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Lesbian Resistance to Feminism in Annalinde Matichei's *The Flight of the Silver Vixen*

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Abstract: Since the 1970s, lesbian SF has been largely treated as a subgenre of feminist writing, obscuring incompatibilities between currents within lesbian culture(s) and egalitarian, democratic feminist politics. These tensions are explored in Annalinde Matichei's *The Flight of the Silver Vixen*, which draws on lesbian literary conventions alongside motifs from Britain's "Aristasian" subculture—a radical Traditionalist movement with an all-female membership that identified as two "feminine" sexes. In such a setting, romantic relationships between ostensibly female characters can be presented in complementarian terms that replicate and affirm social systems typically associated with patriarchy, such as monarchism, classism, and imperialism. Matichei's protagonist, Antala FiaMartia, transgresses the norms of her own world by deserting a military academy, leading a motorcycle gang, and stealing an experimental starship. Once she is in possession of the Silver Vixen, however, she finds herself assuming the role of responsible captain, transgressing stereotypical feminist ideals by respecting divisions of sex and caste. Matichei's approach represents the possibility of a non-feminist—even anti-feminist—lesbian literature.

Keywords: *lesbian science fiction; Annalinde Matichei; Flight of the Silver Vixen; anti-feminism*

A survey of existing critical work on science fiction and fantasy rarely describes writers or literary categories as "lesbian," as distinguished from the descriptor "feminist." Since the 1970s, lesbian fiction, particularly lesbian speculative fiction, has been largely treated as a subgenre of feminist writing—a trend compounded by the tendency of feminist critics through the 1990s to treat "feminist science fiction texts … as a unified undertaking … all grounded upon the same ideological foundations and all working together for the promotion of a single coherent feminism" (Hollinger, 1990, p. 229). The bond between lesbian and feminist frameworks established by writers and critics in theory was confirmed in practice by the economic realities of a limited market that, especially in the United Kingdom, consolidated feminist and lesbian literature under the same publishing houses. Non-feminist lesbian writing, particularly in speculative fiction, has reached significant audiences only with the growth of the Internet in the last two decades. This has created an approximately 20-year lag between the publication of speculative fiction and ant critical treatment of it (Duchamp, 2010, p. 135), further eliding non-feminist lesbian narratives.

The result has obscured incompatibilities and, in some cases, outright conflicts between lesbian culture and experience on the one hand and what may be considered a broad consensus of majority feminist politics (which aims at achieving the independence, autonomy, and equality of women *vis-à-vis* men through the promotion of "egalitarian, communal and democratic values" and the erasure of "class stratification" (Andermahr, 1993, pp. 109–10) on the other. One work that helpfully illuminates these tensions is Annalinde Matichei's science fiction novella, *The Flight of the Silver Vixen* (2011), which draws simultaneously on the classic conventions of lesbian literature and on the special motifs of Britain's "Aristasian" lesbian subculture, which understood itself to be "a 'women's movement' [that] is not part of the liberal consensus, but is royalist, elitist and aristocratic" (Rosetti, n.d., "St Bride's," para. 18), and which, on that basis, opposed what it understood as "feminism," directing especial ire at the perceived feminist coöptation of lesbian identity and liberation as tools for promoting social changes opposed by this subculture. Matichei's complex and nuanced inscription of lesbianism onto characters who uphold and embody a "royalist, elitist and aristocratic" vision of society thus serves to reappropriate the stylistic and symbolic means of such inscription as tools of resistance to the identification of lesbian identity with feminism.

Transgressing Feminism

The essential importance of the transgressive in speculative genres has been widely remarked and is well

summarized by McCracken (1998, p. 158): "A theory of transgression… argues that the popular text is successful because it operates at the borders of what is socially acceptable; and, in order to provoke a widespread interest, the text must… breach the bounds of that acceptability." Past studies have focused on the ways in which "the transgressive" can function as a point of identification for lesbian readers (Betz, 2011, pp. 1–2), as well as on the transgression of casting lesbians in roles conceived originally for men, for example, the hard-boiled detective and the space adventurer. Lesbian speculative fiction is consistently depicted as transgressing genre conventions and, in doing so, transgressing broader societal norms and expectations through "a lesbian appropriation of masculine, heterosexual and established forms" (Andermahr, 1993: 30). Insofar as influential feminists have aimed at overturning "masculine, heterosexual and established forms," lesbian feminist fiction may be justly characterized as transgressive in this way. The failure to examine non-feminist lesbian fiction, however, obscures the inadequacy of this paradigm for reflecting the experiences of non-feminist lesbians and their particular forms of transgression.

The Flight of the Silver Vixen offers a distinctive example. In *Flight*, transgression of genre norms occurs by placing the characters in a quasi-theocratic monarchy marked by strong distinctions of class, caste, and sex rather than typically imagined societies committed to egalitarian, anti-colonial, and democratic or anarchic feminist ideals. The key device making this possible is *intemorphism* (Matichei, 2011a, p. 212), an alternative paradigm of sexual dimorphism that divides the novella's protagonist culture, the *Herthelani*, not into women and men but into "two feminine sexes" that are colloquially called "blondes" and "brunettes," (or *chelani* and *melini* in the Herthelan language. For the Herthelani, hair color is a primary sexual characteristic). Although both present, in the eyes of outsiders, as "women," the Herthelani consistently differentiate the two in ways that determine courtship and parenting roles, religious status, social and career opportunities, and other key aspects of their lives. In this way, the society Matichei depicts in *Flight* transgresses the "established forms" of feminist utopia, suggesting their fundamental incompatibility with distinctive elements of lesbian culture.

Inscribing Lesbianism

To straightforwardly declare Matichei's work a "lesbian text" would be problematic. Past critics looked toward one (or more) of three criteria for establishing texts as "lesbian": authorship, aesthetic or sensibility, and readership or reception by lesbian audiences. The last is most easily proven but arguably the weakest criterion, however, its claim on *Flight* is strengthened by the author's cognizance of interest from a lesbian readership (Matichei, 2011b).

