidates this by saying that the texts produced within this culture are conceived from a male point-of-view, even when they are written by women. Women in texts are written *from* a male point-of-view, as well as *for* a male point-of-view. The myths available, i.e. the acceptable plot lines and typical characters, for a writer are all male oriented, which leaves little room for a heroine instead of a hero (83). She explains that the women in texts are simplified images of women, and only presented in relation to men. The lone cowboy riding away at dusk is never a woman. She sees science fiction as one of the few genres where subverting the male hegemony is possible (91).

¹ See e.g. Marleen Barr's *Future Females: The Next Generation* (2000), Jenny Wolmark's *Aliens and Others* (1994), Joanna Russ *To Write Like A Woman* (1995), Sarah LeFanu's *In The Chinks of The World Machine* (1998), and Donna Haraway's writing, to name a few.

Joanna Russ includes science fiction as an area of resistance to the male dominance under the patriarchy because “the myths of science fiction run along the lines of exploring a new world conceptually” (91). To do this the author can disregard current culture and norms, in favour of inventing new social and technological paradigms. The traditional definition, as put down by Thomas Kuhn, of a paradigm is a “set of shared beliefs” (qtd. in Andermahr et al. 193), which can change through new discoveries. Sometimes different paradigms can coexist, but mostly they supersede each other. One that is relevant to this essay is the woman-as-womb paradigm, as coined by Natalie Wilson. This paradigm conflates women with their ability to bear children, so that the notion of woman is intertwined with having a womb. Paradigms of motherhood can also concern the notion of naturalness of being a mother, and essentialism, i.e. how women are considered inherently nurturing and care-giving. Patricia Melzer reinforces Russ’s sentiment when she writes “[o]nly within genres of the fantastic is it possible to imagine completely new social orders and ways of being that differ radically from human existence as we know it” (1-2). This indicates that women writers have a greater freedom when they write science fiction, and especially when they want to write about something that is far removed from the male experience, or from a point-of-view that is not available for a man. One of these things is pregnancy.

The four novels all differ from each other greatly, but navigate around the same issue. This essay will look at how pregnancy and motherhood is constructed and/or deconstructed in the texts, and touch briefly on how each text works within and outside the contemporary pregnancy- and motherhood paradigms by connecting the novels with the progression of the feminist movement and the respective view of motherhood and how the science fiction genre has been used for this end.

(M)other

Science fiction is a well-suited genre to use when writing about the Other. Jenny Wolmark succinctly summarizes what it means to be the Other: “To be different, or alien, is a significant if familiar cultural metaphor which marks the boundaries and limits of social identity. It allows difference to be marginalised and any dissonance to be smoothed away, thus confirming the dominance of the centre over the margins” (27). She also states that to be marginalised is to be disempowered. She concedes that the alien has usually been used to reproduce the Other in science fiction texts, but that there are writers that use the alien to question the boundary of centre and margin (28). The four writers whose work is analysed further on have all used the

notion of the Other to either write about the experience of being marginalised or to claim the centre.

The concept of the Other can best be summed up by: “[w]hen we identify ourselves as subjects, as “I”, we define ourselves in terms of the Other [sic]; we are stating in effect that we are not “you” or any other available subject position” (Benstock, Ferriss and Woods 168). The concept of the Other is contingent on the concept of self. Andermahr, Lovell and Wolkowitz write about how the women-as-other has been a major theme in contemporary feminist theory (191). They argue that in a patriarchal social order, the sense of selfhood is exclusive for (white, heterosexual) men (192). Women are not part of the “I”, but are primarily objects from which men distance themselves. From this woman is constructed as the Other. This leads to the generic experience being male. One consequence of this is that non-male experiences have to be prefixed with “women-”. One example of this is how “women-troubles”, anything menstrual-related, are not relevant to mankind, only to the subset category of women. Another common example of this are women sports, suggesting that the go-to assumption is that everything is centred around men, if not stated otherwise. There is football, and then there is women’s football.

However, there are some things that are solely the property of the Other, where there is no generic notion to contrast with a “women”-prefix. One of these things is the embodied difference of pregnancy. There is no cis-male subjective experience of pregnancy and motherhood, and therefore it is an experience that has been relegated to the margins, especially within cultural expressions. Dion Farquhar writes that “bodies are always inextricably intertwined with discourse, culture and power” (215). If so, how the body, and especially the maternal body, is written is important, since it is part of how the body is constructed and gendered.

Fiona Joy Green writes that “any understanding of mothering and motherhood must contend with the patriarchal ideology of motherhood as it serves as the conventional lens that shapes common thinking, experiences, and practices regarding mothers, mothering, and motherhood” (3). This patriarchal ideology has positioned women as solely responsible for the care of children. This relation of power is evident in the etymology of *patriarchy*—literally rule of the father (Green 3). Adrienne Rich defines motherhood as an institution that ensures women and mothering are under male control (13). Natalie Wilson argues that “constructing motherhood and the maternal body in a less reified, more open and variable way is a crucial, feminist move” (Wilson 348). This means that the maternal body has to be divorced from the

patriarchal ideology of motherhood, and understood under new terms. In this case, science fiction can offer blueprints to test other paradigms than those dominant at the time of writing, since science fiction provides an exploration of *what-could-be*.

