

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Marge Piercy and History from Below: *Woman on the Edge of Time* and the Revolutionary Wager of the 1960s

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Abstract

This article analyzes Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) as an expression of 1960s political radicalism and a "history-from-below" perspective. The oppression faced by the novel's time traveling protagonist, Consuelo Ramos – a victim of the "prison/psychiatric state" – and her struggle in support of a possible utopian future are situated in relation to Piercy's participation in SDS and the women's movement in confrontation with postwar US political culture. Consistent with Walter Benjamin's call to uphold the subversive meaning of radical traditions threatened by historical erasure, Piercy explores contemporary acts of resistance as potentially germinal moments in a longer arc of insurgency obscured and denied by "official" history.

Keywords: History; Intellectual History/Philosophy; Interdisciplinary; Literature

The title of Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* suggests multiple meanings. Most directly, it serves as a straightforward evocation of the telepathic time travel that seemingly brings the protagonist into contact with a utopian future society. At a deeper level, the edge of time might also imply a liminal position in the broad historical sense, balanced between the old order and the new, or, more immediately personal, a woman living a precarious life and facing different possible futures. But another interpretation runs counter to these perspectives. In that reading, the edge of time denotes a potential cessation of historical change, an outer limit or terminus that we can associate with the politics of "there is no alternative" and late capitalism as the end of history. In the face of this threat, the novel's account of Connie's developing political consciousness and commitment to struggle in defense of a potential future utopia then affirms the latent significance of the openings forged by the movements of the 1960s and early 1970s. Despite the demoralization and repression that followed, the seeds of radical transformation have taken root in ways that might be revealed by later events. While the "official" story at the conclusion of the novel claims closure and Connie's ongoing marginalization in the established order,

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a “history-from-below” conception of radical dissent holds out hope for the resurgence of temporarily hidden political currents that have the potential to redeem and give meaning to the past struggles that helped make later transformations possible. It is this possibility that connects Connie’s agency in the present with the utopian society that Piercy portrays in the year 2137.

Piercy’s experiences as a working-class Jewish woman and participant in the student and women’s liberation movements, along with her ties to the antipsychiatry politics of the 1970s, further situate *Woman on the Edge of Time* in the upheavals of the era. Assessments of the novel have long (and valuably) emphasized its connection to a specific moment of feminist theory and politics, but these perspectives generally proceed at a level of abstraction significantly removed from a consideration of Piercy’s own political engagement as it intertwined with movement perspectives and history.¹ As she remarks in her introduction to the 2016 edition of the novel (originally published in 1976), “my desire to take what I considered the most fruitful ideas of the various movements for social change and make them vivid and concrete – that was the real genesis of *Woman on the Edge of Time*.”² By situating the novel in these terms, we can see how it reflects a more radical, intersectional understanding of oppression and social struggle that is sometimes obscured in accounts of the era’s political upheavals. That same introduction also expresses anger and dismay at the trajectory of US politics in the forty years since the novel’s original publication – contrasting the ferment and optimism that nurtured the feminist utopian novels of the time with what Piercy sees as the necessarily more defensive (and therefore less visionary) efforts of the contemporary left. Yet it is precisely in this context that the resources of hope conveyed in the novel retain their significance as a meditation on the possibilities for radical change that emerge out of a conscious facing up to entrenched oppression and remain generative despite initial setbacks and subsequent fallow periods.

Woman on the Edge of Time therefore works as an affirmation of history from below both as a way of seeing the world and as a way of remaking it. By tracing how Connie comes to understand her oppression and embrace a newly conceivable struggle for revolutionary change, we can better locate the novel’s significance as an expression of 1960s radicalism and historical rupture. Consistent with Walter Benjamin’s call to uphold the subversive meaning of radical traditions threatened by historical erasure, Piercy situates contemporary acts of resistance as potentially

¹See, for example, M. Keith Booker, “Woman on the Edge of a Genre: The Feminist Dystopias of Marge Piercy,” *Science Fiction Studies*, 21, 3 (1994), 337–50; Joan Haran, “(Re)productive Fictions: Reproduction, Embodiment and Feminist Science in Marge Piercy’s Science Fiction,” in Karen Sayer and John Moore, eds., *Science Fiction: Critical Frontiers* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000) 154–68; Tatiana Teslenko, *Feminist Utopian Novels of the 1970s: Joanna Russ & Dorothy Bryant* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003); and, for an overview on these feminist readings of the novel, Sam McBean, “Feminism and Futurity: Revisiting Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*,” *Feminist Review*, 107 (2014), 37–56. One exception that makes illuminating but brief links to 1960s movement politics while offering a reading of the novel that at times overlaps with my own is Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (New York: Methuen, 1986); on some related themes of collective memory and the preservation of utopia see also Carter F. Hanson, “The Undetermined Future: Temporality and Collective Memory in Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*,” *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 30, 4 (2019), 283–302.

²Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2016), xi.

germinal moments in a longer arc of insurgency obscured and denied by “official” history.

Historical rupture and the 1960s

Apathy and the historical resignation endemic to postwar US political culture were central concerns of the New Left. In 1962, the founding Port Huron Statement of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) called attention to “the pervading feeling that there simply are no alternatives, that our times have witnessed the exhaustion not only of Utopias, but of any new departures as well ... For most Americans, all crusades are suspect, threatening.” Individual dissent from “the reassuring tones of the politicians” was in turn stifled by the wider passivity: “the fact that each individual sees apathy in his fellows perpetuates the common reluctance to organize for change.”³ By the time of the 1965 March on Washington to End the War in Vietnam, the then president of SDS, Paul Potter, would similarly observe that the anticomunist rationalizations used to justify the escalating war “have been drummed into us so long that we have somehow become numb to the possibility that something else might exist.”⁴

Against this ideologically induced historical paralysis came Potter’s famous injunction to “name the system.” In his case, that meant recognizing the capitalist and imperialist imperatives that drove New Deal liberals (“good men”) to make decisions resulting in mass death and mutilation in Vietnam.⁵ But this system-naming effort to get to the roots of oppression would broadly characterize the many overlapping movements of the period (however varied their political conclusions), with the Black freedom struggle at the heart of this challenge to the hegemonic social order and in turn informing the perspectives embraced by other movements.⁶

The women’s movement in particular proclaimed the transformative power of making visible the social dynamics that both produced gender (and relationship) norms and undercut women’s capacity to recognize their unhappiness as a political question. Betty Friedan’s landmark analysis in *The Feminine Mystique* characterized white suburban women’s plight as “the problem with no name.” To acknowledge its existence as a general phenomenon legitimated the feelings of discontent that were otherwise perceived as a private matter and marker of personal failings. Stephanie Coontz recounts the importance of Friedan’s insights to a generation of such women: “A half century after they read the book, many of the women I talked to could still recall the desperation they had felt in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and their wave of relief when Friedan told them they were not alone and they were not crazy.”

³Students for a Democratic Society, “The Port Huron Statement,” in Judith Clavir Albert and Stewart Edward Albert, eds., *The Sixties Papers: Documents of a Rebellious Decade* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1984), 176–96, 178.

⁴Paul Potter, “Speech to the April 17, 1965 March on Washington,” in Albert and Albert, *The Sixties Papers*, 218–25, 219.

⁵Even as Potter’s own reticence to explicitly mention capitalism or imperialism reflected the depth of the constraints on political dissent.

⁶On the scope and significance of Black radicalism in this period see, for example, Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002); Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2003).

