Body Parts: Twentieth-Century Science Fiction Short Stories by Women

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TWENTIETH-CENTURY SCIENCE FICTION SHORT STORIES BY women are full of body parts.¹ These texts feature removable legs and arms, missing body pieces, interchangeable blood and organs, prosthetic substitutes. I examine the short story because it was the primary form for science fiction from its beginnings in the 1920s until the 1950s development of the paperback market, and it remains an important form. To theorize the bodies these women disassemble in their stories, I draw on a variety of feminist theorists, especially feminist science theorists. Linda Nicholson has argued that we will never stop essentializing women unless we situate them historically, especially in the sense of historical conceptions of gender. In a feminist commentary on science, Patricia Hill Collins has further advocated an analysis that depends on “intersectionality,” that examines the intersection of science, gender, race, ethnicity—all in their historical moments. So, rather than universalize the trope, I look at body parts in particular historical contexts in these science fiction stories.

In her study of dirt and ritual cleansing, the anthropologist Mary Douglas remarks, “The body is a model that can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious” (115). In these short fictions by women, body parts and the body as model stand always for at least two other systems: science and gender. During the last century, science tangibly marked the bodies of human beings—through vaccinations, orthodontic appliances, C-sections, prostheses, replacement parts, and cosmetic surgery. Women writers responded by adapting stories about body parts to express social anxieties about scientific development. These anxieties often intersected with those concerning identity.²

In one of the earliest science fiction short stories published by a woman, Clare Winger Harris’s “The Artificial Man” (1929), George

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Gregory, who has just lost a leg in an accident, is reassured by his fiancée, Rosalind Nelson, that “the loss of a bodily member doesn’t alter your identity.” George isn’t so sure. “Losing part of my body has made me lose part of my soul,” he says; “I’m not what I was” (79). Thus Harris signals that we are to see George’s body as symbolic of his identity. When George recovers and announces his acquisition of an artificial leg, Rosalind voices the anxiety in the 1920s about this scientific development: “I’d rather see you walking with the visible aid of a crutch than to think of your using an artificial leg. Somehow it seems like hypocrisy” (80). After another accident, George further acquires an artificial arm and an artificial kidney. The artificial kidney proclaims Harris’s story science fiction, for in the 1920s scientists were just beginning to experiment with artificial kidneys in animals.

From this point on, George embarks on an obsessive quest to refashion himself through science by replacing as many of his body parts as he can: he is his own “self-made Frankenstein” and becomes his own monster. He asks his friend Dr. David Bell to help him “find out how much of this mortal coil [he] can shuffle off and still maintain [his] personal identity.” When David refuses, George finds, significantly in 1929, “a German surgeon” to help him have “as much of my body as can be removed and substituted by artificial parts.” Although he dies disavowing his experiment—the moral is that George’s mind, not his body, caused his disintegration—nevertheless, the cultural anxiety about prostheses is still registered in Rosalind’s responses. When George places his “cunningly wrought” arm around her, she shudders (80–82).

This early short story by a woman is thus centered on science and its social effects. The 1920s was the first decade in which prostheses were widely used—a consequence of the destructive trench warfare in World War I and the resulting pressure on science to develop effective replacement body parts. During the war, a variety of metal alloys replaced wood for use in more sophisticated prostheses. Rosalind approves of crutches but judges the more advanced movable metal prostheses unnatural. The story registers the ambivalent social response: astonishment at the scientific achievement, dismay at the social consequences, fear of the effects on human identity.

The story also registers anxiety about gender. In Harris’s “The Artificial Man,” George is marked as manly in several ways: he is captain of a football team, head of a debating team, and a “dominating” personality (79). David is also marked as manly: he is a doctor (a profession that excluded women in the 1920s), and he bests George and rescues Rosalind. They are both also men of science: David, a doctor, is a product of modern science as surely as George, who has had a dozen surgeries and is made up of scientifically designed, replaceable parts. Their antagonism, with Rosalind in the middle, expresses anxieties about the effects of science on men and manliness. To revenge himself on David, George dismantles and dismembers himself with triumph, taking off both legs and one arm and revealing that he has replaced most of his internal organs (82). Harris uses these body parts to suggest that science may make men—not people, men—inhuman: George has lost not only his leg but also his heart. In the front-page illustration for the story in the pulp magazine, the bond between the men is symbolized by George’s offering David his arm, which he first unscrews. Scott Bukatman suggests, “The body has long been the repressed content of science fiction, as the genre obsessively substitutes the rational for the corporeal, and the technological for the organic” (19). In her short story, Harris pits these purposes against each other in the figures of David, the doctor who substitutes the rational for the corporeal, thereby aiding humanity’s search to overcome death, and of George, who substitutes the technological for the organic, thereby perverting—in Harris’s story—humanity’s quest.3

