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## **Teaching on the Edge of Time: developing a slow pedagogy through feminist science fiction.**

### **Introduction**

Marge Piercy's 1976 novel, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, is one of several feminist science fiction novels published during the period that 'stretched and extended the genre [...] developed new themes of gender, sexuality, politics, and religion' (Laz 1996: 55). The novel follows its protagonist, Consuela (Connie) Ramos, a second-generation Hispanic woman living in Harlem, as she travels into different possible futures with her time-travelling guide Luciente. She comes to know the residents of the 2137 village Mattapoissett, whose community is based on principles of equality, fairness and collaboration. Whilst the novel is certainly an exploration of the concerns of the 1970s Western women's liberation movement, it has also been brought into conversation with contemporary feminist debates about, for example, feminist futures and temporalities and academia and motherhood. Sam McBean suggests *Woman on the Edge of Time* is a productive site for thinking through contemporary feminist debates about feminist pasts and futures, rather than simply representative of decade-specific concerns. She resists confining the novel to the decade in which it was written, instead considering what can be learned from it as it 'move[s] through different times and locations' (2014: 45). Here, I similarly consider what *Woman on the Edge of Time* offers in a different time and place. I approach it as being instructive for teaching practice and also suggest that the act of reading the novel offered me a form of resistance to the neoliberal and marketized UK university sector.

In *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Piercy creates a society that nurtures and nourishes the conditions for human flourishing. Although teaching and learning are not explicit themes in the novel, they are celebrated and seen as vital to human wellbeing. In Mattapoissett, possible futures for significant figures in Connie's life— her friends, family, lovers and child – are realised because their potentialities have been allowed to flourish. Piercy emphasises that human flourishing is not an individual pursuit; society needs to create the conditions for it to be possible. Connie herself recognises that throughout her life, which has been marked by violence and oppression, both her body and soul have been starved of what they need: 'She had had too little of what her body needed and too little of what her soul could imagine.' (305). Piercy creates space in both Connie's present and future for deep emotional connection with others, for learning and imagination, change, transformation and hope.

Across the course of the novel Connie shifts from seeing herself as ‘an ignorant woman; sometimes she pitied Luciente for lighting on her, when what did she know?’ (256), to someone who takes pride and amusement in her autonomous ability to visit the future and teach others: “‘Time traveling.’” Connie smiled with sophistication. It was almost fun. She imagined how Luciente must have felt laying down the unbelievable truth to naïve ears. Now she was the visitor from elsewhere’ (315). As readers, we are invited to do the same: to invest in Connie as a whole person, a teacher and a student, to cherish and value her, rather than abuse and degrade her as others have done throughout her life. Deirdre O’Byrne (2012: 77) writes that through the novel, ‘Piercy tried to show what a society might look like when people’s characteristics and gifts are cherished rather than deplored or ignored’. By taking these principles into the feminist classroom we can hope to create the conditions for human flourishing.

In what follows, I argue for the value of returning to second-wave feminist science fiction for thinking about teaching and learning, before discussing the contemporary landscape of the neoliberal and marketized UK university that is reshaping the roles of students, academics and professional services and producing an increasingly demanding and impoverished working and learning environment (Gill 2010; Hartman and Darab 2012; Shahjahan 2015). I consider the possibilities for developing a pedagogy in this context, before drawing upon the calls for slow scholarship (Bagelman and Bagelman 2016; Berg and Seeber, 2016; Collett et al 2018; Mountz et al 2015; O’Neill 2014) and feminist and critical pedagogies (in particular, hooks, 1994) to suggest that the act of reading the novel is in itself a form of slow scholarship. I offer a diffractive reading of *Woman on the Edge of Time*, outlining some of the ways the novel has travelled into my thinking about feminist pedagogies and has helped me formulate and articulate my pedagogic practice as one of ‘teaching on the edge of time’.

### **(Re)reading feminist science fiction**

In her reading of the feminist archive, Victoria Hesford (2005; 2013) traces the ghosts of feminism’s past, asking what possibilities have been left unrealised in its present. She writes:

For feminists in particular, to have a haunted relationship with the feminist past is to be able to bear witness to the possibilities, often unrealized, of that past and to actively resist the policing and defensiveness that have marked much of feminism’s relationship to its diverse history in recent years. (2005: 230)

Hesford asks why efforts to ‘recover’ feminism’s histories often struggle to account for its complexity. Following Avery Gordon (1997), she considers what feminism’s ghosts might be trying to communicate and unsettle in its present and what possibilities they can open up: ‘haunting produces a defamiliarizing relationship to the present that simultaneously opens up the present to the possibility of a different future’ (Hesford, 2005: 230). By returning to a piece of 1970s feminist science fiction and asking how it might be active in the contemporary context of UK higher education, I am reflecting on what kinds of pedagogic possibilities this feminist ghost might open up. Whilst returning to feminist science fiction, and *Woman on the Edge of Time* specifically, is not a new approach – the novel has been written about in relation to feminist non/utopias, motherhood and reproduction, and social transformation (for example, Afnan, 1996; Iverson, 2012; McBean, 2014; O’Byrne, 2012; Trainor, 2006) – I take the reading of the novel in a new direction by setting it in the context of the neoliberal university and in bringing it into conversation with critical pedagogies and slow scholarship. I also suggest that the practice of reading can, in itself, be seen as an act of resistance to the dominant temporalities and demands of the contemporary university.