As she particularly emphasizes, “it is not your fault, Friedan told them, that you feel trapped and discontented. The fault lies with the way society has denigrated and wasted your capacities.”⁷

The same thread of revelation would run through the radicalizing women’s movement in the late 1960s and into the 1970s. In 1969, the Redstockings Manifesto declared that “our chief task at present is to develop female class consciousness through sharing experience and publicly exposing the sexist foundation of all our institutions.” Stressing the political character of women’s path forward, the analysis emphasized that “consciousness-raising is not ‘therapy,’ which implies the existence of individual solutions and falsely assumes the male–female relationship is purely personal, but the only method by which we can ensure that our program for liberation is based on the concrete realities of our lives.”⁸ Looking back from 1977, the Combahee River Collective (CRC) similarly observed that “Black feminists often talk about their feelings of craziness before becoming conscious of the concepts of sexual politics, patriarchal rule, and most importantly, feminism, the political analysis and practice that we women use to struggle against our oppression.” For the Black revolutionaries who comprised the collective, “a combined antiracist and antisexist position drew us together initially, and as we developed politically we addressed ourselves to heterosexism and economic oppression under capitalism.”⁹

Across multiple movements, this was an analysis that conveyed the weight of established culture in narrowing the political terrain but in turn signaled the excitement of breaking through the impasse. It was the same feeling that defined the broader youth culture of the period:

An immense structure of feelings was breaking up and giving way before the onslaught of the new, and not just in the United States but around the world. “Suddenly you could breathe freely,” recalls Vaclav Havel, Czech playwright, dissident, and Beatles fan; “people could associate freely, fear vanished, taboos were swept away, social conflicts could be named and described.”¹⁰

Probing his personal experiences alongside the sweeping impact of the Beatles and the countercultural significance of an emerging drug scene, intellectual historian Nick Bromell cautions against a later cynicism about the energies of that time: “today this palpable sensation that a world was ending, this intuition that history had been terminated by a few chords struck on a guitar, is hard to remember or hear described without a skeptical smile.” Yet the music and the profound audience reaction were an affirmation “that we can cross a line that divides history from life,

⁷Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), xx–xxi.

⁸“Redstockings Manifesto,” in Barbara Crow, ed., *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 223–25, 224.

⁹“The Combahee River Collective Statement,” in Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor, ed., *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 15–27, 17–18.

¹⁰Nick Bromell, *Tomorrow Never Knows: Rock and Psychedelics in the 1960s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 18.

that delivers life as something fresh and anarchic from the grip of the past, habit, convention.”¹¹

The departure from “history,” then, was not delusional in the sense of the old critique of utopianism, of a social vision detached from any historical causality or context. Instead it was the realization that the stifling “realism” of the established order was itself a false consciousness that did the political work of denying transformative human agency in the service of making “more of the same” inevitable. Against that circumscribed future, the 1960s explosion offered a radically open-ended sense of possibilities both in the suddenly charged character of everyday life and in the more explicitly political ruptures forged by the burgeoning movements. Essential here was a reorientation to history from below – to the lived experiences of subaltern groups – as an active critique of the status quo and source of openings denied by the “official” culture. Explicitly advanced as a counter to “the deadening ‘consensus’ approach to the American past that had grown out of the repressive atmosphere of the Cold War,” history from below was a direct expression of “the demands for a new history then being voiced by African-Americans, students, women, and workers, as they combined in various movements for peace, justice, and power.”¹² This encompassed an emphasis not only on social struggle and the agency of ordinary people, but also on the intellectual perspectives and evolving self-understanding of subordinate groups in opposition to the received ideas of ruling elites. Understood in this way, the work of individual and collective self-transformation was thereby intertwined with, and foundational to, the larger political project of transforming society as a whole. This is the vantage point that comes through in Piercy’s own personal history and in the protagonist’s struggle for liberation in *Woman on the Edge of Time*.

Of course, the movements of the period were not a unified whole, and many political initiatives suffered their own forms of hierarchy and exclusion. Thus wide sections of the women’s movement were incisively critiqued by the CRC, the Third World Women’s Alliance (TWWA), and other radical women of color for political narrowness and inadequate attention to the needs and concerns of the multiply oppressed. At the same time, the sustained presence of these more radical organizations reveals the breadth and reach of second-wave feminist politics when we move beyond well-known white-led organizations – with, for instance, the roots of the TWWA going back to developments in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in the 1960s.¹³ As Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor summarizes, the CRC’s intervention created “entry points into activism for Black and Brown women who would have otherwise been ignored,” directly responding to “the inability or unwillingness of most white feminist organizations to fully engage with antiracist issues affecting Black women, like campaigning against sterilization and sexual assault or

¹¹Ibid., 18, 23.

¹²Marcus Rediker, “Jesse Lemisch and History from the Bottom Up,” foreword to Jesse Lemisch, *Jack Tar vs. John Bull: The Role of New York’s Seamen in Precipitating the Revolution* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), ix–xv, x–xi.

¹³Patricia Romney, *We Were There: The Third World Women’s Alliance and the Second Wave* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2021), 4–5.

for low-wage and workplace rights.”¹⁴ In that context, *Woman on the Edge of Time* is notable for its substantial alignment with the intersectional analysis advanced by the CRC and the TWWA – “the idea that multiple oppressions reinforce each other to create new categories of suffering.”¹⁵ While other feminist utopias of the period addressed issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality to varying degrees, Piercy’s novel has been recognized by scholars for doing “the most to take on a panorama of social concerns,” an orientation also observed by Joanna Russ in an essay discussing her own novel, *The Female Man*, and other major second-wave feminist science fiction.¹⁶ In that sense, *Woman on the Edge of Time* illuminates the promise of the 1960s upsurge in arriving at an increasingly radical understanding of oppression and resistance, a transformative experience that was evident in various movements as they grappled with the implications of more circumscribed political projects.

At times, the importance of these radical struggles has also been obscured in historical accounts emphasizing the comparatively mainstream strands of the movements (whether to document their achievements or highlight their limitations and exclusions). Recovering the scope and influence of more revolutionary aspirations accordingly remains an ongoing effort in the history-from-below tradition.¹⁷ If *Woman on the Edge of Time* is significant partly for drawing our attention to this radical spark as an essential aspect of the period – countering narrower understandings of the scope of second-wave feminism and other movement politics – that is not to say that Piercy’s political insights are without their own complications, omissions, or shortcomings. But her novel is distinctive in making the struggle for liberation against interlocking oppressions central both to the depiction of Connie’s life and to the utopian project of Mattapoisett, a narrative that directly reflects Piercy’s background and the breadth of her movement experiences.

Piercy and movement politics

Slightly preceding the rise of the New Left, Piercy graduated from the University of Michigan in 1957 (the same year as Tom Hayden, principal author of the Port Huron Statement, enrolled). By the early 1960s, she was living in Brookline, Massachusetts and struggling to write her first novel. But her earlier experiences at the university and growing up in Detroit were marked by the alienation common to the emerging feminist critique of postwar America, and Piercy remained in sufficient contact with the Michigan student milieu to establish ties to the early SDS – a connection she would subsequently deepen in New York.

¹⁴Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, “Introduction,” in Taylor, *How We Get Free*, 1–14, 5–6.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 4. See also Third World Women’s Alliance, “Women in the Struggle,” in Crow, 460–65; Winifred Brines, *The Trouble between Us: An Uneasy History of White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹⁶Edward K. Chan, *The Racial Horizons of Utopia: Unthinking the Future of Race in Late Twentieth-Century American Utopian Novels* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2016), 96; Joanna Russ, “Recent Feminist Utopias,” in Russ, *To Write like a Woman: Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 133–148; and see Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, 122–23.

