

SEARCHING FOR WONDER WOMEN: EXAMINING WOMEN'S NON-VIOLENT
POWER IN FEMINIST SCIENCE FICTION

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ABSTRACT

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Searching for Wonder Women: Examining Women's Non-violent Power in Feminist Science Fiction, examines how works of Feminist Science Fiction (from various media, especially literature, film, and television) can be used as engaged, critical pedagogical tools for teaching a wide variety of feminist and critical race theories concerning issues of power / empowerment and subjectivity. In each chapter, I describe how I have used particular FSF works in the classroom and how each one fosters discussion on the particular topic / issue.

In Chapter I, “Examining Power, Violence, Masculinity and ‘Tough Girls,’” I deconstruct commonly held definitions of power (especially those with links to violence, patriarchy and hegemony) and demonstrate how works of FSF can encourage students to think about cultural power in relationship to the dispersal of resources. Through an analysis of *Charmed*, this chapter also displays the complexities of examining the links between violence and power.

Chapter II, “Telling Our Stories: Women’s Voices in Feminist Science Fiction,” focuses on the power of language to construct alternate realities in opposition to non-inclusive, “dominant” cultural narratives, and also on storytelling as a means to literally “give voice” to marginalized groups.

Chapter III, “‘The Women Men Don’t See:’ Women's Strategic Invisibility as Potential Empowerment,” analyzes stories of literal and metaphorical invisibility in order to discuss issues of women's subjectivity and voice, invisibility / hypervisibility through

sexualization and objectification, and also “passing” as a member of the dominant race / gender / sexuality.

Finally, my chapter “Ecofeminism as Anti-domination Activism” examines the “culture of domination” present in how cultural ideologies treat both women (and other marginalized groups) and the environment.

Throughout my dissertation, I use personal narratives and references to students’ discussion comments in order to demonstrate how, after studying various feminist theories of media, identity, and voice, they all discovered their own non-violent source and definition of power. I use their stories and analyses to discuss society's potential to construct more diverse, inclusive definitions of power.

For Kevin

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If it takes a village to raise a child, then I can certainly admit that it took an entire community at BGSU to get this dissertation completed.

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PREFACE

Some things do come full circle.

One of my earliest childhood memories is of me “faking sick” so I could watch *Wonder Woman* instead of sitting at the table to eat dinner. I loved this show, but it has taken me 20+ years to piece together why. When I was about four years old, I begged my mom to buy me the Wonder Woman Underoos (underwear that looked like super hero costumes) for my birthday. I cried and tried to throw the gift away when I saw that the little girl costume had straps on the top like Wonder Girl rather than the bustier style of my hero Wonder Woman’s costume. My older brothers enjoyed teasing me for not realizing I didn’t have the necessary chest to fill out a strapless top. I just wanted to be my hero, not my hero’s annoying and helpless little sister.

I never recognized the overt sexualization of Wonder Woman when I originally watched the show. At four years old, all I cared about was that the hero was a girl and that she just had to twirl around to become a super hero. At a slightly older age, however, what I saw in Wonder Woman was a strong, intelligent woman, living on her own with a career, friends, and her own invisible jet. Wonder Woman had my fantasy life. I dreamed of climbing into that jet and flying myself anywhere I wanted to go. I wanted that secret life where I could save the world, and of knowing a whole island of other women just like me with whom I share my real identity and my stories of anonymous heroism. Since this would be a secret life, I honestly thought I could someday have it and still appear the “normal” quiet, dependent, smart-but-not-too-smart girl no one ever noticed.

I thought I had grown out of my Wonder Woman phase, and out of a science

fiction (SF) phase completely. SF movies relied too much on special effects and had few to none interesting women characters in lead roles; the same for television. The popularity of strong lead women characters like Wonder Woman, The Bionic Woman, and even non-SF shows such as Cagney and Lacey in the 1970s and 1980s soon faded, no doubt aided by the cultural backlash against feminism which didn't make these types of shows financially beneficial to an industry that was out to make a buck, not a counter-culture statement.

It wasn't until years later that my interest in science fiction returned, when I had the opportunity to take a Feminist Science Fiction ("FSF") literature class in graduate school. At first, my survey of science fiction literature class didn't do much for me; the Heinlein's of the industry echoed and even heightened the sexism of their eras with their female-robot-as-sex-slave motifs. Science Fiction was, and arguably still is, a man's playground, and the editors of many Introduction to SF Literature anthologies reflect this. Not until the survey course reached the 1970s did I finally get a taste of women authors (some who used male pen names, like James Tiptree, Jr.). I was fascinated by their themes of women's invisibility, of "kitchen rebellions," and of alternate worlds or futures where patriarchy and gender oppression was challenged or naturally absent.

My enjoyment in the SF literature class encouraged me to then take a Feminist Science Fiction course. In this class, I had no more waiting until the middle of the semester to read anything written by women, and no more keeping our readings within the individual text instead of reading them as cultural criticism. This class was about feminism, about media studies, about culture, and about using the Science Fiction (or more specifically Feminist Science Fiction) genre to critique everything in culture from

social constructions of gender roles, the government, and our destruction of the environment. This class was about literature as activism, about women authors who, in their own ways, were trying to change society. I had found my island of women who want to change the world.

For this dissertation, I examine how various works of Feminist Science Fiction can be used as pedagogical tools in order to discuss issues surrounding women's power and subjectivity, especially the issue of women's non-violent power. My first attempts at composing this project did not center around FSF as a pedagogical tool, but rather centered around a topic I've written about before--women in SF films who were also action heroines, such as Ripley from *Aliens*, Sarah Connors from *Terminator 2*, and others. What I decided to focus on in this larger project, though, is the idea that women don't necessarily have to be action heroines, holding their own with the big boys and handling big guns, in order to be powerful (I include a story in my Introduction of how reactions to this first project inspired the specific topic of non-violent powerful women). What I focus on throughout this project is non-violent women in film, television, and literature who are out to make the world a safer place with their ideas and their words instead of guns, an important strategy to consider especially given the current world state.

Maybe my early fascination with Wonder Woman foreshadowed my interest in non-violent powerful women. As Les Daniels details in his work *Wonder Woman: The Complete History*, Wonder Woman was originally created as both a female counter-part to Superman in order to encourage girls to read comic books, and also specifically as a non-violent counter-point to all of the violent (male) comic book characters, especially Dick Tracy (22). In 1941, Dr. William Moulton Marston developed the Wonder Woman

character: an Amazon princess who leaves her Paradise Island for the United States to help Americans battle the Nazis. Wonder Woman joins Major Trevor, an American soldier who had crashed on her island, in the “fight for ‘America, the last citadel of democracy, and of equal rights for women’” (Daniels, 25). Marston’s interpretation of people’s fascination with Wonder Woman is troubling: for instance, he talks about how society is so much better off not glorifying violence but in observing Wonder Woman being bound. He also is quoted at length in Daniels’s work regarding women’s “natural” ability to rule the world peacefully since they have so many “love organs” and will be able to convince men to follow them by using their sexual desirability (22, 23).

Even though Wonder Woman may have originally been created under such non-feminist ideologies, many fans of the character in her various forms might agree with what Lynda Carter, who played Wonder Woman in the 1970s television series, has to say about this super hero in Les Daniels’s *Wonder Woman: The Complete History*:

“Wonder Woman is to me—as she is to so many women of all ages—a symbol of all the glorious gifts that reside in the spirit of Woman. She is dashing and dazzling. Yet her truest power and beauty come from within . . . In that regard, perhaps she is not so different from you and me. We all show one part of ourselves to the world, while we hold close the ultimate power within us. Only when we trust in ourselves do we reach our fullest potential.” (Daniels, Introduction).

As Carter also suggests, Wonder Woman’s role in the war effort paralleled many American women who were doing their part by joining the work force and freeing men to fight. Wonder Woman also represented the desires of so many women in the 1940s who tasted a type of freedom and empowerment through working outside the home for the

first time and found there a sense of independence and worth within society:

Their sense of power and potential—the Wonder Woman within—had emerged and could no longer be repressed . . . Those early Wonder Women whispered to their daughters, “You can be anything you want to be,” and in so doing, raised the consciousness of a new generation of women. They helped us believe in our own unique powers, our hidden strengths, our intellect and instincts—and encouraged us to let our own unexpressed self soar. (Daniels, introduction)

Thus, even though my dissertation does not analyze any Wonder Woman comics or episodes, I wanted to reflect the importance of this hero (who, incidentally, graced the cover of the first *Ms.* magazine under the heading “Wonder Woman for President”) for not only inspiring my academic work on non-violent powerful women, but also for encouraging a little girl to want to change the world, even if I never did get my own invisible jet.

INTRODUCTION

I believe in the power of storytelling; telling our stories is a way of communicating with and educating others as well as sharing something of ourselves. I see my dissertation project as my story, but one that is a tapestry of several stories, each a piece of my life and of my journey throughout this dissertation process as well as my political “coming out” as a feminist.

Throughout this dissertation I often employ a style of writing Susan David Bernstein calls “confessional” in the sense that I include first person narrative stories within an academic work (175). I include these stories for a number of reasons, some rhetorical and theoretical, and some personal.

Since, as chapter II will argue in detail, language and (especially) storytelling have the potential for empowering women, what better way to illustrate this potential than to include stories of my own? Navita Cummings James uses personal storytelling as a framework for her work “When Miss America Was Always White” since “one’s personal story is a powerful way to gain insight into the way people construct their lives and social worlds” (42). I, too, use personal stories to situate myself in my socially constructed culture. I also analyze SF stories and suggest that they provide us with images of alternative worlds / societies and can encourage us to both question how hegemonic the constructions of our social worlds often are and how these stories can also encourage us to construct our social worlds in ways which challenge current systems of power, privilege and oppression.

I use personal stories in both a “contestatory” and an “expressionist” mode of confessional rhetorical strategy. As Bernstein explains in “Confessional Feminisms: Rhetorical Dimensions of First-Person Theorizing,” “contestatory” confessional writing represents “personal experience as a structure and source of knowledge” and also is a way of working

against the “traditional” forms of scholarship which rely on the “detached distance” between the scholar and her scholarship (187). The expressionist mode “celebrates self-identity” and tries to “build solidarity among women academics aliented [sic] by both the distance of an objective stance as well as the abstractions of a theoretical lexicon” (178). By employing these rhetorical strategies, I show the “personal as political” aspect of valuing non-violent forms of power and I demonstrate how these stories (both my personal stories and also stories of science fiction) question theories of power which rely on a strict top-down, oppressive model of power. The SF stories also exemplify theories which see all people as having some form of power, even if it is only their ability to resist the oppressive power of those considered “on top.”

I situate my dissertation in a pedagogical context by practicing what bell hooks calls “engaged pedagogy.” As I’ll detail in later pages, engaged pedagogy is based in Paulo Freire’s theories of critical pedagogy, where students are encouraged to be active participants in knowledge formation, rather than passive receptacles of information. In order to foster this atmosphere of critical engagement with issues discussed in class, engaged pedagogy encourages the teacher to share her own stories in order to encourage students to do the same and, then, connect classroom information to lived experiences. The stories within this dissertation include stories I share with my students, as well as stories about my students and their discussions which centered around issues of women’s power. In the upcoming chapters, not only do I examine various feminist theories and issues related to women’s power and explain why they are important to discuss in a Women’s Studies (or other cultural diversity) classroom, but, by chronicling how I’ve used FSF to foster discussion of these issues, I am sharing with the readers of this dissertation my strategies for opening up a dialogue with students about these important issues.

When I first started teaching undergraduate students during my Master's program, I had never taught anything before. I was given my own section of Introduction to American Culture Studies with only two weeks left before the semester started. Essentially I was thrown in to the deep end of the pool and the only way I knew how to swim was to model what I had always been told was the "proper" way to teach: grill students with questions to prove that they completed the readings and, when examining works of literature, ask what the author "meant" by their work. I knew this wasn't the right fit for me, and it certainly didn't inspire my students, but during that first semester, I was too insecure about my knowledge of the subject matter to attempt open discussion. The fear of being asked a question I would have to admit I didn't know the answer to was stronger than my desire to make my class be about something bigger than the individual pieces of information.

After that first semester, I completely changed my pedagogy even though, at the time, I didn't know a thing about pedagogy. I didn't understand the various styles and theories of pedagogy; I just wanted to be a better teacher. I overcame my fear of student questions and quickly learned how much more both the students and I learned when we talked together about the bigger issues.

As I began my third year of teaching, I had the opportunity to take a pedagogy class. Much of this class was designed as a workshop: we learned how to design exams, we shared activities or videos that worked well to teach certain topics, and sometimes we just needed to vent. This class went beyond the "pizza" class (easy credits to offset our "real" classes) it was supposed to be, however, when our instructor—my teaching supervisor to this day—had us study various theories of pedagogy.

To assist us in discovering what our individual style of pedagogy was, this instructor had

all the graduate teaching assistants physically represent how we saw our relationship to our students. One classmate immediately stood on his chair, with hands on his hips, and stared down at the rest of us; he said that in his classroom he is the boss and his students have to respect him for it. When it was my turn, I sat on the edge of my chair, leaned forward, and extended one hand out and kept one close to me in a gesture of giving and receiving. I explained that I was trying to share ideas with my students so that I both gave knowledge to and received knowledge from my students. The “boss” classmate scoffed and made disparaging remarks about my “touchy / feely” class. Not one for confrontation, I immediately fell silent and felt my body physically shrink back in the chair.

This “I’m the boss” style of teaching, as well as the intimidating, silencing encounter I had with this fellow graduate student, was exactly the type of student / teacher relationship I was trying to avoid in my teaching. It was also the type of encounter that many pedagogues such as bell hooks, Paulo Freire and Jill Dolan speak against in their scholarship on engaged / critical feminist pedagogy.

Freire, in his groundbreaking work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), sharply criticizes what he calls the “banking” system of education, which essentially refers to a classroom setting where the teacher “deposits” bits of information with the students who “withdraw” said information for the test, repeating it back to the teacher with no additional thought, understanding, or application. Freire contends that the banking system

turns [students] into “containers,” into “receptacles” to be “filled” by the teacher.

The more completely he fills the receptacles, the better a teacher he is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are.

Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories

and the teacher is the depositor. (58)

Freire insists that pedagogy “must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed” (33).

Freire’s work, started in Brazil in the early 1960s, was meant to end the exploitation of poor, uneducated and illiterate Brazilian peasants. According to Jeanne Brady, in *Schooling Young Children*,

Freire’s liberatory pedagogy offered these people the necessary tools needed to struggle against their own oppression. . . First, it linked the issue of literacy to understanding how power, inequality, and domination undermine the possibilities for social agency. Second, Freire made it clear that literacy is not about simply reading the word, but most importantly about how people’s social identities are constructed within asymmetrical relations of power. (8)

Even though Freire wrote about and for a specific group of oppressed peoples, namely the poor and illiterate Brazilians, his call for a “critical” system of education--one that empowers the students, makes the teacher/student relationship one of mutual teaching and learning, and also makes students Subjects rather than “patient, listening objects,” (Freire, 57)—has been applied to various oppressed groups. His model for a “problem-posing educator” (68) has been eagerly adopted by educators eager to explore questions rather than dictate answers.

One of the many notable scholars to adopt and adapt Freire’s method of critical pedagogy is the afore-mentioned bell hooks. hooks goes beyond critical pedagogy’s empowerment of students through their active participation in the production of knowledge to include the “growth” of the teachers as well:

Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if

we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks. Professors who expect students to share confessional narratives but who are themselves unwilling to share are exercising power in a manner that could be coercive . . . When professors bring narratives of their experiences into classroom discussions it eliminates the possibility that we can function as all-knowing, silent interrogators. (“Engaged Pedagogy,” 237)

Similar to Freire, hooks realizes the importance of teaching not individual bits of information, but of showing students how to take what they are learning in the classroom and applying it to life outside; she says that she “will not offer them information without addressing the connection between what they are learning and their overall life experiences” (236). Jill Dolan echoes this philosophy when she writes in *Geographies of Learning*: “My goal, as a feminist teacher, is not to force my students toward some artificial consensus; they won't always use the critical tools I'd like to share with them in the same ideological or practical way. But giving them tools empowers them, regardless of how students use them” (5).

Both hooks and Dolan use several personal narratives within their works to illustrate how crucial a critical (or engaged) pedagogy is to students if they are to become productive members of the community—productive not necessarily in the sense of producing goods or revenue, but of producing a society which constantly questions its ideologies and laws in order to constantly improve, which embraces diversity, and which seeks justice for all.

I included my pedagogy class story since this encounter made me appreciate the work of bell hooks, whose “Engaged Pedagogy” we read for our class shortly thereafter. When I finished reading “Engaged Pedagogy,” I finally understood what I was attempting to accomplish in my classroom. I could finally articulate not only *what* but *how* I was teaching, and also why it was important for me to teach that way. Reading hooks’s passion for teaching through an engaged

pedagogy not only justified my own desire to teach in a mutual teaching/learning manner, but also inspired me to find creative ways to encourage critical thought in the classroom. One of the most successful ways, I found, was to use works of Science Fiction.

Long before I decided to write my dissertation on the uses of Feminist Science Fiction in the classroom, I already was using FSF to encourage discussion of several theories and topics related to gender, race, sexuality, subjectivity, social constructions, and so on. As I explain in more detail in the coming pages, using Science Fiction in the classroom can encourage critical thinking and application of information to everyday life since it isn't a set of "bankable" bits of information. Its use of metaphor and alternate realities demands interpretation by the individual reader, and differing interpretations among the class members fosters discussion between them, not just between an individual student and the teacher. Also, since much Science Fiction critiques various aspects of culture, a discussion of a particular SF text easily expands into a critical discussion about bigger cultural issues. The "safety net" that SF provides is that students may feel more free to critique cultural issues if they can direct their comments toward these fictional cultures rather than directly critiquing their own.

One of the key issues I encourage my students to discuss, no matter what the class, is the issue of cultural power (in many of its forms). As I mention in my discussion of the stories, when discussing issues of power in relation to women's representation in the media, specifically, I have been deluged with examples of "tough" or violent women *to the exclusion of* any examples of non-violent women. My project, then, is an analysis of the often-assumed links between power and violence, an exploration of non-violent images of women in FSF, and an explanation for why I consider these issues to be important topics for students to discuss.

I begin my analysis of the perceived connections between violence and power with two stories which explain how I became interested in my topic of women's non-violent power in Feminist Science Fiction. As I briefly mentioned earlier, for one of my graduate seminar classes years ago I was going to present on images of powerful women in such films as *Terminator 2* and the *Alien* series, but after months of post-September 11 coverage followed by even more coverage of real war violence, accompanied by "patriotic" rhetoric suggesting that "might makes right," I couldn't face watching films that dealt with and sometimes glorified violence, even if it was unrealistic and, supposedly, escapist.

So I changed my topic to focus specifically on women's non-violent power in feminist science fiction. This presentation was not well-received, to say the least. While some of my classmates' and professor's comments were helpful, it was very disheartening when they kept suggesting that I talk about characters who were, indeed, powerful but who did not fit my framework of non-violent, such as Storm from *X-Men*. When I reminded my classmates that my focus was specifically on women's non-violent power they responded with "well, Storm doesn't use a gun." Apparently, Storm using lightning to "splat" someone isn't considered violent so long as she's not holding a howitzer. This got me thinking about how we define violence, and also how we define power. If every suggested example of a powerful female character in mainstream entertainment media is a violent woman, then there must be some connection between how society views violence as power.

I decided to explore this possible connection between power and violence in several arenas, but I also wanted to look at examples of women's power that didn't come from violence and to examine if these examples could work to counter any notions of power necessitating violence. In the Spring semester of 2004 I had the opportunity to create, develop and teach a

class on Feminism through Science Fiction where we looked at how various feminist theories and issues were applied in (mostly) feminist science fiction works of literature, film, and television. One of our topics was looking at women's power. At the beginning of class, I showed several short clips from such films and television shows as *Alias*; *Charmed*; *Dark Angel*; *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*; *Terminator 2*; and *Aliens* and asked my students if they thought these represented women's empowerment.

At first, many students commented that these examples were empowering, especially since the characters were protecting themselves and not relying on anyone—especially not a man—to come and save them. After a few more comments about how it sometimes just feels empowering to see a woman kick some ass (a feeling I have also shared), the same students said that, if you look at these images in another way, they are actually disempowering of women on an individual and practical level. These students felt disempowered since they themselves didn't have magical powers or CIA training. As far as the more “realistic” characters (meaning that they didn't have magical powers) of Ripley (from *Aliens*) and Sarah Connor (from *Terminator 2*), my students thought that maybe, if someone's life were at stake, they could summon their courage and become violent, but that they just don't ever see themselves in that type of drastic situation, much less with a flame-thrower handy. (The question “do boys/men feel a similar sense of disempowerment when watching comparable male-led, unrealistic action films” was, unfortunately, not discussed; but this idea is an interesting question for further study.)

One student even commented on how she wasn't sure it really was empowering for these women characters since (as I had mentioned earlier in the class) most women who are seen as “too tough” were punished. We see this in media all the time. I've lost count of how many scenes in the television program *Alias* show Sydney being tortured, often in a very sexualized

scene. In *Terminator 2* (1991), Sarah Connor is severely beaten by the psychiatric ward guards for using her bed frame as a chin-up bar. Later, after she has nearly decimated the scientist's house in an extremely hyper-violent scene, she has a breakdown when she can't finish the job of killing the scientist responsible for creating the terminator technology. It is Sarah's young son who has to take care of his mother as she collapses in tears. We see this punishment in real life, too. Women who are considered "too tough" are often called butch, femi-Nazi, man-hater, or are accused of "trying to be a man." (There's an interesting juxtaposition between those last two terms—women are accused of hating men, yet of trying to be men.) These terms, what Suzanne Pharr calls "lesbian baiting,"(74) are very effective in keeping women in line, meaning keeping them in their so-called "proper" (meaning passive, fragile, and essentially powerless) gender role.ⁱ

I'm not suggesting that there is anything inherently wrong with these kick-butt characters or images. Rather, I see dangerous implications tied to the system of images these characters may create, mainly this notion that power comes from violence. I also see dangerous implications to mainstream media's lack of diversity—lack of diversity in how we present images of powerful women, but also lack of racial, sexuality, body shape/size, physical ability, etc. diversity in who is shown and who is not shown in these (or any) powerful positions.

All of these stories and elements led me to one of my key research question: If, at least in mainstream media, power is linked to violence, violence is linked to masculinity, and masculinity to men (usually this last link is assumed but I'm marking that assumption), then what is implied about women's power (or power for anyone not associated with masculinity)?

This argument is not meant to be essentialist. I'm not suggesting that all men are violent nor that all women are non-violent, just as I'm not suggesting that all men are equally powerful

(especially those who are deemed “feminine”) nor that all women are equally disempowered.

What I am suggesting is that if the only female characters in mainstream media who are seen as powerful are violent, then those kick-butt images are at the expense of other images of powerful women. Also, if power is only associated with men and with violence, there are several possible implications, including:

- women are thus regarded as powerless;
- we justify and reinforce a “might makes right” ideology;
- power is viewed as being with those “on top” and there is no sense of power from below;
- if this “haves vs. have-nots” power hierarchy is seen as determined by biology (that men have it because they are men and women don’t have it because they are women) and if it is seen as fixed and unchanging (it is determined by DNA and chromosomes, after all), then the situation for the have-nots is seen as hopeless.

This last point seems the most dangerous to me. Once a situation is deemed hopeless, then there seems to be no reason to even try to change things. Hegemony works best when we don’t even know to ask questions or to consider that things might not have to be this way. Internalized oppression, as Gloria Yamato writes in “Something about the Subject Makes It Hard to Name,” occurs when a group begins to believe that they don’t deserve any better than their oppressed state (94). There’s no easier way to control a group than to get them to believe that they can’t do any better and that there is no reason for them to question, much less try to change, their situation.