One helpful term when looking at women's experiences is the "woman-as-womb"-paradigm. This means that "the category 'woman' is largely 'womb dependent'" (Wilson 344). This paradigm is a roadblock for female subjecthood and a hindrance for full equality (343). The conflation of woman and womb continually chain women to their 'biological destiny', as Shulamith Firestone calls it in *On the Dialectic of Sex* (1970). This conflation has had a great impact on the status of women. It has led to motherhood becoming the institution that Adrienne Rich writes about, as quoted on the previous page. Adalgisa Giorgio writes about how the "lack of 'subjectivity' ... is both the origin and the consequence of women's traditional exclusion from 'culture' and of their confinement to the realm of 'nature'" (13). When women are constructed as the other, they possess no subjectivity, only objectivity. They cannot speak from an 'I', a self as subject, but only from their position as woman, the object. Sarah LeFanu writes that "[the science fiction genre] makes possible, and encourages [...] the inscription of women as subjects free from the constraints of mundane fiction: and it also offers the possibility of interrogating that very inscription, questioning the basis of gendered subjectivity" (16). So when looking at the four novels analysed in this essay, questions of subjectivity and selfhood will be asked under the presumption that science fiction has been used by women writers (as opposed then to simply *writers*) to regain subjectivity and selfhood and to criticize contemporary motherhood paradigms. How they have done this in connection with pregnancy and motherhood is of interest and importance.

The science fiction genre in itself is an interesting aspect, since it has often been quite devoid of "that rarest of beings in the world of science fiction, a mother" (LeFanu 19). If this is the case, representations of mothers, or the conspicuous lack of mothers, in science fiction become a fertile ground for analysis. When the mother-figure is not a common appearance, where, how, and why she appears carry meaning. If mother is not a generic experience, the employment of motherhood/pregnancy in a story is meant to signify something. Common stereotypical images of women have portrayed them as monstrous, with the successful and well known *Alien*- and *Species*-movies as apical examples. In *Alien* (1979), the alien offspring are planted within human bodies, and kill their hosts on the way out. In *Species* (1995) an alien, unearthly beautiful woman seduces and kills men acting on her prime instinct—mating. They are simply the monster, without an independent self. The monstrous mother, or just monstrous

alien woman, is a common trope within science fiction, and an example of the alien being used to simply reproduce the Other.

The body does not exist outside the discourses of power and culture, as Farquhar said above. Emily Martin's research shows the impact of having one's experiences marginalized; she writes about how women separate their self from their material body when they speak of pregnancy and labour (79). She interviews women about their own experiences of labour, where a recurring theme is that their bodies became something on its own, out of their control (83). This "fragmentation of self" is evident when her interviewees talk about childbirth (84). The women's way of talking about their labour underlines the internalised othering of the non-male body. This leads to a lack of subjectivity in the marginalized experience of childbearing. The experience is put in the margins, because it is not part of the centre; becoming Other even to the women themselves.

Women writers have used science fiction to write about pregnancy subversively, and to try to escape the woman-as-womb-paradigm or envision other paradigms than those under which they are living and under which their bodies are constructed. Melzer argues that both science fiction and feminist politics have an important thing in common - both "conceptualize issues of difference [...] and are concerned with contested boundaries and definitions of bodies and cultural/social territories" (4). Both are grounded in contemporary times, but envision another reality. One way they have done this is to use science fiction to imbue the Other with subjectivity. This can be done in various ways. In the analysis section, it will be shown how the Frankenstein's monster is the embodied Other. *Herland* switches centre and margin, and places three men in an all-women country. In *Woman on the Edge of Time* time travel is used to highlight arbitrary boundaries, while in *Lilith's Brood* humankind is put under the dominance of the Other - an alien race that takes control of reproduction.

Motherhood

The discourse of motherhood has changed through time. In modern times, the Industrial Revolution led to women staying at home and men working out of the home, creating more divided roles based on gender (Coulter 708). Before, child caring was just one of many responsibilities for women in an agrarian society. The societal shift led to the separate spheres during the Victorian era, the public and the private. Women were part of the private sphere, staying at home. This led to women being seen as naturally caregiving and motherly. The urbanisation also led to a change of the birthing experience. Where previously women helped

women in the process, now male doctors were more prominent (Crawford 501). During the Victorian era, talking about female experiences, such as menstruation and pregnancy, around men was taboo, and if they were at all written about, it was in women's private diaries (Showalter 67). The female rights' advocates of the time were influenced by Victorian moral values. While they thought the maternal instinct was an argument for women's right to vote, the physical side of the maternity was still looked at with disgust due to its marginalised position (Showalter 157). The first wave of feminists argued that their inherent qualities as mothers made them equal to men, and should thus be allowed to vote.