Matichei herself avoids the signifier "lesbian" in the course of avoiding the signifier "human." Her biographical statement declares her "an affable alien from an all-feminine world," while her blog ruminates on the difficulty of filling out an author profile on Goodreads when one is not human and therefore neither male nor female. Matichei (or at least her authorial *persona*) identifies, like many of her characters, as "blonde," or *chelana* ("Aliens").

This distinctive use of "blonde" and "brunette" as terms designating gender identities (unrelated, in real life, to actual hair color) will be recognizable to avid readers of British tabloids in the 1990s, who may remember the strictly disciplined "schools" and gay "embassy parties" of the young women calling themselves Aristasians. The Aristasians relied on flowers or ribbons to mark blondes and brunettes, since hair does not grow so cooperatively on Earth as on Matichei's imagined world of Sai Herthe. Not all Aristasians identified as lesbians, but many at the core of the movement/cult/subculture (depending upon whom one asked) identified as "girly-girls," simultaneously marking lesbianism and a commitment to "femme "(see Hoskin, 2017, for a treatment of this term) aesthetics. The world of Sai Herthe is a product of the retrofuturistic, Art Deco-inspired imagination of Aristasia, with which Matichei's publisher is closely connected.[1] *Flight* itself is a novelization of a short story—*The Princess and the Captain*—which first appeared on Aristasian websites

in the early 2000s.

Regardless of Matichei's own identity, the fact that much of her inspiration comes from (a very particular corner of) Britain's lesbian culture strengthens classifications of her as a lesbian author. However, regardless of the signifiers one might attach to the ladies who once took cocktails in London's Aristasian "Embassy," once the blonde and brunette "sexes" marked by ribbons at the embassy parties are written into a self-contained, biologically consistent world, Matichei is correct to say that she does not write about "lesbians" ("Aliens"), just as her characters are right to say that they are not "women" (Matichei, 2011a, pp. 64, 77). Both terms have significance only in the context of "schizomorphic" races such as our own, in which only one sex is "feminine."

We thus come to the question of "lesbian aesthetic" or "lesbian sensibility," noting that the crux of Matichei's transgression of the genre lies in the way that her writing consciously engages the conventions of lesbian literature and most especially, those used to establish characters as lesbian. There is no explicit sexuality in *Flight*, in keeping with a tradition of lesbian science fiction going all the way back to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (Betz, 2011, p. 68), and it would not be fair, in light of Matichei's own statements, to characterize her as a "lesbian author." However, Matichei very deliberately produces a particular effect that can only arise from superimposing lesbian signifiers onto very particular, not-technically-lesbian material. The tension between what Matichei is writing into the scenes and what, within the logic of her imagined world, the scenes actually contain, is significant.

Because of the way she thus "inscribes" lesbianism on material which, by her own design, resists such inscription, she creates what Farwell (1996) called:

> the tension between the ideologically determined traditional narrative rules, along with subsequent reader expectations, and the particular woman or lesbian who occupies this space. The tension between function and the character permits disruption and a shift in the narrative paradigm itself. (p. 59)

As we examine Matichei's inscription of lesbianism through her chosen conventions, we will also examine this shift, which destabilizes assumed connections between lesbian identity and feminist ideology.

The Autonomous Not-Woman

When we first meet *Flight*'s heroine, she could easily be mistaken for the protagonist of many other works of lesbian fiction. Matichei tells us that:

> One of the brunettes, tall, with Eastern features, clearly dominated the room with her energy and personality. Her lips were painted crimson, her almond eyes highlighted with jet black liquid liner. Her hair was swept in the dashing front quiff adopted by many bikers, with one strand calculatedly out of place. Her name was Antala FiaMartia, and very few people who heard it ever forgot it. (Matichei 2011a, p. 9)

The spirit of this description, if not its details, might remind a reader of Florence King from *Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady,* or perhaps Molly Bolt from *Rubyfruit Jungle*. Antala, standing on the bridge of an experimental starship that her biker gang has just stolen from the Royal Novaryan Navy, certainly merits Molly's description as "gutsy and wild" (Brown, 1973: fourth cover). The situation itself, alongside small details such as her height and oriental features, all contribute to what Andermahr (1993, p. 52) called the "foregrounding of atypicality" that works "to mark out lesbian difference in the text."

That Antala is atypical in a specifically lesbian-associated way is carefully indicated over the first few pages on which she appears. All explicit statements of attraction by characters in *Flight* occur from brunette to blonde or blonde to brunette, as when a blonde remarks that Antala is "simply dreamy" (Matichei 2011a, p. 20). Between Antala's introduction and this remark, however, we are treated to two significant moments in her interactions with other brunettes. As she looks out over the assembled gang, "[f]irst in her eyes" (Matichei 2011a, p. 17) is Chirenchihara Reteliyanhe ("Chinchi")—a promising cadet who, when Antala deserted her military Academy, followed her "because she felt raiAntala

(where "rai" is a term for nobility) needed someone to look after her." Matichei tells us that:

> It was a curious bond between the two brunettes. RaiChinchi felt that in raiAntala she had found a person of supreme quality whom it was her duty to stay beside. RaiAntala found her friend's devotion inexplicable and felt somewhat guilty at involving this young technician in a life of cocktail parties and midnight rides. The thing had irritated raiAntala. She wanted to waste her life. Why must she be forced to feel that she was wasting raiChinchi's life as well? … She often resolved to send her away, but… How could one send her away? (Matichei 2011a, p. 18)

The pairing could easily come out of what Elaine Marks (1979, p. 353) has termed a "gynaceum" novel—a mischievous older student inadvertently drawing an innocent in her wake. There is a deep emotional intimacy here, upon which Matichei inscribes lesbianism through the use of the "female gaze," in which "[l]ooking is … used as a mode of sexual pleasuring, rather than to carry connotations of dominance and power," as the male gaze does (Andermahr, 1993, p. 201). The context of Antala's features being identified as "Eastern" implicates the gaze in the other direction as well, following on the observations of Reina Lewis (2016, p. 164) regarding late 19th- and early 20th-century European womens' descriptions of being seen and admired by Ottoman women. The fact that Chinchi is "first in [Antala's] eyes" and follows the character in order "to look after her," alongside the allusion to the dynamics of the gynaceum, squarely frames the emotional intimacy of the pair within the lesbian literary tradition.