In this dissertation, I attempt to redeem my topic of powerful, non-violent women in Science Fiction by deconstructing commonly-held beliefs that power only comes from violence,

and by examining alternative models of power, specifically those which allow for empowerment through non-violent means. Questioning the ideologies surrounding cultural power is necessary in order to empower those people who are in the margins--in this case, women. It is my argument that women do not/should not have to appropriate violent masculinity in order to become powerful (and even then it is only within the limited amount that patriarchy is willing to give them). Instead, society needs to revise its definitions and ideologies surrounding power to recognize how powerful women are already. Using works of FSF in the classroom and showing students various examples of non-violent power is my way of encouraging students to question their own ideologies and formulate their own definitions of personal and cultural power / empowerment.

In order to deconstruct and examine models of power--those which rely on violence and top-down oppression and those which value non-violent resistance to oppression--I employ some of Foucault's notions of "nothing is outside of power" and his ideas of power as hegemonically reinforced to favor only the few in order to show that definitions of power are culturally constructed and can thus be re-constructed.

After I examine models of power, especially the potential for non-violent power, in Chapter I, I use the remaining chapters to examine feminist science fiction (FSF) examples (within film, television, and especially literature) of empowered non-violent women characters who work toward large-scale social change. Often, these women's empowerment comes through actions and beliefs usually coded as "feminine" (and, thus, weak and de-valued) such as invisibility, connection with/protection of the environment (also called ecofeminism), and telling their stories. (Again, the use of the word "feminine" does not imply that all women and only women can be feminine; it is meant to problematize the notion that any quality stereotypically

associated with women is coded as inferior and any quality associated to men / masculine is culturally viewed as superior.) I discuss how, through narrative devices popular in science fiction (such as reversals, alternate histories, and alternate worlds), these “feminine” strategies are privileged for their ability to encourage readers/viewers to question cultural ideologies about everything from why men are assumed to be the stronger sex to why technology (often used for violence and/or at the expense of the environment) is often viewed as the ultimate expression of a “civilized” society.

It is not my intention to simply reverse the gender/power dichotomy--any reductive “women rule and men are just pigs” argument is both simplistic and non-productive. By revaluing feminine notions of power, I demonstrate how any definition of power is culturally constructed and hegemonically reinforced. As long as any inequality exists in society, it affects us all. By looking at how revaluing non-violent modes of power can empower one group-- in this case, women--we will have better strategies for empowering all oppressed groups, be they defined by race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and so on. This is not to emphasize gender oppression over all other forms. Oppression must be understood as a complex system that interweaves all components of a person’s or group’s identity. I focus on gender oppression since power-through-violence seems most clearly designated along gender lines. For example: though African American women have historically been stereotyped as much more violent than white women, debates over whether women should be allowed in military combat don’t distinguish any other identity category than sex / gender. As Lorraine Code says in *What Can She Know*, “Gender is always a determining ingredient in the way lines of power and privilege are drawn, and it is always asymmetrically determinant for women and for men” (176).

FSF’s usefulness is not limited to discussing feminist issues; I’ve used SF works to

discuss gender, race, sexuality, class, religion, and a host of other topics. I think it's sufficient to summarize SF's usefulness in two of my favorite quotes. The first comes in Sherrie Inness's words:

Science fiction is concerned with sorting out the problems and concerns of the present world, interpreting gender concerns, race relationships, class conflicts, and other issues of our daily lives. Yet it is able to transcend the limitations of our everyday world. This is one of the primary reasons science fiction is crucial to study when analyzing women's changing roles. (105)

As Walter Mosley says in "Black to the Future," "The power of science fiction is that it can tear down the walls and windows, the artifice and laws by changing the logic, empowering the disenfranchised, or simply by asking What if?" (408). This first question, this first step, is an important one if society is to change and to learn to value every person as powerful, as important, as equal.

Chapter I: "Examining Power, Violence, Masculinity and 'Tough Girls,'" focuses on the perceived connections between power and violence and includes analyses of two FSF stories which encourage the reader to think of literal power (energy) as representing cultural power (in "The New Atlantis") and also to complicate their thoughts on violence / power by suggesting the sometimes-necessary violent aspect of power-as-resistance (*Charmed*). I begin this chapter by laying out some of the key theories and arguments surrounding power. The first section uses such theorists as Michel Foucault, Susan Bordo, Barbara Chasin and Judith Butler to establish a model of power which is not top-down; rather, these theorists argue that power is a network of systems and that everyone has some form(s) of power. The next section examines one such form of power: resistance. While sometimes resistance can be violent, resistance can take many

forms. To illustrate both the contextuality of power and the possibility of non-violent resistance, I examine a short SF story by Ursula K. LeGuin called “The New Atlantis.” Here, LeGuin uses the (non)availability of electric power to represent top-down, oppressive power but then the author shows how the oppressed people rebel by creating their own electric (solar) power; these characters gain cultural power by creating their own literal power and sharing it with others.

The next section within the “Examining Power” chapter examines the links between power, violence and masculinity. Even though many, if not most, current theories of power do not follow a model which is determinate on this link, many people’s (especially politicians) understandings of power seem to do so. This link is encouraged in our society by various “right makes right” justifications of violent acts and by our mainstream visual media which so highly value the spectacle of violence as an expression of power. To this end, chapter I concludes with examining issues of power, gender and violence in media. I have included a review of theories on violent women in media partly to show how constructed ideas of gender, power and representation are since the theories have changed so dramatically throughout the past three-plus decades (when feminist media theories have focused attention on women’s media representations).

I have also included media analyses, one of an episode of *Charmed* which questions the “necessity” of women’s violence and one of *The Handmaid’s Tale* (both the novel and the film), to demonstrate some of the differences (both technical and theoretical) between visual media and literature. These analyses bridge the sections on “power and violence” and the remaining chapters which each illustrate one specific type of non-violent power.

The next three chapters represent various theories / topics I’ve discussed in my Women’s

Studies classes (although they could certainly apply to other cultural diversity courses) such as language as a source of oppression and of empowerment, cultural visibility as subjectivity, and the links between types of oppression such as the domination of land and the domination of women. These three chapters also discuss the texts which I've found useful in encouraging critical thinking and classroom discussion about these issues of women's non-violent power.

Chapter II expands on what I previously wrote about the power of language and of storytelling. This chapter incorporates various rhetorical and feminist theories on language and storytelling while applying them to the novels *Egalia's Daughters*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and the first two books in the *Native Tongue* trilogy.

Chapter III discusses issues of invisibility—both literal and metaphorical—and situates invisibility concomitantly as both oppressive, but also as potentially empowering. This chapter first examines invisibility as disempowerment, especially within racial theory, and then discusses potential empowerment by analyzing an episode of *Enterprise* where a female character literally becomes invisible. It is through her invisibility that she empowers herself (at least in this one episode). The next texts I analyze are “Fears,” by Pamela Sargent, and *The Handmaid's Tale* where women's hypervisibility due to sexual desirability and their concomitant cultural invisibility is highlighted. The final text to which I apply theories of (in)visibility is James Tiptree, Jr.'s (aka Alice Sheldon) “The Women Men Don't See.” In this story the women are not literally invisible, but their lack of sexual desirability reduces them to living “in the chinks of men's world machine” (205) The story takes place as two culturally invisible women try to leave this world by any means necessary, knowing full well that no one except for other invisible women will ever even know that they have gone.

Chapter IV discusses ecofeminism as a source of empowerment through anti-domination

activism. By emphasizing parallels between patriarchy's treatment of women and treatment of the environment, I demonstrate how valuing the environment is a way for women to also value themselves. Stories analyzed within this chapter include *Woman on the Edge of Time*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, "When It Changed," *Egalia's Daughter* and *Herland*. Whether the story shows a utopian or dystopian society, they each show how a change in how we value "Mother Earth" reflects potential changes for how we value women.

My "Conclusions" chapter ends my project by pointing out how our society is already making some improvements toward gender equality. Also, I use documentary filmmaker Dorothy Fadiman's ideas about the power of storytelling to emphasize the important role that stories play in communicating with and educating others; I apply her words specifically to the potential of societal change through stories of Feminist Science Fiction.

I have written *Searching for Wonder Women* in response to violence being portrayed as the only type of power, it suggests some dangers of this portrayal, and it offers examples of non-violent power and a more diverse collection of female characters who might be viewed as powerful. Even though the stories analyzed are science fiction, they show us aspects of our world which are key to understanding who is considered powerful and why, and how that understanding of power affects us all.

CHAPTER I. EXAMINING POWER, VIOLENCE, MASCULINITY AND “TOUGH GIRLS”

As mentioned in the last chapter, discussions regarding issues of cultural power and, more specifically, how power is *perceived* are necessary in order for students to understand issues of privilege, oppression, and empowerment. This chapter will focus on only a few aspects and types of power and how they directly apply to my work on women’s non-violent empowerment. Of the three works of FSF described in the later parts of this chapter, the short story “The New Atlantis,” by Ursula K. LeGuin, works well to encourage students to look for examples of cultural “top-down” models of power that frequently manifest in, for example, decisions about distribution of resources. At the same time, this story illustrates how resistance by the supposed powerless “have-nots” *is* a form of power. The second piece of FSF discussed in this chapter is the television show *Charmed*, specifically the episode “Witchstock.” This episode serves to complicate the question (which I used as the day’s topic title in my FSF class), “women’s power: violence or peace?” What my students and I came to learn was that the binary of that day’s topic title is not always so clear-cut.

The final examples of FSF I employ in this chapter are both the novel and the film adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. While I discuss *The Handmaid’s Tale* (the novel) in all of my chapters to discuss a variety of women’s empowerment issues, in this chapter I am specifically focusing on how the differences between the mediums—literature vs. film—can be used to discuss the varying levels of cultural critique often present in these mediums (an issue further explored in my FSF class when the students created films out of some of their classmates’ short stories and then wrote analysis papers which, in part, discussed the challenges and rewards of trying to retain the same level of feminist consciousness from the written stories in the visual

adaptations.

A large part of how I use power throughout this chapter and this project reflects how mainstream society (and institutions such as the entertainment industry) uses and portrays power rather than how power is academically and theoretically defined; thus, I write about power as it is commonly used and understood. While society cannot always rely on mainstream media to dictate how ideas are defined and used, understanding how media is constructing (and not just reflecting) ideas of power, violence, and women's empowerment is important if we are to grasp what society is being encouraged to believe. Also, understanding how popular culture and the media are shaping ideologies is important if we are ever to use the media as a tool for constructing more inclusive definitions of power. Such concerns are especially significant with regards to women's social empowerment.

I begin this chapter with a brief section on theories of power, particularly focusing on how, even though power was seen as having a top-down manifestation, theorists such as Foucault argue that power actually "comes from everywhere" (93). As such, understandings of power also need to include resistance and rebellion. The next section of this chapter then applies these understandings of resistance as power by examining LeGuin's short story "The New Atlantis." This story looks at how literal power (energy) is linked to cultural power and the effects of one small group of people's attempts to gain both literal and metaphorical power.

Acts of resistance may be assumed to be violent, but often they are non-violent and result in the empowerment of those being oppressed. It is this style of non-violent empowerment that I explore in the remaining chapters of this project. In order to show not only the need for non-violent modes of empowerment but also to consider how these types of empowerment are culturally devalued, I examine the links between power and violence, between violence and

masculinity, and thus the link between power and patriarchy.

To close this chapter, I question these links by examining some images and theories of “tough” or violent women in the media. These tough women exemplify what many people exclusively picture when thinking of “powerful” women. In order to bridge the powerful violent women of this chapter with the non-violent powerful women of the remaining chapters, I analyze an episode of *Charmed* where the three sister-witches debate the role of violence within their destiny to protect the world from evil. Since examples of violent / non-violent power for women often seem to fall along medium lines (visual media tends to focus on violent powerful women whereas literature focuses on non-violent), I conclude this chapter with both a brief commentary on technical and theoretical differences between mediums and I apply these points to a close reading of *The Handmaid’s Tale*—the novel vs. the film. However, before I begin discussing images of powerful women characters in media, I begin through a general consideration of some theories of power.

Defining and Theorizing Power

Power is contextual. When we say “the power went out” we probably mean that we lost electric or gas power. When Captain Kirk asks Scotty for “more power!” he wants more oomph from the engines to go faster. When a minister or priest talks of the “power vested in me” they mean authority granted by the government and/or church. When George Bailey (in *It’s a Wonderful Life*) calls Mr. Potter the most powerful man in town, he is referring to Potter’s money and influence to make decisions, and how he thereby controlled other’s lives. Throughout this project, “power” refers to cultural power unless stated otherwise (as in the discussion of “The New Atlantis.”)

Early theories of power modeled it within an oppressive, top-down framework; within

dictatorships, especially, there were clearly-drawn lines between the “haves” who had the power to make decisions and control other people’s lives, and those who had to follow the decisions made about them. Judith Butler, in *The Psychic Life of Power Theories in Subjection*, argues that “We are used to thinking of power as what presses on the subject from the outside, as what subordinates, sets underneath, and relegates to a lower order” (2). Power is also regarded as “the ability to control resources and make decisions that impact many people” (71). Such conceptions of power argue that the haves seem to wield their power and control over the have-nots, thereby impacting the have-nots on both group and an individual level. Barbara Chasin further argues that, even in modern societies where everyone, supposedly, has a voice in shaping how the government runs the country, “Our individual choices are constrained in many ways by the decisions of the powerful. We are all affected, but those with lower incomes and people of color are more vulnerable. In addition, males and females face differential risks as a result of gender inequality” (252).

Power is often regarded as something tangible which some people possess and others do not. However, Michel Foucault argues strongly against this reified conception of power:

But the word power is apt to lead to a number of misunderstandings with respect to its nature, its form, and its unity. By power, I do not mean “Power” as a group of institutions and mechanisms that ensure the subservience of the citizens of a given state. By power, I do not mean, either, a mode of subjugation which, in contrast to violence, has the form of the rule. Finally, I do not have in mind a general system of domination exerted by one group over another, a system whose effects, through successive derivations, pervade the entire social body...Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. (92, 93)

Undeniably, oppression happens more often than not from a top-down direction, however it is because the *construction* of power as “from above” has justified and maintained this hierarchy, not because power actually does come only from above. Susan Bordo articulates that

Following Foucault, we must first abandon the idea of power as something possessed by one group and leveled against another, and we must think instead of the network of practices, institutions, and technologies that sustain positions of dominance and subordination within a particular domain. Second, we need an analytics adequate to describe a power whose central mechanisms are not repressive, but *constitutive* . . . we need an analysis of power “from below,” as Foucault puts it. (94)

This extensive quote from Bordo's “The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity” establishes how I wish to examine and re-value socio-cultural understandings of power. First, understanding that definitions of power are culturally constructed, not biologically determined, is primary. As Bordo (using Foucault) suggests, power is deployed in such a way so that its hegemonic control of “practices, institutions, and technologies” and how they disperse privilege is often taken for granted. The resulting oppression is institutional and structural (as opposed to individual), and is often internalized to the point that oppressed peoples believe they deserve no better.

The second aspect of the above quote which I want to focus on is that, in order to “analyze power from below” a radical approach which recognizes the biases of the cultural institutions and systems of power that, supposedly, guarantee equality needs to be considered. I must also note that everyone, in one sense or another, has some form of power even if that power is in the form of resistance to the “established” systems of power.

As Foucault argues, “Power comes from below; that is, there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations, and serving as a general matrix--no such duality extending from the top down and reacting on more and more limited groups to the very depths of the social body” (94). It is not enough to recognize this directionality; we need to question and understand *why* we have a hierarchical system and why the people on top get to be on top. When we see that power systems are just as constructed as other false binary hierarchies (such as white over black, male over female, thin over fat, etc.), we can begin to see the false notions that the haves possess all forms of power and the have-nots possess no forms of power. If power is indeed “everywhere,” then we begin to see that the have-nots do have forms of power. These forms of power such as rebellion, protest, etc. may not be as culturally valued as “traditional” forms of power such as wealth, political influence, decision-making, etc. Rather, they are valued because we have been culturally taught to value these traditional forms of power. Power needs rebellion to maintain its structure. If we include the aspect that “power is the ability to control someone else,” and we don’t need to control others because they aren’t rebelling against their situations, then the structure of power collapses.

Resistance as Power

One of the over-arching points of my project is to suggest that our commonly-understood definition of power, and of who is powerful, is very limited and limiting. When we use broader definitions of power such as Foucault’s, especially his theories on how power is everywhere and how resistance is an important type of power, then there is room to view the feminist strategies of empowerment (which I will discuss in the coming chapters of this work) as just as valued a type of power as picking up heavy artillery and shooting up the bad guys. As Foucault wrote in his *History of Sexualities*,

Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power . . . Their [power relationships] existence depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance . . . These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. Hence there is no single locus of great refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial; by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations. But this does not mean that they are only a reaction or rebound, forming with respect to the basic domination an underside that is in the end always passive, doomed to perpetual defeat. (95-96)

These sites of resistance, or what in later chapters I am calling strategies of empowerment, are not to be seen as subordinate to violent power, nor are they necessarily and inherently superior to violent power since many types of violence work to end systems of domination. As Iadicola argues, “violence is an important tool for social control and the maintenance and defense of the social order. Violence and the threat of violence is also a tool by which those with little power are able to disrupt the system and potentially change it” (Iadicola, 20).

While violent rebellion may be a source of empowerment for some oppressed peoples, sites of non-violent empowerment are also significant to explore. As Stromquist proposed, there are four dimensions of empowerment: “the cognitive (critical understanding of one’s reality), the psychological feeling of self-esteem), the political (awareness of power inequalities and the

ability to organize and mobilize) and the economic (capacity to generate independent income)” (23). Nowhere does Stromquist mention that empowerment requires violence; rather, it “necessitates persistent and long-term interventions in order to break old patterns of low self-worth and dependence, and to foster the construction of new personalities with a realistic understanding of how gender functions in their society and strategies for its modification” (23). Within this view of empowerment, people must first change and empower themselves before they are able to change society: “Empowerment is not simply the ability to exert power *over* people and resources . . . we believe empowerment must be understood as including both individual conscientization (*power within*) as well as the ability to work collectively, which can lead to politicized *power with* others, which provides the *power to* bring about change” (Parpart, et al, 4).

This change may be revolutionary and radical, transforming society and all the people within it; it can also be what the Jane Parpart, Shirin Rai and Kathleen Staudt (editors of *Rethinking Empowerment*) call an “evolutionary change” where “marginalized people . . . convince the powerful of the need for change” (4). Sometimes the change cannot be seen in others, only in the individual person who has changed herself: “Involvement in the politics of subversion is thus empowering in itself, even if it fails to transform immediately dominant power relations” (Parpart, et al, 7). Patricia Hill Collins adds, “change can also occur in the private, personal space of an individual woman’s consciousness. Equally fundamental, this type of change is also empowering” (111).

The women in the stories I examine throughout this project are not trying to gain power *over* men; rather, they are trying to take back the right to make their own decisions and live their own lives as subjects with their own unique voices. Many of them don’t need to “find their

voices,” for most of them have been speaking already; what they want is for their voices to be heard and valued. They want respect without having to win it in a fight. They want equality without having to prove that they deserve it. They want to work with other people, not against them. They want to change their worlds but not just so that they will have more power and others will have less; they want to change the systems, networks and matrixes of power so that resources and respect are shared. They hope that when cultural power is shared equally, so will all resources.

We might not think of electric power being the same as cultural power, but in this case the distribution of power—the commodity—reflects a type of cultural power. It is this relationship that Ursula K. LeGuin’s short story “The New Atlantis” explores.

“Power is Power:” Ursula K. LeGuin’s “The New Atlantis”

In LeGuin’s “The New Atlantis,” originally published in 1975, Belle tells us of her time in the 21st century where the country’s power supply is running low and the government carefully controls and regulates what little energy there is left. When the story opens, Belle’s husband, Simon, was just released from a government hospital. Her husband is often taken away by the government--sometimes to jail and sometimes to the hospital--since his work on solar energy is considered a danger to the government and the hospitals are routinely used for brainwashing. Simon and his friends have already developed a “sun tap” or portable solar energy cell, which they demonstrate in Belle’s apartment, talking about how “power is power” and how having this illegal source of energy is a site for rebellion and resistance against the government (330).

Everything in this future society is geared around capitalism and government control. The only areas of study offered in schools are business, advertising and media skills--all areas

that emphasize capitalism, consumption, and/or distractions and propaganda so as to ensure that the people won't resist governmental control. All power sources are controlled by the government, and only governmental employees are allowed to publish any scientific research into alternative forms of power. Even leisure time and nature are under governmental regulations, a point made clear when Belle, a musician, is forced to go on a retreat to the enclosed, "Authorized Personnel Only" Yellowstone National Park even though all she wanted to do was stay at home and practice her viola. Marriage is illegal and relationships are monitored. Any people living together too long are forced to relocate to separate housing. Any "unreported pregnancy with intent to form a nuclear family" is grounds for arrest. Women are not allowed to learn about or practice medicine, although an underground exists for those who learned from a tutor. Government officials are allowed to search and bug anyone's home with no probable cause other than due to suspicion of being a danger to the government. No agency checks the government-- they can dole out power or not, hence this society's need for an additional power source independent from the government's control.

This story is all about the metaphor of electric power as cultural (especially governmental) power, but it doesn't stop at the level of the government's power to control people's electric power supply. Rather, LeGuin's story shows avenue's for resistance and how that resistance is a form of power--one that is so threatening to the government that Simon is taken away when his solar cell prototype is discovered.

One level of resistance is to gain Power through their own source of power/energy:

"The State owns us," [Simon] said, "because the corporative State has a monopoly on power sources, and there's not enough power to go around. But now, anybody could build a generator on their roof that would furnish enough power to light a

city.”

[Belle] looked out the window at the dark city.

“We could completely decentralize industry and agriculture . . . Technology could serve life instead of serving capital. We could each run our own life. *Power is power!* . . . The State is a machine. We could unplug the machine, now. Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely. But that’s true only when there’s a price on power. When groups can keep the power to themselves; when they can use physical power-to in order to exert spiritual power-over; when might makes right. But if power is free? If everybody is equally mighty? Then everybody’s got to find a better way of showing that he’s right . . .” (italics added; ellipses in the original, 330)

Simon’s solar cell is not just for his use alone so he can have more energy than others; he intends it to be for all people so all will have equal power/energy. Thus they will all have cultural power in this society where power/energy is one of the key sources of cultural power.

On other levels, though, the characters show their power in the form of resistance to the government’s attempts to control their lives, including what they are allowed to do and say as well as how much power/energy they are allowed. Simon and his friends exercise their resistance when they simply talk about their invention in full knowledge that their homes are bugged. Belle plays the radio when she and her husband talk, or she plays her viola when Simon’s scientist friends come over. Even Belle playing her music is resistance since classical music (or anything non-commercial and non-formulaic) is devalued and people’s leisure time is controlled. When Belle uses music to cover up “dangerous/scandalous” conversations she is asserting her agency. She uses music as her soulful voice to “speak” what she thinks and feels and to articulate her resistance. Her husband’s work had to be hidden, but Belle feels that her

work, her resistance, her musical voice could carry out into the darkness and be heard despite the surrounding cloud of oppression:

I went on improvising in the dark. Without light, when you couldn't see all the hard shiny surfaces of things, the sound seemed softer and less muddled. I went on, and it began to shape up. All the laws of harmonics sang together when the bow came down. The strings of the viola were the cords of my own voice, tightened by sorrow, tuned to the pitch of joy. The melody created itself out of air and energy, it raised up the valleys, and the mountains and hills were made low, and the crooked straight, and the rough places plain. And the music went out to the dark sea and sang in the darkness, over the abyss. (333)

Belle wishes for a day when her husband's invention and work doesn't have to stay in the dark. She wants to see it spread out to the entire world, thereby empowering the people by giving them energy, and also by showing them that they didn't have to stay in the shadows of the government's sanctions. Belle wants the people to know that their own work--their own voices--could shine, too. Students may wonder if we can call Belle's resistance empowering since readers don't see any positive social changes by the end of the story. This skepticism works well to broaden the discussion to one of challenging what is considered powerful or empowered, who gets to define it as such, why we might never hear about similar attempts at grassroots resistance in our world and who is harmed / who benefits from keeping those attempts at resistance (whether they are ultimately "successful" or not) out of mainstream awareness.

