

COURTING UTOPIA:
THE ROMANCE PLOT IN CONTEMPORARY UTOPIAN FICTION

by

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Abstract

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Utopian literature is typically read as a transformative genre that compels readers to rethink the norms and assumptions that govern their worlds. But what kinds of imaginative work does the genre perform with regards to women's status in the ideal society, and how has this work developed—or failed to—in more recent utopian texts? *Courting Utopia: The Romance Plot in Contemporary Utopian Fiction* focuses on a specific subgenre of utopian literature known as the feminist critical utopia, which emerged in the 1970s out of previous utopian genres and continues to develop today. Despite the genre's aspirations for social change, however, I observe an ongoing refusal to challenge, let alone transform, normative gender roles in feminist critical utopian texts, a limitation that persists because the novels remain wedded to traditional narrative conventions carried over from earlier utopian forms. Ultimately, the genre remains predominantly structured not around the rhetoric of social change, as utopian scholars generally presume, but around the rhetorics of romance. Looking at the work of Marge Piercy, Margaret Atwood, and Ursula K. Le Guin, who have been central to defining the field, as well as recent popular novelists Suzanne Collins and Scott Westerfeld who show where the feminist critical utopia is moving in the twenty-first century, I detail how the romance plot undermines the feminist utopian project by restricting the utopian imagination to traditional gender roles. Identifying romance as a key obstacle to the imagining of more radical forms of social change, I

break company with those who see authors like Piercy, Atwood, and Le Guin as the paragons of the genre and instead look to Robert C. O'Brien, Samuel R. Delany, and finally Toni Morrison for alternative narratives that move beyond romance to reimagine feminist critical utopian worlds. The persistence of the romance plot in contemporary feminist critical utopias has been largely overlooked by utopian scholarship, but contending with how this pervasive plotline shapes utopian possibilities stands to offer new insights into the development of more open, oppositional, and liberatory female characters and feminist alternatives to the status quo.

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Table of Contents

Prologue

1

Chapter 1

Introduction: Feminism and the Utopian Romance

14

Chapter 2

Nurturing Women, Utopian Men: Ray Bradbury and Ursula K. Le Guin

48

Chapter 3

The “Female Principle”: Sentimental Motherhood in *Woman on the Edge of Time*, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Year of the Flood*

99

Chapter 4

Choosing Utopia: Courtship Narratives in Contemporary Young Adult Dystopias

151

Chapter 5

Approximating Paradise

198

Coda

237

Bibliography

260

No matter how great a change may take place in society, romance will turn up again, as hungry as ever, looking for new hopes and desires to feed on.

Northrop Frye

The world of romance is a frightful nightmare enclosed in a beautiful dream.

Alberto Varvaro

Prologue

To say that Octavia Butler has rocked my world would be an understatement. Ever since I encountered the author in my tenth grade English class, all that I have read by her and about her has led me to understand her work as concerned with imagining possibilities for existence that would be better than our current world—less divisive, less exploitative, less cruel. Years later, when I finally picked up her Xenogenesis series (*Dawn* [1987], *Adulthood Rites* [1988], and *Imago* [1989]), I could see how Butler was using recurring themes in her work related to transformation, communication, and community to highlight flaws in human behavior and imagine what life might be like if we could move beyond our current limitations. In the series, an alien species called the Oankali save the last, dying humans and give them a chance to adapt and survive after nuclear war destroys the earth. Whereas the humans in the novel are afraid of change, prone to violence, and fiercely hierarchical, Oankali are peaceful, adaptable, curious, and puzzled by many human behaviors, particularly their rules for gender. Oankali cannot understand why women should be seen as weaker than men, for instance, or why sex need be between one man and one woman and only involve penetrating one partner. Oankali have three genders—male, female, and a neuter “ooloi”—and all three are integral to sexual activity and family bonding. This revisioning of sex, gender, and family is key to the peaceful, egalitarian principles of Oankali society. The novels thus evince a central tenet of feminism: that reconceptualizing social and political dynamics depends on amending assumptions about gender identity, sexual behavior, and the structures of family life.

Though I was already in graduate school when I first read Xenogenesis, too old to long for fantasy worlds and too well trained in skepticism to fall for them, I was ready for those gray,

tentacled Oankali to come take me away. The aliens provide an alternative model of existence upheld as decidedly utopian: who wouldn't want to replace violent, hierarchical humans bent on self-destruction with a peaceful, egalitarian, sustainable community of intelligent beings? Some of Butler's characters are concerned about losing their essential humanity by linking up with the aliens. But those are the bad guys—the chauvinists, the aggressors, the ones utopia could surely do without. Their xenophobic obsession with purity highlights the obviously correct choice: joining the aliens to build a better world. Even the more sympathetic human characters look almost silly clinging to their old, outdated ways. Although the series is rich with complexities, we are meant to read the aliens as desirable, and I certainly did.

But fast forward a few months, and I picked up the novels again. This time, I had a completely different experience. No longer so enthralled by my first encounter with the bells and whistles of the imagined world, I was able to read more carefully and critically what I had initially accepted, even praised. Now with every page, what had once seemed appealing was fraught with unease. I have written elsewhere about the problems with the entirely transparent systems of Oankali communication;¹ on top of this was the increasing alarm I felt upon realizing the primary use the aliens make of their absolute connectivity. Asserting an unqualified awareness of others' thoughts and desires, they use their position of authority to compel both human and Oankali acquiescence to sex and childbearing. Were I granted my initial wish to join this fictional world, I would be allowed in only to become a breeder—a breeder in a peaceful society with no discord, no friction, and no way to challenge, rebel, or dispute my fate. No matter how much I may want the novels to create imaginary alternatives, I cannot get around the ways

¹ Katherine R. Broad, "Body Speaks: Communication and the Limits of Nationalism in Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* Trilogy," in *The Postnational Fantasy: Essays on Postcolonialism, Cosmopolitics, and Science Fiction*, ed. Masood Ashraf Raja, Jason W. Ellis, and Swaralipi Nandi (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011), 141-155.

the narrative works to create a clearly ordered universe in which women are necessary for reproduction and not much else. There may be hot tentacle sex and three-parent households with genderless ooloi, but the women are still expected to keep the society together and sacrifice themselves for their offspring and mates.

A number of authors have written beautifully and cogently about the disappointment and even shame felt upon realizing that books once held in high regard can impart messages that, when deciphered, diminish the joy the novels previously imparted. Writing from within the academy and from popular culture respectively, Wayne C. Booth and Laura Miller give two accounts of losing the ability to fully enjoy, or enjoy in the same way, books they had once taken pleasure in unreservedly. For Miller, the loss of this literary innocence occurred in her early teens, when she discovered the “secret” religious meanings of C.S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956) and found herself unable to re-enter a haven of her childhood that had once seemed pure of ulterior motives.² For Booth, the moment took place later in his career, as the rise of feminist criticism in the 1970s and 1980s led him to find that the bawdy humor of Rabelais’s *The Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532) could no longer be enjoyed without also recognizing its flaws as a sexist text. Both Miller and Booth still appreciate what there is to value in these books, but neither of them wants to give up his or her knowledge and go back to an earlier, more straightforward delight. Miller asserts, “Although I miss the childhood experience of being engulfed by a story, I would not willingly surrender my adult ability to recognize when a writer is taking me someplace I don’t want to go.”³ For Booth, the fuller reading made possible by such

² Laura Miller, *The Magician’s Book: A Skeptic’s Adventures in Narnia* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2008), 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 6.

awareness opens new possibilities for critical practices, as “the freedom to make new interpretations [comes] by exercising freedom from old methods and assumptions.”⁴

Miller and Booth provide not only readings of Lewis and Rabelais, but readings of how they *feel* reading Lewis and Rabelais, and of how those feelings changed as they developed more complex reading practices. At one point, the Chronicles made Miller feel awake and alive, as Narnia “showed me how I could tumble through a hole in the world I knew and into another, better one, a world fresher, more brightly colored, more exhilarating, more fully felt than my own.” Later, the books made her uncomfortable, even embarrassed. Realizing that the novels recount Lewis’s religious doctrine, she “looked back at my favorite book and found it appallingly transfigured... How *could* I have missed that? I felt angry and humiliated because I had been fooled.”⁵ As an adult, Miller now finds herself drawn to the series “not merely because of its form or style or historical significance, but because of how it made me feel, which is at heart the fundamental question with any work of fiction.” Even as she is able to read with a more critical eye what she terms the “biases and small-mindedness” of the text, her evaluation ultimately hinges on a personal, emotional response based on how the fantasy novels successfully transported her to another, magical world.⁶

This may seem like a particularly unscholarly way to approach a text. Shouldn’t we focus on the aesthetics of the piece and check our feelings at the door? But I want to suggest, like Miller, that we cannot separate out each strand of the reading experience so easily, nor understand the work of the text without taking into account how it works upon us. Booth takes up this question directly when he writes that literary criticism must address “the complete

⁴ Wayne C. Booth, “Freedom of Interpretation: Bakhtin and the Challenge of Feminist Criticism,” *Critical Inquiry* 9.1 (1982): 76.

⁵ Miller, *The Magician’s Book*, 4, 6, emphasis original.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 12, 15.

imaginative offering, the experience the work makes possible for us.” When we pick up a book we ask, “What will it do with or to us if we surrender our imagination to its paths?”⁷ To read critically means asking where a book is leading its readers, what ideals it seeks to espouse, and what kind of imaginative work it attempts to perform. For Booth, reading is therefore an ethical practice, by which he does not mean that reading should evaluate the moral stance of a particular text, but that it should take into consideration “the entire range of effects on the ‘character’ or ‘person’ or ‘self’” that reading a text produces.⁸ An ethical reading contends with “the qualities of character that are engaged in and affected by our experience with narratives.” It expressly considers “the actual consequences, the load of values carried away from the experience” we have when we read.

If our evaluation of a text involves how the text works upon us, shaping how we feel and what we imagine, then “the central imaginative experience” of reading is not primarily about the text’s historical context, although I will talk about that, nor about its forms and styles, although I will certainly talk about that too.⁹ It is instead about how these aspects of narrative work together to create the richly imagined world that acts upon the reader, opening some possibilities, foreclosing others, producing a response that leads us through to the final page and, hopefully, keeps us lingering with the text even after the book is closed. It is not only speculative forms like utopian literature and science fiction that perform imaginative acts upon the reader, of course, but the work of the imagination is of the utmost importance to genres expressly intended to envision what does not, never has, and never can exist. We cannot determine what shape anyone’s imaginative experience will take—there are as many reactions as there are readers—but

⁷ Booth, “Freedom,” 57, 59.

⁸ Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1988), 8.

⁹ Booth, “Freedom,” 63.

that does not mean we cannot make any claims about the imaginative work of a text or understand how a genre strives to evoke particular responses in its readership, opening or closing them to potential new ways of existing.

For centuries utopian literature has been valued for how it envisions forms of social change and posits other ways of being in the world. Rereading *Xenogenesis*, however, taught me to look more carefully at the imaginative work utopian literature performs upon the reader and ask where these texts take us if we allow ourselves to follow. The approach to utopian literature I have developed through the critical practices of Miller and Booth and through my own experiences is twofold. Reading a novel's utopian ideals requires approaching the text as a sincere reader, eager to be transformed, open to understanding the new world the novel creates. Reading these ideals critically, however, necessitates a resistant approach that steps back to see more fully what the utopian vision entails, how the novel brings this world about, and what implications this world has within the novel and in the reader's own imaginative life. To question and critique the assumptions and ideals of the utopian world, one must also recognize the imaginative impact the text is striving for and the impact it likely has on many readers—to get the sexist joke of Rabelais or the Christian symbolism of Narnia or why Oankali are superior to human beings, and then to consider the consequences.

After my disappointment with *Xenogenesis*, I began to read more widely in the field of contemporary feminist critical utopian literature in search of texts that perform a different kind of imaginative work from Butler's series. I looked for texts that fulfilled the aspirations of the genre to reconceptualize gender identities and challenge gender roles in ways that allowed female characters to develop beyond the positions of mother and wife common in traditional literature. I hoped these imaginative acts would prompt readers to envision alternative arrangements and

reconsider assumptions about gender roles dominant in their own lives. I wish I could say Xenogenesis is unique in its shortcomings, an unsuccessful attempt at an otherwise promising genre. But as I contended more fully with how the narrative structures and imaginary worlds of these novels work upon the reader, I uncovered surprisingly little that really challenges gender norms. Even as the genre reconsiders sexual behavior, gender identity, women's roles, and family structures, its ideological and aesthetic efforts seem to me to serve less to imagine processes and outcomes of social change than to reinstate the desirability of our current world's social and sexual status quo. It is therefore puzzling to me that feminist utopian scholarship regularly praises these texts as progressive and liberatory. This disconnect has led me to a number of questions. Why do authors who strive to envision radical, feminist social change persist in maintaining traditional gender roles? Why is it so difficult to imagine other possibilities for sex, gender, and family relations that are substantively, not just superficially, different? Why are so many critics seduced, like I was, into falling for depictions of more ideal worlds that are predicated on stable and normative gendered relations? And where is the outrage when the supposedly alternative world turns out to be more of the same?

But before I attempt to tackle these issues in the following pages, I must first address another question that is both easier and harder to answer: why even bother reading these books that I clearly find so inadequate? Laura Miller maintains, "The honest, educated reader... faces a... precarious task: how to acknowledge an author's darker side without losing the ability to enjoy and value the book."¹⁰ I want to be clear that I do see in this genre a literature worth holding on to, for its imaginative power, social commentary, and dynamic sense of optimism. I still recommend Octavia Butler's work to anyone who'll listen (start with *Kindred* [1979] if

¹⁰ Miller, *The Magician's Book*, 171.

aliens seem too weird), and although my enthusiasm is tempered and involves a lengthy preface, the novels still do important work that isn't happening elsewhere in mainstream literature. My point is that I don't think valuing these texts means accepting them uncritically, or ignoring the myriad ways they could and should be better. The utopianist in me continues to believe in the possibility of more radical, oppositional, nonsexist, and freeing feminist critical utopian literature. The genre has come a long way since its inception, but it has not yet reached its potential. It is my hope in this dissertation not only to locate some of the ongoing problems with feminist critical utopianism, but to consider opportunities for the genre to grow.