¹⁷See, for example, Dan Berger and Emily K. Hobson, *Remaking Radicalism: A Grassroots Documentary Reader of the United States, 1973–2001* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2020); Romney; and for an earlier analysis of historical omissions in the liberal/progressive accounts of the 1960s see Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals turn to Lenin, Mao and Che* (New York: Verso, 2002).

In a 1974 article for *Partisan Review*, Piercy reflected back on her sense of terminal estrangement during the 1950s:

I found myself a perennial adolescent, isolated, stuck in the alienated pose of an individual in a hostile environment. History had ended in the American apotheosis; it was only a matter of time (and struggle with the forces of evil) before the rest of the world became just like Our Town with cigarette commercials ... Changing this country felt inconceivable. Politics was voting. The long ice age of General Motors, General Foods, General Eisenhower, and general miasma.

Even the available avenues of countercultural dissent were largely a dead end for women: “there was no support for choosing anything other than a narrowly defined norm. There was no subculture to drop into especially, especially for women ... To an independent woman the enclaves of beat and hep were more piggish than the straight world.”¹⁸

Piercy did enjoy considerable academic and literary success at Michigan alongside her discontent with the many constraints of the period. Starting out in the dorms with two other working-class women “helped all of us survive in an environment for which we were not prepared and in which we were not fully respected.”¹⁹ But even as she worked on the *Michigan Daily*, won multiple Hopwood Awards (scholarships) for fiction and poetry, and enjoyed her sexual and social autonomy, she found it hard to see a way forward outside mainstream conventions: “The truth was, by my senior year I was running a little scared. Everything around me told me I was not what a woman was supposed to be ... What would become of me? I could not guess and all scenarios seemed depressing. There were no role models for a woman like me.”²⁰

Budding political activism provided some degree of solace, including the local civil rights and free-speech efforts that Piercy later regarded as insubstantial but that at least broke with the general apathy: “what we did then politically was weak, mild, ineffective, but we were not completely passive.”²¹ Her 1982 autobiographical novel, *Braided Lives*, picks up on this theme in illuminating ways, with the narrator (also a student at the University of Michigan) describing the liberating significance of the meetings put on by a student-organized “Political Alternatives Forum”: “At those timid meetings I live for a few moments in a world larger than that bounded by dormitory and classroom.”²² By the mid-1960s, this glimpse of broader possibilities would flower into an immersion in the movements that became central to Piercy’s life.

In an unexpected connection, *Braided Lives* also points to a seminal expression of the history-from-below tradition when the narrator relates that, in the repressive atmosphere of the 1950s, even to share a copy of “J. P. Thompson’s *History of the*

¹⁸Marge Piercy, “Through the Cracks: Growing up in the 50’s,” *Partisan Review*, 41, 2 (1974), 202–16, 203.

¹⁹Marge Piercy, *Sleeping with Cats: A Memoir* (New York: William Morrow, 2002), 88.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 101; see also *ibid.*, 92–101 *passim*.

²¹*Ibid.*, 99.

²²Marge Piercy, *Braided Lives* (New York: Summit Books, 1982), 192.

English Working Class feels like a brave political act.”²³ Slightly fictionalized, this reference to E. P. Thompson’s landmark labor history (*The Making of the English Working Class*, actually published in 1963) reinforces the excitement of discovering personal and political solidarity by digging beneath the orthodoxies of the day.²⁴ Thompson’s emphasis was on recovering and validating the lived experience of the working class, famously described as the task of rescuing “the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the ‘obsolete’ hand-loom weaver, the ‘utopian’ artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity.”²⁵ Not only an act of historical recovery, this was a conscious political intervention, the pursuit of a counternarrative that could hopefully both inspire and gain further significance from a resurgent radicalism (and appropriately written between 1959 and 1962, while Thompson was heavily involved with the first British New Left).

For Piercy, the revitalization of such radicalism in the US New Left would intersect with the struggle to find her own voice as a woman and writer against the repressive pressures of mainstream society, but also against the limits of the movement itself. For a time during her first marriage she worked as a secretary in Chicago, an experience she described as suffering a profound loss of visibility: “it was as if my voice had been swallowed by the air ... I came to resent my nonpersonhood. I got louder, shriller. It did not matter. I spoke, but the conversation went on over my head in waves that broke over me.”²⁶ Her first husband’s aspirations to a conventional marriage in line with his French bourgeois family background also became a deeply stifling experience, ending in divorce with Piercy seeking freedom to write and live outside what was “a ‘box for me where I experienced a gradual diminishing of self.’”²⁷

Eventually ending up in Brookline, in the early to mid-1960s Piercy was in regular contact with the Ann Arbor chapter of SDS. Her political involvement also extended to “an occasional demonstration against the war in Vietnam” on trips into New York.²⁸ In 1965, Piercy and her second husband (in what was a very unconventional marriage) relocated to Brooklyn, where Piercy developed a stronger writing community and plunged into extensive movement activity. After working for *Viet Report*, in 1966, Piercy was among the founders of the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA) and the associated newsletter that offered reportage and critique of US imperialism and corporate power. By 1967, she was also an organizer with the SDS regional office in New York. Here she worked on *CAW!* – an infrequently published national SDS magazine – and sought to nurture the nonstudent Movement for a Democratic Society (MDS) as a basis for continued activism among young professionals in major cities. This pursuit overlapped with the Radicals in

²³Ibid., 191.

²⁴See also Peter Linebaugh, “From the Upper Westside to Wick Escopi,” *New Left Review*, 201(Sept.–Oct. 1993), 18–25, 22.

²⁵E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1980), 12.

²⁶Piercy, *Sleeping with Cats*, 116.

²⁷Ibid., 120.

²⁸Ibid., 174.

the Professions project that advocated a “long-haul” approach to sustainable radical careers in fields such as education and law.²⁹

There was, then, a hopeful sense of open possibilities as the movement took root in a wider array of institutions and confronted the repressive character of everyday life. But SDS was also beginning to fracture around leadership battles and opposing political perspectives, and by 1969 Piercy would join the escalating feminist critique of the gendered power hierarchies within the movement itself. Whatever demoralization this might entail, for Piercy such setbacks were dialectically tied to a growing recognition of the importance and promise of the women’s movement as a way forward out of what increasingly felt like a New Left cul-de-sac.

“I did not experience the dreadful tearing asunder of SDS in the same way as friends,” Piercy writes, “because I was involved in something bursting with life and energy that was teaching me to remake myself stronger – mentally and socially.”³⁰ There was an “intense sense of revelation” as she joined the downtown Women’s Center and took up a new round of organizing: “out of there I began organizing consciousness-raising groups, I stayed in one of them for a year and a half. I was involved again in helping women get abortions and in the regular lobbying, busing to Albany to the legislature.”³¹ The rich fabric of movement activities was also deeply transformative on a personal level:

I was seeing myself and the world and all my relationships, all the relationships of my life from my parents on, in a new way ... every day there was new women’s theater, women’s readings, women’s zines, women’s programs, women’s demonstrations and guerilla theater at bridal bazaars, the Miss America pageant, construction sites; every day someone proposed a new way to look at some aspect of our lives that turned our perspectives upside down; every day I found something I had thought be a personal problem was an issue shared by many, many women.³²

The stakes of this political shift were captured in Piercy’s essay “The Grand Coolie Damn,” first published in *Leviathan* in 1969 and included in Robin Morgan’s path-breaking anthology *Sisterhood Is Powerful* a year later. As Piercy describes, the piece marked “my break with the New Left, although I never turned on it the way some feminists did. I never thought we were all wrong, only that things did go sour.”³³ The heart of the analysis stressed the internal failings of the movement, opening with the question of why, if “the movement itself is supposed to be for human liberation,” women inside were “no better than outside.” Here Piercy described what she saw as a decline from an initial period where “people were generally willing to put effort into their relationships with each other and human liberation was felt as

²⁹Ibid., 177, 188; Kirkpatrick Sale, *SDS* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 287, 339; Bob Gottlieb and Marge Piercy, “Movement for a Democratic Society: Beginning to Begin,” in Massimo Teodori, ed., *The New Left: A Documentary History* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), 403–10, 406.