In the 20th century, pregnancy and the female body lost some of the taboos surrounding them, but they were still problematic. Ann Allen Taylor says that the maternal dilemma is "one of the most intractable problems facing women in the West" (1). She defines the maternal dilemma as the difficulty of being both a mother and an autonomous individual, which is connected to the woman-as-womb-paradigm. What differs is that the maternal dilemma is reliant on the possibility of a freely chosen motherhood. This choice has been a possibility only since the early 20th century.

The second-wave feminism of the 60's and 70's marked a shift in the view on motherhood. From then on feminists rejected motherhood as a universal female experience (Allen 2), and many started exploring the meaning of motherhood. Shulamith Firestone published *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* 1970 and Adrienne Rich published *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* 1976. Both had a great impact on the discourse on motherhood. In *The Dialectic of Sex*, Firestone saw pregnancy and childbearing as something that shackled women, an unwanted biological destiny. She called for technology to free women from this. In *Of Woman Born*, Rich blended her own experience with feminist theory to write about motherhood as an institution and as a social construct.

Third-wave feminism and motherhood have rejected the tendency of feminism to be based on white middle class women's experiences, and have encompassed an intersectional view on motherhood/parenthood. It also embraces queering identities where gender and sex is disconnected to each other.

Frankenstein and the hideous progeny

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, daughter of the women's-right advocate Mary Wollstonecraft, wrote *Frankenstein: or The Modern Prometheus* 1818, in the midst of the industrial revolution. During this time, men and women were seen as inhabiting separate

spheres, where the woman stayed in the home, in the private sphere, whereas men inhabited the public sphere. The beginning of the 19th century saw a nascent deconstruction of these two spheres though, alongside the rising middle class, and a more widespread advocacy of women's rights. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's mother had died just days after giving birth to her, and she herself had lost a small child just prior to the conception of *Frankenstein*. In her diary she writes about how she dreamt of the little child, and how she rubbed life into its inanimate limbs. Several critics have connected Shelley's own experiences with *Frankenstein*, and talk of how "the creation of the monster is a metaphor for birth" (Walters-Kramer 129). Ellen Moers emphasises Mary Shelley's being a motherless child, a childless mother, and with a revered father who disavowed her after running away with Shelley. She argues that *Frankenstein* must be seen in the light of this (147).

Frankenstein was written in a time where the maternal dilemma is not applicable as motherhood was not a choice to be had. The view of motherhood was still quite essentialist, connecting women with a "natural" ability to be caregivers. Shelley, as stated above, had her own complicated experiences with motherhood. There was little room for her to talk about these marginalised experiences. Suparna Banerjee argues that Shelley used Victor Frankenstein as a symbol for the labouring mother: "Shelley projects the physical and mental states associated with gestation and birthing on the scientist" (5). By doing this Banerjee argues that Shelley "puts women's intimate experiences into the public/masculine" (6). Banerjee also says that Victor Frankenstein's reaction to the monster is analogous to postpartum depression, "an aspect of motherhood that is the most suppressed in cultural discourse" (5). To subvert the division of the female/male and private/public, Shelley simply puts the experience in the centre, embodied by the male scientist. This would explain the absence of mothers.

A key issue with *Frankenstein* is the absence of not just mothers but also women. The most obvious absence is the non-existent mother of the Creature. There is only Victor Frankenstein, who toils day and night to create life, single-handedly. He wants to create a beautiful man, but the very same material he has collected is a horror to him upon the Creature's awakening. Feminist critics tend to point out that it is the horror of artificial life that is repulsive, made without a woman. Brian Attebery points out where the marginalised women are in the novel:

She is the silenced or murdered female characters Justine, and Safie, and Elizabeth. She is the barren landscape of Alp and Arctic—Mother

Nature withholding her blessing from men and their depredations. She is the monstrous Other, the Creature whose fate is predetermined by bodily form (37).

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar echo this when they write: “Though it has been disguised, buried, or miniaturized, femaleness [...] is at the heart of this apparently masculine book” (232).

The actual murders are committed by the Creature, but one very significant death, or rather denial of life, takes place when Victor Frankenstein has created a female companion for the Creature. Frankenstein promises to build a woman to the Creature, so that he will not be alone in the world. But the scientist is plagued by the vision of the Creatures procreating and so “trembling with passion, [he] tore to pieces the thing on which [he] was engaged” (Shelley 171). He does this because he believes the Creatures would spawn “a race of devils [that] would be propagated upon the earth” (Shelley 170). That a female Creature will primarily procreate underlines the woman-as-womb-paradigm. Victor Frankenstein does not think of creating the companion without a reproduction system, or that the Creatures might coexist without procreating. He did not have these doubts of the validity of the Creature’s existence and the possible consequences when creating his male Creature, but he will not let control of them, and ultimately their reproduction, slip out of his hands.

Frankenstein is a proto-science fiction novel, where a writer places marginalised experiences in the centre. It shows the inability to claim subjectivity in those experiences as woman at the time, and the need to place those experiences where they become monstrous. This alienation of the self to be able to write is what spurred the creation of the Creature, the embodiment of being the Other. Shelley herself referenced her novel as her “hideous progeny” (10). Almost a hundred years later, such a displacement was not needed to be able to write about motherhood.

