

FEMINIST FABULATION: CHALLENGING THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN FACT AND FICTION



by Debora Halbert

I am sitting in my office, surrounded by books. These books are about power, they are about political theory, they are about feminism. The flat surface of the computer screen is beckoning for me to write. I am supposed to write about these books, my thoughts (if sufficiently abstract), but never my feelings. My writing is influenced by both the surroundings and the content of the books I read.

Also on my desk is a small pile of books I reluctantly acknowledge. They are fiction. A genre of the "untrue." They are imaginary accounts of imaginary people, places, events, and eventualities. If I happen to be reading one of these books, no matter where I am, and someone asks what it is, I usually reply, "it's just fiction."

Furthermore, the books I choose to read are not "literature." The New York Review of Books does not review them as great contributions to the literary western world. So I am embarrassed I read "fiction," and I am embarrassed I don't read "literature" when I do read fiction. I thus justify my reading habits as "a way not to think." But I am beginning to question the category of "just fiction." I am beginning to realize my own embarrassment at being caught reading "just fiction" stems from an overly judgmental attitude premised upon boundaries of "fiction" versus "fact."

Fiction has had as profound an affect on me as theory. Fiction has infused new ideas within my head as effectively as feminism. Fiction has proved both a companion and a source of knowledge. But it is not knowledge easily communicated. It comes in the form of a story. There is no one line directly communicating the point. The meaning is holistic in the sense that once read, the understanding is larger than the words used to express it. To speak about a book is to necessarily reduce it to mere linearity, something theorists have been doing for centuries. In part, it is what I will have to do in this paper, and in the process, flatten out the beauty and creativity.

There is a new word to talk about the books I like to read. Other people besides myself are recognizing that life's complexity is reflected in fiction as well as theory. Feminist fabulation is a notion coined by Marleen Barr in Alien to Femininity: Speculative Fiction and Feminist Theory and further conceptualized in Feminist Fabulation Space/Postmodern Fiction.¹ This idea was created to lend legitimacy to works of speculative, utopian, and science fiction. She believes, and I agree, that feminist fiction is engaged in a project of envisioning alternative myths to patriarchy. Feminist fiction is involved in trying to change how women think about their relationships to men and vice versa. Feminist fiction is involved in creating new relationships absent domination and control, abuse and inequality. Ultimately, I agree with Marleen Barr when she says, "The imaginative works included under the rubric feminist fabulation concern living according to alternative myths and fictions, a change which can be realized by rewriting patriarchal master narratives."²

Fiction offers us new possibilities. There is the possibility we can come to new understandings of how knowledge is constructed and realize the differences between feminist fiction and political theory are not as great as some would argue. There is the possibility that new voices can make waves in our thinking. There is the possibility that people can learn different ways of thinking by seeing how new relationships work in fictional form. There is the possibility that writing will break free from the overly rigid boundaries created by the academic world and roam through conversations and feelings as well as arguments and positions. All of these things are in some sense issues important to feminism.

There are a variety of ways to approach these subjects. The value of feminist fabulation is that it allows for us to see what happens when our own sexist views are confronted by feminist worlds, or when feminist worlds are confronted by patriarchy.³ Feminist fabulation stands outside of theory and literature, but is similar enough to challenge its exclusion. In the process, feminist fabulation makes hidden things visible, and unproblematic things problematic. Feminist fabulation challenges us with its different vision of the world and with the alternative visions of what the world could become.

Francis Bartkowski writes, "Feminist fiction and feminist theory are fundamentally utopian in that they declare that which is not-yet as the basis for a feminist practice, textual, political, or otherwise."⁴ The value of feminist fabulation is much greater than entertainment. I don't want to be embarrassed to spend time reading "just fiction." I learn about life, and better places to live through fiction. I am free to explore new connections and reestablish old ones within the complex narratives made available by fiction. The argument made in fiction may not be easy to follow, if an argument is being made at all, but there is valuable knowledge available for us if we will only just look for it.

