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The Bodypolitics of Feminist Science Fiction: Elisabeth Vonarburg's *Le Silence de la cité*

Lorie Sauble-Otto

Whether utopian or dystopian, feminist science fiction is an emerging field of interest in Cultural and Literary Studies, as well as Women's Studies, and to use Jenny Wolmark's phrase, is "at the cutting edge of culture" (113).[1] From freedom of sexuality to pregnancy and childbirth, feminist science fiction writers are exploring the female body in space and imagining its liberty, and sometimes in Dystopia, its bondage. This essay centers around the emergence of feminist science fiction as the realm wherein women writers reinvent themselves and their bodies, thus the process of reproduction. This theme of reproduction as oppression is what Sara Lefanu calls "the hallmark of the feminist incursion into science fiction" (57). Also, I would like to promote, as does Marleen Barr in *Feminist Fabulation: Space/Postmodern Fiction*, the canonization of what she calls "feminist fabulation," and correspondingly, the instructional validity of the genre.[2] As Barr states: "… patriarchy… continues to define feminists and threatening texts (especially science fiction written by women and men) as second-class" (15). If, as Barr elaborates, feminist fabulation is "a springboard for subversive thought, a literary space of personal transformation which can inspire social and cultural transformation," then it could serve as an empowering experience in the classroom (227).

The theme of appropriation of women's bodies, procreative capacity and their offspring is central to Elisabeth Vonarburg's fiction. In *Le Silence de la cité*, Vonarburg ventures into a realm where total metamorphosis is a reality and parthenogenetic conception of children becomes the key to survival in a post-apocalyptic world. This essay will pinpoint a few of the specific ways in which the author's writing calls into question or problematizes the discourse of male-dominated reproductive technology. As Emily Martin has suggested in *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction*, feminist reconstructions of the discourse of reproductive technology can be empowering: "Imagining technology being used to control those who ordinarily use it to control others throws the power relationships into focus" (58).

Within postmodern theories dealing with power and oppression, Haraway has used the figure of the cyborg to both liberate and empower the female body. The cyborg becomes an appropriate lens through which to read the fiction of Vonarburg. Haraway's "Manifesto" provides a starting point for an examination of the strange coupling of the machine, or technology, and the body. Haraway characterizes the cyborg as existing in a "post-gender world" (150). She describes the cyborg in fiction, or the fusion of what is organism and machine, as a way of "mapping" our realities (150). In Haraway's "informatics of domination," the cyborg body and cyborg writing are an exploration of self and of survival (161-162). Armitt reminds us of the purpose of Haraway's cyborg as metaphor, as standing "as a model for human relations, ideologies and even philosophies" (9). Haraway's cyborg identity provides a useful tool for an analysis of "binary oppositions" (9). The cyborg "represents the fusion and confusion" of borders and boundaries existing especially around "race, gender, sexuality and class" (9). I find it important, if not necessary, to reiterate the symbolic nature of the cyborg, in that the term may be applied both to humans as cyborgs and cyborgs as humans/machines. Haraway's cyborg is a metaphor which, in feminist science fiction, becomes more than metaphor. Even the boundaries between cyborg and human become blurred.

Within Haraway's system of "informatics of domination" nothing is "natural," thus a cyborg character escapes what is deemed natural (for females): childbirth and reproduction. Cyborgs replicate rather than procreate. As Haraway notes, "the *actual* situation of women is their integration and/or exploitation into a world system of production/reproduction and communication" (163; emphasis added). In opposition to the reality of women's social and economic status, science fiction provides a space where women can imagine a new situation for themselves in the reappropriation of reproduction and reproductive technologies.

