

# A M A N D A A Z Z I

## REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS AND OPPRESSION IN MARGE PIERCY'S UTOPIA

### Résumé

Depuis les années 1900, les sociétés patriarcales contrôlent les droits reproductifs et imposent la ségrégation raciale pour affirmer leur pouvoir et leur domination sur les corps marginalisés, principalement par le biais de législations discriminatoires qui éliminent la liberté de choix des personnes concernées. Cependant, dans un monde qui garantit l'autonomie des groupes marginalisés, en éradiquant l'assujettissement des femmes et les préjugés raciaux, on peut se retrouver dans une utopie. Cet article évalue les façons dont les romans *Utopia* par Thomas More (1516), *Herland* par Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1915) et *Woman on the Edge of Time* par Marge Piercy (1976), présentent des utopies différentes favorisant la liberté des femmes et du secteur marginalisé. J'analyse comment le roman de Piercy supprime l'enchaînement biologique de la maternité et impose l'égalité par le biais du mélange racial dans son monde futuriste de Mattapoisset. Le fait de rendre les hommes et les femmes « mères » et de briser les liens génétiques et culturels offre la possibilité de perturber les hiérarchies postcoloniales. Si le roman de Piercy semble présenter un monde utopique féministe décolonial, je soutiens que les caractéristiques dystopiques flagrantes de Mattapoisset - notamment la suppression de l'autonomie corporelle et la préservation de la race - créent une utopie imparfaite.

**Mots clés :** utopie, dystopie, droits reproductifs, mélange racial

Oppression comes in many forms, but more commonly against marginalized groups—women, people of colour, persons with disabilities—through colonial oppression imposed by patriarchal society. Humankind's

### Abstract

Since the 1900s, patriarchal societies have controlled reproductive rights and even imposed racial segregation to assert power and dominance over marginalized bodies, primarily through discriminatory legislation that eliminates the freedom of choice of those affected. However, in a world that ensures marginalized groups' autonomy, by eradicating women's subjugation and racial prejudice, one can find themselves in a utopia. This paper explores the ways in which Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915) and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) present different utopias favouring women and the marginalized sector's freedom. I analyze how Piercy's novel removes motherhood's biological enchainment and mandates equality through racial mixing in her futuristic world of Mattapoisset. Making both men and women 'mothers' and breaking genetic and cultural bonds provides the opportunity to disrupt postcolonial hierarchies. While Piercy's novel appears to present a feminist decolonial utopian world, I argue that Mattapoisset's glaring dystopian features—including the removal of bodily autonomy and racial preservation—create a flawed utopia.

**Key words:** utopia, dystopia, reproductive rights, racial mixing

most recent history is replete with examples of patriarchal societies controlling reproductive rights and imposing racial segregation to assert power and dominance over marginalized bodies, primarily through

discriminatory legislation.<sup>1</sup> These legislations are major public health issues and violations of human rights, eliminating the freedom of choice of those affected. In this way, a world that ensures marginalized groups' autonomy by eradicating women's material subjugation, as well as racial prejudice, is a utopia. This paper will explore the ways in which Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915) and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) present utopias that theoretically favour women and marginalized groups as they possess absolute freedom. I will then analyze how Piercy's novel goes one step further by removing the biological enchainment of motherhood and mandating racial mixing to create equality within her futuristic world of Mattapoissett. Making everyone—including men—mothers and breaking the bonds between genes and culture provides the opportunity to disrupt all patriarchal and postcolonial hierarchies. However, Mattapoissett's control over these bodies and reproductive systems removes

women's and racialized groups' rights. Although Piercy's novel appears to present a feminist decolonial utopian world, glaring dystopian aspects ultimately create a flawed utopia. Mattapoissett adopts dystopian ideas against women and their reproductive rights by enforcing racial mixing, and therefore, controlling bodily autonomy, in an effort to eliminate racism. I argue that Mattapoissett illustrates these flaws by analyzing women's sacrifice of their power to reproduce by indirectly sterilizing them and stripping them of their choice to bear children. Moreover, I will highlight how racial mixing does not necessarily eliminate racism and may even encourage assimilation.