The intentionality of Matichei's use of the covertly sexual female gaze, so subtle with regard to Chinchi, becomes clearer in its deployment moments later as Antala looks at another brunette, Claralin Carshalton:

> RaiClaralin raised her glass. RaiAntala noticed her perfectly varnished red nails, her matching lipstick, her dashing black-lined eyes. RaiClaralin was a daring rider, a hard drinker, and a potential rival for the place of lead-brunette of the pack. She hadn't quite the nerve to challenge the present Captain; but if raiAntala slipped—well, raiClaralin was a good brunette to have in one's crew provided one could keep on top of her. (Matichei 2011a, p. 19)

Here we lack the reciprocal looking that Andermahr (1993, p. 202) found in Katherine V. Forrest's writing—which subverts the active/passive, subject/object dichotomy of the male gaze—but reciprocity is instead established by the fact that, in *Flight*, Antala's gaze responds to Claralin's activity and provokes positive response, as Claralin subsequently joins her with her drink (Matichei, 2011a, p. 19). The "femaleness" of Antala's gazing at another brunette is reinforced by the novella's having opened with an imitation male (which is to say, overtly sexual) gaze directed by a brunette soldier at the base commander's "gorgeous" blonde secretary—a gaze uninvited by any act and which, going unnoticed, does not engage its object (Matichei, 2011a, p. 7). Though distinctly "female," the motivations of Antala's gaze leave little room for doubt when the paragraph closes with a double entendre.

The bond between Antala and Claralin is tightened further after Claralin uses Antala's status as a deserter from the Academy to question her "legal and ritual fitness to be Captain of this ship" (Matichei 2011a: 25) and makes a bid to supplant her. The failure of Claralin's coup leads to a reconciliation delayed until the ship can land in a "green world," a stock feature of lesbian romance writing first identified by Zimmerman (1990) as a space in which the association of nature and womanhood reinforces a lesbian character's discovery of woman-identification. The green world is a haven from the intrusive, unnatural oppression of the urban space, associated with patriarchal civilization, and is often combined with a "wet world" motif, in which water signifies rebirth and awakening to the lesbian self (Andermahr, 1993, p. 82). It is thus no coincidence that the cathartic argument that goes on to bond Antala with Claralin only takes place once the two can be alone *en plein aire*. We are told that, "The woods surrounding the ship were every bit as dense as they had looked from the air. They smelled richly of some aromatic alien foliage in the midday heat" (Matichei, 2011a, p. 43). After Claralin airs her grievances,

Antala shares her own reason for wanting to speak privately. Among the members of their aristocratic gang is Mela—a princess of the imperial line who thus, according to custom, automatically became sovereign when they lost contact with the homeworld. Antala's rebellious habits are not overcome easily, however, and she confesses her lack of obedience to the princess. After Claralin hesitates to execute the corporal punishment Antala requests in order to make atonement, Antala cuts her own arm. Claralin, ashamed of her hesitation, cuts her own to make amends, and the two declare themselves to be sisters by a bond of blood (Matichei, 2011a, pp. 44–5).

The moment in which the two girls are reconciled is an unconventional union of the green and wet worlds, another means by which lesbianism is inscribed on the text (with a focus on emotional and spiritual dimensions over sexual ones); yet, as we have noted, the text resists this inscription because the characters are not lesbians. Indeed, they are not even "women," as Matichei emphasizes less than twenty pages later (2011a, p. 64). The conditions of intemorphism do not give rise to the signifier "lesbian" and offer no support for it. As will be seen, this distancing creates space in which common associations of lesbianism with feminism in contemporary Anglo-American culture can be disrupted and reconfigured.

Antala kills her would-be assassin in combat, which is reminiscent of the Amazon ideal extolled by Monique Wittig in *Les Guerrillères* or *Le Corps lesbien.* There is a deeper connection, however, between Antala's and Wittig's rejections of the term "woman." "Lesbian is the only concept I know of," wrote Wittig (1988: 440), "which is beyond the categories of sex, because the designated subject is not a woman either economically, or politically, or ideologically." Wittig praised the lesbian as archetype of female freedom; however, Antala's people, the Herthelani, are stubbornly not lesbians because they are not women subject to the discursive forces that produce "lesbian" as a signifier. Freed by their biological autonomy, the species does not need the term to define themselves against "heterosexual" women or against men. The Herthelani can structure their society and self-understanding on their own terms, and the result is unlike a typical lesbian feminist utopia, Amazonian or otherwise.

The Imperial Constitution of Femininity

Rosemary Marangoly George (1993/4, p. 97) has written extensively on the role of the British Empire in constituting women's independent identities in the Victorian and Edwardian periods through the colonial provision of an "authoritative self… defined against a racial Other in encounters that were located in space that was paradoxically domestic as well as public: the English home in the colonies." In George's analysis, in the effort to impress a "civilizing" influence on the colonial "wilderness," feminine-coded domesticity could be read as an act of heroism and a form of national service. It created a bridge to public participation and political impact that rendered "the modern individual woman… first and foremost an imperialist" (George, 1993/4, p. 97) managing her servants like "unruly children" at the fringes of an empire depicted in the literature of the day as a household writ large (George, 1993/4, p. 108).