The Links between Power and Violence

Before I begin suggesting and analyzing additional examples of women's non-violent power, I need to establish the need for such an analysis. The link between power and violence is

so strong in our culture that, rather than violence becoming one type of power, it has become what many people mistakenly see as the *only* type of power, or at least the only way to achieve cultural power. In this section, I analyze the relationship between power and violence and then, by linking violence to masculinity, I argue that violence as power potentially negates women's empowerment in cultures where gender roles are still biologically assigned.

As Barbara Chasin details in *Inequality and Violence in the United States*, there are three major types of violence: interpersonal, organizational, and structural. She explains that “[i]nterpersonal violence is what most of us mean when we think of violence. Identifiable persons injure others and are usually aware that they have done so; in most cases their targets are intentional” (14). This type of violence is usually on a small scale where “usually one or a few individuals attack another” (14). Organizational violence, however, comes from individuals within “formal institutions” such as the military and the police, or even corporate executives knowingly making decisions which harm others. Structural violence, Chasin argues, is the “least obvious” type of the three since there may not be any explicit decisions which intend harm, yet people are harmed as “an outcome of many years of decision making by those in positions of power” (15). Structural violence occurs when people are harmed because they lack access to resources available to others. “If identifiable groups are suffering physically from conditions that could be changed given the existing state of knowledge, while other groups are not suffering, then there is structural violence” (15). There may be no intent to harm and no decision to oppress, yet harm and oppression do occur even though there are no individuals or even individual institutions to blame.

Other key concepts Chasin points out include that “systems can be violent as well as individuals” (7), that structural and organizational violence “result from decisions of the most

powered in the society” (15), that while victims of interpersonal violence often know their victimizers, victims of structural and organizational violence “do not see and are generally unaware of those responsible for their injuries. Similarly, those responsible rarely see the suffering their actions have caused” (15). Finally, Chasin also points out that both mainstream media and politicians often criticize and analyze interpersonal violence, yet they rarely discuss the other, less obvious and sensationalized forms of violence. With these two forms of violence often remaining hidden from political discussions (even if their effects are felt full force by the victims), the silence surrounding these types of violence serve to maintain the status quo, adding another cycle onto the spinning wheel of those in power making decisions which further disempower others.

Sometimes violence as power is not hidden at all; rather, it is justified and celebrated as an expression of patriotism and/or masculinity. For example, Senator Daniel Moynihan told Arab leaders in 1990 that ““You must understand that Americans are a warrior nation”” (quoted in Ehrenreich, 129). Our presidents reinforce this warrior image when they quote lines from *Rambo* and *Terminator* films, or even in the fact that they themselves used to portray heroic cowboys in the movies. If a Terminator imitation makes a president “all American,” no wonder we don’t hear more anti-violence comments as those from Martin Luther King, Jr., who thought that the Vietnam war was “injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of people normally humane” (King, “Declarations,” 37). King asked himself how he could “preach against violence at home when young men would ask him, ‘What about Vietnam?’” King answered:

Isn't the United States using massive doses of violence to solve its problems, to bring about changes it wanted? Their questions hit home, and I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first

spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today--my own government. ("Declaration," 37-38)

As I mentioned in my introduction, one of the implications I see of this culturally understood relationship of violence = power is that it maintains a "might makes right" ideology. Many scholars of power and of violence discuss this implication. Many of these scholarsⁱⁱ see violence as a tool of power. For example, Joseph A. Kuypers writes in his work *Men and Power* that

The dynamics of one having power over another creates patterns of action between people which, when normalized, define basic freedoms and rights. Those holding power-over claim a set of rights and prerogatives not accorded the other, including the right to hit another person, the right to greater mobility, the right to force the actions of the other, the rights to punish and jail, and many other rights of "higher" authority . . . So while power may at times seem to serve some necessary purpose of defense, or public health, it is also always a dynamic which reduces the fundamental freedoms and privileges of someone else.

This view of power sees violence and the threat of violence as an elemental tool in the pursuit and maintenance of power. In this respect, problems with violence are, at root, problems with power. (19-20)

Gail Mason, in her work on violence, *The Spectacle of Violence: Homophobia, Gender and Knowledge*, says that feminist and Foucauldian theory occupy a similar "nexus" between violence and power:

Violence and power may be distinct, even oppositional, phenomena in a conceptual sense, but they are closely linked in practice. Power is not dependent upon violence . . . Violence may not be intrinsic to power, but power is intrinsic to those forms of violence

that are shaped by regimes of difference, such as those of gender, sexuality or race.

(135)

By theorizing violence as an instrument of power rather an intrinsic part of power, room remains for non-violent forms of power, even if these forms of power are not considered equal to violent constructions of cultural power. It is this inequality—inequality between forms of power as well as inequality between people--which often leads to violence; in fact, as Iadicola and Shupe write, “violence is related to inequality” since

At the most fundamental level, what allows us to violate another is our ability to deface those others as separate and less than ourselves . . . The story of violence is a story of inequality. We have learned that inequality is both a cause and an outcome of violence. How we respond to the structures of inequality in the society and world will determine the nature of violence within these systems.” (viii)

The Links between Violence and Masculinity

Culture and gender theorists have long understood that, often, socially constructed and hierarchical systems of inequality are linked under forms of patriarchy and systems of power, justifying and maintaining those very systems. Just as violence is linked to systems of power, so masculinity is linked to violence. This link is neither causal nor intrinsic, yet constructions of masculinity seem so entwined with violence that the two can not be entirely separated. This section will briefly demonstrate this connection between violence and some forms of masculinity and imply the connection between masculinities and power; these links are important to understand for the following sections dealing with violent women in the media and the implications for women’s power if power is so tied to masculinity.

As masculinity scholars, such as Michael Kimmel and Jackson Katz, suggest, there is a

strong link between violence and some forms of masculinity—not because of any biologically essentialist, hormone driven imperative for males to be aggressive and violent, but rather because many men in our culture have been *taught* that masculinity includes violence.ⁱⁱⁱ This “lesson” might be, in part, a backlash to the Women’s Movement and feminists seemingly “wreck[ing] boyhood, . . . not allowing boys to be boys,” (Kimmel, 141) and taking men’s power away. Kimmel defines William Pollack’s concept of the “Boy’s Code” (alternatively called the “mask of masculinity” (Pollack) or “tough guise,” (Katz)) as “a kind of swaggering attitude that boys embrace to hide their fears, suppress dependency and vulnerability, and present a stoic front” (142). This attitude may, for some men, turn into deep seated misogynist (and/or racist and homophobic) attitudes. James Garbarino, author of *Lost Boys*, studied male youth offenders and concluded that their violence often “hides some deep emotional wounds, a way of compensating through an exaggerated sense of grandeur for an inner sense of violation, victimization, and injustice” (128). If the easiest way to not feel like a victim is to victimize someone else, especially someone with less cultural and/or physical power than you, then boys’ and men’s victimizations of women shouldn’t come as much of a surprise.

In backlash to women’s rising cultural power, some men fall back on the one area they *think* power distribution is still purely biological—physical strength (although, as I’ll explain in my discussion of *Egalia’s Daughters*, aspects of physical strength are culturally constructed by encouraging it in men and discouraging it in women). Katz, in his education video *Tough Guise*, points out that as women’s status (as well as that of people of color and GLBT people) rises in our culture, men’s bodies become physically larger, stronger and more intimidating in media representations whereas women’s bodies become physically smaller, passive, and non-threatening. Media also shows these larger men as increasingly verbally intimidating and

physically violent and, whether there is a causation or simply a correlation, there is a corresponding rise in violence against women perpetrated by men. In *Challenging Macho Values*, authors Jonathan Salisbury and David Jackson write: “We believe that masculine violence is intentional, deliberate, and purposeful. It comes from an attempt by men and boys to create and sustain a system of masculine power and control that benefits them every minute of the day” (108). Violence, or more specifically the threat of violence, is an attempt to retain privilege and is also a strategy to stop anyone from challenging not only their individual power, but the systems of power as well.

Violence can also be used by those who do not have cultural privilege; indeed, sometimes the unprivileged feel that violence is their only option for survival, much less to use in order to try to overthrow systems of power. An interesting thing occurs when female characters in visual media—especially film—become violent: they are often punished or, at the very least, they must justify their violence through such tropes as protecting their child. Some punishments include being raped and beaten, being locked up in a psychiatric ward, or even “splitting” their personalities into a violent and non-violent persona. Societal reactions to violent women in media varies: some see them as a symbol of or for women’s empowerment and some see it as an example of our society’s moral decline (even though many of these same people have no problem with portrayals of violent men). Katz (in *Tough Guise*) draws parallels between society’s reactions to early “tough women” portrayals in media (particularly *Thelma and Louise*) to society’s reaction to Loreana Bobbit cutting off her abusive husband’s penis. While no one can deny the violence of these women’s acts, the “unmarked” taken-for-granted assumption of an acceptable link between violence and masculinity is clear. An act of violence (even a fictionalized one) by a woman toward a man remains shocking, yet the daily rapes and beatings

of women by men (a rape every five minutes and a beating every 15 seconds according to Shaw and Lee (395)) is hardly noticed or is reported in the media (and thus downplayed) as a “crime of passion.”

Even though many people have charged media violence as a primary cause for violence in society, especially school shootings and other kid-on-kid violence, many academic studies have only found a correlative--not causal--link. Viewing violence on TV, movies and video games may certainly desensitize some viewers to real-life violence, but other factors that contribute to the “ratcheting up” of violence cannot be discounted. For example, Gloria Steinem, in “Supremacy Crimes,” lists media violence as only one factor in a long list. She also attributes high rates of violence in the U.S. to such factors as:

the plentiful guns that make killing seem as unreal as a video game . . . affluence that allows maximum access to violence-as-entertainment; a national history of genocide and slavery; the romanticizing of frontier violence and organized crime; not to mention extremes of wealth and poverty and the illusion that both are deserved. (442)

To say that media violence alone causes societal violence is inaccurate.

Media nevertheless plays a role in establishing, reflecting, justifying and maintaining cultural ideologies--ideologies about who is valued or not valued in a society, who is powerful or not, how or why they are powerful, and so on. Media creators such as screenwriter and director John Milius point out, too, that our media tend to offer more examples of extreme violence whenever the country is struggling with its own sense of power and, some may add, with its own performance of masculinity: “When the United States is politically weak or vulnerable, it needs its muscular movie heroes, Conan, Rocky, Rambo, to suggest that we have things worth fighting for, worth preserving, even if those things are not easy to talk about, or describe anymore”

(Davies and Wells, 8).

While no one should deny someone else the sense of empowerment achieved from watching violent characters, the interpretation that these types of characters are (just about) the *only* powerful characters might lead to the view that only violent people can be powerful. Even if we as a society have moved beyond the idea that only violent *men* can be powerful, have we completely moved past the idea that only violent women represented in our media can be powerful women? While we do have a few examples of non-violent powerful women characters in media such as Amy Gray (Amy Brenneman) in *Judging Amy* and President Mackenzie Allen (Geena Davis) in *Commander in Chief*, it remains unclear if these types of characters have the same level of power and respect as their “kick-butt” sisters. This perception of a lesser level of power for these characters may, in part, be due to these characters’ story lines centering around (or at least often including) examples of disrespect from peers and superiors in their fields. While this may lessen their images as “powerful” to some viewers, it may also make these characters seem more realistic and worthy of emulating to others. Since most of our popular kick-butt women characters are young, white, heterosexual and “conventionally” beautiful, we are arguably still being shown a very limited example of what women are (or are being allowed to appear) powerful? These concerns are not meant to deny the potential empowerment these violent characters may represent for some women; these characters play an important role in the development of powerful women’s images in popular culture—my point is that they should not be the *only* images.

Before I focus on women’s non-violent strategies of empowerment, I first briefly survey how violent women in the media have been theorized and how these theories negotiate the links between power and violence / violence and masculinity, topics I’ve as already introduced. Then,

I will briefly lay out some important differences between visual media and literature in order to partly explain the propensity (necessity?) of violence in visual media and the capabilities of literature to focus on non-violent forms of power. I illustrate these differences by analyzing the story of *The Handmaid's Tale* in both its literary and its filmic forms.

How “Tough Women” in Media Have Been Theorized

“Tough women” have been extensively discussed in feminist and/or media scholarship. Tough women such as Ripley in the *Alien* films (1979, '86, '92, '97), Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2* (1991), Samantha/Charley in *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996), Jordan in *G.I. Jane* (1997), the title characters in *Thelma and Louise* (1991), plus TV’s Buffy and Xena (among others) have received substantial amounts of attention from critics and scholars. Principally they comment on the spectacle of women being violent. These women, whom Yvonne Tasker calls “Rambolinas,” (15) may be tough, they may be powerful, but they may or may not be socially constructed as “women.” Some people might think, if “woman”= feminine and insofar the definition of feminine is the opposite of tough and powerful, it is questionable if tough women can be women given our culture's limiting, dichotomous understanding. These tough women are often theorized as being symbolically male, especially if, as with Ripley, Sarah, and Charly, their bodies are also muscular and if other gender signifiers (e.g., how they dress, how they act, how they talk, how they wear their hair) suggest that they are masculine or, according to Tasker, “musculine” (3).

There is nothing inherently wrong with these “kick-butt” characters or images. Rather, I see dangerous implications tied to the system of images these characters may create, mainly this notion that power comes from violence. I also see mainstream media’s lack of diversity in how they present images of powerful women, and also lack of diversity in ethnicity, sexuality, body

shape/size, physical ability, etc. in who is shown and who is not shown in these (or any) powerful positions. By mainstream media showing only these violent women as having power, and then only within patriarchal systems of power, a binary of “masculine = powerful / feminine = powerless” is set up. A few masculine women may gain the appearance of some power, but not women in general. Also, other qualities of the “feminine” are still devalued whether men or women display them. It is these devalued feminine traits, which I see especially with notions of invisibility, ecofeminism, and story telling, that I will turn to in the latter part of this dissertation in order to problematize and re-value them. First, I briefly trace the evolution of gender and “tough women” in media theories.

Most of the articles I discuss in this section do not speak specifically to science fiction films. These articles speak to how women are conceptualized in general, how filmic conventions contribute to / reinforce cultural conceptions, how previous (mostly Freudian / psychoanalysis) theories are now regarded as no longer adequate, and how changes in academic theory reflect and create cultural adaptations in how women, real and fictional, are viewed.

Theories on women in film in the 1970s and ‘80s relied heavily on psychoanalysis. Within this framework, sex and gender are defined in binaristic terms of man = active, woman = passive. Women are defined by their “lack”—their lack of a penis, lack of the phallus (cultural power granted to men), lack of ability to enter the Symbolic Order (the realm of reason and intelligence rather than emotion). Within psychoanalytic theories, women are regarded as lacking subjectivity; they are the objects of men’s desires. Within psychoanalytic media theory women do not further the narrative of the story, they actually stop it while the men pause to stare at them.

The influence of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis in the theories of Laura Mulvey

(“Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema, (1975)”) and Mary Ann Doane (“Film and the Masquerade,” 1982) are clear. Both of these groundbreaking scholars dealt with the images of women on screen and the audience’s identification (or lack thereof) with and their interpretations of the characters. Mulvey argues that the women of early cinema are not active themselves; rather, they are there to give the male characters something with which to react. The main quality of women in early cinema, Mulvey contends, is their “to-be-looked-at-ness”; women don’t do much but show up, look pretty, and become objects of the male gaze (there are notable exceptions such as the femme fatales of film noir who are very active, intelligent, and cunning, but they are still there to provoke action from the male characters). Women in the audience, according to Mulvey, are in an awkward position: they cannot be spectators since they desire to be the woman on the screen, rather than simply desire them as male spectators do. Doane argues against this point, saying that women can become spectators but only after using a process she calls the “metaphor of the transvestite” where they try to “be a man” and identify with the characters as a male spectator does.

Even though Freudian psychoanalysis fell out of favor in the medical and psychological communities, aspects of psychoanalytic media theory have carried on much longer and can be seen in the works of Carol Clover. Clover’s work *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992) examines the fluidity of gender roles in horror and slasher films. She also examines how audiences “read” these characters and how their identification with characters switches back and forth between the characters. The tough women characters that Clover calls the “Final Girl” (since she is the final character left alive) is a gender transgressor in that she is active. She is smart and aware of what is going on. She is curious and is a looker (as opposed to just being looked at). She is what most people would call a tomboy. She is not

sexually active (this is considered gender transgressing since she isn't actively trying to "snare" a man). She even has a masculine name (Ripley, Stretch, Charly, etc.). Early examples of the Final Girl show her fighting the killer but needing to be rescued by a man in the end, whereas later configurations have the Final Girl killing the killer with no help.

Clover recognizes the fluidity of gender-- that women can be masculinized by becoming active, fighting back, using phallic weapons and that male villains can be feminized by being penetrated / killed. As she writes in her conclusion, "[the Final Girl] is a physical female and a characterological androgyne: like her name, not masculine but either/or, both, ambiguous" (63). Gender fluidity also applies to how audience members can actually switch their identification, that male spectators may at first identify with the male killer (mostly because the I-camera literally has us seeing from the killer's point of view) but will then shift identification to the female hero. Within Clover's discussion of fluidity, however, there still exist some of the binaristic framework for gender. The Final Girl becomes a "transformed boy" (55) (rather than, perhaps, an "active, empowered girl") and achieves "symbolic phallicization" (60); she is read as a "congenial double" (51) for the other sex.

While Clover's may be using the activeness of female characters in horror films and the willingness of spectators to identify with characters of the opposite sex as examples of how horror film can break down the rigid binaries of gender constructions, her language still seems to set these Final Girls (and the feminized villains) up as non-normative. Her passage, "The fact that masculine males...are regularly dismissed through ridicule or death or both would seem to suggest that it is not masculinity per se that is being privileged, but masculinity in conjunction with a female body" (63) privileges the masculinity of women but devalues the feminine, no matter which sex it may apply to. For Clover, viewers who cheer on the Final Girl as

transformed boy still don't value the Final Girl *as a woman*. It is this "tough women as symbolically male" rhetoric that has persisted in the cultural constructions of gender even when other elements of psychoanalysis have faded away.

Even though the action films of the 1980s reinforced the "active male / passive female" stereotypes (one key exception being the 1986 hit *Aliens*), the early '90s brought about a new type of woman character—the action heroine—and a new type of media theory that questioned the "phallic woman" theories of the past. In their introduction to *Reel Knockouts: Violent Women in the Movies*, Martha McCaughey and Neal King write about the "quagmire" these strong yet violent characters create for feminists. McCaughey and King question the notion that violent women only reproduce male domination and suggest that they are also resisting such domination.

Jeffrey A. Brown, in his afore-mentioned article, goes beyond questioning the phallic women stereotype and declares that violent women are not symbolically male, gender transvestites, or doubles for the opposite sex. Instead, Brown employs Judith Butler's ideas of gender performativity. If all gender is performance, construction, and / or masquerade, then there can be true gender fluidity since no gender is assigned to either sex. Brown insists that "the masculinized woman reveals the arbitrariness of gender that is not easily discounted" (56) and that "the action heroine is an obvious contradiction to the woman-as-image theory typified by Laura Mulvey" (56). When we label a strong, active, violent woman as masculine rather than just a woman who happens to be strong, active, and violent, then "women are systematically denied as a gender capable of behaving in any way other than passive" (63). Thus, for those viewers who see violent women as masculine, there is no gender subversion.

Similar to Brown's ideas, Elizabeth Hills suggests in "From 'Figurative Males' to Action Heroines" (1999) that we view heroines as "transformative, transgressive and alternative *women*"

(49, italics in original). She argues that one of the qualities female heroes such as Ripley from the *Alien* films often exhibit that should be recognized more is their ability to adapt to change, to transform themselves. This adaptation ability fits with the concept of gender fluidity since these transformations often require the heroines to go from followers to leaders, from passive to active, but it's more than that. These heroines aren't women trying to be men, they aren't androgynous; these are women who "derive their power from their ability to think and live creatively, their physical courage and their strategic uses of technology" (39). Hills suggests that feminist media theorists take a hint from these adaptable heroines and learn to adapt our theories of analyzing them:

Like Ripley we have to invent a set of strategies or theories that are not only specific to the ongoing changes in our contexts, but which will [as Braidotti states] "call into being new, alternative ways of constructing the female subject." This new mode of appreciating heroic female characters such as Ripley might then resonate with the feminist desire for personal and social change, and enable us to transform how we conceptualize and experience female subjectivity in the cinema and other cultural sites.

(50)

Brown's and Hills's theories of tough women lead me to where I am trying to position my work: i.e., to not deny the potential empowerment that images of violent women may have, but equally to value alternative images of powerful women where their power doesn't come solely from violence, physical strength, use of weapons, and so on. If society is to value women as women, then we need to value all aspects of women's power. Sometimes that power may arise out of violence, but we can't forget that sometimes there are mightier methods than employing the sword, flame thrower, or howitzer.^{iv}

We Sisters Three: The Transformative, Transgressive Heroic Women of *Charmed*

“Our heroes are girls, and they are butt-kickin’!”

(Holly Marie Combs, in a commercial for *Charmed*)

Amid all of the scholarship surrounding the identity/subjectivity of female action heroes—ranging from Mulvey’s women’s “to-be-looked-at-ness” to Tasker’s “symbolic males” to Hills’s “transformative, transgressive and heroic” women—the positioning of the Halliwell sisters in *Charmed* can, in part, be summarized in the commercial for the *Charmed* reruns quoted above (spoken by one of the lead actresses). This slogan neatly summarizes how I will situate *Charmed* in the “how do we classify tough, active women in media” debate. These women are tough, but in no way are they presented as trying to “be [like] a man.” Following Elizabeth Hills’s argument that we need a more complex, less essentialist and binary-driven theoretical framework for studying tough women in media, I propose that *Charmed* exemplifies Hill’s notion of a “both/and” understanding of gender coding. While issues of the characters’ / actresses’ sexualization cannot be dismissed, I argue that it is through the Halliwell sisters’ combined masculine and feminine traits, their process of transforming or “becoming” the Charmed Ones as well as their use of teamwork and flexibility (as discussed in Sharon Ross’s article ““Tough Enough,””) that empowers them and allows these characters to represent Hills’s “transformative, transgressive and heroic women” model.