This rereading is not an unproblematic practice. As Clare Hemmings (2011) shows us, the portrayal of recent Western feminist histories is often reliant on narrative of progress, loss or return. Loss and return narratives can easily prompt a celebration of earlier feminist theory, with a disregard of any critique of it. The often-nostalgic revisiting of the feminist past – most frequently used as a reference to the ‘1970s’ – results in a flattening out of theory and practice, serving to reinforce dominant retellings. I attempt to avoid a nostalgic revisiting of *Woman on the Edge of Time* by bringing it into conversation with literature on critical pedagogies and slow scholarship; my teaching practice has developed by reading it in conversation with this wider body of work, not in isolation from it. In reading I was able to slow down, think about this work and reflect on my teaching practice. Further, the act of reading in itself – taking the time to think about teaching – is a form of resistance to the devaluing of teaching and to speedy pedagogies. Joan Haran (2010: 394) suggest that it is ‘the self-reflexive practice of reading – and writing – as part of a cross-genre intertextual conversation that is potentially transformative’. Reading across genres, and undertaking the reading of a genre that is not common to my discipline of sociology, can offer a form of resistance to the temporal norms of the neoliberal university, as well as generate ideas about how to enact critical and feminist pedagogies.

Diffraction is a method of reading texts through one another that allows for ‘building new insights, and attentively and carefully reading for differences that matter in their fine details [...] Diffractive readings bring inventive provocations; they are good to think with.’ (Barad in Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012: 49-50). Diffractive reading brings texts into conversation, using insights from one to explore the other. Through this reading method it is possible to consider what a text can offer in a different context, rather than cementing its meaning through singular interpretations. Haran (2010) also advocates for the value of reading across genres through what she terms ‘conscientious reading’ – a practice that makes use of emotional responses and subjective interpretations of a text. These reading practices encourage us to read widely both within and beyond our disciplines and benefit both our pedagogic and scholarly work. Sarah E. Truman (2016: 95) advocates for the value of working across disciplines to teaching and learning. She suggests that ‘employing noncanonical knowledge, de-familiarization, artistic interventions, and perhaps marginalia or additions to an existing text on a page’ as a way of enacting critical public pedagogy. The use of a range of materials in teaching sociology is not uncommon and Cheryl Laz (1996) has argued that science fiction in particular has the capacity to help students ‘make strange’, ‘make believe’ and ‘make real’ sociological concepts and theories. What I think could be given more detailed consideration is how non-traditional and transdisciplinary materials can help us as academics develop our pedagogies.

Haran (2010: 395) suggests that when reading fiction as theory ‘we venture outside our comfort zones and weave in other threads, drawing theoretical resources from non-canonical sources’. So, this reading practice was impactful for me, in part, because I am reading outside the conventions of my discipline; slowing down to think about teaching will carry different meaning and practice in other disciplines. However, I would also argue that there is something particular about reading feminist science fiction even when reading fiction is a disciplinary norm. Feminist science fiction is a genre that is able to hold onto multiple threads, theories, possibilities and temporalities (Haran, 2010; McBean, 2014) and so encourages resistance to and critique of dominant narratives and practices. It is also a genre that has the explicit intention of imagining and enacting other ways of being and so invites the reader into these imaginative spaces, creating the conditions for generating new ideas and practices. Kim Trainor (2005) suggests, in her reading of *Woman of the Edge of Time*, that fictional lives and utopian societies offer us ways of imaging what kinds of social justice

might be possible in our own worlds. This is in common with other novels of the same period and genre that imagined feminist societies ‘in strikingly similar terms’, composed of non-hierarchical organising, ecological justice, sexual freedom and the near eradication of violence and oppression (Russ, 1995: 134). Just as *Woman on the Edge of Time* provides ways of imaging and enacting different futures, I argue that the novel can offer us ways of thinking about what kinds of educational utopias we want to create in our classrooms.