Accepting fiction as a form of theory challenges the very definition of what we consider theory, and this is in part what I am asking us to do. Theory tends to obscure the emotional in favor of the rational, and traditional canons are exclusionary clubs. Feminist fabulation is a way of balancing emotion and rationality within theory, while opening up the canon to new and different voices. Feminist fabulation is different, but should not be excluded for its differences. Instead, we should embrace the elements of feminist fabulation that can balance patriarchal ways of thinking.

The goal should not be to enter the canon (literary or theoretical) on its terms, but to transform the canon through its relationship with feminist fabulation. In order to redefine modernity, and in order to redefine the space women find themselves in, it is not enough to desire inclusion. Feminists on the margin give feminist fabulation the power to be transformative. And that transformative power is important, not only because many voices are silenced in the current configuration, but because feminist theory needs these voices too. Standing outside the boundaries is the appropriate place from which to transform the boundaries. Acknowledging the positive aspects of difference is what makes it possible for transformation to occur. Categorization is essential, but so is consistently being aware of what is included and excluded. It is time to evaluate what the boundaries demarcate and perhaps transform them to include aspects of feminist fabulation. I am not arguing that we do away with boundaries all together, but simply become aware of what is excluded and what has transformative power.

I would like to focus on three narratives created by three different women: Sherri Tepper's The Gate to Women's Country, Marge Piercy's He, She and It and Marion Zimmer Bradley's Thendera House. I wish to take a journey through the rich narratives created by these women in search of the ideas made available to those who wish to read. In part, I wish to illustrate how diverse feminist fabulation is in both ideas and approaches. I also wish to illustrate how the complexity of feminism is reflected through the diversity of voices heard through feminist fabulation. I also want to illustrate the multiple voices made available for theory

too.

FEMINIST FABULATION

Tepper, Piercy, and Bradley have all written fairly recent novels actively engaging us in thinking about our future. To direct my inquiry I felt it necessary to pick general themes to use as a focus. I will center motherhood, family life, violence, and government within my reading.

Because I am asking for these texts to be viewed as a type of theory, treating them as theory will (hopefully) help me make the knowledge accessible without trivializing the narrative structure. I cannot begin to convey the complexity of these books and the richness of the themes within them. Only reading them in their entirety can do that. I can, however, help shed light upon the themes raised. Even though my themes may differ from those centered by the writers, a new reading can bring new insights to light. I hope this paper will inspire others to treat these books as more than "fiction." Just, as I hope a secondary consequence of my orientation will be that people begin to treat "theory" as a type of "fiction."

Tepper begins her story in a post-holocaust future. Society is strictly divided by gender. Women live within the walls of city/towns. Men, except for those who have renounced violence, live outside the city walls in garrisons. The cities are run by councils of women. The men are primarily responsible for defense of the city and war. They are warriors, and each boy at the age of five goes to live in the garrison with his warrior father.

At the age of 15 each boy is given a choice; either become a warrior and remain in the garrison, or go through the gate to women's country and become a servitor. Servitors are men who have opted out of the warrior lifestyle and instead pursue activities within the city walls. While they appear to be servants, their true role is one of the many subplots in this complex narrative.

Any boy who chooses to remain in the garrison can choose to enter women's country until the age of 25. At 25 each boy becomes a warrior only allowed to enter the walls of the city during carnival time. Carnival is a time for celebration and the meeting of the two sexes.