Insofar as being tough, being active, and being the hero has traditionally been coded as masculine, the three main characters in *Charmed* have masculine characteristics; however, their true power lies in their possession of *both* masculine and feminine traits. Just as Hills says of Ripley and the alien from the *Alien* films, I think that the *Charmed* sisters can also be seen as “complex and transgressive both/and figure[s] rather than the oppositional either/or figure[s] of

traditional gender codes” (Hills, 45). Throughout this series, the sisters’ masculinity doesn’t make them any more symbolically male than their feminine traits lessen their empowerment (as well as their literal powers) or “disqualifies [them] as heroes.” (Hills, 43)^{vi}

It is the sisters’ process of becoming heroes and of negotiating their new identities and subjectivities that lies at the heart of the show. The notion of transforming into or “becoming” a hero works on multiple levels within the *Charmed* story line. On one level, the Halliwell sisters (Prue, Piper and Phoebe in the first three seasons, and then, after Prue dies, Piper, Phoebe and long-lost half-sister Paige in the remaining and ongoing seasons) have to become the Charmed Ones (the most powerful witches of all time) by physically coming back together in their family’s home, learning to become friends and to work together, and by discovering and reading the incantation in the Book of Shadows (a book of spells) that doesn’t so much transform the sisters as releases their inherited powers and binds them together into the Power of Three (the highest form of magical power). They have to learn how to become witches (even though they are born as witches) not only by learning how to use their special powers, but also by learning how to use spells and potions, how to appreciate the history and culture of witchcraft, and also how to tap into their ancestors’ wisdom and power. (In one time-traveling episode the exchange of wisdom is reversed as they must even convince one of their ancestors to become the super-witch they knew her to be in their present time.) Only when they do all of these things can they fulfill their “destiny” as the Charmed Ones.

An ongoing theme of the show is how the sisters must grow into their powers, both their initial powers and the new powers they earn, and when they can use them. At first their powers manifest accidentally and uncontrollably. Soon they learn that their powers come from their emotions, and that to control their powers they must control, not suppress, their emotions. They

also must learn to exchange their emotions of fear and squeamishness for anger and confidence. In “Witchstock,” the time-traveling episode mentioned above, they must even teach this lesson to a young Grams (their grandmother who raised them after their mother died many years earlier).

When the sisters accidentally get pulled back into time, they meet their Grams when she is a young witch and also a peace-and-love hippie. When a demon also time travels to kill off the (future) grandparents of the Charmed Ones (and thus erase the sisters), Grams and her husband want to reason with the demon and Grams refuses to fight, even after her husband is killed. The sisters can’t believe that Grams, whom they’ve always known as a tough-as-nails, take-no-prisoners woman who does anything to protect her family, just cowers over her husband’s body. In Gram’s “original” life the murder of her husband sends her into a rage, sparking her tough attitude for the rest of her life; the sisters soon realize that they somehow altered the timeline just enough that Grams never enters her rage stage, leaving her much more vulnerable. The sisters convince Grams to get mad, to get so pissed off that she can vanquish the demon. Their speeches work, and Grams becomes the tough woman they recognize (although the young Grams does insist that at the very least she turn the demon’s body into flowers rather than just to demon dust).

This is an interesting episode from a violence-awareness perspective. Often, violent women characters in the media are criticized especially if, within the story line, they are not punished enough for being violent. Here, the three sisters, who are the forces of good, must convince a peace activist that, with demons at least, violence is the only way. Not only is Grams’s violence not punished, but her non-violence stance *is* punished when her husband is killed. Also, she is rewarded for becoming violent (although a better word might be “tough”

since violence often connotes being the aggressor and the witches' violence is always in reaction to or defense of demon attacks) by becoming the most powerful witch at the time and becoming the matriarch of the Halliwell family. Even after convincing Grams that she has to become violent, the sisters still struggle with the "is violence always the answer" question, adding to their flexibility as heroes (to be discussed more later), a trait in female action heroes which is highly valued in Sharon Ross's article "'Tough Enough': Female Friendship and Heroism in *Xena* and *Buffy*."

In order to reach their true destiny and true potentials as the Charmed Ones, the Halliwell sisters also have to learn to listen, trust, and work with each other. Their powers work individually, but many episodes deal with the dangers of one of them trying to be the lone hero and getting into dangerous situations where they need their sisters' help and, concomitantly, realizing that they all have to work together and then they can even defeat the Source (of all evil). This certainly goes against the "traditional, masculine" style of action heroes who are the lone hero or who have a side-kick. While the powers of the oldest sister--whomever that is, since Piper becomes the oldest when Prue dies--are always seen as the strongest, the sisters almost always share an egalitarian relationship and even show how Phoebe's power of premonition, a non-active one, is just as special and powerful as the other magical powers. They also must learn when they may not use their magic; any use for personal gain is not only forbidden, but is punished. Also, magic must remain secret except in extreme circumstances. Any public showing of magic must be fixed, otherwise Cleaners (who protect both good and bad magic) must come and use drastic solutions, including wiping the memories of everyone who witnessed the magic or even "erasing" someone from existence. The Charmed Ones heroism goes unrecognized, unrewarded, and unending; they can never just have a "normal" life.

Their desires for a normal life run throughout the series, although they recognize that they can never quit their destiny. This is actually the concurrent main story line of the show, as demonstrated by the theme song: “. . . I am human and I need to be loved just like everybody else does. See, I’ve already waited too long and all my hope is gone” (“How Soon is Now?”). The sisters constantly negotiate their identities, never quite getting the mix of “super-witch” and normal right; they have to [re]learn how to have (somewhat) normal lives. In this sense, the Halliwells face a common peril for female heroes: isolation. We don’t see their isolation as much since they have each other and they are often dating, but the show makes several remarks about their lack of outside friends and/or lack of a social life.

Rather than denigrate the show for this aspect, though, I see the character’s recognition, negotiation, and attempts at transformation as a potential strong point of the series in that this is the story line that may connect with (female) audience members the most—the negotiation of identity between a personal and a professional self. This negotiation is difficult in a culture where women are concomitantly told that we “can have it all” and need to be “super-women,”^{vii} that we need to have our own lives (meaning outside the home) but still face cultural pressures to find someone to marry “before it’s too late,” and that too-powerful women won’t attract boyfriends / husbands (implying that we better hide how smart and successful we are and have our own type of dual identities). This stereotype is, of course, completely heterosexist and offensive not only to women but also to men in that the stereotype presumes that men are insecure and/or shallow and wouldn’t want powerful, independent women. Even though the fear of independent women facing isolation is based on a stereotype, Lisa Maria Hogeland argues in “Fear of Feminism: Why Young Women Get the Willies” that this fear of men not being attracted to feminist women, or anyone anyone with “a politics that may require making

demands on a partner” is often what keeps many (especially young) women from calling themselves a feminist, no matter that they hold many feminist beliefs.

Charmed might not work well as a mainstream movie, but the reasons why it wouldn't work are the same reasons why I think it does work as a TV show. It relies on character development, it does not rely on the spectacle of violence, and it focuses on the women's daily (non-supernatural) lives. Just as the *Charmed* heroines have feminine qualities, so, in this case, does the medium of television. One possible explanation of why female action heroes tend to be more successful on television than in films is that television allows both “masculine” (as in “public sphere”) and “feminine” (“domestic sphere”) aspects of the show's characters to come through, especially by allowing viewers to see the characters' daily struggles (as with *Charmed*), not just the necessarily-extreme situations that films portray.

When I was teaching my Feminism through Science Fiction class, my students and I often talked about the differences between mediums (mostly film, television, and literature). We also discussed why most if not all of the feminist science fiction novels we were readings probably wouldn't make it as a mainstream film. During the class I mentioned earlier in this chapter (the one where I showed clips that depicted various forms of powerful, violent women), the conversation had started with student comments concerning the sense of empowerment many of them felt watching these “kick ass” women; then the conversation included comments about how we could also view these images as disempowering since these examples of empowered women relied on magical powers or extreme situations that these students would, most likely, never find themselves.

One student, a fan of *Charmed*, made an interesting point concerning this show and (what the other students called) its “unrealistic examples of empowerment.” She said she still feels

empowered by *Charmed* even though she doesn't have their super powers because that show looks so much at the sisters' normal lives. Whether they got the courage through their powers to tell off their sexist bosses, to change jobs, etc., the program showed examples of "real" empowered women in real-life situations. Sometimes these "real life" situations must be read metaphorically (Piper being afraid to have children since her "job" of demon vanquishing would make it difficult to spend enough time with them, for example). At least for this student, the show still offers examples of women doing the difficult work all women do in negotiating their domestic and public (although supernatural) spheres. Although character development is not completely absent in all film, or always present in all television shows, the genre of science fiction does tend to highlight film's reliance on special effects and/or the spectacle of violence, often at the expense of character development and cultural critique, whereas science fiction in television relies less on special effects and more on character development and cultural critique, partly due to smaller budgets and partly due to the serial nature of television.^{viii}

The issues of negotiating identities, becoming a hero, and using emotions to engage their powers are only a couple of examples in Hills's argument that point to how a combination of masculine and feminine traits make for true power. These heroes are not lone vigilantes firing off automatic weapons at every opportunity; rather, they work together for the greater good (as opposed to fighting only to protect themselves or for revenge) by working together and being flexible.

I find it interesting that the battle scenes in *Charmed* are often very brief and very neat (again playing around with the question of how violent this show is). When Piper blows demons up with her powers or when the sisters use vanquishing spells and potions, the vanquished demons just "poof" into demon dust (sometimes after a brief moment of going up in flames), and

even the few times that a weapon, usually the demon's own dagger, is used, the death scene is quick and clean. Any injuries suffered by the sisters are immediately healed by Leo, their guardian angel, so we don't see the sisters get dirty and bloody very often. When Piper was pregnant, she was literally indestructible since her fetus, half witch and half whitelighter, extended its protective bubble to Piper's entire body; instead of pregnancy making Piper vulnerable, it made her the most powerful entity in the universe. When Piper learned of a conspiracy to kill her soon-to-be-born son, she went on a demon-killing spree but we saw no weapons, no blood, no bodies, just poofs and some piles of dust on the ground. Are all of these narrative devices compromises that tough women on TV must have in order for them to be socially acceptable? Are audiences more willing nowadays to see women kicking butt, but not willing to see the blood and gore associated with "traditional, masculine"-style action movies? Is this type of "neat and clean," almost "kitch" violence what makes this show acceptable? Are these compromises reinforcing traditional gender roles, or are they a step towards Hills's "both/and" identity formation? Of course, one difference is that television cannot show the same level of violence and blood as movies, so if most of the successful action heroines are on television, how can we know if the differences in representation are due to gender / sex issues or due to the medium?

In mainstream media, there can never be a perfect example of women's empowerment as long as there are any lingering notions of masculinity = men (alluding to the "symbolically male" tough women), of masculine traits being superior over feminine ones, of women's beauty being their primary value,^{ix} plus a whole host of other issues. *Charmed* certainly plays its part in the mainstream media wheel of advertising a certain lifestyle in order that we will buy stuff. Any feminist ideologies present in the show are probably more about appealing to a certain

demographic than they are there to espouse any radical “fight patriarchy” message.

Nonetheless, the characters of *Charmed* are changing the shape of action heroines they inspire real people within their “real-life” situations. These characters don’t have to lose any part of their identity (such as their femininity) in order to be[come] heroes (or lost their masculinity in order to gain love). They consider each situation and what they need to do for the greater good, and they work together rather than try to be more powerful by putting someone else down. In short, they are girls, and they are butt-kickin’.

This particular episode of *Charmed* may explain the “necessity” of violence for its heroes, but the rest of this project will deal with stories and characters who don’t have to battle literal demons (although their stories may be just as frightening) and who don’t rely on violence for their sense of empowerment.

“Can’t We Just Watch the Movie Instead?” Film vs. Literature

Science fiction, especially feminist science fiction, is a useful tool within cultural studies and gender studies because it takes us out of our all-too-familiar, hegemonic world and ideologies and gives us the positionality to look at our society from the outside. A friend and colleague of mine once said that “a fish in the water doesn’t realize it lives in the water; it’s not until the fish is taken out of the water that it can see where it has always been.” SF, especially the feminist science fiction literature, uses several narrative devices to take us “out of the water” and provides what Darko Suvin calls “cognitive estrangement” (41).

While the primary goal of my dissertation project is to examine non-violent types and examples of power, another goal of my work is to highlight an often-overlooked genre, Feminist Science Fiction, and to show how useful it can be for feminists and for cultural theorists because it can take us out of our cultural “waters” to show us how things could be and, thus, get us to

question why things are how they are. Science Fiction, in general, has a long history of cultural critique but it has been predominantly a white, U.S. and British male genre, both the creators and consumers. Feminist Science Fiction, on the other hand, has made more than a few ripples in the water as it has brought systems of patriarchal power as well as other systems of privilege and oppression under cultural critique.

It would be unfair to compare how feminist Feminist Science Fiction literature is to how feminist mainstream visual media is; each industry has its own agendas and feminism isn't usually at the top of most mainstream blockbuster films or network television. The difference isn't limited to feminist vs. non-feminist works, either. As Brooks Landon suggests, regarding the differences between science fiction literature and science fiction film: "science-fiction literature has also pursued several teleological agendas hidden within its ostensible goal of interrogating and/or advocating change and the impact of science and technology on humanity; science-fiction film does not seem to have shared these 'hidden' agendas" (35).

Aside from ideological differences between the mediums, there are also structural, technological, and economic differences between visual media and literature. Novels and short stories are usually the product of an individual, whereas films and television shows are the work of teams of people, each working on an aspect of the final product. Even though the original ideas for the *Star Trek* series, as well as other SF television shows such as *Andromeda* and *Earth: Final Conflict*, might have come from Gene Roddenberry, each episode for each series required a team of writers, producers, directors, and so on, all contributing their own piece to the final product. Connected with the "solo vs. team effort" difference between the mediums is the economic investments required for each medium—the amount of money, if any, advanced to an individual writer is much less than the tens (if not hundreds) of millions of dollars required to

produce a block-buster, effects-driven film; with that much money invested, film production companies need to aim for the large, often young-to-middle aged male, audiences--not the small niche audiences that many feminist presses cater to. Also, when thinking of the foreign market, the films with the biggest overseas profits tend to be the blockbuster films that don't lose much meaning in the translation since, for action adventure and effects-driven SF films, there isn't much intricate dialogue that might be misinterpreted. If FSF literature is narrative driven and centers on cultural critique, translating concerns arise not only from the literal word-to-word translation, but also the cultural elements that might get lost in translation.

Visual media, especially film, rely heavily on the spectacle of violence and special effects. Because they are visual, film and television have a greater potential for sexualizing and objectifying women characters, even ones who are supposed to be strong characters. General science fiction literature has a long history of misogyny, racism, and of objectifying women; FSF literature, however, focuses on the cultural critique of such objectification and inequality. As such, most FSF novels would probably make for poor films since cultural critique doesn't often imply lots of explosions, couldn't be done well in under two hours, and doesn't come across as "entertainment."

The most well-known example of a feminist science fiction novel turned into a mainstream film may be the 1990 production of *The Handmaid's Tale*. This film exemplifies several of the distinctions between SF film and literature, and proves how difficult, if not impossible, it is to successfully translate FSF literature onto the big screen. The novel (and to a lesser degree, also the film) tells the story of how pollution (and thus involuntary sterilization of most people) combined with a radical backlash against women's rights have led to the formation of "The Republic of Gilead," an ultra-conservative, misogynist culture that has taken away all

women's rights to read, work, have money, and make their own choices about family and reproduction. Religion is used as justification for a system of handmaids. Married men who cannot have children (although their sterility is always blamed on their wives) and who rank high enough are given handmaids—women who are there only in order to get pregnant--and then that child belongs to the man and his wife, not the woman who gave birth. The story's narrator (in both the novel and the film), Offred, is one such handmaid. She tells us her own story as she enters a new household, that of the Commander and of Serena Joy, and as she resists her enslavement in the few ways available to her.

Viewers unfamiliar with the novel might never realize that the Republic of Gilead is specifically only the United States (in the film there was only a vague mention of the fruit shipment from Florida being held up by the fighting), and they definitely have no way of learning that the Republic was instigated by the President of the U.S. getting shot and all members of Congress and other key government offices being bombed, necessitating the military's take-over of the country. These acts of terrorism, it is assumed, were committed by Islamic terrorists, but we learn at the end of the novel that it was actually committed by members of the U.S. military eager to gain control over the country and put themselves in the highest seats of power and privilege.

Film viewers may not be privy to the military's means of take-over, but they are subjected to various explosion scenes that do not take place in the novel other than on TV in areas far away from where the immediate story takes place. This is an obvious tactic of adding in visual spectacle and outward, visceral representations of the horror, fear, and futility that the women, especially the handmaids, must have been feeling in lieu of the inner thoughts and emotions expressed in the novel. As Barry Keith Grant suggests in "Sensuous Elaboration," in

science fiction film we need to see the outward symbols of terror and fear rather than rely on the characters' inward expressions of that fear as in literature (18).

Another visual spectacle added specifically for the film was Offred's murder of the Commander. The film version climaxes in a scene where Offred brutally slices the Commander's neck with a knife and the camera lingers on the fallen Commander and his growing pool of blood. We see Offred being taken to safety, and we see her at the end, very pregnant, living in a trailer and talking of how she still keeps in touch with Nick, the baby's father. The novel is much less kind in its final moments: Offred's narration ends when she is taken out of the house by the Guardians, but Nick has told her it is safe to go with them, so we have some glimmer of hope. Hundreds of years later, a historian presents a conference paper and tells his audience how he came to find audio tapes, made by Offred, hidden away in a footlocker in a family's house that is presumed to have helped women escape the country. Readers know that Offred made it as far as Maine, but we have no way of knowing if she found freedom, was captured and sent back, or was killed; because of the naming system where the women took the name of the Commander they were stationed with at the time, there is no way of tracking down the narrator, known only as Offred since she was the handmaid of Fred.

In the novel, we have no final glimpse of a happy ending to give us a sigh of relief; this, I believe, is one of the key disservices the film does to the story—it doesn't keep viewers uncomfortable and scared to the point that we are determined to never let this happen to us; instead, this happy visual ending lets viewers relax, safe in the knowledge that this was just a simple science fiction story, not a story of social commentary that hits, for many people, too close to home. The film version also portrays Offred's power as coming from her violent murder of the Commander, not from her activism, her ability to retain her identity as an individual, and

her bravery in telling her story for others to learn from. This film's dismal profits and reviews may, in part, explain why there aren't more attempts to translate FSF literature into mainstream films, but it also illustrates how the current mode of filmmaking isn't compatible with this level of social commentary. Instead of giving up on FSF literature as a source for film stories, shouldn't we also (or instead) consider how this example illustrates how modes of filmmaking need to be altered to accommodate stories low on visual spectacle and high on narrative, character development, and social commentary?

The film version, as is necessary to any film adaptation, deletes many key scenes and themes from the novel; unfortunately, the themes it overlooks tend to be the center of the novel: how the Republic of Gilead and its total oppression of women came to be and, thus, how close the contemporary U.S. society is to (re)turning to those oppressive ideologies. Even though the novel was written in 1985 and reflected the cultural/political climate of that time, many points in the novel are just as, if not even more, applicable to the current climate, especially since 9-11. A few examples of this reactionary tendency include the Patriot Act and its various ways of reducing privacy, the racial/ethnic profiling and the surveillance on various "threatening" groups; and also the "return to 'family values'" rhetoric that seeks to more narrowly define what constitutes a family (as in 11 states approving the Defense of Marriage Act (anti-same-sex marriage) amendments in the latest national election) and "proper morals" regarding women's bodies and reproductive issues as exemplified in President George W. Bush's ban on "partial birth" abortions. In a political climate that is actually taking away personal freedoms and rights, it is obvious to see that we have a "top-down" system of power that truly needs to be analyzed from below.

The remaining chapters examine examples of non-violent power. Often, as I mentioned

earlier, these modes of empowerment such as connection with/protection of the environment, telling their stories, and invisibility are considered “feminine” and are devalued. I will discuss how, through narrative devices popular in science fiction (such as reversals, alternate histories, and alternate worlds), these “feminine” strategies are privileged for their ability to encourage readers/viewers to question cultural ideologies about everything, from why men are assumed to be the stronger sex, to why technology (often used for violence and/or at the expense of the environment) is often viewed as the ultimate expression of a “civilized” society.

Another goal of my work is to highlight an often-overlooked genre, Feminist Science Fiction, and to show how useful it can be for feminists and for cultural theorists because it can take us out of our cultural “waters” to show us how things could be and, thus, get us to question why things are how they are. Science Fiction in general has a long history of cultural critique but has been predominantly a white, U.S. and British male genre, both the creators and consumers. Feminist Science Fiction, on the other hand, has made more than a few ripples in the water as it has brought systems of patriarchal power as well as other systems of privilege and oppression under cultural critique.

CHAPTER II. TELLING OUR STORIES: WOMEN'S VOICES IN FEMINIST SCIENCE
FICTION

I will tell you something about stories,
[he said]
They aren't just entertainment.
Don't be fooled.
They are all we have, you see, all we have to fight off illness and death.
You don't have anything
if you don't have the stories.
from *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko

In a way, this dissertation is essentially about stories: my personal stories, stories of FSF, stories by my students, even stories about stories. Because of the multi-dimensional role stories play in this project, I thought it only fitting to begin the Women's Non-violent Power / Empowerment portion of the dissertation with the power of language, specifically the power of storytelling.

Throughout this chapter, I employ various linguistic and feminist theories to explain not only the power of language and storytelling in general, but more specifically their potential to empower the oppressed. The first section of this chapter discusses the power of language to both reflect and shape reality, what Peter Berger calls "world-building," and language's concomitant potential to both reflect / maintain patriarchal privilege but also to offer women a site of resistance by giving them voice--whether they use the "master's" language or try to create their own.

This chapter then shifts into discussing FSF stories' role in encouraging readers not only to question such oppressing things as gendered language and "objective" knowledge, but also to encourage readers to change language in order to change society. Many feminist theorists, most notably Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous, argue that "marking" and changing the patriarchal privilege embedded within much of our language is absolutely necessary to change how

oppressed peoples are valued and (mis)treated in our society. By reshaping language, we can reshape how we understand the world and our places within it. Stories of FSF are often commentaries about language and storytelling. The first FSF works discussed in this chapter, *Native Tongue* (1984) and *The Judas Rose* (1987)—the first two pieces of Suzette Haden Elgin’s *Native Tongue* trilogy—set up an alternate future where women have lost all of their rights (to vote, to earn money, to divorce, etc.). A group of women linguists, however, are rebelling against their oppressed status by secretly developing and dispersing a women’s language. They hope to empower women world- (and galaxy-) wide and eventually contribute to paradigm shifts within society that will re-value women and create peace and equality within and between all people / beings on Earth and beyond.

The next section discusses the power of storytelling, in particular, and how it gives voice to those often silenced and also questions the opposition placed between stories and “objective” truth. Women of color feminist scholars such as bell hooks and Audre Lorde have long understood the historical necessity women of color, especially, have placed on storytelling as a means of making themselves and their cultures visible. In societies where “official” history is written by those with cultural power and privilege, and where those privileged people have seldom included women (much less women of color), storytelling serves as a record of “alternate” histories. Stories also encourage society to question the biases and privileges within those official accounts of history.

An example of FSF which sets up a fictional “alternate/ reversal” society in order to encourage readers to question the social constructions and binaristic hierarchies within society is Gerd Brantenberg’s *Egalia’s Daughters* (1977, translated into English in 1985). While this novel alludes to dozens of feminist issues, its role in this chapter will be to examine modes of

oppression such as gendered language and constructed hierarchies in order to discuss language's potential for shaping—and, thus, re-shaping—societies by re-shaping how individuals construct their reality through language.

The third and final major work this chapter will analyze is *The Handmaid's Tale*. Even though this novel has already been discussed at length in the last chapter, its use within this storytelling chapter serves to highlight how the act of storytelling can be a radical act of self-empowerment, of making oneself and others like oneself heard and seen. As the narrator in *The Handmaid's Tale* says, “I tell, therefore you are” (344). This work also links this chapter to the next chapter on the potential (albeit problematic) empowerment through strategic invisibility.