Many scholars find it challenging to define utopia as its content, form, or function becomes too broad or too narrow. Ruth Levitas believes that they approach these elements of utopia differently “because they are asking different questions” (179). As “[t]he essence of utopia seems to be ... the desire for a different, better way of being” (Levitas 181), it is ultimately unfeasible to

---

<sup>1</sup>Oppressive medical legislations against marginalized groups, more specifically women of colour, exist all over North America. For instance, in 2021, a Human Rights report from the Senate Committee, entitled “Forced and Coerced Sterilization of Persons in Canada,” found that Indigenous women have been and still are subjected to forced and coerced sterilization by medical intervention, even though it is required to obtain informed consent. Additionally, Native Americans accused the Indian Health Service (IHS) of forcibly sterilizing approximately 25% of Native American women, between the ages of fifteen and forty-four throughout the 1970s. The allegations included: “failure to provide women with necessary information regarding sterilization; use of coercion to get signatures on the consent forms; improper consent forms; and lack of an appropriate waiting period (at least seventy-two hours) between the signing of a consent form and the surgical procedure” (Lawrence 400).

meet everyone's needs. Moreover, Lyman Tower Sargent states that “[t]he word *utopia* or *outopia* simply means *no* or *not place*” (5). Therefore, creating or attaining a utopia is virtually impossible because it is a “non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space” (Sargent 9). In this way, while *Mattapoissett* meets a specific criterion of better living conditions for all, the genre's limitations trap Piercy into writing a utopia that holds dystopian<sup>2</sup> aspects as a denunciation of patriarchy and colonialism because utopia is an impulse “grounded in the human capacity, and need, for fantasy” (Levitas 181). Additionally, Levitas states that “utopia is intrinsically both oppositional and transformative” (183), which further demonstrates how *Mattapoissett*'s transformation of women's subjugation and racial mixing—though positive in many ways—does not necessarily eliminate the issue of control over their bodies and reproductive systems. In this respect, a group must determine their definition of utopia, even if it includes evil utopias or utopias that possess dystopian traits for an Other. In *Mattapoissett*, we find women who wish to bear children and marginalized groups who

do not want to endure a process of racial mixing or assimilation. Of course, one cannot truly know Piercy's intention with *Mattapoissett*, and it may be a way to present the shortcomings of such a utopia.

In its original form, Thomas More, who coined the term 'utopia' when he published *Utopia* in 1516, presents an idealistic island ruled by an elected monarchy, though still broadly patriarchal and imperial. In the novel, women “prefer a married state to a single one; and as they do not deny themselves the pleasure of it, so they think the begetting of children is a debt which they owe to human nature and to their country” (More 101). Consequently, married women wish to bear children and take on domestic roles, or they remain chaste—though both options ultimately do not give them control over their bodies. As More places this utopia in the New World, the Indigenous peoples of this land cohabitate “if they are willing to live with [the] [settlers]” (More 51). However, “if the [N]atives refuse to conform themselves to their laws, they drive them out of those bounds which they mark out for themselves, and use force if they resist” (More 52). Conquest over racialized groups—in this case, Native peoples—along

---

<sup>2</sup> In his book, *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction*, Tower Sargent refers to dystopia as “meaning [a] bad place” (22).

with the treatment of women, present dystopian flaws within this utopia, similarly to that of Mattapoissett. Although More creates a liberal utopia for his time, marginalized groups remain subordinate because they serve within a patriarchal colony. As a template for future utopias, authors have either similarly adhered to or entirely subverted More's story's expectations of these marginalized groups, specifically regarding the control over their bodies and reproductive rights.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's feminist utopian novel *Herland* (1915) radically shifts the concept of reproduction by excluding men from the process and putting forth a place that erases the necessity of male presence.<sup>3</sup> *Herland* illustrates a utopia composed of "only women and girl children" (Gilman 2), and they reproduce through "parthenogenesis... that means virgin birth" (Gilman 30); as a result, they live in an ideal world free of war, conflict or male domination. However, as per utopia's definition as a non-existent place, even *Herland* holds immeasurable dystopian behaviours. On the one hand, the text establishes a racially 'pure' female nation and calls upon women "to secure the borders of

the home, to sanitize and preserve this space for the future citizens... [while] maintaining the 'boundaries' of whiteness" (Egan 77). Therefore, *Herland* perpetuates white feminism and disregards the issues of women of colour or marginalized groups at large, "displaying the text's belief in racial superiority" (Egan 81). The neglect of racialized women is crucial; it aligns with the real-world realities that Connie, from Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, attempts to escape, as she endures discrimination for being Mexican American. On the other hand, *Herland's* utopia equally asks the 'undesirable' or 'unfit' women "to submit to the will of the community, and they do so by taking control over their thoughts in order to control their bodies" (Egan 80). As a result, these women are not allowed to bear children, and they cannot bear the idea of "[destroying] the unborn" (Gilman 46), so they deny marginalized women's reproductive rights and their access to abortion.