It can be extremely difficult to advocate for alterations to generic conventions, especially ones that have become deeply entrenched over time. As feminist critics in other fields have shown, modifying characters and plotlines may change some aspects of a traditional text by depicting female characters in a different light, for instance, or subverting narrative expectations for resolution. But such changes but may still fall short of reshaping generic conventions. For example, writing about feminist fairy tales, Leslee Farish Kuykendal and Brian W. Sturm argue that simple gender role reversals that make a princess strong or a prince in need of saving “challenge gender stereotypes and patriarchal ideologies only at the story level of the text” and persist in creating one-dimensional, unrealistic protagonists. The authors assert, “in order to truly re-vision a fairy tale, thereby creating a work that is artistically new and rings true... feminist authors must... re-vision the entire work and create something from the ground up.” They must “pay as much attention to subverting gender stereotypes of heroes and princes as... to redefining female protagonists.”¹¹ A feminist re-visioning of a narrative convention therefore involves

¹¹ Leslee Farish Kuykendal and Brian W. Sturm, “We Said Feminist Fairy Tales, Not Fractured Fairy Tales! The Construction of the Feminist Fairy Tale: Female Agency over Role Reversal,” *Children and Libraries* 5.3 (2007): 40.

creating multi-dimensional, realistic characters and developing plotlines that work from beginning to end to reshape the narrative possibilities for female protagonists and the ways readers imagine female roles both inside and outside literature.

As Elizabeth Grosz explains, successful feminist narratives not only critique existing ideologies but imagine radical possibilities outside the bounds of current parameters. They self-consciously deconstruct phallogentric norms while also striving to articulate an alternative modality to take their place. For Grosz, a feminist text must:

render the patriarchal or phallogentric presumptions governing its contexts and commitments visible. It must question, in one way or another, the power of these presumptions in the production, reception, and assessment of texts... it must, in some way or another, problematize the standard masculinist ways in which the author occupies the position of enunciation... And third, a feminist text must not only be critical of or a challenge to the patriarchal norms governing it; it must also help, in whatever way, to facilitate the production of new and perhaps unknown, unthought discursive spaces—new styles, modes of analysis and argument, new genres and forms—that contest the limits and constraints currently at work in the regulation of textual production and reception.¹²

A successful feminist text exposes the masculinist assumptions underlying the logic of traditional narratives as well as the gendered positions that govern its narrative construction. It retains a level of awareness about its own embeddedness in patriarchy at the same time that it strives to bring new discursive spaces into being.

¹² Elizabeth A. Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion: The Politics of Bodies* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 22-23.

A new discursive space challenges the roots of social and ideological organizations and narrative forms. But this does not mean that any unusual arrangement, such as the three genders and three-parent families in *Xenogenesis*, necessarily fulfills Grosz's call for "unknown, unthought discursive spaces." These arrangements differ from the possibilities and norms that structure typical expectations for family and social life and may suggest a starting point for rethinking the social and sexual status quo. Yet such differences do not by definition rupture previous norms or produce more wide-reaching and genuine alternatives. I therefore disagree with Rachel Blau DuPlessis's assertion that narrative strategies such as "reparenting in invented families, fraternal-sororal ties temporarily reducing romance, and emotional attachment to women in bisexual love plots, female bonding, and lesbianism" necessarily break with the "orders and priorities" of conventional narratives. These disruptions surely allow writers to "take issue with the mainstays of social and ideological organization of gender" but may still fail to upset underlying assumptions about gender identity and familial bonds that keep such organization in place.¹³

My own exploration of contemporary feminist utopian literature has revealed the tremendous staying power of traditional conventions and norms, even when a vision of a new society provides novelty, intrigue, and a glimpse of something else. In many of these novels, women selflessly take care of men and selflessly take care of children. Girls step up to be heroes and then apologize for seeming too brash. Dystopias blame bad mothering for the dire state of affairs and utopias credit women's return to traditional roles as the solution to all social ills. Women are so preoccupied with getting married it sometimes seems the books could be shelved in the romance section instead. For all that a reader might expect to encounter radically

¹³ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), xi, x, 5.

restructured social arrangements, he or she winds up reading a great deal about the nuclear family and the happy heteronormative home. Instead of showing the world radically changed, then, these texts offer conservative idealizations of the dominant sex-gender system, in which stereotyped women are upheld as mothers and caretakers with little depth or complexity and few other interests or needs. Although many of these novels foreground female characters and take seriously private and domestic spaces often considered women's realms, they tend to fall short in challenging the sexual status quo and may even express a staunch commitment to maintaining and reinforcing normative patriarchal arrangements and the heterosexual reproductive home.

Courting Utopia: The Romance Plot in Contemporary Utopian Fiction focuses on a specific subgenre of utopian literature known as the feminist critical utopia, which emerged in the 1970s out of previous utopian genres and has continued to develop through the present day. Despite this genre's aspirations for social change, however, I argue that there has been an ongoing refusal to challenge, let alone transform, normative gender roles in the feminist critical texts, a failure that persists because the novels remain wedded to traditional narrative conventions carried over from earlier utopian forms. Looking at the work of Marge Piercy, Margaret Atwood, and Ursula K. Le Guin, who have been central to defining the field, as well as recent popular novelists Suzanne Collins and Scott Westerfeld who show where the feminist critical utopia is moving in the twenty-first century, I detail how the romance plot undermines the feminist utopian project by restricting the utopian imagination to traditional gender roles. Identifying romance as a key obstacle to the imagining of more radical forms of social change, I break company with those who see authors like Piercy, Atwood, and Le Guin as the paragons of the genre and look instead to Robert C. O'Brien, Samuel R. Delany, and finally Toni Morrison for alternative narratives that move beyond romance to reimagine feminist critical utopian

worlds. Building on their innovations to the field, I end this study with a consideration of radical literature more broadly, exploring what elements can be adopted by the utopian form to facilitate more far-reaching examples of feminist social change. The persistence of the romance plot in contemporary feminist critical utopias has been largely overlooked by utopian scholarship. But contending with how this pervasive plotline shapes utopian possibilities stands to offer new insights into the development of more open, oppositional, and liberatory female characters and feminist alternatives to the status quo.

Readers might protest that I am surely in bad company, choosing the weakest examples of feminist critical utopianism to criticize and missing out on a wealth of eye-opening literature. But the authors I focus on in this project represent the main canon in this field; time and time again, Le Guin, Piercy, and Atwood are cited as the triumvirate that most embodies the creative and empowering potential of the feminist critical utopian imagination. Collins and Westerfeld, meanwhile, are two of the top-selling authors in recent history, utopian or otherwise, and have been vigorously applauded for their feminist heroines.¹⁴ But though these texts have made important contributions to the rise and advancement of feminist critical utopianism, I find that

¹⁴ See especially Chapters 1-3 of Tom Moylan's *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 1986), as well as Marleen S. Barr, "Food for Postmodern Thought: Isak Dinesen's Female Artists as Precursors to Contemporary Feminist Fabulators," in *Feminism, Utopia, and Narrative*, ed. Libby Falk Jones, and Sarah W. Goodwin (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 21-33, especially 21-22; Lucy Sargisson, *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 24; Chris Ferns, Chapter Seven, "Dreams of Freedom: Piercy, Le Guin, and the Future of Utopia," in *Narrating Utopia: Ideology, Gender, Form in Utopian Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 202-236; Erin McKenna, *The Task of Utopia: A Pragmatist and Feminist Perspective* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), especially page 10 and Chapter 3, "The Anarchist Model of Utopia"; Alessa Johns, "Feminism and Utopianism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. Gregory Claeys (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 174-199; and Ashley McAllister, "100 Young Adult Books for the Feminist Reader," *Bitch Magazine*, January 28, 2011, <http://bitchmagazine.org/100-young-adult-books-for-the-feminist-reader>.

the field still offers few models that provide alternative instances of feminist social change. The failures of these feminist projects are as instructive as their successes, however, for their insights into how to initiate more radical changes that have heretofore been expressed only in limited ways. Despite their current constraints, contemporary feminist critical utopias do have the potential to fulfill the emancipatory ideals of the genre. The time has therefore come to look with a more critical eye at a literature that continues to hold such tremendous appeal.

Chapter 1

Introduction: Feminism and the Utopian Romance

Feminist Utopianism: From “Classic” to “Critical”

Contemporary feminist critical utopias like *Xenogenesis* and the other novels I consider here have traditionally been read as radical departures from traditional utopian texts. This break is said to occur on two fronts: in the genre’s deviation from traditional, classic utopias, and in its feminist innovations. These developments, scholars maintain, make feminist critical utopias uniquely equipped to articulate the transformative vision that characterizes the utopian genre overall. Despite their differences, however, what these utopian traditions have in common is a tendency to keep women in traditional roles. Although many of the authors of both classic and critical feminist utopias have endeavored to challenge gender roles, and critics have often read them as doing exactly that, understanding how romance continues to be used to structure utopian imaginings—even in feminist critical utopian texts—will reveal a more complicated story than that which utopian scholarship has previously told.

Whether classical or critical, feminist or not, utopian literature is concerned with the processes and outcomes of positive social change. Articulating “the desire for a better way of being,” utopias depict societies that “while not perfect are in some ways better than our own.”¹

¹ Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 8, and Carol Farley Kessler, *Daring to Dream: Utopian Stories by United States Women, 1836-1919* (Boston: Pandora, 1984), 5. Thomas More famously coined the term “utopia” in his 1516 eponymous satire as a pun on the Greek *ou* (no) and *topos* (place). From this derives the term eutopia, “good place,” and dystopia, “bad place.” But since, as Lyman Tower Sargent notes, “all fiction describes a no place,” I have abandoned the term eutopia as the specifically good place in favor of the more widely used utopia, even though Sargent defines utopia as simply “a non-existent society described in considerable detail.” Lyman Tower Sargent, “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited,” *Utopian Studies* 5.1 (1994): 5, 9.

Darko Suvin defines a utopia as “the verbal construction of a particular quasi-human community where socio-political institutions, norms and individual relations are organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author’s community.”² Lyman Tower Sargent calls utopianism a form of “social dreaming” which involves “the dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live.”³ In short: a literary utopia is organized around the central principle that the society it depicts is different and more desirable than the author’s and readers’ known worlds.⁴

Utopian scholars presume that in depicting alternative societies, utopian novels compel readers to envision different social structures and possibilities for human existence. The genre performs a specific socio-political function, then, in imagining how current social orders might move beyond the status quo to create new ways of being in the world. Clare Bradford, Kerry Mallan, John Stephens, and Robyn McCallum assert that utopias “have a transformative purpose: that is, they propose or imply new social and political arrangements by imagining transformed

² Darko Suvin, “Defining the Literary Genre of Utopia: Some Historical Semantics, Some Genealogy, A Proposal and A Plea,” *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 6 (1973): 132. That utopian literature depicts (or at least gestures toward) another *society* distinguishes it as a subset of radical literature, which I discuss in greater detail in the Coda.

³ Sargent, “Three Faces,” 3.

⁴ There are as many ideas of “desirable” or “better” as there are writers and readers, but the utopian world must be better according to the internal logic of the novel. Here Gérard Genette proves useful for understanding how utopian narratives are organized around the presentation of information that highlights the fictional society’s improvements. See especially Genette’s discussion of mood, which he takes to mean “the regulation of narrative information” or how “the narrative reports information to us,” including the narrative’s distance, transcription of events, use of language, perspective, focalizations (through whom the information passes in its delivery), and any alterations or infractions of the codes governing the narration. See *Narrative Discourse: An Essay on Method* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 161-211 and *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 72-78.

world orders.”⁵ Utopias offer what David Harvey calls a “proposed reorganization” of social relations, property rights, and labor arrangements intended to produce “a radically different social consciousness.”⁶ Tom Moylan insists these reorganizations “help lead the way to a radically new future” that has solved the economic, social, and political problems of the present.⁷ Utopian literature is therefore read as transformative, liberatory, and radical, to the extent that it advocates a complete and thorough reworking of existing systems and allows readers to imagine and potentially engage in the production of a more just and equitable world order.

Such reworking can occur in innumerable ways, but despite competing visions of what constitutes the ideal world, utopias are typically broken into two camps: the classic utopias prior to the 1960s and the critical utopias that emerged out of the oppositional political movements of the 1960s and 1970s and continue to characterize the genre today. Within these subsets, there are also traditions of both feminist classic utopias and feminist critical utopias. Most classic utopias are not feminist and do not include questions of gender in depictions of the better world. Carol Thomas Neely explains, “Although their capacities to reproduce utopian citizens are assumed and regulated, women have mostly been ignored, both within traditional utopias and as their authors.”⁸ Examining those few utopias from Plato through the mid-twentieth century that do reference women’s roles, Lyman Tower Sargent identifies two camps: those “with the family abolished and women fairly equal, as in Campanella’s *The City of the Sun* (1623), or with the

⁵ Clare Bradford et al., eds., *New World Orders in Contemporary Children’s Literature: Utopian Transformations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 6.

⁶ David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 238.

⁷ Moylan, *Demand*, 19, emphasis original. Of course utopias can seek to serve conservative agendas, as for example in the work of Ayn Rand, but I am focused on those which purport to envision a more radical agenda and which scholars read as such.

⁸ Carol Thomas Neely, “Women/Utopia/Fetish: Disavowal and Satisfied Desire in Margaret Cavendish’s *New Blazing World* and Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*,” in *Heterotopia: Postmodern Utopia and the Body Politic*, ed. Tobin Siebers (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 60.

family maintained and women definitely inferior, as in Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1621)... Most utopianists since 1850 argue for a clearly inferior role for women."⁹ The vast majority of classic utopian literature is overwhelmingly male-dominated, and when it does give attention to women's roles, it is generally to emphasize their subordination. Utopias like Benjamin Lumley's *Another World* (1873) maintain that woman be instructed "to appreciate the efforts of man and to encourage and comfort him in his progress, but not to take his place."¹⁰ Likewise Z.S. Henlow insists in *The Future Power* (1897) that "women will be excused from work altogether, for they have their homes to attend to, their husbands to look after, and their children to bring up."¹¹

Some classic utopias do consider gender roles in the better world, but as Sargent notes, this hardly leads to sweeping change: "Most utopianists simply assume that sex roles, the status of women and the attitudes toward them, will remain the same in the future good society as they are in the present bad society. There are often various inventions to make women's lot easier, but it remains essentially the same."¹² For instance, Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1888) and William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890) emphasize how happy and healthy the women of utopia are, yet the novels are not ultimately concerned with transforming women's status in the new world. Writing during the rise of first-wave feminism in the late nineteenth century, these authors suggest the political and economic improvements of the

⁹ Lyman Tower Sargent, "Women in Utopia," *Comparative Literature Studies* 10.4 (1973): 304-305. Women in *The City of the Sun* share some occupations with men, but "the occupations which require more hard work... are practiced by men... In fact, all sedentary and stationary pursuits are practiced by the women, such as weaving, spinning, sewing, cutting the hair, shaving, dispensing medicines, and making all kinds of garments. They are, however, excluded from working in wood and the manufacture of arms." Tommaso Campanella, *The City of the Sun* (1623, Project Gutenberg, 2009), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2816/2816-h/2816-h.htm>.

¹⁰ Benjamin Lumley, *Another World: Fragments from the Star City of Montalluyah* (1873, Kindle edition, 2005), chap.19, loc. 1000.

¹¹ Z.S. Henlow *The Future Power; or, The Great Revolution of 19—* (Westminster, 1897), 11, quoted in Sargent, "Women," 305.