Kathleen Ludwick’s “Dr. Immortelle” (1930) also explores human identity through the trope
of body parts. In this story, an evil scientist is thwarted by a brave nurse when she exposes his centuries-long project of blood transfusion to prolong his life at the expense of many donors. The nurse dies in World War I, reminding us that transfusion developed rapidly because of the war. During the nineteenth century, most transfusions resulted in death, and it was not until blood was typed in 1901 that it could be given with any safety. Ludwick’s plot explores the social anxieties resulting from the use of transfusion: fear of pollution, fear of commodification of body fluids, and fear of losing human identity when the boundaries of the body are penetrated.

Early in the story, we learn that the nurse’s baby brother was one of Dr. Immortelle’s victims, dying of “an infection.” “Many little victims,” we are told, “lost their lives” because the evil surgeon had no method at first “to determine the amount of blood taken from the donors” (562, 564). But depletion and viral infection are not the only results to fear from the transfer of blood from body to body. The story’s second narrator, Victor de Lyle, assistant to the evil scientist and aptly named for Mary Shelley’s scientist, tells a tale of pollution of identity more harrowing for 1930s white readers than the depredations of viral infection. Victor was Dr. Immortelle’s slave, formerly black, now not only perpetually young but also white because of the transfusions. Going beyond the many fictions of passing that were published in the 1920s and 1930s, this plot uses transfusion to express fears of racial integration. Yet the story strangely balances its racism with an appreciation for American multiculturalism. Victor is the voice of conscience in the story, and, like many slaves in the nineteenth century, he was initially the unwilling subject of Dr. Immortelle’s experiments, more victim than villain. This construction of science on the body of the African American is reiterated in the conclusion of the story, when Victor sacrifices himself in order to kill his master and save Linnie, the white nurse who helps to expose Dr. Immortelle. Ludwick struggles to balance the “tremendous value” of blood transfusion for humanity (569) against fears of social as well as physical contamination; she also struggles to balance fears of the “melting pot” of United States society as polluted by “blood taint” (566) against admiration for the qualities of clairvoyance, love of children (569, 565), and courage that those of African descent, according to Ludwick, bring to the mix. Gender figures in the difference in use of body parts: Linnie, the Red Cross nurse, is the hero, we are told by her fiancé, the framing narrator, because, instead of taking blood, she gives it, perishing in a hospital tent bombed in the war.

Judith Merril’s short story “That Only a Mother” (1947) moves the association of body parts and science to the theater of World War II, although it is set after a future world war. In this story, a woman separated from her husband by war and by his work on secret scientific experimentation delivers a baby genetically altered by radioactivity. We see the baby only through the mother’s eyes, until the end: this baby is a paragon, learning to speak at four months, singing at seven months, possessing a smile like “the first golden edge of the sun bursting into a rosy pre-dawn”: “[p]recocious, but normal.” From the father, returning at the end of the story, we learn that the baby is also a “limless body,” lacking arms and legs, a horror (17,18, 21). One of the first stories to deal with the results of the United States use of the atomic bomb, “That Only a Mother” allows the missing body parts of the baby—as well as the smile and beautiful face—to stand for the potential consequences of atomic science. Merril centers her story on science: she accurately predicts birth defects resulting from atomic radiation.