Both More's *Utopia* and Gilman's *Herland* address women's subjugation and the control of reproductive rights, similarly to Piercy's utopia, by eliminating women's agency and autonomy and stripping them of

---

<sup>3</sup> Perkins Gilman's novel was published in 1915, during the first wave of feminism. Their objectives focused on providing opportunities for women, with a focus on suffrage.

a biological right. These tensions were key elements of 1970s second-wave feminism, aligning with *Woman on the Edge of Time's* publication in 1976. It is critical to acknowledge that these utopias are, in fact, written to teach readers about their contemporary society. That is why, in the name of social cohesion, these utopias limit maternity and reproductive rights as well as promote the assimilation of racialized groups. These limits are a challenge that are found in Piercy's novel as well. However, its measures to decolonize racial discrimination and depatriarchalize motherhood and reproductive rights fall into the second-wave feminist movement of the 1970s.

The women's movement was a significant influence in feminist utopian novels, as it was for Piercy's creation of *Mattapoisett*. Second-wave feminism was crucial as it "emerged in the wake of the May 1968 student uprisings and took its cue from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, focused mostly on the body and reproductive rights" (Chetcuti-Osorovitz and Sanos 65).<sup>4 5</sup> Feminists fought for "the right of women to control their own bodies and campaigned for

the legalization of contraception and abortion as well as equality within the family and [labour] force... [t]hose concerns shaped most of the 1970s and 1980s activism" (Chetcuti-Osorovitz and Sanos 65). The pill had been created in the 1950s, but only became more accessible in the 1960s, leading up to the movement. However, some "were concerned to make birth control information available to the poor" (Staggenborg 17), which consisted of predominantly racialized groups from then until now. In these circumstances, second-wave feminism was controversial because it left out women of colour. Piercy acknowledges this disparity within the movement and makes her protagonist a single, poor, ageing Mexican American to demonstrate the importance of including a marginalized woman within the narrative. In this way, feminist utopias begin "by showing how women are profoundly alienated and limited by patriarchal society... they then go on to acquaint the reader with an alternative society in which women could feel at home and manifest their potential" (Michael 111-112). *Mattapoisett* presents a world in which both men and women can

---

<sup>4</sup> The student protests of May 1968 aligned with the "MLF," an acronym for the political movement entitled le Mouvement de libération des femmes (or Women's Liberation Front). They brought together various Marxist and other feminist collectives, organizations, and committees that had mobilized from 1967 to 1970.

<sup>5</sup> Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is regarded as a major contribution to feminist philosophy and even a starting point for second-wave feminist movement. More broadly, the book discusses the mistreatment of women throughout history in two volumes: *Facts and Myths* and *Lived Experience*.

reach their full potential as they, primarily women, no longer need to adhere to society's pressures, especially within the patriarchal narrative of motherhood. However, this utopia does not allow them to decide how to fulfill their purpose in the world. The superimposition of a patriarchal world compared to the feminist utopia illustrates how easy it is to forget how, for many women, their agency comes from pregnancy and motherhood, which is biologically void in Mattapoissett. Piercy depicts a constructive change by decolonizing patriarchal systems within the novel, but her focus on subverting the societal discourse of maternity and discouraging violence against women does not bode well for every woman either.

In the novel, Connie and her niece, Dolly (Dolores), endure several forms of violence and abuse in the real world, making Mattapoissett look like a true utopia—especially since they would no longer be victims due to their gender, race, and class. Michael expresses how “the novel goes beyond pointing out inequalities in its incisive analysis of a society in which those in power—white, bourgeois males—remain in control through their victimization of those they regard as marginal to society, as *Other*” (114). Therefore, Connie is “unable to escape the role of victim and the cycle of

victimizations in which she is caught” (Michael 115). As the novel was written during the second-wave feminist movement, many women would jump at the opportunity to live in a utopia like Mattapoissett. However, Connie believes that the future's removal of an integral aspect of womanhood—reproduction—is a dehumanizing experience, even if it proves to generate gender equality. The story begins with the first of many instances when a man controls a woman's body. Dolly is seeking help from her aunt as Geraldo, Dolly's pimp and boyfriend, beats her and “[brings] a doctor to fix [her]” (Piercy 8) because she is carrying his child. Dolly “tried to get pregnant, believing Geraldo would let her quit whoring” (Piercy 8), but to no avail. The narrator chooses the word 'let' here wisely, because it indicates how Geraldo has control over Dolly's body—whether that means carrying his child or continuing as a sex worker for him. He commands them with “loud masculine order[s]” (Piercy 9). This toxic hegemonic masculinity sets a precedent for the society in which Connie originally finds herself, especially in the case of men or patriarchal systems forcing women to keep their babies, or in this case, enforcing an abortion. These impositions impede a woman's freedom of choice, similar to how

women cannot choose to bear children in their utopia. Both worlds possess a dystopian element as women are forced to bear children or sacrifice this right for equality, ultimately leaving them with no choice.