***Herland* and parthenogenesis**

Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* was published 1915. Charlotte Perkins Gilman was a conscious women’s rights advocate, and that she used her fictional writing as a way to engage with the contemporary feminist discourses and issues. She ran her own magazine, *Forerunner*, in which she promoted the equal nature of women and men, as well as published her own stories. At the time Gilman wrote *Herland*, 1915, the first wave of feminism was demanding equal rights, especially voting rights. The suffragist movement held an essentialist view of

motherhood, i.e. that mothering is an innate quality of women, saying that due to the maternal aspect of mothers they were “both moral and respectable” (Porter 505). They used this argument to validate claims to the right to vote which is deployed, but also subverted, in *Herland*.

Herland, named so by the three male explorers who discover it, is populated by women. There are no men, and there have been no men for the last two thousand years. They reproduce at will through virgin birth—parthenogenesis—and have done so since the first Mother gave birth to five daughters. These five daughters in their turn had five daughters, and so on. The story of the start of Herland is described as; “[h]ere at last was Motherhood, and though it was not for all of them personally, it might [...] found here a new race” (Gilman 76). Compared with *Frankenstein*, a new race in *Herland* is not the beginning of devils overrunning the earth, but rather a self-contained, self-sufficient people with a stable and peaceful society. The choice by the author to make birth a mythical virgin birth can be seen as subverting the personified predominating paradigm at the time—the male scientist. But there is no clear divide between the women of Herland and science. They express a strong want to embrace the sciences they have not had the same progress in as the outside world. Van, the narrator, describes their hunt for knowledge; “[t]hey were deeply aroused on the subject of evolution; indeed, the whole field of natural science drew them irresistibly” (185).

Van reflects toward the end what marginalisation of one’s experiences entail. In a key passage of the novel, he reflects on the difference in gender connotation;

When we say *men*, *man*, *manly*, *manhood*, and all other masculine derivatives, we have in the background of our minds a huge vague crowded picture of the world and all its activities. To grow up and ‘be a man’, to ‘act like a man’—the meaning and connotation is wide indeed. [...]

And when we say *women*, we think *female*—the sex.

But to these women, in the unbroken sweep of this two-thousand-year-old feminine civilization, the word *woman* called up all that big background [...]; and the word *man* meant to them only *male*—the sex.
(176-177)

In this passage it becomes clear that the subjectivity, the centre, is turned around. The three men, who are seen as and see themselves as alien—“here were we, three aliens in this land of women” (158)—do not have the subjectivity that makes up the centre in Herland. The generic

reference in Herland is *woman*. Van has earlier in the book come to the conclusion that “those ‘feminine charms’ we are so fond of are not feminine at all, but mere reflected masculinity” (79).

The three male explorers serve as a stand-in for the reader. They come from what could be called our society (in 1915). It is through that lens that they see, and the reader is presented with, Herland. They—Van, Jeff and Terry—represent three different aspects of the view on women. Van, the narrator, is a man of science, who is guided by his scientific side. Jeff is a sociologist, who idealizes and adores women. Terry is misogynistic, and the one who in the end gets exiled from Herland. He is the one who exclaims: “but these women aren’t *womanly*” (78), and “[t]hey aren’t human—they’re just a pack of Fe-Fe-Females!” (106). Terry has the hardest time to adjust to the “non-feminine” women, and continues to believe in his own society’s superiority to Herland. He is the one of the three who attempts rape of his wife as well, justifying it by saying that sex is his wife’s duty. This is what leads to his exile. That a man is the narrator, and that it is through his eyes Herland is explored, is to emphasise the Othering of the women by the men, as well as positioning the men themselves as the Other in Herland. The men, except Terry, start to appreciate Herland and see the women as people foremost, and find their being women irrelevant. The different views of women they represent serve to ridicule gender roles at the time.

Even though the women in Herland are so intimately connected with motherhood, the maternal body is strangely absent. There is no talk of the corporeal aspect of pregnancies, nor of breastfeeding. In the book, which otherwise is much concerned with spelling out the particulars of the all-women utopia, there is no talk of sexual acts. The women show no sexuality, and those who do are judged to have “atavistic tendencies”, and are denied motherhood due to this (121). They compare the men’s account of sex with the mating they have observed in nature. They cannot fathom the point of such recreation, especially if it is not to produce offspring. Elaine Showalter states that due to the stigma attached to sex, as well as the ignorance surrounding it, “abstinence [was] the only rational response to the sexual dilemma.” (156). Hence, this lack of sexuality is not surprising.

Although their society is built around motherhood, it is not vital for them to each be a mother individually. They compare motherhood to a profession, drawing parallels between letting a non-dentist do one’s teeth and letting anyone raise their children. The women can control the parthenogenesis by pure force of thought. If it is not deemed appropriate to bear a child, they do not. They willingly abstain from having children as well to keep the population

down. Sarah LeFanu highlights this aspect of *Herland*: “In Gilman’s work the transformation of the private mother/child relationship (and she was reviled for ‘abandoning’ her own child and for the unorthodoxy of her personal relationship) into a vision of a community of women and children anticipates a central theme of the feminist utopias of the 1970s” (62). Motherhood is removed from the private, marginalized space into the public arena. Another thing that would surface in the second feminist wave is the idea of conception at will. In *Herland*, this is done by pure force of thought, but in theme with the mythical theme of virginal birth. In the second wave feminism, the birth control played a big part, putting the control of reproduction in the hand of woman herself. *Herland*’s women’s show that motherhood is not an individual project, but a part of society as a whole.