As in Harris’s and Ludwick’s stories, anxieties about science in “That Only a Mother” intersect with anxieties about gender. Why is the baby a daughter rather than a son? The baby’s seamless body, with no extensions, a body trunk
with no extruding parts, represents the “scientific” view of the female as a deformed or unfinished male, a belief as old as Aristotle and as recent as many contemporary textbook explanations of the development of the fetus.\(^5\) The roles of female and male parents in the story reveal another fear. The women take over the functions of the men, who are away at war. The loss of body parts in the child, then, also represents the alienation between men and women in wartime. Isolated from each other, men and women fail even in the most “natural” cooperation of reproduction. They’re simply too different. This difference is reflected not only in the work assigned to men and women in the story but also in the parents’ responses to the limbless child: the mother, loving her daughter, refuses to see or name the daughter as deformed. The father, if I read the ambiguous ending correctly, strangles the baby: “His hands, beyond control, ran up and down the soft-skinned body, the sinuous, limbless body. \textit{Oh God dear God}—his head shook and his muscles contracted, in a bitter spasm of hysteria. His fingers tightened on his child” (21). Twice before this episode, the mother read news articles about infanticide by fathers whose babies were affected by radiation. The dehumanization of fathers is shown here in the husband’s fragmentation: he is head, muscles, fingers, not a whole. Moreover, the attribution of hysteria, traditionally women’s weakness, to the father suggests that the husband’s masculinity has been damaged by the war. He has not been able to protect his child, as a father should; indeed, his work with secret science has been the cause of his child’s differences. Merrill’s story, then, is not only one of the earliest to explore the effects of the atomic bomb but also one of the earliest to explore anxieties about masculine biology and aggression, what essentialist feminists later call “testosterone poisoning” (Kramarae and Treichler 445–46).

Angélica Gorodischer is a science fiction writer in a quite different, South American tradition. In her story “The Perfect Married Woman” (“La perfecta casada” [1983]),\(^6\) a woman in her forties with grown children goes about her daily housewife’s tasks, except that occasionally, when she opens a door, there is an unexpected place or time on the other side, offering her its secrets. The woman eventually interferes with political events behind the doors; she assassinates leaders, hides the weapons of armies, and opens escape routes to people trapped in a riot. Twice she cuts off the head of a man: once a man in a bathtub, once a bearded man in a tent. From the details, we realize that these dismantlings of bodies represent famous murders by women: Charlotte Corday’s of Jean-Paul Marat in the French Revolution, Judith’s of Holofernes as depicted in the Old Testament.

The severed heads are linked to science, for the events in the story are interwoven with accounts of the married woman’s use of the everyday technology of the modern house: she irons, she watches TV. “On Monday and Thursday afternoons, when she irons shirt collars,” the narrator tells us, “she thinks of the slit necks and the blood, and she waits” (246). The body parts of the men she kills represent the banality of the everyday science that has helped to imprison middle-class housewives in lonely spaces as family servants. These body parts further symbolize the anger women store away as they successfully enact their limiting gender role, an anger that \textit{la perfecta casada} uses in the worlds on the other side of doors, acting out and acting up against the men and political institutions that maintain women’s inferior position. The story ends with her ironing: “Again, she runs the iron over the front of the shirt and remembers the other side of the doors that are always carefully closed in her house, that other side where the things that happen are much less abominable than the ones we experience on this side, as you can easily understand” (246–47). The ending reverses our perspective: it is not the history of bloody civil insurrection that is terrible, the narrator explains, but rather the silencing of women’s anger, the loss of life in the living.
Emily Martin points out that in scientific discourse, body functions are described by analogy to “hierarchically organized bureaucratic system[s] of control” (74), and the body has sewers, police, and factories. In Gorodischer’s story, the body stands not for public bureaucracy but for private domesticity. The perfect wife literally cleans up the reprehensible history of gender repression by chopping off men’s heads and disposing of their bodies. Gorodischer thus combines the figure of the silent and repressed housewife, a figure given mythic status by the women’s liberation movement, with the figure of the female avenging fate, the bad mother who kills instead of sustains. Gorodischer lets these negative myths about women speak to each other, telling a darkly humorous story of women’s place and history. She asks, What if an ordinary woman, one who spends her life cooking and cleaning for others, were to gain a dictator’s power—what bodies would she torture and dismember?

In a short story from 1988, the United States writer Eileen Gunn explores anxieties about gene engineering. As Joan Brumberg observes in her study of the bodies of United States girls, “At the end of the twentieth century, the body is regarded as something to be managed and maintained” (xxi). Gunn’s title, “Stable Strategies for Middle Management,” refers not only to the story’s setting in competitive United States business culture but also to the ways that ambitious young men and women are managing their bodies in order to increase their competitive edge. “You’ll get ahead faster with a little adjustment,” the narrator warns a friend who has refused bioengineering (711).