Reproductive rights, such as access to contraception and abortion, have been the subject of controversy worldwide for decades despite being largely protected by the American Constitution. Suzanne Staggenborg posits that the Supreme Court's ruling in *Roe v. Wade*<sup>6</sup> was "a powerful stimulus for the anti-abortion countermovement, which grew enormously after 1973" (4). Consequently, pro-life activists tried to regain power but were most successful in recent history. Some "[anti-abortion] states are racing one another to ban abortion earlier and earlier in pregnancy—Missouri at eight weeks; Georgia, Kentucky, Ohio, and Mississippi at six weeks; and Alabama at conception" (Cohen and Joffe 8-9). These laws protect the fetus, but they do not protect the woman's rights. For many women, unintended pregnancy "has a major impact on numerous social, economic, and cultural aspects of modern life" (Institution of Medicine 50) especially as it pertains to the unaffordability of raising children or lack of

readiness. Piercy presents this critical perspective, as well as Geraldo's control over Dolly's body, to expose the impediment to women's reproductive rights and the privileged men who make these decisions. Luciente, Connie's friend from Mattapoissett, explains that the hegemonic masculinity causing reproductive rights issues is one of the woman's movement's motivations to remove women's bodies from the equation:

It was part of women's long revolution. When we were breaking all the old hierarchies. Finally, there was the one thing we had to give up too, the only power we ever had, in return for no more power for anyone. The original production: the power to give birth. Cause as long as we were biologically enchained, we'd never be equal. And males never would be humanized to be loving and tender. So, we all become mothers. Every child has three. To break the nuclear bonding. (Piercy 110)

Dohal presents Piercy as a social critic "by separating sexuality from production in the future society" (5) because women solely gain equality by sacrificing their only 'power' over men. As babies are made in a brooder, Piercy emphasizes how "the male mothers

---

<sup>6</sup> In 1973, *Roe v. Wade* was a U.S. Supreme Court decision which ruled that the Constitution of the United States must protect a pregnant woman's liberty to choose to have an abortion without excessive government intervention.

reflect changes signaling the end of gender roles" (Dohal 5) and encourage the humanization of men, benefitting them in the long run. However, women no longer possess the capacity to bear children, their human right.

Connie's perspective challenges this institutional decision because, on the one hand, she wants to keep this right, but, on the other hand, she understands that giving up their power to create life ultimately achieves the gender equality women desire. As a marginalized woman, Connie endures the prejudice "of motherhood and inferiority" (Dohal 5), as her current society expects women to give birth and breastfeed without question. The idea of motherhood traps them. In this respect, the future utopia reduces this pressure on women, but Connie initially believes that the removal of this biological bond violates her right as a woman and mother:

Angelina, child of my sore and bleeding body... But you fit right. The nurse said I would have to show you, but you reached right for my breast. You suckled right away. I remember how you grabbed with your small pursed mouth at my breast and started drawing milk from me, how sweet it felt. How could anyone know what being a mother means who has never

carried a child nine months heavy under her heart, who has never borne a baby in blood and pain, who has never suckled a child. Who got that child out of a machine the way that couple, white and rich, got my flesh and blood. All made up already, a canned child, just add money. What do they know of motherhood? (Piercy 111)

Connie's internal conflict offers an empowering perspective for women who genuinely wish to give birth and experience the connection between mother and newborn. Although women and men may all be equal in "education, work, sexual expression, and even parenting" (Dohal 5) within Mattapoissett, the physical sacrifice is a loss to women. Latimer posits, "[r]eproduction politics continue to be popularly framed through ideologies of individual 'choices' and 'rights'" (5); consequently, women only ask for the right to bodily autonomy. In addition, it removes the right of both women and men to have biological children because "[t]here's no genetic bond—or if there is, [they] don't keep track of it" (Piercy 109). They simply "mix the genes well through the population" (Piercy 108). As Luciente explains, they are "kidbinder[s], meaning [they] mother everybody's kids" (Piercy 75). In Mattapoissett, they provide both men and women with the option to be a mother—

“comothers” (76 Piercy)—so they are ultimately equal, but at the cost of women's rights.

Piercy's challenge while creating her utopia is redefining women's agency by eliminating their material subjugation; however, Mattapoissett arguably removes a critical right that leaves them with less freedom of choice than before. Tatjana Alvadj defines choice for women through Becker, which stands for “autonomy, independence, and freedom of will, signifying women's sense of themselves as having an influence on the process in which they are engaged” (42). It is empowering to possess an “enhanced individual power in [the] [decision-making] process within the family and community and openness for new knowledge and change” (Alvadj 43). The freedom of choice is also crucial because Connie already possesses very few choices. As a marginalized woman, “it was a crime to be born poor as it was a crime to be born brown” (Piercy 62). This discrimination makes it difficult for her to become and stay a mother to her daughter, Angelina, because Child Services remove her. She finds herself trapped in the current world's systemic racism<sup>7</sup> that prevents her growth in society.

