

Université de Montréal

A SALUTE TO FEMININE UTOPIA
PART ONE : FEMINIST MANIFESTOS AND UTOPIAN
FICTION AND PART TWO : CWENALAND AN ODYSSEY

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Résumé

En ce qui concerne la littérature féministe, il s'y trouve un chevauchement important et intéressant entre le manifeste en tant que forme littéraire et la fiction utopique. Les deux se servent d'une image imaginée de l'avenir ou d'un meilleur état futur pour critiquer et dénoncer tant les conditions actuelles que celles du passé qui ont donné naissance à celles-là. Cette thèse aborde à la fois le manifeste et la fiction utopique / dystopique pour élaborer les conditions de l'espace essentiel des femmes et du féminin. Ce lieu utopique se veut plus qu'un endroit où aller ; il exprime les origines du féminin, lesquelles vont au-delà de ce qui est masculin en visant un épanouissement du féminin en dehors et au-delà de la stricte dichotomie masculin-féminin de la société patriarcale.

J'examine d'abord les termes en usage puis je discute du manifeste comme une forme littéraire d'un intérêt particulier pour les écrivains féministes. Je passe ensuite en revue des théories de fiction utopique, lesquelles me conduisent à des possibilités fructueuses du langage pour assurer une voix aux femmes ainsi que l'expression du féminin. Je prends comme exemple le livre The Activist de Renée Gladman pour appuyer mes arguments concernant le pouvoir performatif du manifeste comme une forme qui s'empieète sur la fiction utopique dans le but d'imaginer l'espace du féminin.

Dans la deuxième partie de la thèse, j'entre dans une utopie fictive dans le cadre d'une exploration personnelle de ce qu'est le féminin et son expression. Le récit emmène le lecteur au pays de Cwenaland. A chaque étape de la narration d'autres voix percent et découpent le texte. Certaines sont sous la forme d'une image ou d'un portrait, d'autres sont des cris ou des gémissements qui dérangent la voix narrative. Ces voix en tangente et en diagonale enracinent mon utopie fictive dans la diversité d'expérience et d'expression féminine

Mots-clés : féminisme, manifeste, fiction utopique, le féminin, Renée Gladman, l'hégémonie masculine, le patriarcat.

Abstract

There is considerable and interesting overlap between the manifesto as a literary art form and utopian fiction in regards to feminist writing. Both use an imagined image of the future or of a better future condition in order to criticize and denounce conditions in the present, and the past that gave rise to them. The thesis looks at both the manifesto and writings about utopia/dystopia in order to frame a place for female and the feminine. This utopian place is more than a place to go. It is a place that expresses what femininity is based on - more than simply that which is not masculine - and offers some kind of fulfillment outside and beyond the rigid masculine-feminine dichotomy of patriarchal society.

I first examine terminology then I discuss the manifesto as a literary form of particular interest to women writers. I then review notions of utopian fiction, which leads me to the important opportunities that language offers to women to have a voice, and to express that which is feminine. I examine closely Renée Gladman's book The Activist to support my arguments regarding the performative power of the manifesto as a form that overlaps with utopian fiction in imagining space for the feminine.

In Part Two I imagine and describe a fictional utopia as part of a personal exploration of how to identify that which is expressive of the feminine. The narrative takes readers on a journey to Cwenaland. At each stage in the narrative other voices pierce and slice the prose. Some are in the form of an image or a portrait; others disrupt the narrative voice like a shout or a wail. These voices that are tangential and diagonal to the narrative ground my fictional utopia in the many levels of feminine experience and expression.

Keywords : Feminism, manifesto, utopian fiction, the feminine, Renée Gladman, masculine hegemony, patriarchy

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Dédié au féminin là où Elle se trouve / To Woman everywhere

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*I am the gypsy of stolen voices
the serpent muse of crushed lapis stone*

*I bleed the blood of the moon reflecting the sun
I paint the sky of my womb with mirrored faces*

Moe Clark, Alessandra Naccarato Ravensara

A SALUTE TO FEMININE UTOPIA

PART ONE:

FEMINIST MANIFESTOS AND UTOPIAN FICTION

Defining the feminine

There is considerable and interesting overlap between the manifesto as a literary art form and utopian fiction in regards to feminist writing. Both use an imagined image of the future or of a better future condition in order to criticize and denounce conditions in the present and the past that gave rise to them. My intention is to look at both the manifesto and writings about utopia/dystopia in order to frame a place for female and the feminine. This utopian place is more than a place to go. It is a place that expresses what femininity is based on - more than simply that which is not masculine - and offers some kind of fulfillment outside and beyond the rigid masculine-feminine dichotomy of patriarchal society.

I first examine these critical terms – feminine, feminism, women or woman, and utopia/dystopia – then I discuss the manifesto as a literary form of particular interest to women writers because it by definition challenges the *status quo*. I then review notions of utopian fiction in order to support my argument that what is and is not expressed in women’s dreams for the future tells us more about the essential feminine than straightforward declaratory statements. This leads me to the important opportunities that language offers to women to have a voice, and, in expressing their essential selves, to express that which is feminine/Feminine outside masculine hegemony. My discussion of feminist thinking about what and how women write in a voice distinct from that of men drew me to examine critically several contemporary female authors, including the poetry of Juliana Spahr, stories by Lydia Davis and by Diane Williams, The Obituary by Gail Scott (2011) and The Activist by Renee Gladman (2003), in order to support my arguments regarding the performative power of the manifesto as a form that overlaps with utopian fiction in imagining space for the feminine. Ultimately I chose The Activist because of its theme of revolution, featuring people who find themselves challenging political and cultural hegemony, and its still-warm connection to recent political events, as well as its deliberate confounding of gender and racial categories. This example of Gladman’s writing bridges poetry and prose, experiments with form, and powerfully enters into the subjectivity of what most people like to call objective reality, thus illustrating the feminine voice without being declaratively feminist.

In view of the difficulties pointed out by philosophers such as Irigaray, Butler and Kristeva of

identifying the feminine outside and distinct from the framework of hegemonic masculinity, I argue that in entering an imaginary place for women – for the feminine – in the form of utopia/dystopia, the essential feminine reveals itself. Foucault's (1986) little developed concept of heterotopia as places that may or may not exist, that express visions and ideals both good and bad, and that contest prevailing versions of reality in “that they suspend, neutralize, or reverse the set of relations that are designated, reflected or represented [*refléchis*] by them...”(178) has potential for writers who seek to suspend, neutralize or reverse the social network they are defined by while at the same time refute. Because the modern world is a dystopia for the feminine, feminist writers have no need to imagine dystopia. Rather, they are drawn to imagining spaces that express feminine values and priorities so as to solve problems of feminine expression in society by laying claim to an imagined future. However, it is more normal for feminists to be critical of what is than to define in detail what could or should be as language itself is controlled by masculine hegemony. In Part Two I imagine and describe a fictional utopia as part of a personal exploration of how to identify that which expresses the feminine outside and beyond the conventional binarised category of the not-masculine. Utopias contain ideas for an imagined spatial reality that express social and artistic ideals in a futuristic three-dimensional framework. The language used for a manifesto-like call for feminine utopia is critical in light of feminist concerns with language and I have written parallel narratives in different voices. The framing narrative uses a single-voiced subject to take the reader on a journey to Cwenaland. At each stage in the narrative other voices pierce and slice the prose. Some are in the form of an image or a portrait: stories or *RÉCITS* in other voices in a different pace and tone. Others are *ESSENCE*: an accent, a flash, a chime that pierces the narrative voice like a shout or a wail. These voices that are tangential and diagonal to the narrative ground my fictional utopia in the many levels of feminine experience and expression.

The experience of writing my own vision of feminine utopia felt like a manifesto, albeit not in the confrontational language often associated with feminist manifestos which have tended to be more direct calls for change and attacks on male-dominated society. The manifesto and utopian fiction have in common the drive to find a future place for woman in which the perennial problems that dog females in today's societies can be imagined as solved, and the

broad objective of a socially equitable society where women find fulfillment outside and beyond the male-dominated environment is realized. They differ in form and frequently in target audience. While both express a vision of a better future, the manifesto relates to present circumstances, often looking back to the past that led us here; it is performative, and in recent years has found abundant expression on the Internet. Utopian fiction expands towards the broader horizons of the purely imaginary, tells more of a story, and is free to choose or whether not to address the past and present circumstances where the yearning for a better and ideal future originates.¹

A characteristic of contemporary or third wave feminism is the proliferation of non-binary gender roles and identities that admit the feminine. These take us beyond the identity difficulties exposed by Alcoff (1988), who criticized “Feminist theory, the explanation of sexism, and the justification of feminist demands ... grounded securely and unambiguously on the concept of the essential female” (408); they open a new door for the feminine voice and shed new light on feminine subjectivity. The enrichment of literature with voices that are not locked into male or female subjectivity argues for the disappearance of the binarised subject and of the feminine as ‘Other’. Voices across the male-female spectrum include Gay, Lesbian, Queer, Bi-sexual, Transsexual, Transgender and Intersex. I argue that these are expressive of the feminine in diversifying sexual and gender identity. In view of this evolution of what used to be considered a feminist perspective, issues of language are paramount. My challenge is to identify an inclusive term or terms that encompass the notion of Woman or of the feminine on which I focus.

Issues around terminology are exhaustively discussed by Sedgwick (1990), who explicitly distinguishes between sex, gender and sexuality. These terms have different meanings which overlap and are often deliberately confused.² Sedgwick describes ‘sex’ as biologically-based differences arising from XX and XY chromosomes, and refers to this as “chromosomal sex” – the “minimal raw material on which is based the social construction of gender.” Gender is “the

¹ I have blended writing about utopia and dystopia inasmuch as it does not serve my argument to distinguish them. While my own writing visions utopia, some useful commentary on language is to be found in criticism of dystopian fiction.

² Recent journalistic reports indicate use of the term ‘transgender’ for what used to be ‘transsexual’, thus conflating the two distinct meanings of these terms.

far more elaborated, more fully and rigidly dichotomized social production and reproduction of male and female identities and behaviours ...”(27). So while sex is biological - what we are born with, not as – gender is social/political: how we are seen and defined by society and so how we define ourselves to others. Finally, Sedgwick defines ‘sexuality’ as “the array of acts, expectations, narratives, pleasures, identity-formations, and knowledges, ... that tends to cluster most densely around certain genital sensations but is not adequately defined by them”(29). She points out that this definition goes beyond the “feminist-defined sex/gender distinction”(28), being a more comprehensive term that, depending upon context, could refer to ‘sex’ and also to ‘gender’. Sexuality might be considered psychological in its broadest sense, that is, behavioural: how we see ourselves and respond behaviourally to what we feel are our needs, and how we define ourselves to ourselves.

Sedgwick concludes that sexuality, while comprising a wide range of relational positions that are “all over the experiential and conceptual map” (29), remains distinct from both biologically-defined sex and socially-defined gender. When de Beauvoir, for example, stated that one was not born a woman but became a woman, she was not talking about sex, because one is (mostly) born female, but she may well have been talking about gender and was certainly talking about sexuality. The aim of my analysis is to infer from such distinctions that which might be considered the spirit of the feminine – which I call in this paper simply the feminine – in terms that are not masculinist, in spite of the feminist call for eliminating both ‘feminine’ and ‘feminist’ in order to overcome conventional dichotomies.

In her discussion, Sedgwick shows how easily confused the three terms – sex, gender and sexuality – are as the meaning of each overlaps and frequently used both inaccurately and interchangeably. My own attempt to tabulate meanings of the three terms in a way I could use to clarify my argument dissolved in ambiguity, so I hereby declare that the sex I am writing about is female or woman, the gender, feminine or woman, and the sexuality, female or feminine. This exercise makes it clear that people do not readily fall into distinct categories, even if we actually knew what the terms really mean. Terms that blur conventional binary distinctions include, under chromosomal sex, Intersex where people have both male and female parts of their bodies; transgender people who identify wholly or in part with a gender that may not correspond to their sex; and ‘queer’ - a broad-ranging term that allows for

numerous permutations and combinations of human sexuality. Thus increasingly identities select the gender and/or sexuality that fits – with more or less reference to their biological category – and nomenclature proliferates. The feminine can be present in any combination, such as, for example, in biological males who define themselves as women and/or consider their sexuality to be feminine as well as in biological females who feel like men and behave in a sexually masculine way, and everything biologically, socially, and behaviourally in-between. I have opted to simply use the term ‘the feminine’ without capitalisation to designate the spirit of femininity and the female as that which is not masculine or male and in whatever form it occurs.

This discussion bears some review of the term ‘feminist’ and whether or not seeking out the feminine represents a feminist perspective. Feminism has come to mean holding strong opinions about gender and sexuality in defiance of conventional binarised thinking. The term originally (mid 19th century) referred to “feminine quality or character”, and later (early 20th century) was used as a medical term to describe “the appearance of female secondary sexual characteristics in a male individual”. It is now defined as “Advocacy of equality of the sexes and the establishment of the political, social, and economic rights of the female sex.” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2012)

There appears to be no exact male equivalent to ‘feminist’, as indeed there is not to ‘misogyny’. The lack of a male equivalent in language is one confirmation of male hegemony. Misogyny is a "near-universal phenomenon" without a female equivalent: “Man hating among women has no popular name because it has never (at least not until recently) achieved apotheosis as a social *fact*, that is, it has never been ratified into public, culturally recognized and approved *institutions* (...) As a cultural institution, misogyny therefore seems to stand alone as a gender-based phobia, unreciprocated”(Gilmore, 2009, 10). The term ‘misandry’ has been coined but is not in wide use. Misandry refers "not to the hatred of men as men, but to the hatred of men's traditional male role" and a "culture of machismo. ... Misandry is "different from the intensely *ad feminam* aspect of misogyny that targets women no matter what they believe or do”(13). In a feminine utopia, misandry is shared by men and women alike.

In Part One, I look at the manifesto as an art form, and particularly the feminist manifesto, which leads us to an analysis of dystopian space in feminist terms. A review of negative elements that need to be purged and rethought in a feminine utopia orients the discussion to women's writing and the feminine voice. I argue that the feminine voice of prose forms such as the manifesto can provide indications of the feminine by directly and indirectly drawing attention to the dystopian world women currently occupy. It is from within this writing that it begins to be possible to consider a feminine utopia – that is, a world where the feminine is unconstrained and fulfilled.

Feminism and the essential feminine

Historically there are grammatical and linguistic meanings of the term 'feminine', such as "designating the gender to which belong words classified as female on the basis of sex or some arbitrary distinction, such as form." There are musical and poetic meanings: "Of the ending of a verse, phrase, etc.: having the final syllable or note unaccented, esp. in feminine ending; (of a verse, phrase, rhythm, etc.) characterized by such an ending." The word can also be used "Of a personal attribute, an action, etc.: characteristic of, befitting, or regarded as appropriate to the female sex. Of a woman: having or exhibiting the qualities, behaviour, or appearance considered as typical of the female sex; womanly"(OED, 2012). More interestingly 'the feminine' means "that which is feminine; the feminine element in human nature" and has been used as a noun since the mid-seventeenth century. This term carries a positive connotation that has the possibility of not being dependent on definitions of the masculine, and refers, variously, to the numinous, to enlightenment, to wisdom, regeneration, mystery. A danger is that this be confused with '*the eternal feminine*' - after German *das Ewig-Weibliche* (1832 in Goethe's Faust): "the essential, idealized female nature; (hence) the ideal or typical woman; (more generally) womankind" - which seems to be some combination of the mother or mother-goddess, the young, innocent and fundamentally good or pure, and perfect beauty – unfortunately yet another concession to the dominance of masculine values and the imposition of an artificial dichotomy that falsifies truth.

In using the term ‘the feminine’, I hope to elude both the formal imposition of artificial categories and the question of essentialism criticized by de Lauretis (1990) as inappropriately derived from biological differences and better understood as derived from “the historically specific conditions that imparted to theories or theorists their values and assumptions, methodological and conceptual approaches, and forms of address and of critical reflection” (244). Along with Sedgwick, I consider the essentialist counter-argument spurious in that it is but a loose reworking of the nature-nurture controversy. Biological science and social science have adequately demonstrated that we are all a blend of what the environment does with and to what we are born with, and no purpose can be served by re-imagining this (another!) artificial division. “The immemorial, seemingly ritualized debates on nature versus nurture take place against a very unstable background of tacit assumptions and fantasies about both nurture and nature” (Sedgwick, 1990, 40). She refers to “a conceptual deadlock” that has grown up around these terms and “is built into the very structure and theoretical tools” we have for this debate. The same criticism can be addressed to the oppositional categories of male and female, or masculine and feminine. In both cases, one questions the pervasive use of two separate, divided and bounded definitional categories to explain a complex phenomenon that affects all of life on this earth. While they are not real in the sense of corresponding to reality, they have been useful as analogies and to explain species reproduction. But it is striking how many situations, as well as our thinking and values, are defined in terms of male-female polarisation, from our career choices to our religions, from our names to our toilets:

“... nowhere are the signifiers of gender more painfully acute and subject to surveillance than in sex-segregated washrooms. ... The elimination function is an area of bio-political regulation that is ... central to an overemphasis upon an absolute and unchanging sexual difference” (Cavanagh, 2010, 4).

Grosz and other feminist philosophers have struggled with essentialism in part by exploring the work of Irigaray and her fundamental concept of ‘sexual difference’. This consistent theme in Irigaray’s writing has evolved from her early theory of the feminine as necessary to and defined by masculinity to her later assertion that difference is a “generative interval” that exists between the two sexes: ”a sensible transcendental” offering an opportunity to explore outside dichotomous boundaries, “a utopian horizon” offering space occupied by the

feminine” (Cheah & Grosz, 1998, 19). The theme is taken up by Butler, who is “interested in where masculine/feminine break down, where they cohabit and intersect, where they lose their discreteness” (28). Characterizing sexual difference as “this one fundamental structuring principle ... that will affect how one is a gay man or a gay woman”, she argues that “ If one really pursues the theoretical consequences of gayness, one finds that even the presupposition of sexual difference is brought into a really important crisis”(29). Cheah argues that this crisis draws attention to “ ... the imaginary domain as the space for the contestation and representation of sexual identification ... that calls foreclosed subject positions into question”(24). Such claims place the feminine in heterotopic space, where it can and does contest conventional social definitions of sexual difference.

So while the bases for sex or gender-created identities are ‘in crisis’, it is clear that the feminine remains ‘essential’ because “the feminine is something that Western philosophy cannot do without in a very specific sense because it has grounded a kind of metaphysics. The feminine is an aesthetic idea that breaks open the ground of fundamental metaphysical concepts and the reason that comprehends them. So in that way, it always is this door to a radical future”(23). And while “Irigaray ... occupies the space of the slippage between ‘the feminine’ and ‘women.’ She rarely talks about ‘women.’ She sometimes talks about ‘Woman,’ but usually quite critically, and she often talks about ‘the feminine,’ but somehow, she’s talking about the interlacing of and slippage between the three terms”(23). Along with Grosz, we ask, “Isn’t it the potential of ‘Woman’ to unleash a feminine that has never been understood before? Not just Woman, not just women, but something in women”(23) and in those who acknowledge a feminine identity? This is the feminist dream, and invoking utopia as imagined space where the feminine is unleashed is a step towards considering the feminine an inclusive term that does not, at this stage, need closure through definition and consensus, but needs to remain open, first needing expression so that we learn to know and become it.

While feminists of the first wave in the early twentieth century demanded the vote and a political voice, feminists of the second wave in the 70’s and 80’s sought equality: fathers to take care of children, admission to professional education and the labour force, no-fault divorce, shared housework, admission to men-only clubs and organisations. Much has been achieved since this protest movement, and now equality too is being questioned as a viable

objective.³ Is equality desirable for women, females, and the feminine in an environment and a culture that remains defined and controlled by males and the masculine? A feminist perspective more appropriate to our time now and in the immediate future may take balance – based on “the proliferation of alternative and different discourses, knowledges, frames of reference, and political investments” (Grosz, 2002, 13) that can be exchanged – rather than equality as its goal. I argue that balancing male and female or men and women is not an advance on equality, but balancing feminine and masculine as interacting but independent and shared but not identical points the way to a balanced society and a Utopian environment that meets the criteria of and fulfils all genders and identities.