¹² Sargent, "Women," 305.

utopian world will naturally solve issues such as voting rights, education reform, and labor laws. The women in these texts are not agitating for change; rather, they are shown happily caring for their families, the burden of long isolating hours alleviated thanks to short work days, tight-knit communities, and labor-saving devices in the home. Yet even as women are included in the narrative, their concerns are not the focus of utopian reforms. The male protagonist, a visitor to the utopian world, listens to lengthy reports on the structure of government, political councils, the distribution of wealth and resources, and details about the factories, granaries, and other activities of the workforce, all while basking in the delightful ministrations of a fresh-faced utopian girl.

Contrasting these male-dominated classic utopias, though, is a long counter-tradition of feminist utopian literature celebrated for its attention to the roles of women in the utopian world. As William Marcellino explains, “Feminist utopian works critique dominant male power and focus and offer some kind of imagined, idealized society that is not characterized by male power and focus.”¹³ In Margaret Cavendish’s *The Blazing World* (1666), the traveler is a woman who establishes dominion over a land of Bear-men, Bird-men, and other assorted Creatures. In Sarah Scott’s *Millenium Hall* (1762), the utopian world is populated by women who have retreated from the trials of misogynist society. Mary Bradley Lane’s *Mizora* (1881) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* (1915) likewise respond to the traditions of masculine utopias by imagining secluded and separate worlds where men are unknown and women take on central roles denied in other classic texts. Lane advocates for women’s education by depicting a highly sophisticated society of scholars, while Gilman challenges the claim that women are not fit for politics by showing how successfully women govern a peaceful and prosperous nation. These works also

¹³ William Marcellino, “Shadows to Walk: Ursula Le Guin’s Transgressions in Utopia,” *The Journal of American Culture* 32.3 (2009): 203.

differ from the classic utopias in that they are expressly concerned with the personal, private, and domestic aspects of utopian life—issues Thomas More and his compatriots hardly address at all. The women in these societies are devoted mothers and daughters who have used their skills to reorganize their personal lives, spreading child care responsibilities across society and ensuring the utopian community fosters the health and well-being of all. Feminist utopias had a particularly strong voice in the women's movement, and well-known activists like Gilman published both political tracts and polemical fictions to impress upon the reader the importance of social change. These texts use the conventions of classic utopian literature to show how society would benefit by granting women leadership roles, work outside the home, a valued position in the household, and suffrage.

Despite the significant differences between classic utopias and feminist utopias, however, both genres have come under fire for appearing static, inflexible, and outdated: “societies so ideal that they have nowhere to go, rely on rigid hierarchies and use coercion to maintain their perfect order.”¹⁴ In the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s, a new style of utopian literature emerged that endeavored to move away from this model of perfection, embracing openness and uncertainty while emphasizing the conflicts and struggles inherent in actual, lived society. Scholars read these novels as eschewing clear-cut processes of social change in favor of open, dynamic, and oppositional stances. As Kristine J. Anderson explains, “many contemporary utopias are intended to be ambiguous, confronting their own problems directly.”¹⁵ The texts often use fragmentary narrative forms that introduce a multiplicity of voices, alternate among

¹⁴ Johns, “Feminism and Utopianism,” 174.

¹⁵ Kristine J. Anderson, “The Great Divorce: Fictions of Feminist Desire,” in *Feminism, Utopia, and Narrative*, ed. Libby Falk Jones and Sarah W. Goodwin (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 86. See also Libby Falk Jones, “Breaking Silence in Feminist Dystopias,” *Utopian Studies* 3 (1991): 7.

time periods, portray shifts in consciousness, and destabilize narrative authority. The result is a utopian imagining that resists the closure of more static and regimented classic utopian societies. Unlike their traditional predecessors, these novels champion indeterminacy over dogma, progress over perfection, and conflict over stasis.

Tom Moylan has suggested these recent utopias constitute a new genre of utopian literature, the “critical utopia,” which adapts and expands the principles of classic utopian literature to reconceptualize utopianism altogether. These critical utopias came out of the social justice movements of the 1960s and 70s—the women’s movement, the civil rights movement, and protests against the Vietnam War—that were highly critical of mass culture and society and resistant to the social, political, and economic status quo. These texts are “‘critical’ in the Enlightenment sense of *critique*—that is expressions of oppositional thought, unveiling, debunking, of both the genre itself and the historical situation. As well as ‘critical’ in the nuclear sense of the *critical mass* required to make the necessary explosive reaction.”¹⁶ Critical utopias use the opportunity for social dreaming provided by the utopian form to imagine alternatives to the consolidation of capital and deepening of inequalities that have characterized the American social, political, and economic landscape since World War II. In doing so, they have dramatically shaped the field of utopian literature and its scholarship.¹⁷ In the words of Lucy Sargisson, this

¹⁶ Moylan, *Demand*, 10, emphasis original.

¹⁷ One is now hard-pressed to find an account of contemporary utopian literature that does not use the term critical or include the idea of critique as central to the genre. For instance, Kenneth Roemer’s definition of utopia in *America as Utopia* (1981), published five years before *Demand the Impossible*, reads, “A literary utopia is a fairly detailed description of an imaginary community, society, or world—a ‘fiction’ that encourages readers to experience vicariously a culture that represents a prescriptive, normative alternative to their own culture.” In 2003, however, he revised this definition in *Utopian Audiences: How Readers Locate Nowhere* to add that the imaginary culture “invites readers to experience vicariously an alternate reality *that critiques theirs* by opening cognitive and affective spaces that encourage readers to perceive the realities and potentialities of their culture *in new ways*.” Kenneth M. Roemer, *America as Utopia*

revolutionary new body of work “rejected the conventional frameworks on which thought (and theory) are structured. It was transgressive of dualist thought and binary oppositional thought... it created a new conceptual space and had a transformative function: it provoked a paradigm shift in consciousness.”¹⁸ This paradigm shift signals what Sarah Lefanu calls “a definitive break in tradition,” a break that Nolan Belk reads as “specifically adjusting the rhetorical devices of the [utopian] genre.”¹⁹

Building on the strands of openness and ambiguity characteristic of critical utopian work of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, critical dystopias work like critical utopias in emphasizing social critique, but they follow a structure that moves from dystopian misery to utopian optimism for the creation of a better world. They distinguish themselves from bleak traditional dystopias like George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) by promising a turn toward utopia, or at least a glimpse of the utopian horizon, that allows the reader to progress from the hopeless world of dystopia into a more promising future.²⁰ Raffaella Baccolini calls this kind of dystopia open ended, exemplified by what Jim Miller terms “dystopian optimism.”²¹ Since these dystopias end on a utopian note, I refer to them throughout this dissertation as critical

(New York: Franklin, 1981), 3 and *Utopian Audiences: How Readers Locate Nowhere* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 20, emphasis mine.

¹⁸ Sargisson, *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism*, 97.

¹⁹ Sarah Lefanu, *Feminism and Science Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 56, and Nolan Belk, “The Certainty of the Flesh: Octavia Butler’s Use of the Erotic in the Xenogenesis Trilogy,” *Utopian Studies* 19.3 (2008): 371.

²⁰ See Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (New York: Westview Press, 2000), 7 and Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini, “Introduction,” in *Utopia Method Vision: The Use Value of Social Dreaming* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 14.

²¹ Jim Miller, “Post-Apocalyptic Hoping: Octavia Butler’s Dystopian/Utopian Fiction,” *Science Fiction Studies* 25.2 (1998): 358. Baccolini explains that in traditional dystopias such as George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, “Utopia is maintained in dystopia...only *outside* the story: only by considering dystopia as a warning can we as readers hope to escape such a dark future... But recent novels... by resisting closure, allow readers and protagonists to hope: the ambiguous, open endings maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work.” Raffaella Baccolini, “The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction,” *PMLA* 119.3 (2004): 520, emphasis original.

utopias in order to emphasize their utopian content and form. Because dystopian works may hint at utopian outcomes rather than portray full utopian societies, I draw on the notion of a utopian impulse, utopian longing, or utopian imagining to indicate the desire for utopian possibility—for political and social landscapes that have yet to be or that cannot be expressed within the pages of the text. I count as utopian the gesture toward the utopian society prior to the potential realization of that society within the world of the novel.

It is not only the oppositional stance of the critical utopias I address here that distinguishes them from classic and feminist predecessors, but their engagement with feminist discourses from the late twentieth century women's movement. The critical utopias Moylan discusses are all conspicuously feminist, and they differ from earlier feminist utopias in the ways they utilize the critical utopian form to oppose male domination through resistance to hierarchy and control.²² Critical feminist utopian writers such as Joanna Russ, Marge Piercy, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Samuel R. Delany, along with others such as Sally Miller Gearhart, Suzy McKee Charnas, Octavia E. Butler, Margaret Atwood, Doris Lessing, and Shari Tepper, have been routinely celebrated for using critical utopian discourses to denaturalize and reorganize the oppressive structures that constitute what anthropologist Gayle Rubin calls the contemporary "sex/gender system."²³ This outpouring of feminist critical utopian literature gave voice to a

²² Feminism itself is arguably a utopian discourse: Catharine R. Stimpson writes, "Feminism is the primary utopian movement in the West today and a primary influence on utopian thinking and speculative fictions." Anne K. Mellor has declared, "Feminist theory is inherently utopian... Those seeking a viable model of a non-sexist society must therefore look to the future; their model must be constructed as an utopia, as a heuristic fiction." Catharine R. Stimpson, "Feminisms and Utopia," *Utopian Studies* 3 (1991): 2 and Anne K. Mellor, "On Feminist Utopias," *Women's Studies* 9 (1982): 243.

²³ "As a preliminary definition, a 'sex/gender system' is the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied." Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Feminist Anthropology: A Reader*, ed. Ellen Lewin (Hoboken:

growing women's movement that drew on but also challenged earlier feminist utopian work that continued to emphasize hierarchy, domesticity, and closure.

Most scholars thus read feminist critical utopian texts as radically departing from earlier forms, performing oppositional work by critiquing masculine forms of domination through a reconsideration of women's social roles in more open-ended and fragmentary narratives. As in earlier feminist classic utopias, the private and personal is of the utmost importance to these critical utopian imaginings, but unlike these earlier texts, questions about motherhood, sexuality, and the family are seen as much more complex. Even as they celebrate strong bonds between mothers and daughters and among female friends, feminist critical utopias no longer depict the feminist utopia as a chaste and asexual realm, where mother love has replaced all other intimate bonds. Tom Moylan, Lucy Sargisson, Sarah Lefanu, Jenny Wolmark, and others celebrate how the novels pay attention to female sexual pleasure and desire in myriad, fluid forms, depicting alternatives to heterosexual pair bonding such as homosexuality, androgyny, and polyamory. Anne Cranny-Francis suggests the feminist critical utopias reorganize hierarchies to emphasize female solidarity, while Chris Ferns believes the texts contend with historical specificities, diversity, and female autonomy more successfully than classic feminist utopian texts. These readings suggest feminist critical utopias are among the highest expressions of emancipatory and oppositional utopian thought.

But while it is evident that feminist critical utopias significantly innovate on the traditions of both classic and feminist utopian literature to imagine more vibrant, open-ended, oppositional

Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 88. Nancy Chodorow calls this "the social organization of gender," which is "analytically separable from, and... never entirely explainable in terms of, the organization of production, though in any particular society the two are empirically and structurally intertwined." Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 9, 8.

texts, I find the imaginative work of the genre and its place in the history of utopian literature to be more complex, nuanced, and ultimately troubled than the above critics have argued. The genre aims to shatter the status quo, especially with regards to women's status, gender roles, and oppressive, hierarchical gender structures in the family and in interpersonal relations. This dissertation, however, maintains that the work to imagine alternate feminist societies in feminist critical utopian literature is not yet done. Although feminist critical utopias play an important role in depicting feminist possibilities and alternative worlds, there have been significant limitations to this undertaking that persist in feminist critical utopian literature and scholarship today: women in contemporary feminist critical utopias, I argue, remain tethered to traditional roles, turned into objects who bear the responsibility for social uplift, and held within normative familial and social structures that reveal little change from the reader's own world.

Mothers, Lovers, and Wives

The more I have read in this field, the more it has become apparent that what unifies the depictions of female characters and utopian worlds in feminist critical utopias is the romance. *Courting Utopia* argues that contemporary feminist critical utopias are predominantly structured not around the rhetoric of social change, as utopian scholars generally presume, but around the rhetorics of romance. Rather than articulate processes of social change that result in radically restructured social relations, contemporary feminist critical utopias are fundamentally romance novels whose utopian resolutions are synonymous with "happily ever after" endings that conform to normative standards for proper gender behavior and sexual relations. While there may be more subversive strains at work in some of the texts, this overall turn toward normativity seems at odds with the assertion that utopian novels, especially critical utopian novels, and

especially *feminist* critical utopian novels, perform the politically vital work of rupturing oppressive systems by imagining empowering alternatives for women. Instead, the outcome of utopian change becomes the assurance of a traditional world. As Sarah Lefanu asserts, “an act of revolution can be achieved only through a subversion of the narrative structure that holds the protagonist in place.”²⁴ One key way to do the “subversive and emancipatory work”²⁵ scholars hope for in this genre will be to break with the conventional romance plot and its hold on female characters and narrative forms.

To illustrate how romance functions within contemporary feminist critical utopias and to open possibilities beyond these normative arrangements, I break the romance plot into three composite parts: courting, in which the young woman of the future utopia chooses the proper mate; nurturing, in which she supports this mate; and mothering, in which she produces a viable future for this mate. Looking at how mothers, lovers, and wives make the utopian world possible reveals how the fulfillment of reproductive heterosexual desire constitutes a central structuring principle of the genre. In novels concerned with mothering, utopia is possible only when women are properly maternal, neutralizing disruptions to traditional gender roles brought about by the rise of feminism and late-market capitalism. In those reliant on nurturing women to uphold utopian ideals, women’s caregiving normalizes the utopian world to assure readers utopia isn’t different, it’s just better. When courtship compels the turn toward utopia, romance—not social change—motivates the desire for utopia, making the romantic resolution the novel’s primary concern. In some cases the romance plot undermines the novel’s capacity to articulate a vision of social change, while in others the primacy of romance suggests the text works not to challenge normative gender relations but to uphold these relations as the basis of an ideal world.

²⁴ Lefanu, *Feminism and Science Fiction*, 35.

²⁵ Moylan, *Demand*, 19.

In these examples, women play functional roles to bring about the utopian dream. Fergus P. Hughes explains, “functional roles are always defined in terms of a specific plan of action—preparer of dinner, firefighter, monster, victim, train conductor, passenger on the train. The functional role defines the behavior but not the permanent identity of the character.”²⁶ However, the women populating the feminist critical utopian canon whom I discuss in this dissertation have few qualities outside their roles as mothers, lovers, and wives who take care of men and children, turning these functions into their permanent identities.²⁷ Functional female characters tend to be favorably juxtaposed to ornamental women who serve no purpose in advancing narrative; it seems a positive advancement in feminist literature for female characters to drive plot and ensure it is not only dominant male characters who facilitate the emergence of utopia.²⁸ Yet my discussion of the functional female hinges on the double meaning of the term: she functions to bring about utopia and does so by fulfilling traditional family functions. The functional female is a plot device based on gender stereotypes that maintain women’s subordinate positions in the patriarchal sex/gender system. This trope limits female characters

²⁶ Fergus P. Hughes, *Children, Play, and Development*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2009), 108.