Herland could be argued to be quite essentialist in its view of motherhood. The whole country is concentrated upon motherhood and it is what their society is built upon. Just as Gilman’s contemporary suffragists touted women’s natural ability for the maternal as their source of strength, the fulfilled and peaceful inhabitants of *Herland* embody the woman-as-womb-paradigm and have made it their religion. Their original Mother was placed in “Temple of Maaia—their Goddess of Motherhood” (75). Sylvia Määttä argues in her thesis that the exclusion of men is not due to an essentialist notion of women, but rather used to highlight the possibility of women to be everything that men can be. Gilman herself wrote “The idea in *Herland* is purely arbitrary, and is used only to bring out as clearly as possibly the essential qualities of a purely feminine culture” (as qtd. in Määttä 179). What is essential in this feminine culture is, just as Van states above, that *woman* can encompass everything that *man* does. Van comments: “[h]ere you have human beings, unquestionably, but what we were slow in understanding was how these ultra-women, inheriting only from women, had eliminated not only certain masculine characteristics [...] but so much of what we had always thought essentially feminine” (77-78). This essentialism is broken down in the novel, and shown to be just as arbitrary as Gilman herself writes. There are women who choose to not have children, even though they get the urge to do so. They place their society before having a child individually. And even though motherhood is a focus point for their society, the women are strong individuals who work together for many things, not just motherhood.

Frankenstein gave us a birth myth centred on men. *Herland* is all women, with no men involved at all, where fathers are more of a mythical concept for the inhabitants. Instead of placing women’s marginalised experiences in the centre, *Herland* simply exchanges the margins for the centre, while saying there is no inherent difference between these.

***Woman on the Edge of Time* and ectogenesis**

In the second wave of feminism, motherhood carried a more negative connotation. Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* was written 1976, in the midst of the second wave of feminism. It came out the same year as Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*, the classical feminist text on "motherhood as experience and institution", as its subheading says. *Woman on the Edge of Time* is written as a feminist, didactic text, which directly engages with the feminist debate at the time. It specifically answers Shulamith Firestone's demand in her *On the Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970). Firestone called for women to cast off their "biological destiny" to be mothers. She says this should be done by technological advances; in particular, she advocates childbearing outside the womb (as qtd in Wilson 344), i.e. *ectogenesis*. Firestone thinks this is the only way to gain full equality. Piercy engages directly with this idea in *Woman on the Edge of Time*.

In the novel, the protagonist Connie, a destitute woman who has had her child taken from her, travels into a utopian future. In this future, in the village of Mattapoissett, children are made in "brooderies" which is a plant of artificial wombs which supplies villages with children. The biological ties are completely severed between child and caretaker. Children are conceived at the request of the would-be-parents who are a trio of co-mothers that together decide to take care of a baby. The term mother is not gender bound, so even men are called mothers. All three mothers breastfeed the baby, even those who Connie identifies as men. Just as Mattapoissett uses technology to produce babies, they use biotechnological advances to make men breastfeed.

The whole community of Mattapoissett is presented as gender neutral. The pronoun used for all is *per*, short for person, and they never reference gender. But since the world is seen through Connie's eyes, we get her gendered view of Mattapoissett. When Connie's primary contact in Mattapoissett, Luciente, explains why they themselves use a gender neutral language and employ technology for the same reason, the echoes of Shulamith Firestone are reverberant: "Cause as long as we were biologically enchained, we'd never be equal" (97). Technological advances are evidently used to make what they perceive is an equal society. Gender is circumvented because the people of Mattapoissett think that difference lies behind inequality.

Connie's first introduction to how babies are made in Mattapoissett induces a strong reaction of disgust. She is shown the "broodery", a small building containing the stored genetic material for Mattapoissett. It is also "where the embryos grow" (Piercy 93). The very first greeting Connie receives when entering the broodery is: "be guest to what I comprehend was

a nightmare of your age [sic]”. Connie’s reaction is a state of shock, mouth agape, stomach turning, confirming the nightmare aspect of it for her. For her the embryos in their sacks are strange products, produced by “[m]other the machine” (94). For Connie, pregnancy is so entwined with her perception of being a woman that the notion of mother is transferred to what now produces the children—the machine. To see a machine do what was so important to Connie, reduces her own experiences. That a machine should be a mother is abhorrent to her. For Connie motherhood has shaped most of her life, and the transfer of the capability to make children to a machine denigrates her existence.