Even in the current era of more gender equality, girls and women remain vulnerable to kidnapping and slavery; in many places girls are seen as less desirable babies and more easily aborted; there are still powerful forces fighting to refuse education to girls; and there are still anomalies, such as the church of England – having admitted female clergy – refusing to allow women bishops, and laws in many US states that allow men access to children born to women that they raped (CBC 5 November 2012). There is still an obsession in white western culture with naked female bodies – for selling cars and jeans, as pornography, in fashion and the entire celebrity culture – not entirely unrelated to the obsession that is associated with Arab culture to repress and silence females using concealing clothing, imposing strict behavioural controls (e.g. not being allowed to drive a car, to sing in front of an audience, to dance) and restricting their access to public space. Moreover, there are still numerous instances of casual discrimination which society does not question. The discrimination seems to start with the cultural compulsion – which seems increasingly irrational – to fix sex, gender and sexuality into two distinct and immutable boxes. I say irrational because if there is one thing both experience and science have shown, it is that almost nothing in nature fits into two neatly based alternative options: all binaries are artificial.

In addition to the discrimination practiced against females and against the feminine in almost every part of our planet, there is also the question of how the feminine survives in masculine

³ The new book and movement ‘Lean-In’ that claims to prepare women for more effective participation in the upper ranks of corporations has already been criticized for failing to address the needs of culturally deprived women who will never enter the corporate world. (Kantor, 2013)

cultures that force them into a subjugated position. Identifying this experience is not easy as, first, the masculinised environment is the only one we know, and, second, people of both (all) sexes disagree on how to identify those cultural elements that make it 'masculine'. As both Butler (1990) and Sedgwick (1990) have written, women are as likely as men to consider the existing gender imbalance in our societies as 'natural' and to accept the hegemonic values that we all know. To try to extract feminine from masculine 'ways of being' is to invite essentialist criticism and to fall into the trap of cultural relativity. Sedgwick argues that just as sexuality and sex are intertwined but not the same, so "the question of gender and the question of sexuality, inextricable from one another though they are in that each can be expressed only in the terms of the other, are nonetheless not the same question, ... [they] represent two analytic axes."(30)

Feminists have been making this argument for some time. An early feminist argument states that the feminine cannot exist as long as it is defined in terms of what is known to be masculine; the feminine is forced into an oppositional category that inevitably names it in masculine terms. Wittig (1970) stated her goal as "suppressing men as a class, not through a genocidal, but a political struggle. Once the class 'men' disappears, 'women' as a class will disappear as well" (3); and in This sex that is not one, Irigaray (1977) argued that as long as the dominant logic or logos is masculine, any other discourse or identity is subjugated and has no identity of its own; the female is not a sex, and her subjectivity but a fragment of the dominant subjectivity, which is male. In Butler's terms, "It would be wrong to think that the discussion of 'identity' ought to proceed prior to a discussion of gender identity for the simple reason that 'persons' only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility"(16). Haraway (1991) – a biologist – called the state of being female "a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices. Gender, race or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism."(155)

Binary thinking is at best a tool or mechanism for helping the human mind understand and name complex phenomena; it is an overlay on reality, not reality itself. And perhaps it is growing awareness of the falsity of the sex-gender binary that is causing so much emphasis to

be placed on it now: from the compulsion to know the baby's sex *in utero*, to the unspoken rule that she wears pink from birth and he wears blue (the difference being that she is pretty much stuck with pink into adulthood whereas he can wear other colours as long as they are dark and neutral) to choice of toys, clothes, behaviour, education, sexuality, and adult social roles. With the growing interest in neuroscientific research there are now scientists claiming brain differences that rationalise belief in male and female differences – claims that have little empirical support but which have been enthusiastically embraced by parents, educators and politicians (Fine, 2010). These and other similar studies, as well as art, fiction and poetry, oblige one to ask, Why? Of what value or use is it to our society, our humanity and our planet to force everyone into two categories, of which one *prima facie* dominates the other?

The contemporary third wave of feminism, if popular writers and movements are any indicator, recognises female gains in terms of equality in recent years and celebrates differences. A recent article describes male heroes in contemporary fiction as more inclined to be 'loser' types, as though being self-abnegating and ineffectual is the new way to get the girl (Blair, 2012). Since the feminist declarations and manifestos of the 70's and 80's, recent popular writers, such as Wolf (*Vagina: A New Biography*) and Rosin (*The End of Men*), novelists (e.g. Enright *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood*) and philosophers (Badinter, *Le conflit: la femme et la mere*), and Joan Didion and Joyce Carol Oates telling their stories of widowhood, have moved away from the call for revolution and are expressing their subjective experience as females (vagina, economic power, motherhood, wife-dom) as accessible by all and therefore a legitimate voice of the feminine subject. This third wave trend to express female subjectivity is a move towards recognition of the inherent value of female subjectivity.

Somewhere between these extremes can be heard the voices of contemporary women writers who neither display the female subject nor apply a feminist perspective but make the case for the feminine by inhabiting it: "Write, let no one hold you back, let nothing stop you: not man; not the imbecilic capitalist machinery, ... and not yourself. ... I write woman: woman must write woman." (Cixous, 1976). The feminine is a quality and a truth that goes beyond categories of sex, gender and sexuality to mean something precious and necessary to our existence as humans. Its attributes can be inferred from an imagined universe based on that

which is other than masculine. The emergence of transgendered, transsexual, homosexual and intersexual identities illuminate ways of achieving balance, admitting the feminine and the masculine into a shaded and nuanced mix that precludes one prescribed way of being and lights the way towards the freedom and flexibility of choice.

Much is invested in maintaining conventional man-woman categories: major societal institutions in the areas of religion, community, economics and medicine rely on being able to identify two distinct sexes, and consequently notions of gender and sexuality are conflated with limited biological categories. In view of society's blind adherence to this binarised worldview, articulating the feminine is a challenge. Women writers have been reclaiming their identity and their territory in manifestos since feminism's first wave, and continue to do so. Manifestos written by women provide important clues to how women of different generations feel about their lives in masculine society and how such protests have evolved both their themes and their goals. Manifestos that protest the *status quo* by implication envision a future ideal, and thus link to feminine utopias born of unfettered imagining of how the feminine might find expression.

The manifesto-ing of the feminine

The manifesto is a form of artistic expression: writers and artists who disparage the *status quo* with which they no longer identify demand artistic and political change. The feminist manifesto has evolved to express the feminine voice in a hostile environment. The social and artistic changes called for in manifestos comment on feminine subjectivity by reflecting those features of contemporary culture that women find particularly unbearable and on which they base their call for change, and they do not all agree.

The manifesto was popularised by artists and writers during the Modernist period of the early twentieth century. Indeed it was practically impossible for a new -ism to become recognized and defined without one or more manifestos being issued by key figures. Manifesto is derived from the Italian word *manifesto*, itself derived from the Latin *manifestum*, meaning clear or conspicuous. Its first recorded use in English is from 1620 - or even 1581 - in England, but it

is a word that translates readily into a variety of languages, making manifestos of all types easy to disseminate.

Somigli (2003) defines the manifesto as a form of negotiation and legitimization of the artist's role at a time of profound social and cultural transformation. The interaction of poetry and politics for women is expressed in manifestos that can help us trace the evolution of feminist thinking through the 20th century and into the 21st. Starting perhaps with Lewis and Pound's (almost explicitly anti-woman) Blast! manifestos for the Vorticist movement, of which Part 1 was issued in 1914, examples include Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto (1909) and Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature (1912). Later Modernist movements were marked by the Symbolist manifesto (Moréas, 1886), and the Dadaist manifestos, of which the best known is Tzara's published in 1918, although numerous artists considered their manifestos appropriate to the aims and values of the Dadaist movement. The first Surrealist Manifesto was published by André Breton in 1924.

The Modernists' anti-feminine stance drew fire from women who considered themselves artists belonging to Futurism or Vorticism, or more generally participating in the Modernist revolution. In 1912, Valentine de Saint-Point wrote a direct rebuttal to Marinetti in Manifesto of the Futurist Woman, and Mina Loy's Feminist Manifesto was published two years later. These had both been preceded by English suffragette Christabel Pankhurst's more political manifesto, The Great Scourge and How to End It (1913), which Lyon (1999) argues should be aligned with the feminist avant-gardistes "to show how the rhetoric and tactics of the militant woman's movement were enfolded into the foundations of English modernism, and how, conversely, helped to produce the public identity of the militant suffrage movement" (94). These early twentieth century feminist manifestos provide a basis for the contemporary manifesto as society has changed and as successive waves of feminism have redefined the changes women are calling for.

Since these early Modernist movements and the compulsion to state explicitly what both political and artistic movements were for and against, the manifesto has become not only more commonplace, with numerous examples both published and on the Internet, but also more

likely to be considered a legitimate literary form. It is therefore important to define what a manifesto is and what it is not. For Puchner (2006):

“Manifestos tend to present themselves as mere means to an end, demanding to be judged not by their rhetorical or literary merits – their poetry – but by their ability to change the world. ... This desire for openness and manifestation is central to the manifesto, defining its creative practice ... articulating what hitherto has been unarticulated.” (2)

Lyon, on the other hand, focuses on the manifesto as political expression through art:

“the nascent fury embodied in the form: like a fist striking through the scrim of civic order, the manifesto aims to challenge false conciliation in the name of a truth that fills the hearts and minds of its putative constituents. ... The manifesto is ... a genre that gives the appearance of being at once both word and deed, both threat and incipient action.” (14)

In spite of the numerous manifestos authored by women, Lyon describes the manifesto form as masculinist: “The manifesto declares a position; the manifesto refuses dialogue or discussion; the manifesto fosters antagonism and scorns conciliation. It is univocal, unilateral, single-minded. It conveys resolute oppositionality and indulges no tolerance for the faint-hearted ...”(9). Nevertheless, as performative expression of the feminine, the feminist manifesto contests the *status quo*, challenges patriarchal hegemony and claims territory for women.

Nicholls (1995) argues that the language of the manifesto “... draw[s] a contrast between ‘womanly’ preoccupation with the material – especially phonic – qualities of properties of language on the one hand, and a virile literature of action on the other” pertaining to the dominant male themes of “danger, war, adventure”(77). He points out that “the sadistic fantasies of the decadent almost always embodied a strong misogynistic drive, so there was a curious logic to the association of the female body with the excessively material nature of a ‘feminine’ language”, adding that to be a Modernist “was to be relentlessly masculinist” (61). Lyon takes Nicholls to task for not “engag[ing] the unabashed masculinism of this single sex male utopia; rather he seems to imply that since ‘the feminine’ stands for a nineteenth-century aesthetic practice, its material effects as a gender construction are limited.”(101)

Students of the Modernist movements of the early twentieth century draw repeated attention to their inherent misogyny. Misogynistic sentiments were expressed in several manifestos,

giving rise to female counter-declarations. “At its most endearing, a manifesto has a madness about it. It is peculiar and angry, quirky, or downright crazed. Always opposed to something, particular or general, it has not only to be striking but to stand up straight”(Caws, 2001, xix). Feminist manifestos that emerged in the different waves of the feminist movement conform to Caws’ criterion that “the manifesto generally proclaims what it wants to oppose, to leave, to defend, to change. Its oppositional tone is constructed of *againstness* and generally in the spirit of a one time only moment”(xxv). Examples include the well-known SCUM manifesto by Valerie Solanas in the 60’s, the Combat pour le liberation de la femme by Monique Wittig and others in the 1970’s, Donna Haraway’s Cyborg Manifesto of the 1980’s, the 100 anti-theses of cyberfeminism published on the Internet in 1997, and the book Manifesta published in 2000. The feminist manifesto has also been compared to new feminist writings at the juncture of fiction and theory known as fiction/theory, because it “links the transgressive, the subversive, and the new to violence in the order of the symbolic”(Moyes, 1994, 312). Distinguishing marks of the manifesto include the use of ‘we’, its performative rather than constative nature, and, as both declaration and promise, it is a “disruptive language act”(313).

The forms of a manifesto are as varied as the intentions of their authors, and manifestos are as much about what ‘we’ are for as what ‘we’ are against. Lyon discusses the ‘we’ that is implied in any kind of unilateral declaration; in the case of feminist declarations, ‘we’ can mean all women, or only those women that share the same viewpoint. Other personal pronouns used in manifestos include ‘they’ as ‘the other’ – both blasted and blessed – and ‘you’, as in everyone out there who is not but should be with ‘me’ or ‘us’. Later feminist manifestos distance themselves from 70’s rants and reflect more on how women’s place in society has changed (or not) since the second wave feminist movement (Baumgartner and Richards, 2000). The authors replace ‘womanism’ with feminism, a more inclusive term, but their thirteen-point *manifesta* fall far short of exhortations by Wittig, Irigaray, Butler and others to move beyond gender categories and avoid the trap of defining female in male terms. In its reasonable tone and bland language, there is little here that can be defined as revolutionary; on the other hand, the very lack of revolutionary passion indicates how cautious women that call themselves ‘activists’ for the feminist cause must be in order not to be dismissed as “bitches, shrews, and hysterics”(Wittig, 1970), even in 2000.

We are now some distance into the 21st century and the notion of what a manifesto is has broadened and deepened. The dividing lines between art and politics have become less distinct, and blurring is encouraged by the variety of new forms of communication available. Varied and interesting developments in terms of contemporary poetics and feminism are to be found in virtual communications, and specifically, blogs (weblogs). Blogs represent an equitable and accessible invitation to people of all ethnic groups, gender categories and socio-economic backgrounds to express themselves. These expressions may be manifestos and they may be poetry, and they may be anywhere in-between, reminding us, as Gail Scott (2002) does, blurring the lines between politics and art in her manifesto The Virgin Denotes, of “the pleasure of sounding out, a kin to poetry.” (p.13)

Both Lyon and Puchner invoke theatrical qualities of the manifesto that aim to be disruptive, and contemporary manifestos are promulgated on the world-wide web and spill out into the streets.

“The performance is above all a catalyst leading to violence and even to a confrontation with the law ... the aim being, as Walter Benjamin later put it, to guarantee art's ‘uselessness for contemplative immersion.’ Art is as it were hollowed out, deprived of its traditional power to redeem and legitimate the social order, its mask of human-ness falls away.” (Nicholls, 1995, 227)

In 2011, manifesto as theatre took place in Toronto, followed by New York and cities all over the world. Called Slutwalk, women of all ages, backgrounds and persuasions took part in these “theatrical displays” (Nussbaum, 2011): “Freed from the boundaries of print, writers could blur the lines between formal and casual writing; between a call to arms, a confession, and a stand-up routine—and this new looseness of form in turn emboldened readers to join in, to take risks in the safety of the shared spotlight.”(2)

Many feminist blogs see themselves as limited to - and moving against - that which is ‘male’ and which is construed as ‘patriarchal’; acknowledging few constraints, these women’s voices are out on their own territory. They can express themselves as artists, poets, and performers as well as journalists and political commentators, and they can speak out on social issues that affect not just one artificially defined half of humanity, but humanity as a single, pulsating, living, suffering whole. The new media are making space for new gender categories and

hopefully for no categories at all. Perhaps Wittig's call to all women to drop gender categories that define the feminine in male terms, to find another language that is our own, and to express that which is unique to woman, is starting to happen.

While Hélène Cixous's essays are not considered manifestos, *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975) is manifesto-like. The text is declarative and although addressed more to art than politics calls on women to overthrow the *status quo*. Cixous wants women to write, to express their femininity through writing, to speak that which they are *qua* women. To say their femininity, to say the feminine,

“Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies-for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history-by her own movement.” (Cixous, Cohen and Cohen, 1976, 875)

She called this *écriture féminine*, later changed to *écriture dite féminine* (writing said to be or described as feminine) so as to emphasize her belief that the feminine does not equate with females but can and should also be found in males, just as the masculine can be found in females (Conley, 1984). In fact for Cixous (after Freud) our 'originary' condition is bisexual (or pansexual, or just sexual) as all unborn humans are at first, in the womb.

Manifestos, in staking out the future, base themselves on the present as the authors live and experience it. This present is created by events and circumstances in the past, thus the manifesto comments on the past by disrupting the present with a vision – a promise – of the future. Modernist art manifestos were tightly woven into the environments the authors inhabited as part of their call for the future to change, break away, make things better. But inasmuch as the future is factually unknown, this must be in the form of a vision or hope rather than an endorsement of something existing. However, if and when the vision of change takes form, going beyond the revolution to construct an imagined future, as in a utopia, the manifesto addresses both eliminating that which is contested and putting in place the ideal that will replace it.

Feminist manifestos show that what women call for, rebel against, denounce and hail in their declarations are dependent on historical and political circumstances. Writers promise a future

that has features of a feminist utopia – the present patriarchal society being itself dystopian enough not to need reimagining in fiction. For some, feminist utopia ranges from a women-only no-men environment, and no patriarchal institutions such as banks and religions, to women in charge and men as slaves, to female-dominated religions, and from freedom to initiate sexual and romantic relationships to limiting sex to only with women. For others, utopia is based on humanistic visions of equality for all, compassion towards one's fellow-person, responsibility towards the planet, and freedom of movement among floating categories of sex, gender and sexuality. The first might be considered feminist, the second feminine. Utopian fiction offers a parallel example of thinking about the ideal – or essential (in a good way) – feminine universe. While manifestos place their emphasis on damning the present, and by extension the past, utopias use the imagined future to correct the wrongs of both present and past. At some level, then, feminine utopian fiction and feminist manifestos overlap.

Utopian fiction and feminist dystopia

The feminine is not locked into female or woman, any more than the masculine is locked into being a man or male. The evolution of the feminist manifesto attests that the patriarchal environment which characterises most contemporary societies represents dystopia for the feminine and all humanity. The predominance of masculine values – in whatever sex and gender they are found – has resulted in a dystopian society in which few institutions function as they were originally conceived. Religions and the church, banks and finance, medicine and health care, science, capitalism itself have been deformed and depraved and no longer meet societal purposes for which they were intended. Many of these original purposes are in line with feminine values that favour a safe, nurturing and flourishing environment. As patriarchal institutions expand and become more remote from their origins, they are more adapted to the dystopian environment they are helping create. Issues that concern females – reproductive health and childbearing, thriving of planetary life, and social cooperation and inclusion – are increasingly neglected if not actively disparaged.

Consequently, the meaning of utopia is increasingly that place in which the negative social

functioning of modern life is expunged. So-called ‘original’ values or human ideals are rediscovered and acted on in some pure form to create an environment in which all life can thrive – an environment based not on the masculine that we are used to, but on the feminine that it systematically neglects and repudiates. The ways in which male and female are portrayed in utopian/dystopian writing communicate masculine and feminine ideals on which elements of a utopian society might be based. Using language to conjure up utopia and portray a society based on the feminine located in space for the feminine is arguably a manifesto. For after all, what is a manifesto if it not an evocation of utopian ideals?

The ideal or utopian space for the feminine is in part a reaction to the dystopian space women currently occupy and in part a space that does not yet exist nor is easily imagined. It is space that contests and inverts conventional space for females. Foucault inferred cultural values and practices – including implicit rules of behavior and insight into social status and roles – from the spaces that we construct and the ways in which we use them. He wrote: “... we do not live in a homogeneous and empty space, but on the contrary in a space thoroughly imbued with quantities and perhaps thoroughly fantasmatic as well.” (Foucault, 1986, 3)

In his essay Of Other Spaces, Foucault added heterotopia to ‘intrinsic’ and ‘extrinsic’ spaces. Heterotopia means places that “have the curious property of being in relation with all the other places, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect.” Foucault distinguishes between utopia: “places with no real place. They are places that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces” and heterotopia is

“places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society-which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.”

Linking utopia and heterotopia is the mirror:

“a sort of mixed, joint experience, ... The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, ... [it] enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. “

Foucault argues that one effect of qualifying spaces in these ways is that

“I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, ...”.

Feminine space is a ‘placeless place’ that serves to explore the imaginary, using the mirror (‘the utopia of the mirror’) to ‘see myself where I am not’. And by creating a fictional utopia for a brief moment ‘makes this place ... absolutely real’ while it is, of course, ‘absolutely unreal’, which makes it a heterotopia we can use to explore represented, contested and inverted space for the feminine – where ‘I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am’.

