

3690: A Journal of First-Year Student Research Writing

Volume 2020

Article 1

2021

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Corey Flores
Floresc_no@sjfc.edu

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Recommended Citation

Flores, Corey (2021) "Woman on the Edge of Time as a Call for Change in Mental Health Treatment for the Disadvantaged," *3690: A Journal of First-Year Student Research Writing*: Vol. 2020 , Article 1.
Available at: <https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/journal3690/vol2020/iss1/1>

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Woman on the Edge of Time as a Call for Change in Mental Health Treatment for the Disadvantaged

Abstract

Overview: Marge Piercy's novel, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, takes a dive into the perspective of a mentally ill woman who experiences time travel to a utopian future. Specifically, the novel follows Connie, the protagonist, through her torturous life in a mental ward. She struggles to find any enjoyment in her quarantined life, finding stimulation only through visits from her friends and family. Furthermore, she struggles as a person of color living in poverty. These conditions only lead her mental state to worsen. Her solution for her perpetual agony and looming mental problems is her frequent trips to a utopian future, which act as an escape for Connie. Piercy dwells on the topic of mental health in her novel under several lenses, but she expounds on the importance of receiving proper treatment. Within the novel, the mental hospital is an agonizing setting where Connie makes absolutely no progress in her receipt of treatment. The doctors are depicted as villainous, though in reality, they just have no clue what is wrong with her. Ultimately, the doctors struggle to properly diagnose and treat Connie, and her wasted time and search for an escape only fuel her desire to abandon the ward altogether. However, Connie could have benefitted with a diagnosis and treatment if the doctors had the necessary knowledge to handle a person of her kind. In many real world cases, doctors fail to provide needed treatment to people of color and/or those who struggle financially. By observing Connie's lack of progression in the mental ward, we can see that the doctors fail to meet expectations for her treatment. All the while, the state of our own world suffers from the same exact problem, making Piercy's statement a burning call to the audience for the better treatment of people of color or economically disadvantaged individuals.

Author's reflection: My name is Corey Flores and I am two years into my college career. I spent my first two years at St. John Fisher as an Interactive Media major. Though I learned a lot and enjoyed elements of this career path, I found that my greater passion was somewhere else. Because of this, and the effects of COVID-19, I decided to take a gap year before resuming my studies. Ultimately, I will be changing majors when I return, taking on Audio and Music Engineering. Storytelling has always been an inclination for me. Through various mediums, I've consistently found myself excelling in the act of storytelling. Writing is a profound example of this; coming up with the right words to communicate my message to an audience is enjoyable to me. Creating visual art with an emphasis on dynamism and character is satisfying. But what intrigues me most of all is writing music that sends the listener into its world, and then producing, mixing, and mastering it. By the time a master is finalized, the song not only tells a story through composition, but through the nuances in mixing and production. Overall, my first two years at St. John Fisher have been integral to my personal and intellectual growth. I feel a sense of accomplishment having contributed to the *3690 Journal* for my writing as a freshman. I've grown to become a confident writer and storyteller and am greatly looking forward to the sprawling new chapter ahead.

Corey Flores
ENGL 199-02
Professor Uman
3/22/2020

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Disadvantaged

Marge Piercy's novel, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, takes a dive into the perspective of a mentally ill woman who experiences time travel to a utopian future. Specifically, the novel follows Connie, the protagonist, through her torturous life in a mental ward. She struggles to find any enjoyment in her quarantined life, finding stimulation only through visits from her friends and family. Furthermore, she struggles as a person of color living in poverty. These conditions only lead her mental state to worsen. Her solution for her perpetual agony and looming mental problems is her frequent trips to a utopian future, which act as an escape for Connie. Piercy dwells on the topic of mental health in her novel under several lenses, but she expounds on the importance of receiving proper treatment. Within the novel, the mental hospital is an agonizing setting where Connie makes absolutely no progress in her receipt of treatment. The doctors are depicted as villainous, though in reality, they just have no clue what is wrong with her. Ultimately, the doctors struggle to properly diagnose and treat Connie, and her wasted time and search for an escape only fuel her desire to abandon the ward altogether. However, Connie could have benefitted with a diagnosis and treatment if the doctors had the necessary knowledge to handle a person of her kind. In many real world cases, doctors fail to provide needed treatment to people of color and/or those who struggle financially. By observing Connie's lack of progression in the mental ward, we can see that the doctors fail to meet expectations for her treatment. All the while, the state of our own world suffers from the same exact problem, making Piercy's

statement a burning call to the audience for the better treatment of people of color or economically disadvantaged individuals.

