

NEW PARADIGMS OF FEMALE AGENCY IN SCIENCE FICTION BY MEXICAN WOMEN WRITERS

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Abstract: Even though science fiction (SF) in Mexico has been mostly the domain of male writers, Mexican women writers have utilized this genre to present innovative female identities fitting for a modern society deeply informed by and built on science and technology. In this article I analyze the representation of three icons of science fiction – the space explorer, the scientist and the post-human entity – in stories by six Mexican women authors to demonstrate how they have re-imagined them to create new paradigms of female agency appropriate for the contemporary world. Four tenets of theories of feminist science fiction will be applied in this literary analysis: interrogation, questioning of the traditional male>female power hierarchy, affirmation of fluid identities and subversion of traditional SF metaphors. These Mexican women writers are a significant corpus of innovative literary voices worthy of close critical attention and inclusion in the widening canon of the “Mexican Feminine Boom”.

Key Words: Mexican women writers, science fiction (SF), female agency, paradigm, feminist science fiction, space explorer, scientist, post-human entity

Even though since the 1960s Mexican women writers have made great strides into the male-dominated Lettered City, those writing science fiction (SF) are still usually not taken seriously by literary critics. In Mexico, SF is still a minor genre often considered, like in the rest of Latin America, “foreign or inauthentic” (Brown and Ginway 1). Female Mexican SF authors comprise a smaller but growing cohort in a field traditionally dominated by men since the eighteenth century.¹ Englantina Ochoa Sandoval was the first Mexican female writer of SF. Her story “Muerte tras la pantalla” (1959) offered a suspenseful tale replete with Cold War hysteria in the form of political assassinations and technologies used for nefarious purposes. A handful of other women wrote SF in the following two decades, but it was not until 1984 with the advent of the Premio Puebla de Ciencia Ficción [Puebla Science Fiction Prize] that a greater number of female writers took to the genre. In fact, this prize was the spark that initiated the present boom in Mexican SF. I have documented dozens of female Mexican authors of SF from 1959 to the present whose works altogether amount to more than two hundred short stories and at least a dozen novels. With the advent of the Internet in Mexico in the 1990s, online publications took off and at the present locating contemporary Mexican SF (by women and men) has been greatly facilitated thanks to blogs, e-books, fanzines and social media.

Science fiction, a protean genre premised “on the basis of some innovation in science or technology” (Amis 11), uniquely offers Mexican women authors a literary form through which to confront and explore the process of modernization as they question gender roles that traditionally confined them to the domestic sphere. In SF, female characters venture into domains that previously had been almost exclusively dominated by male figures: from the business office to a law firm to a spaceship speeding to a new planet. According to Sara Martín Alegre, the fight against patriarchy “requiere ficciones anti-patriarcales, entre las que la CF puede ocupar un lugar privilegiado dada su capacidad para imaginar alternativas utópicas feministas” (125). As I will demonstrate in this article, SF Mexican female writers present innovative visions of how women can dialogue with modernity through elements specific to the genre. Specifically, they have utilized the creative liberties of SF to construct new paradigms of female agency fitting for a modern society deeply informed by and built on the products of science and technology. In SF, heroines appropriate the most potent tools in the citadel of patriarchy: science and its practical applications into transformative technologies. Mexican women authors of SF forge forward-looking female identities informed by the discourse of scientific rationality. This is the case, for instance, of modern incarnations of Malinche and the biblical Magdalena, women rulers of an all-female planet, women freed from motherhood through technological advances and even female superheroes. Such SF paradigms of female agency serve to challenge “normative ideas of gender roles” and present “myriad ways in which [women] are constructed” (Lefanu 5).² In the stories to be studied in this essay women are no longer passive victims of modern technologies but, rather, active creators and manipulators of the same. Below I will demonstrate how female Mexican writers have taken three familiar SF icons – the space explorer, the scientist and the posthuman state of being – and creatively transformed them into valiant female identities far from conventional gender roles. These new paradigms of female agency based on technoscience provide insights into how Mexican women can creatively confront the slippery terrain of modernity.

I will analyze six SF stories by Mexican women authors.³ This selection brings together works that spans over five decades (1967-2018). They will be read through the theoretical lens of feminist science fiction which has its genesis in the 1970s when critics began studying more seriously the growing and distinct corpus of SF by U.S. and European women writers.⁴ This body of theory is premised on extrapolating feminist tenets from SF written by women. With its myriad icons and suggestive

1. Mexico’s (and Latin America’s) inaugural work of science fiction was Manuel Antonio de Rivas’s 1775 story titled “Syzigias y cuadraturas lunares [...]” in which a French man invents a flying machine and travels to the moon. In the nineteenth century there were only a handful of SF works produced in Mexico. In the twentieth century SF production steadily grew with a total of about 300 works by male authors in the second half of the century. For histories of Mexican SF see: *Los Confines: Crónica de la ciencia ficción mexicana* (1999), by Gabriel Trujillo Muñoz; *Expedición a la ciencia ficción mexicana* (2001), by Ramón López Castro; and *Territorios de la ciencia ficción mexicana (1984-2012): Por una poética y una política de lo insólito literario* (2022), by Margarita Remón Varela.