Other interesting facets of this world include the importance placed upon education of the women. Each woman must have a profession, a craft, and an art. The logic used stems from the disastrous affects of nuclear war. After the devastation the specialization of the remaining humans made it extremely harrowing to rebuild. No one knew how to do anything because everyone had specialized to such a great extent. Education in a variety of subjects was one of the rules codified into society as a result of nuclear war.⁵

Marge Piercy's He, She and It offers a completely different scenario of the future. Instead of speculating on the post holocaust world, Piercy looks at a "cyberpunk" future. The four overriding characteristics of life in Piercy's book are: (1) huge multinational corporations trafficking in data and information rule the world; (2) virtually complete environmental destruction; (3) a rich poor gap that isolates the poor in the destroyed environment outside of the multinational corporate territories; (4) planetary overcrowding that have exhausted the food supply and made conditions outside of the multinational headquarters overcrowded and dangerous. Many people see Piercy's future as the most likely scenario given current trends.⁶

Within this world, those who work in upper divisions of the corporation are given housing within the corporation's boundaries. This means that they live under protective bubbles that screen out harmful ultraviolet rays. Those unemployed by the corporation, or not sufficiently important, live outside these bubbles in the overpopulated urban sprawl covering much of the planet.

The main character in Piercy's novel comes from an independent collective that trades its specialized computer software to continue life free from multinational control. In this community, covered by its own protective bubble, life goes on in a much more local manner than in the massive city spaces operated by the

multinationals. The only thing protecting this small community from outside control is its specialized technical knowledge. In this potential future, computer technology, information ownership and control and the networks woven by computer technology are the prime methods by which power is distributed and communication is done. This future is mostly dystopic, but Piercy professionally creates a possible future and uses it to analyze what humanity means in the age of artificial intelligence, overpopulation, and power politics no longer regulated by governments or people.

Marion Zimmer Bradley takes yet another approach to issues important to feminists. Instead of speculating on the earth's future and positioning her characters in such a scenario, Bradley imagines what would become visible when our patriarchal society comes into contact with another, different society. The darkover novels written by Bradley span many books and have a large following. I cannot encapsulate the culture developed by Bradley in a few short paragraphs. However, Thendera House focuses on the meeting of these two cultures.

Within Darkover society, itself extremely patriarchal, live a group of women who have "renounced" their lives with men. They live without men, though often form liaisons with them. A woman from the earth culture chooses to live within the group of women known as "renunciates", or "Free Amazons." About the same time, one of the Renunciates chooses to marry one of the earth men. Each must learn to deal with culturally inscribed gender roles alien to them. This novel does an excellent job of making visible characteristics that remain unquestioned within patriarchy by placing a stranger into previously unquestioned situations. Bradley shows us that possible alternatives can exist and that these alternatives can be as "real" as our reality.

With these brief outlines as a guide I would like to begin my analysis. Ultimately, I want these books to appear as interesting and complex as I found them to be.

MOTHERHOOD

communit

A central theme in both feminist theory and most feminist literature is motherhood. Susan Lees argues that there are two fundamentally opposed views of motherhood exhibited in feminist utopias.⁷ One perspective "emphasizes the tasks and responsibilities associated with caring for children, and seeks to relieve women of the unjust burden they bear in this regard."⁸ The other position "seeks to universalize the social benefits of maternal experience"⁹ by emphasizing the gratification of motherhood. I would suggest that these two positions are accurate, but oversimplify the feminist approach to motherhood. Within these two general categories, it is possible to focus on a multiplicity of approaches to motherhood and what being a mother means.

First, feminist novels taking place within the framework of patriarchy take care to point out how patriarchy influences the act of motherhood. Instead of finding methods for relieving women of the burdens of motherhood or universalizing its benefits Tepper, Piercy, and Bradley each deal with issues of motherhood in unique ways.

Sherri Tepper's society has the male children leave their mothers at the age of five to live with their warrior fathers. This in itself offers us insight into the role of mother. Tepper makes the point that the mother of a warrior lives a life of grief. Mother's grieve when their sons leave at age 5, they grieve when they chose not to come home at age 15, they grieve when they are killed in war. Instead of focusing on the burden of motherhood, Tepper highlights the love a mother has for her son, and for fathers and for friends. In women's country as in any other place mothers are held hostage by their love for their sons.