The narrator has chosen to become something like a female mosquito. “The No. 2 Insect Option is supposed to make me into a successful competitor for a middle-management niche,” she tells her friends, “with triggerable responses that can be useful in gaining entry to upper hierarchical levels.” The friend who refused DNA-level change maintains, “Bioengineering is a waste of time and money and millions of years of evolution” (711). This satiric story not only explores anxieties about gene engineering but also has fun with sociobiology, a strand of the biological sciences that for the last thirty years has used investment analogies to talk about reproduction and other animal behavior. Sociobiology has been a major target of feminists, especially in its representation of males as investors in reproductive economics and females as subject to this resource management (see esp. Bleier; Fausto-Sterling 179–87). When the narrator explains, “I’ve invested all my time and most of my genetic material in this job” (712), Gunn is parodying a jargon that views reproduction as production. Donna Haraway aptly explains this conception of the body: “Broadly, within late-twentieth-century scientific discourse the natural body is conventionally . . . a strategic assemblage of heterogeneous biotic components held together in a reproductive politics of genetic investment” (“Investment” 146). Elizabeth Grosz elaborates the implication of this postmodern view: the “capacities [of the civilized body] become purchasable commodities, capable of selective augmentation, replacement, or transformation” (141).

Gunn’s story explores anxieties about science not only through her narrator’s changing body parts—the narrator wakes up with a stiletto-shaped tongue—but also through the wired responses accompanying her new body. In this sense, the story examines anxieties about gender too, especially about women’s claims to equal rights in the workplace. When Harry, her workplace rival, proposes marketing strategies, she punches her tongue into his arm; for this she is accused of “backbiting” by her male boss (709). At a business lunch, when her male friends annoy her, she stings them and waxes them over (713); her actions satirize biological theories of female wired unreliability in the office. When her boss decides to reorganize to give her male competitor a position superior to hers, she realizes her new bio-
logical potential and, female mantis–like, decapitates him. “I mean, irritable is one thing,” she remarks, “but biting people’s heads off is quite another” (715). In this story women threaten to get the upper hand and break through the glass ceiling; biologically they are definitely competitive.

“When you signed those consent forms, you agreed to let the B-E staff mold you into a more useful corporate organism,” an employee is told (709). Anxieties about women on top and DNA manipulation are accompanied by fear of the erasure of identity in corporate structures and global business economies. As Barbara Stafford suggests in an analysis of medical transplants, “The marketability of dismemberings is accompanied by the growth of regulation and the loss of personal control” (194). In Gunn’s future fantasy about personnel DNA makeovers, dismemberings are marketable exactly at the intersection of science, gender, and corporate America in its global manifestation.

“The Becoming” (2000), by the African American writer Akua Lezli Hope, depicts a dystopian future when a megacity extends from Boston to Washington and government is run by a faceless “them.” Society is stratified into three classes: those who are born to a life of “telecommuting, the Cottage Industries, the slave-boxes” (153); those who may choose to become entertainers or artisans, given greater financial rewards but required to undergo bodily alteration; and a privileged technological class. The benefits of this future are many: the arts flourish under the direction of a “city Muse”; technology is plentiful, and holograms decorate apartments; and denizens of BosWash speak a fascinating hybrid of Spanish, Standard English, and Black English.

Hope’s story is set near Cenpark and centers on an artist’s reminiscences about the day of her Great Becoming, which are intertwined with her remembrance of her first, great love. The artists’s parents, artisans and street players, raised their daughter with musical training; playing the saxophone is what she loves best. Her relation to music is one of embodiment, an erotic, physical experience: “the horn. The enormous breath changer. She craved it in her hands, its mouth in her mouth, part of her passed through it, it transformed her, finger and key, breath and lip, the reed vibrating tones that colored the mind.” As she approaches her day of Becoming, she develops a relationship with one from the more privileged class. Called a techno-man, Jason, her lover, is also described in terms of music: he desires to “play her like she played” (153, 155).