By explaining the role and power of language and of storytelling, this chapter further justifies not only my use of personal stories and first-person narrative throughout this dissertation and in my classrooms, but also my topic of FSF stories as important cultural texts with the potential for creating small- and large-scale social change.

In order to understand and appreciate the power of storytelling, one must first understand the power of language. Many linguists hold a similar understanding of language as does sociologist Peter Berger, who “treats language as the primary agent of what he calls ‘world-building’” (Diamond and Quinby, 103). Similar to Berger’s “world-building” is the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis which maintains, according to Hendricks and Oliver, that “language plays a powerful role in shaping human perceptions of reality” (6). Hendricks and Oliver also claim that

. . . language, rather than being a neutral vehicle that communicates already-formal ideas, works instead to shape our ideas about the world. Language is very influential in shaping the way we organize and understand reality.^x (6)

Suzette Haden Elgin, a linguist specialized in the Navajo language and author of the

Native Tongue trilogy, also subscribes to this hypothesis and uses it as the basis for her novels (to be discussed shortly). This controversial hypothesis, based on a study of American Indian languages, proposes that “languages vary dramatically and in ways not easily anticipated, and that such variations encode dramatically different understandings of reality, so that people speaking different languages actually see the world in widely divergent ways” (Squier and Vedder’s “Afterword” to *Native Tongue*, 307). The language we speak thus both reflects and shapes how we see our reality, and the notion that different languages teach people to view the world differently shows how constructed our perceptions of “reality” and “truth” are. As Squier and Vedder add: “How we perceive the world depends upon our linguistic structures in both the words we choose and the larger metaphors they encode. These structures, for example, powerfully affect our understandings of gender” (307). If our established understandings of the world are constructed through language, then there is the possibility (and maybe even the probability) that changes in language may/will produce changes in individuals’ perceptions of the world and, thus, change society in general.

This belief that “changing our language changes our world,” Squier and Vedder contend, is not limited to linguists. Since language “contributes to the invisibility and regeneration of privilege” (Rothenberg, 89), and therefore plays a crucial role in establishing and maintaining gender roles and hierarchies, many feminist scholars such as Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray have focused much of their work on the power of language to both “reinforce existing gender relations,” but also to “free ourselves from domination” (Squier and Vedder, “Afterword” to *Native Tongue*, 308). (As Squier and Vedder are careful to point out, this idea is not unique to feminist scholars; it has also been addressed by such philosophers as Ferdinand Saussure, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault (“Afterword” to *Native Tongue*, 308)).

There are certainly some disagreements among scholars as to what language women should use to “free ourselves.” Should we force existing patriarchal languages to include and valorize women and their experiences or, as Irigaray suggests, should oppressed peoples create their own language? Linguist Robin Lakoff argues that women should “try to adopt the more powerful speech patterns used by men” since “women’s speech exhibits a powerlessness that is detrimental to feminist goals” (Hendricks and Oliver, 3). If Hendricks and Oliver’s assertion that “men’s language use focuses on possession and manipulation of objects”^{xi} (7) is correct, then must the oppressed—the people who have historically been manipulated through existing language systems—“reclaim and valorize” their own language in order to “avoid some of the oppressive tendencies of the language developed by males?” (3) Do women need their own language in order to tell their own stories since (to paraphrase the title of Audre Lorde’s famous work) we cannot use “the Master’s tools [to] dismantle the Master’s house”?

Liberation through Language: The *Native Tongue* Trilogy

This question of oppressed peoples, especially women, needing their own language for the sake of their liberation is one of the key elements of *The Native Tongue*. These novels, the first one taking place in 2205 and following years, set up an alternative future where women’s rights had been revoked world-wide in 1991. Women have the same status as children in that they are subject to their male guardian’s supervision, control, whims, and often their physical and/or emotional abuse. The women are not allowed to own property or, in the case of the few women who are allowed/forced to work, they are not allowed to keep their wages. Women do not have the right to vote, to sue, or to divorce their husbands.

Within this alternative society, a subculture of people called the Lines^{xii} dedicate their entire lives to linguistics, specifically the learning of alien languages so that they may serve as

interpreters in trade negotiations with hundreds of alien species. Because linguists are so in demand and, because (for reasons known only to the people of the Lines) only members of the Lines are capable of learning the alien languages with any fluency, women and even young children of the Lines are not only allowed to, but are forced to work as interpreters for the U.S. government.

This doesn't mean that the women of the Lines aren't oppressed in all other ways, however. The tribes of the Lines are already isolated (the general public so hates/fears/envies the talents of the Lines-people that the isolation was self-imposed and for their own safety). The women of the Lines are further segregated by being "banished" to the women-only houses unless and until their husbands demand their presence for sex or for a task. What the men don't know is that the women not only enjoy their segregation, but that they schemed in order to convince the men to banish them to their own houses so that they may work, uninterrupted, on their secret and forbidden language, Láaden.

The new language "encodes," or creates a word to describe an idea, concept, experience, or emotion that doesn't have its own word. Láaden is a "women's language" in that, besides creating translations of existing words, it encodes things that are de-valued in patriarchal society (and, thus, don't have their own words to describe them) but which are important to women's lived experiences. It also de-masculinizes language so that women, for example, aren't erased from such words as "mankind." This secret language is seen by the men of the Lines as very dangerous. The men, as do the women, believe that language has the power to shape perception so a language that empowers women may be a serious threat to patriarchy. It's also a threat to the extremely conservative religious ideologies since, according to the priests, the women's translation of the King James Bible creates a goddess worship (when in fact it just takes out

gendered language). To have a language that reflects what the women consider important not only points out how patriarchal and gendered our current language system is, but it also serves to empower women so that they may tell their own stories with their own words. Not only are they making their own tools, but they're building their own house, too.

The other key element Elgin stresses throughout her novels is her position that “the only nonviolent mechanism we have for reducing human violence is language” (“Afterword” to *The Judas Rose*, 366). While Láadan’s secret empowering of women is certainly a main goal for the Lines women, the second phase of their plan for Láadan (once enough women know it so it cannot die out with the silencing of its creators) is to spread Láadan to all people across the galaxy so that it may also work to end violence. Since the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis posits that language has a direct impact on how we perceive the world, a language that is no longer based in patriarchy and reinforced through violence would change the world’s (especially men’s) “need” for violence. As Squier and Vedder write in *The Judas Rose* “Afterword,”

The language we use affects (and genders) our understanding of the world, our place in it, and our interactions with one another; changing our language can change for better or worse not only how we think, but the world in which that thinking occurs. The premise of the *Native Tongue* books is that a linguistic revolution is necessary, not only to challenge the linguistic foundation of patriarchy but to treat the society of violence that subtends it. (366)

Elgin sees the language of Láadan as nourishment: in the first two novels, it feeds women’s hearts and souls so that they have strength and self-love to withstand their oppression. In the third novel, *Earthsong*, Láadan takes on literal qualities of nourishment; hearing Láadan physically nourishes human bodies so that they do not need food or water. With no need to fight

over scarce resources, humans “living” off of this language find an inner peace that extends throughout the society. This was the ultimate goal of the originator of Láadan, Nazareth. As she explains,

Meanwhile, Láadan would spread; the tiny wild vine wreaths, unnoticed by anyone, would go up on wall after wall. It would continue to keep the women of the Lines, and all the women who knew it beyond, immune to the state of violence that the men struggled with so incessantly; it would continue to provide the women with the patience necessary to bring the men *out* of those endless loops of violence always begetting more violence. The day would come when they would have a war, and all of the men would look at each other and laugh and just go home. (355)

While the “science fiction” component of language literally feeding the people who hear it may, for some readers, serve to diminish the seriousness of Elgin’s hopes for a change in language to change the world, Elgin’s basic tenet (according to Squier and Oliver) that “language is power” (365) might encourage readers to revalue the importance of language, especially in how we value and treat others. “When the women create Láadan, then, they are not simply creating new words. They are, in fact, reordering what is significant and not significant, perceived and not perceived” (313).

This often-overlooked aspect of language—that it reflects what is regarded as significant and not significant—is often met with skepticism from some students, both male and female, when I apply it to gendered language. The “it’s no big deal” attitude is prevalent in discussions of masculine pronouns used to refer to mixed-gender groups or of the “-man” suffix on occupations such as “fireman” which are held by people of both sexes. This attitude often changes, however, when we read a work such as *Egalia’s Daughters* (discussed later in this

chapter) that switches not only which sex has cultural power, but also switches the language used to reflect the hierarchies. Once students see gendered language used in a way that they are not accustomed to, they begin to see the implications of gendered language in our culture.

Elgin also believes that language is devalued precisely because everyone practices it. In *Language Imperative*, Elgin writes that

If speaking a language were like brain surgery, learned only after many long years of difficult study and practiced only by a handful of remarkable individuals at great expense, we would view it with similar respect and awe. But because almost every human being knows and uses one or more languages, we have let that miracle be trivialized into “only talk.” (in “Afterword to *Judas Rose*,” 365-366)

This trivialization of language is compounded when language is expressed as story, whether as myth or personal narrative. American society has been conditioned to not value stories very much, other than as entertainment. Often we even associate “myth” and “story” with “untrue.” Various “Top 10 Myths About...” lists imply that “myth” means “falsehood” or “misinformation”). When parents say “it’s just a story” to a child so she or he won’t believe that the monster from the movie will come get her, they mean “it’s just a work of fiction.” Adults telling a teenager who broke curfew again “don’t give me another one of your stories!” probably mean “don’t lie.” We’ve been conditioned to not see that myths are actually stories that explain something important to a particular culture and that personal narrative stories can teach us just as much, if not more, about the world than any set of historical “facts” can.

There are literally dozens of purposes for using stories in various settings and contexts. While many people mostly associate stories with sheer entertainment, even that entertainment aspect can serve a valuable purpose. For example: many fairy tales and similar stories entertain

while also teaching children valuable lessons or morals. They often also point out or comment on cultural ideologies and illustrate what we as a society value and/or fear. Personal narratives can be used to get to know someone / let someone know you, let someone know you trust them or consider them an insider (think of parents telling embarrassing stories about you to your date), and they can let others know that they are not alone in what they are going through. Personal stories can also be used strategically such as in a classroom setting where a story can set a mood in a class where students may feel more comfortable to share their own experiences or apply classroom materials to their personal lives. Stories can also be used to illustrate a point so it's more memorable, entertaining, and thus understandable.

Telling one's own stories can be very empowering, especially for people who have historically been silenced by not being equally included in "objective" historical and scholarly texts or who have been "told about" by others who assume they have more authority to speak. As Cheryl A. Wall states, "...claiming the right to speak is a requisite part of claiming a self" ("Taking Positions," 11). Certain topics may also culturally be considered taboo, especially women's experiences of oppression. For many women, telling their own stories not only helps them cope with whatever oppression they may be facing, but it also "visibilizes" the oppression and "marks" the privilege that so often go unnoticed. It also allows the silenced to move from passive object of study to active subject. As bell hooks asserts,

"moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and growth possible. It is that act of speech of 'talking back' that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice." ("Talking Back," 340)

This “talking back” is especially important for women of color who face double erasure because of sexism and racism, but it also applies to any marginalized group.

Many feminist scholars such as Dorothy Smith, Carol Gilligan, and Patricia Hill Collins advocate standpoint epistemology as a means to validate marginalized voices. This epistemology “argues that research should start with women’s lives, or with particular women’s lives, and treat women’s experience as the grounds of feminist knowledge” (Mason, 18).

Linguist Shari Stone-Mediatore suggests that including personal narratives as a source of cultural knowledge “challenges the long-standing opposition between story and truth,” gives voice to those who have been “systematically occluded by dominant discursive logics,” and also “throw[s] new light on the structure of historical reality and historical knowledge” (5, 8).

Georganna Ulary adds that first-person narrative (or what she calls the “confessional mode”) not only questions issues of authority and objectivity, but also “redesigns what constitutes legitimate ‘truth’” (175).

Dominant discourses can also take narrative form; the difference between dominant and marginalized narratives, as explained by Stone-Mediatore, is that dominant narratives “tend to be endorsed and repeated by powerful institutions, with the result that the narrative character of these representations passes unnoticed as they come to be accepted as ‘common-sense’ knowledge” (6). Thus “objective history” is often nothing more than the unquestioned narratives of the dominant culture with the backing of educational, religious, and other cultural institutions. “History,” according to a famous saying, “is written by the winners.” Narratives from marginalized groups, then, often conflict with what is considered historical truth and they “enter public discussion explicitly as stories” or, more specifically, “a particular group’s story, not a general truth” (Stone-Mediatore, 6).

Any marginalized group telling their stories, then, is essentially challenging what is considered truth and is marking the privilege that dominant cultures enjoy by having their narratives assumed to be universal truth. Storytelling, then, may be one of the greatest acts of resistance and empowerment a marginalized group can accomplish: “For [the marginalized], true speaking is not solely an expression of creative power, it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges the politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless. As such it is a courageous act; as such it represents a threat” (hooks, “Talking Back,” 339). This threat is further advanced since storytelling “create[s] a collective voice” (King, “Andrea’s Third Shift,” 404) so that marginalized people--both within and between specific groups--are no longer isolated from each other. When these isolated voices join together, they can use their stories to slowly change “whose histories have been authorized and whose have been silenced; whose lives have been acclaimed and whose have been devalued; whose names we will remember and whose we will never know” (Dyson and Genishi, 129).

The remainder of this chapter will examine how two key works of FSF, *Egalia’s Daughters* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*, take up this theme of storytelling as resistance and empowerment. *Egalia’s* satiric story of a “reversed” society and *Handmaid’s* alternate future both use stories-within-stories to highlight the crucial role storytelling played for each of the narrators’ empowerment.

Herstory: Questioning Dominant “Truth” in *Egalia’s Daughters* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*

Some FSF authors in the 1970s and ‘80s such as Sheri S. Tepper, Marge Piercy, and Gerda Brantenberg knew that before we could acknowledge powerful women, we had to examine the very notions of power and also how, within mainstream ideologies, power was directly linked to masculinity within false theories of biological determinism. Lorraine Code adds,

The structures of power-knowledge in western societies, within which women must claim their identity and power, are historically rooted in an ancient, taken-for-granted biological determinism . . . With reference to the human soul, Aristotle [in *Politics*] observes that “the slave has no deliberative faculty at all; the woman has, but it is without authority, and the child has, but it is immature.” (181)

Here we see how devalued women’s power is since it is essentially put on the same level as that of a child. This view goes unquestioned when gender roles are biologically assigned rather than understood as culturally constructed. FSF works of literature such as Gerd Brantenberg’s novel *Egalia’s Daughters* reverse the power binaries, and just about everything else, in order to show how socially constructed and hegemonic our gender roles, language, and even concepts of “his” story are, all which play into notions of cultural power.

While women (called “wim” in the novel) in *Egalia*’s “reversed” society retain our generally understood notions of women’s biological anatomy and still give birth, the men (called “menwim”) are the primary care givers to their children (even though the wim breast feed the children, it is the menwim’s job to bring the baby to her at work, or to hold the baby in place to breastfeed at night so the mother never wakes up; after children are weaned, the wim have next to no day-to-day contact with them). It is just assumed in Egalian society that wim are more intelligent, stronger, and more capable of having all the “important” jobs and positions of political power. When a masculist movement starts up, the characters (and the readers) are introduced to alternative theories about strength and power. Wim in Egalian society are assumed to be biologically stronger than men; however, the masculists argue that biology plays only a small role compared to gender discrimination that encourages wim to be active and athletic while forcing the menwim to hardly move so that they will remain weak. The tight skirts, ropes tied

around their knees, and uncomfortable shoes menwim are culturally forced to wear also limit the extent of menwim's physical activity. Physical strength is so linked to cultural power that menwim's "natural" weakness in this society is used to justify wim's domination, and menwim's penises, which must be worn through a slit in their skirts and inside a decorative box called a peho, become a source of cultural disempowerment since it makes the menwim so literally and metaphorically exposed and vulnerable.

This reversal world not only takes us out of the waters of our own societies and ideologies, but also encourages us to think about what elements of *our* culture which are coded as feminine (and thus devalued) aren't weak at all, but rather can be sources of great strength and power. Throughout the novel, the oppressive impact of gendered language toward menwim is highlighted, as is the potential for menwim's empowerment by de-gendering it or using a new (masculist) language. Fandango, a young manwom just starting to question matriarchy throughout his society, has a late-night philosophical conversation with his older brother:

. . . "take the word 'manwom.' Have you ever thought about it? I mean, it suggests that a manwom is just a certain sort of wom, though a wom isn't any sort of manwom. Why don't they just say 'man'? And then there's the way they say wom or womkind to mean the whole huwom race for huwomity. 'The rights of wom'... 'wom-made fibres,' there are lots of examples."

[The older brother responds:] "Well, you can always say 'huwom being' instead of 'wom' if you want; it's neutral."

"Yes, but even huwom is derived from the word for wom in the language of ancient Wome – *womo*, like in *womo sapiens*, which is the root of the word *huwomitas*... You know what? I think I'll become a masculist when I'm older... I could

become a linguist. It's important to have a really good understanding of the language.

Then I could systematically set about weeding out all words indicating that wim were in control of society.” (145-146)

The penultimate chapter of *Egalia's Daughters* is a story-within-a-story. Petronius, the novel's narrator and now one of the leaders of the Masculist League, wrote a reversal-world story called *The Sons of Democracy* where his “reversed” language is our current language and his reversed gender roles are our “traditional” gender roles of women taking care of children and men having all positions of privilege and importance. After 260 pages of matriarchal language throughout *Egalia's Daughters*, the sudden shift back into “our” language not only feels awkward to some readers, but also makes the patriarchal-ness of our language and the social construction of our gender roles clear.

Reviews of Petronius's story, all written by wim, attacked the story as being “masculist-separatist propaganda,” “farfetched,” “pornographic,” “perverse,” and Petronius's mother, Ruth (a high-ranking political figure), called the patriarchal society of the story “unthinkable” in this exchange with her son:

[Petronius:] “‘Unthinkable.’ That's your word for anything that isn't exactly as it is now!”

[Ruth:] “I'm sorry, Petronius, but it *is* unthinkable! You may well be right that I'm conservative, and I want to keep power relations the way they are today . . . because . . . because . . . well, because I'm in a position of power myself, for goodness' sake! But then I hold that position with the complete conviction that I'm making the right decisions.”

She stopped for a moment. Petronius said nothing; he was dumbfounded by this

admission on the part of his mother.

. . . [Petronius:] “Such societies [where menwim rule] have *existed!* Only we never hear anything about them, because we live in this awful matiarchy!”

[Ruth:] “*Have* existed! Precisely . . . And what do you think happened to them, Petronius? . . . In a society where menwim were allowed to rule, all terrestrial life would die out. If menwim weren’t kept down, if they weren’t restrained, if they weren’t civilized, if they weren’t *kept in their place*, life would perish . . .”

And as always, Ruth Bram had the final word. (268-269)

It is not uncommon for my students to respond to *Egalia* with comments about how the author of the novel was “just trying to say that women should have all the power and men should be oppressed.” While I feel that the author’s inclusion of “reviews” of Petronius’s story—such as “Surely the idea wasn’t simply to take over wim’s ways of doing things” (267)—demonstrates that a simple reversal of power relations is *not* what the author advocated, these student comments are very conducive to discussion. We often discuss how feminists are often stereotyped as “man-haters who just want all the power for themselves” and how a simple reversal of power dynamics doesn’t fit with what the editors of our Introduction to Women’s Studies textbook claim as the “two core principles underlying any concept of feminism . . . equality and justice for all women, and it seeks to eliminate systems of inequality and injustice in all aspects of women’s lives (Shaw and Lee, 10).

The question of “whose histories have been authorized and whose have been silenced” is another key element of *Egalia*. The psychological impact of being left out of history is made clear in another passage with Fandango talking to his brother: ““Hey, d’you know what I was thinking? I was wondering why history always only talks about wim, and then I thought it must

be because wim are so important, and I really like history, and then I feel so unimportant”” (145). If “official” accounts of history focus on only one group, or always show that group in a positive light and all others as “savage” or “needing to be civilized,” and if these stereotypes are reinforced through cultural institutions, then it’s no big leap to how or why the “others” may often internalize their oppression. That’s why learning alternate historical accounts are so important, especially for those oppressed groups. That is also why telling stories that confront the hegemonic dominant canons of historical and narrative cultural accounts is such an important act of rebellion / resistance / empowerment for the oppressed and such a threat to those in dominant positions of power.

The resistance / empowerment for the marginalized lies in the rebellious acts themselves, but also in the telling and retelling of those acts. If other marginalized groups or later generations never hear of rebellions, they may not know that rebellion is possible or that it makes any difference. Spinnerman Owlmoos (Petronius’s former history teacher, one of the only mafele [i.e., male] teachers at the school) tells the younger masculists, after they wondered why menwim have always just accepted their oppression, that:

“It wasn’t really like that,” said Spn Owlmoos. “It isn’t really true that menwim have always acquiesced . . . Menwim have rebelled countless time—and in various ways—and there have also existed societies in which menwim have held the power. The problem is that we hear little or nothing about these rebellions and these patriarchal societies *because* we live in a matriarchy. Historians write nothing about them. The historians are wim. Anthropologists write nothing about them. The anthropologists are wim. That’s why . . . even if we do write something, what guarantee do we have that it will get through to people, or that it will be preserved? In former times, too, menwim wrote their

chronicles; but they weren't published. It is wim who decide what gets published. It is wim who decide what is important and what is unimportant. History is written by wim.” (173, 178-179)

It is a privilege to be a member of the dominant group and have your culture's history written about. The power of language is so important that in societies such as that in *The Handmaid's Tale* (see the Introduction for a summary of the novel), even being allowed to read or write at all is a privilege for the dominant few. Taking away written language is one of the tactics used to keep women (especially the handmaids) isolated, uninformed, and unprepared for any type of collective rebellion. But their rebellion doesn't come in the form of killing their masters (even though that's how the movie version portrayed Offred's resistance); rather, it is in leaving messages of encouragement for others to discover and treasure, or in whispering their names to each other to keep their real identities alive. Besides displaying the power of language and storytelling, this dystopian novel shows that rebellion and empowerment don't have to be armed warfare; they can be the little things that unite people against their oppressors and inspire them to remember that they count, that they aren't invisible.

One of the easiest ways to keep a group oppressed is to isolate them in order to keep them from plotting any type of rebellion and encouraging each other to keep their spirits up and their identities as individuals intact. We see this tactic of isolation in *The Handmaid's Tale* used most clearly among the handmaids. Women aren't allowed to read, write, or even talk to men in this alternate future, and their conversations with other handmaids are usually observed and thus limited to official phrases of greeting or chants meant to remind them of their subordinated place within society. The handmaids must communicate through lip reading at night in the “training” barracks where they tell each other their real names (“Offred” would be the name of whatever

handmaid was living in that Commander's house since that handmaid belongs to Fred), through stolen moments of conversation in the bathrooms where they can tell each other who has escaped and how, or through secret messages like "don't let the bastards get you down" scratched into the corner of the wardrobe. Though kept isolated from each other, these brief exchanges between the handmaids are enough to reinforce their "collective," remind each other that they are individuals, and pass on strategies for survival and escape.

Offred, the narrator, sometimes forgets what life was like before her rights and identity were taken away. Little things like finding a word stitched onto a throw pillow remind her of the times before when she got to use her mind and wasn't just kept alive for the use of her womb. Not long after Offred moves into the home of her current commander, he begins to secretly "invite" Offred to his study late at night (as if she could refuse), first to do mundane things like play scrabble and, later, to dress up like a prostitute and accompany the Commander to Jezebel's, a secret gentlemen's club. Offred actually enjoys the secret meetings in the Commander's den since it is the only place she is allowed to talk, to read, and even to win a game against a man. These small acts of defiance against Gileadean rules give Offred a small sense of power even though she must rely on the generosity of a man to allow her these stolen moments.