However, there are distinct differences between being held hostage because of love and being nothing more

than a birthing machine for male desires. Tepper's character Stavia meets a group of people, not of Women's Country, in which the women are expected to bear children until they no longer can. In the comparison between a place where women chose when to have children to the place where men chose when women will have children, the importance of autonomy over childbirth becomes painfully apparent. Having control over childbirth is seen as more important than making men into women, mothers, or excluding them completely. In Women's Country women control reproductive technology, not men. This gives them the ability to better regulate choice.

Social reform will work when women control technology. This is the uniqueness of Tepper's vision. She does not advocate female isolation. She does not advocate the technological solution of separating childbirth from women. Instead, she goes about trying to change men by putting women in charge of technology.

She does not universalize, or reify motherhood. Instead she focuses on how painful it is to be a mother when faced with the prospects of violence and war. Social transformation is the key, but this transformation takes place through genetic technology. The deeper secret of Tepper's society is that the council controls childbirth and who begets who. Only men who choose to return to Women's Country are fathers even though the socially accepted myth is that only warriors father children. By perpetuating the myth that warriors father children the council is able to genetically select for non-violence in both men and women. Generally, the "myth" of patriarchy is maintained in order to obscure the feminist (and social) project.

Ultimately, Tepper's vision of the future offers a complex combination of motherhood and genetic selection. The issues she raises are controversial at best in their ethical dimension. Yet, because she has posited her culture in a post holocaust world she can decisively argue for the benefits of selecting for peacefulness. As long as war systems are perpetuated through everyday practice, the implications of disaster is only seen by the few. After a nuclear war our generally violent society cannot remain invisible any longer.

Bradley and Piercy also deal with motherhood in ways differing from much feminist research. Piercy's main character is both a professional woman for a multinational and a mother. Shira has recently divorced and the multinational (now in charge of custody issues instead of a government) has given custody of her child to the father. She returns to her home without her child.

In part, this book deals with what a mother will do for her child. It is not about universalizing the pleasures of mothering, but recognizing that mother/love is a complex relationship filled with pain as well as caring. It neither glorifies motherhood nor attempts to argue that women should not be mothers. Instead, it places a mother into the position of choosing between betraying her home and community or losing her child. It deals with what it means to be a mother when agencies such as the patriarchal state maintain ultimate control.

Bradley also deals with the issue of motherhood. The Free Amazons live by an explicitly written creed. One of the central tenets of this doctrine is that anyone taking the oath of loyalty to the Free Amazons will not give birth to a child except at a time of their choosing and that the child will not hold the name of its father. Bradley, like Tepper, is not so worried about separating motherhood from women, but rather about placing the decisions to have birth within the hands of women. With just this one facet of life changed, the entire perspective differs.

Feminist fabulation does not reject motherhood as inherently oppressive. However, I disagree with Lee's argument that they "magnify and elaborate its importance."¹⁰ Instead, feminist writers try to make visible what it means to be a mother in both its positive and negative lights. They do not glorify motherhood without also illustrating the sorrows attached. There is a rich variety of choices in feminist fabulation. Motherhood is an important theme because it is so central to women's lives, yet the complexity of the scenarios in which the theme of motherhood is played out makes the diversity of the ideas shine through.

FAMILIES

The nuclear family is a culturally bound and recent phenomena. However, at least in the United States, the nuclear family has been naturalized. Feminist fabulation helps to unpack the concept of a "natural" nuclear family. Feminist utopias clearly portray the nuclear family as fictional, even dysfunctional.¹¹ Feminist fabulation is interested in broader understandings of family and helps us to re-imagine family in a broader context.

Families in utopias generally include friends and relatives. Marriage isn't glorified within the family structure, instead men and women are involved in relationships that don't necessarily mean living together. Feminist fabulation provides a variety of options.

Tepper's option has women living separated from all men except the servitors who have chosen to reenter Women's Country. These servitors are not servants as much as companions and equal partners, but this image is not what the council wishes to have spread throughout the garrisons and thus the name servitors. Servitors live in relative equality with women, understanding that women will maintain power over technology where it applies to themselves and the health of the community. Families in Women's Country consist of all women and boys until the age of five. Boys who choose to return from the ages of 15 to 24 are usually relocated to a different town to avoid potential conflict between the servitors and the warriors who grow up together.