Connie needs to find a space where biological motherhood neither cages her nor gets stripped from her. However great Mattapoissett may be, Piercy creates a space for short-term fulfillment as the maternal space is regulated within this utopia. Luciente explains to Connie that they “each have [their] space... [o]nly babies share space” (Piercy 73). They leave during adolescence. Luciente and her people live a life of solitude to “meditate, think, compose songs, sleep, study” (Piercy 73), and decide their fate, whether it means being a mother or not. She compares the choice of becoming a ‘mother’ to becoming a war soldier. Luciente adds that “[i]t's like being a mother ... [s]ome never mother, some never go to defend” (Piercy 105), and some do both. However, they make a choice based on their sense of agency. Luciente emphasizes that “[i]f [a] person didn't want to be mother and you were a baby, you might not be loved enough to grow up loving and strong ... [so this] [p]erson must not do what [they] cannot do...” (Piercy 105). As Piercy provides options to these people to pursue different roles in their lives, it also assesses how we determine and meet individual or societal wants and needs.

---

<sup>7</sup> Systemic racism, or institutional racism, is a central and enduring social structure which upholds the privilege of predominantly white racialized groups in modern societies, namely North American and Western societies.

Although Connie understands that being a mother is a want more than a need for herself and other women, it becomes difficult to establish whether this is a determinant within Piercy's utopia. Ruth Levitas quotes William Leiss to address this debate:

[T]here is no aspect of our physiological requirements (the famous basic needs for food, shelter, and so forth) that has not always been firmly embedded in a rich tapestry of symbolic mediations. Likewise what are called the higher needs – love, esteem, the pursuit of knowledge and spiritual perfection – also arise within a holistic interpretation of needs and are not separated from the material aspects of existence. (182)

Leiss's mention of love as a need is essential to Connie because she wants to experience this feeling again—both romantically and maternally. However, according to Luciente, love no longer plays the same role in Mattapoisett. Even if Connie wishes to define her identity and be part of the decision-making process as both a woman and mother, it is impossible. Luciente exclaims to Connie: “[birth is] all you can dream about... [but] [their] dignity comes from work... [e]veryone raises the kids... [r]omance, sex, birth, children—that’s what you fasten on... yet that isn’t women’s business anymore...

[i]t’s everybody’s [business]” (Piercy 274). Luciente almost shames Connie for wanting autonomy over these aspects of her life. Everything Connie wants—both in her world and Mattapoisett—seems wrong. However, Levitas believes that “all needs, once concretely expressed, are in a sense artificial in that they are socially constructed, but they remain real needs” (183). Therefore, whether Connie’s needs are socially constructed, they are important and valid. Her fulfillment as a woman comes from motherhood and intimate relationships. One may agree that this is Connie's choice, but these needs are socially constructed, as previously mentioned. Others may take it one step further by highlighting how these socially constructed ideas stem from the patriarchal narrative of motherhood or womanhood at large, in addition to the inherent shame of women who do not or cannot bear children.

Within Connie’s patriarchal society, men measure a woman's value based on their ability to bear children or rather lack thereof. Connie's mother, Mariana’s, last baby was stillborn. Mariana's husband and Connie's father, Jesús, claims that “[t]hey took her womb in the hospital... [and] [Mariana] [was] no longer a woman ... [a]n empty shell” (Piercy 44). Her inability to give life in this singular moment, even though she did it

five times beforehand with Connie and her siblings, defines her worth and agency as a woman. A woman without a child appears to be empty and purposeless. Connie also experiences this sexist dehumanization because "[doctors] had taken out her womb ... when she had come in bleeding after [an] abortion and [a] beating from Eddie, [her] [ex-husband]" (Piercy 44). They also "[u]nnecessarily... [completed] [a] hysterectomy because the residents wanted practice... [s]he would never again fear a swollen belly; and never again hope for a child" (Piercy 44). Piercy's insertion of this forced sterilization indicates how governments assert their power over women like Connie, as a woman of colour, because they do not wish for them to procreate. These procedures "have often been justified by medical personnel as necessary for public health" (Patel 2), even though "recent cases of forced and coerced sterilization target women living with HIV, women who are ethnic and racial minorities, women with disabilities, and poor women, among others" (Patel 2). Patriarchal societies impose the idea that women are child-bearers and housemakers; therefore, if women cannot bear children, their value lowers, and they lose their purpose. For certain women, childbearing is a privilege considering rising

infertility issues, and Connie is one of those women. In this way, disallowing or sacrificing women's rights to give birth is like forced sterilization, so Connie rejects Mattapoissett's regulation. While they depatriarchalize motherhood, these changes remove women's choice to bear children and even allow the state to determine how they mix races, which is the other dystopian aspect of Piercy's utopia.