2. Mexican women writers of SF have a similar trajectory to that of their U.S. counterparts who “emerged in the postwar era as a product of both new cultural conditions for women authors and new narrative practices in the realm of SF itself” (Yaszek 6). However, U.S. women writers of SF are more numerous and varied: between 1926 and 1960 alone, 203 U.S. women authors published almost 1,000 stories in SF magazines (Davin 22). Since the 1960s the number of U.S. women writers of SF has grown almost exponentially.

3. Since most of the stories studied here are unknown to even scholars of Hispanic literature, there is some scholarship on only those by Blanca Mart and Gabriela Damián Miravete, the two best known authors of this cohort.

4. Central works of feminist science fiction include: Joanna Russ’s “Amor Vincit Foeminam: The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction” (1980), Sarah Lefanu’s *Feminism and Science Fiction* (1989), Marleen S. Barr’s *Lost in Space: Probing Feminist Science Fiction and Beyond* (1993), Robin Roberts’ *A New Species: Gender and Science in Science Fiction* (1993) and Patricia Melzer’s *Alien Constructions: Science Fiction and Feminist Thought* (2006).

figures with utopian possibilities (or not) SF is viewed by scholars of feminist science fiction as something more akin to critical and social theory and not simply as a literary text upon which theories are applied. The premise of feminist science fiction is that most SF written by men is not feminist due its tendency to objectify the female body and/or assign women to subservient roles⁵ In contrast, SF written by women will tend to be feminist by featuring non-traditional female protagonists who question patriarchal mandates. The works I analyze here are examples of feminist science fiction since they fulfill four tenets of this body of literary theory. First, akin to feminist rhetoric, SF is also “by its nature interrogative” (Lefanu 100): it questions the given status quo of everything, from the organization of society to how it may fall apart. Second, in feminist science fiction the central objects of interrogation are the supposed “dualities of masculine and feminine” (Roberts 90) and shifting them to “privilege the marginal over what is usually central [thus deconstructing] the binarisms of patriarchy” (90). Third, fundamental to feminist science fiction is the notion of “contested boundaries and definitions of bodies and cultural/social territories” (Melzer 4). Beyond gender politics, this body of theory also questions the very idea of fixed, static limitations to what one considers to be an independent entity. The concepts of “multiplicity”, “flexibility” and “fluid selves” (Melzer 16, emphasis in the original) are privileged. Finally, in feminist science fiction metaphors of this literary genre are utilized to “subvert [science fiction] from within” (Lefanu 95). For example, “space and time travel”, “parallel universes”, “contradictions co-existing”, “black holes and event horizons” (95) can all be utilized to articulate feminist perspectives in this genre. These and many other metaphors become powerful tools of interrogation of what one takes as a given in everyday earthly existence. These four principles of feminist science fiction – interrogation, inversion of traditional male>female hierarchies, questioning of conventional boundaries and subversion of SF metaphors – will be clearly discernable in the stories analyzed below.

Space Travel

Traveling into outer space and freeing oneself from the gravitational force of Earth is ripe with implications of individual freedom consummated far away from repressive societies. Space travel in SF takes one to close encounters with non-human civilizations and entities which challenge assumptions of reality or identity being univocal, just as stepping out of conventional roles and social expectations leads one to uncover new possibilities and paths in the road to self-discovery (hence, space travel can also symbolize inward journeys). Space travel in conventional SF often denotes adventure in the style of *Star Trek* or *Star Wars* strongly associated with testosterone-charged masculinity. Two Mexican SF novels premised on space travel are *Dr. Atl's Un hombre más allá del universo* (1935) and Carlos Olvera's *Mejicanos en el espacio* (1968).⁶ Even though they have many literary merits, the space explorers in these novels are still males who pursue other-worldly adventures. In contrast, as we will see below, María Elvira Bermúdez subverts this central SF convention by introducing the first female astronauts in Mexican SF who leave Earth in search of new destinies and identities. They embody what Lefanu terms as “travelling heroism” (27) in which SF women protagonists travel “through time and space” (27) and “find freedom from a dominant and constricting order” (32). The socio-historical backdrop for the earliest stories on space travel by Mexican women writers are the 1960s and 1970s when women were rapidly modernizing in this country. More than half of Mexican women lived in urban areas and 27% worked in commerce and 16% in manufacturing, signaling growing opportunities in a robust economy to study and enter the professions once dominated by men (Tuñón Robles 108). As a prelude to the revolutionary 1960s, in 1958 Mexican women voted for the first time in a presidential election. Also, Mexico was not exempt from worldwide movements and protests for social justice during this period, culminating tragically in the government-mandated

5. In most SF by Mexican male writers women are sexually objectified and granted limited (if any) true agency. Well-known examples include: *Eugenia* (1919), by Eduardo Urzáiz; *Mejicanos en el espacio* (1968), by Carlos Olvera; *La primera calle de la soledad* (1993), by Gerardo Horacio Porcayo; and *Gel azul* (2009), by Bernardo Fernández. However, there are notable exceptions of female protagonists in SF by a few male authors, such as “Árbol de vida” (1981), by Edmundo Domínguez Aragonés and “Nanograffiti” (2001), by Federico Schaffler.