Tepper's book indicates that a father figure, while important, does not have to be an integral and everyday facet of a child's life. Indeed, warriors, even when presented with their sons at the age of five, never establish "bonds" of fatherhood with them. Instead, the boys enter a legion with all the other boys their age and begin their training as military men.

At the same time, she does not discount the role of men in upbringing a child. The servitors play a role as advisors and confidants for both the women and children. However, keeping the control of a man out of the household is seen as important. Men, within the patriarchal mindset, wish to own women. This must be avoided. Men who choose the life that women lead are not apt to desire domination, control, and ownership of women. These characteristics are what can allow men permanent residence in Women's Country. Men must make the choice.

Families in Tepper's future remain unstructured by marriage. Rather, they consist of women and children with male servitors as surrogate father figures. Servitors usually come to live with women and children from other towns, but become part of the family. There is a distinct absence of a domineering masculine figure.

Piercy's book starts with the breakup of the nuclear family. She does an excellent job of positioning life within a community of people versus the isolation of the nuclear family within a corporate setting. She also points out how power can create dysfunctional relationships.

When the corporation she works for gives custody of her child to the father, the main character, Shira, goes home in the hopes of someday being able to see her son again. Piercy contrasts her home, a small community where she is surrounded by friends, family and where even the computer installed in the house seems like an old friend, with the fairly isolated life of someone working in the corporation. While she goes to live with her mother, there is also an extended community from which to draw strength. Like Tepper's novel, men are visible, but are not seen as crucial to child rearing. Most aspects of child care are retained by the women, but in both these novels the influence of a single parent working in conjunction with a larger kinship network is

not seen as dystopic or dysfunctional. Instead, an environment free from domination by a strong masculine figure is portrayed as significantly more healthy than one with such a figure.

Even after Shira and Yod manage to steal Shira's child, the family thus created is far from "traditional." Piercy, in this novel, does an excellent job of dealing with questions of identity and what it means to be human by creating an artificial intelligence that eventually takes on the role of "father" for the child. However, it isn't the figure of authority most often associated with male father figures that ensures Yod's inclusion. Instead, as Shira thinks, "Let him (her son Ari) grow up thinking men were rational, benign, gentle, infinitely patient and vastly intelligent and strong."¹²

I need to make it clear that the "fatherhood" of the AI is not the point of the book. Rather, the point is that this creature was a "person" who not only functions biologically and cognitively, but also functions emotionally in order to fully operate as "human." The book questions what humanity means and in the process challenges what the ideal man could and should be. Needless to say, because the cyborg exhibits gentleness, patience, nonviolence and lacks the motivation to control and dominate the women and children, it becomes a "he" and a member of the family. The male dominated family has no place in this future.

Marion Zimmer Bradley's book contrasts marriage to living in an all women's community. On the earth base, individuals still engage in what could be called "marriage." Even though women are given opportunities virtually equal to men, traces of sexism still exist. For example, men have the impression that women need protection (usually from other men). This paternalism influences the assignment of tasks as well as interpersonal arrangements. The all-women's community where the women take care of themselves, challenges this paternal, sexist view. The women work and defend their own household. Essentially, Bradley reverses "reality" by posing the nuclear family as dysfunctional because of the isolation of people from each other and the domination of women. She argues that groups of women, having minimal contact with men, can be a perfectly functional group. Essentially, what we consider "real" and functional takes on very different meanings within these women's futures. Marriage is no longer the cornerstone of the family and families are more flexible units.

VIOLENCE AND FEMINIST FABULATION

Violence is another important issue in feminist theory. Feminist literature and theory often advocate non-violence. However, the feminist approach to non-violence is more complex than envisioning a future absent violence. There are still questions of how to reach such a world, and how to protect oneself upon the way. There are questions about ends and means and ethical dimensions of certain types of acts. These novels develop different perspectives on the role violence should play.

