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Oy It's the Cosmetics, Stupid: Or How Estée Lauder Changed the Post 9/11 World

Episode 2: The Second

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Marleen S. Barr, City University of New York |

Professor Sondra Lear, the protagonist of my novels Oy Pioneer! (2003) and Oy Feminist Science Fiction (in press) – and some of my short fiction – appears in this story. I trot out Sondra whenever I imagine coping with reality in terms of science fictional premises. Sondra, then, is a Walter Mitty fantasy version of me. Yes, spending one's professional life as a science fiction scholar is exceedingly interesting and exciting. But it does have its limitations. I can't hang out with the feminist extraterrestrials who form the crux of my academic pursuits. I can't beam up and down, time travel, or eat calorie free knishes which pop out of a spaceship food synthesizer. It is frustrating always at once to be so close and so galaxy-far-far away from these forever unreachable things. Sondra assuages this quandary. She enables me to position myself within a feminist science fiction scenario Holodeck. Through Sondra, I can dream my impossible feminist science fiction dream; fulfill my quest to follow that star.

Carolyn Heilbrun's mystery novel series protagonist Amanda Cross inspired me to create Sondra Lear. But, unlike Heilbrun, Cross is not Jewish. (Amanda Cross would never say "oy"—which happens to be my favorite word. Ditto for Sondra.) Departing from Heilbrun's creative model, I decided to imbue Sondra with the full spectrum of my very strong New York Jewish cultural identity. She can be understood as something akin to a feminist version of Fran Drescher using her own life as a model to create Fran Fine, the nanny from Queens. Sondra Lear, then, is the spaceship venturing feminist science fiction scholar from Queens. Ms. Fine lands in an alien Manhattan townhouse which constitutes a different universe in relation to her mother's plastic slipcovered couch. Professor Lear lands in different fantastic scenarios which function similarly in relation to my mother's plastic slipcovered couch.



Bess Myerson in 1957

Mothers form the center of Jewish women's universes. In this story, I science-fictionally evoke the world of my mother's youth on Manhattan's Upper West Side. My mother went to high school with [Lauren Bacall](#). She told me that after they got off the city bus they took to school, Bacall (a.k.a. Jewish New York girl Betty Joan Perske) sometimes came to her home on West End Avenue and enjoyed chatting with my grandfather. She also described how proud the New York Jewish community was when [Bess Meyerson](#) won the 1945 Miss America Pageant.

So, when I was really standing on the F.D.R. Drive watching July 4th fireworks, I somehow connected the event to a spaceship inhabited by feminist extraterrestrials named Lauren and Bess. I called upon my trusty alter ego Professor Sondra Lear to engage with them – and other great Greatest Generation Jewish women I threw in for good measure.

Sondra and I very much hope that you enjoy this story, which emanates from our real Jewish New York female personal and historical cultural inheritance. We are grateful to have the opportunity to share it with you.

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Oy It's the Cosmetics, Stupid: Or How Estée Lauder Changed the Post 9/11 World

Professor Sondra Lear, feminist science fiction scholar par excellence, was ensconced on the F.D.R. Drive amidst hordes of various and sundry (sundries figure later in the story) July 4th revelers. As Sondra watched the gorgeous fireworks being launched from barges emblazoned with the *Macy's* logo, she thought about American capitalism. Even though the fireworks spectacle was an over the top *Macy's*

advertisement, there was something truly beautiful about the symbolic rockets' red glare bursting in air over the East River. Sondra appreciated the Thirty Fourth Street inspired miracle of a peaceful crowd gathered on an elevated highway viewing proof through the night that post 9/11 *Macy's* was still there.

During the twilight's last gleaming, she noticed something resembling a light pollution defying bright star visible through broad pyrotechnic stripes. While watching the supposed star move closer, Sondra answered her ringing cell phone and listened to a spaceship's hailing frequency.

"Hello. Is this Professor Sondra Lear, the feminist science fiction scholar? Is this the land of the free?"

"Nothing is free in America—except commercially sponsored events. Excuse me. I think I'm watching a spaceship hover over the Long Island City skyline landmark [Citibank Building](#)."

"Affirmative. You are speaking with a feminist utopian separatist planet denizen. We chose to make first contact with a feminist science fiction scholar."

"Even though I'm an Earthling who studies science fiction and women, I'm first and foremost a 'New Yawker.' How do I know that I can trust you? What if you are akin to that giant roach thing that climbed the New York State Pavilion in *Men In Black*? What if on this July 4th the horrors *Independence Day* depicts emanate from your ship? What if the fireworks function as a smokescreen to hide your intention to barbecue New York? First things first, though. What's your name?"

"Lauren. I'm accompanied by my first officer Bess."