6. ‘See my article “Rebellious Youth vs. Empire in Carlos Olvera’s *Mejicanos en el espacio*”, *Chasqui*, Vol. 48. No. 1, May 2019, pp. 150-165.

killing of peaceful protestors in downtown Mexico City on October 2, 1968.⁷ Finally, the race to the moon between the two Cold War enemies, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R, during the same decade was closely watched by the whole world including Mexico and was further inspiration for writers of SF. Hence, in a time of rapid social changes, Mexican women authors of SF writing tales of space travel can be interpreted as a metaphor of breaking free from the mundane domestic sphere to explore new identities in the university classroom, the workforce and beyond.

María Elvira Bermúdez's short story "Los centauros de Denébola" (1967)⁸ features two modern women travelling into outer space: WNadja is a biologist and ZDoris a historian. They are equal in rank and knowledge to the four male members of their crew. These women do not simply take orders from men but, rather, work side by side with them. Significantly, when they land on the star Denébola, it is WNadja who takes the first step onto the surface and not the male Captain HLórens – an emblematic act underscoring her pioneer woman status. These female explorers distinguish themselves by rebuffing male attempts to colonize this new world and subjugate its inhabitants. Thus, they oppose the patriarchal notion that space exploration should be an extension of human colonialism in which extraterrestrials "must be dominated [since they] menace the human ability to survive" (Kerslake 19). In their attempt to preserve the natural environment, WNadja and ZDoris practice ecofeminism which "insists that the *interdependence of all things* is a constitutive reality of the universe" (Ress, emphasis in the original 1). ZDoris counters male imperial discourse by befriending a manatee while WNadja insists that their first task to find the intelligent beings that govern the star in order to dialogue with them. The natives turn out to be a race of magnificent centaurs. When they suddenly appear, they speak through incomprehensible musical tones and then gallop off wordlessly leaving the space travelers astonished. Through historical records in the spaceship computer they learn these centaurs long ago rid their society of machines, laws and religious creeds in order to return to a state of natural freedom. Eugenics and birth control are enforced to maintain a healthy population in which having multiple partners is permitted and both female and male centaurs can become rulers of the tribe. They prioritize artistic creativity over scientific logic and their preferred pastimes are music and art. During the search for the centaurs, KVitor and WNadja affirm their mutual love, but the centaur king orders them to leave Denebola under the threat of being turned into centaurs or even exterminated. However, they decide to assimilate into this extraterrestrial society while their fellow humans return to Earth.

It may seem ironic that WNadja, a modern educated woman, traveled so far from Earth only to end up embracing a pre-modern centaur society. However, the author's focus is on the centaurs' philosophy of "amor indomitable a la vida y a la libertad" (68) and not on conformist allegiance to modern technoscience. In fact, Bermúdez critiques the excesses of scientific advances which, in the case of the centaurs, resulted in a society where "el arte se deshumanizó y la política tomó por peligrosos derroteros" (67). By portraying a centaur society as the extraterrestrial utopian ideal, Bermúdez reaches far back to Greek mythology at the dawn of Western civilization and juxtaposes it with modern technologized societies to hold up the former as the preferred ideal. The centaurs constitute an amalgamation of humans and animals, an apt metaphor for intelligent, artistic beings who fiercely guard their untamable, animal liberty. These are not cyborgs, "a self-regulating man-machine system [...] fusion of organic and mechanical parts" (Cavallaro 45), a vivid example of what could be an insidious invasion of modern technologies into human bodies. Rather, centaurs are naturally evolved human-animals who prize a return to individual freedom. This society is an example of SF utopia premised on acceptance of positive "radical difference, radical otherness" (Jameson xii). Even though

7. Two important leaders of that protest were actually women: Ignacia Rodríguez, la Nacha, and Roberta Avendaño, la Tita (Cano 53-54).

8. Bermúdez published this story under the male pseudonym Raúl Weil, most probably ceding to the assumption at the time that women did not write science fiction.

through advanced rocket technology WNadja discovered this centaur society, she turns her back on male-initiated scientific enterprises which often lead to the destruction of the environment and violent colonization of other nations and planets. Also, in this extraterrestrial society she will have equal voice as a woman and the opportunity to eventually become the leader. This travelling heroine will have more liberty on Denebola to evolve her identity than she did back on Earth. As an example of feminist SF, in this story the male over female status quo is interrogated and the metaphor of space travel is subverted to include a female protagonist who will continue to evolve and has the potential to discover multiple fluid identities.

Two other stories with space travelling heroines from the same period are worth mentioning: Bermúdez's "Hespéride" (1968) and Marcela del Río's "Venus" (1972). In the first story female independence is represented by a woman astronaut who pilots a spaceship to Mars by herself, leaving behind her husband and a repressive home planet to spend long hours in space writing, reading and reflecting on art and philosophy. In outer space she discovers a private room of her own far away from earthly commitments, annoyances and distractions. The latter story also features a lone travelling heroine who leaves Earth in search of a more liberating extraterrestrial society. A disappointing love affair on Venus only propels her to continue exploring the universe instead of returning to the safety of her familiar but repressive planet. In spite of the explicit space age technologies embraced by travelling heroines in the aforementioned stories, intimate relationships with the opposite sex are still central. This could be interpreted as a reflection of the social transition towards a more progressive Mexican society in which women were expected to continue tending to duties at home as they entered the ranks of the professional workforce. As Susie S. Porter observes about mid-twentieth century changing female gender roles in Mexico, "Sociologists and journalists simultaneously celebrated modernity and fretted about the impact of women's growing workforce participation on the fabric of Mexican family and society" (199).