³⁰Piercy, *Sleeping with Cats*, 208.

³¹Ibid., 205.

³²Ibid., 206–7.

³³Ibid., 205.

something to be acted out rather than occasionally flourished like a worn red flag." In part, she traced the loss of this earlier experimentation to the broader forces of repression reshaping the movement: "it is not necessary to recount the history of the last two years to explain what happened. Repression brings hardening." But if the shifting conditions and sense of urgency pushed activists to move on from "an excessive amount of introspection," the end result was also the creation of a posturing cadre of male movement leaders who upheld a political culture that exploited and subordinated women. Under the guise of more disciplined and radical practice, the "professional revolutionary" justified top-down authority by claiming a political expertise necessary to advance the movement, meanwhile leaving others to do the actual work of sustaining movement institutions, "much of the time women."³⁴

This issue of professional expertise as a potential source of coercive power runs through Piercy's politics, connecting her experiences in the 1960s with her later attention to psychiatric and carceral institutions. Yet, as was evident in MDS, she also hoped to mobilize young professionals as a key constituency within the radical left. Stephen Schryer situates these views within a broader New Left orientation that critiqued the dehumanizing and bureaucratic character of contemporary institutions while hoping to bring professional expertise into the sphere of radical politics: "Hence, many of the New Left's most influential political initiatives consisted of efforts to dissolve the boundaries between professionals and nonprofessionals so as to give nonexperts a greater say in the application of expert knowledge" (an aspiration Schryer critically explores in relation to *Woman on the Edge of Time*).³⁵ In the 1970s, we can see such concerns in Piercy's engagement with the antipsychiatry movement, and specifically the collective behind the *Radical Therapist* journal (subsequently renamed *Rough Times* and then RT). Here she encountered a movement of professionals, patients, ex-patients, prisoners, and organizers pursuing an alternative to the repressive and carceral practices of mental-health institutions that were upheld by medical expertise.³⁶ As she later commented, this experience combined with others to inform not only *Woman on the Edge of Time* but also her poetry, where a recurring theme was the possibility of women exercising personal agency against the force of coercive public institutions: "I'm asking ... what it means to choose to acquiesce in decisions on the part of government you feel to be wrong, or to resist, to cooperate with punitive and politically repressive grand juries or to resist." For Piercy, the personal stakes were profound, the peril of deep despair versus the pursuit of self-determination and new ways of living through political engagement.³⁷

³⁴Marge Piercy, "The Grand Coolie Damn," in Robin Morgan, ed., *Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 421–38, 421–23.

³⁵Stephen Schryer, *Fantasies of the New Class: Ideologies of Professionalism in Post-World War II American Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 143.

³⁶Radical Therapist/Rough Times Collective, "Introduction," in Radical Therapist/Rough Times Collective, eds., *The Radical Therapist* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974), 8–9.

³⁷Marge Piercy, "Revision in Action: Chipping and Building," in Piercy, *Parti-colored Blocks for a Quilt* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1982), 90–92; Piercy, "Afterthoughts: A Conversation between Ira Wood and Marge Piercy," in *ibid.*, 321–22.

Piercy also recounted her own struggle to break from the manipulative politics she inherited from male “professional revolutionaries” and recognize the real implications of the women’s movement, writing that at first that “she saw the whole thing as interesting primarily as an organizing tool ... a way to organize women who could not be reached on other issues or in other organizing contexts.” As she continues, “it took me two *more* years of grisly experiences, of getting used and purged, to get my nose well rubbed in women’s exploitation, to find out women’s liberation was not talking about the other fellow, and to understand how much I had adopted male values to think of liberation as a tool.”³⁸ Piercy concluded by emphasizing the need for women to move on to their own approach to organizing, stressing that “the answer does not lie in trying to be the token woman or in trying to learn quickly how to manipulate or shove around those who manipulate us ... We want Something Else.”³⁹ For Piercy, this perspective would frame her political work after she moved to Wellfleet, MA in the early 1970s, where she would help to found Cape Cod Women’s Liberation and (in 1972) coauthor *Getting Together: How to Start a Consciousness-Raising Group* with Jane Freeman.⁴⁰

In a second piece published in 1970, Piercy complemented this analysis by exploring the multiple sources of women’s oppression in the wider society. Here she linked economic exploitation with the cultural conventions structuring the nuclear family, highlighting women’s designated labor (and appropriate source of fulfillment) in child rearing and housework and in turn connecting this to the concomitant exploitation in low-wage jobs of women “who are not supposed to be *really* working outside the home.” At the psychological level, male anxieties and the threat felt by other women who remained attached to dominant values were likewise seen as constant pressures “cutting you down to a size where you’ll fit naturally into that little place, and ask yourself if you don’t fit, ‘what’s wrong with me?’” Finally, women faced the struggle within themselves: “your head is full of society’s programming. We, as women, find satisfaction in our roles. Women get used to pretending to submit.”⁴¹

Against these constraints stood the alternative of embracing an oppositional project in concert with other women and rooted in the long history of women’s dissent:

We have to learn something of the war we were born into, the longest revolution of all. History is ruling class, white male history ... Interesting women sink into history and dissolve, unless sexually titillating. But they were effective, and the options represented by women like André Leo, Louise Michel, Mother Jones, Rosa Luxemburg, Ernestine Rose and Sojourner Truth are real enough still.⁴²

³⁸Piercy, “The Grand Coolie Damn,” 429, original emphasis.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 437.

⁴⁰Piercy, *Sleeping with Cats*, 213; Donna M. Bickford, *Understanding Marge Piercy* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2019), 5.

⁴¹Marge Piercy, “Women’s Liberation: Nobody’s Baby Now,” in Dotson Rader, ed., *Defiance: A Radical Review #1* (New York: Paperback Library, 1970), 134–62, 135–38, original emphasis.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 149.

This aligned with an ongoing commitment to participatory democracy as a liberating impulse revived in the 1960s and sustained by the women's movement even as it lost traction elsewhere: "Nobody on the Left talks about participatory democracy anymore, nor do people in the women's movement: we just try to do it, with great difficulty and pain. It is hard, but it is also beautiful." Piercy accordingly hoped to redeem the potential evident in the 1960s upheavals alongside an affiliation with the rediscovered revolutionary currents of women's long fight for self-determination. "I believe," she concluded, "that we must succeed in the women's movement for humanity in a real sense to come to exist and for people to survive."⁴³ It is this arc of transformative self-consciousness and political agency within a multigenerational movement, this possibility of marginalized women remaking themselves and remaking history from below despite the many experiences of (personal and collective) defeat, that lies at the heart of *Woman on the Edge of Time*.