Marge Piercy strives to create a situation in her novel that highlights the horrible truth that disadvantaged people struggle to receive mental health treatment. But first, she must set the scene by establishing a character who is disadvantaged. Piercy introduces the protagonist, Connie, as a Mexican-American who struggles financially. In the beginning of the novel, Piercy dives straight into the gruesome issues within her family, such as prostitution, accidental pregnancy, and domestic abuse. For example, Connie, in her apartment, opens the door to find that Dolly, her niece, has come to visit. Dolly describes some of the dark issues that run in her life, such as her pregnancy and her worry that she may lose the baby because she was beat by her pimp, Geraldo. “Geraldo hit the door harder. ‘Open the door, you old bitch! Open or I’ll break it down. Bust your head in. Come on, open this fucking door!’ He began kicking so hard the wood cracked and started to give way” (Piercy 6). This event taking place within Connie’s own home indicates that she is wrapped up in stressors that she can’t shake herself. And they are so gruesome that the sheer concentration of negativity may come across as shocking to the reader. Piercy builds the protagonist in this way because she ultimately does want the reader to feel as though they are looking into a life experience that they weren’t even aware of. Her ultimate desire is to uncover an alarming issue that is largely concealed from the public, so by shocking the reader with the introduction of Connie, the audience’s attention is effectively grabbed. And this is something that Piercy uses to her advantage, as that attention can be directed towards the ultimate issue at hand.

Connie’s burdening context translates into an issue within the world of mental health treatment. The truth is that doctors often fail to understand the backgrounds of people of color

with rough life experiences and financial struggles. This is a key part in being able to treat these patients, and when the doctors can't connect the dots, the patient ends up with a treatment plan that doesn't make sense for them, or perhaps none at all.

One major problem that Marge Piercy brings to light with *Woman on the Edge of Time* is that of a contextual misunderstanding between the doctors and their patients; and that's putting it lightly. The truth is that doctors will often fail to recognize the contexts of patients who come from different ethnic groups or struggle financially. Nancy K. Grote delves into the issue of doctors leaving certain patients unfulfilled due to their ethnic or financial background. As a scholar of mental health psychology, Grote has a rich understanding of mental health treatment and the issues that revolve around the doctors themselves. She even goes as far to say that the reluctance on the part of the doctors to reach the necessary understanding is blunt cultural insensitivity, and to that, I agree:

Cultural insensitivity or ignorance on the part of mental health clinicians presents a significant barrier to treatment engagement and retention in women of color living on low incomes. Clinicians may lack proficiency in recognizing the cultural context of a woman's depression and in understanding her culturally endorsed symptoms of distress.
(Grote 297)

According to Grote, the problem with doctors is their inability to recognize the striking difference between their patient's context and their own. Context is a dominating factor in mental health that looms behind the scenes; consequently, its significance is easily overlooked by doctors. But how is this alarming problem integrated into Connie's plot in the novel? In *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Marge Piercy accentuates the ignorance of doctors when she plants this notion in the midst of Connie's seclusion in the ward. As she waits for the doctors to perform an

examination on her, she recalls the frustration and shame she experienced in her previous examination. This recollection is where Piercy establishes the big issue:

All those experts lined up against her in a jury dressed in medical white and judicial black [...] all those cool knowing faces had caught her and bound her in their nets of jargon hung all with tiny barbed hooks that stuck in her flesh and leaked a slow weakening poison. She was marked with the bleeding stigmata of shame. She wanted to cooperate, to grow well. (Piercy 60)