By the 1980s, with the opening up of the Mexican economy to foreign investments through nascent neoliberal policies, coupled with the continuing expansion of professional and educational opportunities for women, the space travelling heroine becomes more complex in character and motivations. Blanca Mart,⁹ one of the most important Mexican writers of SF, often writes stories and novels based on space travel. Lilia Granillo Vázquez and Isai Mejía Villareal observe that in Mart's SF works "La ciencia, la libertad individual y la imaginación se confabulan para insistir en el respeto a los seres diferentes" (6). In the twenty-first century Mart has continued to develop the figure of the female space explorer through her protagonist Whissita Lena Reed. She appears in a number of short stories as well as the novel *A la sombra de mercurio* (1996). Prizing her independence, Whissita lives by herself on another planet in a house overflowing with books. She is also a xenophile who studies cultures from all over the universe. As a student of the history of war her goal is to find pacific means of co-existence with all sentient beings. For example, in "La Guerra de Puerto Space" (2018) Whissita's antiwar nature is evident when she is held prisoner by the Arkudes. Instead of attempting to fight them with violent weapons, she concocts a potion that allows her to make peace her captors and form a new alliance.

Whissita's best friend is Al Braker, a space adventurer who peddles his piloting services to practically anyone regardless of motives. Braker's gruff nature and womanizing ways would seem to make him an odd companion for Whissita, but they are good friends who look out for each other. Even though they have occasional romantic trysts, she keeps her physical and emotional distance and is always on equal footing with him. When Braker is overtly flirtatious and proposes marriage, she deftly ignores him since she has no interest in formal commitments. However,

9. Although originally from Barcelona, Spain, Mart lived for almost thirty years in Mexico until 2014 and considers herself "catalana-mexicana puesto que nací en Barcelona pero prácticamente toda mi obra se ha realizado en México [...]". (personal email, February 18, 2019). Many of her major works of SF were written and published in Mexico. Originally publishing as Blanca Martínez, starting in 2006 her pen name changed to Blanca Mart. For the sake of consistency, I use only Mart in this article.

she also subtly caters to his inflated male ego to win over his help in difficult missions. For example, in "La libélula" (2003) she recruits his assistance to travel to Venus and bring back water from its fountains of youth. Since only she has a visa for Venus, they have to get married for him to accompany her. However, Whissita sees this arrangement as strictly business and warns Braker: "Tengo que aclarar que nos casamos realmente, dejando, desde luego, con la persona adecuada, firmados los documentos para nuestro inmediato divorcio en cuanto volviéramos de nuestro viaje" (31-32). Whissita jealously guards her independence through clear-eyed pragmatism.

Nevertheless, in "Fin de semana en Agar-II" (1998) Mart critiques the extremes to which ideals of sexual equality may be taken. Fed up with Braker's chauvinism, Whissita flies off to Agar-II where complete equality between sexes and races has supposedly been achieved. This would-be utopia is, in fact, a dystopian disappointment. When Whissita is assaulted and almost raped upon entering the city, she tries to file a complaint and is told that even though three people attacked her, since they were all skinny, they really only add up to one person, and therefore the attack was legitimate. Other seemingly absurd rules include the following: people in the same profession can attack each other regardless of physical advantages or disadvantages while those in different professions cannot attack each other; no assistance can be given to anyone in a fight; and women and men are always considered equal in fights. Seeking a peaceful society, Whissita instead finds one ruled by illogical rules resulting in violence. On her way out of the city when she complains to a taxi driver, he attacks her, but she easily subdues him revealing her warrior side. Through this tongue-in-cheek story, Mart posits her space travelling heroine as a complex modern woman who, while seeking pacific resolutions, does not hesitate to use violence when necessary. Even as she maintains her independence and considers herself equal to all men in intellectual prowess, she does not consider her occasional romantic affairs with Braker as sexual submission but, rather, as acts of liberation. Robin Roberts states feminist science fiction challenges "the genre's misogynistic bias by subverting science fiction tropes" (92), and this is the case with Whissita who always has the upper hand with Braker. In fact, it is Braker who is dependent on her in his constant longing to track her down in different parts of the universe. In "Puerto Pirata" (2010), for example, when he is returning from a precarious adventure in which he had to kill an exact clone of Whissita, he grows melancholy at the thought of life without Whissita. Braker still clings to traditional notions of human coupling, like one afraid to leave the Earth's gravitational field, while Whissita, though appreciative of him, has traveled much further to many corners of the universe. No doubt, Whissita too is a space travelling heroine whose fearless tenacity propels her to have close encounters with all kinds of entities in the universe while at the same time she satiates her intellectual curiosity through studious reading, another form of deep travel. Lefanu affirms that "feminism demands [...] our acceptance of a relativistic social order" (100), and this is evident in stories by Mart featuring Whissita Lena Reed where the conventional hierarchy of male>female is deconstructed, identities become fluid and traditional gender roles are interrogated. All these characteristics of the space explorer constitute a new paradigm of female agency expressing liberation from restricting traditions and social expectations on Earth as modern women seek out dynamic identities in a technologized society.