Connie Ramos and the logics of oppression

The novel's opening sequence brings together the multiple layers of oppression faced by Consuelo Ramos as a working-class Chicana living in contemporary (mid-1970s) New York City. Connie hits her niece Dolly's pimp with a bottle when he arrives to force Dolly into an abortion. She then winds up in Bellevue Hospital having been beaten and committed against her will based on Geraldo's claim that she attacked him and Dolly: "man to man, pimp and doctor discussed her condition, while Dolly sobbed."⁴⁴ The family and community dynamics of gendered personal power thus work in tandem with the institutional forces that have continually circumscribed Connie's identity to once again ensnare her in a totalizing system of social control. Against her objections that she did not hit Dolly, that Dolly was coerced into supporting Geraldo's accusation, "the doctor went on making notations on the form. She was a body checked into the morgue; meat registered for the scales":

She tried to tell the nurse who gave her the injection, the attendants who tied her to the stretcher, that she was innocent, that she had a broken rib, that Geraldo had beaten her. It was as if she spoke another language ... They acted as if they couldn't hear you. If you complained, they took it as a sign of sickness. "The authority of the physician is undermined if the patient presumes to make a diagnostic statement." She had heard a doctor say that to a resident, teaching him not to listen to patients ... Fool, poor fool she had got herself locked away again. She had jumped into the fire. Why had she done it? Why?⁴⁵

Working from a Foucauldian perspective, Jennifer Burwell neatly captures the social logics and institutional practices that act to constitute Connie's subjectivity in subordinated terms: "*Woman on the Edge of Time* describes the operations of power upon

⁴³Ibid., 161–62.

⁴⁴Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 13. Subsequent citations are from this edition.

⁴⁵Ibid., 13.

its protagonist with the goal of materially defining and producing her as a subjected individual.” Against the possibility of Connie simply being excluded from the social body, the emphasis is on “a politics that aims at incorporating her into society as a ‘pathological subject,’” highlighting an “obsessive concern for penetrating, defining, and controlling her.”⁴⁶ This is the point at which Foucault’s analysis of the diffuse locations of power intersects with the feminist insistence on the reach of the political into the personal and quotidian.

For Connie, family history is marked by a downward spiral, with interludes of close and nurturing relationships giving way to patriarchal dominance and isolation. Her brother Luis, once a “young hoodlum” capable of grace and family kindnesses, remakes himself as Lewis, an assimilated businessman who wields power over her fate in the hospital. Luis’s economic ascendance is scaffolded by a series of marriages – first to a Puerto Rican woman, then to an Italian American woman, finally to a white Protestant woman – as well as a move to the New Jersey suburbs. Connie imagines Luis would be happy if he could similarly remove her from his increasingly respectable family, and it is he who authorizes her long-term transfer to a psychiatric facility, Rockover State Hospital. Connie has been there before, and the first time she “had wanted to cooperate, to grow well” under the gaze of the medical experts and in response to her own guilt.⁴⁷ But she is not ashamed of her actions in confronting Geraldo, and she now knows Rockover as “a place of punishment, of sorrow, of the slow or fast murder of the self.”⁴⁸

As the novel ranges back over Connie’s life prior to the hospitalization, we see the cumulative power wielded by (especially white) male actors that brings her to this point. An early period of fulfillment at a community college in Chicago ends following an abortion and rejection by her family, “after her Anglo boyfriend Chuck had deserted her.”⁴⁹ Another moment of happiness as a secretary at the City University of New York reveals itself as part of a cycle in which a professor of romance languages “liked to have a Spanish-speaking secretary, that is, a new one every year – dismissed when he went away for summer vacation. He called them all Chiquita, like bananas.”⁵⁰ Both experiences partly overlap with Piercy’s own life up through her mid-twenties.

Most traumatically, Connie’s previous stay at Rockover followed an act of violence against her young daughter, Angelina, who is placed in state custody and adopted by a suburban white family. Connie understands that moment of anger as the culmination of her own anguish following the deaths of two men she loved and an abusive marriage to Angelina’s father, Eddie Ramos. Her first and loving husband, Martín, is swept up in Barrio resistance to police violence and killed in the streets. Her second marriage collapses in the wake of Eddie’s assaults and leaves Connie struggling without child support. She then has a relationship with Claud, a blind Black musician and pickpocket who dies of hepatitis from a prison medical experiment after they

⁴⁶Jennifer Burwell, *Notes on Nowhere: Feminism, Utopian Logic, and Social Transformation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 134–39, 137.

⁴⁷Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, 54.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 25.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 235.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 44.

both get arrested: “Claud had been open to her and everybody – the judge, the probation officer, Luis, everybody – had tried to make her ashamed of being with him.”⁵¹ Mourning Claud’s death “in a haggard frenzy of alcohol and downers,” Connie awakens one day to her daughter’s screaming and strikes her in a rage when she sees Angelina has ruined her only pair of shoes.⁵²

Even as she harms her daughter, Connie spirals into thoughts about the deeper, social violence she is caught up in reproducing:

Connie dragged herself from her bed hungover and strung out, and it hit her that having a baby was a crime ... That she had borne herself all over again, and it was a crime to be born poor as it was a crime to be born brown. She had caused a new woman to grow where she had grown, and that was a crime.

Similarly, Claud’s plight is tied back to the “reform schools, the courts ... those rotten sixty-day-to-six-year indeterminate sentences, all the institutions that would punish him for being black and blind and surviving.”⁵³

Where once she tried to transcend that bleak inheritance through the conventional pursuit of self-improvement (not unlike Luis), Connie now recognizes and rejects the immense pressure of the authorities arrayed against her. She recalls the shame of her first stay in Rockover, when “she had judged herself sick” and faced “all those experts lined up against her in a jury dressed in medical white and judicial black”: “Social workers, caseworkers, child guidance counselors, psychiatrists, doctors, nurses, clinical psychologists, probation officers – all those cool knowing faces had caught her and bound her in their nets of jargon hung all with tiny barbed hooks that stuck in her flesh and leaked a slow weakening poison.”⁵⁴ Piercy’s account thereby moves from the more immediate sources of oppression in Connie’s interpersonal relationships to the systemic forces that contain her while defining her trajectory as a product of personal failings and illness, exposing her inadequacies as a woman. A social worker accordingly confronts Connie about her medical history prior to her current confinement: “you have a history of child abuse ... It was the clinical judgement of the court psychiatrist that your daughter would be better off with foster parents.” When the next question interrogates Connie’s role as Claud’s criminal assistant, Connie stops herself from challenging the official characterization of her relationships: “Her face slammed shut. They trapped you into saying something and then they’d bring out their interpretations that made your life over. To make your life into a pattern of disease.”⁵⁵

The novel, then, reveals the history the winners impose on their victims, both as lived experience and as consciousness, and charts Connie’s growing recognition of this hegemonic power. As Connie resists her subordination in increasingly politicized ways, events proceed to a culminating conflict over an experimental

⁵¹Ibid., 106.

⁵²Ibid., 55.

⁵³Ibid., 55–56.

⁵⁴Ibid., 54.