Piercy loads this passage with lots of potent images that all contribute to her central point. First, let's discuss the way that the doctors are described. By employing words such as "experts" in "medical white and judicial black" clothing, Piercy draws a stark image of contrast between the so-called professionals and Connie. But if we go deeper, the negative effects of this become clear. The "nets of jargon" and "tiny barbed hooks" leave Connie marked with shame; this is a metaphorical way of saying that the contextual wall between the doctors and Connie is harmful to her mental state. Furthermore, this passage makes it clear that the doctors are to blame for this problem. The narrator includes the detail that Connie was making the effort to cooperate with the doctors, for the sake of fixing her mental problems. By including Connie's efforts in direct juxtaposition with the doctors' villainous neglect, Marge Piercy makes an monumental statement; her astounding use of emotionally potent diction completes her ultimate goal of invoking urgency for the change of a prominent issue in mental health.

Tying into Connie's desire to cooperate with the doctors is her role as an activist throughout the novel. This is significant because by portraying Connie as the burdensome hero, Marge Piercy implies that people of color who may be in a weak economic state can prove to be strong in their morals. In Connie's case, her morality supersedes the morals of the villainous

doctors, who have a background of heavy education and discipline. Susan V. Iverson, a professor of higher education, discusses the symbolism behind the activist role that Connie plays in her essay, "Academic Mothers: Women on the Edge of Time." She closely analyzes the novel and builds the argument that Piercy's intended role for Connie was that of "embodied activism." To further explain, Connie symbolizes a voice for change, and that surely shows in the actions she takes; her strength and persistence throughout her agonizing time in the ward serves as an example. Iverson writes, "Connie, in Piercy's novel, appears to act without any models or pathmakers. And she is an unlikely hero, as an 'invisible' person 'due to her status as a woman, a Mexican-American, and a poor person, as well as a mental patient'" (Iverson 93). Iverson asserts that Connie symbolizes strength for marginalized groups, as she embodies activism despite all forces working against her. She remains determined to fix her mental problems despite the faulty doctors. But to add further esteem to her role, she does it out of self-interest, instead of seeking a role-model status. This is where Iverson introduces the significance of Connie's role as a mother. Iverson argues that because Connie is a mother, she embodies the massive strength needed for that role, but will not seek admiration for it because it costs her a lot of her mental and emotional energy. Iverson states, Academic mothers may be reluctant to perform such roles as models or mentors [...] She is filled with feelings of rage and deprivation because of the high costs attached to her considerable accomplishment" (94). The exhausting role that mothers must play is directly correlated to Connie's efforts at the ward, which were unmatched by the doctors. In essence, Connie was spending a wealth of her energy, time, and emotions on the central problem of mental health. Surely, it is admirable to be an activist, but her attitude doesn't reflect that because her spending went to waste. On the whole, Marge Piercy's implementation of a motherly

side to Connie's character is symbolic in that it invokes the theme of grueling efforts that eclipse any gratification.

Quality of life is an interesting piece of the puzzle, as it reveals a lot about the contexts of disadvantaged patients. When measured scientifically, quality of life, or QoL, serves as actual evidence that context factors into one's mental state, and therefore cannot be overlooked or misunderstood by doctors. Lore Van Damme, a scholar of psychology in education, conducted a study that addresses the crucial factor quality of life. She explores detained girls and the likelihood that they will experience an increase in mental health problems as they continue through adolescence and young adulthood based on their measured QoL. Ultimately, she wishes to research the course of their mental health problems in order to help clinicians solve their issues in the best possible way. Van Damme's studies consist of controlled surveys and interviews with detained girls. Her findings prove the speculation that context or QoL translates into their mental health. One result that sticks out is that "a low QoL placed detained girls at risk for mental health problems, which placed them at risk for offending subsequently" (Van Damme 291). The study shows that context is a prominent cause of mental problems. Yet, the lack of doctors to challenge this complication is alarming. And this is an urgency clearly implied by Marge Piercy, as she builds a character who comes from a harrowing background and proceeds to write her mental problems as the hurdle she must overcome, and the doctors as the antagonists that prevent her from achieving this.