The Female Scientist

With the exception of Mart's stories and novels, female space explorers do not appear frequently in SF by Mexican women from the 1980s onwards. By the end of the twentieth century more complex paradigms of female agency begin appearing in post-human forms, such as cyborgs, androids and even holograms. The figure of the female

scientist serves as an intermediary figure between the fully human, seen above with the space explorer, and variations of the post-human, the focus of the final section of this article. Nevertheless, in the earliest example of scientists in SF by a Mexican woman writer they are still male and non-Mexican: in Englantina Ochoa Sandoval's "Breve reseña histórica" (1961) U.S. geneticists fail in their attempt to create human eggs with no traces of non-white genes. The German male scientist in Marcela Del Río's *Proceso a Faubritten* (1976) seems to harbor nobler intentions by inventing a device to grant immortality to all humans although the consequences are disastrous.¹⁰ These pioneering female authors of Mexican SF still follow the typical SF icon of the Euro-U.S. mad scientist who exhibits "symptoms of social maladjustment [and is] obsessive and antisocial" (Stableford 1076) and takes scientific experiments to the extreme of endangering human life. In contrast, the first female scientist in Mexican SF is the biologist WNadja in María Elvira Bermúdez's story "Los centauros de Denóbola" (1967) who, as explained earlier, does not utilize scientific knowledge to pervert natural processes vis-a-vis male colonial enterprises but, rather, to live in harmony with nature. From the start female scientists in SF by Mexican women writers defy male scientific practices.

The woman scientist as a new paradigm of female agency in Mexican SF is especially important as an aspirational role model since in present-day Mexico female scientists continue to be a minority in a field of academic inquiry still populated mostly by men.¹¹ By granting presence, voice and active agency to female scientists, Mexican women authors of SF help normalize this possibility for all women in reality. As Jane Donawerth observes, "our culture defines science as a masculine endeavor" (1), and therefore "women scientists are the necessary first step of imagining women as subjects of science, not as its objects" (7). When women authors of SF introduce female scientists, they subvert a fundamental SF icon and subsequently create feminist science fiction. The female scientist in SF is more than just a lofty literary metaphor since she embodies a credible professional possibility for women in Mexico. Mexican women writers defy the conventional image of the male scientist by constructing female equivalents, subsequently demolishing the assumed male over female hierarchy of scientific knowledge. In the following two stories we will witness how female scientists go beyond practicing known sciences to invent new technologies that affirm female agency.

In Martha Camacho's story "Cybergolem" (2002) a female scientist in the twenty-third century is the progenitor of history-shifting technology. Edith Lozaces, a renowned Mars-born neurosurgeon, embarks on unexplored bioengineering territory to evolve the human brain in a positive direction for the benefit of humanity. Her singular invention, the cybergolem electronic chip, keeps in check lower, reptilian, instinctual thoughts and actions, such as "la agresividad, de la territorialidad, del salvajismo" (93). These chips are only inserted into the brains of people truly dedicated to preserving the best of the human species such as doctors, artists, scientists and various religious leaders. Over time, this clever invention greatly contributes to the civilizing process of many societies on Earth. In order to ensure the permanence of this social progress cybergolem chips gradually dissolve to become one with the human bodies in which they are inserted. Subsequently, these improved human beings are not simple cyborgs but, rather, electronically reprogrammed human beings.

It turns out, only men have cybergolem chips planted in their bodies since Edith's ulterior goal is to eliminate male aggression, "a behavior which is directed towards inducing a detrimental effect of a partner or oneself" (Angst 43). This female scientist realizes that throughout history it is men, and not women, who have initiated and perpetuated destruction and needless death. As she states, for men even "la mínima negociación familiar requiere agresión ritual" (93). Through a scientific

10. See my article "A Failed Utopia in Marcela del Río's *Proceso a Faubritten*", *Hispania*, Vol. 97, No. 1, 2014, pp. 125-139.

11. As Elsa S. Guevara Ruiseñor notes, well into the twenty-first century women make up only 34.8% of students in science and technology careers in Mexico (28). She advocates for greater participation of women in the sciences since they bring new perspectives on "modos de conocimiento y propuestas en la construcción de nuevos paradigmas científicos" (23).

approach to the problem, Edith concludes that male aggression is simply a flaw, like a defective machine part, that can be repaired to ensure reliable functioning. True to feminist SF, here an important convention is interrogated and re-imagined: the destructive male mad scientist is replaced by a Nobel Peace Prize-winning female scientist whose invention evolves human civilization into a more harmonious society free of male aggression.

Significantly, this story is not recounted in first person by Edith, a narrative strategy which would ostensibly grant her agency, but, rather, by a certain Aaron Emet who accompanies her as she carries out one of her famous cybergolem chip surgeries. Afterwards Edith leads Aaron through a portrait gallery of famous humans implanted with this chip, and the final one turns out to be his father, Aaron Emet Llianne, the governor of Earth. Stunned by the discovery of his less-than human paternity, Aaron's vain admiration of his unnaturally perfected body is shattered since he realizes he is not a unique biological entity but, rather, the object of an experiment in improving the male species. Similar to the robot-like Golem of Jewish folklore mentioned by Edith, Aaron has no choice but to slavishly follow the orders of his master, Edith, and be anti-aggressive to ensure peace on Earth. As Marleen S. Barr states, feminist SF "is at once a stop sign in relation to patriarchy and a go-ahead signal for women" (10). Edith will halt aggressive male domination and destruction of human civilization (as well as all other life on Earth) with her cybergolem chip.