⁵⁵Ibid., 19–20.

brain implant intended to remove the patient's violent impulses. Connie and a number of fellow inmates are transferred for testing to a premier research facility in Manhattan, another move authorized by Luis. Two of her friends are subjected to the implants and additional procedures with devastating results, an outgoing and self-confident Black woman reduced to passive compliance and a young, gay white man driven to suicide. For Connie, the stakes of these procedures are clear, a threat not only to her own autonomy but to the struggle for a utopian future in which she is immersed. Luciente – Connie's analog in that possible future with whom she appears to be in telepathic contact – spells out the rival trajectories hanging in the balance when Connie first tells her of the project:

It's that race between technology, in the service of those who control, and insurgency – those who want to change the society in our direction. In your time the physical sciences had delivered the weapons technology. But the crux, we think, is in the biological sciences. Control of genetics. Technology of brain control. Birth-to-death surveillance. Chemical control through psychoactive drugs and neurotransmitters.⁵⁶

After a failed escape attempt, Connie is forced to meet with a psychologist who asserts the opposite, that only through the implant can she hope to gain her freedom: "What you don't see, Connie, is that if it wasn't for us, you'd face spending the rest of your life where we found you ... Instead of just warehousing you, we're prepared to help you." But Connie understands that the psychologist's true function is to legitimate the research, "an uneasy fifth wheel to the project ... added for some kind of show. He made up reasons for what the others did in terms not exclusively medical."⁵⁷ Against the false "cure" (and false consciousness) offered by the medical authorities – in reality a biological extension of the carceral regime directly into her brain – Connie resolves to derail the project in defense of the utopian community she sees as the true historical advance that would enable people like her and Angelina to flourish.

Political agency and utopia

By alternating between Connie's encounters with the utopian future and her plight in the hospital, Piercy shows how Connie's growing identification with a larger history fosters her own sense of political agency and counters the dominant narratives about her life. At first experiencing the village life of Mouth-of-Mattapoisett in 2137 as unattractively primitive for its lack of the familiar trappings (and gender conventions) of urban America, Connie increasingly recognizes the richness and autonomy of daily life in the socialist, feminist, and ecologically harmonious community. The unfinished revolution of that future time – still under attack by the remnants of the old order – inspires Connie to resist her oppression and situate her own fight as of a piece with the war of attrition waged to defend that social transformation.

⁵⁶Ibid., 215.

⁵⁷Ibid., 253.

When one of Luciente's comrades, Jackrabbit, announces his upcoming rotation into a military assignment, Connie asks why an artist with his evident talent should be required to serve. "I don't know anything," she explains, "but I can see it's for real. Yet he still has to work in the fields and go to the army and cook and all that." Luciente responds that she herself is a real geneticist, "and I have to defend and dig potatoes and cook and all that. I also eat and make political choices and rely on those in arms to defend me – as does Jackrabbit."⁵⁸ She then expands on the exploratory freedom and self-expression the villagers enjoy in conjunction with their shared responsibility for the labor that underpins the community:

Connie, we think art is production. We think making a painting is as real as growing a peach or making diving gear. No more real, no less real. It's useful and good and on a different level, but it's production. If that's the work I want to do, I don't have to pass a test or find a patron. But I still have family duties, political duties, social duties, like every other lug. How not?⁵⁹

Acknowledging the risk inherent in the defense assignment, Luciente and Jackrabbit describe the political conditions that compel this mutual burden:

The enemy is few but determined. Once they ran this whole world ... now they have the power to exterminate us and we to exterminate them. They have such a limited base – the moon, Antarctica, the space platforms ... that the war is one of attrition and small actions in the disputed areas,

Luciente explains. "We fear them, but we've prevailed so far and we believe we'll win ... if history is not reversed. That is, the past is a disputed area."⁶⁰

Under such circumstances, she argues, the only principled decision is to share in the danger: "Who isn't precious to self? How could we decide who to spend and who to save?"⁶¹ Connie in turn comes to accept this commitment as she confronts the idea that her own history is intertwined with the battle to shape the "disputed area" of a "past" that – if things go as hoped – makes Mattapoisett possible. As Bee informs her in a previous conversation, "you may fail us ... You individually may fail to understand us or to struggle in your own life and time. You of your time may fail to struggle together."⁶² Recast in this way, Connie's behavior reflects reasoned political analysis given greater meaning by the future it helps to engender, a subversion of the medical authorities who construe her as ill and irrational and characterize their intervention as a therapeutic response to patients with limited "intellectual faculties," a necessary containment of "centers of aggression, the primitive emotions run amok."⁶³

⁵⁸Ibid., 258.

⁵⁹Ibid., 259, original emphasis.

⁶⁰Ibid., 259.

⁶¹Ibid., 259.

⁶²Ibid., 189.

⁶³Ibid., 273.

It is this transformed consciousness and understanding of self-determination that drives Connie's final acts of resistance to the repressive psychiatric order that confronts her. It is also the foundation of the political and artistic culture that sustains Mattapoisett and the other villages. By recognizing their society as the inheritor of past subaltern and radical experiences and drawing on this lineage as a generative resource, the villagers embody a kind of living "history from below" made evident in the creative self-activity of daily life at an individual and collective level. To put this another way, the villagers embrace their own capacity to make history rather than experiencing it as an impersonal force operating upon them, and this perspective both animates their relationship to the past and fosters their open-ended sense of possibilities in the self-organization of their communities.

This creative engagement with history is visible in the naming practices and traditions of their society. Different villages consciously take on what they describe as a "flavor" associated with a specific national, ethnic, or other identity from a variety of historical contexts. Thus the village of Goat Hill has a Cape Verde-influenced tradition presumably in part inspired by the radical independence movement associated with Amílcar Cabral in the 1960s and early 1970s.⁶⁴ Mattapoisett is rooted in Wampanoag traditions, Ribble is a "Lancashire village," and Ned's Point draws on Ashkenazi history, a heritage that one of the residents describes to Connie as "Freud, Marx, Trotsky, Singer, Aleichem, Reich, Luxemburg, Wassermann, Vittova – all these were Ashkenazi."⁶⁵ Piercy's portrayal of such community identities detached from specific historical – including racial and ethnic – formations might seem a potentially shallow conception of a multiethnic future, a danger the novel acknowledges when Connie describes these practices as "artificial."⁶⁶ On a more generous reading – and reflected in arguments that Bee makes to Connie – Piercy's depiction also evinces a desire to show the possibilities for conscious acts of collective cultural preservation and solidarity detached from the essentialist frameworks (and associated hierarchy and repression) that the villagers have overcome through hard political work.

Some of the villagers' names similarly reflect political affiliations resonant at the time of Piercy's writing. Among Luciente's family and comrades, Connie encounters Bolivar, Crazy Horse, Neruda, and Red Star. Piercy's call for women to align with and promote the long history of women's struggles also carries over into the novel, with characters named Sojourner, Sappho, and Louise-Michel (after anarchist and Paris Commune leader Louise Michel). Connie also meets Magdalena, a woman who has chosen to devote herself to running a children's house rather than rotating between jobs, a decision Luciente explains through one of the community's sayings: "Person must not do what person cannot do – you have heard us say this a hundred times; but likewise, person must do what person has to do" – a variation on Marx's "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." Magdalena tells Connie

⁶⁴Ibid., 143.

⁶⁵Ibid., 96, 299, 145–46.