I do not wish to advocate violence as a method for social change, however, this does not mean it is not part of what some people see as important for liberation. Aside from aggressive violence, there are still questions of defense needing analysis. I would argue that while most feminist fabulation advocates a certain level of nonviolence, there is a loving toughness exhibited in this writing.

Death is a part of life and these writers do not pretend to have found a way for women to remain safe, absent occasionally using violence. In fact, often times their safety depends on their willingness to use violence because, to a certain extent, in all these novels patriarchy still exists. Feminism tends to overemphasize the nurturing and caring side of women to balance out a society where these characteristics are missing. However, once care is institutionalized, questions of protection and violence remain.

Tepper deals with this issue in a thought provoking manner. The garrisons are ostensibly for the protection of women. When the town is threatened the garrison goes to fight. Because of the lessons learned from nuclear

war men, must engage in face-to-face and personal combat. If they choose to take life they must face that person's death as well as the possibility of their own.

War is dreadful, daughter. It always has been. Comfort yourself with the knowledge that in preconvulsion times it was worse! More died, and most of them were women, children, and old people. Also, wars were allowed to create devastations (nuclear hotspots). Under our ordinances, no children are slain. No women are slain. Only men who choose to be warriors go to battle. There is no devastation (Tepper, p. 130)

War is not waged by killing children and raping women, a method in vogue even today. Instead, men meet on a battlefield between two cities and fight understanding they will be the ones to die.

The general understanding of life in women's country is that warriors make war, and women, along with male servitors, remain peaceful and lack weapons. However, there is an underlying "secret" only the few know.

Warriors assume that without them Women's Country would be unprotected. However, some women within Women's Country as well as the top Servitors are adept at something akin to martial arts. They can also use powerful and secret weapons. However, these weapons and skills are only used for defense and must be used in face to face combat. If the warriors threaten the peace of Women's Country, or the primary mission of the rulers (to ensure aggression is bred out of the population) the women will use their skills of violence. But, their skills are never used in general combat or to slaughter many. Instead, they only attack the key leaders providing the threat, thus localizing the damage and killing those responsible instead of those following orders.

Tepper's women have one goal -- to prevent the complete devastation of the world again. However, any violence undertaken must be understood for what it is -- the destruction of another human being. Her book brings up difficult questions about the role of violence for women, but proves that attitudes of women towards violence do not have to fall singularly onto the side of peace.

Piercy also sees violence as part of her future. True, He, She and It is not a utopia, rather it has elements of a feminist utopia within a distinctly dystopic future scenario. However, her central characters also engage in violent acts in order to pursue their goals. When placed in the position of surviving themselves or fighting back these characters are unafraid to fight.

In one example, Shira goes back to her multinational home to "kidnap" her child. The multinational is using her child in order to blackmail her into giving up secrets from her hometown. During the rescue, Josh is killed. While Shira has divorced this man and hates him for taking her child away from her, she is horrified by what has happened. It was necessary for their escape that he die, but his death is a layer of guilt she will live with forever.

There are tough questions surrounding violence and humanity. These questions are extended to feminism. Yod kills Shira's husband in "self defense," not because of any real desire to hurt him. The humanity of both the killer and the victim is kept central. We are not allowed to dehumanize the enemy. Death is always accompanied by grief and remorse and is never done cavalierly. The implications of death, in these books, even of a "bad" person, are examined. Instead of embracing an attitude of non-violence, these books tend to walk the line between non-violence and self defense, choosing violence when necessary.

Bradley also displays an attitude towards violence not strictly based on non-violence. Bradley understands that there are social inhibitions to women using violence and interacting with men generally that must be dealt

with. Thus, the Renunciates cannot leave the house while undergoing initiation. One part of initiation is self-defense. The Renunciates teach self-defense by breaking down psychological barriers and teaching physical defense tactics. Part of becoming a Free Amazon is coming more completely into womanhood free from the constraints of a male-dominated world. Once initiation has been successfully completed, women are free to do what they want. Some may choose to be guards and mercenaries. They have confidence, and fighting skill, and even the men grudgingly acknowledge their ability to fight.