While these moments comfort Offred in that they remind her of who she was/is as an individual, they also frustrate her since they remind her of what she has lost. Most of all, Offred covets her Commander's pen, saying "Pen Is Envy" (241), an obvious pun with "penis envy." Since Offred can never steal the real "source" of men's power in this patriarchal society where the women have no cultural power (even over their own bodies) other than their individual instances of rebellion, she wants to steal the phallic symbol of it. In action-driven films, any woman's attempt to "steal phallic power" would probably include grabbing a big gun or, as in

G.I. Jane, telling the men to “suck my dick.” In this case, however, patriarchal power is linked to education and communication, especially in this comment by Offred: “The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains... I envy the Commander his pen. It’s one more thing I would like to steal” (241).

At the end of the novel, we learn that Offred did eventually get to tell her own story. The penultimate chapter concludes with Offred being taken out of the Commander’s house by the Eyes—the enforcers of all Gileadean rules. We have a glimmer of hope for Offred, though, since Nick (her secret lover who is a member of the Mayday group which liberates handmaids) tells her to go with them. Offred’s narration ends with her stepping into the Eye’s van, saying: “Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing. I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can’t be helped. And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light” (378). The final chapter, called “Historical notes on *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” is set more than 150 years after the Gilead period at a conference of the Gileadean Research Association. Here, we learn that the novel we have just read is one of the only narrative records of that entire period since women were not allowed to read or write and all official records were wiped out. This diary is actually a transcription of several audio tapes recently discovered in a house which was a station on the “Underground Femaleroad” assisting fugitive handmaids to Canada and eventually to England.

Some readers may argue that Offred’s empowerment through telling her story is partially negated since it took other people far in Offred’s future to uncover her story and give her a voice; also, can telling her story be empowering if no one in her own time ever heard it and benefitted from it? Rather than judging Offred’s empowerment on how many people she reached in her time, perhaps we need to consider how she educated people of her future--and those of us

reading Atwood's novel now--against the mistakes of her time. Perhaps we also need to consider the empowerment of Offred telling her story just for her sake. Sometimes, just telling their story is empowering for women who are often denied a voice and subjectivity. Offred explains her reason for sharing her story with us:

I keep going with this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story, because after all I want you to hear it, as I will hear yours too if I ever get the chance, if I meet you or if you escape, in the future or in heaven or in prison or underground, some other place. What they have in common is that they're not here. By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are. (344)

By believing in a reader's existence, Offred can also believe in her own. For many women, sometimes just the act of telling their story makes it (and them) more Real.

Maybe those of us from countries with (relative) free speech can't fully appreciate how just speaking out against your own government is a radical act of resistance.^{xiii} As the United States enters a period of increased surveillance and government / military power (in part due to Patriot Act policies), and a potential (or probable) period of decreased rights for women and LGBT people as the President nominates anti-choice candidates for the Supreme Court and reinforces anti-same-sex marriage laws, we may soon find ourselves in a society much like the dystopia which Margaret Atwood envisioned over two decades ago. Maybe it will be some of our stories that encourage women to fight to keep control over their own bodies, or maybe it will be some of the FSF works mentioned here that warn us that this dystopia might be coming unless we do something about it now. How can someone's stories be "just" stories if they have the

power to do something like that?

All of these FSF stories are told so that the women may be known, heard, and seen. For many of the characters, telling their story is the one power they still possess. It is not just the characters who gain power through telling their stories. Through feminist science fiction, feminist writers can create other worlds and alternate histories in order to add their voices to this world and hope they are heard, and those of us reading of their worlds can feel like we finally found our island of wonder women in a sea of science fiction that often glorifies weapons of mass destruction in a galaxy not far, far enough away.

CHAPTER III. “THE WOMEN MEN DON’T SEE:” WOMEN’S STRATEGIC INVISIBILITY AS POTENTIAL EMPOWERMENT

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, cultural visibility is a key concept to both feminist and critical race theories. In this chapter I will explore the concomitant disempowerment yet also potential empowerment that literal and metaphorical invisibility within FSF stories offers to women, especially women of color. Through the textual analysis of such stories as Pamela Sargent’s “Fears,” James Tiptree, Jr.’s “The Women Men Don’t See,” Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and also an individual episode from the television show, *Star Trek: Enterprise*, I will examine how FSF stories can be utilized in the classroom in order to discuss various issues surrounding (in)visibility such as women’s hypervisibility due to their sexual objectification, how SF “erases” the notion of racial difference to discuss issues of continuing racism, and strategic invisibility (of both whiteness and racial “otherness,” and also of gender/sex).

I preface this section by acknowledging that invisibility can be a very oppressive issue. Women of color have perhaps published the largest amount of scholarship on women’s invisibility, but I would add that it can be oppressive to many groups including queer women and women who don’t fit the “beauty norm” such as fat women, old women, and women with physical challenges. I do not mean to deny or silence any of these women’s voices speaking against cultural invisibility. Portions of this chapter will address the oppressiveness of cultural invisibility, but I believe that, within FSF, invisibility can be used toward empowerment. Some examples of possible empowerment include (literal) invisibility as a means of escape, (metaphorical) invisibility as strategy (such as slaves and servants overhearing key information since their masters forget they are in the room), or even invisibility of the dominant groups

(white, male, heterosexual, etc.) normalizing themselves through their “unmarked” status.

Even though some of the SF stories I will be using to illustrate issues of invisibility deal with literal invisibility, it is important to understand the all-too-real cultural invisibility oppressed people feel when those in the dominant cultures choose to not “see” them. For example, Sallie Bingham, in her autobiography *Passion and Prejudice*, recalls growing up in a white Kentucky family who employed black servants, “Blacks, I realized, were simply invisible to most white people, except as a pair of hands offering a drink on a silver tray” (in hooks, 21). bell hooks, who includes this quote in her essay “Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination,” comments on the autobiography by adding:

Reduced to the machinery of bodily physical labor, black people learned to appear before whites as though they were zombies, cultivating the habit of casting the gaze downward so as not to appear uppity. To look directly was an assertion of subjectivity, equality. Safety resided in the pretense of invisibility . . . One mark of oppression was that black folks were compelled to assume the mantle of invisibility to erase all traces of their subjectivity during slavery and the long years of racial apartheid, so that they could be better, less threatening servants. (21)

Many slaves, as well as other racially and/or sexually oppressed groups, learned to internalize this state of invisibility in order to survive. Sometimes this invisibility could even be used strategically. For example, house slaves could often be in the room where white people were talking and could overhear details which helped slaves plan their escapes. For a more current example, many women adopt an air of invisibility if they don’t wish to be cat-called on the streets, some to the point of purposely looking unattractive (by common contemporary standards) or becoming fat in the hopes of being ignored. Whether these types of

strategic internalization of invisibleness can actually be considered “empowerment” is not clear, especially since they connote a passive quality; invisibleness is being used here to remain unnoticed, to purposely remain invisible. This cultural invisibility and its use as a strategic means of escape mirrors early examples of fictional literal invisibleness in entertainment media.

Another reason why I argue that invisibility, at least within SF stories, can be seen as empowering is because we see so many examples of characters (almost all of whom are female) employing invisibility as a superpower. The cartoon characters of my childhood such as Wonder Woman (in her invisible jet) and Sheila from *Dungeons and Dragons* used invisibility as a means of escape or, at most, a way to sneak around an enemy. This power, I thought, wasn't so powerful since they didn't *do* anything with it; it was a passive power that allowed them to run away (or, in Sheila's case, to steal things). The invisible characters of today (such as Lexa from *Mutant X*, Sue Storm from *The Fantastic Four*, and the animated character Violet in *The Incredibles*), however, use their power to sneak up to the enemy before getting in a good punch or they can combine their invisibility with some sort of protective force field. (This isn't to say that all images and aspects of invisibility are empowering for these characters—for example, Sue Storm (Jessica Alba) has a gratuitous nearly-nude scene in *The Fantastic Four* when her power fails her and she reappears naked--she had disrobed since normal clothes don't vanish--in front of a crowd of people). These characters now run toward danger and end up saving the day instead of just saving themselves.

Literal invisibility as empowerment is limited to science fiction. When I refer to “invisibility as strategic empowerment” outside of my story analyses, I am referring to such concepts as racial and gender passing, and also to the erasing of race / gender / sexuality oppression to further normalize (and thus make culturally superior) whiteness / masculinity /

heterosexuality. These fictional accounts of strategic literal invisibility, however, work well to open a discourse on all issues surrounding cultural (in)visibility. Before I get to my FSF examples of invisibility as potential empowerment, I will briefly outline some key aspects of racial and gender invisibility as both oppression and potential empowerment.

Invisibility as Power for Some, Oppression for “Others”

*Erasure,
unseen,
amorphous,
transparent,
absence of human presence,
shadow,
overdetermination,
fade;*

Like Musak, they think we are piped into the airwaves by someone else.^{xiv}

All of these terms and many more are found often in the writings of oppressed groups, especially women of color. These words portray the authors’ experiences of being there but not, of being seen yet not seen, or being objects for others to define themselves against but not subjects of their own identities. These descriptors of invisibility have more to do with the lookers not wanting to see, rather than of the authors not being there to be seen or heard. This opening section focuses on oppressed people’s cultural invisibility due to their race / ethnicity and their gender / sex and also examines the seemingly contradictory theories of racial “otherness” as cultural invisibility (resulting in oppression for some) and of whiteness as normative invisibility (resulting in privilege for others).

Cultural invisibility is certainly not limited to women of color. Indeed, one of the most famous creative works dealing with issues of invisibility is Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) where an African American male character says:

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe;

nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me . . . When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me. (3)

Here we see that the problem lies with the people who refuse to see him, just as the invisibility of women, especially women of color, arises out of other people's blindness and not from the women not trying to be seen and heard.

People of color, often considered by some whites as racial “others,” certainly feel the oppression of cultural invisibility, yet Paula Rothenberg, in her introduction to *White privilege: a essential readings on the other side of racism*, discusses the notion of whiteness as invisibility since whiteness has historically been the unmarked “norm” whereas people of color are the marked “others.” Indeed, “Whiteness” is often not even considered a race. As Rothenberg writes: “As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people. There is no more powerful position than that of being ‘just’ human” (10). In this case, whiteness's invisibility as a race reinforces this notion of whites as “just people” whereas people of color are the “raced” others.^{xv} Rebecca Aanerud adds that “At its best, whiteness studies--a fast-growing field in recent years--analyzes how whiteness as a socially constructed category of racial and cultural identity maintains and reproduces its hegemony” (71). Part of this hegemony is the unearned, undeserving privilege many white people unquestioningly--and, possibly, unknowingly--enjoy. As Paula Rothenberg writes,

White privilege is the other side of racism. Unless we name it, we are in danger of

wallowing in guilt or moral outrage with no idea of how to move yond them. It is often easier to deplore racism and its effects than to take responsibility for the privileges some of us receive as a result of it. By choosing to look at white privilege, we gain an understanding of who benefits from racism and how they do so. Once we understand how white privilege operates, we can begin to take steps to dismantle it on both a personal and an institutional level. (1)

One characteristic of privilege is that it often goes unnoticed and/or unquestioned by those who possess it, which makes it even more difficult to “dismantle.” Rothenberg later points out that one way of making whites see their invisible privilege is to “see themselves as white, to see their particularity. In other words, whiteness needs to be made strange” (12).

The types of invisible privilege that many white people enjoy are similar to the invisible privilege that many men (especially straight white men) enjoy. Thanks to works such as *This Bridge Called My Back*, *This Bridge We Call Home*, and “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” these invisible privileges are being brought out into the light, a first step towards dismantling the individual privileges and the entire system of privilege / oppression. If whiteness and maleness (as well as straightness) maintain their hegemony through invisibility, then making people see them as a race / gender / sexuality lessens their power:

The invisibility of privilege strengthens the power it creates and maintains. The invisible cannot be combated, and as a result privilege is allowed to perpetrate, regenerate, and re-create itself. Privilege is systemic, not an occasional occurrence. Privilege is invisible only until looked for, but silence in the face of privilege sustains its invisibility. Silence is the lack of sound and voice. Silence may result from a desired quiet; it may signify intense mental concentration; it may also arise from oppression or fear. Whatever the

reason, when there is silence, no criticism is expressed. What we do not say, what we do not talk about, allows the status quo to continue. (Rothenberg, 89)

Whiteness's (and maleness's) invisibility as power stands counter to the invisibility of racialized and gendered "others" whose invisibility is a source of disempowerment and oppression. Yet some authors see the journey of recognizing one's invisibility as a source of empowerment. In "Invisibility Is an Unnatural Disaster," Mitsuye Yamada writes,

I would like to think that my new awareness is going to make more visible than ever, and to allow me to make some changes in the "man made disaster" I live in at the present time. We must remember that one of the most insidious ways of keeping women and minorities powerless is to let them only talk about harmless and inconsequential subjects, or let them speak freely and not listen to them with serious intent. We need to raise our voices a little more, even as they say to us "This is so uncharacteristic of you." To finally recognize our own invisibility is to finally be on the path toward visibility. Invisibility is not a natural state for anyone. (543)

The narrator in Ellison's *Invisible Man* also sees his invisibility as potential empowerment. He admits,

It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen...Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat. Sometimes you're ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around. (3, 8)

This ability to "slip into the breaks and look around" unnoticed is often echoed in the FSF works to be discussed shortly. This isn't to say that the characters wouldn't mind being able to

walk in full sunlight and be regarded as fully human, fully equal, but given their situations it is sometimes advantageous to be a ghostly red shadow in the hallway, an opossum living in the chinks of man's world machine, a figure living underground coming up once in a while to look around at the world they are missing and remembering why they chose to stay hidden in the first place.

Some groups such as women of color and/or lesbian women have multiple binds of oppression and multiple levels of invisibility. Many lesbians (of any race) and women of color have discussed their exclusion from groups they thought they belonged to: lesbians have felt pushed aside within both queer and feminist organizations, and women of color have often felt overlooked within feminist organizations and/or theories and also within critical race studies. Even within the groups that an author initially thought would be accepting of her, there can be an erasure if that group feels she is trying too hard to assimilate into the dominant culture. For example, Yoko Arisaka writes about her double-erasure within the Asian American community. She suggests that when some Asian Americans try to assimilate to the dominant [white] culture they become invisible to their "racial minority" culture but are still "invisible as a group in the dominant culture" (214). It is even more difficult for Asian American women to gain cultural visibility since their ethnic culture may still hold on to the values of "repose" and "respect for others" to the point that "bring[ing] attention to oneself and to put one's own needs before the needs of all others would be seen as 'undignified'" (Arisaka, 215). To be "seen" by the dominant group would entail complete assimilation, thus invisibilizing their ethnic individuality within the "melting pot." This assimilating often then incurs some level of shunning from their less-assimilated ethnic group. For Asian-American women, the gendered cultural mandate for women to not claim cultural space for themselves is added to their ethnic cultural mandate for

people to be self-less, creating multiple layers of invisibility.

That Asian-American women carry so many layers of both racial and gendered notions of cultural invisibility makes my first FSF example of invisibility as potential empowerment particularly interesting since it features an Asian American woman in the position of being both culturally and literally “invisiblized.”

“Where No Man Has Gone Before:” Women’s (In)visibility in FSF

One recent example of women's potential empowerment through invisibility is from an episode of the latest *Star Trek* series, *Enterprise*. The *Enterprise* series ran from 2001 – 2005, yet the show was set as a prequel for the original series (which aired 1966 – 1969), setting *Enterprise* more than 100 years before Captain Kirk and crew set out on their adventures. The episode to be discussed here shows only the second time the transporters were used on people; needless to say, all of the characters on this *Enterprise* are quite leery of trusting their molecules to this new technology. This episode, “Vanishing Point,” (originally airing in 2002) explores one woman’s literal erasure which, ironically, in some ways contributes to her empowerment. There have been several episodes in the various *Star Trek* series that deal with various forms of invisibility; I focus solely on this particular episode not only because it comes from the most recent series, but also because it is the only one that shows additional components of women’s (especially women of color’s) metaphorical invisibility along with the “literal” invisibility of the character.

Ensign Hoshi Soto (Linda Park), the only Asian-American character and one of only two women lead characters aboard the star ship, is often portrayed as a whining, cowardly, insecure communications officer. Asian-American women, as with any women of color, often face double-erasure in society, particularly in media; thus the literal disappearance of this character is

particularly interesting. The only other lead female character is T' Pol (Jolene Blalock), a Vulcan; thus among the women characters on this show, one is a literal alien, and one is metaphorical. As Debra Benita Shaw says in *Women, Science, and Fiction*, it's easy to see why women's issues of alienation are so often played out in SF's conventions of women-as-aliens:

It is my belief that the appeal of Science Fiction for women has always been that it allows opportunities both to express and explore alienation as well as to offer a fictional description of the kind of world that a gender-free or differently gendered [and, I would add, racialized] science might produce. (6)

Hoshi, already coded as an outsider due to her gender and her ethnicity, is convinced that her first trip through the transporter didn't put her molecules back together right and that she is literally disappearing. Hoshi watches her image fade in her mirror, and then watches water run right through her hands while she takes a shower. Her medical complaints are ignored by her captain, crewmates, and doctor; her worries are dismissed as being only in her head and she is repeatedly told she just needs to "get a good night's sleep." This dismissiveness of women by men--especially male doctors--has historical underpinnings since women with any baffling medical or psychological complaints were often labeled "hysterical" and were supposedly suffering from wandering wombs. (Apparently, the sexism and racism of our current health care system still haven't been solved even in a fictional utopian future. For being part of the *Star Trek* series, which prides itself on pushing the cultural envelope by showing episodes commenting on racism or showing the first televised interracial kiss, commenting on homophobia and gender roles or the Viet Nam war, or miscegenation and amalgamation or even discrimination towards people with HIV/AIDS^{xvi}, the persistent sexism and/or racism in this episode is somewhat surprising.)

Viewers are lead to believe that Hoshi's fears are imagined when we see that her crewmates, mostly white men, have the ability to see her; they merely choose to ignore her. When she approaches the mess hall table where three of her (male) crewmates are sitting, she asks if she may join them; the men don't even pause their conversation, so she has to ask again if she may sit down. Hoshi looks completely humiliated when the captain assigns two of these men to go back to the surface of the planet since, the captain assumes, Hoshi is too shaken up to go back to the planet herself. The three men (even the one not going on the mission) immediately get up from the table and leave Hoshi sitting alone; the camera lingers on the lonely Hoshi as she mumbles to herself "see you later."

Soon, though, we see that Hoshi is, indeed, disappearing. After complaining to the doctor that a birthmark was put back in the wrong place (and was then told "well, it looks very nice where it is") and being dismissed again, Hoshi goes to the gym. After Trip leaves her with another "just get some sleep" remark, Hoshi realizes that her body slips right through some solid matter and can't make the door open (why she can't just walk through the door is never addressed, nor is how she can later manipulate some types of matter). She then stands in front of a large mirror and we watch as she sees her own image completely disappear from the mirror (but we can still see her even though her crewmates cannot). Hoshi spends the next several minutes trying to get someone to see her, but fails. Eventually her crewmates go looking for her, and after Trip (who transported right before Hoshi did) finds what he thinks is her "cellular residue," Hoshi listens as he blames her for getting herself killed by not listening to him when he told her to transport first.

The story turns abruptly when Hoshi finds alien terrorists trying to blow up the ship. Since the aliens cannot see her, she tries to diffuse their bombs right in front of them. When the

aliens escape on their own transporter device, Hoshi follows them through their transporter, only to rematerialize in the uniform she was wearing in the beginning of the episode. It takes her crewmates a while to explain to her (and to the audience) that Hoshi had been stuck in the transporter buffer for several seconds and that none of her adventure had actually happened.

So, the one episode where Hoshi plays hero turns out to be a dream. This episode leaves us with a very ambiguous ending. Does this dream negate her empowerment since it didn't actually happen, or, as the captain says, is she still a hero since she pictured herself as one in her dream? Just because the dream is over, though, will anything change with her crewmates, or will they still choose to not see her? By including Hoshi's literal and metaphorical invisibility, this episode further problematizes the question of who has and does not have power, for

Visibility and invisibility are crucially bound; invisibility polices visibility and in this specific sense functions as the ascendant term in the binary. Gaining visibility for the politically under-represented without scrutinizing the power of who is required to display what to whom is an impoverished political agenda. (Phelan, 26)

Even though the ending of the episode reestablishes the status quo of Hoshi's outsider position on the ship, it also explores her potential empowerment through her invisibility. For one thing, she proves (within the dream's story line) to all the men that she is not crazy or hysterical. Also, this plot device allows Hoshi one of her most active roles and gives her the opportunity to prove to herself that she can overcome her fears and be a hero; at the time I began researching for this article, I hoped that this might even be the beginning of a less-timid character for the rest of the series. Unfortunately, Hoshi went back to her whining, cowardly self for all but a few instances in the remainder of the series. Her character has all but disappeared from the storyline, another negation of her potential empowerment.

Even though this episode was narrative-driven and (for one of the only times in the series) explored this character's development, the final moments of the episode demonstrate, again, that how a story is told impacts the potential empowerment. Hoshi is told by her (male) crewmates that her dream / story never happened. We don't even get to hear her report her story to her captain; instead, the episode ends with Hoshi grasping for any sense of empowerment by asking her captain if she could open the sick-bay door for herself, just to prove that her dream was, in fact, over. Unfortunately, just because she was visible to the eye doesn't mean that she was taken more seriously by her crewmates.

The concomitant invisibility / hypervisibility of race (be it the assumed and normalized category of whiteness, the disregard and overt oppression of people of color, or the less obvious "race doesn't make a difference so we're all alike" oppression) shares parallels with the invisibility / hypervisibility of sex / gender. Often, when women are seen it is only through the "gaze" of objectification, sexualization and even exotification. In these instances, women may become hypervisible, yet remain invisible since only their sexualized bodies are seen and not their subjectivity.^{xvii} This paradox of women's hypervisibility and concomitant invisibility is highlighted in the story "Fears" by Pamela Sargent.

The context of this story is that a pill was created which allowed parents to pick the sex of their child. (It is alluded to that this was supposed to make sure no girl babies were killed at birth out of parents' disappointment.) As a result, very few females remain. Women have become literal possessions of men and must get married at 16, must have as many children as possible (mostly male children since who would want their child to live a life of sexual and maternal slavery), and have no rights to divorce or have their own job until they are at least 65 (when they lose their usefulness as child-bearers and caretakers). Only the very rich men can

afford to have a wife or even to have sex with a female prostitute. The somewhat-wealthy might be able to afford to have sex with a trans-woman, and other men must make due with the “pretty boys” or must join the priesthood (although there are so many priests that the church cannot afford to take on any more).

The females who do exist are situated in the invisibility / hypervisibility dichotomy. The narrator of the story can pass for a man since her father left her false identification and other papers and her physical appearance doesn't give her away if she keeps her encounters with people brief and superficial. She lives in constant fear that her disguise of “non-femininity” (the character admits that she cannot pass as “masculine,” thus my use of this word) will get her into trouble whether people realize that she is a female trying to pass or if her lack of masculine traits will have men assume she must be a pretty boy looking for a date. One wrong hand gesture, one wrong look of passivity rather than aggression could bring her to captivity and a life of sexual slavery.