### **Developing a pedagogy**

Studies that consider how academics develop their pedagogies are limited and have largely focused on the impact of institutional professional development programmes (Sadler 2013). In a UK context, whilst it is not compulsory for lecturers to hold accredited teaching qualifications, since the 2003 English Higher Education White Paper (DfES) that advocated for the professionalisation of teaching in HE, professional development programmes have been actively promoted and delivered in most institutions (Baughan et al 2015). These programmes are largely consistent in learning content and curriculum and many are accredited by the Higher Education Academy (Baughan et al 2015). They have been found to have a positive impact on the development of a teaching identity (Butcher and Stoncel 2012; Gibbs and Coffey 2004), albeit with differing effects across career stage, experience, and other factors (Parsons et al 201; Remmik et al 2013). However, the development of a teaching identity and pedagogy is an ongoing and changing process that cannot be confined to an institutional programme. Reflection is key to this process and is a less formalised practice that requires ongoing engagement with pedagogic theory (McAlpine and Weston, 2002; Nevgi and Löffström 2015). Pedagogies are also shaped by cultural and institutional practices (Burrough-Lange 1996; Olson and Einwohner 2001; Remmik et al 2011; van Lankveld et al 2017). Anne Nevgi and Erika Löffström (2015) suggest that academics who engage reflexively with their practice and see themselves as developing practitioners are more critical of the teaching traditions of their faculty. Reflexive practice helps academics develop their own pedagogic position *and* critically engage with the pedagogic traditions of their discipline and institutions.

The perception that teaching carries lower status than research in higher education can act as a barrier to and have a constraining effect on the development of a pedagogy (van Lankveld et al 2017; Young 2006). The focus on research as a means of career progression, reward and recognition, has reinforced the lower status of teaching and teaching and learning scholarship

(Chalmers 2011). ‘Researcher’ and ‘teacher’ are often viewed as contradictory aspects of the academic role, particularly in research intensive environments (Nevgi and Löffström 2015). The binary and hierarchical positioning of teaching and research maps onto and perpetuates individual and institutional rankings, with ‘research active’ universities and/or individuals afforded higher status than those that are ‘teaching focused’. These rankings are part of the apparatus of the neoliberal institution that fosters an environment of competition and individualism by enforcing a value laden distinction between these aspects of the academic role. Whilst this conflictual positioning is resisted by many early career academics who speak explicitly about wanting to be good teachers (Remmik et al 2013), the institutional emphasis often placed on research can constrain the development of a teacher identity and pedagogy (Skelton 2012). Recognising that developing a pedagogy is an ongoing process means valuing it as a part of academic life that deserves time, attention and care (Hartman and Darab 2012). I think the calls to incorporate slowness into academic life are instructive here for finding ways of doing this. As I demonstrate through my reading of *Woman on the Edge of Time*, engaging with ideas across disciplines and genres can open up different ways of thinking about and understanding pedagogy. Slowing down to learn to teach is particularly important if we are engaging with critical pedagogies and aim to enact the questioning and transformative possibilities of education (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994).

### **Slow scholarship as a feminist pedagogy**

Slowness as a form of resistance to neoliberal marketization has its foundations in the 1980s slow food movement, which advocated for a care-ful, meditative and collective engagement with food (Petrini 2003). Slow scholarship and pedagogy are expressions of resistance to the neoliberal university, rethinking its temporalities and practices through an ethics of care (Bagelman and Bagelman 2016; Berg and Seeber, 2016; Collett et al 2018; Mountz et al 2015; O’Neill 2014). Jen Bagelman and Carly Bagelman (2016: 368) observe that scholars ‘intentionally deploy the concept of the neoliberal university to both name and identify a set of processes which – though highly contextual – are global in reach’. These processes include increased time pressures, decreased resources, standardised metrics used to rank institutions and individuals, and an intensified and individualised audit culture (Collett et al 2018; Gill, 2009; O’Neill 2014). They change the shape and purpose of the institution and the roles of and relationship between lecturers and students. Academics report increased feelings of isolation, little time for ‘intellectual reflection, scholarly debate and engagement with ideas’

(Hartman and Darab 2012: 55) and harm to their emotional and physical wellbeing (Berg and Seeber, 2016; Gill 2009; Shahjahan 2015). This is felt differently by different groups; precarious or part-time workers, and academics of colour, are particularly negatively impacted (Bhopal 2015; Hartman and Darab 2012; Shahjahan 2015).

‘Speedy scholarship’ is propelled by a ‘cult of speed’ ‘rooted in the global capitalist economy’ (Honoré 2004, cited in Hartman and Darab 2012: 57), productive of pedagogies characterised by ‘reduced content, accelerated delivery, and the curtailment of debate’. This creates an impoverished learning environment for students – the ‘absent partners’ in the institution (Hartman and Darab 2012: 56). Even where institutions appear to give time and space to academics, speedy temporalities can dominate. Vivienne Bozalek (2017), for example, suggest that writing retreats can create conditions that promote particular forms of productivity, with attendees expected to demonstrate immediate results in the form of publications. Similarly, advice and time-management literature aimed at academics ‘celebrate overwork and the culture of speed’ (Berg and Seeber, 2016: 13), offering strategies for multi-tasking, rather than promoting resistance to the dominant temporalities of the institution. Squeezed and speedy temporal rhythms also characterise the development of pedagogies. Academics fit professional development programmes in between teaching, administrative and research responsibilities, with often no time, or limited time, afforded to them. Despite, or perhaps due to, professional development increasingly being viewed as central to growth in HE, it is difficult to create slow spaces where we engage in collaborative thought and reflection on our pedagogies.

Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber argue for embracing ‘timeless time’ (28) – creating space for thought and reflection – as both a personal and political necessity. Slow scholarship asserts that intellectual and personal growth occurs through collective, collaborative work inflected with a feminist ethics of care (Mountz et al 2015). As Jeannie Rea writes, ‘good ideas do need nurturing [...] they come out of thinking people having the space and time and resources to talk, argue, experiment, write, challenge, teach and learn’ (Rea 2010: 2 cited in Hartman and Darab 2012: 53). The slow movement is a political response to the neoliberal university, a resistance to the ‘isolating, embodied effect of neoliberal temporal regimes’ and a collaborative effort to build a ‘socially just university’ (Mountz et al, 2015: 1237-1238). It hopes to create the conditions for good scholarship through care-ful engagement with ideas, collaborative work and a politics of care that resists the ‘culture of scholarly individualism

and intellectual mastery' that leaves academics reluctant to recognise stress and admit struggle and propels the performance and privileging of busyness (Berg and Seeber, 2016: 2).

In deliberately provocative terms, Riyad Shahjahan (2015) advocates for being 'lazy' as a disruption of the Eurocentric notion of time that dictates academic work and structures the neoliberal institution. Laziness, Shahjahan argues, interrupts linear temporalities: that is, colonial tools used to deem subaltern groups as out of time, behind time, or anachronistic. When such logics are internalised, the values of the neoliberal institution are expressed through competition and individualism; activities that 'advance' academic careers are considered most valuable (Shahjahan 2015). Shahjahan's use of laziness deprivileges the need for a particular result, prioritising instead being present and at peace with not doing. It is a temporal practice that seeks to challenge, subvert and disrupt, to decolonise time, bodies and pedagogies and improve the quality of scholarship through connection with self and others. But it is a strategy that, Shahjahan acknowledges, carries the risk of being left behind by the institution. The measures and evaluations we are subject to in the university make its demands and expectations ever-present and individuals acutely aware of the consequences of not adhering to them. Yet, the harms of this environment to both the individual and the educational and political landscape, as documented by Shahjahan and others (Berg and Seeber, 2016; Bhopal, 2015; Gill, 2010; Hartman and Darab 2012), demonstrate the necessity of taking this risk when possible.

Much discussion of slow scholarship focuses on strategies for slowing down research and writing, without explicit consideration of the meaning and implementation of slow *pedagogy*. Bagelman and Bagelman (2016) note that academics are often positioned as the agents of change in slow scholarship and ask how we can develop pedagogic tools that promote slow scholar-studentship. Taking zine-making as an example, they suggest slow pedagogies can interrupt and reconfigure the student-as-consumer and teacher-as-producer model of education, fostered by the contemporary university and its fast-paced mode of delivery. They use the material and embodied practice of zine-making as a pedagogic strategy that acknowledges the whole self in the room, countering the alienation of student from teacher and self from body that bell hooks (1994) observes in fear driven educational environments. Such materials and approaches can also contribute to the project of decolonising the curriculum. The zines produced by Bagelman and Bagelman's (2016) students, for example, rework official institutional materials, such as maps, in ways that centre the indigenous

territories and knowledge the Australian university they work in is built upon. The use of non-fiction, music, film, zines and other artforms, can create a sense of community, solidarity and possibilities for action, making visible hidden histories and stories and building meaningful relationships with students through interactive and explorative work (Bagelman and Bagelman 2016; Laz, 1996; Wolff 2008).

We also need to slow down our approach to developing our pedagogies. Professional development programmes can be strategic, instrumental tick box exercises, even when they emphasise the importance of reflective practice. These programmes are frequently linked to probation and promotion and easily subsumed into strategies for managing and monitoring individual performance. Karen Collett et al. (2018) suggest that slow approaches to professional development encourage an ethics of care and friendship, build trust, and invite supportive reflection and feedback. They propose that slow scholarship and an ethics of care are adopted as guiding principles ‘for re-imagining the design and delivery of professional academic development courses’ (Collett et al. 2018: 134), affording the development of a pedagogy status and value by giving it time, care and attention. Slowing down can be facilitated by looking beyond our own discipline, a practice that requires us to take the time to understand and consider new terminology, ideas and frames of reference and to challenge our own. As Berg and Seeber (2016) argue, the slow movement is concerned not only with revitalising everyday life, but repoliticising it. The practice of slowing down by engaging with a range of interdisciplinary materials is a way of politicising scholarship and pedagogy.