Constraining women to non-violence as their only alternative is unnecessarily limiting. While non-violence is an admirable and necessary social goal, self-defense is also important. Bradley attempts to balance the aggressiveness of violence by making it clear violence is not an enduring feature of their ideal world. As Camilla, one of the warrior Renunciates, says,

"Yes, you will all learn to protect yourselves, by force if you cannot do so by reason or persuasion; but this in itself will not make you the equals of men. Even now, a day is coming here in Thendera when every little matter need not be put to the sword, but will be decided more rationally. For now, we accept the world as men have made it because there is no other world available, but our goal is not to make women as aggressive as men, but to survive -- merely to survive-- until a saner day comes."¹³

These women can defend against bodily threat, they can feel secure as they walk along the streets, they do not, however, have power over anyone. Power is reserved for times when they or their friends are in trouble. Violence is not used lightly.

All three of these books approach the role of violence in similar manners, but at the same time offer a critique of the traditional myth that women are only peaceful and nurturing. Women, just as men, should not be consigned to stereotypical images of passiveness and aggression. Furthermore, feminist fabulation helps to balance violence with peacefulness. Instead of overemphasizing violent action, these books temper violence with love and compassion. Ideally, we would live in a world without violence, but until this happens women need to be as capable of defending themselves physically, and more importantly, psychologically. Feminist fabulation reflects this need.

GOVERNMENT AND FEMINIST FABULATION

Many future feminist visions are built upon anarchistic communities with little or no governmental structure. Each society is governed by cultural norms and values, but little in the way of strict governmental policy is ever talked about.¹⁴ Minna Doskow notes of the classic utopia, Herland

She (Gilman) founds her utopia on a basic human relationship -- motherhood -- and an emotion -- the love that accompanies it, and assumes that these shape appropriate and equitable institutions.¹⁵

Her point is that instead of focusing on government institutions, Gilman focuses on feeling and emotions. The different voice offered by Gilman speaks to the different voices women can lend to academia, fiction and feminism. However, the differences go further than avoiding institutions in favor of emotional structures. Generally, feminists tend to create societies absent overwhelming governmental control. At the same time, the different government structures offered by women come in different varieties. Coercive power is considered undesirable. At the same time, each author deals with the structures that create a society along with the feelings and emotions expressed by their characters within these societies. Each offers a challenge to myths of the state by showing different visions of the state. Each vision is slightly different from the others: women controlling the state (Tepper); women living separately from men (Bradley); men and women living in a local democratic

community (Piercy).

Crucial, though, is that emotion is not ignored. Feelings are explored along with alternative state structures. One of the most important reasons for blending feminist fabulation with political theory is the space opened for emotion within the more traditional canon. State structures have emotional implications. For example, a state deciding to go to war creates the possibility for grief. These women are adept at identifying and analyzing these implications much better than "nonfiction" writing usually does.

CONCLUSION

I think the possibilities of "just fiction" are more empowering than often given credit. I think treating fiction as theory may not be "academically sound," but it provides a creative space where issues of violence, peace, family structure, marriage, and new government structures can be tested and evaluated. I think it is time the boundaries are questioned.

The borders between feminist fabulation, feminist theory, and political theory are thin and easily crossed. The positive potential of feminist fabulation is the possibility of transforming politics from outside the borders. The negative possibility is that feminist fabulation will continue to be considered "just fiction." I may continue to be embarrassed that I spend my time reading fiction. Then again, maybe not. I can see how feminist fabulation crosses the borders, how it offers alternative and creative visions of the world, and how those visions can be transformative if people only take the time to read. The transformation becomes more possible when political theory is seen as another form of fiction and the boundary between fact and fabulation begin to disintegrate.

[Home](#) * [Back to Contents](#)