# WHY SPECULATE ON THE FUTURE?

Trying to figure out what things will be like in a thousand years is a silly and futile endeavor, but it is also absorbing. If people did not enjoy imagining the future, there would be no science fiction and no speculative writing. We almost always guess wrong. My favorite short story of William Gibson is "The Gernsbach Continuum," in which a man finds himself in the future projected by 1930s designers—what he calls "raygun Gothic"—a future that never happened instead of our own: the world projected by the World's Fair as World War II was just beginning in Europe.

Imagine a monk in an abbey in England in AD 1000 trying to decide what the world would be like in the year 2000. Yes, there are still people, dogs, cats, horses, cows, and that's about it. The forests that covered much of England have vanished. Sherwood Forest has a few trees more than Manhattan—if you leave out Central Park. The monk's world was governed by the natural cycle of light and seasons and the cycle of the Catholic Church. He would not understand a single commercial or a book he would pick up—except perhaps some poetry. Poetry changes with every generation, but it does not improve or progress. It just changes its styles, trappings and some of its obsessions, but we can still enjoy

Sappho and Homer; they are today's news as much as when they were written—or recited.

The reason for speculation is more to consider options in the present than it is to predict the future with reliability. People have enough trouble predicting the stock market for the next six months or six weeks, or the likelihood of a marriage combination working out in two years. But that doesn't stop anyone from taking a flier in the market or getting married. From the moment we pick up the phone to talk to someone or walk out the door in the morning, we are taking chances—some with the odds in our favor and some really long shots. We attempt to predict the near future constantly and our future next year, next decade, twenty years hence in order to make plans involving work, houses, finances, retirement; but we know such planning is more hope than accuracy.

Truthfully, the most fruitful ways to approach the future for me are speculative fiction or utopian fiction. Isaac Asimov once said that all science fiction falls into three categories: What if, If only, and If this continues. I have written in all three categories. *Dance the Eagle to Sleep* is a kind of What if. *Woman on the Edge of Time* is mostly If only, with the brief venture into the dystopia of If this continues. *He, She and It* is If this continues. To me, fiction is my only legitimate access to future possibilities, because it admits that it is "made up" and is the fruit of imagination.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and again in the seventies of the twentieth century, a number of feminist utopias were created. I notice that in recent years, fewer of them are appearing. I believe that the urge to create them, while it comes from a sense of what we do not have in our lives, depends upon a certain ambient optimism or sense of movement and hope. When women are politically active in a way that seems to bring forward motion, then we have more energy and more desire to speculate

about the kind of society we might particularly like to live in. When most of our political energy goes into defending gains we have made that are under attack, whether we are defending the existence of women's studies, access to safe medical abortions or affirmative action, there seems to exist among us less creative energy for imagining a fully realized alternative to what surrounds us.

The utopias that men have created over the centuries tend to be tremendously organized down to the street plans, tend to be hierarchical: cities of god where everything is minutely planned and perfectly utilized. The utopias women imagine tend to be looser, more fluid groupings where women can do things forbidden us, anarchical places of hard work and new means of giving birth, socializing children, finding companionship, love and sex, with different attitudes toward aging.

All feminist utopias spend a great deal of time worrying about child care—as women do in real life. I cannot think of a utopia created by a woman where a woman is solely responsible for her offspring. None of them contain that awful isolation many women report as occurring after birth when they find themselves left alone with a stranger, a new live baby who demands everything at the top of his or her lungs. One characteristic of societies imagined by feminists is how little isolated women are from one another. Instead of the suburban dream turned nightmare in which each house contained a woman alone and climbing the walls, or the yuppie apartment house where no one speaks but each has perfect privacy in her little electronic box, the societies women dream up tend to be long coffee klatches. Everybody is in everybody else's hair.

We live in a society in which many people report that their closest relationships are with their pets or with personages or

characters they see on television. I understand the person/animal bond. My cats are friends. If I can't share my poems or my worries with them as I do with human friends, can't argue politics, neither are they too busy to give me their time and affection. But I can't imagine feeling intimacy with someone encountered on television. I write that, and a moment later I remember my mother's later years isolated in Florida where she knew no one, with a husband contemptuous of her. She was starved for conversation and interaction, so she would watch the evening news and argue with the anchors and reporters. Sometimes any simulacrum of communication and exchange has to satisfy us, because we can't get anything better.