Heterotopia defines myth as a form of communication that contains “a prophetic vision of society that allows for the presence of constant change and improvisation. ...”(Reid-Pharr, 1994). And, because “Within heterotopia the emphasis is always on the possibility of possibilities”, the myth allows many alternative ideologies and belief systems to be “expressed, challenged and defended.” (348) – as, for example, prevailing patriarchal ideologies and challenges to them. Johnson (2006) explains how some interpretations of Foucault’s heterotopia emphasise the differentness of those places (or ‘*emplacements*’) that are “sites of marginality that act as postmodern spaces for resistance and transgression” because they act “by outlining how heterotopia contests the space in which we live” (Hetherington, 1997). He draws attention to Foucault’s assertion that “these ‘*emplacements*’ [places] ... have the curious property of being in relation with [connected to] all the other ‘*emplacements*’, but in such a way as to suspend, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect”(75). Johnson explains that Foucault’s reference to the mirror illustrates the disruption of space most explicitly. Although the mirror is like a utopia, a ‘placeless place’, it is also an actual site that disrupts our spatial position. The space occupied is at the same time real and unreal, forming a dislocation of place and fomenting contestation of the *status quo*, for example by feminist writers.

Lefebvre (1974) distinguished between perceived, conceived and lived space: space frames

experience, it also expresses experience through cultural values and gestures, and it is produced by experience. Space therefore defines human understanding of contexts of self as/and subject. As feminine space is space for, of and defined by women and not by patriarchy, it is therefore 'other'. Lefebvre also used the term 'heterotopy', although his description of utopic spaces has more in common with Foucault's notion of heterotopia: "The utopic is a non-place and a real place, 'half-fictional and half-real', closed and open, concentrated and dispersed, near and far, present and absent. It is a paradoxical, contradictory space, opposite the everyday"(Johnson, 84). Critical attention to the disruptive and contradictory aspect of heterotopia gained currency for the concept among feminist critics who see an opportunity to define space in feminine terms.

Irigaray (2004) is among those who emphasise the importance of the relational aspects of space inhabited by women. Bringing a feminist perspective to the study of geographic space, Massey (1994) found no value in "upgrading the status of space in terms of the old dualisms"(260) but instead argued for overcoming and reformulating dichotomous terminology. She uses geographical examples to demonstrate that space cannot be defined simply as that which is outside time and therefore 'formless' and chaotic, as Laclau proposes. Rather than being conceptualized in terms of an absence or lack, space must be interrelational: "the existence of the spatial depends on the interrelations of objects" (261). By conceptualizing space as constructed from social relations and interactions, it is possible to infer that while "the spatial is socially constituted, the social is necessarily spatially constituted too"(264). A woman defining space in non-patriarchal terms, Massey concludes that by conceptualizing space as a dynamic simultaneity of social relationships and therefore as not static, it is reasonable to see space as having "*both* an element of order *and* an element of chaos." (265)

Utopian space is both chaotic and orderly; heterotopic space contests conventional dualities and lets the feminine 'see herself where she is absent'. Feminine utopia – that is an idealized place devised according to the feminine – offers access to what distinguishes the essential feminine from the feminine as defined by the present, masculinised world, providing clues about what should be overthrown and what needs to be dreamed up in order for the feminine to find full expression in 'socially constituted' feminine space. Utopian/dystopian fiction

more commonly takes the form of an extreme characterization as a way of repudiating Haraway's 'terrible historical experience of ... patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism' against which protagonists rebel. While authors such as Marge Piercy and Doris Lessing have used female protagonists to frame dystopian visions, and both these authors are feminists, they created characters in which female rebels are outcast and heroines are persecuted for being mentally ill – but is mental illness the only way to portray feminine subjectivity in social space?

Irigaray explains how both psychoanalytic theory and philosophy exclude women from genuine social existence as autonomous subjects and relegate them to “the realm of inert, lifeless, inessential matter”(Donovan, 2005). While Irigaray suggests how women can begin to reconfigure their identity such that one sex does not exist at the expense of the other, “she is unwilling to definitively state what that new identity should be like. ... She refrains from prescribing a new identity because she wants women to determine for themselves how they want to be defined”(ibid). She points out ways of approaching a new definition arising out of “a mimetic engagement with the old definitions” – such as those challenged by feminist manifestos. Irigaray's claims for the feminine include novel use of language and words that lead to new notions of the transcendental in terms of the feminine divine; new and different civil laws aimed less at protecting or asserting female equality than at creating new space for women's social existence; and ways of enhancing and enabling the mother-daughter relationship to thrive – a set of utopian ideals that provide a firm basis for feminine utopia.

Part of the difficulty of proclaiming a feminine identity, as Haraway (1991) explains in A Cyborg Manifesto, is that “There is nothing about being ‘female’ that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as ‘being’ female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices”(155). Seidenberg (1999) confirms, “Gender is a nightmare. To inhabit, to enact one gender, to embody one gender all day and all night, every day and every night is a nightmare ... To speak as a woman ...[is] too many and too limited.” As Kristeva succinctly puts it: “It is not possible to say of a *woman* what she is without running the risk of abolishing her difference.”(Moi, 1986, 161)

While Butler's patriarchal 'standards of gender intelligibility' indicate the challenge of understanding and expressing the feminine, others emphasise the importance of language in giving women a voice:

"The silencing of women by men has surfaced in a number of ways: ... [which] expose the interweaving of linguistic manipulation and dominant patriarchal ideologies ..., metaphors for the historical silencing of women. "(Cavalcanti, 2000, 153)

Like Irigaray, Cavalcanti feels that "language has a liberating potential in the feminist dystopias. ... Women's resistance is observed in these fictions in terms of the strategies they develop to evade a dystopic linguistic order by means of the construction of ... utopias of and off language." (153)

Language is a key to liberating the feminine from masculine control. Moylan (2000) calls language a "crucial weapon and strategy. ... by regaining language [misfits] also recover the ability to draw on the alternative truths of the past and 'speak back' to hegemonic power"(149). Echoing Cixous, Wittig (1992) has argued that while "The universal has been, and is continually, at every moment, appropriated by men", language can destroy gender categories: "For each time I say 'I,' I reorganize the world from my point of view and through abstraction I lay claim to universality"(81). "This absolute grounding of the speaking 'I' [affords] women [the ability to] speak their way out of their gender"(117). In her novel Les Guérillères, women 'speak their way out of their gender' by rejecting cultural (masculine) myths and symbols, finding a new language, and rewriting their history, falsely invented by men. Wittig's does not want to feminize the world but to make categories of sex obsolete in language"(85): in fictional feminine utopia, Irigaray's sexual difference disappears.

Causse (1999) points out that feminist writers locate "Utopia in language: a language which transcends gender opposition; a language which would make the feminine an integral part of a shared universe"(87); and one form that language can take is "The revivification of epistolary, diary, and journal modes of writing, ... [which] results more from feminist attention to forms of women's writing than from historical genre influences, at least when practiced by female authors"(Murphy, 1990, 27). By writing a memoir, the female subject engages in what Kristeva (1987) calls a fight against corporeal decline and disintegration, with the writer as warrior facing oncoming death: her "aesthetic and particularly literary creation [sets] forward a

device whose prosodic economy, interaction of characters and implicit symbolism constitute a very faithful semiological representation of the subject's battle with symbolic collapse"(35). This is a defensible and recognized way of countering Cavalcanti's 'silencing of women' and giving voice to the "self-defined woman who would not be satisfied with sameness, but whose otherness and difference would be given social and symbolic representation." (Whitford, 1992, 24)

All feminist writing lays claim to utopia (*l'utopique*), in that it seeks to solve problems of women's place in patriarchal culture (Lindsay, 1986). There is feminist utopia as an imagined feminine-confirming reality; and then there is feminist utopia as "a project that seeks to transform not only the bias but also the basis of all recorded cultures, feminism [as] a form of fantasy"(Gubar, 1986). Although both imply un[male]reality, the emphasis on interpretation of history and using feminist eyeglasses to alter traditionally accepted descriptions of what was and by extension what is, is a transforming project. The challenge is the unimaginability of that which will be after transformation, in part because femininity is known heretofore in masculine terms, and in part because woman is not an undifferentiated monolithic category. Moreover, the feminine is increasingly present through proliferating gender identities.

Kristeva and others assert that patriarchal oppression of femininity originates in masculine desire to control reproduction and therefore women's bodies. Haraway (1991) defines cyborgs as "theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organisms" resulting from the control of the Other over human bodies – the Other being patriarchal capitalism. "Modern biology constructs theories about the body and community as a capitalist and patriarchal machine and market: the machines for production, the market for exchange, and both machine and market for reproduction"(44). Feminists agree that "there is sexual oppression in all societies and that, in neocolonial globalization, the maternal body is the support of the global capitalist system. ... woman has always been regarded as a (maternal) envelope for man, ... the maternal body has been made the substrate of existence in many societies." (Cheah,16)

Deery (2000) considers this an expression of the "old male desire to procreate independently of women"(97). "There is a powerful argument to be made that a primary ... issue in gender differentiation and gender struggle is the question of who is to have control of women's

(biologically) distinctive reproductive capacity”(Sedgwick, 28). That this continues to be true well into the second millennium, echoes in USA Planned Parenthood’s Director Cecile Richards remark: “When those guys can’t figure out what to do about jobs, and they can’t, their first target is women”(Lepore, 2011, 46); and, in Egypt, “Women are an area where [the Islamist movement] can plant a visible flag. Making women wear the hijab ... is easier than dealing with health insurance.” (Steavenson, 2012, 34)

Haraway (2004) emphasizes the drive of scientific progress towards reducing the ever-diminishing distance “between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that are used to apply to organisms and machines”(152), that explains the pervasive oppression of women across the globe and leads to the patriarchal drive to control women’s bodies. She too calls for a new and different language to explore alternatives and express something new and outside conventional categories, without which we will not find answers to this or to any of the other critical moral dilemmas posed by scientific progress.

Most of the reasons why women continue to inhabit a dystopic environment are socio-political and politico-religious. It is therefore reasonable to assume, with the feminists, that in a feminine utopia political and religious institutions are overthrown and that women regain control over their reproductive capabilities and choices. Social change on this scale does not lend itself to rational (masculine) argument and advocacy but to the imagining of a fictional utopia in which new values, behaviours, relationships, gender choices and views of the body are expressed by and for the feminine. Language is needed to invoke a feminine utopia: women’s writing as voice of the feminine questions fixed-gender identities of both masculine and feminine in ways that ‘create space’ for the female, contesting the status quo, shifting the body out of a fixed spatio-temporal framework and the feminine out of the female body.

In summary, it is clear that “Women need territory – literary, artistic, social, emotional, physical and ecological – for cultural survival: ... We need to start hearing and speaking again, and we need to start somewhere. We need our hallowed ground, our sacred sites”(Weil, 1999, 37). In defining new kinds of space as part of defining a new form of subjectivity outside the constraints of male dominance, Irigaray refers to “the necessity of returning to

one's own world, into oneself, for one to be capable or remain capable of approaching the other. To open to the other, we need to preserve proximity to ourselves, to find ourselves again, to restore the integrity of an intimacy with ourselves”(Irigaray, 2004, 6). To counter the ‘silencing of women’, woman needs to identify her ‘sacred sites’, to use ‘epistolary, diary, and journal modes of writing’, to devise new language so that she can turn inwards, into her own world and territory and into a safe place so as to be able to ‘speak her way out of gender’. Language is a crucial weapon in heterotopia as it is used to depict other imagined universes where woman's ‘hallowed sites’ might be found. “To speak as a woman, ... one needs provisionally a place from which to speak”(Seidenberg, 1999): women have to make that place for themselves and dwell in it. If at the core of the mistreatment and repudiation and belittling of the feminine in contemporary societies is the patriarchal need to control human reproduction through control over women's bodies, woman's manifesto calls for repudiation of that control as well as of the cultural-political environment in which it exists and thrives. The language of her manifesto and her utopian vision of home are her own, and expressing and inhabiting it brings knowledge and awareness of her own space and of feminine territory. The feminine utopia may be ‘a placeless place’ but it will ‘suspect, neutralize, or disrupt the set of relations that [it] happen[s] to designate, mirror, or reflect’ and, as heterotopia, it ‘simultaneously represent[s], contest[s], and invert[s]’ those spaces considered real in our culture, the spaces of patriarchal hegemony.

Writing the body – the feminine manifests

In her discussion of aesthetics in feminine writing, Russ (1983) declares that works purporting to express the feminine viewpoint “have chosen to avoid it by externalizing the psychological situation, using ‘objective’ images that convey the pattern or content of a woman's thought without actually entering into it”(62). Feminists have long pointed out that the “feminine writer has difficulty link[ing] up [her experience] to universals because the universals presently in existence are based upon masculine experience, masculine norms”(65). By using her writing to explore her own mind, the feminine writer ‘resists and transgresses’ masculine experience without needing to state her intention to do so.

Butler (2009a) draws attention to the political question of sexual or gender identity “that precedes and prefigures the political elaboration of [women’s] interests and point of view” (465).⁴ She evokes the ways in which culture and society force a binary distinction between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ that “consolidates” the subject. Butler’s questioning casts doubt on the process by which “interiority and the disjunctive binary discourse” has taken hold. Feminine and feminist writers deliberately blur identities, using ‘I’ and ‘she’ and sometimes ‘you’ and ‘we’, not interchangeably but often seamlessly. Scott (2008) draws a distinction between ‘splits’ and ‘seams’ of the writing subject, calling a visibly repaired split in the subject a ‘suture’: that is, the seam created by uniting the fractured subject is not concealed. In representing, it contests and inverts. For Cixous, “Concept and identity give way to unending metamorphoses without a stable ‘I’, where there is no more opposition between world and art, real and imaginary”(Conley, 1984, 59). Thus because “Subjectivity ... is linguistically and discursively constructed and displayed across the range of discourses in which the concrete individual participates”(Belsey, 2009, 167), women’s ideologically and linguistically constituted roles, behaviours, experiences and reactions are both found in and challenged by literature. This combination of writing as part of but also challenging prevailing ideas evokes heterotopia and is a characteristic of feminine expression.

In her manifesto, Cixous (1975) wrote “Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing,... Woman must put herself into the text ... by her own movements”(417). She calls on women “to repaint the world” through expressing their unique perspectives and experiences. She calls this “writing the body” and she refers to the “libido” as being a driving force in women’s expression of the feminine as an “essence” and not male-defined: “Her libido will produce far more radical effects of political and social change than some might like to think”(421). Cixous admits that “It is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing, ... for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded – which doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination”(422). She compares women writing to flying: “they

⁴ Although Alcoff (1988) has criticized the obvious progression of such an argument to what has been called ‘essentialism’ or the discredited urge to define what is ‘essentially’ female through “the concept, its history, and its variable meanings.” (313)

take pleasure in jumbling the order of the space, in disorienting it, in changing around the future, dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down”(425). Whereas Foucault describes contemporary, socially-defined space as messy and jumbled, and heterotopia as a blend of order and chaos, Cixous claims the jumble and dislocation for the feminine and renounces the need to ‘bring order’ through prevailing cultural rules and procedures.

Women writers’ voices clamour to be heard but are not all saying the same thing. As I explain above, woman is not a monolithic homogenous category but refers to a quality or qualities that all humanity shares. The ‘us’ of the early manifestos has changed from women artists caught up in the literary movements of their time to a rich array of feminine art, and increasingly the feminine ‘us’ is not limited to the female sex but embraces the feminine sensibility in humanity: what Cixous calls ‘originary bisexuality’ and Kristeva traces to Freud. That the feminine is not limited to the female but is present in greater or lesser quantities in every human being means that language that is defined by and controlled by the masculine not only gives the power edge to males but also minimizes space for and acknowledgement of that which is not masculine.

The feminist demand for equality poses the problem of what makes language equal or not? With our pronoun struggles, bad enough in English but worse in French where all nouns are gendered, and the proliferation of explicatory conjoined pronouns such as ‘s/he’ and ‘his or her’, along with efforts to dislodge entrenched masculine words used for universals and generics - such as God, chairman, actor, mastery, even ‘chapbook’ - are what Armit (1991) calls “revisions” and not replacements. Cixous, Wittig and others have argued forcefully against language revisions, calling for something new and different rather than an adjustment to the hegemonic masculine. The feminist element that wants to go beyond equality and reject current society outright are those that today focus on the continuing prevalence of misogynistic values in their blogs and manifestos and performance art. Their voices speak out against a range of situations that are adverse to women, such as rape as a weapon of war, violations of the environment, the poverty of women and children, girls deprived of an education, and, closer to home, discrimination against sex workers, gender oppression in religion, and institutionalised prejudice in societal institutions such as health care and the

criminal justice system. They also speak out against gender categories. Many of these have been and continue to be addressed in the manifestos that women have produced over the past century and they also figure in the utopian environment – the place for the Feminine – in which these and other, aligned values are expressed. Manifestos are performative and, according to Butler, so is gender:

“To say that gender is performative is to say that it is a certain kind of enactment; the ‘appearance’ of gender is often mistaken as a sign of its internal or inherent truth; gender is prompted by obligatory norms to be one gender or the other (usually within a strictly binary frame), and the reproduction of gender is thus always a negotiation with power; and finally, there is no gender without this reproduction of norms that risks undoing or redoing the norm in unexpected ways, thus opening up the possibility of a remaking of gendered reality along new lines.” (Butler (2009b, ii)

Feminine utopia remakes gendered reality along new lines where the feminine has a voice, has legitimacy, has power (in a feminine way). For Cixous, it is about pleasure, or *jouissance*: that is to say, the pure joy of that which is. This is in contrast to a world dominated by the “libidinal masculine”, which has developed from the castration fear and is characterised by “the big, ..phallogentric, ... social fête” of power, war, enslavement, battle, competition and domination (Conley, 34). Renée Gladman's The Activist is a poetic examination of a current trend: minority groups that see themselves as oppressed and society as unbalanced and take to the streets to publicise perceived social wrongs, demanding change. By speaking/writing this social movement, Gladman is giving a voice to widespread concern about western society's inequalities, as well as those prevalent in the developing world, and to the antagonisms that are revealed when a minority group creates its own identity.⁵ Gladman's work exemplifies ways in which the feminine voice – in her case, a black and queer feminine voice – manages to sustain balance between being in and of masculinist, dystopian culture while reaching out from it to contest and invert it. The Activist creates heterotopian space to express that which is different from the masculine hegemony of objective reality. While not in traditional manifesto form, and not declaratively utopian, The Activist meets criteria of the feminine, expressing utopic values in indirect ways and with unique language. The story of a place - not always

⁵ That this is a growing social phenomenon is evident in the fact that the recent book *Secret Manoeuvres in the Dark: Corporate and Police Spying on Activists* by Eveline Lubbers is devoted entirely to accounts of infiltration and spying in such groups – who spies on whom, how they do it, and their reasons – for as the groups grow in size and diversity, so does the authorities' need to have information on them (Forrester, 2012).

utopic but framing utopia, overall more intrinsic than extrinsic - tells who lives there and how they live, and in so doing synthesises the call to arms through manifestos that is needed to make feminine utopia a reality.

The Activist

The book-length prose poem by Renée Gladman was published in 2003. It comprises ten titled sections or chapters, and focuses, variously, on a group of activists accused of blowing up a bridge who are trying to make a plan of action using a map of the city that starts to disappear, on a reporter who is trying to find a story to report on the activists and related protest activities, and on the authorities who have differing opinions on what exactly the activists have done but manage to inflict punishment just the same. The ten sections take different textual forms: some are prose poems and later sections are written in double-spaced prose. There are two sections plus two single pages in other parts of the book that are single-spaced blocks of text on an otherwise empty page. These blocks of phony reportage have no page numbers, perhaps to underscore the unreality of the opinions and exchanges of the authorities that are being reported:

“...’This is the situation we’re facing: a shockingly high number of witnesses claim that the bridge is in perfect form, the President of our nation is convinced that the bridge has been exploded, another group asserts that the bridge has collapsed, not exploded, and a handful of researchers contests that there never was a bridge.”

The writer, poet and publisher Renée Gladman was born in Atlanta, Georgia in 1971. She earned a BA at Vassar College and an MA in poetics at the New College of California. Her work has been associated with the New Narrative movement and includes poetry and prose. Among her publications are [A Picture-Feeling](#) (2005), [The Activist](#) (2003), [Juice](#) (2000), and [Arlem](#) (1994). Most recently, she has published a trilogy of novels about “an unraveling city-country called Ravicka” (Friedman, 2011). She has also edited Leon Works, an experimental prose chapbook series, as well as the Leroy chapbook series.

[The Activist](#) begins with a linguistic and visual evocation of two separate worlds, two distinct realities that are the city.

“There,/ those buildings made entirely of glass, busses streaming between/ mean the city is integrated./ But over here,/ Where the sun sinks behind the mountains,/ These our jails, our isolated/ Have seized the periphery.” (11)

From the beginning the book is dealing with multiple interpretations of reality in terms of haves and have-nots, white and black, those ‘streaming’ in busses and those caught and trapped in jail.