²⁷ This is not to say these are the only social roles women play, or are ever clear-cut and consistent, but that they constitute three realms of expected female behavior. Even in 1950, sociologist Mirra Komarovsky described “the general premise that our culture is full of contradictions and inconsistencies with regard to women’s roles, that new social goals have emerged without the parallel development of social machinery for their attainment, that norms persist which are no longer functionally appropriate to the social situations to which they apply, that the same social situation are subject to the jurisdiction of conflicting social codes, that behavior patterns useful at some stage become dysfunctional at another, and so on.” Mirra Komarovsky, “Functional Analysis of Sex Roles,” *American Sociological Review* 15.4 (1950): 508.

²⁸ For instance, analyzing female television characters of the 1970s, Donald M. Davis notes an overabundance of “the young, attractive, and sexy female who is more ornamental in many shows than functional,” hanging on only as a girlfriend to central male characters. Donald M. Davis, “Portrayals of Women in Prime-Time Network Television: Some Demographic Characteristics,” *Sex Roles* 23.5-6 (1990): 331.

and ties utopia to evaluative judgments about women, maintaining that good women bring about utopia while dystopia is the fault of those who fail to conform.

The romance plot both depends on and reproduces this notion of the functional female who fulfills heterofeminine ideals. As Robin Silbergleid explains, “the romance narrative fosters the newly defined bourgeois family, with its necessary emphasis on sexual difference and a gendered division of labor.” To the extent that patriarchy necessitates “the ideologically correct end: marriage and (re)production” to maintain primogeniture, it requires compulsory heterosexuality and proper heterofeminine desire. “The rise of the romance thus serves to protect the interests of capitalist democracy,” Silbergleid says, “by selling citizens the story that everything will be okay if girl marries boy, and if girl stays home and raises little boys to be good capitalist workers, establishing a correlation between the family romance and mercantile success.”²⁹ Replace “good capitalist workers” with “good utopians” and the idea is the same: under the rubric of desire, the romance plot ties together a constellation of norms Judith Butler describes as “the heterosexual matrix” and “heterosexual hegemony.”³⁰ The utopian mother, lover, and wife circulate within and around the home to maintain the primacy of masculinist social, economic, and political forms. Thus a cluster of terms—patriarchy, heterosexuality, heterofemininity, romance—describes how various facets work together to reproduce the discursive parameters of the sex-gender system, a system that in turn supports the very hierarchical and exploitative capitalist structures of the dominant world order that critical utopianism seeks to subvert. To get out of these structures will therefore necessitate disrupting

²⁹ Robin Silbergleid, “Women, Utopia, and Narrative: Toward a Postmodern Feminist Citizenship,” *Hypatia* 12.4 (1997): 156, 157.

³⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2nd reprint (New York: Routledge, 2006), 7 and *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 16.

the norms that keep the dominant order in place, an idea which the end of this dissertation will address in greater depth.

The use of the romance plot to create utopian worlds that depend on and are characterized by women's return to traditional roles has a long history in utopian literature. Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1888) ends with the traveler to utopia falling into the arms of his beloved, using a woman's love to mark his acceptance of and arrival into the better world. Ignatius Donnelly's *Caesar's Column: A Story of the Twentieth Century* (1889) includes a double-marriage that inspires two male friends to reject dystopia and establish a utopian community with their new wives. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915) traces the courtship and marriage of three American men with three utopian women from a separatist female community, while her sequel *With Her in Ourland* (1916) ends with the birth of a son who "prefigure[s] the birth of a new man able to shoulder equally with a new woman the stewardship of the world and its society."³¹ In each case, the quest for utopia is synonymous with and largely superceded by the quest for the utopian woman, organizing sexuality, kinship, and labor around conventional heterosexual coupling.³²

Critics have acknowledged the presence of the romance plot in these novels but have not fully contended with the importance of this plotline to the narrative overall, nor its endurance beyond these early, classic texts. Kenneth Roemer argues the romantic plotline in *Looking Backward* eases readers and characters into utopia, for "both are experiencing strange new worlds," and provides "welcome relief from dialogues and speeches" common in utopian

³¹ Carol Farley Kessler, ed., *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Her Progress Towards Utopia With Selected Writings* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 78.

³² In addition to romance, these novels also drew on sentimental and popular courtship literature of their day; see Jean Pfaelzer, *The Utopian Novel in America, 1886-1896: The Politics of Form* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985), 6 and Roemer, *Utopian Audiences*, 92.

literature.³³ It is not clear what is relieving about the heterosexual romance plot, nor for whom, yet the implication is that romance compels readers' interest in the real focus of the novel, the description of the utopian society. But this reading misses how the promise of fruitful union becomes the impetus and outcome of utopian transformation. The protagonist ultimately gives up his past life and joins the utopian world in order to be with a beautiful woman. The romance plot therefore does more than "invite empathetic reading experiences"—it is the foundation of utopia itself.³⁴ Naomi Jacobs explains, "The love of a utopian woman assuages the visitor's sense of estrangement, resolves his emotional struggles, and makes him feel he belongs in this world so much more perfect than he himself can be."³⁵ The fulfillment of the romance plot assures the traveler to utopia that he can find a home in this new world.

The articulation of a utopian vision through the fulfillment of the romance plot proves puzzling for a literature that sees itself and is seen by others as transformative. As Jacobs asserts, "the courtship plot creates enormous problems for any utopian work intended to provoke social

³³ Roemer, *Utopian Audiences*, 26, 27.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁵ Naomi Jacobs, "Islandia: Plotting Utopian Desire," *Utopian Studies* 6.2 (1995): 79. My argument is in line with Jacobs's assertion that "utopian desire has often been expressed through particular genre conventions that work against the radical implications of utopian thought. From the nineteenth century onward, many utopian novels have been suffused with erotic desire and organized by the courtship plot that has dominated the novelistic narrativization of erotic desire in modern Western literature. This traditional plot tends to locate the satisfaction of desire in personal fulfillment rather than social change, [and] to relegate female characters to an object position within the narrative." But she and I differ in our understanding of what an alternative plot would look like. Although Jacobs argues that Austin Tappan Wright's *Islandia* (1942) reshapes the romance plot, the novel relies on a woman to bring the male protagonist into utopia, identifies that woman as an embodiment of the utopian ideal, and alters the romance plot only by having her better serve her country by marrying and having children with another man. While I am indebted to Jacobs's reading of the romance plot, I hope to expand and complicate her conception of the genre conventions of romance and its applications to contemporary feminist critical utopias. Jacobs, "Islandia," 75.

action.”³⁶ Couching protagonists’ transformations in terms of their romantic involvements effectively dilutes the force of the novels’ messages about utopian economic, political, and social change while heightening the resolution of the romance plot above other discussions of utopian change. As a result, Jean Pfaelzer maintains, “The romance form itself... limits the transforming function of utopian fiction.”³⁷ Even Roemer is forced to concede, “The domestic environment does obscure the potential effects of changes in economic, social, and family systems on the daily lives of workers.”³⁸ By predicating utopia on stereotypical female caretakers and focusing the novelistic resolution on the male’s acceptance and embrace of his female guardian angel, utopia comes to be about upholding traditional gender roles and relationships, rather than breaking new ground.

But perhaps the conventional resolution of reproductive heterosexual romance is not a limiting function of utopian literature. Perhaps it is fundamental to the utopian project and does in fact reflect what authors see as change. Utopias may create conditions that contemporary readers think of as traditional and regressive but that authors found lacking in their day.³⁹ For example, nineteenth century women’s fiction tended to depict reforms that to the contemporary reader may hardly seem like significant changes, regarding for instance self-improvement, household management, and marital harmony. Nina Baym explains, “Since this reformed world is primarily affectional and domestic it may appear to have much the same shape, to a twentieth-

³⁶ Ibid., 75.

³⁷ Pfaelzer, *Utopian Novel*, 41.

³⁸ Roemer, *Utopian Audiences*, 112.

³⁹ For a biography of Bellamy and a cogent discussion of his reasons for espousing the kind of utopia he did, see R. Jackson Wilson, “Experience and Utopia: The Making of Edward Bellamy’s ‘Looking Backward,’” *Journal of American Studies* 11.1 (1977): 45-60. For an account of Gilman’s utopian politics and her perspective on American society, see especially her 1898 treatise *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (Kindle Edition, 2010).

century reader, as the old. But... most of these novels see their old world as neither affectional nor domestic and they hope to impose these values on a society that seems to them governed purely by mercenary and exploitative considerations.”⁴⁰ Similarly, instead of being at odds with the transformative messages of utopia, it may be that the domestic worlds described in utopias like *Looking Backward*, *Caesar’s Column*, and *Herland* in fact constitute the novels’ utopian ideals. Following the reading practices I outlined in the prologue, I therefore strive to understand in this project what it is the text posits as its utopian ideal—where it wants to take the willing reader—rather than map my own desires for utopian change onto the imaginary world.

Plotting the Utopian Romance

What is the romance plot and why has it maintained such a strong hold on the feminist utopian imagination? While Rachel Blau DuPlessis reads the romance plot as identical to the marriage plot, defined by “the use of conjugal love as a telos and [by] the developing heterosexual love as a major, if not the only major, element in organizing the narrative action,” the romance form encapsulates a number of desires.⁴¹ Patricia A. Parker explains, “‘Romance’ is characterized primarily as a form which simultaneously quests for and postpones a particular end, objective, or object.”⁴² For Fredric Jameson, this object is in fact a projection of the Other

⁴⁰ Nina Baym, *Woman’s Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870*, 2nd edition (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 20.

⁴¹ DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond*, 200n22.

⁴² Patricia A. Parker, *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 4. It is this quest that leads Jean Radford to note that in “offering a vision of ‘the possible future or ideal,’” romance identifies itself as a utopian genre. Jean Radford, “A Certain Latitude: Romance as Genre,” in *Gender, Language, and Myth: Essays and Popular Narrative*, ed. Glenwood Irons (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 4.

that ends when the Other is finally revealed or “*tells his name*.”⁴³ The object of the romantic quest can therefore be “defined typologically, as Promised Land or Apocalypse,” or characterized as “the terminus of a fixed object,” making romance either “that mode or tendency which remains on the threshold before the promised end... [or] the liminal space before that object is fully named or revealed.”⁴⁴ Thus the feminist critical utopia’s investment in utopian realization is itself wrapped up in the unfolding and fulfilling of romance: the object of the quest is *both* the “Promised Land” of the utopian community and the “fixed object” of a mother, lover, or wife. This slippage between the end as utopian community and the end as reproductive heterosexuality structures the unfolding of the narrative toward that ending at the same time that it conflates these two objectives, utopia and love.⁴⁵

Significant to this project is therefore the ending of each novel I consider, for the ways the conclusion, structured as the acquisition of the object or objective of the quest, “finally answer[s] without remainder all of the presiding questions the story has raised.”⁴⁶ In answering these questions, the text frames and often re-frames our understanding of the quest itself and of the novel’s utopian ideal. Joseph Allen Boone, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and others have emphasized the open endings of many feminist texts beyond traditional

⁴³ Fredric Jameson, “Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre,” *New Literary History* 7.1 (1974), 161, emphasis original. For Jameson, this Other embodies the evil against which the romantic hero fights: “the concept of evil is at one with the category of Otherness itself: evil characterizes whatever is radically different from me” (140).

⁴⁴ Parker, *Romance*, 4-5.

⁴⁵ This conflation is further evident in that earlier fantasy genre, the medieval romance. In these tales, the hero undergoes a series of trials to prove his worthiness to join the courtly class, trials both motivated and rewarded by the acquisition of a suitable maiden. The journey toward utopia likewise uses the love object as both cause of and prize for election into the utopian world. See Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 186-188 and Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1953), 123.

⁴⁶ Noël Carroll, “Narrative Closure,” *Philosophical Studies* 135.1 (2007), 7.

closure in marriage or death, in a process DuPlessis describes as “writing beyond the ending, taking ending as a metaphor for conventional narrative, for a regimen of resolutions, and for the social, sexual, and ideological affirmations these make.”⁴⁷ But I maintain that even those contemporary feminist critical utopias that do not resolve through the typical marriage/death bind for female protagonists nevertheless hinge on the same “psychosexual and sociocultural construction of women” found in traditional plots.⁴⁸ Each novel’s ending, though it may look toward utopian possibilities beyond the text’s conclusion, uses the love object as a prize for the utopian quest. The resolution articulates the final details of the novel’s utopian vision in what turns out to be a welcomed return to the reader’s familiar social and sexual norms.

This emphasis on narrative structure, especially on closure, is counter to the dominant tendency in utopian scholarship to discuss utopia as an imaginary impossible, rather than in terms of the imaginative possibilities I outlined in the Prologue. Fredric Jameson argues, “it is less revealing to consider Utopian discourse as a mode of narrative, comparative, say, with novel or epic, than it is to grasp it as an object of meditation, analogous to the riddles or *koan* of the various mystical traditions, or the aporias of classical philosophy, whose function is to provoke a

⁴⁷ DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond*, 21. On the closure of the traditional marriage plot, see J. Hillis Miller, “The Problematic of Ending in Narrative,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 33.1 (1978): 5; “A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Plain Jane’s Progress” in Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1989), 125; and Rachel Blau DuPlessis, “Endings and Contradictions,” in *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frame*, ed. Brian Richardson (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002), 282-299. Elizabeth Abel explains, “As a marital ideology linking private bliss and public harmony gained force in England and America, paradigmatic narratives of courtship... both reflected and reinforced the power of the marriage pot by organizing narratives along an erotic trajectory that culminates... in modes of closure that resolve both narrative and sexual tensions and create the illusion of an ordered and enclosed fictional and social universe.” Elizabeth Abel, “Foiling the Marriage Plot,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 24.1 (1990): 111.

⁴⁸ DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond*, 4.

fruitful bewilderment, and to jar the mind into some heightened but unconceptualizable consciousness of its own powers, functions, aims and structural limits.”⁴⁹ Likewise Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry maintain, “Utopia can be more of a space for self-conscious speculation than a model of unrealizable, perfect space or political engagement.”⁵⁰ While I agree that utopian literature needn’t provide an actual model or blueprint for how to achieve a better world, the valorization of process over content—of speculation over model—risks moving utopian criticism too far away from the text itself, from the content of the utopian world and the structure that guides its realization. It is not enough to imagine something different; we have to look at what that different world entails and understand what changes we are being asked to undergo.