Barr has questioned not only the genre of science fiction itself but also our emerging concerns with regard to practices in the medical field and their "threat to women's autonomy" (*Lost in Space* 93). Barr examines how authors "blur generic conventions" in their writing (81). Barr begins her discussion by underlining the fact that when it comes to "reproductive technology, the differences between fiction and fact become indistinct" (82). Barr is

referring to the reality of women's reproductive technology and its so-called advances such as test-tube fertilization. She suggests that because we live in an "environment that includes the reality of woman as birth machine," it becomes next to impossible for a feminist science fiction writer to "create true science fiction" (83). She concludes that "the battle between the sexes over the control of women's fertility and, correspondingly, infertility," as emphasized in feminist texts, "are not only stories," but should "serve as warning" (93).[3] Barr's tone of foreboding can be traced throughout many works of feminist science fiction, and speaks to frequent, recurrent preoccupations about the regulation, uses, and abuses of the female body.

In *Le Silence de la cité*, the narrative centers on cybernetic reproduction. The heroine, Elisa, is brought to term by her male "creator," Paul, in an artificial womb. The female body, and especially that of Elisa, is, as pointed out by Wolmark, "the primary site on which the contradictions of gender identity are played out, in the context of the shifting borders between the human as cyborg and the cyborg as human" (134). Elisa has the ability of total gender metamorphosis; however, she first believes that this ability is connected to Paul, her creator/father become lover, and that she has no control over her own body. Elisa has also inherited from her biological parents a regenerative faculty allowing her to heal herself, stop any bleeding, and in general, to regulate her own body and its reactions to various stimuli.

Outside the City, nuclear disaster and war constrain human society to a sparse existence, and a genetic virus causes more females to be born than males, rendering women slaves to the men. *Le Silence de la cité* describes a world in which myth and religion have been recodified to further enclose women within repressive social, economic and religious systems.[4] The new myth tells how women began to want to change their bodies in order to be like men, so that God punished them by causing more female children to be born than male, condemning females to slavery:

« Je dis à ma servante : "Viens" et elle vient, "Va" et elle va », dit la nouvelle mouture des Evangiles; il n'y a pas de « serviteurs » dans les Nouveaux Evangiles, le mot même a disparu. Inférieure, esclave, objets qu'on manipule à sa guise.... (108)[5]

Elisa exists in a strange futuristic world, a mixture of repression and technological miracle. It is a world where the majority of humans and mutants barely survive alongside technologically advanced and indestructible robots called ommachs (Vonarburg's splicing of the French words 'homme' and 'machine'), or cyborgs. In this world where one out of five children born are male, women are chattel and Elisa's genetic gift develops into Paul's "Project" to repopulate the earth with beings capable of regeneration.

Elisa, empowered by her newly-acquired hermaphroditic possibilities, is threatened by Paul and is forced to flee the city in order to take stock of the condition of the societies functioning on the outside. To do so successfully and safely, she takes on her male bodily form, and eventually, several years later, confronts and kills Paul, who has discovered her new identity. Free from the constraints of fear and flight, Elisa then constructs her own community removed from the City where she begins to raise the children to whom she is both biological mother and father. Elisa provides both sperm and ovum, and the pregnancies are carried to term by artificial wombs in the City, leftovers from Paul's experiments. This reproduction is, as described by Haraway, a kind of cloning. Cyborgs reproduce themselves; Elisa reproduces herself, creating what Baudrillard terms "the purest form of parentage" (96). In one sense, reproductive technology is positive in this novel, since in lieu of a man controlling it, a woman is using the powerful technology to survive. In addition, her thirty-some children have the added capacity to metamorphose. The children are born girls and are educated early on about their physical and genetic properties. At the age of seven they go through their first "change," brought on through hypnosis, and then all of them alternate genders every couple of years.