"That's reassuring. I'm not really afraid of feminist extraterrestrials named Lauren and Bess. Do you happen to 'know from' Joanna Russ's *Whileaway*?"

"*Whileaway* is the neighboring feminist planet located second to the right and straight on 'til morning down the intergalactic highway from my home world. My wife was born in *Whileaway*."

"Anyone married to a *Whileaway* resident is good by me. Can we dispense with the take me to your leader stuff. America's leader spends the summer vacationing in Crawford, Texas. Believe me, you don't want to go there. Nor do I think that President George W. Bush is up to an unscripted close encounter with feminist aliens. Contact our cool and articulate Mayor Michael Bloomberg instead. You won't need your phasers to defend yourself against New Yawkers; nothing phases New Yawkers. This crowd is not even responding to your spaceship."

"You're the only one who can see our ship. We came to Earth to meet *you*, not some male leader—especially a Republican leader. We picked you to assuage the consequences of the dire events which will occur later in the summer. Israel will fight a war against Hezbollah. Terrorists will plot to blow up planes

flying over the Atlantic Ocean. Do you agree to accept your impossible mission? Are you on board? Can we beam you aboard?"

"Beam me up, Lauren."

The ship's Bridge was decorated with vintage 1940s furniture. A tall woman greeted Sondra. Her fellow alien wore a conservative one piece bathing suit replete with a sash that read "Miss America."



Lauren Bacall

"I'm Captain Lauren Bacall and this is first Officer Bess Myerson. Bess and I appear to you as younger versions of the Earthling Bacall and Myerson who presently reside in Manhattan. I am, of course, not exactly the humanoid Bacall; feminist separatist utopian planet dwellers would not suffer Humphrey Bogart and Jason Robards gladly. I come from a planet called World of Our Mothers, a.k.a. WOOM. Every female other worlder we encounter interacts with us in terms of a WOOM of her own, that is mothers who are particularly pertinent to her. Since you are a New York Jewish Baby Boomer, you will deal with us by engaging only with living or dead World War II era New York Jewish women. When undertaking your mission, only women who meet these stipulated requirements must assist you. You can negotiate one reasonable exception to this rule. Who are ya gonna call?"

"Do I get a *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* 'lifeline' to help me make the decision?"

"Go for it."

"I pick [Betty Freidan](#)." Freidan instantaneously materialized on the Bridge. "One quick question, Ms. Freidan. If you had to nullify Israel attacking extremists and plane bomb plotting terrorists, which Jewish New York woman who roughly belongs to your age group would you choose to ask for advice?"

"Although she was born in Russia and raised in Milwaukee, I would most definitely turn to [Golda Meir](#)."

"Since female Prime Ministers of Israel do not grow on trees (not even on tress that grow in Brooklyn or trees planted in Israel), can I receive a dispensation from the New Yawk requirement and argue that Meir is a special case?" Sondra asked Lauren.

"Okay," said Lauren as Freidan dematerialized.

"Beam Meir up, Lauren."

"No can do. Processing your request involves simultaneously utilizing both the Transporter and the Way Back Machine. We have to conserve our transportational and time travel energy; our ship's food synthesizer has lately drawn too much power making calorie free potato kugel, matzoh balls, cheese blintzes, knishes, bagels, and cream cheese at warp speed. We will just have to send you back to 1973 Israel."

Since even the mere mention of these foods raised Sondra's cholesterol numbers, she was glad to be extricated from the conversation. At the moment when she materialized in Meir's Jerusalem office, the Prime Minister was too preoccupied with the Yom Kippur War to notice her unconventional entrance method. "So sorry to disturb you. But can you please tell me the best way to thwart extremist Israel attackers and terrorist plane bombers?"

"I hear your New York accent. Although I would love to chat with a fellow American, I have absolutely no time. I must give a Knesset speech immediately. I could arrange for you to pose your question to Moshe Dayan."

"No thank you. I so much enjoyed meeting you."

Dejected because Dayan did not conform to her mission's Prime Directive about engaging with World War II era Jewish women from New York (and she had already used her one exception to this rule), a dejected Sondra walked to the King David Hotel and sat on a lobby sofa. The woman sitting next to her was checking her makeup.

"My name is Sondra Lear."



“I’m Josephine Esther Mentzer, a.k.a. Estée Lauder.

I’m here in Jerusalem doing market research for a new makeup line.” Sondra perked up as she immediately recalled that Lauder was a Queens born Jew of her mother’s generation.

“Do you have a minute? I’m writing fiction about terrorists who want to bomb planes and a war involving Israel. In light of these circumstances, how can my female protagonist do the most good?”