I am therefore concerned with what Peter Brooks calls “the design and intention of narrative, what shapes a story and gives it a certain direction or intent of meaning.”⁵¹ For Brooks, plot does not simply arrange what happens but embodies the forward-moving drive of the narrative from beginning to end. As Noël Carroll asserts, “narratives are driven from moment to moment.”⁵² Brooks explains, “Plots are not simply organizing structures, they are also intentional structures, goal-oriented and forward-moving.” In a plot structure like the romance, the love object is a device that makes the story “‘move forward,’ and makes us read forward, seeking in the unfolding of the narrative a line of intention and a portent of design that holds the

⁴⁹ Fredric Jameson, “Of Islands and Trenches: Naturalization and the Production of Utopian Discourse,” *Diacritics* 7.2 (1977): 11, emphasis original.

⁵⁰ Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry, eds., *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 4. Likewise, Tom Moylan insists, “The strength of critical utopian expression lies not in the particular social structures it portrays but in the very act of portraying a utopian vision itself,” and later reiterates, “The form is itself more significant than any of its content.” Moylan, *Demand*, 26, 39.

⁵¹ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Knopf, 1982), xi.

⁵² Carroll, “Closure,” 6.

promise of progress toward meaning.”⁵³ This progression toward “meaning” echoes the previous assertion that our understanding of the romance plot is impacted by its resolution. When the plotting of utopian transformation hinges on fulfilling a heteronormative romantic ideal, the novel, rather than promoting an open utopian vision, forecloses its imaginative intentions before it has even begun. To recognize this pattern therefore requires attention to both form and content—to the way the plot progresses toward closure and to the utopian vision such closure affords.

This study will illustrate the ways utopian scholars have persisted in misreading these plots, imagining instances of radical change even when the narrative resolution arguably suggests otherwise. Harold Bloom refers to misreading as a form of misprision, an error in judgment he says constitutes the very basis of poetic production.⁵⁴ I am more concerned rather with how the misreading I perceive constitutes a selective reading, overlooking troublesome aspects that do not accord with preconceived ideas of what the narrative should be. Jeanette Winterson argues:

What we write about fiction is never an objective response to a text; it is always part of a bigger mythmaking—the story we are telling ourselves about ourselves. That story changes. George Orwell, writing in 1940 about Henry Miller, has very different preoccupations from Kate Millett writing about Miller in 1970. Orwell doesn’t notice that Miller-women are semihuman objects. In fact, his long essay ‘Inside the Whale’ barely mentions women at all. Millett does notice that half the

⁵³ Brooks, *Plot*, 12, xiii.

⁵⁴ See Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 6.

world has been billeted to the whorehouse, and wonders what this tell us about both Henry Miller and the psyche and sexuality of the American male.⁵⁵

Winterson shows how misreading can favor male interests by overlooking aspects that threaten a dominant position, and then points to a feminist counternarrative that makes visible previous elisions. All readers participate in mythmaking, she suggests, but a fuller reading (which she assumes a feminist reading to be) tries to minimize the oversights that contribute to incomplete or inadequate understandings of a text.

Interestingly, however, the misreading of feminist critical utopias has had the opposite effect as Orwell's misreading. These selective insights, I will argue, tend to isolate elements to show that the text voices a revolutionary feminist ideology, without placing these elements within the whole narrative as it unfolds or contending with other aspects in the text that might complicate or contradict that reading. As Rita Felski notes, "[Critics] have a habit of imposing their own obsessions on literary works without always listening to what a specific work is saying. And why should feminist critics be more or less susceptible to this than anyone else?"⁵⁶ Although we come to literature with existing thoughts and experiences, reading a text through a preconceived ideological lens skews the critical reading process in favor of what that lens already supports. Look for a feminist utopia or an imaginative escape, and as long as the text satisfies the surface of your desires, you are more likely to follow wherever the narratives goes—as in Laura Miller's early encounters with *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* or my first reading of *Xenogenesis*. As the founder of the countercultural publication *Brat Attack* laments about community activists, "I feel as if there is a point... where you take one issue and you have

⁵⁵ Jeanette Winterson, "The Male Mystique of Henry Miller," *The New York Times*, January 26, 2012. <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9501E3D71739F93AA15752C0A9649D8B63&ref=henrymiller>.

⁵⁶ Rita Felski, *Literature After Feminism* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2003), 10.

blindness about anything else.”⁵⁷ Perhaps the first glimmer of a feminist critical remaking of a classic utopian tradition is so rich, so exciting, and so unprecedented that it does not initially seem to warrant a fuller reading of how the unusual arrangement or innovative technology, for example, operates within the logic of the text. Contemporary feminist utopian scholars may be so invested in the “unconceptualized consciousness” espoused by Jameson that they pay less attention to the specifics of the narrative. Perhaps there is also an implicit concern that critiquing such elements might be seen as denouncing the feminist achievements of the text or fostering divisiveness, even if greater discussion and debate could instead strengthen the feminist politics of the genre. Critics may be so invested in encouraging this genre to thrive that they read primarily for signs of the novels’ successes instead of advocating a more nuanced and critical approach.

It is harder to understand why these blind spots persist even in feminist critical utopian writing itself. A single text contains any number of “inherently possible plots” or directions the plot could have gone.⁵⁸ A contemporary feminist critical utopia could stay within the parameters of the genre and still transgress some of its norms by trying something different. For example, a text could create a world that more fully depicts queer relations or other forms of fulfillment, instead of mentioning queer embodiment but representing only normative heterosexual bonds. Or it could leave aside romance altogether and focus on the multifaceted social, political, and economic changes of the new society. Authors could take strides to imagine more varied manifestations of romance, to give romance a different position in the narrative unfolding, or

⁵⁷ Dana Collins, “‘No Experts: Guaranteed!’: Do-It-Yourself Sex Radicalism and the Production of the Lesbian Sex Zine ‘Brat Attack,’” *Signs* 25.1 (1999): 76. I talk more about *Brat Attack* and other zines, small circulation self-published magazines, in the Coda.

⁵⁸ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 450; see also 9 and 448-450.

even dispense with it altogether, focusing the energy and attention of the novel on the better world itself.⁵⁹ Many critics have already done important work to address alternative ways of thinking about gender, sexuality and the status quo.⁶⁰ Contemporary feminist critical utopian literature and theory stands to benefit from a more productive engagement with feminist and queer theory to expand the horizons of possibility for the genre and its scholarship, which I elaborate on toward the end of this project. These directions stand to radicalize the imaginative work of the text by looking beyond the romance plot for other ways of depicting utopian change.

But even if authors do try to innovate on this familiar plot, they may come up against restrictions regarding “what is felt to be narratable by both literary and social conventions.”⁶¹ The demands of publishers and popular expectations can keep writers locked into conventional romance, a complaint Louisa May Alcott made when her publisher instructed her marry to off her beloved Jo March.⁶² Additionally, it is plausible that the formula serves a useful function in

⁵⁹ Joseph Allen Boone’s chapter “Uneasy Wedlock and the Counter-Tradition’s Contribution to Open Form: Beyond the ‘Happy Ending,’” in *Tradition Counter Tradition: Love and the Form of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) offers more instances to challenge narrative expectations of marriage and closure. However, as Elizabeth Abel points out, Boone overstates the impact of many of the counter-traditions he identifies, without questioning how the structuring of these novels or his own text serve to glorify rigid binaries and essential gender traits. See Abel, “Foiling,” 112.

⁶⁰ The range of approaches to this problem encompasses a variety of theoretical positions, but I find especially relevant the possibilities for sex, gender, and subjectivity raised by queer theorists: see Lauren Berlant “Introduction: The Intimate Public Sphere” in *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, 1-24; Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), especially 5-9; José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1-32; and Lee Edelman, “The Future is Kid’s Stuff” in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 1-32.

⁶¹ DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond*, 3.

⁶² Michelle Ann Abate quotes a letter Alcott wrote to her uncle Samuel Joseph May: “publishers are very *perverse* & wont let authors have their own way so my little women must grow up & be married off in a very stupid style.” Abate adds, “Alcott’s decision to have her tomboyish character marry the paternalistic Professor Bhaer instead of chum Laurie Lawrence—as not only her editor but many of young readers desired—was her tacit protest against this convention: ‘I

helping readers, writers, and publishers recognize the patterns and expectations that structure this subgenre, making authors loath to disrupt them. And authors who attempt something different may continue to make the same mistakes, applying superficial changes that fail to impact underlying structures and norms. But as Lauren Berlant points out, “one of the main utopias is normativity itself.”⁶³ What if the aspiration of the contemporary feminist critical utopian genre to imagine social change is stronger in the scholarship than in the primary texts themselves? Perhaps the utopian desire expressed in the novels is indeed for normative heterofeminine ideals, for creating opportunities for romance to thrive rather than subverting its resolution in the status quo. Or perhaps the narrative shortcomings are more nuanced, and the closed, conservative structure comes from differing ideas about what feminism looks like, leading authors to maintain that ideal motherhood and caretaking, for instance, reflect a feminist ideal.

It may also be that authors hold on to romance as a key way to make the utopia appear personable, warm, and a desirable world to pursue. Classic utopian worlds have often been criticized as seeming dystopian in their overt rationalism. Contemporary feminist critical utopian writers may therefore try to compensate for the absence of emotion in previous utopian worlds by drawing on the emotionality of the romance plot. Susan Sontag points out, “In the classic models of utopian thinking—Plato’s Republic, Campanella’s City of the Sun, More’s Utopia, Swift’s land of the Houyhnhnms, Voltaire’s Eldorado... reasonableness had achieved an

wanted to disappoint the young gossips who vowed that Laurie and Jo *should* marry.” Michelle Ann Abate, *Raising Your Kids Right: Children’s Literature and American Political Conservatism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 7, emphasis original.

⁶³ Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 5. My thanks to Sean Grattan for pointing out that for those outside the bourgeois model of the heterosexual home, such a model for gender roles and family life may well start to look utopian.

unbreakable supremacy over the emotions.”⁶⁴ She then goes on to show how such impassiveness is also common in dystopian genres. When earth is invaded in popular science fiction films of the Cold War, for instance, “the other-world creatures that seek to take ‘us’ over are an ‘it,’ not a ‘they’ ... And it is this regime of emotionlessness, of impersonality, of regimentation, which they will impose on the earth if they are successful. ‘No more love, no more beauty, no more pain,’ boasts a converted earthling in *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956).” The terrifying future is devoid of emotions; “no more love” could be the tagline of many dystopian worlds. Against this fear of the impersonal “technocratic man, purged of emotions” emblematic of the Communist enemy, romance assures readers the utopian world will nourish love, not refashion it altogether.⁶⁵

Lastly, authors who do not strive to reproduce the romance plot may also find it is difficult to imagine what might take its place. In a parallel argument, Janice Radway suggests male violence is common in popular romance novels “not because certain writers and readers enjoy it but because they cannot imagine it away. To them, such behavior may seem so natural, permanent, and unassailable that they hunger even more for a fantasy that will contradict their suspicions and convince them that it can lead to female contentment and happiness.”⁶⁶ This is akin to Rebecca Totaro’s speculation that early modern authors like Thomas More and Margaret Cavendish did not eliminate plague from their utopian worlds because they couldn’t imagine a world without disease: “The Renaissance paradigm for the human condition, then, had a permanent place for plague and, as far as I can tell, no one—writer, doctor, or priest—was able

⁶⁴ Susan Sontag, “The Imagination of Disaster,” in *Against Interpretation* (New York Delta, 1961), 220.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 221, 222.

⁶⁶ Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 169.

to think beyond it.”⁶⁷ The romance plot is one of the most basic organizing principles of literature, from the medieval quest romances to nineteenth century sentimental literature to popular fiction and “chick lit” of the current day: “romance plots... are, evidently, some of the deep, shared structures of our culture.”⁶⁸ Perhaps romance, like the plague, seems an incontrovertible part of our world.⁶⁹

Given the difficulties of imagining a postromantic utopia, it may be hard to find an example that meets my demands for contemporary feminist critical utopias to challenge the heterofeminine status quo. Isn't it enough that the genre exists, and that these authors are doing something to interrogate social norms? As the “free fem” Daya cries to another formerly enslaved woman Aldera in Suzy McKee Charnas's *Motherlines* (1978), “Most of us burned out our courage crossing the borderlands [to escape]. What great task must I now perform to satisfy

⁶⁷ Rebecca Totaro, “English Plague and New World Promise,” *Utopian Studies* 10.1 (1999): 2.

⁶⁸ DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond*, 2. Fredric Jameson notes, “This particular type of literary discourse [the romance] is not bound to the conventions of a given age, nor indissolubly linked to a given type of verbal artifact, but rather persists as a temptation and a mode of expression across a whole range of historical periods, seeming to offer itself, if only intermittently, as a formal possibility which can be revived and renewed.” Jameson, “Magical” 142. Nina Baym summarizes the embeddedness of the romance in the novel form when she explains that after a popular 1824 essay on romance by Walter Scott, many authors began to define romance as “a type of novel which is in turn a modern type of romance.” Nina Baym, *Feminism and American Literary History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 64.

⁶⁹ Not only is it hard work to come up with something new, but familiar patterns can start to seem inevitable. For example, Le Guin has written that when crafting the genderless world of the planet Gethen in *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), she included a taboo against incest because “the old incest prohibitions... are so general among us—and with good cause, I think, not so much genetic as psychological—that they seemed likely to be equally valid on Gethen.” Le Guin considers the incest taboo a given, but Octavia Butler's “Near of Kin” (1979) is “a sympathetic story of incest” and Doris Lessing's *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five* (1981) normalizes dreams about incest. What seems an indisputable truth to one author is fair grounds for exploration to another; perhaps the romance plot only seems unassailable because few within the feminist critical utopian canon have so far taken the initiative to assail it. Ursula K. Le Guin, *Dancing At the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places* (New York: Grove, 1989), 14; Octavia E. Butler, “Afterword” to “Near of Kin” in *Bloodchild* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1996), 55; and Doris Lessing, *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five* (New York: Vintage, 1981), 173-177.

your standards?”⁷⁰ But in criticizing Daya for supporting hierarchical structures in their new community, Alldera’s point is that to consider the struggle finished is to miss the very possibility for utopian realization. This is also the premise of the critical utopian genre, which by definition “present[s] a good place with problems” and “focus[es] on the continuing presence of difference and imperfection within utopian society itself.”⁷¹ None of the utopian worlds I consider are beyond the need for change, yet by emphasizing the good she has done, Daya stops herself from having to do more. Likewise, although the books I discuss in the middle chapters are arguably the most promising of the genre, that doesn’t mean we cannot envision texts that might advance both the feminist and utopian projects more effectively. Until we stop endorsing these normative arrangements parading as feminist ideals, we, like Daya, will never create anything else.