### **Reading *Woman on the Edge of Time***

*Woman on the Edge of Time* explores possibilities for alternative futures through the time-travelling abilities of the protagonist, Connie Ramos. Connie’s life is marked by state violence and control. We first meet her as she is committed to a psychiatric institution for a second time, following her arrest for protecting her niece, Dolly, from a violent attack. Prior to and throughout her incarceration, Connie journeys into the future with Luciente, a time-traveller from the year 2137 and resident of the village Mattapoissett. Connie participates in Mattapoissett society, experiencing its non-hierarchical organising, its principles of environmentalism, and its gender, sexual and racial equalities. In contrast to her time in Mattapoissett, where she is treated with respect and humanity, in the institution Connie is subjected to increasingly invasive and oppressive treatment. This culminates with the insertion of an experimental implant in her brain, designed to control emotions and

behaviours as part of a medical trial. When Connie develops the ability to travel without Luciente she arrives in another possible, dystopian, future that is deeply hierarchical and patriarchal, where technology is used to control and oppress the majority of society for the benefit of a wealthy elite. As it becomes clear that Connie's actions in the present can influence the realisation of these possible futures, she wages war on those who control her. In what follows, I offer my reading of *Woman on the Edge of Time*, a reading that places the novel in the context of the contemporary neoliberal and marketized university and draws on critical and feminist pedagogies and slow scholarship to consider what we can learn by reading it in this context. The way I approach this is two-fold. I begin by demonstrating how reading the novel was instructive to my thinking on pedagogy by reading the themes of the novel through the lens of critical pedagogies. I then consider some points where Piercy explicitly engages with the process of learning and teaching – whilst this is not a dominant theme in the novel, *Woman on the Edge of Time* imagines the conditions required for human flourishing, and it is evident that Piercy views both learning and teaching as part of this.

### ***Seeing and knowing as pedagogy***

Connie is first visited by Luiceite when she is alone at home. Following Luciente's departure, Connie's niece, Dolly, arrives and remarks that 'the chair's warm' (3). The comment signals to the reader that Luciente's presence is not to be dismissed as a product of Connie's imagination. This is one of several points in the novel that place it in the realist tradition, alongside its invested narrative and the richness of the worlds depicted (Trainor 2005). The material and embodied link between Connie's present and future worlds – often marked by touch (McBean 2014) – suggest that readers are not being invited to question the authenticity of Connie's experiences, but rather to trust her voice and make an empathetic investment in her world. Consequently, when reading the novel's appendix 'The Official History of Consuelo Camacho Ramos' – a fictional sample of medical case notes – the doctors' descriptions of Connie as 'incoherent', of 'slow intelligence' (413), and delusional with 'no consistent notions of right or wrong' (415) are the antithesis of the Connie the reader has come to know. These medical records affirm how little of Connie the medical professionals see – they epitomise the lack of knowledge, care and understanding that form the casual brutality of the institution. Throughout her life, Connie suffers violence at the hands of institutions and individuals, who treat her as a commodity. We learn, for example, that she was pressured into having a hysterectomy so that trainee doctors could practice the

procedure. Whilst in the psychiatric institution, where she describes feeling like ‘a bag of garbage’ (16), she is subjected to experimental treatment designed to control and subdue her emotions. The dehumanisation of Connie contrasts starkly with the respect, warmth and love Luciente gives her. Luciente recognises her pain and humanity, telling her: ‘I see you as a being with many sore wounds, undischarged anger but basically good and wide open to others’ (57). As readers, we see Connie as Luciente does, as someone to be valued. We are asked to invest in and attend to Connie’s experiences, biography and knowledge, to see her humanity and know her as a whole person. This is a principle that should travel into the classroom: we must see and know students as whole people who enrich and enliven the learning environment (hooks 1994).

The simultaneous dehumanisation of Connie by medical professionals and investment in and care for her by her friends in Mattapoisett can be read as a warning of the dangers of commodification, particularly its human cost. It warns us of the risk of casting students as consumers and universities as providers, of seeing students as one-dimensional cogs in the educational machine, rather than as individuals who enrich the learning environment and from whom we can learn. Just as Connie and Luciente learn from one another, we learn from students’ knowledge and experience and should embrace all that they bring to the learning community (hooks 1994). The reader comes to know Connie through her history, biography and inner world, looking beyond the medicalised, pathologized and criminalised narrative presented in her medical notes. hooks’ (1994) argues that we must develop a holistic relationship with students to ensure they are *seen* in the classroom, as whole people, rather than the narratives produced about them through, for example, institutional records (of grades, attendance, etc.). hooks (1994: 41) advocates for practices such as diary writing as an ‘exercise in recognition’ that ‘ensure[s] no student remains invisible in the classroom’. Even in larger classes, activities that allow students to share experiences and have them taken seriously, as Piercy requires that we do with Connie, ensure that students are seen, recognised and feel part of a learning community.

Connie’s engagement with the future is shaped by her past experiences. For example, her disgust with the ‘brooder’—a factory in Mattapoisett where foetuses are created and incubated until birth – must be understood in the context of her own maternal losses (McBean 2014). The histories students bring to the classroom will frame their learning – we need to recognise that responses to new ideas are shaped by personal, often painful, experiences. This

also requires understanding that the institutions we work in are not neutral, apolitical, ahistorical spaces, but are places that feel welcoming to some more than others. Students and academics of colour can experience a sense of unbelonging in institutions that privilege whiteness and perpetuate colonial and racist legacies (Ahmet forthcoming; Johnson and Joseph-Salisbury 2018; Rollock, 2019). Recognition of the impact of our own and students' experiences on our learning demands time, space and patience. Connie remains unconvinced by the brooder, as did many of Piercy's readers (Piercy 2016) – her response reminds us to make space for the different starting points, responses and conclusions that circulate in the classroom. As Luciente urges of Connie when she expresses confusion and distaste upon her first visit to Mattapoissett, as both teachers and learners we must 'wait a little, trust a little [...] Let people open and unfold' (72), just as we are required to do when reading the novel. We, teachers and learners, are positioned 'on the edge of time': always coming from somewhere and looking towards often unknowable futures.