“Her actions should be undertaken in terms of femininity and aesthetics. It would do her well to remember that materials used to manufacture makeup could become the components of bombs. All plane passengers should be prohibited from bringing makeup on board. The makeup that is not being used in flight should be given to women who live in the communities which spawn terrorists. Planes could drop the makeup over these communities in the manner of the Allies air lifting food to Berlin during World War II. I have based my entire business empire on the premise that, vis-à-vis the particular circumstance you describe, male terrorists will choose to remain with alluring makeup wearing women. In other words, they will make love not war.”

“Bombing planes may not be the true objective of the terrorists I depict. They might, instead, have economic destruction in mind. Think of all the products which will not be sold due to the new prohibitions against taking liquids on planes. Duty free shops will have to close. The *Macy’s* luggage department, for example, will no longer sell merchandise suited for overhead compartments. The terrorists could merely want to blow holes in retail sales. But I digress. I’ll spare you my analysis of the situation. Thank you for your suggestions. It was lovely to meet you.” Sondra left the King David Hotel, reached into her pocket, and took her cell phone in hand. The aliens’ technology made it possible for someone calling from 1973 Jerusalem to reach present day New York; female aliens like to talk on the phone.



Macy's 4th of July fireworks over New York

"Okay, Lauren I'm out of here." Luckily, at a time when cell phones were not yet invented, Sondra was spared the necessity of telling Estée Lauder why she had a penchant for conversing via using a device resembling a powder compact. When Sondra found herself back on the F.D.R. Drive watching the fireworks finale, Lauren's spaceship was nowhere in sight.

Later in the summer, soon after the war between Israel and Hezbollah started and the terrorist plane bombing plot was revealed, Sondra acted in terms of her conversation with Lauder. First, she wrote to Leonard Lauder, the Estée Lauder Company's Board Chairman, to tell him that she had recently met his mother in 1973; she explained how Estée's ideas pertained to the present summer crises at hand. Leonard Lauder responded by hiring planes to saturate southern Lebanon with Lauder Company cosmetics. Since love of free samples knows no cultural boundary, Lebanese women took full advantage of the cosmetics bonanza which fell from the sky. Just as Estée predicted, male Hezbollah fighters put down their arms in favor of welcoming embraces by heavily made up seductive women. A cease fire was declared before either side suffered any casualties.

Next, Sondra wrote a *New York Times* op-ed piece which, stemming from her talk with Estée, explained how the new airline security restrictions primarily inconvenienced women. Women surrender their makeup. Women ingest baby formula to prove that it is safe liquid. Women are embarrassed by carrying tampons in plastic bags. Moveon.org responded by starting a grass roots campaign to encourage all male airplane travelers, like so many gentile Danes who voluntarily wore yellow stars, to board planes while holding tampons. Visible tampons on planes became as pervasive as cell phones and laptops. It became common to see irate male passengers gesticulating at airline personnel via brandishing tampons.

Immediately upon her return to her own temporal July 4th, Sondra thought about how proud she was that despite all the problems in the world, her flag—and her very liberal version of what it symbolized—was still there. She exulted in the fact that, as she had explained to Lauren, New York—although no land of the free (especially in terms of real estate prices)—had recovered after 9/11 and will long endure. She began the new fall semester in good spirits.

When her cell phone rang during her first lecture, Sondra glanced away from her notes and saw "Lauren" written on the phone screen. "Excuse me class. I absolutely must take this call. I'll return in a moment."

"Sondra, I'm so sorry that I never had a chance to say good-bye," explained Lauren.

"No problem. Can you dispense with the Prime Directive stuff and tell me something about the future?"



Grace Paley

"Next summer's new airport security measures will stipulate that everyone will be required to fly naked. 'Cockpit' will take on a whole new meaning. Evangelical Christians will rail against flying nudist colonies. Bush, to appease them, will come up with an enormous change (of law, not clothes) at the last minute. Grace Paley, by the way, conforms to your particular WOOM profile."

"I should have consulted Paley. I once heard my exact contemporary Eve Ensler say that she wants to be Grace Paley when she grows up. By the way, Ensler revised the *Vagina Monologues* to include tampon carrying men. What legislative changes will the Republican Congress enact?"

"There will be an amendment to the Constitution which bans in flight nudity. It will mandate that all passengers must wear plastic transparent body suits replete with opaque patches to cover genitals and women's breasts. Manufacturing these Saran Suits, as they will be called, will become a multimillion dollar business launched from the space of the erstwhile *Macy's* carry-on luggage department. In short, Sondra, ya ain't seen nothin' yet. Bye for now."

Sondra turned her attention back to her students. "I see your hand, Elaine. Before continuing, I want to suggest a lucrative pursuit for graduates: plastic."