Most men in the story don't see females' lives as one of slavery, but one of pure luxury. Women, the few times one is spotted in public, are always wearing elaborate outfits of furs and jewelry and are whisked through crowds by teams of bodyguards. They “don't have to work,” just take care of the home and kids and fulfill their husband's sexual needs. Even if they cannot ask for a divorce, women are treated well since every man knows how lucky he is to have a woman and that a richer man could take her away if she's not happy where she is. So these hypervisible women, for all their oppression and all of their lack of subjectivity, do hold some power over their husbands but their power is only to get themselves into another relationship where they are adored but denied personhood.

The narrator is one of the few females who live on the border of visibility and invisibility.

She and her friend (lover?), we learn at the end, have lived hidden away in an underground hide-out for many years. The friend cannot pass as a man and remains completely invisible by choice; if she is ever spotted she would be taken away and forced to marry a man with the highest bid. The two women consider themselves lucky since most underground women don't have a real home; the narrator's father felt responsible for choosing to bring a daughter into the world, so he bought up all the land around his family's mountain, build this hideout and also a "front" house to confuse any suspicious visitors, and he taught her how to survive by passing as a man. The narrator dares to only venture off the mountain for supplies, and then usually only to the town store where she has always been known as "Joe." "Fears" follows Joe's day out in the big city when "he" has car problems. Joe gets to hear first-hand how men view women now that they are so scarce and also how they were regarded in the old days. Joe's day as "me and not-me" cements her decision to remain hidden away; she may have lost her freedom to live as a visible woman, but she refuses to give up her freedom to live as she chooses.

Women in our culture may not have the literal fear of slavery if they are visibly recognized as female, but there are many fears that many if not most women share because they are female (or share with some transwomen and gay men because they are feminine). When Maggie Hadleigh-West, director of the documentary "War Zone" (which looks at sexual harassment and assault women face every day just walking down the street) spoke at my campus she asked the audience (made up of mostly undergraduate students) if every woman who has ever been whistled at, "hey babied," pinched, poked, rubbed up against, talked dirty to, sworn at for not responding, grabbed, felt up or assaulted by a stranger to raise her hand. From my vantage point it appeared that every woman raised her hand. Hadleigh-West's point was that our culture should take this street harassment more seriously since it is an epidemic, since it can

escalate and lead to more severe forms of assault, and since the dismissal of these “lesser” forms of assault serves to justify and possibly even encourage a “culture of rape” by devaluing women and disregarding their concerns about their safety.

The attempts by the narrator of “Fears” to pass as non-feminine certainly has parallels to women of color being able to “pass” in white society. While the need may not be as strong today as only several years ago, there are still enough cultural and institutional oppression of women of color that passing may bring some advantages, whether economic or social. Women of color also live in the hypervisibility / invisibility state since their race may make them stand out and they may be a token person of color in any given setting, but their needs and concerns are not listened to and their identity outside of that token status is invisible all too often.

In “Fears,” the narrator’s bodyguard mentions that with the new invention of the artificial womb, women won’t be necessary at all any more. The narrator is unsure if this would be a day to celebrate since maybe they would be allowed to live their own lives out in the open, or if this would lead to the complete genocide--erasure--of women everywhere.

While *Enterprise* played with notions of literal and metaphorical invisibility and “Fears” highlighted the issue of women’s hypervisibility, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (the novel) focuses more specifically on the idea of hyper-visibility as a form of invisibility. The handmaids are not allowed to show any parts of their bodies, even inside their appointed “homes.” They are forced to wear long-sleeved bright red cloaks and, when outside, a headdress which serves much like blinders on a horse—Offred comments that they are to “keep [her] from seeing, but also from being seen” (11). The handmaids are hyper-visible, yet they are so low-thought of that no one pays them much attention in the house and they slip through the hallways like “distorted shadow[s], a parody of something, some fairy-tale figure in a red cloak, descending towards a

moment of carelessness that is the same as danger” (11). Serena Joy, Offred’s Commander’s wife, even says “I want to see as little of you as possible” (20); handmaids had to use the back door and avoid the lady of the house at all times. While this may be just an expression of hierarchy, the handmaids also visibly represented the “shame” of the Republic both in the need for handmaids (proof that the men screwed up the environment and their own fertility) and the ease of which women’s rights were taken away.

Another play with hyper-visibility and invisibility is the culture of surveillance so prevalent in the novel, and so strikingly absent in the film. The handmaids were constantly on display in their red cloaks, especially if one of them were pregnant. Japanese tourists gawk at the red figures and ask if they may take a picture. Offred must, silently, refuse their request since “To be seen—to be *seen*—is to be . . . penetrated” (38, elipses in original). Their cloaks and headdresses are supposedly for their protection, to keep others from objectifying them, to give them “freedom” from men’s gazes. In order to escape men’s sexualized surveillance of their bodies, they are now under constant surveillance to ensure observance of all the laws of modesty and obedience.

Perhaps the most invisible of the women of the Republic are the Unwomen—those women who were not morally fit to be a Wife, not fertile or obedient enough to be a handmaid, but not sick enough, yet, to die from cleaning up the toxic messes around the country. These women, seen only in training films for new handmaids to ensure their obedience, are the “disappeared” women of the Republic. In one way, they serve as a powerful tool of control for the Republic, but in their invisibility they also serve as a type of inspiration for the handmaids: these women die because they refuse to exchange their sense of identity and subjectivity for a life as a handmaid, even if it costs them their lives. These Unwomen are not even mentioned in the film

adaptation; perhaps if they had staged an armed-rebellion they would have earned a spot on screen, but their silent refusal of a life of domination is too much a moral and not enough a visual rebellion against their oppression to make it onto the big screen.

One of the most famous FSF stories of women's cultural invisibility is James T. Tiptree's (Alice Sheldon) "The Women Men Don't See" (1978). When a small plane carrying Don Fenton (the story's narrator), the plane's pilot, Mrs. Ruth Parsons and her daughter Althea, crashes in Mexico, Don is forced to finally look at the women he would "never have looked at or thought of again" (177). Don and Mrs. Parsons chat about themselves as they trek out into the mangroves in search of fresh water; actually, Don repeatedly tries to get Mrs. Parsons to talk more about her life but she has a talent for answering his questions with questions about him. What Don does learn is that Mrs. Parsons works as a librarian in GSA records and that she volunteered to come on the water expedition so that her daughter Althea could have some romantic alone time with their Mayan pilot, Estéban. Shocked and somewhat amused by Mrs. Parsons's attitudes toward her daughter's sexuality, Don asks her what Althea's father would think of Althea having sex (and possibly a baby) with an "Indian." Again Don is shocked to learn that "there isn't any Mr. Parsons [and] there never was" since Althea's father was a one-time fling just as Mrs. Parsons's father was a one-time fling for her mother. "A mad image blooms in my mind," Don says, "generations of solitary Parsons women selecting sires, making impregnation trips. Well, I hear the world is moving their way" (202). Even before Don's curiosity toward Mrs. Parsons's is piqued due to her non-traditional views on her daughter's sexuality, he finds himself frustrated that Mrs. Parsons doesn't consider him a sexual threat since she voluntarily sleeps right next to him so they can share the serape. He says,

The woman doesn't mean nothing to me, but the obtrusive recessiveness of her, the

defiance of her little rump eight inches from my fly—for two pesos I’d have those shorts down and introduce myself. If I were twenty years younger, if I wasn’t so bushed . . . But the twenty years and the exhaustion are there, and it comes to me wryly that Mrs. Ruth Parsons has judged things to a nicety. If I *were* twenty years younger, she wouldn’t be here . . . Mrs. Parsons knows her little shorts are safe. Those firmly filled little shorts, so close . . .” (191)

In her discussion of “The Women Men Don’t See,” Justine Larbalestier suggests that this passage demonstrates not only men’s attitude of women’s role in science fiction, but also echos many men’s attitudes of women’s place in society as a whole:

. . . a woman is only visible when she is a potential love interest. [Don] mis-reads what is happening around him because he can only think of women within such a narrow perspective. Women exist for the convenience of men like himself. They exist within a chivalric order: there for him to desire, or for him to rescue. They exist so that he can see his “real” manliness reflected back at him. (146)

Again, we see how women are not subjects unto themselves, but are there to help define what men are by showing women as what they are not, and also what they are supposed to have.

Don continues to inquire into Mrs. Parsons’s life, asking why she would “settle for that kind of lonely life, there in Washington. I mean, a woman like you...” Ruth finishes his sentence with “should get married?” (203) and feels compelled to explain that no, she isn’t a “professional man-hater / lesbian” and no, there was no great trauma in her life to create a grudge. She tries valiantly to convince Don that she loves her single life and has a greater sense of freedom.

With that, Don and Mrs. Parsons have this exchange:

“Hurrah for women’s lib, eh?”

“The lib?” Impatiently she leans forward and tugs the serape straight. “Oh, that’s doomed.”

The apocalyptic word jars my attention.

“What do you mean, doomed?”

She glances at me as if I weren’t hanging straight either and says vaguely, “Oh...”

“Come on, why doomed? Didn’t they get that equal rights bill?”

Long hesitation. When she speaks again her voice is different.

“Women have no rights, Don, except what men allow us. Men are more aggressive [sic] and powerful, and they run the world. When the next real crisis upsets them, our so-called rights will vanish like—like that smoke. We’ll be back where we always were: property. And whatever has gone wrong will be blamed on our freedom, like the fall of Rome was. You’ll see.”

. . . “Oh, come on. You and your friends are the backbone of the system; if you quit, the country would come to a screeching halt before lunch.”

No answering smile.

“That’s fantasy.” Her voice is still quiet. “Women don’t work that way. We’re a—toothless world.” She looks around as if she wanted to stop talking. “What women do is survive. We live by ones and twos in the chinks of your world-machine . . . Think of us as opossums, Don. Did you know there are opossums living all over?” (204-205)

As the story progresses, Don and Mrs. Parsons run into what Don first assumes are poachers or smugglers, but soon realizes are aliens. These creatures--students on a peaceful expedition--are looking for a piece of equipment they lost and which Mrs. Parsons kept and hid

in the hopes of finding the aliens and convincing them to take her and her daughter with them to their planet. Don can't understand why Mrs. Parsons would want to leave with these creatures with long black tentacles at the ends of their limbs: "'For Christ's sake, Ruth, they're *aliens!*' 'I'm used to it,' she says absently" (213).

The "Mrs. Parsons of the world" are used to living in the "chinks," in the shadows, underground. The Mrs. Parsons of this story is not being hunted down to be put into sex slavery, nor has she literally vanished from sight. Instead, this story tells a more realistic version of women's hypervisibility / invisibility: she is seen by men when they want a woman-as-sex-object, yet her worth in the "world-machine" is determined only by that role. Ruth Parsons, as well as many women and other "invisibilized" peoples, longs for the day she doesn't have to live in the chinks with only the freedom and power that others, mostly men, are willing to give her. Mrs. Parsons chooses to use her position as an "opossum"--someone no one will miss when she's gone--as an opportunity to slip away. She doesn't know what kind of society she will encounter, but the hope that it is one where she is seen and is memorable not only for her role as sex object for men is enough for her to "choose to live among unknown monsters, to say good-bye to her home, her world" (217). Perhaps she is willing to leave her world because precisely because it is not her world, her home, nor the world of any women living in the chinks of men's world-machine.

The women of these stories discussed here use their invisibility to survive, to run away, or to change the world around them in some small way so that it does feel like their home, too. Invisibility as oppression *and/or* as empowerment touches on so many topics within both feminist and critical race theories that I see cultural (in)visibility as one of the key issues to be discussed in the Cultural Diversity classroom. Using FSF's metaphor of literal invisibility makes

the implications of cultural (in)visibility all the more, well, visible--even if the idea of using invisibility as empowerment may strike some people as an oxymoron.

CHAPTER IV. ECOFEMINISM AS ANTI-DOMINATION ACTIVISM

In a way, all of these chapters on non-violent power are talking about an ideology of anti-domination: telling stories instead of being subjects of stories, and being seen and valued rather than seen and objectified and dismissed. It is interesting how closely this ideology of anti-domination resembles critical pedagogy's insistence that students be subjects in the creation of knowledge in the classroom, rather than objects to be filled by the "boss" teachers who (sometimes literally, as I witnessed in my pedagogy class) want to stand in positions of domination over them.

This final example of non-violent power is examining anti-domination in regards to human's relationship with the environment and the parallels between domination of the land and domination of women, what is called "ecofeminism."^{xviii} Rosemarie Putnam Tong's *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction* defines ecofeminism in this way: "Ecofeminism strives to show the connections among all forms of human oppression, but it also focuses on human beings' attempts to dominate the nonhuman world, or nature" (247). Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva expand this definition by saying,

Ecofeminism is about connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice. It asserts the special strength and integrity of every living thing . . . We see the devastation of the earth and her beings by the corporate warriors, and the threat of nuclear annihilation by the military warriors, as feminist concerns. It is the same masculinist mentality which would deny us our right to our own bodies and our own sexuality and which depends on multiple systems of dominance and state power to have its way. (14)

This masculinist mentality is, unfortunately, still present today.

In this chapter, I will first briefly lay out the parallels between domination of the

environment and domination of women. Since Western ideologies tend to place everything and everyone in binary hierarchies, it is important to show how hierarchies of Man (human) over Nature stems from the same patriarchal ideologies which put Man (males) over Woman. (These hierarchies carry over into issues of race, class, sexuality, physical appearance, etc., but for this chapter I will only be dealing mostly with these first two hierarchies.) Mies and Shiva articulate how hierarchies work to subordinate, not differentiate, one group to/from another:

Some women, however, particularly urban, middle-class women, find it difficult to perceive commonality both between their own liberation and the liberation of nature, and between themselves and “different” women in the world. This is because capitalist patriarchy or “modern” civilization is based on a cosmology and anthropology that structurally dichotomizes reality, and hierarchically opposes the two parts to each other: the one always considered superior, always thriving, and progressing at the expense of the other. Thus nature is subordinated to man; woman to man; consumption to production; and the local to the global, and so on. Feminists have long criticized this dichotomy, particularly the structural division of man and nature, which is seen as analogous to that of man and woman. (5)

After laying out these parallels of domination, I will then discuss a few works of Feminist Science Fiction such as *Woman on the Edge of Time*, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, “When It Changed,” *Egalia’s Daughter* and *Herland* as they relate to ecofeminism, and I will suggest how cultural critique present in these works of fiction can be an essential tool for social awareness and, hopefully, social change. As critical pedagogues such as Freire would contend, this social awareness and social change should be the ultimate goal of any teaching.

When saying that there are parallels between domination of the environment and of

women, I am not trying to reinforce the binaristic split which has historically associated men with Reason, Logic, the Symbolic Order and Power; and women with Nature, Emotion and Lack—lack of entrance to the Symbolic Order and lack of cultural power as well as lack of the phallus. Rather, I am agreeing with Rosemarie Putnam Tong's assertions that

Because women have been culturally tied to nature, ecofeminists argue there are conceptual, symbolic, and linguistic connections between feminist and ecological issues. According to Karen J. Warren, the Western world's basic beliefs, values, attitudes, and assumptions about itself and its inhabitants have been shaped by an oppressive patriarchal conceptual framework, the purpose of which is to explain, justify, and maintain relationships of domination and subordination in general and men's domination of women in particular. (246)

This culture of domination or, what Annette Kolodny in *The Lay of the Land* calls the ideology of "conquering," is a popular theme which various works of FSF play with and critique. This critique comes in many forms and on many levels. Within these FSF stories, nature it- (her-?) self sometimes literally speaks out. Sometimes we are given glimpses of a future where the environment has been damaged beyond repair and we are warned against taking this same path; other times we are shown utopian futures or other worlds where harmony with nature is drawn so beautifully for us that we cannot help but want it for our world and our time, too. Whether these stories to follow are stories of warning or of a utopian future to strive for, they all serve to show what our world could be.

As I mentioned, sometimes nature literally fights back or speaks up against mistreatment. These are not the most common type of ecofeminist stories, possibly since they push the boundary between speculative fiction (what may actually happen to us) into fantasy. Since

fantasy is associated with magic, fire-breathing dragons, and other elements not readily accepted as “real” in mainstream Western cultures, any fantastic story might lose its social critique edge to some readers / viewers. For example, Sheri S. Tepper’s *A Plague of Angels* has a sub-plot where the heroine is told by some of her new animal friends that they don’t understand why humans think that they are the only intelligent creatures and the only ones worthy of having everything at the expense of all other creatures. Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Family Tree* has “Mother Nature” striking back against over population and encroachment. Mysterious vines pull cars into the underbrush of newly-formed (or more accurately, restored) forests, forcing people to use non-polluting or non-individual forms of transportation. Even more disturbing, nature steals babies out of cribs in any home with more than two children (we are not told if they are “redistributed” or killed), and turns lavish houses into smaller homes by reverting the other rooms into part of the jungle.

While these stories are just as valid in their ecofeminist critique, another concern besides their dismissal by readers as pure fantasy is that the responsibility of change remains with nature, not the people. It is for this reason that I choose to focus primarily on the speculative fiction stories which give punishment or praise for what actions humans take regarding care-taking for the environment.

Ecofeminist, anti-domination themes are very popular in FSF literature whether the stories praise a culture’s harmony with nature, or condemn a society which let greed and technology overwhelm the environment and essentially doom the people. *The Handmaid’s Tale* is one such story of condemnation. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the stupidity and greed of humans hurt the environment and, in turn, the people. Radiation from atomic power plants has rendered almost everyone in the U.S. (now called the Republic of Gilead) sterile, cutting off population

growth and creating the need for surrogate mothers--the handmaids. The Unwomen--mostly lesbians and poor women who cannot or will not be surrogate mothers--are sent to clean up the toxic messes (for the short time they can survive). Technology got so out of control in Gilead that, instead of freeing women from domestic tasks, as the popular mantra used to support “modernization” in the 1950s promised, technology took away women’s freedom.

Computerized banking took away women’s money in a few short mouse clicks, making women financially dependent on men. Easy computer access to public documents quickly identified which women were morally fit to remain in their privileged lifestyles and which women were “undesirable”--for example: lesbians, feminists, and even those married people for whom it was a second marriage. These were the women who became either the servants, the handmaids, or the walking dead at the toxic dump sites.

All of these technological tactics were needed in order to establish and maintain the system of handmaids now necessary because of reliance on and misuse of nuclear power. Donna Haraway, in “Cyborg Manifesto,” talks about how it is the technology (and its effects) which we cannot see--that which, like radiation, seems so “clean”--that we have to worry about because we forget it’s there until it is too late and its disastrous effects cannot be changed. She says,

Our best machines are made of sunshine; they are all light and clean because they are nothing but signals, electromagnetic waves, a section of a spectrum . . . The diseases evoked by these clean machines are “no more” than the minuscule coding changes of an antigen in the immune system, “no more” than the experience of stress. (153 – 154)

It is within these “clean” technologies that we again see the multiple oppressions of women of color, poor women, women of developing nations, and other oppressed groups since it is they who are the most likely to be working in hazardous conditions with little safety gear, it is

they who will most likely have to live in an area saturated with radiation or pesticide poisoning, it is they who have higher levels of pollutants in their own breast milk to feed to their babies who already have higher risks of being born with serious medical problems, and it is they who cannot afford the medical benefits that this “clean” technology has created, or even the computer whose silicon chips they assembled.^{xix}

Technology is not, in itself, innately good or bad, useful or harmful just as “living closer to the land” isn’t some magical cure-all women’s-only secret for saving society. I did have two students who tried to each argue one of the “all technology is good / bad” sides. One student said that we should “all go back to an agrarian lifestyle since *all* technology is evil,” and the other said that “all technology is good, even if it sometimes gets used by evil people to do bad things.” This second student’s disclaimer, that the technology isn’t bad but can be used for “bad” things, led to a very interesting class discussion about cultural responsibility of those creating new technologies. It also served as a good lead in to discuss how these FSF works demonstrate that employing technology within current patriarchal systems of power, privilege and oppression to the point that we overstep our ability to control its potentially harmful effects serves to reinforce binaristic systems of who benefits and who suffers from technological “progress.”

We also discussed the need to be wary of defining “progress” as simply gaining as much material goods and power for ourselves at the expense of others. This definition also has a spiral effect: when “developing nations” want to progress, they carry over this mentality and try to find someone they can take from as well:

Virtually all development strategies are based on the explicit or implicit assumption that the model of “the good life” is that prevailing in the affluent societies of the North: the

USA, Europe and Japan. The question of how the poor in the North, those in the countries of the South, and peasants and women worldwide may attain this “good life” is usually answered in terms of what, since Rostow, can be called the “catching-up development” path. This means that by following the same path of industrialization, technological progress and capital accumulation taken by Europe and the USA and Japan the same goal can be reached . . . The belief, however, that a high material living standard is tantamount to a good or high quality of life is the ideological support essential to uphold and legitimize the constant growth and accumulation model of modern industrial society. (Mies and Shiva, 55, 57- 58)

Unfortunately, this “catching up” mentality necessitates that other nations and peoples be subject to even more exploitation, pushing them further away from equality with those industrialized nations. The further away these “other” nations seem to those grabbing up all the goods, the harder it is for their complaints to be heard and considered and the easier it is for those with power and wealth to continue stripping the land, taking the fuel, and dumping the messes.

Within most FSF stories, the societies seem more unified even across land or water barriers. Even though there may be degrees of nationalism in that people take pride in which communities they come from, there isn’t the same “us vs. them” mentality which allows for higher degrees of exploitation against the “thems.” If those lines--be they geographical, economic, racial, gender, etc.-- could be erased, and if everyone felt part of a greater whole, maybe “haves” wouldn’t take advantage of the “have-not” quite so easily.

Another way of looking at a more responsible style of industrialization is to just follow the “don’t do to others what you don’t want done to you” mantra. The one specific mention of an ecofeminist ideology within *Egalia’s Daughters* plays out this very idea. *Egalia* has virtually

no pollution since their punishment for anything from littering to large-scale industrial pollution is to force the polluter to sit in a small, enclosed room with their pollution, the idea being that since no one would want those pollutants around themselves, no one else would want them in their air, water, or neighborhoods. “If externalization of all the costs of industrial production were not possible, if they had to be borne by the industrialized countries themselves, that is if they were internalized, an immediate end to unlimited growth would be inevitable” (Mies and Shiva, 59). Rather than raising their own standard of living by lowering it for those “down stream,” the Egalians keep the land clean for everyone. This mentality is so common sense that it barely seems worth mentioning in the novel, yet since that mentality carries over into so many other areas of their civilization, it is actually a very important element of their ideology.

When the feminist utopian societies in FSF stories face crisis, they work with the land to bring back the natural harmony. Many stories of utopian societies focus on women-only cultures that arose out of either war or disease killing all the men.^{xx} After seeing technology’s destructive potential, these new societies choose to stay within their technological capacities and are content to remain largely pre-industrial. In Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* (originally written in 1915), three male explorers go in search of a long-lost, female-only society (which was isolated from their men and from the rest of the world long ago by an earthquake); a society, they soon learn, which had naturally (as opposed to technologically) developed the ability of parthenogenesis (asexual reproduction). With limited space and limited resources available to them, the natives of Herland decided to cultivate the land to produce as much food in the smallest space, so they gave up herding livestock.^{xxi} They chose to use their knowledge to preserve the environment rather than dominate it, a counterpoint to *The Handmaid’s Tale* where

men dominate the land and the women.^{xxii} As Debra Benita Shaw writes in *Women, Science, and Fiction*,

Destruction of the environment through depletion of resources and the indiscriminate use of machine technology is, in these [utopian] texts, identified with masculine power, and their most radical proposition is, as Dennis Livingston puts it, “that the best thing men can do at present is to get out of the way, as women on their own have the potential of creating a culture more ecologically sensitive and humanistic than men have been able to offer. (128)

The social commentary of *The Handmaid's Tale* isn't limited to issues of national security or family values; it also teaches us the need for ecofeminism by showing what the United States could very easily look like if current environmental policies and decisions regarding women's rights continue unchallenged. (It is unfortunate that the film version of *The Handmaid's Tale* did not include many of the ecofeminist elements and social commentary. This is just one more example of what can practically be included in a film and what issues film producers believe audiences are willing to grapple with during their hours of escapist entertainment.)