Many of the same simultaneously imperial and domestic motifs can be found in the rhetoric of the Herthelani, but are used to define different objects. On one level, they distinguish themselves clearly from "the Outlander," i.e. any of the male/female dimorphic races of other worlds. The Herthelani experience the women of those races as unsettling in their union of what, to the Herthelani, are distinct blonde and brunette features and mannerisms (Matichei, 2011a, pp. 77-8). The men, however, are not included in "full humanity," and are often implicitly compared with animals, as when beards are designated "face-fur" and said to be removed by some *mascûls* (as they call schizomorphic males) in order "to make themselves look more human" (Matichei, 2011a, p. 58). The Herthelani, however, are not an expansionist people and maintain no rule over or settlement among schizomorphs, who are engaged only in diplomatic contexts or patrols against piracy. The otherness they offer thus exists only on the fringes of the Herthelani consciousness.

To the Herthelani, the true Other is within. No less than in Victorian and Edwardian British society as ana-

lyzed by George, the Herthelani "authoritative self" is born in the union of the personal and domestic sphere with the public (and, indeed, the cosmic) sphere by the imposition of civilizing order on a strange wilderness; but that wilderness is conceived as the terrain of the ego. The Herthelani see themselves as the *memsahib* of British India saw her native servants—children in perpetual need of compassionate but stern discipline.

The Herthelani envision their polity as "the great *Familia* of Nation and Empire" (*Flight* 33) and personify it so far as to call themselves "daughters of the Empire" united in a common bond as "child[ren] of the Empress." Mela, as she grows into her role as acting queen in the absence of other authority, comes to refer to her friends and crewmates as "my children" (205). These political deployments of the signifier of motherhood are conditioned by the Herthelani concept of the monotheistic god they call Mother, whose image underlies their sense of both political and spiritual order. In Her name, the Empress reigns over the Golden Chain of hierarchies extending down to the lowest levels of the *ranyam* (queendom), such that the mistress of a household may even refer to a bonded maidservant older than herself as "child" (Matichei, 2011a, p. 39).

These discourses have obvious resonance with the philosophies of Cixous (1976), who has suggested that the mother is the fundamental metaphor of women's writing, and even more pointedly with Andermahr's (1993, p. 190) observation that "the mother/child dyad" is a "motif common to the lesbian romance. At its best, this motif is used to represent the mutual nurturance of the lovers. But frequently, it appears as a more one-sided affair in which one woman nurtures the other." This motif is clear in the mentoring relationship (examined further below) between Antala and Queen Ashhevala, a young monarch who places herself under Antala's tutelage with expressions of gratitude in which her status as an orphan is reiterated, metaphorically extending Antala's role beyond that of teacher (Matichei, 2011a: 160). On a subtler scale, this dyad also characterizes the relationship between Antala and Claralin insofar as their aforementioned reconciliation is made possible only by the dissipation of competitive tension through Claralin's confession that she depends on Antala for the resolution of difficult decisions (Matichei, 2011a, p. 27).

In Matichei's hands, the inherently unequal relationship of mother and child becomes the organizing principle of a hierarchical society diametrically opposed to the standard values and norms of feminist utopias. There is a passing resemblance to Katherine V. Forrest's *Daughters of a Coral Dawn*, where autocratic rule is exercised by a leader known as "Mother." In *Daughters*, however, this is depicted as morally ambiguous and fraught with tensions. In *Flight*, the symbolic motherhood of authority figures is fundamentally positive and repeatedly depicted as the necessary means for the individual's maturation and spiritual growth. This draws on motifs common to utopian lesbian separatist literature that connect a "desire for the pre-oedipal relation to the mother" with a construction of lesbian identity as a quest for union with the collective, rather than a desire for individuation and self-expression or realization (Andermahr, 1993, p. 122). Matichei's treatment, however, draws on the distinctive feature of a sexual binary within the bounds of femininity itself to overcome this dichotomy between the individual and the collective.

The dialectical resolution in *Flight* can be understood in light of Irigaray's (1985) notion of mimesis. For Irigaray, there are two modes for the performance of femininity. The first is "masquerade," in which a woman performs femininity without self-awareness. The second is "mimicry," in which

> One must assume the feminine role deliberately… to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it… Women gain thereby a sort of ironical double consciousness, a presence in their apparent absence… As Irigaray points out, "…women… are not simply resorbed in this function. They also remain elsewhere," simultaneously visible and invisible, present and absent. (Andermahr, 1993, p. 116)

The Herthelani are extremely conscious of performance. When Antala's crew steals the Silver Vixen, Matichei notes that "for all that this hijacking was no

more than a prank, it was also the distant and playful echo of a State occasion" (10). The word "playful" bears on the Herthelan concept that human existence is fundamentally performative and thus playful in the sense described by Huizinga in *Homo Ludens* (1949, pp. 100–1): "One might call society a game in the formal sense, if one bears in mind that such a game is the living principle of all civilization." Matichei writes of Antala's gang: "hoverbike bands like this one had an ethos that, while outwardly rebellious, was in some respects super-Raihiralan—taking the old aristocratic warrior-virtues as the basis of their play. But then do not the old books tell us that all worldly action is but play?" (Matichei, 2011a, p. 22)

The Herthelan understanding that all action is play in the performance of a role manifests in two ways. While Antala plays the role of captain and grows into its reality over the course of the book, Mela is the group's sovereign in reality but has to slowly learn to play the role. The shift in dynamic from the camaraderie of the gang's dynamic back home to authority in their new circumstances is difficult for her at first, requiring both a compartmentalization of her own psyche and the ability to manage others' newly compartmentalized interaction with her. "I do not greatly relish the authority that is thrust upon me," she informs her crewmates/subjects,

> "but be assured that I intend to do my duty and not dilute it… The audience is now at an end."
>
> The company seemed at a loss what to do. Were they expected to disperse? If so, where to? RaiEstrelle broke the silence. "Are we still to call you 'Your Highness', rairaiMela?"
>
> Everyone laughed. It was a laugh of dissolving tension.
>
> "No," said rairaiMela. "We are back to our normal selves now. We shall have to learn—as all in authority learn—the difference between our high functions and our small selves. For now I am Mela again. But don't forget that your Princess watches over you."
>
> Was that a reassurance or a warning? Either way it seemed curious and out of character. And yet, no one took it lightly. The Princess was another persona: another thing-spoken-through, that is, another mask. But high masks are of jade or gold or ivory, carved with eternal forms, while our small selves are but fleeting bundles of impulse and emotion, blown by the winds of the world.
>
> "Oh, thank Heaven for that, rairaiMela-sweetie," said raiCharmian. "Let's have a drink." (Matichei, 2011a, p. 26)