Patterns and Trends

To encourage speculation about what new, unthought discursive spaces contemporary feminist critical utopian literature might begin to develop, this dissertation emphasizes close critical readings that illustrate each novel’s continued investment in the heterosexual romance plot with its restrictive expectations for female behaviors and roles. Tzvetan Todorov writes, “When we examine works of literature from the perspective of genre, we engage in a very particular enterprise: we discover a principle operative in a number of texts, rather than what is specific about each of them.” These readings place the specifics of each text in conversation with each other to show that what may seem particular to an individual novel in fact forms part of a pattern or trend—an operative principle—that constitutes the feminist critical utopian genre. As

⁷⁰ Suzy McKee Charnas, *Motherlines*, (New York: Berkeley, 1978), 159.

⁷¹ Sargent, “Three Faces,” 8, and Moylan, *Demand*, 10-11.

Todorov goes on to maintain, “For there to be a transgression, a norm must be apparent.”⁷²

Looking at the operation of the romance plot within the genre draws attention to the norms at work in order to establish the need for transgressions and consider ways such developments could occur.

To make the case that these norms constitute restrictive aspects of the genre and argue for how they can be overcome, I examine key passages and plot elements of these texts through two strands of feminist theory. I go back to second-wave feminist thinkers who have shown the sexism embedded in much literary criticism to highlight how contemporary critical feminist utopias and the scholarship about them suffer from similar problems, revealing some of the blind spots in current utopian scholarship. I then also turn to more recent feminist and queer theorists who have challenged some of the tenets of second wave feminism to suggest new directions in which feminist critical utopian literature and scholarship could develop. I also turn to popular culture feminist writers, film critics, and bloggers who offer insightful readings of the texts, characters, plot structures, and tropes I address, suggesting that perhaps their position outside the academy makes them less invested in upholding a canon of contemporary feminist critical utopias and therefore more willing to critique as well as praise. These varied critical readings point to a more complex and nuanced reading of what has been previously celebrated within the genre, deepening and problematizing the feminist principles of these texts.

I bridge these feminist theories with a consideration of narrative and the construction of plot to ask what impact the romance plot and its traditional resolution have on the feminist aspirations of the genre. In contending with the political and rhetorical implications of narrative through a feminist lens, I show how the liberatory potential of utopian thought has been

⁷² Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), 3, 8.

appropriated into a more conservative conception of what desirable change might be, how narrative structures are used to foreclose alternative imaginings, and how forms of gender oppression persist in feminist critical utopian thought. I suggest the romance plot organizes critical utopian narrative in such a way that female characters become simplified plot devices for achieving a dream of the utopian home. My critique is not intended to downplay the genuine feminist achievements of these texts, but to ask how feminist critical utopianism can be more fully invigorated to challenge narrative conventions and produce the unthought meanings, identities, and ways of being in the world that Grosz calls feminist and I call both feminist and utopian. Turning at last to examples of what I consider more successful contemporary feminist critical utopian texts, I then ask how authors can develop alternative characters, plots, and utopian outcomes that better articulate the kinds of challenges to the status quo the genre seeks.

While the phenomena I observe characterize the 1970s feminist critical utopias that first defined the genre, the shortcomings of transformative feminist thought within the novels is not unique to the decade. *Courting Utopia* follows the development of the genre into the twenty-first century to show how similar problems persist. Despite the advancement of feminism and women's rights in the intervening years (and ongoing innovations within narrative and form across literary genres), contemporary feminist critical utopias from the 2000s are remarkably similar to their 1970s predecessors. By pairing canonical and genre-defining texts from both time periods, I illustrate how the genre is characterized less by marked development and change than by a consistency and constancy across historical periods. Counter to the emphasis on newness celebrated by Moylan, Baccolini, Lefanu, and others, examining these novels in conversation with each other suggests a lack of formal, ideological, and imaginative innovation when it comes to narrative conventions and utopian ideals.

The rest of this dissertation turns to close readings of the texts themselves. Chapter 2, “Nurturing Women, Utopian Men: Ray Bradbury and Ursula Le Guin,” explores how both a classic and a feminist critical author portray utopian communities as possible only when women use supposedly innate capacities for care and support to lead wayward men into the utopian world. While Bradbury trades on stereotyped female characters to compel the utopian plotline, Le Guin’s feminist revision continues to conflate utopia and romance while relying on female caretakers who function to advance the male protagonist’s aims. My third chapter, “The ‘Female Principle’: Sentimental Motherhood in *Woman on the Edge of Time*, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Year of the Flood*” elaborates on the positioning of female caretakers in three feminist critical utopias from the 1970s and the 2000s that are structured around idealized conceptions of sentimental motherhood. Authors Marge Piercy and Margaret Atwood base their understanding of dystopia and utopia on women’s reproductive bodies, suggesting utopias are utopian because they allow women’s natural maternalism to bloom, in contrast to the perverting sexual-economic conditions of the dystopia world. In all of the above examples, utopia is not a radical deviation from the status quo but a world that codifies normative sex and gender roles to ensure a stable and fruitful society.

How does the utopian female of Chapters 2 and 3 know which man to support? In Chapter 4, “Choosing Utopia: Courtship Narratives in Contemporary Young Adult Dystopias,” I examine the intersections between courtship and the possibilities for a utopian future in popular contemporary young adult fiction. In Suzanne Collins’s trilogy *The Hunger Games* (2008-2010) and Scott Westerfeld’s four-volume *Uglies* series (2005-2008), which I position as part of the feminist critical utopian genre, the turn toward utopia within dystopian narratives is predicated on romantic involvements, as young women caught in typical love triangles learn to choose the

right man. But while Collins's protagonist fights for utopia in order to marry and have children, making the utopian resolution synonymous with the romantic resolution, Westerfeld challenges the normative gender conventions of feminist critical utopias with a more genuinely rebellious female hero who keeps fighting for change. The conclusion of Westerfeld's series alters the traditional *bildungsroman* to keep alive a conception of utopia as an ongoing challenge to the status quo.

While in Westerfeld the transformative potential of the feminist critical utopia remains limited, the genre does have the potential to imagine alternative possibilities for feminist utopian change. I begin Chapter 5, "Approximating Paradise," by looking at examples by Robert C. O'Brien and Samuel R. Delany that challenge the romance plot by disabusing characters of their fantasies of patriarchal romance. But while *Z for Zachariah* (1975) and *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia* (1976) continue to revolve around romance even while critiquing its shortcomings, it is in Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1998) that I finally find a novel that more fully reconceptualizes utopian possibilities for female characters. By incorporating elements of the fantastic into a multivocal narrative form, Morrison creates a complex and open feminist critical utopia that allows women a way out of traditional heteronormative social, sexual, and maternal roles and then shows how such freedoms change society for the better. In considering how Morrison works toward new instantiations of feminist utopian possibility, I suggest the narrative conventions of the contemporary feminist critical utopia needn't be linked to female bodies, normative gendered behavior, or functional female roles, providing a much-needed model for how to rethink utopian narrative beyond the romance plot. Finally, in a brief Coda, I build on the possibilities offered by *Paradise* to explore additional examples of radical, transformative literature outside the utopian genre that might provide further models for feminist social change.

Striving to imagine a postromantic feminist utopian narrative is not to advocate for a world entirely free of romance, or to suggest utopia needn't be a place that values emotions or fosters loving relationships. Instead, it is to question how and why a narrative focus on romance comes to eclipse other forms of emotional expression and fulfillment, asking what social, political, and economic systems are furthered by a commitment to the romance plot and what systems are thereby denied. It is to consider how and why an uncomplicated and universal conception of ideal womanhood remains central to the feminist critical utopian imagination, and what narrative strategies might enable more historical, nuanced, and oppositional models to take its place. The problems I raise are not endemic to the novel form itself, or the result of the aspirations of the critical utopian genre. The end of this dissertation suggests it is possible to produce alternatives that do not equate utopia with heterosexual monogamous reproductive marriage and that strive to imagine what impossible, as-yet-unthought openings could replace conventional finales too often associated with narrative as well as personal fulfillment. Contending with the narrative possibilities for feminist critical utopias beyond the romance plot allows us to hold on to the genre's promise of imaginative transformation while maintaining that such a transformation can work to offer the new discursive spaces central to both feminist and utopian forms.

Chapter 2

Nurturing Women, Utopian Men: Ray Bradbury and Ursula K. Le Guin

Though the feminist critical utopias of the 1970s are said to represent a marked departure from the male-dominated utopias of previous decades, the genre is heavily indebted to its traditional predecessors, especially regarding gender and romance. This chapter examines how the romance plot fosters a gendered conception of utopia in a classic text that could hardly be considered feminist, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), to illustrate how similar principles are utilized in one of the first and most influential feminist critical utopias from twenty years later, Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* (1974). Feminist critical utopias ostensibly do different kinds of imaginative work than classic utopias: Le Guin is concerned with investing utopian and science fiction with a feminist perspective, using the speculative form to rethink normative expectations regarding gender, hierarchy, and social norms. But reading these Cold War novels side by side reveals remarkable similarities, as both imagine utopia as a traditional, heterosexual ideal predicated on women who support and care for male protagonists. Examining how both novels motivate the protagonist's turn toward utopia and articulate his vision for the ideal society, it becomes apparent that even the feminist critical utopia relies on servile women to minister to the male protagonist's needs. Although Le Guin has been upheld as advancing the imaginative possibilities of the feminist critical utopian genre, especially with regards to women's roles, *The Dispossessed* works much like *Fahrenheit 451* to use this supportive female figure to produce a utopian world that works to reinforce normative gender roles rather than subvert them, thereby limiting the ways in which the reader is led to imagine possibilities for radical change.

Both *Fahrenheit 451* and *The Dispossessed* are told from the perspective of a brave and rebellious male protagonist. Both are plotted around a formula of romance that uses a woman who is nurturing and inspiring to ease this protagonist—and, by extension, the reader—into utopia with her.¹ This nurturing woman drives the utopian plotline and motivates the hero's progress, and it is she who becomes the means and ends of utopian change. Contrasted to a dystopian woman who represents the world the protagonist must ultimately reject, the utopian woman personifies the heteronormative domestic roles the utopian turn brings about. It is this conception of the heterosexual home that most embodies the utopian world for which both novels strive. Other critics, most notably Tom Moylan, have written about the nurturing woman in these novels, but they have treated her as an isolated case, not recognizing the key role she plays in the achievement of utopia and the ways she exemplifies the utopian dream. Looking at a traditional and a critical feminist utopia together, however, makes apparent how both novels conceptualize utopia as a heteronormative ideal by predicating the turn toward utopia on a stereotypical arrangement between an agential man and the nurturing woman who supports him.

The nurturing woman is a specific character type who provides for the male protagonist throughout his times of need. Nurturance encourages others to grow, develop, and flourish; the term encompasses functional roles like caretaker, advocate, and muse while highlighting how these activities all focus on developing the capacities of another. I am therefore interested not only in how the women I discuss in this chapter aid the male protagonist, but how they allow him to thrive. The nurturing woman facilitates the hero's personal and intellectual maturation while assuring him that utopia will be a place of happiness, fertility, and growth. Chapter 3 will address

¹ “To the extent that the reader identifies wholly with the protagonist, the reader will share those struggles and their ultimate resolution.” In other words, the reader will “experience with the protagonist his seduction by utopia.” Jacobs, “*Islandia*,” 79.

forms of female nurturance specifically associated with maternity and child-rearing; here I am concerned with women who nurture adult men by providing the insights and encouragement the men need to realize their potential and develop a new utopian world. While nurturing female characters may nurture in different ways, their roles throughout the narratives remain the same: they exist to cultivate male potential and, in turn, the potential of the utopian society. Nurturing women are credited with all that is good, while those who fail to perform their prescribed duties are blamed for dystopia's shortcomings and denied a place in the utopian world.

The nurturing woman combines several female stereotypes, including sympathetic ear, unconditional caretaker, and inspiring muse.² Such an idealized and objectified "semi-divine" figure has "been a part of the Western tradition of the muse since the overlay of Christian neoplatonism on ancient Greek myth."³ The female muse who inspires male creation "participates in a long tradition identifying the author as a male who is primary and the female as his passive creation—a secondary object lacking autonomy, endowed with often contradictory meaning but denied intentionality."⁴ In the novels I consider here, the passive female is figured as inspiration to the male protagonist, not the author. Whereas "the active male engenders his

² On stereotypes of women in fiction, see Alfred Habegger, *Gender, Fantasy, and Realism in American Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 23-27, and Ruth Yeazell, "Fictional Heroines and Feminist Critics," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 8.1 (1974): 29-30. On the history of "male creators of female exemplars" see Chapter Ten, "Fiction: The Woman of Feeling," in Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (New York: Methuen, 1986), 110-128.

³ Talia Schaffer, "A Tethered Angel: The Martyrology of Alice Meynell," *Victorian Poetry* 38.1 (2000): 50, and Joyce Zonana "The Embodied Muse: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh and Feminist Poetics," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 8.2 (1989): 244. Zonana explains, the female muse is either "the passive female object of the active male poet's quest" or "external and Other to the poet" (241). In this depiction of the female as object and Other, we can see a parallel figuration to the romantic quest detailed by Parker and Jameson in Chapter 1. See also Mary K. DeShazer, *Inspiring Women: Reimagining the Muse* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1986), 2.

⁴ Susan Gubar, "'The Blank Page' and Issues of Female Creativity," *Critical Inquiry* 8.2 (1981): 247.

poetry upon the body of the passive female muse,” the muse in these novels remains an “inspiring force” to the otherwise dominant male.⁵ Marilyn Farwell explains, “The woman remains a means by which the male completes his quest, not a lover with her own sexual/spiritual needs.”⁶ The nurturing female is always on hand to help her man develop into a new utopian subject and a dynamic voice for change.

This figure persists in both classic and critical utopias. In *Fahrenheit 451*, Clarisse rouses the hero to action, awakening his capacity for awareness, sensitivity, and social change. In *The Dispossessed*, Takver supports her man by inspiring his work ethic while keeping him grounded and calm. When he is away traveling, the dystopian woman Vea fulfills Takver’s role by providing an opportunity for sexual release presented as natural, necessary, and the animating force of male creativity.⁷ These three characters may initially appear unrelated: the two women I address in Le Guin’s novel seem diametrically opposed, one a steady caretaker and wife and the other likened to a prostitute, mirroring a stark dichotomy between utopian and dystopian women also seen in Bradbury’s text. Meanwhile the utopian woman in *Fahrenheit 451* serves to shake up a complacent man, while the utopian woman in *The Dispossessed* instead has a soothing effect.⁸ But while Le Guin in some ways makes a critical advance by giving greater attention to

⁵ DeShazer, *Inspiring Women*, 10, and Joanne Feit Diehl, “‘Come Slowly Eden’: An Exploration of Women Poets and Their Muse,” *Signs* 3.3 (1978): 576.

⁶ Marilyn R. Farwell, “Toward a Definition of the Lesbian Literary Imagination,” *Signs* 14.1 (1988): 107.

⁷ *The Dispossessed* also includes a gay male character, Bedap, who plays a similar although less extensive role. I discuss Bedap below; however my primary concern here is with the sexualized female characters in the novel.