Another characteristic of feminist utopias: freedom from fear of rape and domestic violence. All of them seek to eliminate domination of one person over another. People live in small groups, larger than nuclear families and less closed in, but small enough for everyone to know everyone else, as in extended families. Society is decentralized. Order is kept far more by persuasion than by force. Nurturing is a strong value. Communal responsibility for a child begins at birth.

These feminist visions tend to be ecologically conscious, assuming a partnership between the natural and the social world—excluding, of course, the older ones such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*. Often the societies women have imagined are quite pastoral. This is no accident, since what I view as one of the many functions of feminist art is to create that experience of the underlying ground of unity, among women, among all living creatures, among all of us who with our planet make up one being, Earth as she rolls along.

The societies portrayed in feminist visionary novels are usually communal, even quasi-tribal. Often a strong emotional

connection to the natural world is stressed as a basis for an ecologically sound society. In James Tiptree's short story (James Tiptree was Alice Sheldon) "Houston, Houston Do You Read Me?" the spaceship of a feminist society contains not only chickens but an enormous kudzu vine, and the women who run the ship are excited about getting a goat soon.

One concern of *He, She and It* is what we are doing to the world we inherit and pass on, and what that will really mean to the daily lives of ordinary people. One of the strongest messages that we all receive through our pores, as well as through our ears and eyes from the media, is that ordinary necessary work is demeaning and those who do that work are fools and that ordinary people are made of inferior stuff and only the extraordinary, the celebrities, are made of different stuff. Fame is an attribute of the body and soul that ennobles through and through.

The only work that ennobles is unnecessary work, for example media work or financial manipulation. One of the most lucrative activities in our culture is taking over functioning companies that actually make something, playing with the stock and then moving them off to Guam or dismantling them altogether. This destruction is highly rewarded by our society. Feminist utopias are almost all concerned with the dignity of necessary work, as they tend to be concerned with integrating the aging into society and with socializing children as a mutual and glad responsibility.

Similarly, classlessness is pervasive in feminist visionary fiction, especially that written in this century. Many of the utopian novels women have written are deeply concerned with sharing the prestigious, the interesting, the rewarding opportunities, and also with sharing the maintenance, the housework, the daily invisible labor that underlies society.

Another characteristic of contemporary utopias is sexual permissiveness. The point of that permissiveness is not to break taboos but to separate sexuality from questions of ownership, reproduction and social structure. The feminist utopias that are not entirely lesbian often assume, as in Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, some mix of monogamy, casual promiscuity, homosexuality and heterosexuality, with adolescent bisexuality as the norm. Many feminist utopias portray lesbian relationships matter-of-factly and without apology. For a number of them, lesbian relationships are the norm, since the societies described contain only women, such as Sally Miller Gearhart's *Wanderground. Herland* was probably the last asexual utopia created by a woman.

Some of these imagined societies emphasize sex as connection. These tend to be the ones that have an essentialist view of women as inherently nurturers. Others emphasize pleasure. They envision women's sexual energy loosed and free to redefine sexuality individually and collectively.

Some feminist utopias contain men and some do not. None of them contain men as we commonly think of men today, as the dominant, normative head of society. In none of them will you find a power structure that in any way resembles the Congressional committees that have lately been debating a woman's right to terminate an abortion when the fetus is not viable or when her life or health is threatened. As Joanna Russ suggests in her title *The Female Man*, women are the norm.

In general all utopian fiction seeks to create a society with an entirely different class structure (such as Plato's Republic), usually with the writer's social class having more power than is the case in the contemporary set-up—in Plato's case, in his Athens. But most feminist utopias seek to destroy class roles in the interest of equality.

Who wants equality? Those who do not have it.
Joanna Russ has written in "Recent Feminist Utopias":

> I believe that utopias are not embodiments of universal human values, but are reactive; that is, they supply in fiction what their authors believe society lacks in the here and now. The positive values stressed in the stories can reveal to us what, in the authors' eyes, is wrong with our society. Thus if the stories are familial, communal in feelings, we may safely guess that the authors see our society as isolating people from each other, especially (to judge from the number of all-female utopias in the group) women from women. If the utopias stress a feeling of harmony and connection with the natural world, the authors may be telling us that in reality they feel a lack of such connection.