The narrator describes herself as a “reporter”: “I am studying the interiority of criminals” (12), who is at first simply there to report on the activities of suspicious groups which she calls “activists” and “rebels”. In the first part of the book, we alternate between the activists’ meetings and the reporter’s involvement with them, and the blocks of prose that represent the reporter’s published accounts. The precipitating event is the destruction (or not) of the J.Gifford Bridge. The government - in the persons of the President, a Senator, and the police of the Brendan Seize Unit (which, we notice, shortens to the BS Unit) - claim that the bridge has been bombed and that the rebel perpetrators should be arrested and punished. The activists, however, claim the bridge is still there and can be used by commuters who need it. Meanwhile the commuters as concerned citizens are complaining that the government is prevaricating, that they can see the bridge is still there, and they want it opened. The government has called in a team of Canadian experts to verify the state of the bridge, and they too have an opinion. As one critic has noted, “Crossing points of all kinds are threatened” (Dutton, 2004). Gladman’s language “... continually fails to connect people as they unknowingly spew nonsense at one another, or have trouble saying what they mean, or aren’t sure they know what they want to say, can’t remember if what they said was what they meant, or if they said it out loud, or to themselves, or in a dream. In addition, maps go blank and the infrastructure of the city is attacked or perhaps never existed.” (ibid)

As the narrative progresses we are increasingly admitted inside the closed meetings and planning sessions of the group of activists, sometimes referred to as the CPA although the acronym is never explained. We share the reporter’s growing access to the rebel group, having gained their confidence, but as proper names, ‘I’, and ‘we’ become increasingly interchangeable, we identify less with the observing reporter and are drawn into the internal drama of the activist group members.

The leader of the group is called Monique Wally – one notes the initials of the feminist author of Les Guérrillères, Monique Wittig. Sometimes she is referred to as M. and sometimes she is ‘I’. Her friend, second-in-command and sometime lover is called Stefani, and is variously characterised by male and female pronouns, which, along with the neutral spelling of the name, obfuscate gender. Stefani helps Monique when she must address the group and show leadership to inspire action. Monique’s speeches are peppered with ellipses, into which Stefani shouts “Yeah let’s lay ‘em all out,”(36) thereby covering up Monique’s apparent lack of leadership. But M. is increasingly confused and seems to be losing her incentive to action, which as the book advances, seems more and more pointless to her, in part because of the disappearance (“mutation”) of her map: “If I’m wrong then all this mutating indicates we’ve moved into an alternative reality, one whose principles of space and intention differ drastically from that which all our lives we’ve grown used to”(93). She delivers an important key to the book: “But ... I don’t know. Reality is not static – its properties are in constant flux, so perhaps we are as much in the world as we can ever be, and that’s the problem”.(93)

The non-female group members, Lomarlo and Alonso, remind her that the group needs to be told what to do. As with Monique and Stefani, their relationship is also ambiguous: “The next morning Lomarlo wakes with his ass pressed against Alonso’s hip” (42), and later Alonso seems to have a relationship with Barry. Identities in The Activist break free of conventional gender and other categories. Gladman has said, “At no time in the three centuries of western thought I studied did I ever feel that my subjectivity was being considered. A black, queer woman was not a problem for philosophy; rather, it was a zero”(Wilkinson, 2012), and her text invokes a range of alternative subjectivities. At times, the racist context in which the activists are operating – and perhaps protesting – is foregrounded: the narrator makes it clear that she is not white. The ‘whites’ become ‘them’: ”They worry that we are doing drugs in the weeds-that the colored people are”(93); however, the text acknowledges, “But how easy it is to become paranoid when you are an activist! Paranoia cousins you in every encounter, every look given.” (94)

The second part of the book in narrative prose/poetry focuses more on the dynamics of the activist group and the leaders’ internal relationships. These sections of narrative are written by and about ‘I’, who might be Monique, or the reporter, or some combination. Towards the end

of the book, the ‘I’ is Stefani and ‘you’ is Monique.⁶ In the section *The State*, the narrator (Monique?) is being held by men in uniform, and it is not clear whether her memories are of a dream or of an interrogation carried out on her while she was drugged. “I am on my back, looking at the ceiling, which is covered in wires and mirrors and loaves of bread. Legs of pants with militaristic creases surround me; congealed body water falls on my cheeks and slides into my ears” (p.68). Unclear on what is reality, the subject pursues a meditation on her situation – captive or dreaming – which could be applied to any dystopia:

“Every time I feel certain that I have devised a way of procuring from my captors, or conversely from my imagination, which world I’m in, the path that I took to get there fails to maintain its shape. I reach for it and see it multiply itself by two, and as soon as I see that, it grows or lessens in dimension. The idea that I thought would save me dissipates mercilessly” (72)

– an experience familiar to us all, captive or captor, rebel or policeman.

As the narrative moves more closely in on the group, the activists become less purposeful and more chaotic. Members are awaiting a leadership decision but Monique is unclear on what to tell them. “Clandestine meetings” take place between the leaders – Monique and Stefani, Alonso and Lomarlo – where they ask, “Why is the map mutating?”, followed by “a half hour of silence” (100). Underlying the group dynamics is the relationship between Monique and Stefani which is sketched lightly with sexual and romantic references that make it unclear exactly how this relationship stands at the time of the narrative: “S. stays. M.goes. S. is behind. M. promises to return. It’s just for a time, for some training. ...S. didn’t want to go. Never again. But it’s my responsibility. You don’t believe her”(122). The reporter struggles to do her job and report on something real: “What I wanted was to get to the bottom of things – as in any archaeological work – to suss out the source. The question, which even at this moment I’m turning over in my mind, is the nature of protest”(109), and, as any rebel against a dystopian government might ask, “What is it – beyond the issues? What makes one go outside and scream?”

The final two sections of the book are entitled *White City 1* and *White City 2*. At first, considering the opening lines, this appears to refer to race; however, we have understood by

⁶ The book is dedicated to Stefani Barber

now that we are in the aftermath of the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York City. “But our plan to protest globalization in a coherent circle around the towers is ineffectual without the towers, which were destroyed earlier today”(131). Everyone including the shell-shocked gang members is covered with a powdery white dust, so skin colour differences disappear and the reference is ambiguous. In the last scene the activists are confused and disoriented and Monique is unable to think of anything to tell them. She is handed a note by Alonso that may contain some kind of instruction to help her out as she stands up to address the group. However, the note is illegible, and words, when Alonso speaks, are “unspeakable”(145).

In The Activist, Gladman’s writing responds to many of the criteria of feminine (and feminist) writing: “What is cool is to add identifiers such as “Blackness” or “queerness” to the question of experience. How quickly that (historical) narrative of wholeness, of centeredness, of capture breaks down”(Hayes and Shockley, 124). The gender categories of her characters vary unpredictably, and much of the writing is an interior monologue making more of a subjective comment on how the world is being experienced than a representation of how the subject feels or appears. Not only is there no clearly definable ‘objective reality’ but the very notion that one could or should exist is in question. Like Les Guérillères, the text conveys a conflict or revolution without specifying exactly what this is or what it is about: the revolutionaries become increasingly muddled and their goals less clear, in parallel with the authorities who contradict each other in their version of what has happened. This blurring of boundaries and edges between people, their beliefs, their behaviour and the acts they may or may not be performing – perhaps best symbolized by the vanishing map that the activists use to check on their positions and make their plans – is a way of communicating subjective experience that is not white, male, heterosexual by failing to apply rules of cause and effect, linearity, binarity and logic.

The activist group members occasionally find themselves using another language, especially Monique, and the male group members do not understand: “What the hell is she saying?” (44)

“Monique continues her monologue. She says many things, but ha chini chini is the most recurring. ... /Stefani pokes him in the side with her elbow /and whispers: /Isa uma kuni. Monique ma uma kuni. /He shakes her off. ... /He reaches under his ass and finds some pieces /of wire. He exclaims: /ja se pa cahini.”(45)

The invented language is another way of breaking language rules to defy conventional reality, and, in Irigaray's terms, express utopian ideals.

While it could be argued that as a poet Gladman is under no compunction to use language conventionally, she herself has said that The Activist is a 'bridge' written at a time when her writing was crossing from poetry into prose:

“While I'm definitely invested in building narrative structures, it would be impossible to do this work without the silence and expanse of poetic space. In fact, what makes writing fiction interesting is this unshakeable desire to stay still, how that troubles the instinct of sentences to progress.”(Wilkinson, 2012)

Gladman also refuses to be locked into a single genre. She has said

“Prose, I think, introduces the element of the awareness of yourself in language as you are unfolding things in time and allowing yourself to be distracted or interrupted, allowing yourself to question the difficulty of what you're doing and be stalled, not to move. ... Ultimately, what I want is for there to be a blur over everything.”(Gladman, n.d.)

Like her book Juice, The Activist is “not a history book, but a book of experimental prose” (Gilbert, 137). In both books Gladman “provides a form for writing alternative personal and collective histories, but tends to leave out many of the precise details. How history represents becomes as important as what is represented by history.” The historical event that focuses The Activist is the destruction of the World Trade Center, but I would argue that this book is also prophetic of the future. The activists' conversations conjure up the imagined internal dynamics of the group *Occupy Wall Street* that would only occur several years later. In Juice Gladman wrote, “In our past there is a germ for survival, beneath our weathered clothes and yellowed papers, a propellant of time. I could spend the rest of my days devoted to time”(19). And in Juice as in The Activist, the writing subject is deliberately confused: “a kind of ghost haunting its own history without ever being able to fully occupy it.”(137)

About her writing, Gladman has said,

“I see prose as a kind of body of text that unfolds, or accumulates, through continuous seepage—it into other things and other things into itself. ... I am loosely interested in questions of event, character, and time as they encounter the experiment of the sentence. That is, the sentence that does not attempt to coalesce the problems of narrating experience in language but rather is invested in exploring the dynamics of these problems.” (Wilkinson, 21)

Her use of paragraph-sized blocks of prose for the sections representing the reporting of the events as represented by the authorities is another way of experimenting not just with sentences and grammar, but also with the look and impact of the black text on the white page:

“The prose block is the articulation of my personality, the body of my thinking. It captures a tone, a feeling toward language that I have not been able to conjure in any other form. ... A block of text is a moment of travel that captures a pattern of experience and holds it there. The white space says, “Look at it!”” (23)

These ideas may be inspired by one of Gladman’s models, Gail Scott, who also fractures the narrative subject, blurring lines around distinct realities, and has said: “If one builds sentences such that the reader isn’t totally hooked in the narrative, sentences which give pause in the way they relate to each other,... the space opens up for the thoughtfulness of the reader” (Moyes and Scott, 2013, 133).

As Clarice Lispector wrote in Hour of the Star: “My life, the most truthful one, is unrecognizable, extremely interior, and there is no single word that gives it meaning.” Gladman draws on “habituated experience” and attends “to the shock of fresh insight”:

“Often her most disruptive shifts of narrative development expose the enormous energy flow of this process, and suggest the myriad directions of thought and alternate paths of knowing that any instant offers. Gladman's narratives, rather than simply progressing forward in linear fashion, accrue such elliptic disruptions spatially, exposing a sequencing that is as close to three-dimensional expansion as one might come in articulating a subject's perception of a situation.”(Morrison, n.d.)

The multiple directions and language gaps arguably point the way to language innovation that aspires to be free from white masculine heterosexual hegemony.

A characteristic of The Activist is the deliberate fracturing of the subject using ‘I’ interchangeably with characters’ names or initials and pronouns. This shattering of the ‘I’ highlights some of the complexity of the leader Monique’s role, adding to her uncertainty and causing some of her confusion. On the other hand, this shift relieves the subject of having to bear the burden of a monolithic, linear, settled consciousness: “ ... the liquidity of Gladman's I ... is a narrative presence that seems bracingly consistent in its expression of the paradoxes that are rife in any seeking to know, or in any attempt to express the implications of that search upon a subject's experience and condition of being” (Morrison, n.d.). The range of personal pronouns fractures the hegemony of the ‘I’: names are used, as well as initials and

pronouns: ‘you’, ‘we’, ‘he’, ‘she’. In her speech the leader says, “I want to say, ‘We find we can’t agree,’ but that would be committing to two personal pronouns. Who could face that?”(133) – even the traditional lines between friends and enemies are blurred. Who knows who we are? Reality depends on who we think we are and how we see ourselves at any given time; it can be claimed by anyone and has an equal chance of being ‘real’ – if anyone is capable of claiming what ‘real’ means. Even while shifting narrators and perspectives in The Activist, one is aware of the subject ‘I’ behind all of them. In this sense Gladman is staying consistently inside her inner voice and feminine experience.

While The Activist is not a manifesto in the conventional sense, it does portray a situation of confrontation and conflict where activists are plotting to overthrow something that the authorities are defending. This is the image of a declaratory manifesto: to overthrow the *status quo*, usually in art but also politically. If this is the case, what then are the values that underlie this declaration? What is the utopian ideal the manifesto is inclining towards? The shape of this text narrows us down from the broad political focus at the beginning to a more personal and intimate – and less ostensibly fact-related – field of vision towards the end. The reporter starts out reporting the events as perceived by the authorities, then the perceptions of public onlookers, and finally ends up squarely in the activists’ camp. At the beginning,

“I dream them here, the activists, who are recurring. I walk down this street convinced that I am on the cusp of something. Many things occur, but all at a tremendously slow pace. Then – and this happens every time – trucks come reeling around the corner, trying to flatten me. I know it’s the radicals because they are always leaning out of windows, shouting slogans” (11).

Whereas towards the end of the book,

“After a few minutes more of his speech, I remember my previous desire to be with Monique. I turn to her. She is there, watching me, with her hand covering the face of her watch. ... I begin to feel weak trying to hold her gaze; it is deciphering. She is reading me, undressing me, something.”(135)

The text indicates that ultimately whether the highway bridge is there or not, is broken or whole, reality is how people see things and in particular, each other: ‘The personal is political’ – a feminist battle cry!

The strange language that appears in The Activist reinforces the separateness of each player’s vision of reality. Cameron (1990) states, "It is interesting to note that in feminist utopias ...

there is often some attempt at a modified language. A female utopia could not be content with what we have now" (13). Attempts to modify language are a part of the 'Other' – the world of the feminine: Gladman sought to "escape [her] monolingualism." (Friedmann, 2011). So while the world portrayed in this book is not a conventional utopia, it is conveying the feminine through its invented language and violations of grammatical rules, its fracturing of the subject, and the way it dissolves monolithic reality into a variety of shapes and times.

The Activist is also something of a manifesto in that voice is given to the minority – the black, queer and female in a white, straight, male world – and to overthrowing the *status quo* of that world. The authorities and the white bystanders in the park do not come across as anything but idiotic, unable to see beyond the end of their political noses. As a poetic commentary on the nature of reality and its dependence on who is perceiving and defining it, and on reality as ultimately a function of human relationships, how people feel about each other, and how that in turn is influenced by what they felt previously and they will feel in the future, The Activist speaks the feminine. Just as Massey explains space in terms of human relationships and Butler explains gender in terms of human relationships, Gladman makes that the basis of political reality as well.

On the other hand, the horror of serious and painful events of history such as the bombing of the WTC is not diminished. The activists are, interestingly, silent, as though the scale of such a disaster took it beyond their experience, but they are covered in dust and confused as to what to do next. Gladman did not choose to focus her activists on that catastrophe – although in some sense the entire book is a tribute – but on a relatively small event that may not even have occurred. This places their activism at similar level to the behaviour of the authorities and the reporter: well-meaning but ultimately pointless and doomed. The rebels' acts, like those of the other characters, find their meaning less in making large political gestures than in their relationships to each other.

A reasonable and logical 'objective reality' – that can be identified and reported on as the 'I' that is the reporter is trying to do – is more typical of a masculinist perspective. The novel's challenge to objective reason and logic in forcing the reporter to record participants' random views and link them and those of the other characters in with her own, for example, is both

feminine and utopian. In Weil's words, she is on her own territory and she is expressing what belongs to her and where she feels at home. The book is in many ways an extended meditation on the varying subjectivized forms of what dominant patriarchal thinking would call objective reality and by extension a manifesto-like call for activists to overthrow it. In her subtle, humorous and elliptical way, Gladman tells us not just that objective reality does not exist but exactly how it does not exist. And while portraying more of a dystopic than a utopic environment, The Activist communicates a feminine sensibility and responds to Massey's, Irigaray's and Butler's contention that feminine reality – feminine space – lies within and is produced by human interrelationships, that language rules are made to be broken, and that limits and boundaries of all types need to be challenged.

Conclusion: manifestos, utopia and *écriture féminine*

Elephants live communally in herds. There are separate herds for females and the young, and for the males. When a young male reaches a certain stage of maturity, he leaves the female herd and joins the bulls. In the female herd, the mothers search out food, ward off dangers and predators, and find watering holes. They usually have a leader, and the young learn from their mothers about escaping or hiding from threats, finding food and water, and protecting other members of the herd. The bull herd visits the females for short sojourns, especially during the mating cycle when the females are in heat and the annual rains have ensured a supply of food and water. The female manages her pregnancy and childbirth with the help of other females who stand around close to her when she is giving birth, and all help the new baby get on its feet. If she does not survive or cannot for some reason feed the new baby, it is taken over by one of the other females. All the females care for the young elephants, and all the herd members mourn the death of one of their number. This female community is self-sufficient and mutually supportive. The males are only needed for fertilization – and if elephants built houses for themselves perhaps the males would do the heavy lifting.

These elements of utopia are normal and natural for elephants. For humans searching out feminine space and fulfillment of a feminine ideal, the notions of strong community and mutual support, self-sufficiency both socially and for survival, males not threatening or even

dominating, and female control over her own space and body, are utopic. Although Irigaray says she will not redefine femininity outside of patriarchy because it might interfere with women redefining themselves for themselves, and she believes that the feminine (e.g. female subjectivity, the female imaginary body) cannot be defined outside of current, male definitions without doing more to disrupt male definitions of women, Grosz (2012) brings a new and constructive line of thinking to the question of essential femininity. She sees a fit between Irigaray's notion of sexual difference "as that which has been repressed by patriarchal cultures, ... the concept whose elaboration has the potential to transform our relations to ourselves, to our world and to our future"(71), and Charles Darwin, who, in his writings on natural selection, attributes a determining role to "female selection", that is, that those features to which females respond positively in mate selection are those that the species continues to reproduce in males of succeeding generations.

Feminine utopia celebrates sexual difference – "the organising concept of the second half of the twentieth century [as] the multiplicity of different subject categories, social groups or identities"(Grosz, 2010, 103). Utopian fiction is an opportunity for "the opening up of the world itself to the interests, frameworks, and questions now relevant to and framed by women and their associated values of femininity (or its absence)" (104). As writers like Gladman show us, this representation is not observed and explained in terms of an objective reality, but – in Cixous' terms – expresses "a transformation of the relationship of each to her (and his) body and to the other body."(Conley, 58)

Woman needs to look inside, to examine internally her sense of identity and her territory, her dreams: she needs her own gaze. While the notion of the 'male gaze' was applied by feminist writers to "men's visual and voyeuristic mastery over women", Lacan interpreted Freud's allusion to the power of the male gaze as the power of Medusa's head, "whose gaze petrifies everything: women are stuck forever in the straitjacket of otherness, struck down and turned to stone by the Male Gaze"(Wilson, 1992, 96). However, Medusa herself is female, making it the woman who has the power to turn to stone "or to castrate men in certain situations"(Freud, 1922). The female gaze can only become real in language that is not pre-loaded by masculinity. Seeking the feminine by looking deeply into ourselves to imagine utopia means that utopia is to be found within the feminine body. Space that woman can represent and at the

same time contest and invert is more heterotopic than utopic, consequently finding expression in more manifesto-like writing.