In Gabriela Damián Miravete's story "Soñarán en el jardín" (2015)¹² the female scientist also attempts to ensure a more peaceful future society, but her strategy deals with the preservation of historical memory of past crimes directed at women: femicide, "the killing of females by males because they are females" (Russell 13). Hence, this story addresses a sadly current social ill in Mexico where thousands of women have been murdered and/or disappeared.¹³ Damián Miravete's story takes place in a utopic future when femicide has become a crime of the recent past. Marisela, the female scientist, was a child victim of sexual abuse and her friend Paquita was raped and murdered, so femicide is not an abstract concept for her. She joins a women's collective and they teach each other self-defense techniques and speak out publicly against femicide. Even while facing violent retribution and death for their actions, these brave women demand solutions instead of cowering in fear. Marisela's interest in the sciences leads her to study electronic engineering and she invents an ingenious new way to preserve the historical memory of femicide by creating holograms of victims by

utilizando testimonios y materiales proporcionados por sus familiares, amigos y, sobre todo, la información recuperada de sus cuentas personales de correo electrónico y redes sociales: fotografías, videos, cartas, conversaciones [...] para recrear de la forma más precisa sus voces, sus movimientos, sus reacciones; para, de alguna forma, *traerlas de nuevo a la vida*. (127-128, emphasis in the original)

Through a long trail of digital footprints Marisela holographically re-assembles dead women as "living" entities.

These machine-generated holograms are placed in a peaceful seaside sanctuary full of lush trees, plants, fruits, birds and butterflies that is open to the public. The holograms are a pedagogical improvement over one-dimensional photography since through life-like three-dimensional singular holograms, visitors can hear direct testimony from these re-materialized dead women. One named Rubí Marisol talks with a boy named Tomás and answers his innocent questions about why she does not have a physical body. When he guesses she may have been murdered because she did something wrong, she corrects him saying she was not at fault. And when he asks if her mother could cure her, she

12. 2018 winner of the Otherwise Award (formerly James Tiptree Literary Award) for science fiction and fantasy literature that "expands or explores our understanding of gender" (otherwiseaward.org). To date, Gabriela Damián Miravete is the only Hispanic writer recipient of this important award.

13. According to the United Nations, in 2016 an average of seven women were killed every day in Mexico ("The Long Road").

poignantly replies, “Cuando te matan, ya no te pueden curar” (126). Tomás is moved to hug Rubí but only feels electric sparks in the airy space this “silueta” (117) occupies. Tomás, whose biblical name is suggestive of a doubter, will leave this garden with unforgettable knowledge of the crime of femicide. More importantly, as a male, Tomás will learn to treat women as human beings who deserve respect. As David S. Dalton notes, these holograms “provide the inoculation that children – particularly boys – must metaphorically ingest in order to overcome their destructive tendencies” (148). This garden is not an entertainment park populated by amusing clowns and people dressed up in animal suits but, rather, materialized vestiges of women brutally murdered whose purpose is to be a “espacio didáctico” (129) which all school children are mandated by the state to visit so that history is not repeated.

In her role as a female scientist, Marisela is an active agent for an important social cause close to her heart and informed by personal experiences. Instead of simply utilizing her deep knowledge of electronic processes to create commercial products for mass entertainment, she applies it to a more transcendental social cause – the perpetuation of the collective memory of femicide. The fact that these femicide victims are forever frozen as holograms movingly dramatizes how the potential of their lives was truncated. Nevertheless, precisely because they cannot evolve, they are caught in a limbo between life and death, visible and yet not material, and therefore, ironically, newly victimized in what is effectively a prison – albeit, beautiful and peaceful. They have lost agency in both life and death. These shadowy figures, as the title suggests, can only dream about a future that never materialized. As Jean Baudrillard observes, holograms represent “the fantasy of seizing reality live [although] it is the imaginary aura of the double that is mercilessly tracked” (105). These holograms are, of course, not themselves the victims of femicide. They are not even their double or a clone since holograms are “already on the other side of the truth” (108). Marisela is also aware of the limits of holographic replications since “la vida es una trama única, un hilo dentro del gran tapiz, y si se rompe, no será el mismo hilo el que lo reemplace” (129). In fact, some of the relatives of the victims are not happy with their reconstructed daughters’ holograms and refuse to return to this sanctuary. At the end of each day Marisela turns off the machinery and whispers “Descansen, niñas mías” (134), even though she knows these silhouettes will not rest in peace for eternity since the following morning she will have to re-constitute them holographically to, once again, carry out their didactic chores. Scott Bukatman notes that in “science fiction the death of the subject is continually acted out in a form that yields a rebirth on another plane, producing strengthened continuity” (281). Even though in this story these victims do not experience evolution into a new enlightened state of being, their ghostly holographic presence will serve as a reminder of past atrocities against women. This is a type of feminist science fiction that, as Barr notes, presents “a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the patriarchal one we know, yet returns to confront that known patriarchal world in some cognitive way” (11). Here the author confronts the national trauma of femicide in Mexico and presents a memorable way in which this historical crime can be mediated through technology.