⁸ Clarisse and Takver also help to construct the figure of the ideal male, as they enhance the emotional awareness of the male protagonist. Julie Ellison explains that stereotypical figures of female sympathy in literature tend to “serve sensitive masculinity” by constructing a “deep-feeling, fragile man of sensibility” who is emotionally aware and yet “thoroughly masculine.” In contrast to a stereotypical macho man, this sensitive man draws on rather than shuns the

female characters than Bradbury and contending with issues related to sexuality, gender equality, and normative roles, she makes both Takver and Vea instantiations of the conservative phenomenon found in Clarisse. All three of these women are present to encourage men to flourish, functioning as typically “flat” female characters who exist to induce change in the “round” male protagonist.⁹ They are upheld as the embodiment of an ideal world or denigrated as its opposite based on how they do or do not bring about a normative social arrangement characterized by the nuclear family and in which women exist to provide nurturance and support. I will discuss how the advent of feminism and rise of the counterculture movements of the 1960s impact Le Guin’s conceptualization of the female muse with regards to female sexuality, marital equality, and opportunities for women outside the home. Nevertheless, I maintain that Le Guin’s feminist critical utopia appropriates “this exemplary female”¹⁰ to maintain rather than subvert the gendered narrative structure and utopian vision of a traditional text like Bradbury’s.

“Who Am I”?: Discovering the Utopian Self in *Fahrenheit 451*

Ray Bradbury’s bestselling novel, considered “a literary classic” alongside *Brave New World* (1932) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), introduces readers to firefighter Guy Montag,

nurturance women provide. Julie Ellison, *Cato’s Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 33, 20.

⁹ Flat characters are “unalterable” because “they [are] not changed by circumstances; they [move] through circumstances, which gives them in retrospect a comforting quality.” Round characters, by contrast, are affected by their environment and therefore capable of change. E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel and Related Writings* (1927; London: Edward Arnold, 1974), 48; see also 46-54. On the frequent figuration of flat characters as female, see Molly Hite, *The Other Side of the Story: Structures and Strategies of Contemporary Feminist Narrative* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 26-27.

¹⁰ Elaine Showalter, “Killing the Angel in the House: The Autonomy of Women Writers,” *The Antioch Review* 50.1/2 (1992): 208.

whose job is to start fires rather than extinguish them.¹¹ But although the “apparently pessimistic” novel describes a dystopian world of destruction, surveillance, and apathy, it also tells a utopian tale about renewal and hope, a tale in which “the final affirmation is quite clear.”¹² Montag’s turn toward utopia reflects his intellectual development: he begins the novel an unquestioning subject of the dystopian regime, parroting the society’s rules against reading and enthralled by the pleasures of book burning. But he soon begins to rebel against orders, sneaking books to read, refusing to start fires, and challenging his wife and her friends to change their ways. Eventually he escapes the city and joins a small community of outsiders who memorize books to ensure literature and history will endure, creating an alternative network of resistance beyond the eyes of the watchful regime. Montag’s trials and eventual triumph may seem a fairly straightforward indictment of an anti-intellectual, totalitarian regime. But closer attention to how the women in the novel function to facilitate Montag’s transformation will suggest that Bradbury’s utopia comes about only when women take care of men in a society based on proper heterosexual roles.

To propel Montag into the utopian world, *Fahrenheit 451* introduces two contrasting women, Montag’s dreadful wife Mildred and his exuberant teenaged neighbor Clarisse.

¹¹ Sam Weller, *The Bradbury Chronicles: The Life of Ray Bradbury* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 209.

¹² Willis E. McNelly, “Ray Bradbury,” in *Science Fiction Writers: Critical Studies of the Major Authors from the Early Nineteenth Century to the Present Day*, ed. Everett Franklin Bleiler (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1982), 172. Gary Saul Morson calls the novel an “anti utopia” and David Seed characterizes it as part of the postwar dystopian tradition, but William F. Touponce, like McNelly, locates it squarely in the utopian tradition. See Gary Saul Morson, *The Boundaries of Genre: Dostoyevsky’s The Diary of a Writer and the Traditions of Literary Utopia* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 117, and David Seed, “The Flight from the Good Life: ‘Fahrenheit 451’ in the Context of Postwar American Dystopias,” *Journal of American Studies* 28.2 (1994): 225-240. See also George E. Connor, “Spelunking with Ray Bradbury: The Allegory of the Cave in *Fahrenheit 451*,” *Extrapolation* 45.4 (2004): 410 and William F. Touponce, *Ray Bradbury and the Poetics of Reverie: Fantasy, Science Fiction, and the Reader* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Research Press, 1984), 79-83.

Presented as the quintessential foil to Clarisse's utopian ideal, Mildred represents all that is wrong with the dystopian world and illustrates precisely why a nurturing utopian woman is needed to turn the society around. Emotionally out of touch, physically unavailable, and explicitly anti-reproductive, Mildred is primarily associated with death: in the first few pages of the novel, Montag comes home to find her splayed on the floor, overdosed on sleeping pills. After having her stomach pumped, she has no recollection of the episode and denies she took too many pills, protesting, "Oh, I wouldn't do a thing like that."¹³ Mildred's suicide attempt and subsequent denial link the destructive impulses of dystopia with a pervasive lack of self-awareness and self-reflection. It's never clear whether she overdoses intentionally or accidentally—whether ending her life is her only self-aware act or simply the consequence of numbing oblivion—but her refusal to accept responsibility is an explicit repudiation of her agency.

In a strident critique of technology and the relentless march of capitalist progress, the alienation between Mildred and Montag results from the ubiquity of technological apparatuses that interfere with direct experience.¹⁴ The TV and the car are mediators; husband and wife are only together with one of these objects between them. When Mildred, the "consumer-wife,"¹⁵ wants to buy a fourth television wall-screen, Montag imagines them surrounded by the walls that enclose and separate them, thinking, "Well, wasn't there a wall between him and Mildred, when

¹³ Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* (1953; New York: Del Ray, 1991), 19. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

¹⁴ The novel is often read as a plea for direct, unmediated connection said to counter the effects of technology and mass entertainment. *New York Times* critic Orville Prescott writes, "[H]is basic message is a plea for direct, personal experience rather than perpetual, synthetic entertainment; for individual thought, action and responsibility; for the great tradition of independent thinking and artistic achievement symbolized in books." Quoted in Weller, *Chronicles*, 208.

¹⁵ Seed, "Flight from the Good Life," 231.

you came down to it? Literally not just one wall but, so far, three!” (44). He jumps from this image to a vision of them engaged in the other popular pastime of dystopia, speeding from nowhere to nowhere:

And if it was not the three walls soon to be four walls and the dream complete, then it was the open car and Mildred driving a hundred miles an hour across town, he shouting at her and she shouting back and both trying to hear what was said, but hearing only the scream of the car... And she pushed it up to one hundred and five miles an hour and tore the breath from his mouth (46).

The car takes their breath away, rendering them incapable of speech. Although they shout, they hear only the vehicle, their personhood already effaced as they try “to hear what was said” instead of listen to who is speaking. The passive voice eliminates the speaking agent as the car effectively excises the human presence from the scene.

Mildred’s association with the car and the television, and the Seashell Radio ear buds she wears to sleep so she never has to be alone with her thoughts or listen to Montag’s, all serve to render her less human by making her incapable of expressing or experiencing that most human of emotions: love. When she complains about Montag not watching her “family” of TV actors, Montag responds: “‘Millie, does—’ He licked his lips. ‘Does your ‘family’ love you, love you *very* much, love you with all their heart and soul, Millie?’” Mildred counters dumbly, “Why’d you ask a silly question like that?” (77, emphasis original). The fact that Mildred not only cannot answer but does not understand the question places her in the same category as the television and the radio, automatons that appear to “think” and “speak” but are incapable of human emotion. The TV family does not love with “all their heart and soul” because they have no heart and soul; that Mildred does not love as well suggests that she, too, is heartless. Such a characterization

foreshadows the ways in which the utopian corrective will reinstate the love and family this dystopian nightmare lacks.

Mildred embodies the novel's position on invasive technology, mindless progress, and mass entertainment in post-war society, and the connection between these criticisms and her dismissal of family highlights the overall gendering of Bradbury's critique. Mildred's callous turn away from Montag in favor of the "ersatz intimacy with the 'family' on the screen"¹⁶ speaks to her most damning feature of all: her apparent frigidity. As David Seed points out, the couple's relationship is sexless: "Again and again the dark space of their bedroom is stressed, its coldness and silence."¹⁷ The blame for their marriage is put squarely on Mildred and her asexuality; in a passage Bradbury ultimately did not include in the novel, Mildred is covered in "thickened, sexless material" that is "draped in such a way as not to prove whether man or woman sat there beneath."¹⁸ The combined evidence of Mildred's lack of feeling, lack of femininity, and lack of sexuality signify the deficiencies of the dystopian world, conflating affect, technology, and procreation in an effort to turn readers against her and the sterile society.

The failure of the dystopian woman to fulfill her physical and emotional requirements culminates in Mildred's refusal to reproduce. Brian Baker rightly observes, "the dystopian state is signified by the absence of children,"¹⁹ and it is important to note how closely this absence is linked to women. When Clarisse asks Montag to explain "why you haven't any daughters like me, if you love children so much," he responds:

"I don't know."

¹⁶ Seed, "Flight from the Good Life," 229.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Bradbury, quoted in Seed, "Flight from the Good Life," 229.

¹⁹ Brian Baker, "Ray Bradbury: *Fahrenheit 451*," in *A Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. David Seed (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005), 497.

“You’re joking!”

“I mean—” He stopped and shook his head. “Well, my wife, she... she just never wanted any children at all.”

The girl stopped smiling. “I’m sorry. I really thought you were having fun at my expense. I’m a fool.”

“No, no,” he said. “It was a good question. It’s been a long time since anyone cared enough to ask. A good question” (28-29).

Whereas “I don’t know” suggests Montag’s own complicity in their childlessness, he then revises his statement to blame their lack on his wife. Only as he begins to change his feelings about his society and turn away from his nonreproductive, nonmaternal wife does he amend his feelings about his childlessness—or, for that matter, give any indication of liking children at all.

The associations among dystopia, failed parenting, and childlessness are even more explicit in “The Fireman” (1951), the short story Bradbury expanded into *Fahrenheit 451*. In both the novel and the story, Montag confronts Mildred’s vacuous friends as they gather to watch TV and begins reading poetry to them. Only in the story, however, does he criticize them for barrenness as well as anti-intellectualism. Bradbury cut this scene when he revised the story into a novel, but it is telling for the way it illustrates the gendered determinants of utopian and dystopian spaces and the rhetorical positioning of the reader vis-à-vis these worlds. The exchange highlights how the characters view maternity and is worth quoting in full:

“Wait a minute,” said Montag, angrily. “Mrs. Phelps, why did you marry your husband? What did you have in common?”

The woman waved her hands helplessly. “Why, he had such a nice sense of humor, and we liked the same TV shows and—”

“Did you have any children?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Come to think of it, no one here has children,” said Montag. “Except Mrs. Bowles.”

“Four, by Caesarean section. It’s easy that way.”

“The Caesareans weren’t necessary?”

“I always said I’d be damned if I’d go through all that agony just for a baby. Four Caesareans. Nothing to it, really.”

Yes, everything easy. Montag clenched his teeth. To mistake the easy way for the right way, how delicious a temptation. But it wasn’t living. A woman who wouldn’t bear, or a shiftless man didn’t belong; they were passing through. They belonged to nothing and did nothing.²⁰

The problem with the dystopian society has been modified from one in which people are tethered to technology and disinclined to think, talk, or experience the world around them to one in which people are insufficiently gendered: women who won’t “bear” in “natural” ways and “shiftless” men who lack appropriate drive. Readers are meant to side with Montag against the drones he lashes out against, for surely we want him to liberate himself and experience the joys and powers of literature. And yet his rhetoric reinforces gendered stereotypes about what it means to have a meaningful existence and be considered fully human. Does this mean the utopian society the text imagines at its conclusion is a space in which not only books are celebrated but all women give birth without medical aid while men make their mark upon society as avid producers? What

²⁰ Ray Bradbury, “The Fireman,” in *Science Fiction Origins*, ed. William F. Nolan and Martin H. Greenburg (1951; New York: Popular Library, 1980), 41.

seemed a straightforward rejection of censorship and surveillance in the novel is instead a complex and troubling critique of gender roles.

The Utopian Dream Girl

Montag does not begin to critique Mildred and his dystopian society through his independent volition, however. Instead, his growth is the direct result of a woman. Montag critically examines his society only after a series of brief but instructive encounters with his eccentric and talkative seventeen-year-old neighbor, Clarisse McClellan, whose name alone suggests clarity for our Everyman, Guy. Clarisse's surprising interest in Montag awakens him from the stupor of his dystopian apathy as she teaches him about life before the current dystopian regime ("Did you know that once billboards were only twenty feet long?"), about how to stop and notice the world around them ("There's dew on the grass in the morning"), and about other ways of being in the world ("I rarely watch the 'parlor walls' or go to races or Fun Parks") (9). Her pointed observations as she asks, "Are you happy?" and notices, "You're not in love with anyone" lead Montag to think about aspects of his life he had previously taken for granted (10, 22).

By inspiring and enlivening Montag to take a new approach to his surroundings, Clarisse facilitates his development from dystopian subject to utopian hopeful. George Connor, reading the novel through the lens of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," says Clarisse's job is "to go down into the cave and lead Montag up," characterizing her as an enlightened being who guides the male protagonist Beatrice-like into the light.²¹ William F. Touponce writes, "Clarisse, a minor

²¹ Connor, "Spelunking," 413. It may be tempting to read Clarisse allegorically, as a representation of clarity and light rather than as a gendered being. But these readings of Clarisse as symbol and muse draw on depictions of her as concretely embodied. To the extent that she

character by objective standards because she disappears early in the novel, is in essence the inspirational anima figure of Montag's quest."²² Rafeeq McGiveron adds, "Clarisse's example helps stimulate Montag to wonder and try new experiences."²³ Clarisse's impact on Montag is so central to the narrative that even SparkNotes summarizes, "Montag encounters a gentle seventeen-year-old girl named Clarisse McClellan, who opens his eyes to the emptiness of his life with her innocently penetrating questions and her unusual love of people and nature."²⁴ Inspiring, stimulating, and eye opening, Clarisse is the primary catalyst for utopian change.

There is much that is tempting about this character: she is a welcome departure from Mildred's oppressive despair and the blind destruction of the other firemen with whom Montag works, and her passion for literature, knowledge, and conversation speaks to important desires for community and connection that are often deprioritized in a world increasingly driven by technology, media, and conspicuous consumption. Despite the important social critique she launches, however, her criticisms are limited by the ways she is pigeonholed into a mouthpiece for traditional gender roles. The many critical accounts that recognize Clarisse's stirring role in the novel miss the larger implications of predicating the utopian turn on a sprightly, inspiring female muse. They do not question why an idealized teen girl is the savior of and therefore in service to an older male. Nor do they question the ways Montag is and, perhaps more importantly, is not transformed as a result of Clarisse's care. Although Clarisse is characterized

represents the principles of nature, fertility, and connectivity Montag seeks, she does so precisely because she is figured through deeply rooted gender stereotypes.