The manifesto – an art form said to be masculinist but which lends itself to feminist expression – creates and frames heterotopia as space which the feminine can occupy but which, being imaginary, is a placeless place and therefore free of objectively real definitions. Foucault says heterotopia contests conventional dualities, so that it lets woman ‘see herself there where she is absent.’ Contemplating the feminine has often led to notions of utopia. Cornell considers that Irigaray is “someone who was deploying the feminine unashamedly in a utopian manner, saying that there is a beyond to whatever kind of concept of sense we have. And without that beyond being articulated, endlessly breaking up the real, we can't even get to a different kind of ethics”(Cheah, 1998, 2). Cornell considers feminism “a site of utopianism, moving more to what I've called the imaginary domain, which still keeps alive the imaginary as a place that cannot be completely captured by the symbolic order and the sets of identifications that are rigidly imposed upon us as a set of consolidated subject-positions.”(21)

Language is woman's weapon. She can challenge conventions and grammatical rules, she can use it to express her interiority and insights, she can disperse and blur her subjectivity. Her writing is perforce performative; she writes the body. Gladman says she “began to make up a language that I spoke with my lover on the streets of San Francisco”(Friedmann, 2011). Language can take her to a new notion of the divine: one that favours the feminine. It can express her manifesto-like ultimatum against patriarchal hegemony. She can control her language more than her body, because while both can be criticised her body is subject to control by laws and institutions. She can write blogs, poetry, prose poems, and any other form of text. She can - like Gladman - use language to roam in and out of her characters' heads, to blur their identities, and to place a profound question-mark on the nature of identity – one that is shifting and subjective and not homogenous and monolithic.

The feminist contributors to La theorie un dimanche (1988) consider that females are denigrated by society in both explicit and implicit ways that are built into the culture. Female awareness and consciousness are therefore compressed and distorted by evidence since birth that woman is secondary, an appendage to the male. However, as these imaginary, symbolic

and psychological constructs are questioned and opened to review by *écriture dite féminine* we are able to hear woman's voice and learn the feminine from what she is saying.

Brossard talks about motivation, decisiveness and concentration as necessary elements for the thriving of a female consciousness: motivation inspired by what we have understood as the female condition based on daily evidence as well as history and tradition, what she calls “un immense iceberg d'injustice et de violence” (16); decisiveness in order for feminists to respond to the radical ambivalence and implicit certainty of their situation, considering that even the language available to them originates in masculine subjectivity (19); and concentration, where desire and energy meet, needed in face of the patriarchal environment where we dwell. Concentration is essential to enable us to experience and express our nature using thinking that is not structured along masculine lines of linearity and binarity (24). Brossard emphasises that feminist awareness is wound up with creativity in women, and Scott echoes this by referring to the feminist awareness that is “incontournable – irréductible, indomptable.”(39) – inevitable. For Scott, the creativity to which Brossard refers is the creativity of the writer, and the voice that of the woman writer. She traces a portrait of both the writer and her heroine, recognising the female's need for recognition after an entire history of misogyny. In view of the patriarchal nature of the various options open to women – the professions, gender-related institutions such as marriage, even art – woman does not have a way of knowing how to be. Consequently, various utopias present themselves, such as the tribe of Amazons, from which males are entirely absent, and which are outside of and above history and by the same token, superior (45).

Scott ponders '*écriture au féminin*' – different from *écriture féminine* because the masculine is also present in/can access it – as her musing shuttles between her writer persona and her heroine, evoking the notion of a cyclical movement from the light to the dark, from above to below, from one antinomy to another, in the sense of Persephone and her annual return from Hades to Earth to see her mother. This in contrast to the more typical and simplistic male notion of linear events that progress from cause to effect, from past to future, from here to there. Scott concludes that for a woman to be and to feel her being, she needs to find the mother in the shadows, and in the “gothic environment” of childhood memories (55). Irigaray has also called for attention to be paid to repairing and restoring the mother-daughter

relationship, which, as in the myth of Demeter and Persephone, has been broken apart by men. In cultures where males control the fate of wives, daughters, sisters, mothers, individual relationships between women have suffered. Divisions in the U.S. women's movement in the 70's and 80's have been attributed to women 'trashing' each other (Faludi, 2013). More positively, Dupré lists "la complicité, la tendresse, l'affection entre mères et filles, soeurs, amies, amantes" which need to replace "les vieux schèmes de rivalité et de mesquinerie entre femmes"(130). With Lacan, Irigaray asserts that new language is needed to redefine women's relationships because "language typically excludes women from an active subject position." As Bersianuk explains, the problem women writers have is that in using the symbols (language) of the patriarchy they deny themselves, but even when they are accepted as equal it is still an equality on male terms (94). She describes the scotomised brain, signifying the unconscious exclusion of an exterior reality from the field of awareness, such as lies behind our cultural habit of leaving woman and femininity in the shadows while all that is "light, male and order" remains visible.(126)

In writing herself and dwelling in her utopia, woman begins to close what Scott calls the "tragic space between her and the culture she is part of"(61). It is the growing awareness of how alienated women are from themselves in male-dominated culture that makes her journey so tragic. One option she has is humour, to see the comic and comedic aspects of her situation and express this through writing, through refusing to accept binary oppositions, and proclaiming the solidarity of lesbians, gender as performance, using humour to question everything. There are many examples of humour in her own writing, and several in The Activist as well.

To survive, feminism needs to have the feminine recognised as different (or, as Foucault would prefer, not 'difference' but 'differance'), and Irigaray affirms that women need to defend their rights to an identity and not just to equality. Théoret replaces the word identity with the word community, where the feminine can find true recognition and a way towards a new future, using new narrative forms to express new values (128). The proliferation of sexual identities in society - their voices, their literature, their political presence - is the route to a definition of the feminine (as well as the masculine) that is not male-dominated. The language of the manifesto - *down with that which does not work* - and the imagining of utopia - *up with*

a vision of a feminine universe – combine to open and suggest a powerful tool towards becoming elephants and creating a space for the feminine that is effectively heterotopic and can be embraced by all members of humanity.

So join me now in a voyage into the imaginary, to a place shaped and moulded to the feminine, a secret Utopia where women, men and genders in-between have fled the overweening masculinity of present society to seek out the essential feminine. Part Two charts a visit to a hidden country where the feminine rules and is expressed in diverse and not always converging voices. The people living in Cwenaland came from our world. They do their best to create something new and positive and different that they believe to be truly feminine but they are also aware that being formed themselves by patriarchal culture the process will be arduous. It takes time to learn everything that needs to be eliminated and how to eliminate it as well as to imagine a new feminine reality. After all, uncovering the feminine and making it thrive takes place in the context of the human – flawed ground that is common to all.

The Cwenaland narrative is pierced, challenged and transgressed by other texts that may enrich, or question, or invade. They are other voices speaking from other places and times. They are disparate and disruptive. Just as the manifesto does not seamlessly merge with utopian fiction, so language needs to invoke them both to communicate the texture of the struggle. Exploring Cwenaland we savour the tentative triumph of the feminine and the weakening of masculine dominance. As the true feminine emerges from its protective cocoon to grow strong and present, a harmonious balance between the two may eventually be found.

A SALUTE TO FEMININE UTOPIA

PART TWO:

CWENALAND AN ODYSSEY

1 I AM HERE

Now that I have arrived I have no name. I am tired and cold after the long journey. The greeter Lyssa takes my bags and boxes and leaves the room. I am alone, waiting to be told what to do next.

The room seems large as it is almost empty. A buff-coloured carpet has been laid over a plain wooden floor, and the walls are pale and unadorned. It is shortly after dawn and dusky window drapes plummet to the floor blocking out the grey light. There are two slender shaded lamps in the room, around each a circle of pale yellow light on the floor. I look around and see there are two gracious armchairs covered in rich red silk. The bright colour smiles out of the gloom and I sit down and lean back with a sigh.

I have travelled for days. My guides and I crossed a high desert plateau dotted with scrub and climbed rocky mountainsides up to and then along the snow line. They blindfolded me and guided me into a cave in the mountain and along rocky underground passages that were narrow and damp. I have spent years preparing for this trip. I trusted my two guides because I had passed the qualifying rounds and been found eligible for the journey. I was at home when they came without warning. My bags were packed and near the door, as instructed. So when the doorbell rang and I opened and saw two shrouded forms in dark trousers and heavy jackets, wrapped in heavy dark cloaks and wearing winter caps with ear-flaps, I knew. They were strong, and fast and silent and I was often stumbling along in their wake panting to keep up.

I have lost track of how long we travelled. We took a train and several busses until we seemed to be far from any signs of human settlement. After that we walked, first along unmade roads and tracks, and then we hiked over rougher terrain while it was light, sleeping outdoors at night. We strode, trudged, crawled, clambered through scrub and soggy woodland, across snowscapes and over great rocks, along waterways and through scorched spare landscapes. My guides spoke little, either to me or to each other, but they efficiently made camp at the close of each day's journey, they produced food from their packs and cooked over the camp fire, and we washed our pots and our clothes in the water they always found nearby. The first

few nights I was afraid – of wild animals, of stinging insects, of the unfathomable hugeness of the outdoors. Night-time buzzes, howls, squeaks, chattering and occasional thumps filled me with anxiety. But I was tired, the days were long and I became used to the night sounds to bring on sleep.

And now I am here, in Cwenaland, the country of Cwenas: women and others who fled masculine hegemony to live within the feminine, an unknown place but an open secret, like Peking's Forbidden City. People knew of its existence but there was no official or even identifiable source of information to provide details of its size, appearance, location or society. It was a subject of gossip, myth, fantasy and faith. TV writers invented stories about it, talk show hosts used it for a laugh, you found it in Internet chat rooms and in songs on the radio. Only the truly desperate and committed could hope to find a connection, and after that you were tried and tested and vetted for admission. I spent years looking. I accumulated years of sleep deprivation, missing vacations and wasting energy on false trails all over the Internet and on quests to find contacts in Thailand and Brazil and Estonia. I never stopped believing and yearning in spite of my family's mockery and attempts to get me "back to reality". I did not want their reality. I did not belong there and did not want to stay there. I wanted my life to be different although I had no clear idea of what feminine space could be or of what I needed to fully live the feminine.

I worked so hard to get here, all my attention focussed on leaving the world I knew and making the journey. A flame burned inside me, incinerating any fear and worry that might cause me to hesitate. Not wanting to say goodbye I arranged to meet each one of the people that were important. Each time as we sat and talked and laughed and drank or ate I memorised each face, each body, each personality and expression so I would not lose them. Only I knew this was the last time we would meet, and I felt needling guilt that they would never know where I had gone and why. Sometimes the guilt was so overwhelming that I had to cancel. Sometimes the person I wanted to say goodbye to was not alive. I went to my grandmother's grave where I could freely weep and whispered all my plans and hopes. I carefully crafted letters to my parents so they would not try to trace me. Worst was leaving my brother, knowing that nothing I could ever say or explain would make it all right that I vanished without a trace.

The room seems to darken and I begin to feel sleepy. What would living here be like? Until my welcomers arrive I am homeless and nameless. My old name belongs to another world and cannot be used here, and having nowhere to go feels alienating and lonely - a rejection when I want to be congratulated and embraced. I try to remember the Cwenas' three guiding principles and the reasons I fought so hard to come here. First, living here is inspired and guided by the essential feminine which we are here to find and express and celebrate. Second, the feminine is infinitely variable and ever-changing and how we live is chosen not imposed, communal not standardised. And third, there is no such thing as gender because all humanity and indeed all nature is some part feminine. A feminine place, a female nation, a country of Woman - could be men, could be women, could be other, who knew - like Woman herself: hidden but known, secret yet revealed, possible but not probable. No marriage, no glass ceiling, no church, no monogamy, no rape, no covering up the body, no rejection, no starvation, no discrimination, forced child-bearing, sex slaves, name-changing, no brutalisation, no question.

I shift into a more comfortable position in the enveloping red silk and raise my hand to wipe my eyes. My mind drifts back to the lives of my mother and my grandmother before her and to the life-affirming reasons why coming here was so important to me.

She stood in front of the altar, her all-white bouquet clasped in front of her and her long net veil carefully splayed out behind. She could feel her parents' gaze: her father always so jolly and busy who used to take her on his knee when he came home from work, and who - coming home late and tipsy from his Lodge meetings - chased her and her sister squealing and giggling around the dining-room table. And her mother, severe in her dark burgundy gown, watching the proceedings with that air of tired affection she always seemed to have around her youngest children, twins. She did not dare glance at him beside her, the tall, angular curate with his gleaming dark hair parted in the middle who had always seemed so much older than her and still did. She wondered what he was thinking.

“The bride dressed in white satin, veiled in a double tunic of white ninon, wore a veil of embroidered Brussels net over real orange blossom. She was attended by her twin-sister, who was gowned in a pale blue cachemine de soie, handsomely embroidered round the hem. Then there followed two little maids of honour who were daintily dressed in cream crepe de chine

and carried baskets of white flowers. The bride's bouquet was of white roses and lilies of the valley, and the bridesmaid's of pink carnations."

The local newspaper reporter had made sure the wedding photos were taken and a picture was published next to his words. Her twin sister was there too, the corners of her small mouth turned down. She had been summoned back from her gay party life in Paris for the event and would not be allowed to return. She confided to her sister that there she had many admirers, had learned to smoke and to sport a daring décolleté.

The minister's voice purred on. Soon she would be saying "I do". She would not be here if a neighbour conversing one Sunday at the church said he might have seen her among the lawns and flowerbeds of the city park, strolling one sunny afternoon with the other engaged couples. He did not know whom she was with but her parents took fright.

Decades later - a lifetime later - she told her granddaughter that she was in love with someone else but the man was already married. She had met him at church. She never said who he was or if she ever saw him again. A dutiful daughter, she obeyed her parents and now at twenty-six she was marrying the fortyish curate and settling down to life as a vicar's wife.

Soon she was busy with three small children, trying to manage household expenses in their rambling cold vicarage, visiting the needy in the community, and typing out her husband's sermons. Later, she was pregnant again and had a miscarriage when he pushed her roughly and she fell down stairs. After two more children were born she fell ill. She locked herself in the bedroom leaving the maid to run the household and her sister to take care of the children. Her body inert on the bed, her eyes glued to the ceiling that threatened to descend and crush her. He was active in his parish and often away. At home in his study he was not to be disturbed. His parishioners loved him but to the children he was stern, remote, angry. They were frightened of him.

The moment has come. The minister has asked the question and there is a hushed silence in the church. She opens her mouth and hears her voice quiet and subdued, "I do". Listening to the words launch her into a lifetime with this man she does not know, scenes from the future flash by. The children grown up and gone, their retirement to a country village, her growing fondness for a glass or two of wine with dinner, festive pre-dinner nips of whisky. Late in the day as the sun goes down she spends hours in the tiny kitchen, pouring herself glass after glass as the potatoes boil dry and the meat bakes to a crisp. He is reading and writing in his study and pays no attention.

One afternoon, she falls on the cold concrete step. After that, she sits all day on the dishevelled grey sofa in their tiny dark living-room and lies on it to sleep at night. He frowns as he empties her

chamber pot and brings her sandwiches and tea and she turns away weeping in pain and shame. By the time someone found them and took her to hospital, she was weak and her speech rambled. She died among the grey and skeletal old people in their hospital beds, her body filled with tubes and needles, moaning softly, a candle lit next to her bed.

It's always dusk inside this room its one window thick with dust. Overhead bats and mice scabble in the thatch. In the large open hearth a modest peat fire burns all day. He lays the curve-edged blocks at night, each one nicely fits a human hand. He lights them in the morning first thing, calls them turf. On the walls are masks from Ethiopia and some hand-made spears – worn-out testimony of life in a distant sun-steeped desert now blackened and soft with smoky grime and damp. Untidy rows of books weigh down the wooden shelves holding walls in place and not to be removed.

Peat fire smoke curls up the open chimney and out into the room coiling against the thatch, sitting there small flames click comfortingly while icy drafts finger your back and neck. An ancient cauldron hangs in the fireplace on a metal arm fastened to the wall. It used to boil water over the fire he says with pride, part of our great heritage. Next to the cauldron a small square TV sits on a shelf. It is only turned on at night at eight for the news and then off. She sighs sometimes but silence is better he says. Next to it a grimy red transistor radio could play music but tends not to unless he is out on an errand, to the shops perhaps.

Down the short hall with darkish tiled floor is her tiny gloomy kitchen, a webby window behind the sink, grimy cotton cloth pulled across the laden shelves, yellowish light dripping down from the ceiling. Two square formica counters were once red and flowered stained teacups hang over them on hooks. Several times a day she makes a pot of tea placing the cups on their saucers on a metal tray with a few plain biscuits on a plate and carries it all out by the fire.

She sits at her corner of the sofa facing the fire. He sits in his armchair next to the fire facing her. Together they look at the teapot or read the paper or he fills his pipe with fresh tobacco while she reaches for her cigarettes and a lighter. In the bedroom the chamber pot under the bed is full again and outside weeds fill the garden plot. He talks about the weeding the mowing picking ripe apples before they fall to the wasps. She talks about the rain the damp time to cook the next meal.

Decades amass in this dark damp place and their skin grows papery and deeply furrowed. Light imperceptibly fades as windows grime up and peat smoke fills the room. One day he does not come in first thing to light the blocks laid in the fireplace and her kitchen stays cold and dark, cups and saucers filling the sink. Bats and mice rustle overhead in the thatch.

My eyes begin to close, as I sit in this warming red chair. I know why I am here. I have passed the tests, completed the journey, kept the secret, obeyed the rules and stayed the course. I am ready.

II EVARNE, SAVITRI, COTYS

Three come into the room. Their flowing earth-toned clothing to the floor conceals any identifying features. Their hair is wrapped up in coloured cloth turbans, their faces are in shadow. They ask me to sit. There are some things I need to know. They tell me their names are Evarne, Savitri and Cotys. First one speaks and then another. Their voices are rhythmic and musical, as though reciting poetry. What they tell me they have told many before me.

Everyone who is admitted to Cwenaland has a new name. A name will be selected for me and with me – only one name because families do not exist here; they are not needed. Evarne is tall and slender with a deep resonant voice and a gentle smile. “Marriage and family are inventions of patriarchy to acquire women’s land and property and gain male control over human reproduction” shahee says. “For generations girls were brainwashed from an early age into believing that marriage was desirable, even obligatory, and it took centuries before women learned that the institution suited men better and did not make women happy. Here Cwenas form the social and family ties that suit them and support them. Women choose whether to reproduce or not, and whether they commit to one other person or to many.”

Their clothing rustles, their lips move as they step in and out of the shadows, their voices are low and their faces light up and fade in the dim light. One steps towards the window, another sits in the red chair and gets up again. They glance at each other and their eyelashes flicker but their heads are swaddled and I cannot see their faces. Savitri speaks. Shahee is shorter than Evarne and her loose dark clothing is frosted with intricate orange and gold embroidery. “Cwenas can choose to live with females, with males, alone, or in a mix. They set their own time limits on their relationship commitments. In Cwenaland we believe in growing and maturing through learning and change so we encourage people to think less about personal needs in their relationships and more about ways to learn and grow. As people mature they may be satisfyingly settled in the same living arrangement, or they may find themselves reaching out to different kinds of people, of either sex or gender or often both. Our rule for household formation is ‘Choice not consanguinity’. Most people here have spent enough time out there – shahee gestures towards the window – to understand very well the dark side of

enforced family life.” Shahee tells me that not many households decide to have a child. “I have one” Savitri says softly. “Shahee will be in the first new generation to grow up in Cwenaland. My home group needed assurance that I would raise the child responsibly and not create a burden on the community. I brought photos and told them the story of my first child, the one I lost and had to leave behind. They saw I knew what it meant to raise a child and they gave their approval. Here in Cwenaland many who do not have children enjoy participating in co-raising the babes of other Cwenas.” Shahee looks up shyly.

After a short silence, Cotys steps forward. Stooped and moving with a slight limp, Cotys seems older than the others and waits for them to finish speaking. Shahee explains that there are mechanisms for changing living arrangements as people grow and change. “These are mainly oriented to protecting children and young people from any unnecessary suffering if households expand, contract or break up” shahee explains, in the slightly rasping voice of an older woman. “We do not have many young people here yet. There was too much to learn and discover about ourselves and about how we wanted to live and what we wanted Cwenaland to be. The people who came here did not want to tie themselves into the same old reproductive cycle that caused many pain in their previous lives.”

You Teris

Hey you! U! Where are U, Teris? Hey U there or what? You Teris, what do u feel like, to me, to you? U do menstrual cramps, U do labour pains, U no how to swell up and shrink down, U R magic. Teris, ugottit girl. You Ter Is another word for nothing left to lose, (“nothing ain’t worth nothing but its free”). Uter under belly, uter over vagina, uter is there somewhere. Hey you, Hey U, Hey U Ter Is you there? Is U there in me or what? Ute (r) is a car, Ute goes baby, Ute is fast, ute is high on the road, eats gas, farts exhaust. Not U! Uter is dark, interior, moist and warm, life-sustaining, mostly. We can’t see U Teris but we know U ter is here where I am.