Earlier in the book we find out that a forced sterilisation made Connie’s mother unwanted by Connie’s father: “Afterward that was a curse Jesús threw in her face: no longer a woman. An empty shell” (37). This is a clear example of the woman-as-womb-paradigm. If the womb is removed, metaphorically or quite literally, womanhood is cancelled. Even if motherhood is what put Connie and her female relatives in precarious positions, it is the one thing they do have. When a woman cannot even bear a child, her one role, she has become worthless.

In the broodery, a connection is made between a real pregnancy and the sexual. A young worker in the broodery asks Connie: “did you bear alive?” with the follow-up question “was it exciting? Did it feel sexual?” (95). Not only do we have an emphasis on the life and death-perspective on pregnancy—“did you bear alive?”—but also framing pregnancy as something sexual. This can be read as when the childbearing aspect of the body is removed, the only aspect that is left is the sexual. The conflation of woman and womb is entrenched in its sex, removing the subjectivity of woman on behalf of the womb. It also shows how pregnancy is, as in Connie’s time, something that is non-neutral. It is a sexualised experience, due to its close connection to womanhood, which also leads it to be highly marginalised.

For Connie, motherhood is closely connected to carrying the child, and bringing it forth in the world “in blood and pain” (98). Connie calls the embryos of the future “bland bottleborn monsters”, a term that puts one in mind of *Frankenstein*. For her, creating life outside of the womb is uncanny, and results in monsters. She specifically mentions that they are born without pain. She reacts even more strongly on seeing a man breastfeeding a baby: “They had given it all up, they had let men steal from them the last remnants of ancient power, those sealed in blood and milk” (126). Connie shows us how strong the woman-as-womb-paradigm works in her time; for her, men breastfeeding is not divided labour, but rather negating the right of existence for women. She asks “[w]hat was special about being a woman here?”,

even though she has been faced with countless of women who are integral parts of the community and do important work.

Even though it is seen as utopian that childbirth is no longer in blood and pain, and Connie is there to emphasise how bad motherhood can be, Connie's response points to a crucial thing. It may not be that childbearing makes a woman special, because that would quite an essentialist view, but why is it problematic that a woman carries a child? What Mattapoisett have created might be an egalitarian society, but it is on the behalf of the female body. Equal here is assimilation to *man*. It is not equal status on one's own terms. Connie herself mistakes Luciente for a man in the beginning due to the lack of female signifiers. Pregnancy is still marginalized, but with men and women in agreement.

The exposition of the utopian society where birth is completely outside the womb is contrasted through Connie, who exemplifies the contemporary situation for women. Sarah LeFanu argues that this is to contrast the different situations, that the private relationship between mother and child is detrimental because mothers are locked in their role, on their own (LeFanu 66). In Connie's world, medical science killed her lover and took away the ability to have additional children, and it is threatening to take away her mind. The woman-as-womb-paradigm is strengthened over and over again throughout the narrative. Connie's mother is called "an empty shell" (37) after being unwillingly sterilized, and her niece Dolly is subjected to an abortion against her will because her boyfriend/pimp does not want it. Connie loses her sense of self when her child is taken from her, and suffers from being subjected to a hysterectomy, like her mother against her will. But, even though Connie is deprived of what both her womb and her child, she is still the one with the power to make the Mattapoisett come true.

Connie secures the future by giving up her dream of her child. She works to achieve the utopia, and does so by saying: "for you who will be born from my best hopes, I dedicate my act of war". This birth of a utopian world is covered in blood, as Connie poisons the people involved with the experiment she and her friends at the institution has been put under which could be the undoing of Mattapoisett in the future. This assures her own destruction, but brings forth the possibility for Mattapoisett. This can be read as a reference to Connie's feelings that womanhood, even though problematic, is to be cherished. She gives up her need to embrace her woman-as-womb-view, and metaphorically gives birth to a more promising future instead where there are no more births.

The utopian society in *Woman on the Edge of Time* is built on the erasure of the female experience, pregnancy, from the body. It is fascinating that a utopia would not show how pregnancy could be incorporated into a society, as it is done in *Herland*. Rather, the female body is made synonymous with the male to gain equal status. It is to ratify the centre's control over the margins, by saying the margins can only be included if they are assimilated.

***Lilith's Brood* and xenogenesis**

The third wave feminism focused on embracing differences rather than extinguishing it. The three novels that make up Octavia E. Butler's *Lilith's Brood*², also known as the *Xenogenesis Saga*, came out in the end of the 80's, on the cusp of the third wave feminist movement. The characteristics of this movement are evident in *Lilith's Brood* through the queering of gender identities, the incorporation of difference rather than assimilation, and a criticism of the universalism of earlier feminist thought. The main character is Lilith Iyapo, a woman in her thirties, who wakes up with the alien race Oankali after Earth has been destroyed by war. The Oankali rescued the few humans that were left and put them in stasis for 250 years while rehabilitating Earth to be able to return the humans to it. What follows is an exploration of gender identity, race identity, and right of existence.