This reciprocity demonstrates that performance is capable of making reality, as it ultimately makes Antala a real captain (Matichei, 2011a, p. 138), but it is not viewed as an arbiter of reality. Things have, for the Herthelani, essential natures that abide whether or not performed, and their art of life is to learn the performance of what one truly is in order to become more fully oneself. Blonde and brunette femininity are performed, but they are performed as royalty is—as a way of transcending the "fleeting bundles of impulse and emotion" and identifying oneself with the "high mask." Just as a monarch (ideally) strives to internalize the dignity, poise, and wisdom associated with the crown as institution or office, and thereby seeks to perfect the manifestation of a role owned from and by birth, so too the Herthelani understood their identities as blonde or brunette as both inherited and perfectible, with every refinement of the performance leading the performer back toward her own essential nature. Interestingly, the performance of royalty and femininity are brought together directly when, amidst the tumult of arriving on an alien world and suffering a traumatic assassination attempt, "The Princess retired to the small room set aside for her, to attend to her hair and makeup. She felt it part of her duty to look impeccable" (Matichei, 2011a, p. 85).

In this connection of performance and leadership, there is a nod to Sheri S. Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country* (1989, p. 126), in which Morgot, an important member of the Marthatown Council, informs her daughter Stavia that:

> …half of what we do is performance. Ritual. Observances. If we are seen to be in control, the people are calm and life moves smoothly… Doing nothing

with an appearance of calm may be more important than doing the right thing in a frantic manner."

Stavia spends the novel troubled by the feeling of artificiality, often imagining her performative self as an actress usurping her real self. The reader, too, becomes increasingly aware that performance is a kind of duplicity taking its toll on the councilwomen, building to Morgot's reflection that if "the Lady has a heaven for the merciful, we are not sure any of us will ever see it" (Tepper, 1989, p. 291). Tepper's treatment of the subject is characteristic of feminist literature, in which the best light in which performance can be found is as a chosen strategy of resistance to enforced or unconscious performance, à la Irigaray (Wagner-Lawlor, 2002, p. 115).

The Herthelani, however, neither perform for men (as Irigaray's masquerading woman does) nor against men as a subversion of forced performance (like Irigaray's mimicking woman). There can be, for them, no notion of woman as "man's equal" or "a potential man," as one can find in Irigaray's thought (Wagner-Lawlor, 2002, p. 84), since their society is devoid of men altogether. While one could potentially apply some of Irigaray's analysis on those points to the performance of "blondeness" and "brunetteness," the Herthelani's position of discursive autonomy vis-à-vis masculinity depoliticizes their performance of femininity, because Herthelani femininity has no antithesis and hence does not exist in a power relationship with anything else. Under those conditions, the performance of femininity is not, as in our world, a political act, but instead becomes a spiritual one.

Upon crash-landing in the queendom of Astarche, the Silver Vixen is invited to send a senior officer to audience with the local queen. Antala is fitted in a captain's uniform and Mela offers her a "True Sword"—a blade forged by an hereditary priestess dedicated to Sai Vikhë, the Herthelan angel of battle—to complete the ensemble as her royal representative. Antala, however, demurely refuses the sword, claiming that she is not worthy to carry it. Over the course of the novel, Antala's feelings of inadequacy and imposture diminish and when, toward the novel's end, Mela is captured by alien (male) pirates, Antala does not resist the Princess' new instruction to gird herself with "the Captain's sword" for the rescue mission.

> Silently the Captain took the sword and unwrapped it. The sacred steel seemed to cast a light over the whole control room; not a physical light but a light of the Spirit. In old times it was said that Sai Vikhë, the Angel of Battle, resided in a True Blade in all her winged glory...
>
> The Captain was every inch an officer and noblemaid. The uniform had always had the effect of transforming her [Antala] into something a light-year from her Road Angel [biker] persona, but the sword... changed her entirely and gave her an aura... something that might be called a chemistry between the soul of raiAntala and the soul of the sacred blade. (Matichei, 2011a, p. 181)

The actual rescue and the combat with the pirate captain are, ultimately, anticlimactic to this moment, in which Antala, within the terms of Herthelan religion, becomes a saint—united in spirit with the divine and thus restored to oneness with the Mother. In mentioning that she was "every inch an officer," the text unites also the dyad of subject and sovereign, conceived as derivative of child and mother. This reunion is indicated by Antala's taking of the sword she had previously refused, representing the final alignment of her will with that of the royal authority.

This kind of mystical identification is a common theme of world mythology, but Matichei uses it distinctively to transcend the traditional tension in lesbian literature between identity through woman-identification and identity through erotically charged individuation; in the "chemistry between the soul of raiAntala and the soul of the sacred blade" Antala is united with the Mother both inwardly (through her identification with the divine presence of Sai Vikhë) and outwardly (through the normalization of her hitherto unofficial status in complete obedience to her royal mistress), yet she remains distinctly Antala, and possibly more fully Antala than she has ever been. The art of performance is key to this transformation, as it enables the "presence in... apparent absence" that Irigaray identified as an "ironical double consciousness," though it is not ironic in this case, but the mark of what Sanskrit literature terms a

jivanmukti—one whose simultaneous self-awareness of both her lesser and greater self permits enlightenment even while remaining engaged in worldly existence. Bathed in the aura of the angel who patronizes her social function, Antala is at once transported into the divine realm and stubbornly present in the mundane. It is a maneuver that would be impossible without Antala's conscious use of mimesis in entering into the performed role of the Captain, which is, within the parameters of Herthelan sex roles, intimately connected with the role of brunette (as will be explored more fully below). The mechanism is one of feminist subversion and resistance to patriarchy but, in the absence of a patriarchy to resist and subvert, it is repurposed toward an end that, with its religious overtones and its close connection to caste, is radically incongruous with the feminist utopias of most lesbian science fiction.