The driving appeal of *Woman on the Edge of Time* comes from its time traveling plotline; thus, it has a significant tie to the issue of doctors failing to fulfill the needs of Connie, a struggling mental health patient. In the beginning of the novel, Connie's struggling life position is clearly established. The horrid exposure to the bleak outside life that Connie lives, as

evidenced by the drama with Dolly and Geraldo, serves its importance when it is juxtaposed by Connie's bright and blissful travels to the future. Her position is perpetually gloomy and miserable. However, she encounters Luciente, who is a bright character from a utopian future. She, who hasn't even been classified as a woman yet, is described as strange, yet inviting. Piercy immediately gives Luciente soft characteristics that break the harsh and glum tones set by each of the novel's established characters:

“My name is Luciente.” Strange that she had dreamed in English. Me llamo luciente: shining, brilliant, full of light. Strange that with someone obviously Mexican-American she had not said Consuelo. Me llamo Consuelo. “Come,” he had urged, and she remembered then the touch of that warm, gentle, calloused hand on her bare arm. Trying to draw her along. (Piercy 34)

Connie's first encounter with Luciente is clearly written as otherworldly and unclear. Piercy repeats the phrase, “strange that,” to emphasize that Connie is unsure of the reality of her own situation. At this point, the novel benefits from its third person limited narration because it not only indicates that Connie feels that something is off, but that from an outside perspective, Connie's experiences seem uncanny as well. Connie's uncertainty in response to Luciente's otherworldly entrance challenges the reader to understand a hallucinator's perspective. The narrator's repetition of “strange that” goes against the traditionally knowledgeable role of the third person, while the description of Luciente's name as “shining,” “brilliant,” and “full of light” establishes positivity in her greeting. The result is that the reader is drawn into a position where they can understand one of the coping mechanisms that comes with mental problems: a bubble that takes a person away from their real issues by creating an imaginary utopia. Luciente is not bleak, not miserable, and not mentally ill. Coming from a utopia, Luciente is the

embodiment of human perfection. The significance of this is that Luciente is a figment of Connie's mind; she is created by the mind of a person who does not have any of the perfect qualities that Luciente possesses. This indicates that Connie possesses the desire to live a pure life, and creates that life with her own mind because the doctors fail to diminish her impurities. Under this light, Connie's desire to escape her own hell speaks volumes.

A common difficulty facing patients of color or financial issues is that they don't seek the solution to their problems because they are afraid of the financial consequences. One may wonder if the protagonist, Connie, may suffer from this barrier. After all, she does possess a will to escape her agony, but has only expressed it through time travel. Catherine DeCarlo Santiago, an associate professor of clinical psychology, addresses the issues of logistical barriers as the most common reason that people of color or low financial state don't receive the help they need. Surely enough, one of the facts she uncovered was that "cost and lack of insurance are certainly significant barriers to mental health service utilization among low-income groups" (Santiago 117). What makes this information weighty is the fact that Connie was *not* reluctant to receive healthcare. She stuck it out in the mental hospital to receive treatment, which she ultimately did not get. The personal barriers that people have to overcome before they receive treatment are great enough for one to feel that they will receive the treatment they need if they overcome those barriers. But it is very discouraging for one to go through that, only to find out that it was the doctors who couldn't help them. For that reason, Connie's persevering role, which only leads to a dead-end, is symbolic of the fact that being strong enough to seek healthcare is only half of the battle, and that the doctors must pull their own weight for any progress to be made.

The last chapter of the novel contains Connie's medical records, as recorded by the doctors during her time at the mental ward. The doctors that see Connie throughout the novel

have trouble placing a diagnosis on her. The tragic consequence of this is the lack of a treatment plan to suit her needs. The various categories in her mental records are contradictory, indicating that Connie's condition was difficult to place and constantly changing.

Mental status: This patient is disheveled and appears to be older than her stated age. She readily admits needing help. She is cooperative but confused and occasionally suspicious. Has not demonstrated assaultive behavior on the ward.