In a similar vein, we might say that the classlessness of feminist utopias issues from the insecurities, the competitiveness and the poverty women experience. In the society we all know, our own, women congregate on the bottom. We hold the lowest-paying jobs. We are huddled with our children in homeless shelters and battered women's shelters. We constitute the bulk of the elderly poor. We speak of the feminization of poverty, but behind that Latinate word are millions of households of women struggling to get through another week, choosing between paying for heat and buying food, neglecting their own teeth and chewing aspirin, if they can buy aspirin, so that their children may have cereal, if not milk to put on it. Then there are growing numbers of women not held by any house but out there without shelter or safety of any sort.

The utopias' sexual permissiveness and joyfulness are poignant comments on the actual conditions of sexuality for women: unfriendly, coercive, simply absent, reactive rather than initiating, and I might add, regarded as a function of young women but not of older women and never of old women. A valued place and continuing integration for the aging is another common concern in feminist utopias. The women who write them know that they will likely live long enough to grow first middle-aged and then old, and that this society scorns and demeans older women. The more you know and the wiser you grow, the less valuable you are considered to be.

In a society in which women commonly experience streets as potential mine fields of violence about to explode; in which a city apartment has to be fortified like Fort Knox to protect not wealth but just one's own body and life; in which the first sexual experience for many children is the abuse by someone in their own home from whom they could reasonably expect protection and secure affection; in which any date can turn into an attack—no wonder women dream of a society in which sex is a chosen pleasure, chosen by a woman.

In our society, aging in women is seen as shameful. We are enjoined not to develop, not to mature, not to spread out, not to age. The images we buy unreflectively kill some of us and cripple many more. We are now in a time when people spend hours a day pursuing a perfect body, which is defined as someone who photographs well, since the camera adds fifteen pounds to anyone. We are as puritanical about food and weight as previous generations were about sex. Fat is supposed to be a sign of weakness, indulgence, sin. It takes an enormous amount of time to try always to look younger than you are and to try to carry less weight than your body comfortably wants to carry. It is supposed to be healthy. It is certainly a replacement for educating your

mind, developing your interests, becoming closer to other people. If you spent the amount of time a week you might spend on the pursuit of a prepubescent body on learning a foreign language, on writing something meaningful to yourself and to others, on practicing piano, on changing the society—this country would be a far different place.

I wonder why the media is pushing thinness, called fitness. Of course it is partly a class issue: any affluent woman can afford a trainer, time in a gym, fitness equipment at home, someone to fill in for her while she exercises. The ordinary working class woman may have two jobs, kids to care for on her own, and no money to spend on a health club or a NordicTrack.

Being thin is not cumulative and you can never rest. The French you learned at twenty returns easily if you go to France. Retired athletes go as rapidly to flab as anyone else. So it is a permanent occupation; and truthfully, the waitress who has what is judged by this year's standards as a perfect body is still a waitress and likely to remain so. The myth is that the young and pretty and thin inherit the earth, but it ain't necessarily so. More likely it is the kid who sits at the computer instead of running around the block. Fat and pimples never kept anyone from writing a superb novel or mapping a chromosome or making a million.

We judge women who have, we say, let themselves go. Go where? I cannot remember a recent utopia that accepted the common idea in our culture that a woman's value is primarily as a decorative object, perfectly preserved. Most such novels are concerned with reintegrating the age segregation so typical of our recent society; with finding value in experience that our society finds only in the unused body.

Utopia is work that issues from pain: it is what we do not have that we crave. It is the labor of hunger, just as images of

feasts, roast legs of lamb, mountains of pies are. A book came out a couple of years ago consisting of recipes that women remembered in concentration camps, while they were being systematically starved to death. Utopia is where we are not that we long to go.

It is by imagining what we truly desire that we begin to go there. That is the kind of thinking about the future that seems to me most fruitful, most rewarding. I want a future in which women are not punished for having women's bodies, are not punished for desire or the lack of it, are viewed as independent protagonists in their own adventures—spiritual, intellectual, romantic, sexual, and creative adventures. That's one reason I read and write speculative fiction.