Piercy presents how racial inequality is prevalent in Connie's modern-day society and believes the way to fix it in Mattapoissett is by racially mixing all the newborns. As a Mexican American, Connie endures various forms of racism. Outside of being forcibly sterilized, she lives in poverty due to employment insecurity and lack of education. However, her daughter, Angelina, will not face the same issues because she is white-passing and, therefore, possesses white privilege through her appearance. Even as Child Services discuss with Connie about placing Angelina in another home, they say, "[i]t won't be hard to place her, even at four, ... [because] [s]he doesn't look – I mean she could be anything" (Piercy 61). Angelina's ability to 'pass' as white is a common theme within racialized groups as they look for the opportunity to avoid colonial oppression. Connie emphasizes how "[t]hey kept saying

what a pretty child Angelina was, and Connie guessed that partly they were expressing surprise that her child was so light" (Piercy 61). White privilege is also a common theme throughout the novel because Connie explains how Lewis (Luis), "[her] brother the Anglo" (Piercy 31), anglicizes his name to fit into affluent, white communities. Despite his marginalization, he has become successful within their world and forces his sister to call him Lewis to continue passing as white. Fanon explicitly focuses on this element of the colonized/colonizer dynamic and believes "it's true there is not one colonized subject who at least once a day does not dream of taking the place of the colonist" (5). However, Fanon does not fault the colonized or racialized individual with this reality because "[t]he gaze that the colonized subject casts at the colonist's sector is a look of lust, a look of envy... [for] [d]reams of possession" (5). Fanon also believes, "[t]he thing colonized becomes a man through the very process of liberation" (2). Lewis successfully gains his freedom, but Connie detests and envies her brother's success because she cannot liberate herself.

Connie equally seeks liberation from her constant hunger for love, intimacy, and food. This hunger is a theory that Fanon expands on as "[t]he colonized's sector is a

famished sector, hungry for bread, meat, shoes, coal and light" (4). When Connie visits her brother's home, she has "[a] terrible desire to eat and eat and eat [that] seized her throat" (Piercy 383). She spends an entire page explaining the food she sees in Lewis's home—in the kitchen, refrigerator, and freezer. Piercy emphasizes Lewis's 'colonizer' position through his weight as well. Fanon states that "[t]he colonist's sector is a sated, sluggish sector, its belly is permanently full of good things" (4). This fullness is crucial because Connie says her brother, a "middle-aged overweight businessman" (Piercy 384), often possesses materials in excess, including the food he consumes. The novel denotes Connie's challenges and attempts to solve them in Mattapoissett.

Connie's oppression becomes non-existent when she enters Mattapoissett because most people look like her—darker. This inclusion is a reality because:

Decisions were made forty years back to breed a high proportion of darker-skinned people and to mix the genes well through the population. At the same time, we decided to hold on to separate cultural identities. But we broke the bond between genes and culture, broke it forever. We want there to be no chance of racism

again. But we don't want the melting pot where everybody ends up with thin gruel. We want diversity, for strangeness breeds richness. (Piercy 108-109)

Although Connie does fit in better here because she is no longer a marginalized individual, she questions this racial mixing: "[i]t's so... invented... [a]rtificial... [a]re there black Irishmen and black Jews and black Italians and black Chinese?" (Piercy 109). This racial mixing may 'fix' racism on the surface, but the novel presents Mattapoissett's way of eliminating white supremacy and racial inequality as the absolute solution to racial prejudice. However, it does not ensure the decolonization of a person's mind—they can still possess the same prejudice. Even if there is an element of cultural preservation within their governing system, monoracial ideas go entirely out the door for an appearance of utopianism. Greg Carter explains that "[m]any minorities strive for stabilization or consolidation under a monoracial label, rather than negotiating a mixed-race experience" (8) because it allows them to identify themselves better within society instead of hiding or passing in their hybrid, assimilated or multiracial state. There is no one way better than the other, but once again, possessing the choice allows for their own

people's preservation. If a nation were to unlearn its racial superiority complex or discourage eugenics in some form, it would not force this idea of racial mixing as the only solution.