### ***Non-linear teaching and learning temporalities***

*Woman on the Edge of Time* challenges notions of time, linearity and progress in ways that encourage us to question dominant histories and knowledge often reproduced by the institution and through teaching practice. Mattapoissett has seemingly resolved many of the inequalities of Connie's present, evidenced by the near eradication of gender and racial inequality, the care given to individuals experiencing mental distress, the holistic socialisation of children, a profound respect for elders and an ethical relationship with nature. However, Connie is initially shocked, and at times disgusted, by what she encounters: 'It's not like I imagined' (71) she remarks. It is not the unfamiliarity of the future Connie is disturbed by, but the similarity to her past – a time and place she speaks of with disdain and assumes future societies would have left behind. McBean (2014) argues that Connie's discomfort with elements of Mattapoissett society is indicative of a resistance to linear narratives of progress deployed by Luciente in the framing of Connie's present as more 'primitive', less 'evolved' (132) and more undesirable than Mattapoissett. McBean (2014: 53) suggests that the numerous ways in which the future is *felt* by Connie in her present, creating queer moments of 'discontinuity and strangeness', are illustrative of the ways in which 'we are always out of time', living with 'the multiplicities of our present, the residues of our past, and the loss of a future we have yet to know'. When Connie suggests that the future should be more evolved than it appears, Luciente replies: 'Our technology did not develop in a

straight line from yours' (132). The decoupling of time and progress demands that we question and critique knowledge production, to ask how histories are produced and retold as part of the decolonial project (Arday and Mirza, 2018). The novel offers a critique of authorised knowledge, in which narratives of progress are mapped onto westernised, Eurocentric ontologies and epistemologies (Shahjahan 2015).

In her introduction to the 2016 edition of the novel, Piercy stresses that change is not future orientated: 'the point of creating futures is to get people to imagine what they want and don't want to happen down the road and maybe do something about it' (vii). In *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Piercy creates possible futures not as predictions, but as a means of compelling people to action in the present. Although the novel is often referred to as utopian, Piercy challenges this by firmly situating the 'utopian' Mattapoissett in the period within which it was written. She emphasises that almost all aspects of the society were in reach and achievable in 1970s America:

There's almost nothing there except the brooder not accessible now. So it's hardly a utopia, it is very intentionally not a utopia because it's not strikingly new. The ideas are the ideas basically of the women's movement (Piercy 1982 cited in O'Byrne 2012: 81)

Piercy does not present Mattapoissett as an endpoint, but instead offers a vision of 'utopia' as a process and possibility, rather than a state (Afnan 1996). The understanding of utopia as a precarious process is evident both in how Mattapoissett is a society under threat, one which may not even come to fruition, and in Connie's increasing understanding that it is something she can realise through her actions in the present.

*Woman on the Edge of Time* might be described as a 'critical utopia', a novel that 'reject[s] utopia as a blueprint whilst preserving it as a dream' (Moylan, 1986: 10, cited in Haran, 2010: 396). This concept of critical utopias reminds us that we can imagine change and transformation in the classroom, but should not underestimate the challenges of enacting and sustaining the change, or disregard the power and impact of the contexts we work within. Mark Coté et al (2007: 317) use the idea of utopia to refer to 'an ethos of experimentation that is oriented toward carving out spaces for resistance and reconstruction here and now [...] something *other* than and *outside* of the hyper-inclusive logic of neoliberalism'. This vision complements principles of critical pedagogy, which sees education as a potential site of

transformation and transgression, where oppressive beliefs and practices are questioned and challenged (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994). We can transport these principles into the classroom by imagining how we can create change, however precarious or momentary it may be, through the learning community, carving out spaces of resistance through teaching and learning.