At this juncture, Wolmark's concluding critique in *Aliens and Others: Science Fiction, Feminism and Postmodernism* concerning the emphasis of the narrative and its intent, warrants attention. She remarks that:

> Vonarburg fails to give the Project a context other than that of Paul's original genetic ambitions, and despite Elisa's personal vision, it remains embedded in those negative politics. It is at odds with the quite different politics implied by the metaphor of gender metamorphosis, in which possibilities for the redefinition of gender identity and social relations are explored. In the

> end, Vonarburg's text remains disappointingly unclear about
> exactly where the narrative emphasis should lie. (137)

Wolmark, in her focus on the split between reproductive processes
and metamorphoses, fails to see the way in which the text already
thematizes the split in order to point to the necessity of fluidity of
gender boundaries. Elisa destroys or disables the city in the final
chapter, allowing only ommachs to return within its walls to
recharge themselves or to serve as go-betweens. Elisa wants the
City to be a resource but also desires to discourage overreliance
upon it. Elisa gives up her "Project" and allows her children the
freedom to choose their roles in the future and to determine the
direction the community will take: "Et moi, je ne dirai rien? Pas
comme avant. Le Projet, en ce qui la concerne, n'existe plus. Je suis
libre. Libre" (277).

     With the City closed to humans, the artificial wombs are no
longer really viable, contrary to the assumptions of Wolmark.
Furthermore, Elisa's goal for her Project was only short-term use
of the reproductive technology—thirty-six children. After those
children had been born, reproduction was to take its course. So,
Elisa does change the context of the Project. She has to change her
intentions constantly as the children mature.

     To further reemphasize Elisa's reappropriation of the origi-
nally "male-dominated scientific and technological system," it is
important to reiterate the fact that it is Elisa who eventually
murders Paul, the creator of all of this technology, in order to
permanently sever his domination of said technology (Wolmark
137). Paul symbolizes the masculine authoritative control of repro-
duction and reproducing bodies. Contrary to Wolmark's interpre-
tation, Vonarburg empowers her protagonist, thus re-situating the
discourse of "artificial reproduction" (Wolmark 137).

     Elisa also comes to the realization that birth and rebirth are
ongoing and human, contrary to Wolmark's conclusion of techno-
logical determinism:

> Là est peut-être la révélation, en définitive: apprendre qu'on
> n'en a jamais fini de s'arracher à ses illusions, jamais fini de se
> surprendre à se mentir à soi-même, à se manipuler. Jamais fini
> de se mettre au monde? (275)

I find no evidence of Wolmark's "negative politics of artificial reproduction" in the final direction of the Project (137). Elisa is able to release the power she once believed to have held over her offspring. I believe that Vonarburg's narrative intent is to problematize the discourse of reproductive technology, thereby highlighting both its utility and its dangers. Ironically, Wolmark remains too fixed in her analysis of Vonarburg's fluid and mutable gender critique. I do, however, agree with Wolmark, that the gender-bending possibilities of the metamorphe are not fully explored. Perhaps this is yet another statement or testament to the immobility of the heterogenous, dichotomous construct of gender.

In concluding, I return to Haraway's cyborg metaphor. If, as she states in the Manifesto, Haraway's cyborg is exempt from Foucauldian "biopolitics," then may one assume that Elisa is of cyborg identity (163)? I find evidence that Elisa is in fact subject to the "technologies of sex" and Foucault's "bio-power" as outlined in *The History of Sexuality* (118; 140). The reproductive technology used in the City reflects Foucault's theory: "One might say that the ancient right to take life or let live was replaced by a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death" (138). Both poles of this "power over life" are demonstrated in Vonarburg's work: the first, "the body as a machine," and the second, "the species body, basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity" (139). Vonarburg invests heavily in her ommachs and in their unique service to her community, as well as in their potential for destruction if so programmed. The City also exists as an autonomous bodymachine. On the other hand, she focuses much of the work on the biological reproductive function of the body. Vonarburg leaves open a vast expanse of possibilities for the future of gender and the cyborg. Can the perfect world exist, the world without borders? Even the androgynous metamorphe may prefer one gender over another. I believe that Vonarburg's project is similar to that of her protagonist, a changing, metamorphosing one, full of possibilities to be explored, and remains a classic work of feminist fabulation calling into question historically patriarchal institutions of gender and sexuality.

Lorie Sauble-Otto is a doctoral candidate in French at the University of Arizona.

Notes

[1] Wolmark uses this phrase in reference to cyberpunk in *Aliens and Others*.