On the day of her Becoming, she loses both her innocence and her lover. In the company of her techno-man, she makes her irrevocable choice. When she wakes, “they had left her lovely breasts, but between them [were] the flesh buttons, and below, a swell from her flat abdomen”—she has undergone surgery to make her body the equivalent of a tenor sax. “She could eat but no longer speak,” we are told, “not without playing herself” (156–57). Thus, in this story body parts represent anxiety about developing technology linked to cosmetic surgery. As Anne Balsamo points out, “[C]osmetic surgery literally transforms the material body into a signifier of culture” (58). The narrator’s body parts have been physically reshaped to embody her social function and her class status, just as today cosmetic surgery reshapes women to embody our culture’s social ideal of white beauty and women’s function as decorative signifier of status.

In Hope’s story, body parts further signify anxiety about gender. Although a man too may choose to become a musical instrument in this society, the only such person we see is a black woman. The techno-man, also black, does not have to choose. Their sexual relationship reveals the social hierarchy: “he was selfish . . . He was a studied, relentless lover. It was ever something he did to, not with her” (154). As Haraway reminds us, “In the early years of the Women’s Liberation Movement, orgasm on one’s own terms signified property in the self as no other bodily sign could”
(“Investment” 150). Indeed, the emphasis on orgasm in this grim story explains the particular nature of the narrator’s cosmetic surgery: the techno-man controls her “buttons” in and out of bed. Tellingly, blacks are exploited by other blacks: the politics are class politics as much as racial politics but are still focused on the body—the body commodified and surgically altered rather than the body “natural” constructed as raced.

Twentieth-century women who write science fiction short stories fill them with body parts. Symbolizing anxieties about the dissolution of identity in modern scientic culture, body fragments are lost, re-formed, commodiﬁed, traded, stolen. Feminist theory has recently been much concerned with science fiction elements: the cyborg, the posthuman. The development of electronic technology has made the cyborg, previously a ﬁgure of science ﬁction, an icon for our move into the information age. Haraway offers the cyborg as a model to be embraced by feminists, because of its liminal status (“Manifesto”). Katherine Hayles cautions that this posthuman metanarrative about the virtues of disembodied human intelligence is a dangerous one; she urges a return to embodiment. The short stories discussed here suggest that embodiment is not the answer for women. Harris, Ludwick, Merrill, Gorodischer, Gunn, and Hope point to the dangers of bodily manipulation and scientic management in genetic transformation and cosmetic surgery. The queasy ease with which body parts disappear or metamorphose raises questions about gender and identity: in modern scientic culture, are women still less than men? what parts are they missing? These writers remind us that ultimately we return to a political question: who will be in charge of this management of bodies? In a future when all of us will lose parts of ourselves to science, these writers predict that women, once again, will have the most to lose.

NOTES
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1 A substantial and provocative body of criticism on feminist science ﬁction serves as a foundation for my work. In particular, I wish to recognize Barr (Alien and Lost); Cranney-Francis; Delany; Hollinger; Larbalestier; Lefanu; Le Guin (Language and Dancing); Moylan; Roberts; and Russ. On science ﬁction by women, see also Donawerth and Kolmerten; Donawerth.

2 See also Douglas: “To understand body pollution we should try to argue back from the known dangers of society to the known selection of bodily themes and try to recognise what appositeness is there” (121).

3 See also Bukatman: “Under fascism the body almost explicitly becomes part of a machine through . . . massive deployment of discipline and military technology. . . . The subject as weapon” (303).

4 For information on the development of surgery in the United States through operations on slaves in the South and immigrants in the North, I am indebted to a lecture by Evelyn Hammonds.

5 See Aristotle 461 (4.6.775a); Dinnerstein on “the female [viewed] as a mutilated creature” (181); and Grosz (“patriarchy requires that female bodies and sexualities be socially produced a lack” [60]).

6 Casada might also be translated as “housewife.”

7 See also Grosz: because the sexuality of women is constructed as “seepage” in Western culture, “[t]he ﬂuidity and indeterminacy of female body parts, most notably the breasts but no less the female sexual organs, are conﬁned, constrained, solidiﬁed, through. . . . solidiﬁcation by clothing or, at the limit, by surgery” (205).

8 The body parts dispersed throughout twentieth-century science ﬁction by women thus serve purposes quite different from the misogynistic ones of the fragmented women’s bodies analyzed by Vickers in Petrarch’s and Renaissance men’s poetry and by Harter in nineteenth-century men’s fantastic literature.

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