Racial mixing has equally been a widely negative part of American history. Mutcherson says, "[d]uring chattel slavery in the United States, slaveowners denied black women and men the most basic forms of dignity – subjecting enslaved black women to sexual abuse and rape... [so] they could own human beings as property" (1), thus began forcible racial mixing to not only dehumanize Black people but equally begin assimilation into white culture. The parents of these mixed-race children could not ensure that their race would be preserved. While it may not be inherently wrong to wish for cultural or racial preservation, some equate these efforts to racial purity and colorism. Carter posits, "the projection of racial purity has been central in U.S. history; for many racial projects around property, labor, and access, 'white racial purity'... was the objective" (8). Although white racial purity was the goal in many parts of the U.S., the creation of black racial purity as a countermovement was equally prominent. In this way, racial preservation does not only go in favour of whiteness but also of Blackness. Their goal

was to preserve their race since pre-, during and post-slavery. In the 1960s, African Americans “discouraged mixing to promote unity, cultural pride, and mass action toward civil rights” (Carter 8). Other umbrella ethnicities—namely Asian Americans and Latinx Americans—equally began to define their own racial and cultural preservation efforts. Moreover, although this racial purity has proven to encourage a sense of unity among people of colour, it also causes issues of colorism. Colorism “refers to a form of skin tone bias that generally favors light skin over dark skin... [c]ommonly... a social hierarchy in which the level of acceptance of an individual is derived from the social meanings attributed to skin color” (Knight 547). Luciente states, as previously quoted above, that Mattapoissett seeks “diversity, for strangeness breeds richness” (Piercy 109); however, this diversity does not “allow all racial groups and identities to flourish together” (Carter 66) independently because it is ordered by the state. Once again, racial mixing is not materializing organically, and this governance even causes hierarchy issues due to blood quantum for the Other.

Within Indigenous communities throughout Canada and the U.S., blood quantum laws, as one of the consequences of colonialism, have severed the ties between

many peoples and the land. According to Carter, “Native Americans have faced removal and marginalization since first contact and now operate under a system of blood quantum that requires minimum fractions of Indian parentage to claim membership and resources” (9). These laws, as a result of assimilative racial mixing, dehumanized Indigenous identities and reduced them to “[m]easuring descent by halves, quarters, and eighths” (Carter 82). Mattapoissett does not do this because “Wamponaug Indians are the source of [their] culture... [and] [their] past” (Piercy 108). They identify with these people regardless of their mixed race. However, the issue of racial mixing causes dystopian developments within Mattapoissett because “[w]hen you grow up, you can stick to the culture you were raised with or you can fuse into another” (Piercy 109). The opportunity to fuse into other groups can easily cause individuals to revert to old racial superiority and white supremacist ways. Typically, the culture or nation in which they are raised possesses a significant meaning. However, as they are mixed race, there is always the possibility of reverting to former oppressive practices and aligning their chosen identity with one of racial superiority. While this is a potential threat, Mattapoissett’s governing power

attempts to invalidate any opportunity for a racially superior and patriarchal society.

Utopias can act as deterrents to colonial oppression and racism. Connie even wonders whether Mattapoissett is a “[p]aradise on earth, [where] all God's children are equal” (Piercy 109). As another effort of decolonization and depatriarchalization, Luciente responds that “[d]ifferent tribes have different rites, but god is a patriarchal concept” (Piercy 109). This brief mention of God in the novel is critical in the subtle dystopian aspects of Mattapoissett. Their integration of the machine brooder of children and racial mixing is equivalent to the governing state playing God—they 'control' everything. As a result, there are inherently patriarchal perceptions within this place. Although these changes ultimately help their society, Levitas wonders if the appearance of a “good society [is] more than a matter of personal preference” (183). Luciente and her people believe their decolonizing and depatriarchalizing efforts are necessary to maintain a good society; however, this idea derives from the rejection of a neo-conservative utopia<sup>8</sup>, as “it emphasizes... the

individual and freedom, [instead] [of]... nation, authority, tradition and loyalty” (Levitas 187). These ideas of respecting the individual and their freedom are crucial to Mattapoissett's values, but as a utopia still cannot exist in reality, ensuring one's freedom of choice—namely for women and marginalized groups—is impossible.

Connie and other marginalized groups understand how colonial and patriarchal oppression challenge them by violating major public health concerns and human rights. They continue to fight for their freedom of choice against the systems that control their autonomy. Their goal is to reach a place—arguably a utopia—that encourages decolonization and depatriarchalization. Marge Piercy's novel *Woman on the Edge of Time* challenges these notions of freedom. The story redefines the idea of utopia by eliminating motherhood's biological enchainment and mandating racial mixing to create equality within the fictional world of Mattapoissett. Piercy disrupts patriarchal and postcolonial hierarchies to comment on how utopias will never meet everyone's wants and needs as well as the overall challenges of creating such a utopia. This reality is crucial