[2] Barr defines the term "feminist fabulation" as, "feminist fiction that offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the patriarchal one we know, yet returns to confront that known patriarchal world in some feminist cognitive way" (10).

[3] It is important to note the recurring theme in feminist science fiction not only of reproduction but of infertility and the final attempt by the human species to survive. In her conclusion Barr examines this latter situation as explored by Margaret Atwood in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

[4] Many cities existed at one time, before the nuclear disaster. Elisa's "City" is the only one that remains functional. The City is a huge automated maze of simulated streets, neighborhoods, and laboratories connected by moving sidewalks, elevators, and escalators. The most frightening aspect of life in the City is the constant, inescapable surveillance via computer screen and surveillance camera. In this City, Paul possesses complete control over the computer network and he is the only one who may carry out activity without fear of being monitored, echoing Foucault's theory of self-surveillance in *Discipline and Punish*.

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STATES OF IDENTITY

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*Limits and Possibilities
of Writing "French"*

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Limits and Possibilities of Writing "French"

*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*

Paroles Gelées was established in 1983 by its founding editor, Kathryn Bailey. The journal is managed and edited by the French Graduate Students' Association and published annually under the auspices of the Department of French at UCLA.

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Introduction

When we began preparations for the Second French Graduate Student Conference at UCLA, we learned very quickly that the concept of "being late" is a phenomenon that haunted not only the Romantics. To follow an original event of any kind is a challenging task, but the successful outcome of our conference *States of Identity: Limits and Possibilities of Writing "French,"* documented by the high quality of the present proceedings, demonstrate that there can be original "seconds," as paradoxical as this might sound.

Our "Call for Papers" for a conference on "identity" in the context of 'French' writing generated national and international responses from students in different disciplines such as Art History, ESL, Philosophy, Theater, as well as French, German and Comparative Literature thus underlining the interdisciplinary appeal of this conference.

Denis Hollier's thought-provoking keynote address on the very timely and controversial question of teaching literature in translation inaugurated the three-day event. Hollier's talk was complemented by insightful responses from Janet Bergstrom and Andrea Loselle from the perspective of film and poetry. We want to thank all three of them for setting the stage for an intellectually challenging yet collegial discussion among students, faculty and the many guests from outside the academic community.

Though the papers presented by the graduate students in six panels contributed much to our knowledge regarding individual aspects of "identity" in different cultures and time periods, the subsequent discussions made it clear that attempts to reach "sameness" regarding a given problem were inevitably deferred by new questions and concerns. What remained was the realization that in spite of the plurality of opinions, we had achieved "identity" in the overarching collective gesture of intellectual

exchange. It is this discovery that justifies this conference and our work in the humanities in general.

This conference and the publication of its proceedings would not have been possible without the generous financial support from our sponsors and we want to thank the Borchard Foundation, the French Consulate at Los Angeles, the UCLA Graduate Student Association, the Center for Modern and Contemporary Studies and the Campus Programs Committee of the Program Activities Board. Last but not least, we want to express our gratitude to the UCLA French Department and its faculty, whose continued support, encouragement and presence during the panels was much appreciated by the graduate students. A special thank you is due to Jean-Claude Carron for his introduction of the keynote speaker and tireless personal *engagement* in the organization of this conference.

Our last acknowledgment goes to the graduate students of the French Department who contributed in many ways to the successful outcome of this event and sacrificed much precious time to meetings and other organizational tasks. We hope that the success of the first two conferences will serve as motivation and inspiration to those who are currently working on next year's conference, which we are all eagerly anticipating.