Lilith's Brood starts with Lilith awakening in an empty room in the chapter named "Womb". She is approached by someone she first believes to be human, but soon discovers to be an alien. Through the alien, Lilith learns that the Oankali's ulterior goal is to trade genes with the humans. The name for the race, Oankali, translates to gene traders. The alien race must evolve continually, or else they stagnate and die. Humans are asked to join the Oankali in families, and to bear children that are constructs between humans and Oankali. The Oankali have chosen Lilith to be their mediator and teacher for the other humans by setting her up as the parent to the rest of the humans. She sees it as becoming their mother, but the Oankali call it parenting. "You're going to set me up as their *mother*?" she asks, to which an Oankali responds: "Define the relationship in any way that's comfortable to you. We have always called it parenting" (111). Her role as the bridge between the Oankali and the humans leads her to become the "judas goat", seen as the betrayer of humankind by the other humans. She has been given strengthened abilities to be able to do her work, but these abilities alienate her further from the humans. They become scared of her, and believe her to be an alien herself. She has

² The three novels of *Lilith's Brood* are *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988) and *Imago* (1989).

craved human company for a long time, but when she is with them, she is as Other to them as the Oankali are to her.

Usually the Oankali settle close to the race with which they want to trade, to establish an equal relationship with them, but humankind's precarious situation have put the Oankali in control of the humans instead. They have sterilised all the humans they saved, and thus humans can only procreate if they choose to have construct children through the Oankali. Reproduction is under the control of the third sex of Oankali—the ooloi. They are the ones who collect cells and initiate procreation. The Oankali family unit is two Oankali of female and male gender, and an ooloi. With the humans, a family consists of a human male and female, dito Oankali, and an ooloi. Lilith bonds with an ooloi named Nikanj.

The first novel, *Dawn*, ends with Lilith being pregnant against her will. Her ooloi, Nikanj, says that it finds her ready to have a child. It says: “Nothing about you but your words reject this child” (Butler 247). She has no subjectivity, as Nikanj claims greater knowledge of her body than she has herself. Interestingly, it is not only Lilith, or the women, that are put in such situations. There are several instances where men experience similar overrides of their will. A telling example is when Lilith's human mate Joseph is about to engage in his first sexual encounter with Lilith and the Nikanj even though he has expressed his reluctance to do so;

[Joseph:] “You said I could choose. I've made my choice!”

[Nikanj:] “You have, yes.” It opened its jacket with its many-fingered true hands and stripped the garment from him. When he would have backed away, it held him. It managed to lie down on the bed without seeming to force him down. “You see. Your body has made a different choice. (189)

Lilith later recognizes the Oankali's ability to listen to the human body, but also what it means when they override the outspoken will of a human:

“It made me pregnant, then told me about it. Said it was giving me what I wanted but would never come out and ask for.”

“Was it?”

“Yes.” She shook her head from side to side. “Oh, yes. But if I had the strength not to ask, it should have had the strength to let me alone.”

(274)

Brian Attebery writes that “one effect of adding ooloi to the human sexual equation is to make females and males appear more alike than different” (144). Instead of a society where men control reproduction, all reproduction is put under the Oankali, and with that the free will of men and women. Melzer find in the ooloi a queering process; “Their third sex not only queers sexual desires but also enables us to conceptualize reproduction—and family—outside a heterosexual context and within genderqueer constellations” (241). In *Lilith’s Brood*, the centre and margins are not divided by genders, but by race. Ooloi has complete control of reproduction, and it constructs babies within themselves before planting them in its female mates’ wombs. The ooloi do offer a queering of tradition sexual roles, but all families and pairings follow a heteronormative pattern. The ooloi have the ability to construct babies from any genetic material, so the fact that here are only heterosexual couples is quite conspicuous. One of the non-heteronormative aspects that have been pointed out though is that in an Oankali-human family, there are two females and two males. But these are depicted as partners in a platonic sense, where physical attraction only occur between heteronormative couples.

Ooloi are perceived as being in control, but they can only live as long as its mates does—it dies from the physical absence of its mates. This points to an interdependence, rather than a hierarchical order where the partners are dependent on the ooloi in a one-way relation. The whole Oankali race act on consensus, and reject hierarchical structures. Melzer points out another important aspect of ooloi-conducted mating—“[d]uring sexual contact there is no separation between self and other(s)” (Melzer 86). An ooloi later says that, since they spend so much time in other people’s skin, they find it very hard to hurt or kill someone. Even though the Oankali have difficulty respecting the subjectivity of their unwilling trade partners, they do not kill or maim humans. The ones who are portrayed committing atrocious deeds to other people are always humans. The ooloi may be in control of the physical side of reproduction, but the survival of the ooloi is dependent on its bonds with its mates.

In the second novel, *Adulthood Rites*, one of Lilith’s construct-children, Akin, is kidnapped by human resisters, and spends a year there. Akin is the narrator and focalizer in the second book of the trilogy. That we lose her point-of-view to gain her child’s instead is an interesting underscoring of Lilith’s loss of subjectivity when she becomes impregnated. When Akin returns to his human-Oankali village, having spent a year with the resisters and getting to know them, he believes strongly in a human-only space, where they will have restored fertility. The Oankali reach a consensus after a while and they decide to build a colony on Mars for the

humans. The Oankali believe the humans will obliterate themselves again, but rely on Akin's assurance that it is more important for the humans to have autonomy. This reflects back to Lilith's comments on how the Oankali have to learn to listen to what humans are saying, instead of just deciding by themselves what is best for the humans. Oankali must learn subjectivity and the importance of humans keeping their selfhood. The resisters now have the choice to either go into Oankali-villages, live as resisters or go to Mars.