---

<sup>8</sup>A neo-conservative utopia highlights free-market capitalist ideologies and interventionist foreign policies. In opposition to a future-oriented neo-liberal utopia, a neo-conservative utopia concerns itself with the past. It purposefully maintains existing inequalities and commands those who seek reformation.

because Mattapoissett still takes away the rights to control their bodies and reproductive systems, despite providing a partially safe space for Connie. Although Piercy's novel attempts to present a feminist decolonized world free of oppression, some glaring dystopian aspects create an intrinsically flawed utopia and reject the possibility of achieving said utopianism. By challenging the patriarchal narrative of motherhood and decolonizing the idea of racial mixing, this paper highlights how hierarchical systems strip women and marginalized groups of their rights in all places—even utopias. Such issues require maternal empowerment, reproductive justice, and the elimination of racial mixing as a solution to racism. The necessary efforts to mend these violations involve the human right to maintain bodily autonomy, and cultural and racial preservation.

### Works cited

- Alvadj, Tatjana. "Immigrant Women and Fertility: Gender Under Re-Construction." *Reproduction, Childbearing and Motherhood: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* edited by Liamputtong, Pranee. Nova Science Pub., 2007.
- Ataullahjan, Salma, et al. "Forced and Coerced Sterilization of Persons in Canada." *Senate of Canada*, Standing Senate Community on Human Rights, 3 June 2021, <https://sencanada.ca/en/info-page/parl-43-2/ridr-forced-and-coerced-sterilization-of-persons-in-canada/>.
- Carter, Greg. *The United States of the United Races: A Utopian History of Racial Mixing*. New York University Press, 2014.
- Chetcuti-Osorovitz, Natacha. "Contemporary Feminisms and the Secularism Controversies: A Model of Emancipation." Translated by Sandrine Sanos. *Women's Activism and "Second Wave" Feminism: Transnational Histories* by Barbara Molony and Jennifer Nelson. Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.
- Cohen, David S., and Carole Joffe. *Obstacle Course*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020. <https://doi-org.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/10.1525/9780520973725> Web.
- Dohal, Gassim. "Utopia: Marge Piercy as a Social Critic in *Woman on the Edge of Time*." *English Language and Literature Studies*, 20 Aug. 2019, doi.org/10.5539/ells.v9n3p1.
- Egan, Kristen. "Conservation and Cleanliness: Racial and Environmental Purity in Ellen Richards and Charlotte Perkins Gilman." *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 3-4, Project Muse, 2011, pp. 77–92, doi:10.1353/wsq.2011.0066.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. François Maspero, 1963.
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *Herland*. Generic NL Freebook Publisher, 1915. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=2009177&site=ehost-live. Accessed 12 Dec. 2020.
- Institute of Medicine. *The Best Intentions: Unintended Pregnancy and the Well-Being of Children and Families*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 1995. Doi: 10.17226/4903.
- Knight, Wanda B. "Colorism." *Multicultural America: A Multimedia Encyclopedia*. Edited by Carlos E. Cortés. Vol. 1. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2013, pp. 547-49. *SAGE Knowledge*. Doi: <http://www.doi.org.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/10.4135/9781452276274.n201>.

- Latimer, Heather. *Reproductive Acts: Sexual Politics in North American Fiction and Film*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013.
- Lawrence, Jane. "The Indian Health Service and the Sterilization of Native American Women." *American Indian Quarterly*, vol. 24, no. 3, University of Nebraska Press, 2000, pp. 400–19, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1185911>.
- Levitas, Ruth. *The Concept of Utopia*. Syracuse University Press, 1990.
- Michael, Magali Cornier. *Feminism and the Postmodern Impulse: Post-World War II Fiction*. State University of New York Press, 1996.
- More, Thomas (Sir). *Utopia*. Th Columbian Publishing Co. New York, 1891 Ed.
- Mutcherson, Kimberly M. "Introduction and Overview." *Feminist Judgments: Reproductive Justice Rewritten*, edited by Kimberly M. Mutcherson, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2020, pp. 1–12. Feminist Judgment Series: Rewritten Judicial Opinions.
- Patel, Priti. "Forced Sterilization of Women as Discrimination." *Public Health Reviews*, vol. 38, no. 1, Springer Science and Business Media LLC, July 2017, pp. 15–15, doi:10.1186/s40985-017-0060-9.
- Piercy, Marge. *Woman on the Edge of Time*. Ballantine Books (2016 edition). New York, 1976.
- Sargent, Lyman Tower. "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited." *Utopian Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1994, pp. 1–37. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/20719246](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20719246). Accessed 12 Dec. 2020.
- . *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Staggenborg, Suzanne. *The Pro-Choice Movement: Organization and Activism in the Abortion Conflict*. Oxford University Press, 1991.