The Editors

Diane Duffrin
Markus Müller

States of Identity
Limits and Possibilities of Writing "French"

*Selected Proceedings from the UCLA French Department
Graduate Students' Second Annual Interdisciplinary Conference,
April 25-27, 1997*

Friday, April 25, 1997
SOUTH BAY ROOM OF SUNSET VILLAGE COMMONS

4:45 p.m. **Introduction of Keynote Speaker**
Jean-Claude Carron, UCLA

5:00 p.m. **Keynote Address**
Denis Hollier, Yale University
"Blanchot, Speaking in Tongues: Otherness in
Translation"
Respondents
Janet Bergstrom, UCLA
Andrea Loselle, UCLA

7:00 p.m. **Reception**

Saturday, April 26, 1997
NORTHRIDGE ROOM

9:00 a.m. **Panel #1**
Grafting Past to Present: Hybrid Identities
Moderator: Michael Stafford

1. "Norman French, Latin and Scots English: Three versions of
the *Leges inter Brettos et Scottos*," *Kristen Over (UCLA, Comp.
Literature Program)*

2. "Verlan: An Expression of Beur Identity or Reversal by
Inverse," *Amy Wells (Texas Tech University, Dept. of Classical
and Modern Languages)*

3. "Marcel Mauss on Nationalism: An Approach to *The Gift*," *Luke Bresky (UCLA, Dept. of English)*

10:45 a.m. Panel #2
The Politics of Pedagogy: Translating Culture in the Classroom
Moderators: Natalie Muñoz, Marcella Munson

1. "Silent Words: Language as an Obstacle to Immigrant Integration and Identity in French Society," *Katharine Harrington (Texas Tech University, Dept. of Classical and Modern Languages)*

2. "*The Guest* in the Classroom: The Voice of Camus in Multicultural Academic Discourse," *Ajanta Dutt (Rutgers University, ESL Program)*

3. "Radical Chic(k): The American Roots of Marie de France," *Susan Purdy (University of Western Ontario, Dept. of French)*

2:30 p.m. Panel #3
Bodies in Writing: Feminine Identity and the Literary Text
Moderator: Heather Howard

1. "Discordant Locations for the Me-ospheric Void: Théophile Gautier vs. *La Sylphide*," *Regina Fletcher Sadono (UCLA, Theatre Arts Dept.)*

2. "The Bodypolitics of Feminist Science Fiction: Elisabeth Vonarburg's *Le silence de la cité*," *Lorie Sauble-Otto (University of Arizona, Dept. of French and Italian)*

3. "The "I" Which Is Not One: Dual Identity in the Case of Simone de Beauvoir's Autobiography," *Kim Carter-Cram (Idaho State University, Dept. of Foreign Languages)*

4:15 p.m. Panel #4
War and Remembrance: National Epitaphs of Self
Moderator: Stacey Meeker

1. "Proust's Poetics of Recontextualization," *John S. LaRose (Lousiana State University, Dept. of French and Italian)*

2. "The Body and the State: Fantasies of Identity in Genet's *Pompes Funèbres*," *Leslie Ann Minot (UC Berkeley, Dept. of Comp. Literature)*

3. "Ecriture et Mémoire: Identity and Collective Memory in Jorge Semprun's *L'Ecriture ou la vie*," *Marcus Keller (California State University Long Beach, Dept. for German, Russian and Romance Languages)*

Sunday, April 27, 1997

9:00 a.m.   **Panel #5**

Lieux de Mémoire: Negotiating Boundaries of Francophone Identity

Moderator: Anne-Lancaster Badders

1. "Exile and Identity in the Plays of Maryse Condé," *Melissa McKay (University of Georgia, Dept. of Romance Languages)*

2. "Personal and National Narrative in *Une vie de crabe* by Tanella Boni," *Laura K. Reeck (New York University, Dept. of French)*

10:45 a.m.   **Panel #6**

Representation and the Reconsideration of Identity

Moderator: Diane Duffrin

1. "Classical Aesthetics, Modern Ethics: Lacan, Kierkegaard, Sophocles, Anouilh," *Joseph Jenkins (UCLA, Comparative Literature Program)*

2. "The Stage of the Stage: Representation from Corneille to Diderot," *Ben Kolstad (UCLA, Comparative Literature Program)*

Open Discussion

Closing Statement
Markus Müller, UCLA