This incongruity is paradigmatic of Antala's entire character arc. In common with many lesbian protagonists, she begins the story beset by feelings of "social stigma and self-contempt" arising from her failure to perform expected social roles. Stimpson (1981, p. 364) identified two possible arcs of protagonists from this point as "the dying fall," which creates tragically martyred heroines (like *The Well of Loneliness*' Stephen Gordon, discussed below), and "the enabling escape," in which the protagonist successfully rebels against stigma and self-contempt. Typically, this involves a rejection of the norms or values of the dominant society. Because Antala's initial stigma as a deserter from a military academy is related to rank and caste, rather than erotic sensibility, rebellion against self-contempt comes not in the form of rebellion against the social order but of return to it. This return can, in intemorphic terms, be accomplished without capitulation to heteronormativity or the patriarchy. Instead, the context of Herthelan society renders that return an imperialist triumph of the higher self—the "authoritative self" realized through donning the mask of any of the eternal roles, from princess to maidservant, that symbolically join the domestic, imperial, and cosmic planes—over the wilderness of the "native" ego. This is the deeper meaning of Mela's comment to the crew when their contact with the Homeworld is initially severed that "we are, as it were, an outpost of the Empire" (Matichei, 2011a, p. 26). To colonize oneself in the name of the divinely-sanctioned, civilizing order of Herthelan society and thus to become such an "outpost of empire" is the deepest aspiration of Herthelan culture, and that internalized imperialism is what renders coherent their conception of themselves as two distinct but complementary "feminine sexes," especially against the more distant background of the boorishness, lawlessness, and selfishness of the (usually male) "Outlander."

Sex and the Social Order

The common rejection of the term "woman" by the Herthelani and Wittig has already been observed but, in the division of the sexes of blonde and brunette, we find one of *Flight*'s most notable transgressions against utopias such as Wittig's. Antala's culture does not compel her to define herself against a heterosexual model of femininity. A comparison was likewise drawn already between Antala and the heroines of *Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady* and *Rubyfruit Jungle* in respect to the fierce independence and "wild and gutsy" behavior that marks all three protagonists as atypical within their social and cultural contexts. Here too, there is an equally notable difference, in that both Florence King and Molly Bolt rebel against socially conditioned models of femininity to become tomboys, while no similar process is necessary or possible for Antala. Her autonomy from all male/female dichotomies undermines the way in which, for those other heroines, "The sign 'lesbian' works to specify a female identity premised on a rebellion against normative heterosexual femininity" (Andermahr, 1993, pp. 52–3). Insofar as "the specificity of lesbian textuality has historically frequently resided precisely in opposition to conventional notions of femininity," (14) Matichei's text once again resists the schizomorphic lesbianism that has been inscribed upon it.

The significance of this maneuver becomes apparent through consideration of the ways in which Antala's identity is, within the context of her all-feminine society, autonomous from any definition against men or masculinity. Hélène Cixous' critique of "patriarchal" binaries as inherently subordinating all feminine-coded terms (Andermahr, 1993, p. 113) has deeply influenced the development of lesbian, and particularly lesbian feminist, speculative fiction. Many writers, such as Sally Miller

Gearhart, have premised their utopias on a reversal in which the feminine binaries become systemically privileged. Others have rejected this approach, arguing that it reinforces the binary system that Cixous has shown to be inherently oppressive (131). Instead, they advocate a total rejection of the binaries by refusing them status as metaphysical realities and asserting them as social constructs that can, and should, be deconstructed. The conception of Herthelan society presented in *Flight*, however, is a third option.

Intemorphism, in placing a sexual binary within an all-feminine society, radically positions both halves of the binary within femininity—sun/moon, spirit/body, nature/culture, etc., and the Herthelani thus untroubledly reproduce fairly rigid constructions of sex roles. Brunettes are "gentilmaids-of-affairs" to whom most worldly business naturally falls. At any outbreak of trouble, from space combat to atmospheric turbulence, Antala orders Claralin to "strap the blondes in" or "look after the blondes" (Matichei, 2011a, pp. 13, 22), at which point they are removed from the bridge. During an invasion of the ship by hostile forces, a blonde asks Mela, "What do the brunettes think about it? They will never discuss these things with blondes for fear of worrying us. Don't they imagine we can think of these things for ourselves?" Mela answers simply, "I know how you feel, darling, but at a time like this they need more than ever to maintain the order of things" (Matichei, 2011a:, p. 86). During the blood sister ceremony, we read that "the blood horrified her [Claralin] as if she had been a blonde," (Matichei, 2011a, p. 45) and, in a similar vein, the suddenness of the Silver Vixen's (herself blonde, like all ships [Matichei, 2011a, p. 18]) stop on the far side of the wormhole is indicated by the simple statements "Cocktails were spilled. Blondes gasped" (Matichei, 2011a, p. 22).

The impression might easily be taken from this sampling that brunettes stand in for men in a new kind of sexism. The dynamics between the blonde and brunette sexes are better understood, however, as an organic outgrowth of the internal logics of a certain kind of lesbian literature, than as a repetition or emulation of the patriarchal paradigms of our world. While Antala's seemingly patronizing dominance, like her unwillingness to take orders, might be read in our world as stereotypically male, her world offers no such frame of reference. These qualities, no less than their opposites, are instead, by default, thoroughly "feminine."

In her critique of *Daughters of a Coral Dawn*, Andermahr (1993, p. 152) observed that:

> The emphasis on sex and the novel's antidemocratic character make the text quirky and divergent on two fronts. It is possible that the two features are linked and that the existence of power relations, disparities of age, status, attractiveness, make possible within the terms of traditional romance the eroticization of women's relationships; they add a sexual frisson which is less prominent in the relationships between Gearhart's interchangeable hill women [in *The Wanderground*].