***Learning in and beyond the classroom***

In formal education settings, there is often an enforced division between those who learn and those who teach, a division maintained and reproduced by power, gendered, racialised and classed hierarchies. In contrast, Piercy offers an understanding of learning as lifelong and every individual as both teacher and student. Learning is not confined to the restrictions of the institution and is not limited by time with fixed endpoints or goals. When Connie expresses scepticism at the value of learning without books and outside classrooms, Luciente replies:

Who wants to grow up with a head full of facts in boxes? We never leave school and go to work. We're always working, always studying. We think, what person thinks person knows has to be tried out all the time. Placed against what people need. We care a lot *how* things are done. (138)

Connie's own formal education is, however, one she is fiercely defensive of. She makes numerous references to her time in college, which was cut short when she became pregnant. Her affective attachment to this period tells us of the value of books and classrooms, of both formal and informal learning environments. Reclaiming and imagining educational experiences offers Connie, alongside her friend and fellow patient Sybil, a way of escaping the institution. Connie reflects how:

At odd moments, the better days, the mental hospital reminded her of being in college those almost two years she had had before she got knocked up. The similarity lay in the serious conversations, the leisure to argue about God and Sex and the State and the Good. (88)

Similarly, Sybil, incarcerated for her belief in witchcraft and healing, takes delight and hope upon hearing about groups of young women studying witchcraft in New York. Sybil excitedly imagines the power of the coven to destroy the hospital to which she is confined. She exclaims:

Imagine, college girl studying witchcraft...I wonder who teaches them witchcraft. Imagine...a secret network of covens all over New York! Imagine the bars crumbling on the windows. Imagine the doctors fainting in the halls! The locks melting and running like thin soup to the floor! (373)

Sybil is able to imagine escape from the hospital through this learning community. She later begins to make tentative plans to do so. Imagining a space of learning and a community outside of the hospital enables Sybil to take action in the present.

These moments of joy and satisfaction, although fleeting, suggest something of Piercy's vision of education as nourishing and utopian. Even in the marginalised space of the institution, Connie and Sybil capture, through friendship and imagination, moments of joy in learning and create or imagine educational spaces for themselves. This offers possibilities for resistance to their incarceration. The desire and hope for something more, and their imaginative engagement with what this might be, propel both Connie and Sybil into action. As Piercy (2016: xi) suggests, 'Utopia is born of the hunger for something better, but it relies on hope as the engine for imagining such a future'. hooks (1990: 150) argues that 'understanding marginality as a position and place of resistance is crucial for oppressed, exploited, colonized people.' Through learning from one another and imagining futures beyond their confinement, Connie and Sybil's marginality becomes a point of resistance. During her final meeting with Luciente, Connie asks whether it is acceptable to kill those who hold power over her, thereby pushing against and fighting from her position of marginality. 'Power is violence,' Luciente replies. 'When did it get destroyed peacefully? We all fight when we're back to the wall – or to tear down a wall' (405). It is from a place of marginalisation that Connie is propelled into action. Formal and informal educational spaces can offer utopias in the present, where we are free and able to imagine and hope for better futures and can be a source of resistance for marginalised groups (hooks 1994).

### **Teaching on the Edge of Time**

Having read *Woman on the Edge of Time* as a teenager, I was drawn back to it a few years ago with the sense that it could offer me a way of reflecting on and responding to a challenging moment in the classroom when, during a discussion about sexual assault, a young female student made a victim blaming statement about rape survivors. I do not discuss this incident in detail here, but think it is significant that, in looking for guidance, I was drawn

back to a novel I had only a vague memory of, because of sense that it would be helpful,<sup>1</sup> rather than drawing only on writing on pedagogy. My slow approach to this challenging teaching encounter created space for reflection and thinking that allowed the novel to travel into another time and place (as advocated by McBean 2014). *Woman on the Edge of Time* is a vital ‘companion text’ for me.<sup>2</sup> Ahmed describes companion texts as those that:

Spark a moment of revelation in the midst of an overwhelming proximity; they may share a feeling or give you resources to make sense of something that had been beyond your grasp; companion texts can prompt you to hesitate or to question the direction in which you are going, or they might give you a sense that in going the way you are going, you are not alone. (2017: 16)

Through reading the novel I experienced moments of revelation, prompts to hesitate and question and started to articulate my experience in the classroom as one of ‘teaching on the edge of time’.

‘Teaching on the edge of time’ conveys my sense of occupying different temporal positions in the classroom, which develop my teaching practice. Firstly, in the moment I describe, there were different ways in which I could respond to the victim blaming, each producing different effects. I was struck by a sense of not knowing what was ‘best’ and after the event questioning what impact my response might have had. I wanted to respond without humiliating or shaming, but with compassion and recognition of the challenges of transforming our thinking (hooks, 1994). Like Connie, as educators we are always faced with different options, each of which have unknowable effects. Education should be about freedom and disruption, and should challenge thinking and offer alternative understandings of the world (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994), but how we achieve this in the classroom is not always clear and requires ongoing critique and reflection. Secondly, the young woman’s statement returned me to a time of not knowing, the shameful reminder of times when I might have reproduced problematic ideas myself, or left those of others unchallenged. The incident made me acutely aware of my own moments of transformation through learning and of the

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<sup>1</sup> Importantly, my reading of the novel as teaching guide was facilitated by my institution. I read the novel for a third time, and first wrote about it, for the ‘Policy and Philosophy of Education’ module on the MA Higher Education that I am currently studying for. I am grateful to Professor Paul Gibbs for encouraging me to pursue this reading and for creating an assignment that allowed for this reflection on what a piece of feminist science fiction can offer to pedagogy.