I ask them if there are men here. After all, Cwenaland describes itself as a place for the feminine in everyone, so that should mean men under certain conditions are admissible. “This is everyone’s first question,” says Evarne with a short laugh. “Slowly we are becoming more open to the idea.” Savitri whispers to Cotys, who says, “We test them pretty thoroughly and

their admission process is much tougher so there are only a few. But now some of our own are being born.” “Yes” Savitri raises her voice. “Obviously we have them or I would not have my child. I chose my partner and not the other way around. I was the one who proposed we have a child, and I made my choice based on the characteristics I wanted my child to have, not on that forlorn illusion we used to call romantic love. He was free to refuse and to decide whether or not to share my household and cooperatively raise the child or simply to donate sperm. Here we do not force anyone into reproductive commitments but so far he has shown himself a worthy member of our home group.” “Also,” Cotys speaks, “males are useful for our security force, to defend the borders and protect households. We do not condone violence but we recognise that humanity is violent by nature – even here there is accusation, offense, distress, anger - and Cwenas are trying to find ways to channel it into protecting and securing the community. We do not believe in sin, in combat, in war or aggression.”

The long skirts rustle. Evarne moves closer to me. “Our aim is to make sure that by growing up in a feminine environment, biological males learn the feminine and how to belong to our feminine community. Of course they can choose whatever gender they want, as can the females.” I step back uncomfortably. The words feel propaganda-like. “They have the same games, schools and activities as female babies. No-one is pushed into competitive sports or pseudo-military games, and no-one has to wear short hair, choose between trousers and dresses, take care of dolls or trains. No-one has to take up space in an identity labelled Boy or Girl. Babies of both sexes and neither grow into males or females or a combination, and they can change.” “By the way” Savitri reminds me “you need to overcome ‘she’ and ‘he’ thinking. It will help if you use ‘shahee’. Here, we avoid doing anything that identifies gender and the rules are tolerance, creativity, cooperation, health. We have a slogan: ‘Construct Don’t Destruct.’”

I wonder if they live together and share a house, or are they a group of people related to one another by blood or marriage, the children of a person or couple, a blood relation to be treated with a special loyalty or intimacy, a group of people united in criminal activity, a principal taxonomic category that ranks above genus and below order, a group of objects united by a significant shared characteristic, all the descendants of a common ancestor? What is ‘family’?

LITTLE MAMA DIES

I found out my little mama died today or perhaps it was yesterday. One of my sisters telephoned from France. She was vague. She had never called before. I sometimes called her to find out how little mama was doing but our conversations were dry and short. My sisters do not like me calling our mother little mama. She said they were there when it happened but not in the room. I think that no-one held little mama's hand or stroked her hair and told her not to be afraid. They did not sit by her bed watching over. My sister said there were arrangements to make and was I coming back for the funeral. I do not have much money saved but little mama is all I have and all I ever had so I told her I would be coming. She added my name to her list, she had done the decent thing by taking the time to call. For them I was not really part of the family only an annoying add-on, a foundling in a laundry basket, someone to elbow out of the nest. Little mama took care of me as best she could. But she had a new husband - a real husband - and their two young daughters and my presence there put them in mind of her uncertain past, when she was young. My father disappeared from her life when he found out she was pregnant. I think she loved him, she told me she thought he would marry her. He was probably not all bad so I went looking for him once. I traced him to an address in Paris. He opened the door and looked at me without interest. I said, I am your son with little mama, from the village where you grew up. He looked at me and said, don't come here again, then he closed the door. I told little mama about it and she said he was busy supporting another family and probably did not want to be reminded. At the time, she was in the kitchen chopping potatoes for soup. Such a large family to look after, she was often tired. Later when I left home and worked as a long distance truck driver, I spent weeks alone in my cab on the move all over France. I went to see her on my days off and I brought her something from the towns I passed through: a scarf, some slippers, a bottle of digestif. When my sisters were not there she heated up some of her home-made soup for me and we sat at the kitchen table together. I told her about the trucks and what they carried and the machines that loaded them, and the flat straight roads lined with trees or spiraling up and down hills, and stopping sometimes by the side of the road to step down and stand outside in the fresh air. She gazed into her plate and nodded and sighed, I think she was pleased I was doing so well. When I left France I went to say goodbye to her but her husband was there, watching. She hugged me stiffly and stepped back. He shook my hand, his mind on other things. I told her I would come back from America to see her then I closed the door behind me and my eyes prickled hotly and I had to blow my nose. I did keep my promise, each visit spending a little time with her as she aged and grew sick and my sisters told me not to tire her. She has waited until Spring to die, for the trees to have leaves again, for the winter mud to have dried up in the fields. I will go and spend a little time with her now, sitting by

her bed again while she rests with her eyes closed, and tell her about life in America until my sisters ask me to leave.

There is silence in the room. The Cwenas look at each other as though it is time to go. “Do you have any questions at this time?” asks Cotys. I am shocked - how can they be leaving? “Yes! Where will I live? Will I have a home? What is my name?”

“We offer you Urmya, an Indian goddess of night and the moon, mother and guardian. She protects the community from thieves and wolves. After your trial here is completed you will receive this name or another, better suited. If you fail in your trial, you will not be able to stay. Try to live up to your name.”

“As for your home” says Evarne, “Take time to learn about Cwenaland, to learn about yourself here and how you are changing. Learn from and about the people you meet. Eventually you will discover or define a household, a home group for yourself. Someone will come shortly to take you to the house where you are to live for now.” Shahee smiles and Cotys touches her lightly on the arm. They all turn and glide out of the room.

Two new people enter: one tall and one short. They smile and extend their hands. “I am Henwen” says the taller one. The face is in shadow and the voice is deep and masculine. “And I, Froida. We are taking you to your new home”, says the other, moving lightly around the room, picking up my bags and opening cupboards to collect things I might need. They tell me that the names of Cwenas are names of greater and lesser goddesses that people worshipped in India and Ireland and South America - places with ancient practices of goddess worship. Many of the names have entered human language as names of plants, or adapted so they would not be forgotten. “And now here in Cwenaland,” says Henwen “We are reviving them, as many as we can find. The names celebrate the feminine principle name the feminine in every body.” Standing up from where shahee stoops over my things, Froida adds, “The names make sure we never forget that the feminine is strong and steely, that the feminine withstands adversity, that the feminine is blessed with feminine intelligence, and that without the feminine there is no human soul!”

*Amara Alcis Alethia Altria Audhumbla Barbelo Berit Bibi Briah Buan Carpo Caliadne Coronis Cyane
Cypria Daji Damkina Deianeira Druh Ekhi Ekumoke Elamite Elli Eunomia Fenja Feronia Frovida Fylgia
Gabija Garita Giltine Grydat Gwyar Habetrot Haria Hashat Hemithea Heqet HuTu Iath Ibu Ipamahandi
Ishtar Jahi Jerah Junit Jyestha Kabagiyawan Kakia Kanti Koilasa Laka Lamashtu Lata Levanah Lusin
Magog Mamitu Marica Melusine Miru Morgay Nabia Nessa Ngame Norwan Odras Oizys Olokum
Onatah Pakimna Panes Penardun Redu Rhiannon Rhodope Samhain Savitri Sarpis Sinann Sokhet
Syama Tacoma Tairbu Tenemet Trisala Uda Ulupi Urash Uravari Vatak Vayu Vimala Woope Wutmara
Xiumi Xquic Yakami Yhi Yo'o Zeme Zygia.*

III HENWEN, FROVIDA

Like the others I have met, Henwen and Frovida are dressed in loose, full-length homespun robes in earth colours. Cloth turbans wound around their heads conceal their hair and shadow their faces. It is impossible to surmise sex, gender, age, ethnicity, character. I understand this is to avoid reverting to old identities but I wonder how it feels to women coming from cultures where they were obliged to wear heavy robes to conceal their bodies.

Henwen and Frovida take my bags and direct me outside where a truck-like vehicle is waiting. We climb in and Henwen takes the driver's seat. We glide forward silently – it is solar powered and makes no noise. It has rained recently, I notice, and I watch the puddles' smooth surfaces quiver with the rumbling weight of us passing. Reflected in the water I see unmade edges of road and pools and rivulets where drains should have been. I review a parade of huddled clusters of small wood houses. Some are log cabins and others made of unpainted boards with flat roofs. Open green space surrounds each cluster containing vegetable gardens and allotments with plants laid out in neat rows. Some have flowerbeds and herb gardens, and some contain bushes and trees, fish-ponds and garden benches, while some are a frothy green wilderness. We pass a Japanese meditation garden with pathways of small stones, a small fountain dropping a fine stream of water into an oval pool whose borders are flush with swaying waterplants.

There are only a few other vehicles on this road and all are silent. We pass people on bicycles or on foot. Most of the bicycles are laden with baskets carrying sacks of vegetables, or piles of planks and stones for construction, or clunky containers of made of wood or mesh. There are tricycles ridden by adults with large hampers at the back, and some tandem bikes, many drawing bulky trailers piled with corn and wheat and vegetables still dowsed in the powdery dirt of the fields. When I roll the window down I am struck by the quiet of the streets and the sweetness of the air. Without gasoline fumes and vehicle exhaust the fragrance of a pure spring morning wafts into the car as though the countryside had moved into town.

In the distance, the landscape resembles what I saw on my journey. Mountains in the distance slope down into greenish hillsides that end in the field-strewn valley through which our

roadway passes. Paths and tracks wind up into the hills where much of the land is under cultivation. Far away I can see green and purple patches where crops are growing in militaristic rows, some interspersed with trees. Many of the trees are growing fruit – apple and cherry, mango and mulberry – and others look like willows and oaks. They provide patches of shade in which scattered groups of workers sit and rest.

SUMMER PEACHES

*Articles of clothing flung across the evening sky, gold and glowing in the dying sun when everything seems to indicate a moment poised outside time no sun setting or light fading - like a palace ball where a woman steps into and out of the arms of men while the music plays and stops and plays again. A stole, a bolero, a sash, white shoes fleet and peeping, and the memory of a summer in France, among peach orchards and the songs of Jacques Brel, and the voice of a visitor, a guest in the house describing a film of a man watching the girl dressed in white picking fruit and learning French and love ... coming of age ... the box of ripe peaches daily on the kitchen table, scented, downy ... the dark-haired thin woman reclining on her bed speaking of the day she found the father's body, blood on the hall floor, the gun still in his hand ... warm wind rippling through orchards, peach juice dripping through fingers ... moments when time stops. The visitor closes her door and reads *Gone with the Wind* from beginning to end, again. She reads long novels that make music in her mind that stops and plays and stops again – *quand on n'a que l'amour, la lumière jaillira, l'ivrogne, la chanson des vieux amants, les ramparts de Varsovie, le moribond, ne me quittes pas*. She wears a stole and white shoes and dances among the peach trees. The woman gives her two large boxes of ripe fruit tied with string, one in each hand as she lifts herself and her suitcase into the train. The thin anxious mother and the bent ailing grandmother kiss her goodbye.*

The truck stops in front of a small house. It is in a cluster with some others. Some people are working in the large vegetable garden. They do not look up as we climb out of the car, lift out the bags, and make our way to the front door. Silently, Froida leads the way upstairs and into a sunlit room. It contains two narrow beds on a scrubbed wooden floor, each with a small night-table. There is a sink on one side of the room, with a mirror over it, and under it a small red bin splashes colour. At the end of each bed is a plain wooden chair. A door opposite the sink conceals a medium-sized closet. Between the two beds is the room's only window and

the morning sun pours through. Outside I see people bent over the plants, working their way down a line of young lettuces. Moving slowly along in their sun-protector hats and enveloping clothing, they conjure up rice paddies in parts of Asia.

I wonder what kinds of plant grow here, and whether there are the same growing seasons as in other parts of the world. I wonder if each community is able to feed itself, or whether items have to be brought in from other regions of Cwenaland or even from out there. I am curious and turn to ask Froida and Henwen but the door is open and they are leaving the room. They do not look up and my excitement is suddenly checked. So little talking has a strange effect. Since leaving home I have hardly spoken, and yet I come from a world where everyone talks excitedly and energetically at every opportunity. Speech is a lifeline that ties us to reality and people talk compulsively. We count on others to listen, and then the listeners talk in their turn, and we connect regardless of what we say. Since arriving in Cwenaland I have been greeted and given information but no-one has listened to me talk. I feel strange, and estranged. I wonder if there is some unspoken rule not to engage with newcomers or whether after settling into the place Cwenas come to realise the pointlessness of most speech and limit themselves to what is necessary in the new reality.

I sit down on the bed to look through the window. The sun is high in the sky and the people working in the garden are uncurling their bodies, standing up stiffly and stretching and lifting their sunhats to wipe their faces. I peer at them, wondering if they live here, if I will meet them, if I will like them and if we will talk. One turns towards the house and sees me at the window. For a moment we are gazing straight at each other and I feel a jolt. I turn away in shock. The person is dressed plainly in work pants and a shirt but on her head she wears a mesh baseball cap of the same brownish-yellow colour as my mother when she was outside gardening. My mother's face and body appeared as clearly to me as though she was in the room.

I am mother. I sit here in my chair. I look at things – the television, the old people coming in and out bent over their walkers and canes so they only see the floor. Some look familiar. I say hallo. They

don't reply. Some don't see me. Some don't hear. The room is always the same. The chair I sit is always the same. Sometimes someone speaks to me. I am surprised that I do not understand. When I first came here I walked. I paced the long corridors or I sat in my room. I did not watch television or listen to my radio. The chair in my room is heavy and strange so I lay on my bed. I stopped opening my night-table drawer in to take out my one or two books, a few photographs, my face-cream, a bottle of perfume someone gave me, my sun-glasses. Now these things are gone. The drawer is empty. My radio stopped working and the glass cracked on my clock. Only one photo is pinned on my wall, My Son, I think, or my son.

Now I sit in front of the television with the others. Sometimes I speak to a man in a walker passing my chair. Or to the young woman who pulls clothes over my head at night, helps pull up my pants in the morning. Or to a visitor bringing a real chocolate cookie, not the kind of dry bland white wafer that they give us here and call it tea-time. Sitting in this chair I am waiting. I wait for my son. He will be here. He will be here soon. He will take me home and I will go outside and walk, I will go to shops and buy food, I will go anywhere everywhere that is not here. I tell them when they spoon soup into my mouth or frogmarch me to the shower, just wait, wait until my son finds out, wait, wait until my son comes ...

* * *

For me, her younger son, she is dead. For years I lived with her and took care of her. Now she needs professional help. She raised me and later I lived with her to save money. She shopped for groceries and cooked my meals and made my bed and washed my clothes. She kept my room clean. She met my girlfriends. She made sure my coffee was ready in the mornings when I got up.

After my father left her for another woman, I was the good son, the dutiful son, bringing cake on her on her birthday, eating her tasteless food, helping with things that needed doing in her small flat. Then I got married and bought a house, my wife has a good job. I have built a fine wine cellar. I do not visit her any more. She is not really a person to me. I am embarrassed to be seen with her. She has professional care. They give her clean clothes, wash her hair, get her out of bed every day and feed her nutritional food. They do not talk to her much or give her things to do but she would not remember anyway.

Now her teeth are bad. They are falling out but why bother with dental services? She eats less so they bring her food that is mashed up and she never leaves her chair. She's being well taken care of. My brother agrees with me. He goes to see her when he is passing through. He takes flowers and

chocolates and after a short awkward visit he gets on a plane and flies home. He does not question my decisions.

* * *

I am ten years older than my brother. After he was born she made me carry linen to the laundry. I had to fold diapers and babysit when she went to the store. I was ashamed.

Our father loved another woman. At home he was always angry: with my brother for being born, with me for having to share my room, with my mother for everything she did. I moved out as soon as I could. I was tired of being a father to my brother and a husband to her. Eventually my brother moved out too, leaving her to her pots of flowering violets and her afternoon soap operas on the TV.

I feel uncomfortable when I go to see her with all the batty old people. They make strange noises. My mother does not recognise me. It could be anyone coming in with flowers. I say hallo but I do not kiss or hug her. She has lost her teeth and she says the same things over and over. She does not seem to realise the chocolates and flowers are for her. She does not know what to do with them. Sometimes she gives them back to me. I don't feel quite right touching her or holding her hand.

My brother told me recently he has made all the funeral arrangements, transportation and cremation. There is nothing to do now but wait.

I sink back on the bed. What is she doing now, I wonder. Would she have joined me in Cwenaland if I had asked her? As for so many others, the relationship between my mother and me, which should have been the powerful life force in my life, was broken and weak. In our world the mother-daughter bond is belittled, attacked, concealed. Women already broken break their daughters. Pushy mothers drive daughters into conventional gender roles: child beauty queen, figure skater or gymnast, ballerina or model, followed by wife, mother, grandmother. Even women who excel at gender-equal professions in medicine or commerce or art rarely refuse responsibility for the home, the family and the children. Busy trying to work her way up to equality with the men around her, my mother was often absent. She worked long hours and went back to school for an advanced degree. And while my brother was out playing sports, I had to clean the house and prepare meals as well as bring home good grades.

After moving to another city I made dutiful visits home. Even when she asked questions I did not tell her about my life and could not share my plans with her. Once she wrote to me: “I am a mother, your mother! Please trust me, listen to me, learn from me!” I crumpled it up and threw it away.

Now, looking around this empty bedroom that is to be my home, I feel more regret at leaving my small comfortable familiar little house. Preparing to vacate my house I felt as though I had lost my balance, that I was poised on one leg and could not put the other down, that I was leaning over a sheer drop with nothing for my hands to grasp. In each room was furniture I had chosen and some that had been given. Spaces full of familiar possessions, mementos of my travels, photographs of my nieces and nephews, of my grandparents and my father, paintings and tapestries, and of course my music. It is hard to think about strangers poking through my shelves and drawers, taking some of the discs and leaving others, pulling down my colourful wall hangings and flipping through the books on my bookshelves. I mentally walk through the house again, doing what I had been refusing to do until now, remembering each doorway, each floorboard, the smells and colours and textures, seeing my favourite pieces of furniture and hearing the music I loved. My knees weaken and I sink to the floor. My arms hug my belly holding in the pain in my stomach. I am blinded by tears.

*Our Mother, which art the earth
Hallowed be thy name
We are thy children on earth
as we are in heaven
Our earth will provide our daily bread
Help us to repent of our trespasses
And to forgive those who trespass against us
Protect us from temptation
And deliver us from evil
For ours is the kingdom the power and the glory
For ever and ever
Amen*

IV AMARA, DOBAYBA, NORWAN

There is a knock at my door. It opens and four people lurch in as though the ones behind had pushed the ones in front. By now their neutral clothing and turbans are no surprise. There is an uncomfortable silence as they gaze at me. I am being studied.

One of them, who seems to be Henwen, moves in front of me and starts to speak. I am concentrating on the vocal pitch and on what I can tell from body moves and manner and so I miss the words. I stumble and apologise. Henwen exchanges a look with the others: “You were trying to make up your mind about us, weren’t you? Are we old or young, male or female, senior or junior? Well don’t! That kind of thinking will get you nowhere in this house or in this community. You are wasting your energy, and ours”. When shahee begins again I listen carefully to the description of my new job – in the kitchen – and how meals are prepared and served. “But first you will come to the dining-room and eat.” I remember my empty growling stomach, and wonder what I should wear. “For now wear something you brought with you, it does not matter to anyone yet. You will have a chance to buy or make suitable clothes when you have had time to discover what you want to wear. You need time to learn, to feel, to know. ”

After my shower, I look again through the clothes I have brought and select a beige skirt, fitted around the hips and flaring out so that it moves nicely as I walk and a light-weight black short-sleeved sweater. Habit makes me check in the mirror above the sink. I am pleased with its simple elegance, but then I think who is going to care - and why do I? This is not a place where men notice the shape of women’s bodies and what their clothing reveals, or where women eye the outfit and judge what kind of person you are. Anxiously I reach for my bathrobe and drape the dark blue towelling over my clothes, lifting the hood so it covers my hair.

Two escorts return and lead me down the stairs and into a large bright room. It is full of people seated at long tables. They are all talking in loud voices quite different from the muted tones I have been hearing. We find a table and sit down. Steaming bowls of food are passed down the

table and I fill my plate. As I scoop up the last spoonful, I see a pair of intense dark eyes staring straight into my own. I look away, uncertain. Then I hear a voice asking why I am wearing my bathrobe over my clothes. I struggle to explain my confusion about clothing in Cwenaland and the person opposite bursts out laughing. Shahee explains that it is not necessary to look like everyone else: “Not surprisingly, for some, clothes are for covering up and homogenising appearance to minimise gender and other differences, while for others choosing how you want to cover and uncover the body is an opportunity for originality and variety and experimentation. Of course, many simply wear clothes that are practical for work.”