Daughters of a Coral Dawn is not, of course, the only novel to use inequality as a catalyst for lesbian eroticism. One thinks, perhaps, of Jane Delynn's (2003) *Don Juan in the Village*, or Sarah Schulman's (2013) *After Delores*, both of which evince a strong interest in the relationship between lesbian attraction and disparities in social roles and standing (Andermahr, 1993, p. 220). The effect of shattering the lesbian romance's traditional egalitarianism (Andermahr, 1993, p. 169) has tended to be dark, however. *Daughters* presents us with a quasi-dystopian world of machination and manipulation, while *Don Juan* mires us in the seediness of shallow, objectifying relationships, and *After Delores* chronicles the deteriorating mental condition of an increasingly disturbed and violent young woman. The tragic implication of all three is that a relatively bloodless conception of the lesbian solely as feminist political subject is the only defense against societal and/or psychological breakdown.

In *Flight*'s presentation of inegalitarian Herthelan society, blondes and brunettes have strictly defined, complementary roles, and the entire population is divided into four hereditary castes with distinctive functions and differing levels of prestige. This offers a kind of utopia capable of accommodating a robust, difference-based expression of erotic sensibility, in which pairings and attractions can be driven organically by the lure of the

exotic, the solidarity of the shared, and the logic of the competitive. The romantic undertones of Antala's relationship with two other brunettes, Claralin and Chinchi, has already been remarked. Her movement throughout the book toward Claralin, in contrast to a general lack of development of her relationship with Chinchi, depends vitally on, first, the consciousness of common purpose and way of life shared by Antala and Claralin as members of the *raihira* (warrior caste) in contrast to Chichi's status as *haiela* (priestly caste) and, second, on the competitive edge to their dynamic due to their caste identities' construal of them as natural rivals for the captaincy. Both the pull factor of their shared status and the push factor of their rivalry are necessary strokes in the engine of their romantic tension; if either was missing, the romance would stall. A straightforward reading of the work thus suggests that lesbian eroticism could be fundamentally incompatible with a feminist ideology insistent upon radical egalitarianism and total woman-identification. Such an interpretation of Matichei's work would offer a confirmation of the hypothesis offered by Andermahr (1993, p. 152, quoted above) in respect of *Daughters of a Coral Dawn*, and would also establish *Flight* as an outlier against a broader field of works that, like Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground* (mentioned by Andermahr), attempt to frame romantic relationships between women within societies defined by relative homogeneity in political influence, economic status, and social roles. To the extent that *Flight*, like *Daughters*, succeeds in depicting these forms of difference as integral to the development of romances between its characters, it drives the logic of a lesbian polity toward the illiberal

This unfolds most explicitly in the relationship between Antala and the blonde Queen Ashhevala III of Astarche, the queendom in which the crew of the Silver Vixen find themselves after crash-landing on an alien world also populated by intemorphs. The young queen is tutored by her vizier who, we quickly come to suspect, is manipulating the regency to her own advantage. During an initial audience with Antala, the queen becomes impressed by Antala's understanding of the metaphysics of statecraft (gained through her aristocratic education at the Academy) and places herself under Antala's instruction. This relationship continues over several visits as Antala teaches the young queen the symbolism of everything from chess to palace groundskeeping, elucidating the queen's role as representative of divine authority on the earthly plane and thus the fount of of all earthly authority.

Matichei's awareness of the disjunction between the illiberal utopia she is constructing and the more typical "egalitarian, communal and democratic" society figured in most lesbian feminist literature is shown by her recontextualization of the green world. In most lesbian writing, the green world is contrasted with urban environments depicted as "dystopian" and "inimical to lesbian romantic fulfillment" (Andermahr, 1993, p. 182). A classic example is Fiona Cooper's novel *Jay Loves Lucy*, set entirely in London but placing all of Jay's sexual fantasies in gardens, beaches, country hotels, etc. Queen Ashhevala's garden, however, is located at the heart of the palace, itself located in the heart of the capital city of Astarcheana, and Antala explains that the fountain and its surrounding gardens are the point from which the entire palace complex, the entire city, and ultimately the entire nation, unfold. This explicit connection of the green world to the foundation of the city and civilization metaphorically reclaims the traditionally "patriarchal" urban space.

What makes this transgressive of the feminist SF genre is not simply *Flight*'s approval of a robust monarchy and the caste system (threats to which are depicted as the root cause of most social ills among the Astarcheans) but the use of conventions of lesbian fiction to support that approval. Once again, the green and wet worlds frame the interaction of two feminine characters, as all meetings take place within the palace garden in the presence of the central fountain. Since the fountain represents the wellspring of imperial authority through the royal bloodline, much of Antala's teaching and of the queen's reflection is on the garden as a transgenerational symbol of royal authority. A strong parallel is thus suggested between this setting and that of a classic work of lesbian literature. As Andermahr (1993, pp. 177–8) explained:

> The most famous example of the green world motif … is Stephen Gordon's country estate Morton in [Radclyffe Hall's] *The Well of Loneliness*, which… carries

> a different meaning to the green world myth in the contemporary lesbian romance. Morton represents ancestral roots, class privilege and social inheritance, and is therefore a patriarchal space. Moreover, nature is represented as affirming, not lesbian relationships, but the heterosexual order.