<sup>2</sup> Alongside the graphic novel *Becoming, Unbecoming* (Una 2015), which was also invaluable to thinking about how to respond to this moment.

importance of remembering that we are both educator and student, always positioned on the edge of something. There is always potential to transform our thinking through learning, and there are always aspects of our engagement with the world that require transformation. Finally, I became acutely aware of the temporal uncertainty and precariousness of creating utopias in the classroom. As much as we might hope that our actions in the classroom move us towards creating and at times realising transformative learning communities, we cannot assume that they will keep us there. Utopias are processes and possibilities, but are always precarious (Afnan, 1996; Côté et al, 2007; Haran, 2010; Moylan, 1986). We risk complacency if we assume otherwise. ‘Teaching on the edge of time’ expresses the transformative aims of critical pedagogy (Freire 1970; hooks 1994). Reading the novel made space for my temporal positioning of uncertainty and of not knowing that allowed me to approach the victim-blaming incident with compassion and understanding for the student, whilst having faith in the transformative potential of the learning community (hooks 1994).

### **Conclusions: slowing down to learn how to teach**

*Women on the Edge of Time* took me beyond the established materials for learning about teaching. This reading practice encouraged me to explore how the ‘undetoned energies of the feminist past’ (Freeman 2010) can be active in the contemporary context of the neoliberal university and shape a feminist pedagogy. It follows an approach to reading the novel advocated by McBean (2014) that does not seek to assign it to a particular decade – the 1970s – and, in doing so, treat it as a historical case study of the feminist concerns of the period. In reading the novel as instructive for feminist pedagogies in the contemporary neoliberal university – a kind of slow scholarship and pedagogy – I approach it as a means of intervening into the contemporary landscape of higher education. Reading the novel in this way required me to slow down. I read it in the office, staff room, cafes, parks, at home, during the week and at the weekend. Slowing down allowed me to spend time thinking about my pedagogy, but it also put me at odds with dominant academic temporalities and standard scholarly and pedagogic practices within my discipline of sociology. The experience of reading the novel at work, in the office in particular, is a useful example of both the possibilities and challenges of slow scholarship. Reading a feminist science fiction novel in the office might be a way of performing resistance to the pressures and expectations of the neoliberal institution. But I was aware of my concern of being perceived as not being ‘productive enough’; it was an activity I felt required justification if ‘caught’ – explaining

that I was reading for a purpose, that I really was working. This sense of being out of time with the expectations of the academic workplace is of course disciplinarily specific; slowing down to resist will mean different things across disciplines.

As Carole Leathwood and Barbara Read (2013) point out, the question of who can resist and how is contingent on a number of factors, including gender, race and seniority. In fact, reading this novel in a relatively private office, as someone secure in post, and with collegial and supportive colleagues, carried little genuine risk. However, an awareness that my reading at work might be considered unproductive, a waste of time, or, at worst, neglectful of responsibilities others would have to absorb – as having luxuries not afforded to others – demonstrates the various ways we internalise the demands, expectations and temporalities of the contemporary neoliberal university (Gill 2009; Leathwood and Read 2013; Shahjahan 2015) and how the audit culture of universities means that ‘surveillance regimes are internalized and re-enacted between participants’ (Scott 2010: 226). As Leathwood and Read (2013: 1117) suggest, despite many academics being critical of the pressurised academic environment, in particular the ‘research audit technologies and the grants culture’, we nevertheless often comply with and become complicit in this culture. This is despite the emotional and affective challenges this brings. They observe that:

Collectively, as academics, we are enmeshed in endless contradictions: vehemently contesting audit technologies yet caught in their web; feeling we have no choice but to ‘play the game’, but also ‘choosing’ to do so because of the pleasures it offers. We experience over-work, stress, guilt and anxiety as well as, if we are lucky, pride, relief and joy. We want to escape, but we are continually seduced by the potential pleasures on offer - either that and/or we simply need the job. (2013: 1172)

Similarly, Yves Gendron (2008: 113-114) argues that there are a ‘growing number of academics who feel uncomfortable with the surrounding regime of performativity but who nonetheless continue to perpetuate its influence through their actions and behaviour’. My experience of reading *Women on the Edge of Time* in the office illuminated the contradictions Leathwood and Read (2013) and Gendron (2008) refer to. I was aware of wanting to slow down, to resist and to give time to thinking about teaching, but at the same time was acutely aware of how this practice of reading materials that sit outside of my discipline on ‘work time’ might be perceived. The sense of unease that I sometimes felt in the moment of reading illustrates how the expectations and temporalities of the role, discipline and institution are felt

and internalised. It is both in the act of reading the novel and the ideas the novel generated that illuminated the operation of the neoliberal institution and posed a form of resistance to it. Reading *Woman on the Edge of Time* in a way that deliberately made connections with other texts, meant remaining alert and inquisitive. It was a way of expanding the materials we use to develop, reflect on and interrogate our pedagogies and demonstrate both the necessity for and the challenges of slowing down to think about how to teach.

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