⁶⁶Ibid., 97; for a critical exploration of Piercy's engagement with race in the utopian context, see Chan, *The Racial Horizon of Utopia*.

that she named herself after “a woman burned to death for witchcraft in Germany many centuries ago. A wisewoman who healed with herbs.”⁶⁷

The self-naming tradition alluded to by Magdalena is part of a more general commitment to self-determination in the family formations and child-rearing practices of the community. In adolescence, villagers decide when they are ready to sever ties with the three mothers (of any gender) who have raised them since they were born in the village brooder – a facility that nurtures embryos until birth, reflecting the society’s embrace of a science-informed feminism. The resulting naming ceremony, in which the child is taken to a wilderness area to survive for a week on their own, signals the “transit from childhood to full member of our community.” As Bee’s child, Innocente, explains to Connie, her former mothers “won’t be able to speak to me for threemonth when I come back.” “Lest we forget we aren’t mothers anymore and person is an equal member,” elaborates Otter, another of Innocente’s mothers. Innocente will also return with a new name she selects during her time apart from the village.⁶⁸

Connie balks at the loss of what she understands as the “last remnants of ancient power” afforded to women through the biological and emotional ties involved in raising children, especially when she learns about the responsibility for breastfeeding shared by men and women alike.⁶⁹ “I suppose you do it all with hormones,” she says to Luciente, who explains that “at least two of the three mothers agree to breastfeed. The way we do it, no one has enough alone.”⁷⁰ Responding to Connie’s sorrow over the changes in childbirth and motherhood, Luciente argues that women had to give up the roles that also trapped them – taking a position that calls to mind Shulamith Firestone’s influential perspective in *The Dialectic of Sex*, from 1970:

It was part of women’s long revolution. When we were breaking all the old hierarchies. Finally 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 were biologically enchained, we’d never be equal. And males never would be humanized to be loving and tender. So we all became mothers.⁷¹

In keeping with this feminist analysis, the cycle of life and death is now folded into deliberate arrangements of community care and ecological balance. When a villager dies, “we visit the brooder and signal the intent to begin a new baby.” Then the community as a whole meet to “discuss into which family [subset of the village] the child should be born and who are to be mothers. We begin by meditating on the dead.”⁷²

⁶⁷Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, 128–29.

⁶⁸Ibid., 108–9.

⁶⁹Ibid., 98–99, 126. We might also situate Connie’s response in the context of the sterilization abuse of Latinas in this era, with Connie herself suffering a hysterectomy after an abortion and beating from Eddie “because the residents wanted practice” (39). See also Jael Silliman, Marlene Gerber Fried, Loretta Ross, and Elena R. Gutiérrez, *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2004).

⁷⁰Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, 126.

⁷¹Ibid., 98. On the connection to Firestone see Haran, “(Re)productive Fictions.”

⁷²Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, 154.

Village and personal identity formation thus express a deep commitment to individual agency made possible by a historically informed and technologically enabled set of community practices. This same emphasis on agency is evident in the deliberative approach to political relationships highlighted in the novel. Political decisions with ramifications for multiple villages begin with local meetings open to all, followed by an exchange between representatives from each village that everyone watches via “holi simulcast.” “Then we go back into local meeting to fuse our final word,” summarizes Luciente, and “then the reps argue once more before everybody. Then we vote.”⁷³ A planning-council process reveals a similar commitment when it comes to economic democracy. Here a body of representatives from each village in the township is selected by lot and debates resource use and production decisions with the aid of computerized data analysis. Adding to the participatory ethos, an Earth Advocate “speaks for rights of the total environment” and an Animal Advocate is similarly consulted on behalf of other species.⁷⁴

The possibility of making history from below – of ordinary people engaging in individual and collective self-determination – permeates this vision of utopia, an expression of Piercy’s hopes for the best aspects of the 1960s social movements. The novel thereby condemns the impoverished political realities of the contemporary United States. As Connie recalls her own political involvement around the War on Poverty,

years ago, I was living in Chicago. I got involved that way. Meetings, meetings, meetings! My life was so busy, my head was boiling! I felt such hope ... But it was just the same political machine and us stupid poor people, us ... idiots who thought we were running things.

The implication of this gap between utopia and the present, however, is not that pessimism should prevail. Luciente accepts the validity of Connie’s analysis as an experience of defeat, but offers a perspective informed by long-term revolutionary commitment: “you lose until you win – that’s a saying those who changed our world left us. Poor people *did* get together.”⁷⁵ This is the revised sense of historical possibility that carries Connie into her confrontation with the medical authorities.

Radical struggle in the prison/psychiatric state

Against her self-understanding early in the novel as “human garbage carried to the dump,” Connie now sees herself as a participant in a long revolution.⁷⁶ Just as the sources of her repression widen out from patriarchal family authority to the carceral state, Connie’s struggle moves from spontaneous acts of individual resistance (or pursuit of integration into the established order) to a more collective vision grounded in solidarity with her fellow patients. This struggle in turn becomes the basis for greater self-realization, a possibility affirmed by Connie’s recognition of

⁷³Ibid., 146.

⁷⁴Ibid., 143–44.

⁷⁵Ibid., 146–47, original emphasis.

⁷⁶Ibid., 26.

her Mattapoisett comrades as analogs of those she is closest to, as an embodiment of what they might all become in the crucible of political engagement and altered social conditions.

The account of repression and resistance in the mental hospital reflects Piercy's links to the radical antipsychiatry and anticarceral movements of the 1970s. In her acknowledgments at the start of the novel, she specifically thanks the members of the Mental Patients Liberation Front, therapists connected with *RT: A Journal of Radical Therapy*, people who "risked their jobs to sneak me into places I wanted to enter," and "the past and present inmates of mental institutions who shared their experiences with me." Antipsychiatry organizing encompassed a shift from a medical perspective focussed on individual "adjustment" through therapy to the pursuit of collective well-being through social change. At its most explicitly political, as in the evolving orientation of the Radical Therapist/Rough Times Collective associated with *RT*, this was an analysis that faulted therapy for bolstering the status quo, for turning people's focus away from a critical understanding of society and "making them 'sick' people who need 'treatment' rather than oppressed people who must be liberated."⁷⁷ There are important critiques of this movement – as Peter Sedgwick observed, it allowed some on the left to destructively deny the very existence of mental illnesses.⁷⁸ But it also opened space to pursue meaningful responses to psychological distress without conforming to the established order.⁷⁹

The larger context informing such analysis was a crackdown on 1960s political radicalism and social nonconformity, with militant activism and urban rebellion recast by state ideologues as expressions of individual disorder.⁸⁰ Pathologizing dissent legitimated incarceration as a response to social upheaval, but in turn produced anxieties about political organizing in prisons:

As activists involved with the black liberation, Puerto Rican independence, antiwar, and Red Power and Brown Power movements were sent to jails and prisons on charges linked to their political activities, prison administrators registered an acute sense of concern that prisoner dissent was aided and abetted by imprisoned radicals and the larger social movements with which they were affiliated.⁸¹

Completing the circle, corrections departments then turned to promoting maximum-security units in mental hospitals to house "violent" inmates said to require separation from the wider prison population. As Emily Thuma notes in the context of women's prisons in Massachusetts, activists involved in resisting

⁷⁷Radical Therapist/Rough Times Collective, "Introduction," 8.

⁷⁸Peter Sedgwick, *Psycho Politics* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982). Others have also pointed out the overlap with arguments that would find a very different political expression in the neoliberal dismantling of the welfare state, e.g. Schryer, *Fantasies of the New Class*.

⁷⁹See Hannah Proctor, *Burnout: The Emotional Experience of Political Defeat* (New York: Verso, 2024).

⁸⁰See Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Globalization and US Prison Growth: From Military Keynesianism to Post-Keynesian Militarism," in Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation* (New York, Verso, 2022), 199–23.