The essence of Matichei's thesis seems to be precisely that "ancestral roots, class privilege," and "social inheritance" are not inherently "patriarchal," but manifest in an all-feminine society as well. Indeed, Queen Ashhevala's garden is an essentially *matriarchal* space, and this identification is strongly reinforced when the Queen is encouraged by this matriarchal legacy to confront her vizier, who is revealed to be secretly in league with male aliens. The masculine/feminine-associated dichotomies identified by Cixous are nullified by intemorphism, which thus allows the symbol of the garden to be considered feminine in what was a patriarchal space in *The Well of Loneliness* (Hall, 1928). Furthermore, the relationship between Antala and Queen Ashhevala is opposite-sex within an intemorphic framework (brunette to blonde) but carries all the signifiers of a same-sex relationship in the eyes of a schizomorphic reader (since both are "feminine" and appear superficially as "women"). Hence the refusal "to name lesbianism as the major organizing discourse of the protagonist's sexual identity" that (Andermahr, 1993, pp. 72–3) read as "a refusal of fixed notions of sexual identity" in some other works of lesbian fiction, such as Maggie Redding's *The Life and Times of Daffodil Mulligan*, in *Flight* instead affirms two fixed sexual identities within femininity itself, rendering homo- and heterosexual dynamics ambiguous, and permitting the full investment of a feminine-feminine relationship within a setting of "ancestral roots, class privilege, and social inheritance." The reader might object that the technically opposite-sex couple within the garden fails to carry this sleight-of-hand out of the novella into real-world lesbian discourse, but Matichei forestalls this objection through use of the lesbian *Bildungsroman's* convention of the young student infatuated with an older teacher (Marks, 1979, p. 353), which is found in Queen Ashhevala's self-imposed tutelage to Antala.

The self-consciousness of this symbolic interaction with *The Well of Loneliness* is suggested by the fact that another author at Sun Daughter Press, Alice Lucy Trent, was fond of using that novel as a meditation on the ways in which she perceived post-1960s feminism to have harmed women through its attack on the institutions of "traditional" society, as well as her particular ire that the cause of lesbian acceptance had been used as a rhetorical tool for dismantling values and institutions in which she deeply believed. In a conversation on the Aristasian Internet forum, The *Aphrodite Cocktail Bar*, during the late 1990s, one Miss Ariadne began:

> I can see the great misery that awaits Stephen because of solid Edwardian morality. This was the essence of my comment... that, despite the depredations of the Pit [contemporary culture], lesbians are freer now to follow their natures, than in, say, Quirrie [1950s] times, precisely because of atomization and the destruction of traditional culture. ("The Well")

Miss Trent responded:

> [L]et us consider the position of Stephen... There were Bohemian circles in London and Paris... where she could have lived in complete acceptance. Her tragedy lies not in the fact that she cannot live as she chooses, but that she cannot combine living as she chooses with the only life, the only world that she finds acceptable: the solid, decent world of English better-class country life... And this, so obvious in Stephen's case, is generally true of the so-called "oppressive moralities" of the pre-Eclipse [pre-1960s] world. They compelled not so much by brute force, as because the social and spiritual benefits they offered made people want to be part of them and to enjoy their goodness. ("The Well")

In the context of such an interpretation of Hall, Queen Ashhevala's garden is precisely the reconciliation of Stephen Gordon's life with "the only world that she finds acceptable." Indeed, this is the essence of Matichei's union of inscribed lesbian identity and Traditionalist, conservative social ideals. The unique dynamics of intemorphic sexual difference enable the reproduction, within an exclusively feminine space, of hierarchies and complementarities that feminist SF has traditionally assigned to patriarchal societies. The performance

of femininity, absent a masculine "other," no longer has a political or social context. It becomes instead an internalized, spiritualized performance in which apotheosis is rendered in the terms of the idealized colonial womanhood of the late Victorian empire.

Conclusion

Matichei's distinctive union of social dynamics commonly conceived in feminist thought as opposites diffuses a fundamental tension driving the majority of lesbian (feminist) speculative fiction. As Betz (2011, pp. 18–19) explained:

> [R]epositioning of the lesbian character as hero… complicates the conventional genre definitions of fantasy literature… [involving] some kind of restoration… Underlying these narrative outcomes is the presumption that… the social and cultural institutions once under threat retain their influence; in other words, traditional concepts of law, religion, philosophy, marriage, gender… have rightfully been verified. The essential conservative nature of fantasy genre texts assumes the importance of the underlying heterosexual, still predominantly patriarchal, representations of society. Although the lesbian characters in fantasy novels may remain outlaws at the conclusion of the plot, they remain capable of re-initiating actions that continue to challenge and/or threaten that worldview.

Thus, in a typical work of lesbian speculative fiction, casting a lesbian character in the role of protagonist sufficiently destabilizes genre expectations that the casting itself satisfies the theory of transgressivity described by McCracken (1998) and drives the text in "challeng[ing] social standards and norms" (McCracken 1998, p. 158). This does not happen in Matichei's work, however, because the traditions of Herthelan society are not truly threatened by the heroine. Other works of lesbian speculative fiction displace the transgressive role from an individual female protagonist to a female-only society, but these are societies in which women have been extracted from a schizomorphic duality to function without men and have thus formed communities consisting of a single sex, organized in markedly different ways from the order of historical, heteronormative civilizations. Matichei's Herthelani, however, are not extracted from a schizomorphic paradigm, but instead possess an autonomous sexual duality that reproduces many of the cultural forms of historical, schizomorphic societies.

Where lesbian fiction generally presents a protagonist who transgresses the heteronormativity of her own society, and lesbian speculative fiction tends to present a society that transgresses the heteronormativity of the reader's culture, Matichei draws on the distinctive literary heritage of lesbian fiction to present both a protagonist and a society that transgress the genre conventions of lesbian speculative fiction precisely in failing to transgress so many of the expectations of the traditional social order. The result is a unique presentation of lesbian identity as nontransgressive and thus compatible with many of the conservative values and ideals against which (lesbian) feminist science fiction has historically defined itself, as well as an implicit challenge to feminist claims of solidarity (or even compatibility) with lesbian culture and experience.

Notes

[1] Sun Daughter Press is operated by an organization called the Daughters of Shining Harmony, which emerged out of Aristasia in the mid-2000s. Within its very small catalog may also be found the Aristasian philosophical magnum opus—Alice Lucy Trent's *The Feminine Universe*—and the "Aristasian Authorized Version" of *The Gospel of Our Mother God*—a collection of religious texts that played a significant role in the development of Aristasia (Sedgwick, 2004, pp. 216–17).

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