As opposed to *The Handmaid's Tale*'s story of warning and condemnation, many FSF stories show the benefits of less capitalistic and industrialized (yet some would say more “civilized”) societies where everyone has an equal share of resources. When the female-only utopian societies of *The Female Man* / “When It Changed,” *Herland*, and *Woman on the Edge of Time* face crisis, they work with the land to bring back the natural harmony. This society of harmony fits with Mies's and Shiva's concept of ecofeminism in that:

An ecofeminist perspective propounds the need for a new cosmology and a new

anthropology which recognizes that life in nature (which includes human beings) is maintained by means of co-operation, and mutual care and love . . . This effort to create a holistic, all-life embracing cosmology and anthropology, must necessarily imply a concept of freedom different from that used since the Enlightenment.

This involves rejecting the notion that Man's freedom and happiness depend on an ongoing process of emancipation from nature, on independence from, and dominance over natural processes by the power of reason and rationality. (6)

Even though several of the ecofeminist stories discussed in this chapter revolve around cultures where there are no men as a result of war or disease, many of them rely on comments from male visitors to show how these matriarchal, eco-friendly cultures are so devalued within patriarchal ideologies. When the three adventurous men in the novel *Herland* search for the "strange and terrible Woman Land" (2) hidden away on Earth, they had many expectations. They thought a female culture would either always be cat fighting or would be like a peaceful nunnery. In any case, they assumed it would be quite primitive. When these men found this long-lost, female-only society, which was isolated from the rest of the world long ago by an earthquake, the men were quite surprised at how well-planned and cared for the land was, exclaiming "Why, this is a civilized country! There must be men" (11). The three men carried an assumed androcenteredness about civilization, thinking that the men must be hidden away somewhere.

This disbelief of a female civilized culture is also the theme of Joanna Russ's female-only colony of Whileaway, found in her novel *The Female Man* as well as short stories such as "When It Changed" and "A Few Things I Know About Whileaway." This female-only colony came about hundreds of years ago when a plague killed all the men. When Earth men finally visit Whileaway, the society was seen by the men as being only half a society and "unnatural."

After one man asked “where are all the people?” one of the women says that she “realized he didn’t mean people but men” (“When It Changed,” 495). All of these stories imply a different definition of a civilized society: one that is not necessarily industrialized, but one that can be sustained indefinitely by not taxing natural resources and one that applies the rights of health and happiness to everyone equally. Even the male narrator of *Herland* is impressed with the women’s fertilization system when he says,

“These careful culturists had worked out a perfect scheme of refeeding the soil with all that came out of it. All the scraps and leavings of their food, plant waste from lumber work or textile industry, all the solid matter from the sewage, properly treated and combined--everything that came from the earth went back to it.

“The practical result was like that in any healthy forest; an increasingly valuable soil was being built, instead of the progressive impoverishment so often seen in the rest of the world.” (80)

One criticism my students have shared concerning works such as *Herland* and Russ’s Whileaway stories, stories where the societies are thriving *because* there are no men, is that they portrays essentialist stereotypes of (as one student said) “all women as Earth Mothers and all men as warring, violent imbeciles.” There is no hope, it seems, for men to change their conquering mentalities and, since there isn’t much chance for all men to be killed off in the real world, this may imply that there is no hope for social change.

One well-known story that shows us a future where males and females take equal responsibility for caring for the land in a less capitalistic, industrialized and classist society is Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976). Connie Ramos, a poor Chicana who has repeatedly been beaten down by various governmental systems, discovers that she has a special

ability to “catch”—to receive thoughts and images sent by “senders” in the future and to visit this future with her consciousness while her body remains locked away in a psychiatric hospital even though she isn’t insane. (At the beginning of the story, Connie protects herself and her niece from her niece’s violent fiancé. Since Connie had been in an institution before, this man realized that the best way to not be arrested for his assault would be to put Connie in the psyche ward where no one would believe her claims. He was correct.)

Connie’s guide in this future is Luciente, one of the first successful senders. Luciente’s society, set on Earth in 2137, is an ecofeminist’s dream: there is no more polluting (although they are still working on cleaning up the pollution caused by previous generations), no one has individual transportation other than bicycles, and even their public transportation doesn’t pollute. There is no sexism since everyone shares equally in all duties including housework, farming, military service, intellectual and artistic work, and parenting—even breastfeeding. Every decision affecting the community is made by a community-wide vote. They are also very concerned with keeping balance—balance in population vs. resources, how much the land can produce before the soil’s nutrients are depleted, and long-term affects of any changes since all things in nature are tied together.

Luciente brings Connie to this future society for various reasons: one, to prove that their experiment with time travel is successful; two, to help Connie escape her depressing situation for a while; three, to teach Connie how to escape and survive on the outside; and (most importantly) four, so that Connie can see that there is a future to work toward. In order for Luciente’s future to become a reality, Connie (and other people like her who think they are powerless to make any societal changes) needs to be an integral part of creating that future. Connie says that she never felt so useful and empowered as when she helped organize grass-roots protests against various

organizations taking advantage of poor people. Unfortunately, the system won when all of Connie's time and energy went toward just feeding herself. Connie has begun to see herself as most of the people in positions of power and authority see her (if they see her at all)—as unimportant, as a nuisance, as taking up valuable resources and (as often voiced by those with plenty) as asking for a handout.

This is a common reason why many people cannot do much to change their situations—they are tired just from trying to survive, and who in a position of power will help someone they think is lazy and undeserving? What better system of controlling the masses than preoccupying them with thoughts of survival rather than protest? Some feminist scholars contend that the feminist movement(s) have been, or have been stereotyped as, a white middle class woman's movement because of the multiple binds of oppression facing poor woman, especially poor women of color. These women, working outside the home long before Rosie the Riveter posters glamorized women in the workforce, probably didn't have much time for social protest when their wages were so meager and work hours so long and demanding. *Woman on the Edge of Time* reminds women in the most oppressed positions that *they* are the ones crucial to making change because they are on the front lines; their lives are the most oppressed without change, and their lives will potentially be the most improved with it.

At the end of the novel, Connie undergoes brain surgery and can no longer “send.” Rather than face more horrible, invasive procedures she poisons and kills almost all of the doctors in her ward, ensuring that she can never leave the violent patient ward—the most difficult one to endure—or continue her activism on the outside. While the abrupt ending of the novel might not seem to hold up to the “hang in there for the long run” mentality espoused during most of the novel, it does provoke the reader to ask herself (and her students) several interesting

questions: Is this a nod to the futility of protesting our situations in life, or is this a call for radical, self-sacrificing activism of the most extreme nature? For Connie, it was all worth it since her violent outburst proved the doctors' experiments a failure and her friends in the hospital wouldn't have to go through the surgery as she had. Can we honestly say that her "local" activism isn't as important as her potential for "global" activism? To Connie, immediate results and protection of her few friends outweighed the long-term activism meant to create a future she wouldn't live to see. Is this one of the key problems of large scale activism--that we want to fix only things that will affect us now and that we either don't care or don't think we can make a bigger change, or don't even want to wait for something that may happen in the future?

Luciente is often shocked at Connie's (and our) society of selfishness, competitiveness, and disrespect for the environment and for the future impact our desire for individual possessions causes. Luciente's society functions through communal sharing of everything. Everyone gets equal food, medical treatment, housing, work hours and desirable and undesirable work tasks. This society has a high level of technological capabilities, but they choose to share in manual labor so they all understand and value all the work that goes into everything they have. In this novel, it is everyone's responsibility to work toward a future which breaks cycles of hierarchies, domination and oppression. Since, as the various scholars mentioned suggest, oppression of women and oppression of the environment stem from the same patriarchal ideologies, we all need to be just as concerned about the rape of our planet as we are about the rape of our sisters.

These stories of speculative fiction are not so fictional, especially when we consider the potential ramifications of having a re-elected President who has the worst environmental protection policies in history, when human rights are being taken away even in the democratic U.S., when computer surveillance ranging from CIA satellites to grocery store scanners keep

track of our every move, and when we still have millions of people who don't have enough food or medical services to keep them alive. These FSF works aren't the flashy, entertaining movie storylines which prompt millions of dollars in merchandise sales; rather, they serve as warnings of what may come unless we as individuals, as a society, and as a world start taking environmental and technological issues as seriously as we take quarterly profits.

CHAPTER V. CONCLUSIONS

In this dissertation, I have discussed a number of key FSF texts which foster students' critical thinking of and engagement with various issues surrounding issues of power, especially the potential for women's non-violent empowerment and the need for a diverse representation of "powerful women" within our media and in our culture-at-large.

While my project certainly cannot stand as an exhaustive study of FSF, it serves to illustrate the usefulness of FSF works not only in a Women's Studies classroom, but in society in general, by encouraging people to rethink women's place and women's power within contemporary culture.

We are already seeing the benefits of re-thinking notions of gender as it pertains to language. Even though Suzette Haden Elgin's attempts to adopt the Láadan language she created for her *Native Tongue* books into popular vernacular failed,^{xxiii} she remains pleased with how far feminists' work toward de-gendering language has come. As Elgin points out, we need only look at changes in workplace environments due to sexual harassment policies and gender inclusive language, and look at how questioning language has "catalyzed a civil rights movements" for LGBT folk and for disabled persons (*Native Tongue* "Afterword," 323). Women (and other marginalized groups) are finding platforms for their voices within science fiction so that stories of their invisibility can be left strictly in the realm of science fiction and, hopefully, not in their realities. As these marginalized people write themselves into stories of alternate worlds and alternate futures, maybe those people in the "center" can finally see (and, hopefully, welcome and value) these marginalized people in *our* world and make those "alternate" futures of inclusion and equality a reality.

As my Feminism through Science Fiction students taught me, reading stories of women's

non-violent empowerment *can* change how people view powerful women. At the beginning of the semester, students had to propose their own science fictions stories of women's power, explaining what type or definition of power they were using within their story. Most of the proposals were ideas for women in military combat; their power came from "being able to fight alongside the big boys." While I never restrained them from writing about this type of power (although the desire for students to write what they assume the Instructor wants them to write cannot be dismissed), many students voluntarily re-wrote their proposals later in the semester after we read several FSF novels/short stories and discussed the characters' various types of empowerment.

At the end of the semester, I wound up with 25 creative and thoughtful FSF stories—some from students who have never written a creative writing piece before—and each one with a different type or source of power, mostly non-violent. One of my two male students, a very quite young man whom I had not gotten to know very well at that point in the semester, was visibly overwhelmed with emotion when I mentioned to him during our break that I thought his story was wonderful and that he should try to send it in to a science fiction magazine for publication. He wrote of a young woman who realized she always had her magical powers and only needed to believe in herself. He told me that he chose to write this story rather than his proposed "*G.I. Jane*-in-space knockoff" story because he really liked the idea that women *are* powerful in many ways—they just have to learn to believe that of themselves. This young man, eyes brimming with tears, said that he had never been told he had done anything well in school before. When I said that maybe he had never been *told* he had an academic talent before, but that it seemed clear to me that he had a real talent for writing fiction, his demeanor completely changed. From that day forward, this quiet student participated regularly in class and seemed to feel confident in the

points he was making, and all of his written work (plus the video he and his group made at the end of the semester) felt infused with a confidence and creativity I hadn't seen before. For this student, not only did he learn about FSF stories and the cultural issues we discussed, but he also learned to find his own voice. Even though, as a white male, a student such as this might be viewed as having cultural privilege and visibility, in the context of the classroom, he felt invisible until the opportunity to write in his own words gave him the chance to find his subjectivity in the classroom.

While one student or one class is hardly a sample big enough from which to generalize about the power of FSF stories to change how people view issues of power / empowerment, especially women and women's power, it is enough to suggest, as does Suzette Haden Elgin, the potential of societal change through FSF:

The first hypothesis is that language is our best and most powerful resource for bringing about social change; the second is that science fiction is our best and most powerful resource for trying out social changes before we make them, to find out what their consequences might be. ("Linguistics," in "Afterword" to *The Native Tongue*, 305)

When continuing my work in this area, I plan on using more examples of student work to illustrate FSF's potential for reshaping how people think about the world. Additionally, I will expand the models of non-violent power to include other strategies common to FSF and to include other mediums of science fiction such as comic books. (An interesting side note is that a recent comic had Wonder Woman—the embodiment of powerful non-violent women—kill a man; at the time of this writing, there are rumors that future story lines may no longer allow Diana Prince to remain Wonder Woman due to her violent act.) I am continuously searching for other examples of FSF, especially where they are lacking, such as in mainstream film. As

women become more prevalent in both the science fiction literary world and the film industry, hopefully there will be more filmic FSF texts to analyze in the near future. We have no shortage of excellent FSF stories in literature, but to find a group of people willing and able to transfer the social critique of these stories into a visual format might be a futuristic endeavor within our current cultural climate.

Dorothy Fadiman, a documentary filmmaker who used her own stories and stories from other women in her short film on women's right to choose, *Motherhood by Choice, Not Chance*, said this when I asked her about the power of storytelling:

We have two parts to our brain: one that is about here (pointing to a spot on her forehead) and one that is somewhere between here and here (hands on her chest and abdomen). With stories, they hit us here (pointing to her heart), and when they penetrate, they open us up inside and we start thinking not just with the information that is in our heads but with the compassion from our hearts.

Have you ever heard the story of the wind and the sun betting who could get a man's jacket off of him first? The wind blows and blows, but the man just clutches his jacket tighter to himself. Soon the wind gives up. When the sun takes its turn, at first it doesn't seem to be doing anything at all; the sun just shines and waits. Soon, the man takes the coat off by himself.

A story isn't a lecture; it doesn't try to hit you over the head and tell you what to do or think. A story hits your heart and opens you up; it gets you to feel as well as think. It doesn't tell you what to do, but gets you to do what you feel. (Public Lecture)

I, as Dorothy Fadiman, believe in the power of storytelling; telling our stories is a way of communicating with and educating others as well as sharing something of ourselves. Whether

these stories are of personal experiences, or fictional stories about other worlds or other times, the women sharing their stories are attempting to not only talk about their individual place in this society, but also about society-at-large.

In a culture that has historically viewed women as passive, lack, the Other, and inferior, it is no surprise that our media entertainment reflect these oppressive ideologies. We have seen a progression of women's images in our entertainment from passive to active, from victim to hero, from powerless to powerful. What we have not seen much of is diversity in what makes someone powerful. Feminist science fiction stories are a unique medium in which to educate people about many aspects of culture, including women's power. They are an opportunity to go beyond lecturing and blaming media violence for society's ails or complaining that women are shown as violent. Instead, they show examples of women's power that don't come from violence and they can inspire people to see power in new ways. As these types of power become more recognized and more a part of people's lived reality, maybe there will be a place for those stories in our visual media and in our cultural understandings of women, men, and power.

The consequences of reading feminist science fiction might not be the creation of a feminist utopia, but if science fiction can get us to ask "What if?" then maybe it will get some to ask "How do we get there?" There is no magical "wish upon a star" answer, but the right questions might lead us as a society in the right direction—if not to that island of wonder women, then to a culture that values its own women.

NOTES

ⁱ For more on Pharr's discussion on homophobia reinforcing "traditional" gender roles, see "Homophobia: a Weapon of Sexism." Found in *Women's Voices, Feminist Visions*, ed. by Susan M. Shaw and Janet Lee, 74 – 78.

ⁱⁱ Scholars of power and of violence include:

Chasin, Barbara H. *Inequality and Violence in the United States*. Amherst, N.Y. : Humanity Books, 2004

Felson, Richard B. *Violence and Gender Reexamined*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2002

Hanssen, Beatrice. *Critique of Violence: Between Poststructuralism and Critical Theory*. New York: Routledge, 2000

Iadicola, Peter and Anson Shupe. *Violence, Inequality, and Human Freedom*. Dix Hills, NY: General Hall, Inc., 1998

Kuypers, Joseph A. *Men and Power*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1999

Mason, Gail. *The Spectacle of Violence*. New York: Routledge, 2002

Parpart, Jane L., Shirin M. Rai and Kathleen Staudt. *Rethinking Empowerment: Gender and development in a global/local world*. New York: Routledge, 2002

ⁱⁱⁱ Michael Kimmel suggests that it's actually very easy to prove that violence is a culturally constructed aspect of masculinity and not a biological component: Most boys/men are not violent (and some girls/women are); boys/men from other cultures don't have nearly the same rates of violent behavior; and violent behavior has increased drastically over time—too much to explain through any "mutations" theory of DNA.

^{iv} Additional key texts on images of tough women in media that weren't specifically mentioned here include:

Creed, Barbara. "Horror and the Monstrous Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection." *Screen 27* (1986): 44-70.

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^v While I recognize the re-appropriation of the word "girl" in some feminist circles and the tie-in to the popular Third Wave notion of "girl power," I will use words such as "women" or "sisters" rather than girls throughout this essay out of a recognition of its contested use and out of personal preference.

^{vi} Here, Hills is referring to Ros Jennings's reading of Ripley in his article "Desire and Design: Ripley Undressed," in *Immortal/Invisible Lesbians and the Moving Image*.

^{vii} This sentiment is echoed in a commencement speech by Hillary Rodham Clinton when she says:

If you don't get married, you're abnormal.

If you get married but don't have children, you're a selfish yuppie.

If you get married and have children but then go outside the home to work, you're a bad mother.

If you get married and have children but stay home, you've wasted your education.

If you don't get married but have children and work outside the home as a fictional newscaster, you get in trouble with the Vice President. 6

^{viii} One notable exception to film's general lack of character development is Andrew Niccols's 1997 film *Gattaca*. Some television shows that have high levels of character development and cultural critique include any of the *Star Trek* series, *The Twilight Zone*, and *The Outer Limits*.

^{ix} The construction that women's primary value is her appearance is one that television, in particular, cannot completely disavow since television (especially shows with large female audiences such as *Charmed*) relies so heavily on advertising from beauty industry companies.

^x Here, Hendricks and Oliver are referring to Dale Spender's work in *Man Made Language* (1980).

^{xi} Here, Hendricks and Oliver are specifically discussing Luce Irigaray's findings in *I Love to You* (1996).

^{xii} There are several elements which suggest that the people of the Lines are a Native American nation (or a combination of nations), including the fact that the author is a specialist in the Navaho language and that the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is based on a study of Native American languages; however, this is never made explicit in the novel.

^{xiii} Although since September 11 we might be getting a hint of what a society without free speech would be like: actors and musicians speaking against the war were boycotted; scholars speaking against the U.S. holding Iraqi prisoners without a trial were prohibited from air travel; and several months after several faculty members at my undergraduate school of study signed a letter of protest against President Bush, Jr., giving the commencement speech, letters to the editor are still being published from alumni who say these faculty members (self-proclaimed Christians who say they don't want the world thinking that all Christians support Bush's war policies) are unpatriotic and un-Christian. (To be fair, though, there have been letters in support of those faculty members who signed the protest letter.)

^{xiv} These terms come from various essays in the *This Bridge Called My Back* and *This Bridge Called Home* anthologies as well as *The Woman That I Am* and *Invisible Man*.

^{xv} This lack of race for many whites is not held only by older generations; in every Ethnic Studies class I have taught, many white students have commented on evaluations that they were

surprised that we talked about white people, too, since they (initially) believed that Ethnic Studies just meant talking about Black people. Similar “surprised” comments were made in Women’s Studies classes about gender studies including men, and both Ethnic Studies and Women’s Studies students were surprised when we talked about sexuality, exclaiming “homosexuality and homophobia have absolutely nothing to do with Ethnic Studies / Women’s Studies!,” ignoring both the fact that some people of color / some women are homosexual and that we also discussed the similarities of oppression and privilege or passing between groups oppressed for their gender/sex, race, and sexuality.

^{xvi} For an episode on racism see “Let That Be Your Last Battleground” from the original series and “Far Beyond the Stars” from *Deep Space Nine*; also from the original series in the episode, see “Plato’s Stepchildren,” which showed the first televised interracial kiss. For an episode commenting on homophobia and gender roles see “The Outcast” in *The Next Generation*, or for commentary on the Viet Nam war see “A Private Little War” from the original series. Several episodes in *Voyager* and *Enterprise* dealt with issues of miscegenation and amalgamation (see “Lineage” in *Voyager* and the episodes “Demons” and “Terra Prime” in *Enterprise*).

^{xvii} This blindness to women’s identities as subjects yet obsession with women’s bodies is not only present in critical theories of race and gender and in science fiction stories (especially stories featuring female sex robots, women as mothers to a new world—often against their will—and typical women-in-need-of-rescuing adventures) but also parallels the erasure of real women on science fiction—the writers and the readers.

^{xviii} Rosemarie Putnam Tong’s *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction* defines ecofeminism in this way: “Ecofeminism strives to show the connections among all forms of human oppression, but it also focuses on human beings’ attempts to dominate the nonhuman world, or nature. Because women have been culturally tied to nature, ecofeminists argue there are conceptual, symbolic, and linguistic connections between feminist and ecological issues. According to Karen J. Warren, the Western world’s basic beliefs, values, attitudes, and assumptions about itself and its inhabitants have been shaped by an oppressive patriarchal conceptual framework, the purpose of which is to explain, justify, and maintain relationships of domination and subordination in general and men’s domination of women in particular.” (247)

Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, in their work *Ecofeminism*, note that “Ecofeminism, ‘a new term for an ancient wisdom’ grew out of various social movements--the feminist, peace and the ecology movements--in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Though the term was first used by Francoise D’Eaubonne it became popular only in the context of numerous protests and activities against environmental destruction sparked-off initially by recurring ecological disasters.” 13

^{xix} This information was synthesized from several sources including Sub Rosa’s presentation at the “Bio-power and the Cultures of Technology” Colloquium; Sandra Steingraber’s *Having Faith* on breast milk pollution; “Chapter 7: Environmental and Occupational Health” in *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and also “Where the Chips Fall: Environmental Health in the Semiconductor Industry” by Ron Chepesiuk which discusses women, especially women of color, who work in “toxic jobs.”

^{xx} See, for example, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* and Joanna Russ's *Female Man*, "When It Changed" and "A Few Things I Know About Whileaway."

^{xxi} Vegetarianism (and, to some extent, veganism) is a popular (yet somewhat contested) stance within feminist communities who consider themselves ecofeminists. At the 2005 NWSA conference on "Feminism and the Environment" there were entire panels devoted to this issue. One main point raised is that the hierarchies established to reinforce human life over non-human animal life is based in the same patriarchal ideologies that justifies sexist, racist and heterosexist hierarchies. Meat eating was also linked to the rape culture (since the common term for cattle insemination racks is "rape racks") and to capitalistic over-consumption since it takes more resources to grow cattle, for example, than to grow grain which could feed many more people.

^{xxii} Annette Kolodny, in *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*, writes specifically about this parallel between man's domination of the land and domination of women by examining what is "probably America's oldest and most cherished fantasy: a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essentially feminine—that is, not simply the land as mother, but the land as woman." (4)

^{xxiii} [According to Elgin's website at <http://www.sfw.org/members/elgin/>, the *Láadan Grammar & Dictionary* was published by SF3 (a.k.a. The Society for the Furtherance and Study of Fantasy and Science Fiction) in Madison, Wisconsin. For a sample of the Láadan language on-line, visit <http://www.sfw.org/members/elgin/NativeTongue/laadansampler.html>.]

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