In *Imago*, the third novel, another child of Lilith, called Jodahs, finds the last pocket of humans on earth. Inbred, disfigured, and barely human, they are the last humans on earth with control over their own fertility. When humans were first let back to Earth, they discovered one of the women to be pregnant from an assault. The unexpected fertility were due to a rare Oankali oversight, and the rest of the villagers are infertile. The group created a resister village high up in the mountains to avoid contact with others so they could evade Oankali interference. This led to extensive inbreeding, which resulted in the villagers carrying the same disease. They develop skin tumors and their skeletons fuse together, and few of the babies born are able to survive. The last "pure" human look more alien than the new human-Oankali children.

The mountain village is discovered by Jodahs, who has unexpectedly become ooloi, the Oankali third sex. It is the first human-born ooloi, and it is feared by humans as much as by the Oankali. The main reason for this is that "[human-born ooloi] represented true independence—reproductive independence—for that species" (Butler 742). The human born ooloi has new abilities that the Oankali has never had before. Jodahs becomes the missing link by being more human than any Oankali-human hybrid before, leading to the humans not being repelled by him and find the Oankali-symbiosis much more appealing than going to Mars. One of the mountain resisters even says to the human ooloi; "[m]y god, if there has been people like you around a hundred years ago, I couldn't have become a resister. I think there would be no resisters" (740). The resisters initially opted for the least evil choice they had—to run away and live in scarcity and without procreating, or procreating at a high price. The new choices have opened up the ability for them to choose what they could not do from the beginning. Most of the resisters in the mountain village stay with Oankali mates on Earth, instead of a harsh colonist life on Mars.

Lilith's Brood displays several layers of parenting. The Oankali are Lilith's teachers when she awakes, as well as her combined rescuers/captors. She is set up as the parent to the rest of the humans, to relay what she has learnt to them. Her children are the creators of

the Mars colony, and the rescuers/captors of the last pocket of all-human resisters in the mountains. Human reproduction is put under Oankali power. Both men and women are stripped of their subjectivity, and told that the Oankali know their bodies better. The Oankali and the humans have a lot to learn from each other. The prime force driving the Oankali is the need to find differences, and incorporate them. This is contrasted with the human need to reject all things different.

The monstrous alien in *Lilith's Brood* is a far cry from the monstrous Other in *Frankenstein*. Where the Creature was nameless and a horror, a result of alienated labour pains, Lilith knows her children, and they are shown to be the future. Akin and Jodahs not nameless creatures who are alone in the world as in *Frankenstein*. The human-Oankali children may be fearsome at first sight, but they are given a self and subjectivity by being the narrators of two thirds of *Lilith's Brood*. Rather than the women-only centre of *Herland*, gender relations are equal without the exclusion of one of the genders, and a new gender is introduced even. The bodies are not made similar, as in *Woman on the Edge of Time*, but rather made to embrace differences, to always be in the skin of the Other.

Conclusion

The feminist struggle has treated motherhood and pregnancy as something problematic, and still does. In *Frankenstein*, the issues surrounding pregnancy is completely detached from the female body. In *Herland*, women are shown in control only by a leap of nature that makes them able to reproduce by will, without half of humankind. In *Woman on the Edge of Time* motherhood is expunged from the female body, making the male body the norm. In *Lilith's Brood*, it is the control of reproduction, no matter how it looks, that is important.

Frankenstein was written in the beginning of the 19th century, in the inception of the suffragist movement. *Frankenstein* is an alternative birth myth, where the artificial creation of life by a man leads to agony and death both for the creator and the hideous progeny. It can also be read as the exploration of the horror of birth, its aftermath and loss of agency.

Herland was published at the height of the suffragist movement. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, an outspoken women's right activist, excludes men completely from her utopia to show the potential of women. She uses contemporary motherhood discourse that maternity is what creates the goodness of women to portray the women with agency and power. The women of *Herland* are other to the women of the outside world, and the outside world is utterly other to them.

Woman on the Edge of Time came out in the midst of the second wave of feminism, in the early 70's. It depicts a utopia where there is no difference between men and women. It seems like equal agency and power is only available if bodily facts are circumvented. Women are no longer the other, since what Othered them, pregnancy, has been removed and put into a machine.

Lilith's Brood is centred on the same themes as the third feminist movement that burgeoned just after it was published. It queers gender stereotypes and brings in a wider intersectional view on equality and power. Under, or beside, the ooloi, humans become equal. The other is literally the alien. But as the novel progresses, the alien becomes human, and almost more human than those few of mankind that are left. The human born ooloi seduces the last "pure" humans, who choose to stay with the aliens rather than go to Mars and be with the resister humans. There are no easy answers, as the Oankali are as much captors as rescuers of the human race. Humankind survives through xenogenesis—giving birth to the Other.

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