The Posthuman State

The holograms in the previous story are suggestive of the posthuman state, the third new paradigm of female agency in Mexican SF written by women. According to N. Katherine Hayles, the posthuman state is achieved when technology “has become so entwined with the

production of identity that it can no longer meaningfully be separated from the human subject" (xiii). Rosi Braidotti further defines the posthuman state as one consisting of "a qualitative leap into transversal notions of mixed assemblages, hybrid perspectives and unprogrammed techno-evolutions" (153). Although becoming posthuman may seem like a negative consequence of a highly technologized world, these virtual spaces and fluid identities offer new possibilities of restructured selves in a realm free from oppressive master narratives limiting the functions of cisgender bodies. To extrapolate from Donna J. Haraway's observations on the cyborg, the posthuman body also no longer marks "time on an oedipal calendar, attempting to heal the terrible cleavages of gender in an oral symbiotic utopia or post-oedipal apocalypse" (150). In fact, this new state of being ushers in a "post-gender world" (150). In the following stories the protagonists are still described as female in a cisgender sense although they clearly challenge traditional assumptions about gender through their deep interactions with technology, and thus progress towards a state of being that may be termed post-woman. Subsequently, as per feminist science fiction, "notions of essentialism" are deconstructed from a "relativistic position" (Lefanu 94) as rigid definitions of gender are collapsed.

The unnamed protagonist in Gina Arrambide's story "Danza" (1994) is a genetic engineer, a profession suggestive of radical changes to the physical body. Unlike the female scientists in the previous two stories, the object of experimentation in this narrative is the scientist's own body. She defies the physical parameters of a cisgender woman's body and interrogates the male>female hierarchy by embracing multiple identities. As a child, she stayed at home and pored over encyclopedias while her friends flocked to piñata parties. Her budding sense of identity is marked by difference. At school her outstanding intellectual aptitude makes her a victim of constant teasing by her schoolmates, but this only hardened her resolve to achieve the goal of becoming a genetic engineer. Later even in the professional realm her obsessive work ethic does not earn her respect or admiration but, rather, the mocking moniker "La científica loca" (160), which only provokes her to go even further in scientific experiments. As a lonely young scientist, she is haunted by nightmares of dismembered entities, DNA molecules crawling all over her and a mysterious sinister bug-eyed man who penetrates her abdomen with his bony arm revealing her bloody innards. One day she awakes to find a mysterious scar on her abdomen. When she arrives at her office, she discovers blood stains on the floor and everything is covered in dust as if abandoned. Overcome by cold shivers she feels paralyzed and the man from her nightmare reappears and plunges his arm into her abdomen, but this time she fights back, and the story ends in suspense.

This murderous man can represent the male enterprise of technoscience which attempts to eliminate her for daring to trespass into forbidden territory. After all, "modern science and technology served as means of [the] domination [of women] and not their liberation" (Rose 57). Thus, this female protagonist has to eliminate him in order to become a scientist herself so that her distinctive female self may flourish. As Jenny Wolmark observes, feminist science fiction alters "the focus of the narratives to reveal the equally embedded nature of the power relations within which the subject is constructed and which define the relations between self and other" (55). In order to overcome the edifice of male hegemonic power, this female scientist has to evolve into a new entity. Significantly, when the monstrous man plunges his arm into her abdomen, an action suggestive of sexual violation, she does not scream in pain but, rather, observes coolly as "Un líquido verdoso escapa por la herida" (164). Her body is no longer sustained by human blood but a non-human substance indicative of her transformation into a new entity as she sheds her female body. The green liquid underscores her state of estrangement from normative female expectations and she

comes to the realization that “Tal vez su verdadero lugar se encuentre lejos de este planeta [...] Su mente viaja lejos de su cuerpo” (165). Her evolution into a new as yet undefined entity may be viewed as a species of alien, and as Roberts declares, “the triumph of the female alien is the triumph of a feminist vision of the world” (92). Her alienation from normative social expectations for women is an affirmation of her more authentic identity into which she is transforming.

In the final scene when she fights back by plunging her arm into the monstrous man’s abdomen, he shape-shifts into her friend’s mother and they stick their fingers into each other’s eyes in an act of mutual blinding. Hence, the female protagonist comes face to face with her second antagonist in life (after the male scientist) – the self-sacrificing mother figure who, according to Rosario Castellanos, “se ha desarraigado el egoísmo [y] se desvive por la prole” (16). But this modern Mexican woman will not acquiesce to female gender role limitations: by blinding this mother figure, she vanquishes the oppressive female gaze that limited her autonomy. Losing her own sight may seem debilitating but it could portend the opposite: her familiar but oppressive reality has been eliminated in the process of forging a new one in which her truer nascent identity can begin to find form – whether it be as a transformed woman or as a completely different entity. As she realizes in the end, “esa vida superficial no es para mí. Pertenezco a otro mundo muy diferente” (165). The implication is that birth-assigned gender – female and male – are in fact porous and unstable. The “dance” referenced in the story title is suggestive of the push-and-pull between the old and the new in the genesis of the protagonist’s still inchoate identity forged through genetic experiments on her body. Unlike the space explorers in the earlier stories, this protagonist does not need to launch herself into outer space in search of a new identity on faraway planets and civilizations. Rather, she discovers new intellectual and physiological territories right here on earth through her daring experiments on the very fabric of life. Her intentions are, in fact, to alter a body in which she has never felt comfortable. As Patricia Melzer affirms, the new transformations of the female body in feminist science fiction “constitute elements of political empowerment and resistance” (13). In this story the female protagonist’s interaction with technoscience has not only led her to a posthuman state but beyond to eventually becoming a post-woman.