Stream of mental activity: The patient is incoherent. The patient's thinking is extremely concrete.

Content of thoughts: Denies suicidal ideation. Denies delusions or hallucinations. (Piercy 413)

Connie's recorded mental status contrasts the content of her thoughts greatly. It is recorded that she "readily admits needing help" and is "cooperative," yet denies the possibility that she might be hallucinating. Her stream of mental activity is described as "concrete" as well. The reader, in this scenario, is omniscient, and knows that Connie's experiences traveling through time are given the "concrete" tones of reality. However, they are very unreal to an outsider looking in, such as the reader. This serves as an example of how greatly Connie has become infused into her temporary escape world, with the complementary implication that the doctors fail to understand her worsening condition. Connie's "denial" of hallucinations is information that should lead the doctors towards an answer. But the use of the word "denial" implies that they don't believe the information she gives them. The denial of Connie's accountability runs throughout the novel, working against her when she is trying her best to cooperate. Connie eventually gets frustrated with the lack of help and unclear intentions of the doctors. Consequently, her search for escape rises, and so do her hallucinations and experiences with Luciente's utopia. This is critically

symbolic because it represents that her worsening condition stems from the doctors' actions (or lack of actions). The fact that Connie closes the book with her escape proves the ugly truth about treatment for the disadvantaged by tugging on the reader's heartstrings with an unsatisfying ending. Her long stretch of perseverance at the ward shows that there was potential, but it wasn't matched with the necessary understanding from the doctors. Her time was essentially spent in quarantine rather than at a helpful clinic, and Piercy makes it clear that the doctors are to blame for this.

The final nail in the coffin that consolidates the fact that the doctors are at fault for unsolved mental problems comes from actual data from the World Mental Health organization (WMH). A survey conducted by this organization provides evidence detailing the small amount of people who actually receive treatment. Scholar of psychology, Neal Cohen, is one of many authors in an ebook called "Population Mental Health: Evidence, Policy, and Public Health Practice." The book analyzes data from the WMH in order to argue for the best possible circumstance. Cohen applies the WMH data in his conclusion:

However, as reported elsewhere, the WMH data show that only a small minority of people with even seriously impairing mental disorders receive treatment in most countries and that even fewer receive high-quality treatment. This situation has to change. A good argument can be made based on the WMH results that an expansion of treatment would be a human capital investment opportunity from the employer's perspective [...]

(Cohen 33)

In summary, Cohen argues that because of the lack of proper treatment, the best possible solution would be to expand treatment through the employers. In other words, hiring the right people who can treat people with a background of low-income or people of different cultures is a crucial

action for solving the problem. The fact that Cohen describes this action as an “investment opportunity” is intriguing, as it alludes to the fact that this problem disadvantages the mental health industry as a whole. Not only would the solution benefit patients, but it would also bridge the gaps for successful business within the industry. If anything, the WMH data is a testament to the sheer urgency that this problem must be met with. While the discrimination already damages diverse patients, the problem negatively affects both parties in the end, which is a burning call for change within the mental health industry.

The agonizing condition that Connie suffers through is hard for her doctors to place. Her journey towards diagnosis and treatment stagnates as she perseveres through the grueling drab of the mental hospital. *Woman on the Edge of Time* brings to light the very real problem that people of color or low-income often do not receive the treatment they need despite the presence of their own effort. Connie’s life in agony and the despair of leaving the hospital uncured is representative of the perseverance from the patient’s end that could still lead to nowhere. Despite all forces working against her, such as her poor quality of life, low income, Mexican-American ethnicity, and position as a woman, she remains persistent, symbolizing the strength that these people embody. The concern cannot be targeted towards the patient who makes an effort to receive treatment, but towards the doctors who fail to provide because of the patient’s cultural background. Piercy provides the readers of her novel with the alarming problem that hides in the world of mental health; doctors overlook and misunderstand the contexts of disadvantaged patients, and this causes them to endure their problems without hope for a solution.

Word count: 3558

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