As I puzzle over what that might mean for me, shahee tells me her name is Dobayba. “Take me for example. I came here wearing jeans and a t-shirt underneath a heavy dark robe that covered me from the top of my head to below my feet. In fact it included a hood, which could be dropped in front of my face with a small opening for my eyes”. Dobayba’s father forbade women in the family from leaving their homes without being completely covered up. As a professional woman who wore clothes and make-up when travelling abroad, she had to keep the robe ready for when she returned. As the plane landed, or the train pulled into the station, or the car approached the border, shahee would pull on the heavy dark robe, letting it cover her hair and clothes and sometimes her face as well. “We were taught to control and conceal our femininity. Where I grew up, females belong to the males they are related to - father, brothers, uncles, and later, husband and sons – so we are blamed if we seem accessible or even visible to other men,” Dobayba says. “We did not really understand the reasoning behind these constraints, but I did learn to hide my body in case some unknown male might feel a sexual urge while walking down the street, in which case it would be my fault and I would be punished.” “Not unlike blaming a woman for getting raped,” says one of my escorts, who is listening. “There are places where women who have been raped are punished, even killed, or forced to marry the rapist.”

Dobayba tells us that when she arrived in Cwenaland she could not decide whether to wear the loose flowing clothing she saw on others. Its shapeless neutrality uncomfortably reminded her of the society she had worked so hard to escape from. For her, freedom from patriarchy was wearing tight-fitting, brightly-coloured clothes that she liked. “Now I wear both, depending on how I feel” she laughs. My escort smiles broadly. “This is quite the opposite of my

experience,” shahee says. “I grew up in a culture focussed on female bodies to deliberately attract the male gaze. From early childhood, I was encouraged to ornament my body and I was taught to show it off. My entire life, until I began my journey here, I worried about my appearance - my weight, my hair and nails, removing unwanted hair and altering facial features, and endlessly about my clothes! I not only could but needed to wear clothes that revealed my legs and bottom and breasts, I had to wear my hair long and loose and colour it, and I had to cover my face with make-up.” “Why on earth?” asks Dobayba. “We all did it. There was no other option if you wanted to have friends, jobs and dates. All the women around you - in publicity, in television and movies, in any kind of photograph - dressed in ways that revealed their bodies and got men’s attention.”

The escort, Amara, is telling a story I am not unfamiliar with, but Dobayba is disbelieving. “Did such behaviour not arouse men’s sexual energy?” she asks, “and were you not then at risk?” “Yes and yes” replies Amara. “Something called date rape was common in my community; many of the girls drank alcohol or took drugs to pretend it did not matter. The alternative – dressing more conservatively, refusing boys’ invitations, going home early – meant you had no friends, you sat alone at school, you were not invited to parties or on trips, and you spent all your time stuck at home with parents or room-mates. When you got older it meant you were odd, a misfit, and socially excluded. And as you aged you were simply non-existent. Most women I knew found that a hard way of life. There were no such pressures on men”.

WHY PINK?

Pink is for girls. For girl babies and toddlers. So people will know. Pink for a princess: rosy cheeks and knees. A short flared pinkish skirt over pink tights or showing pinkish knees. Her bubble anorak is pink for winter and a pink hairband holds her hair – blond with reddish glints - brushed out loose and long. A large pink shiny bag over her shoulder with small pink and white furry objects hanging off it and maybe pink Ugg boots. Inside with her books are pink lipstick, pink blusher, furry mittens and a mood-ring for when she is with her friends who are pretty in pink. When girls wait in dark leather lines outside doors of bars and clubs their white-skinned shoulders turn pink on wintry nights and her awesome cleavage looks pink in certain lights. She wanted to draw all eyes but now she is unsure. Pink is vulnerable. Men do not wear pink. They follow her, talk to her, send messages, you know - father's friend, mother's step-brother, even the kid next door who always was slightly older must be her fault for wearing pink. Pink is hot. She sits at home alone afraid of dark assaults in streets and parks - angry pink welts, red gashes, purple bruising, soil. Pastel pink shows dirt. Maybe navy blue or bottle green will do: dinner with the boss again tonight? The man she loves is married but she knows he'll leave his wife for her. Eventually. Her whitish skin turns pink when it is too hot or cold. A carbon monoxide death is diagnosed through excessive pinkness of the skin. Perhaps pink is not her colour but what chance does she have? Pink is vulnerable. Pink is hot. Pink is pretty. Pink is pastel. Pink is searing. Why pink?

I want to know how things are different here. What have Cwenas done to solve these problems? My other escort, Norwan, moves her chair closer. “I live in a home group with four other people and I don't feel our lives are influenced by libidinous masculinity. Each one chooses the gender identity that suits them and the sexual relationships they want - with another woman, with a male, or with any of the transgender and gay folks. I have spent a few years now in a three-person arrangement that we all feel is working.” “Sort of anarchical!” I reply. “Not really because we each have a responsibility to our community and not just to ourselves. We've been taught to make responsible choices about who we make a household with and over how long a time period we expect it to last. That makes us think about what we are doing and how it affects other people. It helps avoid people feeling jealous or hurt or vengeful and it mostly works quite smoothly.” Amara agrees: “My partner lives with me in my home group but shahee keeps a separate room as before. It is such a relief not to have to share

my bed and my bathroom every single day like married couples are forced to where we came from. Imagine not having your bed to yourself for your entire adult life!”

I wonder what they do to teach people how to be responsible in their sexual relationships when after aeons of human history humans have not yet evolved better ways of treating each other. Dobayba tells me there are clinics and services that provide information to young people on their health and their sexuality. They prepare and help them use their knowledge of their bodies to make good decisions for themselves based on what they want and need, so that “Cwenas may both reveal the beauty of their bodies without fear and be comfortable covering their bodies and hair without shame.” And I remember years when I felt troubled, a woman not really knowing what I wanted for myself beyond and out of reach of what men wanted for me.

Most people have left the big dining-room and Amara, Dobayba, Norwan and I are sitting almost alone as the cleaners wipe the tables around us and move chairs to sweep the floor. I feel close to these women and hearing their stories makes me realise that in some way my journey is just beginning. To learn to see myself with new eyes – my own – and to think about feminine sexuality without masculine values, expectations and antagonism opens up new possibilities that fill me with dread and delight.

Speaking softly Amara starts to tell us her story. She never knew a time when she was not beautiful but she never knew what that meant. She was always told she was pretty but parts of her body and face needed this and this and that to be done in order to make them prettier. She submitted to glasses and braces and special shoes. She scrubbed at rough skin on her elbows and knees. She wore special teenage bras night and day so that her breasts would be high and pointed (her father’s argument) and would not grow too big (her mother’s). Before she was out of her teens, her mother bought her girdles so that even in her school uniform she had a flat tummy and a pinched waist. All the girls wore them so she did not think it strange. She copied her friends using products to remove the hair growing in armpits and on legs, but not those who removed hair from their arms, their upper lips and their vulvas as well. She was told when to start wearing deodorant, to remember to put face cream on morning and night, to squeeze her feet into high-heeled shoes, and to sleep with big rollers in her hair. Her aunt took

her to the cosmetics counter and bought foundation for her flawless skin, black liners and bright colours for her limpid eyes, and red and pink stains to smear on her young lips.

Amara submitted, like a dog being prepared for a breeders' show or a slave girl readied for the marketplace. Her friends enjoyed their beauty preparations and made them into a game. None of them thought to question the importance of female beauty. Amara also made sure that she did well in school, competed for university, excelled at sports, and had lots of friends. This was her lot: to do it all. This was what she learned was being a woman. She had to do all this and then fall in love with her 'Mr Right', get married in an extravagant ceremony, and bear and raise healthy, sociable, good-looking, successful children. Amara told us she reached adulthood knowing that she had to work on her appearance and follow fashion so as to be beautiful enough. She dressed in short or long skirts, tight or loose tops, plunging or high necklines, clunky boots or teetering heels. She never went out without makeup and washed her hair every day so that it appeared glossy and full. Amara's gentle eyes look sad. "I was often told I was beautiful", she says, "but the remark slid off me like a drop of rain off metal. I did not know then – and I still don't – what being beautiful actually means." She just knew there was no respite. As she discovered the punishing diets to stay thin, the savage hair and skin treatments that took years off women's lives, the bossing and bullying by managers and employers, she wondered if she was the only one who questioned if beauty was worth it.

"So therein lies the paradox" Amara sighs. "Women make major efforts to be beautiful, to be considered beautiful, but actually being beautiful brings nothing but trouble. Professionally it is harder to be taken seriously if one is beautiful: women are jealous and men are dismissive. Neither men or women believe that a beautiful woman is competent or even intelligent. So just as women must work harder and do better to be considered equal to men, so beautiful women must do even better and work even harder to be considered at all." I agree with Amara and the others are nodding, but it is hard to imagine a feminist movement in support of women who complain they are too beautiful. If feminists already complain about middle-class women paying insufficient attention to poor and non-white women, how much more withering their scorn for women whose problem is their beauty. No. This is a private and secret problem for women and not one for which there will be marches through the streets.

“Let’s see” says Norwan, “To be a woman in the world we left behind, the world that men created with their God-based religions, libidinous masculinity, and rules and laws for women’s bodies, we have to meet an apparently infinite number of incompatible requirements.” “They are certainly incompatible with enjoying being a woman” Dobayba agrees. “We have to be beautiful” Norwan goes on, “but either cover it up, hide it, or be prepared to take responsibility for any chaos that may ensue.” “We also have to bear and raise perfect children or we are to blame, judged bad mothers,” says Dobayba, “and worst of all, women agree with these arguments and judge themselves even more harshly.” “Patriarchal societies pay little attention to the challenges and difficulties of bearing and raising children – the children men’s laws tell us we can bear and raise”, says Norwan. “In some parts of the world we are supposed to stay at home, give up school and any serious jobs, to take care of everyone and run the home, whereas in others ...” “ ...we are supposed to get an education and a job, earn a living, and have successful careers while being perfectly beautiful!” Amara chimes in. Dobayba adds, “and in both of them we can easily lose our jobs or be rejected by our families and have no one to help us at all.” They turn to me: “what do you think, newcomer?” I answer, “I understand why you made the effort to come to Cwenaland. And why I did as well.”

We sit at the kitchen table wringing our hands. Our eyes bleed, our tears fill coffee cups. We are derelict, our hopes and beliefs foregone, in mourning for our lost selves, for who we were and who we are now. We are three, we are one and there are others.

Plain kitchen table, some cold mugs with dregs in the bottom, ashtray filled with ash and butts, faint music on the radio. We sit holding hands and gaze at the candle flame, watching melting wax dribble down. One of us worked to put him through med school. Stayed home after children came and he climbed the career ladder. One of us is a painter. Traveled the world with him for his anthropology degree and made art when time permitted. One of us is an architect who started over in another country when he got a better job and moved.

We are pretty women, one blonde and two with dark hair, one curly and one straight and full. We are interesting to talk to. One of us studies modern dance, one of us is a runner out every morning at dawn, one of us a yoga teacher. But we are invisible.

We each invested: we called it love, we learned to trust. With him we shared our bed, memories, plans, worries, friends, tastes, habits, bank accounts, closets, hopes, kitchen, music, stories, sex, in-laws, even children. The years together total a quarter of our life. Another quarter was our childhood and adolescence. For the remaining disquieting half we will be old and alone. This was not the plan.

We are crushed, body bent with the weight. We have not stopped crying yet. We have lost the path. It seemed clear there in front of us but it has vanished. We are turning in circles. In such unremarkable ways is the path lost, we are not even aware. He told one of us that he was making plans to return to his native country. She looked pleased, started to pack and plan. He said he was going alone (eighteen years). He told two of us that he had found a new mate. One new mate was young and his student - admired him, looked up to him, needed to be formed, went to his office after work hours. He said he felt rejuvenated and resexualised and found a new life (twenty-five years). The other new mate was a former love that he found again by chance. He went to see her and decided to be in love with her still and again (nineteen years). Whom do we abhor the most – him, her, myself? We hurt. We hate. We are bitter, we are burning up. Kind friends come around, drink tea and ask how we are feeling. There is what they call another chance. One of us placed ads on a dating service and goes to meet men in bars. One has learned to rope climb on rock walls in a gym. One of us retreated into her small new home and will not come out. It is her kitchen table we sit at. She stays hunched over in her darkened rooms and mourns. But with our graying hair (carefully touched up) our yellowing teeth (using whitener helps), our plumpish bellies and bouncy backsides, who are we to compete?

Not that he shouldn't be allowed to go, to pursue a young body or an old love to keep him warm in his twilight years. But what then of us? Shall we pluck a spry male body for our bed? Or place personal ads desperately claiming we are 'adventurous and slender, funny and athletic,' and 'easygoing, yet sophisticated' or 'witty and intuitive' or perhaps just 'attractive and spirited', 'slim, pretty, youthful', 'fun and thoughtful'? Or perhaps just move in with a kindred spirit who is a woman and love her instead?

We cook small vegetarian meals now. And we have cats. We teach more, we paint more, we start a crafts business to pay the bills. A middle-class retirement with cruises and adventure holidays is no longer on the cards. So tonight we fill the cat's bowl and lay out our tray of carrot salad and grilled eggplant. Like people everywhere living alone, we pour a glass of wine and turn on the TV. We lift our feet up on the other half of the sofa where he used to sit and we savour our food in silence. The moroseness of evening closes in. We've moved our pillows to the middle

of the bed sized for two, and when we finally turn off the light there are a few more tears to be shed, so we blow our nose and then sleep comes.

One evening sitting at Dobayba's kitchen table she and Norwan admitted that they both felt like outcasts. "We are misfits. However you analyse it, we did not live in a place or time that did anything good for us, where we feel like real people, find out who we are, work at what we are good at, have relationships with whom we want, go out freely on the street." Norwan told Dobayba of something she had found out about, that she had heard about and looked for information on. "I never took it seriously before" she said to Dobayba, "but maybe we should take a look". Opening her laptop, she and Dobayba found themselves gazing at the word Cwenaland.

V WUTMARA, TAIIO

Where I am lodged, meals are communal. Most group houses like mine have a dining-room, and occupants prepare and clean up their own meals. In some of the smaller houses, people have kitchens where they share food or cook for themselves. In some communities there are cafeteria-style eating places where people who live alone, or without facilities or the time or interest can get meals and sit with others while they eat.

My job involves clearing, washing and putting away used plates and utensils as well as the taking care of condiments and side dishes. The large, low-ceilinged room contains two long trestle tables with benches on each side. The floor is rough stone and I sweep, mop and scrub it after every meal. I wish I could spread straw on it and simply sweep it all up at once at the end of the day, along with the chewed bones, apple cores and food debris.

The meals are joyful affairs where people have a chance to meet and talk before and after work. As a cleaner I soon learn that eaters' habits are no different here from elsewhere. Some carry their plates to waiting trolleys, scrape leavings into the bins provided, and throw away used serviettes and paper cups. Others carry their used items to trolleys but leave the rest for the cleaner. And a few leave their dirty plates, food leavings and used cups and napkins on the table. I learn what the community likes to eat, what side-dishes need frequent replenishing, which dishes are popular and which eaten more reluctantly. I learn to work with co-workers whose age and gender I do not know and cannot guess, who have come from all backgrounds, educations, languages and cultures. Yet the food - its preparation and consumption - is a language common to all.

About fifteen people eat here regularly. Every day I see new faces and meet new people. Not all of them are new arrivals in the community; some have been here for many years, and some know Cwenaland's founders. A few are as new as I am. Most have stories to tell. Wutmara is a quiet presence at the table, keeping her eyes lowered and speaking in a soft voice hard to hear above the dining-room chatter. One evening as I sit opposite Wutmara admiring the

embroidered cloth shahee has draped over the cotton shirt and workpants that many wear for work, shahee starts to talk.

My father and older siblings disappeared during the fighting. My little brother and I live alone with my mother. She works in the fields to have food for us. Our village was burned and there are only a few of us left. Early most mornings before it gets hot I grab my squirming brother's sticky hand and we start to walk down the dusty, potholed road. Military vans rumble past scattering pedestrians, followed by the battered trucks of local farmers taking goods to be sold. Supply vehicles carrying gasoline or piled high with bags of cornmeal thunder past dowsing us in thick dry dust. Worst are the open-backed pick-ups crammed with singing shouting rebels toting guns. It takes two hours to walk to the settlement where some foreign aid workers run a tiny school. The students sit on a mud floor under a tin roof. They use pebbles to count and scratch their letters in the dust with thin sticks. My mother does not see the value of educating a girl. I am needed to help at home until she finds me a husband. But she lets me join the class as long as my little brother needs me to take him to school. When the morning is over I take him straight home then I finish my chores. It is better to sit there on the ground with the other children instead of hiding my face at the back of the old schoolroom where only the boys were taught. I was too far back to hear the teacher's voice.

After school, the foreign aid staff give out water and sometimes crackers and fruit. An aid worker smiles at me sometimes. He tells me to leave my village and move into the settlement. He says I face great danger walking alone on the road. Most of the trucks contain anxious aggressive men who do not hesitate to attack or kidnap young girls. He thinks I must be about twelve years old, so as I grow older the danger will increase. He warns me that few teenage girls survive on their own. Women are fair booty, to be raped and killed or just left on the side of the road, or captured by one man or many and taken to live as a slave far from her family. He might be diseased, he might have girls in other villages, and he might throw her out if she got pregnant. He might make her join the rebel group and give her a gun, use her as a decoy to spur gun-blazing confrontations. There is nothing she can do to save herself and there is no-one to step in on her behalf. She is disposable.

I am threatened many times on the road to and from the school. I learn to run into the bush and hide from drunk men with guns, sometimes until it is dark. My little brother has fast legs and as he grows older senses danger before I do. He vanishes into among the low stunted prickly trees calling to me to follow. Two of the girls in the village disappear and I wonder if the foreign aid worker is right. I think I am more of a liability than a protector to my family and I lie awake full of fear. So I

ask the friendly aid worker for help and one day he helps me up into the white jeep that carries him and his co-workers out of the remote region. I drive down the dusty track with them. I do not say goodbye to my mother. I cry for her. I cry for my village. I cry for me. I have never been back.

They bring me to the house of a kind family who feed me and send me to a proper school. Later they help me leave the country. I blame the soldiers, the rebels, the harried farmers and truck drivers for devastating my family and village and forcing me to flee. I wonder obsessively why being a girl means impotence in the face of insoluble problems - powerless, a victim, a liability just because I am.

Wutmara introduces me to her friend, Taio, and in time I hear that story as well. I cannot with assurance tell if shahee was born male or female. I assure Taio that this is not a question I need an answer to, but my new friend is clear that shahee has been cursed – with having to choose one gender identity or the other since shahee was very small and for being unable to do so. Taio’s parents called him a boy, clothed him in shorts and pants, enrolled him in competitive sports, and cut his hair short. He secretly looked for other things to wear, played his own games, and made friends with girls more than boys. His mother would let him come into her bedroom when his father was not home. He was allowed to open and smell her cosmetics and to paint his nails red. His father took him to ball games, practiced throwing footballs and baseballs in the backyard, and taught him how to tie a necktie and shave. Taio describes a tortured adolescence and bursts into tears. “I told them over and over that I was more a girl than a boy, but I don’t think they ever understood.” Before hearing about Cwenaland shahee considered suicide. Just as Wutmara asked herself why she was victimised and powerless and lost everything because she was born a girl, Taio asked herself why shahee was being forced into a fixed gender and sexual role that did not fit. Why the punishment and condemnation? Why is being neither male nor female - or both male and female - less than human in society’s eyes?

I ask Wutmara and Taio what they are doing here in Cwenaland. “Come outside” says Wutmara. “Come and listen.” As we leave the house and move towards the open fields, I hear the distant sound of children’s voices singing. The high clear sound ebbs and swells on the wind, a sweet and rapid chant first loud then softer, the syncopated slightly tuneless chime of

untrained voices. I raise my eyebrows and look at Taio and Wutmara. I know that without radios and television, people make their own music in Cwenaland. Since coming here, I have heard people singing folksongs on battered guitars and joined groups singing round an old upright piano. I hear people sing in the street, in their gardens, in the dining-room in the evenings as the dishes are cleared away. There is almost always singing coming from the fields, where people working sing in unison as though they were in church.