In contrast, in “Caza medieval” (1994), by Claudia Argelia González Araujo, the posthuman condition is not present in physical form but, rather, as virtual reality in which humans interact through avatars. Citta, the protagonist, lives alone in her family’s large home and her favorite pastime is playing “second life” games online in search of companionship. As “Princesa” she befriends “Unicornio”, whose real name is apparently Aldo. They agree to meet up in the downtown square as real people in real time, but this turns out to be impossible since both are immersed in different dimensions of virtual reality and can only meet via their fictional characters. When Citta goes out to meet Unicornio she is given flowers by an old man who is actually Aldo as another avatar. When he tries to assault her at home she kills him. The final twist in this intriguing tale is that Citta – whose real name is Ingrid Moreno – had been creating all the avatars in a drug-induced state. Thus, computer-generated virtual reality blends with hallucinations in which she is actually in control of all the characters.

Written at the dawn of the Internet Age in the 1990s, this story describes a twenty-first century society in which online identities are truly second nature and women can freely explore alternative selves through the many tools of virtual reality. Citta represents a woman on the threshold between a past informed by heroic but patriarchal master narratives and a present in which each individual tells her/his

own stories through multiple but ephemeral and fragmented identities. As a student of medieval literature, Citta looks backward in historical time as she assembles fragments of a literary document in an attempt to reconstruct a past that quickly dissipates “como la niebla en un amanecer gélido” (122). The walls in the family home are crowded with portraits of her parents, grandparents and other members representing links to a past when people still believed in the “myth of original unity, fullness, bliss and terror” (Haraway 151). While in a bygone era families represented community, the present is populated with loners like Citta with few ancestral ties who wander the many electronic alleys of the “*Worldnet*” (126, emphasis in the original). However, her Princess avatar is hardly innocent or a virgin in need of a unicorn to protect her since, as a savvy explorer and creator of virtual realities and entities, she creates Unicornio only to turn around and exterminate him. This Princess is not a damsel in distress, like in conventional fairy tales. Manuel Castells states that in the Internet those who do the “*interacting* and [those] who are the *interacted* [upon] in the new system [...] largely frames the system of domination and the processes of liberation in the informational society” (374 emphasis in the original). In Citta’s case, however, she is doing both the interacting and the being interacted upon by creating all avatars. She is both the subject and object of her own narrative and thus wields the power to generate and destroy virtual entities at will. As Barr notes, feminist science fiction “presents blueprints for social structures that allow women’s words to counter patriarchal myths” (7). Citta defies patriarchal myths about men always needing to rescue “damsels in distress” while women passively look on in admiration. Here the princess’s agency propels her to do away with her mythological guardian, the unicorn. In this brave new posthuman world of electronic identities as fleeting as blips on a computer screen, women too can navigate unexplored territories under empowering varieties of dynamic guises to evolve into post-women.

Conclusion

Natalia Álvarez states that in fiction by contemporary Mexican women authors “se pone fin a la imagen simplista y dialéctica entre mujer buena y mujer mala, creando figuras ricas en matices y que se muestran comprometidas, libres, creativas, inteligentes, lúcidas, fuertes y prácticas” (90). This is also the case of those writing SF who have taken advantage of this genre’s artistic license by transforming its familiar icons, such as the space explorer, the scientist and posthuman entities, into innovative paradigms of female agency that take us beyond historical and clichéd images of Mexican women in the public imaginary. In these stories we witness female characters who, unlike in conventional SF, are not “passive and involuntary” (Russ, “The Image” 83). These models of female agency are innovative in the context of a national literature which, in spite of its admirable leaps into modernity, is still stubbornly realistic in its many modes (although there is a rich tradition of Mexican fantastic literature that should not be conflated with SF). In contrast, these female authors of science fiction situate their heroines in completely new spaces and contexts – another planet, in dialogue with extraterrestrials, a science laboratory, etc.– and trace post-women destinies for them beyond the gravitational forces of cisgender restraints and officialized genres. In reference to Mexican SF by male authors, Margarita Remón Varela points out its frequently pessimistic tone: “no se libra de la problemática identitaria ni del nacionalismo cultural engendrado por el proyecto revolucionario” (57). However, this is not the case in SF by women writers who are overwhelmingly affirmative regarding the benefits of technoscience, although never sanguine, in their portrayals of modern Mexican women confidently evolving towards new more nuanced identities through technological interventions. They exemplify women with strong agency who shatter “los modelos que la Sociedad [les] propone y [les] impone para alcanzar su imagen auténtica y consumarse – y

y consumirse – en ella” (Castellanos 19). As I have established above, these stories are clearly feminist science fiction whose tenets include: interrogation, inversion of traditional male>female hierarchies, questioning of conventional boundaries and subversion of SF metaphors. Mexican women authors of science fiction represent a significant corpus of innovative female literary voices worthy of critical attention and inclusion in the widening canon of the Mexican feminine Boom, a positive outcome of “a globalised [sic], modernized cultural environment that has seen rapid change in all areas of women’s lives” (Finnegan and Lavery 1). In fact, I would venture to state that the corpus of female science fiction writers represents the most noteworthy and inventive development of this genre in its contemporary permutations in Mexico.

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