⁸¹Emily L. Thuma, *All Our Trials: Prisons, Policing, and the Feminist Fight to End Violence* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 58.

such developments stressed the political intent behind the designation “violent,” arguing in opposition to a proposed facility in Worcester “that the center would be used discretionarily against imprisoned women who protested their conditions of confinement, and that women of color and lesbian women would be especially vulnerable.”⁸²

Prisons and mental-health hospitals thereby became intertwined in ways that further exposed the carceral significance of the hospitals and revealed how psychiatric treatment could be mobilized to repress political consciousness and organizing: “critiquing the euphemistic language of ‘treatment,’ [activists] contended that dissident prisoners might be subject to a range of physically and mentally invasive behavior-modification techniques, including psychotropic drugging, sleep deprivation, electroconvulsive shock, and psychosurgery.”⁸³ In response, the movement in Massachusetts deployed their analysis of the “prison/psychiatric state” to successfully link multiple constituencies inside and outside these institutions in a shared political struggle, a fight mirrored in multiple states, including California, New York, North Carolina, and West Virginia.⁸⁴ (Piercy’s own activism in this period also extended to her support for women inmates criminally punished for defending themselves against rape and abuse, most visibly in her widely circulated poem “For Inez Garcia.”)

Connie’s attempt to stall, evade, and sabotage the behavior-controlling implant procedure and other surgical measures thus embodies the inside resistance that was integral to the movement against the carceral regime. Her final resort to violence in turn emerges dialectically out of the intensifying crisis as she witnesses the targeted repression of her Black and queer fellow inmates and as her own amygdalotomy approaches. In a disturbing excursion into an alternate possible future, she also encounters the historical implications of Mattapoisett’s defeat (or nonexistence), finding herself in a terminal extension of late capitalist society characterized by the comprehensive sexual commodification of women.

Emerging in a windowless room, Connie meets Gildina, a contract girl confined to a New York apartment where she provides sex for a mid-level “flack” (corporate employee) named Cash. Gildina regards Connie as a “dud” who has not had any of the grafts or beauty-ops necessary to improve her place in the social hierarchy. “But of course I had a full series,” she tells Connie. “When I was fifteen, I was selected, and I’m still on the full shots and re-ops.”⁸⁵ She also explains that the top tier of society comprises families like the Rockemellons and the Morganfords who live on space platforms remote from Earth’s pollution. Soon a security guard arrives to detain Connie, informing her that everyone belongs to one of the multinational corporations that have replaced nation-states, such as Chase-World-TT that owns Gildina and the eunuch-like guard driven solely by corporate loyalty. Resisting detention, Connie fights to break the telepathic connection and revives in her hospital bed, where she fearfully contemplates a future defined

⁸²Ibid., 55.

⁸³Ibid., 56.

⁸⁴Ibid., 57, 86–87.

⁸⁵Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, 279.

by the biopolitical control of which she is a possible harbinger: “So that was the other world that might come to be. That was Luciente’s war, and she was enlisted in it.”⁸⁶

In her final act of warfare, Connie poisons the medical team a few days before her scheduled surgery. She steals parathion from her brother’s nursery business on a brief Thanksgiving leave at his home, reflecting to herself that “this was a weapon, a powerful weapon that came from the same place as the electrodes and the Thorazine and dialytrode.”⁸⁷ Questioned by the doctors about her “irrational” fear of the upcoming operation, Connie finds a chance to dump the poison into their office coffee pot. Washing her hands in the bathroom afterwards, she says aloud, “I just killed six people ... I murdered them dead. Because *they* are the violence-prone. Theirs is the money and the power, theirs the poisons that slow the mind and dull the heart.” Then she thinks of Mattapoisett and of Claud and her fellow patients, and of “you who will be born from my best hopes, to you I dedicate my act of war. At least once I fought and won.”⁸⁸

The novel concludes with the formal denial of this victory, a series of medical-record excerpts from “the official history of Consuelo Camacho Ramos.” Documenting Connie’s moves from Bellevue to Rockover to the New York Neuro-Psychiatric Institute, the clinical summary depicts a woman suffering from paranoid schizophrenia and violent psychotic outbursts. It cites her brother “expressing genuine concern for his sister” and refers to her “delusions of persecution by niece’s fiancé” and with regard to the “State of New York ‘murdering’ a Negro boyfriend.” The failure to complete the surgery is noted as a consequence of “the incident,” after which Connie was returned to Rockover.⁸⁹ Consistent with Thompson’s “enormous condescension of posterity,” the recorded history thereby leaves her a marginalized and self-destructive figure whose story is still being told from the vantage of established authority. But Connie’s own understanding, and that of readers shown the possibility of another world, recognizes the potential transformative significance of struggle from below, however uncertain its impact in the moment. The specific act of Connie’s final resort to violence should give us pause as a politics that stands in some tension with the democratically grounded and collective practices emphasized throughout the novel. This same tension was present in movement history itself, and in Piercy’s own ambivalences regarding the destructive adventurist wing of 1960s radicalism (notably the Weather Underground). Yet we might also understand Connie’s actions as the self-defensive violence of a woman held captive, consistent with Piercy’s advocacy for Inez Garcia and engagement with the prison movement and emergent anticarceral feminism of the 1970s.

Wherever we fall on the nuances of these politics, Connie’s longer arc of self-transformation and militant resistance to the routine institutional violence that structures her life remains a fissure in the surface unity of the social order, a

⁸⁶Ibid., 291.

⁸⁷Ibid., 351.

⁸⁸Ibid., 364, original emphasis.

⁸⁹Ibid., 368–69.

challenge to top-down historical closure that leaves open the hope of redemption through later political developments.

Conclusion

For Piercy, this is the still-unfolding significance of 1960s and 1970s social movements despite the repressive response that followed, generating a new sense of possibility for personal and historical transformations that had previously seemed entirely out of reach. The meaning of these upheavals, then, depends in part on later developments, consistent with Walter Benjamin's view of the past as, in Terry Eagleton's words, "curiously mutable." As Eagleton elaborates, for Benjamin, "past history is fluid, labile, suspended, its sense yet to be fully determined. It is we who can endow it retrospectively with a definitive form, not simply by choosing to read it in a certain way but by virtue of our actions."⁹⁰ In "On the Concept of History," Benjamin comments on this dialectical process in his observation that "articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it 'the way it really was.' It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger."⁹¹ To recuperate past subordinated struggles against the grain of official history is to transform what might otherwise be deemed insignificant into a lineage that holds meaning for later movements, connecting them to a revived tradition of the downtrodden as they confront their own oppressors.⁹²

Benjamin continues by emphasizing the historical and political stakes of this recurring conflict: "every age must strive anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it."⁹³ Connie's efforts to seize control of her own story accordingly mark a challenge to that conformism, even as state actors move to erase her presence as a historical agent. Piercy leaves unresolved the question whether the revolutionary possibilities will win out. Should events fall the other way, Benjamin's famous warning about the falsification of the historical record under fascism applies: "*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious."⁹⁴ But Connie's initiative in derailing the advance of a repressive technopolitical order also points to Benjamin's revolutionary aspirations, a view of working-class struggle as an emergency break against an unfolding catastrophe, a disruption that in turn opens history to other possibilities.⁹⁵

⁹⁰Terry Eagleton, *Hope without Optimism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 32.

⁹¹Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Volume IV, 1938–1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 389–400, 391.

⁹²See also Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's "On the Concept of History"* (New York: Verso, 2005).

⁹³Benjamin, 391.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*, 391, original emphasis; and see Löwy, 44–45.

⁹⁵Walter Benjamin, "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History'," in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Volume IV, 401–11, 402.

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