Taio and Wutmara lead me into the road and we walk towards the sound. The children's voices are coming from a house larger than the rest. As I approach the building, I see bicycles outside and a playground with rough hand-made play equipment. "You are teachers!" I exclaim. "We teach music, art, singing and anything that brings out human creativity" says Wutmara. "Come and we will show you."

Human penis

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

3011 edition

Records show that a thousand years ago the erect penis was used destructively as a weapon of war and aggression. While at first needed for human reproduction it became widely recognised as a primary source of pleasure. At some stage enjoyed by human sexual partners in situations of mutual enjoyment, ultimately it gave rise to male urges that at times were barely controllable. It is as a tool used in war, therefore, that it is remembered today, most often used for violent rape of females and subordinate males, as well as for forcible impregnation of female bodies. Nowadays of course the male penis is a vestige and few are aware of its former glory and its paradoxical role. Modern sexual pleasure being obtained on demand through automation, and more sophisticated ways of destroying other life forms having evolved, the old and original uses of the erect penis are a quaint reminder of our distant past.

VI TAIIO, WUTMARA

As we draw closer the singing gets louder and then stops. We stand back as the door opens and children pour out. Taio, who is tall and slender – even swathed in the flowing robes that Cwenas wear – grabs my hand and squeezes excitedly. Wutmara, who is shorter and seems radiant in her brilliant embroidery, gazes over their heads at the distant hillside, perhaps remembering what school meant to her. Past her, I can see a hallway through the open door, off which several rooms open - like the romantic old schoolhouse of old.

“Come in and see” Taio takes my arm. Inside the house we walk through spacious lofty connected spaces. Light pours in from large windows high up in the walls. “These are display spaces as well as classrooms. We do not believe in learning by sitting still in rows so we have an active and participatory curriculum. Children learn skills that they are required to practice and present the results of their work in one continuous cycle,” shahee explains. “We call these spaces ‘arcades.’” I am surrounded by a psychedelic display of drawings and paintings, watercolours and acrylics, collages and found-object compositions. Some are messy and unfinished and some polished and professional. Some portray faces and portraits, and others are abstract. Several are inspired by Cwenaland landscapes. Others are collages that mix materials, photographs and blocks of text. We move to the next arcade which is filled with sculptures and carvings - some huge ones on the floor, others casually scattered on tables and shelves. Some are wood, some metal and many moulded from plaster or carved from stone.

The children come noisily back in and singing starts again, Taio leads me past a series of music rooms – a piano in one, a drumset in another. Small groups are practicing together, or small choir-like groups repeat short musical phrases. “Is this all that is taught here?” I ask, remembering hours of sitting in rows waiting for the bell while a parade of adults hammered writing and reading, then literature and geography, history and mathematics, and later chemistry and biology, foreign languages and world religions into our heads. “It is our major emphasis,” replies Taio, “like all Cwena schools. Remember how back where we came from it was generally believed that there were no women artists? Men were the great painters and sculptors, even the great writers, and of course the great musicians. How many great female

musicians do you remember? So few have been named and remembered. Nowadays there are plenty in popular culture, mostly singers. But the style of their art was set and their talent controlled by male practitioners and precedents. Do you remember the discussions about whether or not women's art was truly feminine or expressed woman's voice?" I also remember how visual arts were dominated by patriarchal commercial concerns: "Do you remember all the discussions about how much a painting was worth, depending on who painted it, and then depending on who had identified who painted it? It was ridiculous! Fortunes were changing hands, not because of the beauty of the painting but because of the name of the painter."

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Taio nods. The eyes are intense and the voice fierce. "Here everyone is an artist. We think it is valuable to have not great artists but art created and performed by everyone. We discourage

the idea of ‘the artist’ and encourage the idea of art. And because young people are naturally creative and love to express themselves, Cwenas love to go to school where everyone learns what they like and are good at. Students paint and draw things from life and from their imagination, they sculpt and carve in three dimensions and in a variety of materials, they sing and play instruments, some very simple, like a bongo drum or the recorder, and others more demanding, like the piano or the kora. They explore less well-known arts such as weaving and textiles, object and building design, and all kinds of music and singing – in groups, in choirs, in harmonies, alone, accompanied or not No-one is criticized or rebuked for trying what they do not know. Every individual expresses herself, and explores different things until they find what they love. Then they have the skills and confidence to create for the rest of their lives.”

“And the other types of knowledge?” I ask. “The dry, memory-tested, book-learning kind?” Wutmara explains, “Our schools teach reading and writing and basic mathematics but after that we leave it up to the individual. All that book-learning only makes sense if the student is motivated to learn it. We place no age restriction on school attendance so people come when they are ready to learn. Some stop their schooling in their teens because they are anxious to go and help in the fields, because they are bored, or because they do not know what they love. But when they discover what they like to do and what they want to know, the schools take them back. Some study academic disciplines. Some learn practical skills – to repair machines, say, or to join our security operations, to help plan and manage our food supplies, or to work in health care. They can also come back to school to find out more about the world, to read great literature, to learn a new language, to study history, to write poetry, or to acquire knowledge in a specialized area that interests them, geology for example.

Our society has not yet reached the point where we need chemists and physicists or radio-astronomers or neuroscientists. And if people want to participate in that kind of society, it is available to them out there. Cwenas are not interested in weapons or war, or better computers or communications technology. We do not use banks or financial systems, we do not need emporia of prepared foods, or to travel long distances quickly. We find we have no great need for most of what is called ‘information’ in the world we left behind. What we need is joy and beauty and art and community, so that is what young people are taught.”

“We must go now” Taio interrupts. “But think about what you would like to learn and what kind of artist lies inside there,” shahee taps me on the chest, “and then you can come and be one of our students.” Inspired by what I have seen, I burst out “I need more music, I love music, but I have no skills to play an instrument.” “That is not a problem here,” Taio says as shahee opens the door. “We teach skills at the rate you want and need them. There is an infinite number of ways to make music. You will find the ways that suit you best.”

We stroll back towards the group house. I reflect on how much of what we are good at – or not – is dictated by feedback we receive from other people. When I was told I was not musical and could not draw, I grew up believing that others are artists but I am not. Cwena children are being told not just that they can be musical but that they are. Teaching children in this way erodes the line between Art and not-Art. I start to think I will go back to school. I will learn to be someone who does more than look and listen. I will learn to give form to the sounds I hear in my head and share it with others. I will blend my music with others or hear my music played or sung by others and play or sing others’ music. The idea makes me giddy with joy. Full of gratitude I hug Wutmara and Taio tight. For once, I feel full of life and energy. I can run and jump and shout. For once, I feel close not to god or goddess but to god-ness.

VISITOR

One someone sat on a greying wood bench, under spreading branches of great trees, green red silver leaves sent shimmering by sun and wind, gaze held by dark and jagged bark, dark cenotaphs against the sunlit landscape.

A large grey and black fly of the sort that in the kitchen I would swat except bigger with a tinge of red landed on the bench with something about him that said he was there for a reason, intentionally a visitor a messenger because of what he brought.

He landed and settled beside me on the bench, fellow traveller, both of us stilled at rest soothed by grass and sky, watching the wind excite the leaves into glittering black and gleaming phantoms in its breath and they are what they're supposed to be, just wind and trees as the sun is warm and gold from above!

And not seeing but being was just I – could I be just I? – was I, just? Was the tree just the tree and the wind just the wind quickening the leaves and lifting my hair while a small green weed pushed itself up between two paving stones just being?

My visitor and I gazed out focussed communing, he bringing me the universe all in its place and perfect and outside time and I too as perfect place and time, hearing wind and leaves trilling and seeing shapes – people, trees, cars, clouds – be, as the weed was perfect in its stony crack under sun and sky and wind and trees.

All meaning was there, all things wholly themselves and true, and I seeing hearing knowing was not I but all of this at once and in and of it, the fly poised by my side a silent guide. Until the present moment gently took its leave - no I to hold on to it, only knowing the visitor would go, he could not stay.

He shifted his six feet, a sort of salute, then beat his wings and flew away. One someone left bereft yet fed and full, the visit over for I not able to hold on to a fly or a moment, I left just to be and know.

VII ONATAH

As the weeks go by I take long solitary walks in the hills and valleys near town. I come across other communities of people of indeterminate gender but I cannot estimate the area of Cwenaland and where it begins and ends. Walking high up in the hills one day, I look down into a verdant valley and see a cluster of tent-like structures made of wood and roofed with tarps over sheets of metal and blankets of woven branches.

I scramble down the steep path. My attention is drawn by large swatches of colour draped across the landscape like bands of jewellery on coiled green skin. Coming closer I can see that each is a flowerbed alive with blossoming plants. A series of linked allotments winds away from the shacks and up into the hills on all sides. In them are poppies, lilies, and purple and pink violets. Slightly further away – a vibrant shawl on the hillside’s soft green shoulders – are fields of blooming tulips, and begonias mixed with pink and red weigela, and dense patches of lily-of-the-valley under some trees. Vivid splashes of pink and scarlet, orange and yellow and streaked, black and purple and blue, brilliant white, and dark crimson as far as the eye can see .

In the village, flowering passiflora and bougainvillea and clematis plants are attached to the sides of the shacks, and flower boxes at each window overflow with pink and mauve phlox, white baby’s breath, yellow daisies and primroses, and tiny blue columbines. Some are filled with geraniums in various shades of red; some brim over with multi-coloured petunias. I smell before I see luscious sweet peas climbing up bamboo frames, beds of flowering roses, and explosions of peony and hibiscus.

*When the red hibiscus flower blooms it bursts open a speared bubble of blood, a bullet through pomegranate. One day it is a fat pinkish promise and the next day it is a yawning round red gash, at its centre a slender frond brandishes its yellow stamens and sticks out its tongue.
The bloom folds back its lips curling open its insides and spreading itself for the world to see. It shows its mouth and its bare bottom, red and vivid as though it had just been spanked. It stares, it yawns, it screams. It comes for one day.
The flower that opens at dawn does not blink. The redness of red – strong, unwavering: it does not fail or fall. Evening brings a message, the imminent darkness of the night. In darkness there is no red. No-one knows when the blossoming stops but the next day the bloom is dying or dead. The red shout is silent, red lips faded shut.
In their place is something grayish and pale clinging together, a dishrag wrung-out. Red energy is all used up. The lumpish grey corpse droops, is barely recognizable. It has spoiled, rotted, gone. It has made no sound.
Whether it has died or whether it is waiting to die makes no difference.
Nothing in the universe can make it last longer than one day. From the first heavy breaths of that glorious red dawn it is waiting to die.*

At the centre of the community is water: a large pond, almost a lagoon. Clusters of aquatic plants mirrored in the rippling water – lotus, water lilies and slender water iris – nod in the breeze. In the centre of the pond is a cluster of pure white zephyr lilies and papyrus plants and a dramatic orange and black Bengal Tiger Flower. I can see no-one to ask, so I kneel down beside the pond and listen to the lap of wavelets.

I am startled by a rough voice close to my ear, “This is our church. You are sitting in our place of worship. Is this your intention?” I turn to see a small bent figure holding a hamper woven of reeds and twigs. Shahee seems to have returned from the fields, with her earthy hands and muddy sandals. Shahee bends down with a sigh and places the hamper on the ground. “I’m so sorry” I stammer, “I was walking in the hills and I could see all the flowers from up there” I point to the ridge. “Have you heard about us?” asks the person, “We worship flowers. They call us floradorers. You have heard of our strange rituals and beliefs, that we do not welcome outsiders, that we permit no bringing in or taking out of goods? We left the towns and came here to freely pursue our faith. We have lived in this valley for years and people leave us alone. We have few visitors but when people come we ask them to respect our way of life. Sometimes people seek us out and ask to join.” Shahee peers into my face.

Feeling I should leave, I stand up. Then I hear people singing in the distance. “You will learn more about us than you expected. This is one of our flower worshipping rituals, performed at the end of every day before sunset and which everyone is expected to join in, wherever they are and whatever they are doing. You cannot leave yet.” Shahee turns away. “I am Onatah.” Now I see a procession of people looking as gaudy and gleaming as an Easter Parade. They are dressed in loose fieldwork garments and most have long hair tied up into colourful scarves decorated with fresh flowers. They are all ages and sizes and almost everyone carries a hand-made basket like Onatah’s. Their arms are full of flowers, bunches of small blossoms like poppies and dahlias and bouquets of large blossoms on long stems like gladiolus and hydrangea. Some have lilac branches and others carry drooping amaranth blossoms. The procession is a moving mass of blooms winding towards the shimmering lagoon.

I step back into shadow to watch. The singing gets louder as they approach. As the ones in front arrive at the edge of the pond, the procession splits. Each side moves to the water’s edge and the others press in behind them. Soon the entire pool is girdled by colour and sound and fragrance. The people sing on, swaying from side to side, their blooms glowing in the setting sun and perfuming the evening breeze.

The sun is low on the horizon but I dare not move. No-one pays attention to my presence. They are focused on the flowers in their arms and on their ceremony. Now a new song starts and the voices swell. The sound grows to a crescendo and all the people raise their arms and flower sprays high over their heads. The sun drops over the horizon and as the light starts to fade they sing out the final line of the song and every throat opens in a joyful shout. The arms drop for an instant and then as one fling up towards the sky tossing the flowers high into the air where they seem to float magically before descending in a rainburst of colour, landing on the ground and the people, on the water and on each other. For some minutes silence is total and nobody moves, their faces lowered as though in prayer. Even the wind has dropped. Then one by one they turn away into the darkening twilight, leaving only the carpet of flowers and the echoes of their song.

As I look at the water and breathe in the sight and scent of the fallen blossoms, I notice shadowy figures lightly stepping through the piles of dying flowers and collecting them in

large baskets that they carry on their backs. Some have long curved sticks to reach out over the water and pull in the broken stems. As each basket fills up the bearer disappears, returning with an empty basket. This continues until the pond and the grass around is cleared and returned to its pristine state. I want to follow one of them and see where the broken bodies of dying flowers are taken, but it is dark and I am cold and afraid.

She sits motionless in a chair by the window. Only her fingers move, tapping out a forgotten rhythm, an echo of her years playing the piano. She practiced every day, had students that came to her for lessons. In later years she played to keep her stiffening hands supple. “Music is my life,” she likes to say to staff and visitors. She does not look at the other people in the room in their bibs and wheelchairs, their eyes squeezed shut or staring blankly at the TV.

Her gaze out of the third floor window is attentive, watching cars go by and the diminutive dark figures of people passing. She sees brown leaves fall from the autumn trees, and then later the snow. She watches the trees turn green again in spring and squirrels and birds in the branches. She likes to watch the squirrels – she lifts her hand to point them out.

She sits oblivious to the noise and bustle in the room. The intrusive shout of the television; the groans and sighs of people lying dying in wheelchairs; the coming and going of staff, frowning and busy; the abrupt Tourettes outbursts and random strands of conversation from those who sit or wander, lost in the depths of their ailing minds.

The room where she sleeps looks like a hospital room: bare vinyl floors and sparse furniture – a small desk, a chair, a bedside stand. On the wall outside every room there is small photograph of the occupant with a name printed underneath. As the years pass photos change and some – most – disappear. They are replaced with new names and new old faces. But hers has not changed.

She sits immune to all of it, immune to the sick old people lying on their gurneys and playing with the strings of their bibs, immune to strictures of staff who tell her when to take showers and what to wear, immune to the overheated disinfected air, immune to the austere clinical look of her room with its shared malodorous toilet, immune to the absence of warm familiar faces. She does not notice when the few things she owns – a travel clock, a silk scarf, a bottle of perfume – in time disappear from her room.

She was not always indifferent. She used to take all her clothes out of the closet and off the shelves, lay them out in untidy folded piles on the bed and desk. She was packing. She would be leaving soon. Her things were ready. But there was no suitcase to put them in, no car to pick her up, no home to take her back to. She sat and watched as the sweaters were folded up and the pants hung on hangers and the closet door closed over them. Once she fell and the doctor came to see her. They said she had fallen while trying to go out of the front door with her walker. Somewhere inside, locked into her mind behind a door kept carefully closed, is her despair.

I see a figure waving. Onatah invites me into one of the shelters and offers me something to eat. I take the fresh bread and ripe fruit gratefully. “Do you also keep bees in this community?” Onatah nods. “We keep our own bees because so many of the world’s bees have been destroyed. We could not count on them coming into our valley in sufficient numbers to pollinate all our flowers and fruit trees. But now, like us, our bees almost never leave. We moved here to devote our lives to flowering plants. Flowers contain all that we respect and aspire to and they are right in front of us, with us all the time and everywhere, glorious symbols of all that is good and beautiful in life on earth. They cost us nothing and they give us everything. We do not have to pay for them yet they fill our lives with joy. Do you see?”

I think about the flowers I saw, the colours and shapes. “First, flowers bestow beauty. Each one is different and each is perfection. That is magical. Second, they are ubiquitous. They grow in deserts and forests, on high trees and low bushes and straight out of the ground, in warm climates and in cold ones, even in water. That is miraculous. Flowers also help humanity. They have scents that please the nose and colours that delight the eyes. They have healing properties and are made into teas and tinctures that are good for health. Some attract grubs and insects and keep them away from our crops. Others attract birds that eat pests and make our own lives easier. And while a flower is never controlling, territorial, deceitful or aggressive they have their own power.

Every nation on earth has identified a national flower, and why? Because there is another kind of power in the universal and undemanding glory of flowers, the power of being everywhere,

of finding a home in broken down buildings and cracks in the sidewalk as well as in cultivated fields and gardens, and in the wilderness. Flowers are there whether people are there or not. They devote their lives to being what they are. This is as far as can be from masculine power, of which there is too much evidence on earth: dominating and controlling, staking out territory, building and destroying, inventing and imposing, claiming and trading, competing and competing. Through our cultivation of flowering plants, our way of life pays homage to feminine power. She does not build but she grows everywhere and she adapts to adversity. She cooperates with the conditions she finds around her in order to thrive, she does not take more than she gives, she offers ineffable beauty, living only a short time and occupying only a little space so that new blossoms emerge from their buds and the cycle of life goes on.

As flower worshippers, we do not strain to live forever and we do not survive by dominating over other forms of life. We accept and find joy in the short, sad sweet experience that we call life. We believe that when we die and are buried in the earth we become flowers. So when flowers die we treat them with respect and lay them in heaps under the sun where the warm air helps each plant disintegrate and merge into the soil and stones from whence it came.” “What of all the flowers thrown away in the evening ceremony?” “They are not thrown away, they are returned to the earth. We remove the fallen flowers from their beds, the overblown and waning blossoms, to make space for others to grow. In our evening ceremony with gratitude we say goodbye and we give them back to the earth.”

I fall asleep easily in the tiny shack that Onatah has offered me, and when I awake the sun is up and someone has left a jug of milk and warm bread with a bowl of honey. When I emerge from the shelter the village seems empty and I wonder whether to say goodbye, how to say thank-you or offer a gift. I walk slowly towards the water, drawn to the lavish white flowers dancing in the summer wind, and suddenly I feel like kneeling and bowing my head. “Go ahead,” says a voice I recognise; it is Onatah. “That is why all this is here”. I do not need to turn, but taking her advice I bend my head to the water and the wind and the plants and the sky, all moving together on this perfect morning to create perfection and making me part of it.

CODA

So we leave Urmya in Cwenaland as she grows and learns and transforms. The process is long and not without pain and suffering. In future chapters, she has an accident and learns about illness and healthcare in Cwenaland, she discovers the Cwena religion and how the Cwena worship, she is taken to meet the governing council and to learn the Cwena philosophy of government and more about the economy and managing relations with ‘out there’. She meets people dedicated to restoring and enriching the mother-daughter relationship, she explores sexual identity in the relationships she forms, and she is finally found ready for the ultimate test for permanent acceptance to Cwenaland.

Will she succeed and become a full-fledged member of the community? Will she be able – through living here, her experiences, and her self-awareness – to finally say she knows the feminine that stands alone and independent of the masculine, essence of Woman? Will she with others express and be the feminine so that in the future it will spread and take over and replace patriarchy and libidinous masculinity? As Cwenas we know that once feminine has found itself and demonstrated that masculine dominance can be overthrown it becomes thinkable to balance feminine and masculine in ways that are true to our basic humanity. After all it is our, your, and Urmya’s goal to ensure that humanity learns to grow and flourish in a close caring committed relationship to her mother, earth.

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