²² Touponce, *Poetics of Reverie*, 87.

²³ Rafeeq O. McGiveron, "'Do You Know the Legend of Hercules and Antaeus?': The Wilderness in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*," *Extrapolation* 38.2 (1997): 103.

²⁴ SparkNotes Editors, "SparkNote on *Fahrenheit 451*," *SparkNotes LLC*. 2007, <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/451/summary.html>.

as a leader, the emphasis on her gentleness and innocence exemplifies how stereotypical female attributes serve to transform the dystopian man.

The most noticeable aspect of Clarisse's character is her connection to the fullness of nature—a marked contrast to Mildred's alliance with technology and its corresponding coldness and sterility. When Montag first meets Clarisse, he observes that she walks as though “letting the motion of the wind and the leaves carry her forward” (5), bringing with her “the faintest breath of fresh apricots and strawberries” (6-7). Associated with whiteness in her “pale surprise,” “the white stir of her face,” and her white dress, she is a sharp contrast to the Montag of just a page before (5). Dressed in all black and singed from the fire, we meet him as “a minstrel man, burnt-corked” (4), illustrating the difference between dystopia and utopia in stark racial as well as gendered terms. Bradbury preferred small towns to cities, calling his hometown of Waukegan, Illinois, “an idyllic slice of small-town Americana” and using it as a blueprint for the fictionalized Green Town celebrated in *Dandelion Wine* (1957).²⁵ Montag expresses this same nostalgia for the pastoral: upon meeting Clarisse, he is immediately reminded of his mother and a time when he was a child sitting by candlelight after a power failure. The linking of nature and childhood through the figure of the female body presents utopia as a male fantasy of female care in a flattened and uncomplicated imaginary landscape.

Many feminist scholars have detailed the longstanding convention in literature of linking women to nature. Sally Shuttleworth, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Sherry Ortner, and others note that in a traditional polarity between nature and culture, women tend to be placed on the side of nature.²⁶ The coupling of nature and femininity leads to a sacramental view of female

²⁵ Weller, *Chronicles*, 14.

²⁶ See Sally Shuttleworth, “‘The Surveillance of a Sleepless Eye’: The Constitution of Neurosis in *Villette*,” in *One Culture: Essays in Science and Literature*, ed. George Lewis Levine and

nature as “the abundantly providing, ever nurturing mother, the blessed source of life itself.” It also tends to turn nature into “the passive female, whose sole function is to satisfy male desires.”²⁷ In both scenarios, linking women to nature expresses “the male fantasy of the enigmatic nature of the feminine,” or what Simone du Beauvoir derisively called “feminine ‘mystery.’”²⁸ In this view, women are so strange and exciting that they offer up a wealth of resources for men to enjoy, and yet anything that does not serve male advantage can be dismissed as inexplicable and unimportant.²⁹

Celebrating the feminine as nature is thus hardly commendable, and we should be wary when Bradbury scholarship wholeheartedly promotes the depiction of Clarisse as Mother Earth.³⁰ Donald Watt points out that Clarisse “introduces a contrast in Bradbury’s narrative between the grimy, harsh, destructive milieu of the firemen and the clean, regenerative world of

Alan Rauch (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press), 313-338; Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman*, especially 155-158 and 302-308; and Sherry Ortner, “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” *Feminist Studies* 1.2 (1972): 5-31.

²⁷ Anne K. Mellor, “*Frankenstein*: A Feminist Critique of Science,” in *One Culture*, 307. For more on how the gendering of nature as female allows for masculine domination over both forms, see also Anne K. Mellor, “Possessing Nature: The Female in *Frankenstein*,” in *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. Anne K. Mellor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 220-232.

²⁸ Elaine Showalter, “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness,” *Critical Inquiry* 8.2 (1981): 191, and Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (1949; New York, Knopf, 2010), 268.

²⁹ It should be noted that women can be complicit in these associations: “Many forms of American radical feminism also romantically assert that women are closer to nature, to the environment, to a matriarchal principle at once biological and ecological. Mary Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology* and Margaret Atwood’s novel *Surfacing* are texts which create this feminist mythology.” Showalter, “Feminist Criticism,” 201.

³⁰ These critics, who are predominantly male, effusively praise Bradbury’s writing and celebrate his positive impact on them as young readers and as adults. Some of the few women writing on Bradbury include Anita T. Sullivan, “Ray Bradbury and Fantasy,” *The English Journal* 61.9 (1972): 1309-1314 and Wendy Donaldson, “Heroism Defined and Mentors Divided: Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*,” in *The Image of the Hero in Literature, Media, and Society*, ed. Will Wright and Steven Kaplan (Pueblo: Colorado State University, 2004), 482-486. Women writers do not necessarily write differently, but it is relevant to point out how overwhelmingly male-dominated—and uncritical—Bradbury studies are.

nature.”³¹ Rafeeq McGiveron calls Clarisse “refreshing in her naturalness” and notes that she shows Montag “there is more to life than the moral and intellectual sterility of the unaesthetic workaday world. In other words, she helps him find his own place in the natural world and thereby recognize the potentials of his own human nature.”³² For these scholars, Clarisse humanizes Montag by showing him an alternative to the physical and emotional sterility of his wife and her world of machines. Her associations with nature are presented in purely positive and uncomplicated terms as she guides him toward a more utopian relationship with the natural world.

William Touponce adds that Clarisse figures as culture as well as nature in the familiar divide: “Montag knows that all books that are works of art are connected with her in some way, for she awakens in him the desire to read (to create an imaginary world).” In this way, “she represents those imaginative values he lacks and which he must acquire.” Touponce goes onto assert that Clarisse has a central role in contributing to “Montag’s capacity to dream.”³³ Clarisse is thus not only nature but also art, the imaginary, and, by extension, humanity itself. But in elevating her to all that is good in the world, she has been drained of any actual character. She becomes not an agent of utopian change but a receptacle for whatever abstract ideal the male protagonist finds absent in his life. As Laura Mulvey explains, “Woman... stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by the symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image

³¹ Donald Watt, “Burning Bright: *Fahrenheit 451* as Symbolic Dystopia,” in *Ray Bradbury*, ed. Martin H. Greenberg and Joseph D. Olander (New York: Taplinger, 1980), 199.

³² McGiveron, “Do You Know the Legend,” 103, 104.

³³ Touponce, *Poetics of Reverie*, 84, 87, 92.

of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning.”³⁴ Clarisse is a blank slate onto which Montag can project his fantasies for comfort, security, connectivity, and family; after she dies, her ensuing silence comes to take over the narrative, embalming her as the symbol of utopian hope and never an agent of change.

In telling the story from a man’s point of view and using his transformation as a vehicle for the reader’s process of change, the novel thus grants flat female characters only limited and reductive roles: utopian or dystopian, good daughter or bad wife.³⁵ Given that “the use of conventional plots granting narrative focus and primary agency to male protagonists can skew even works with a strong feminist consciousness,” the masculine focus of *Fahrenheit 451* keeps Clarisse’s character limited while ensuring Montag remains the focal point.³⁶ Mildred, meanwhile, has no opportunity to be equally inspired by Clarisse, perhaps because Clarisse’s charms don’t work on a woman, or because the women, as flat characters, are themselves incapable of change.

A useful framework for understanding what Touponce describes as Clarisse’s “refreshing” and “regenerative” character is what film critic Nathan Rabin calls the “Manic Pixie Dream Girl.” Like actresses Natalie Portman in *Garden State* (2004) and Kirsten Dunst in *Elizabethtown* (2005), this girl’s bubbly exuberance instills a new passion for life in previously

³⁴ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 15.

³⁵ Flat characters “are constructed round a single idea or quality; when there is more than one factor in them, we get the beginning of the curve towards the round.” This single idea “completely describes [them], [they have] no existence outside it, no pleasures.” Forster, *Aspects*, 47. Molly Hite adds that flat characters, who are often female, “can be summed up in a single sentence. Or even a single word. They can often be assigned their permanent place in the fictional universe simply by being assigned a name.” Hite, *Other Side*, 26.

³⁶ Jacobs, “*Islandia*,” 77. See also Nadia Khouri, “The Dialectics of Power: Utopia in the Science Fiction of Le Guin, Jeury and Piercy,” *Science-Fiction Studies* 7 (1980): 49-61, and Kathleen Margaret Lant, “The Rape of the Text: Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Violation of *Herland*,” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 9.2 (1990): 290-308.

listless men. Rabin complains, “The Manic Pixie Dream Girl exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures.” The “psychotically chipper” “MPDG” fulfills a fantasy of female subservience with women on hand to inspire their men.³⁷ Writing for the website “Feminist Frequency: Conversations with Pop Culture,” Anita Sarkeesian observes that this character “perpetuates the myth of women as caregivers” who are programmed to “‘fix’ these lonely sad men, so that they can go ‘fix the world.’” Why can’t the women solve problems? According to Sarkeesian, “They’re too busy being adorable.”³⁸

While Rabin is largely concerned with the MPDG as a contemporary phenomenon, “The Manic Pixie Dream Girl isn’t a recent creation: You’ve seen her in plenty of movies, including some real classics” like *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), *What’s Up, Doc?* (1972), and *Annie Hall* (1977), among others.³⁹ She also abounds in literature, from Sally Bowles in Christopher Isherwood’s *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939) to Margo Roth Spiegelman in John Green’s *Paper Towns* (2008). Not all bubbly female characters are MPDGs however; Audrey Hepburn’s Princess Ann in *Roman Holiday* (1953), from the same year as *Fahrenheit 451*, has many of the same qualities but grows to learn the importance of duty to family and country—not a feminist rebel, but not a

³⁷ Nathan Rabin, “The Bataan Death March of Whimsy Case File #1: *Elizabethtown*,” *A.V. Club*, January 25, 2007, <http://www.avclub.com/articles/the-bataan-death-march-of-whimsy-case-file-1-eliza,15577/>.

³⁸ Lisa Wade, “Anita Sarkeesian on the Manic Pixie Dream Girl,” *The Society Pages*, April 2, 2011, <http://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2011/04/02/anita-sarkeesian-on-the-manic-pixie-dream-girl/>. Sarkeesian also cites the female muse as “the foundation for this trope.”

³⁹ Neda Ulaby, “Manic Pixie Dream Girls: A Cinematic Scourge?” *National Public Radio*, October 9, 2008, <http://www.npr.org/2008/10/09/95507953/manic-pixie-dream-girls-a-cinematic-scourge>. For more examples see “Wild Things: 16 Films Featuring Manic Pixie Dream Girls,” compiled by Donna Bowman, Amelie Gillette, Steven Hyden, Noel Murray, Leonard Piercy, and Nathan Rabin for the *AVClub*, August 4, 2008, <http://www.avclub.com/articles/wild-things-16-films-featuring-manic-pixie-dream-g,2407/>.

MPDG either. Depictions of female exuberance in the 1950s thus needn't be coupled with flattened characters or serve to enliven brooding men.

The problem with the MPDG is deeper than gender stereotyping, however. Journalist Adam Serwer criticizes the MPDG because she “remains a two-dimensional projection of the desires of a guy who is progressive enough in gender matters to want a woman who is ‘interesting,’ but not one that has an internal life of her own.” As a result,

the insidiousness of the MPDG archetype lies in the way the creator assumes that their characters are progressive. These characters are in a superficial sense positive in that they're usually protagonists or allies of the protagonist, but the purpose of this is merely to assuage guilt and provide the unparalleled sense of comfort that comes with the knowledge that everything is in its proper place.⁴⁰

Cheerful and fun—but not so much that she becomes a full character—Clarisse plays a deceptively positive role as she “lead[s] the male protagonist to happiness.”⁴¹ Yet she disrupts Montag's complacency to bring him not upheaval but a comfortable sense of normality, a utopian world in which, as Serwer notes, “everything is in its proper place.”

This neatly ordered world is ultimately evidenced in the gendered conception of utopia the novel puts forth. Ostensibly, Clarisse's manic enthusiasm and persistent questioning teach Montag the importance of reading—*Fahrenheit 451* is obviously concerned with the value of literacy and the perils of censorship. But the hopeful turn at the end of the novel is not just that a community of readers persists beyond the reaches of the dystopian world, a world we know must

⁴⁰ Adam Serwer, “The Nice Guy and the Manic Pixie Dream Girl,” *The American Prospect*, August 24, 2011. <http://prospect.org/article/nice-guy-and-manic-pixie-dream-girl>. I would quibble that Serwer is not correct in suggesting the MPDG can be a protagonist, however, since her flattened and supportive position by definition suggests a secondary role.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

ultimately fall. The utopian community is recognizable as hopeful because it is invested in its own futurity. Theirs is a society that will be able to reproduce: memorizing banned texts speaks to the importance of transmission, perpetuity, and growth, as community members learn books to pass them along. Embodied in this act is the preservation of nature as well as culture, both of which are already coded as female through Clarisse. The nurturing femininity that brings about this world is thus in the service of individual male identities, as well as the society as a whole.

This stress on a reproductive future as the site for utopian happiness—what Kevin Hoskinson calls “Bradbury’s optimism for a recivilized world”—emerges even though Montag does not directly speak about marriage, family, or childbirth after he leaves his wife.⁴² As he stands among the book people and watches bombs from an ongoing war flatten the city, he recalls a passage from Revelation 22.2: “*And on either side of the river was there a tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month; And the leaves of the tree were for the healing of nations*” (165, emphasis original). This tree suggests fertility, with the monthly fruit—ovulation—as the literal and metaphorical saving of humanity, in contrast to the “untimely” fruit of the fig tree in Revelation whose unnaturalness signifies God’s wrath and the coming apocalypse. Revelation depicts the redemption of the faithful and renewal of the New Jerusalem after the apocalyptic destruction of Earth and repeatedly characterizes the city as a bride who symbolizes the defeat of “the great whore.” Both *Fahrenheit 451* and the biblical passage it evokes equate utopian redemption with ideal femininity in the form of the fertile mother/bashful bride. The promise of the fruitful wife becomes the desired outcome of the

⁴² Kevin Hoskinson, “On *Fahrenheit 451* as a Cold War Novel,” in *Ray Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea Publishing House, 2006), 70.

utopian turn, a turn that can only come about after the destruction of all those who persist in their blindness.⁴³

It is Clarisse who best embodies the utopian family whose values contrast the dystopian world left behind. When Clarisse asks Montag about “daughters like me,” she makes him feel “very much like a father” (28), placing the two of them in a hypothetical nuclear family. Presenting herself as an ideal daughter and not a delinquent like her peers, she admits, “I’m afraid of children my own age. They kill each other,” and then supplies a reason for this criminality: overly permissive parenting. “My uncle says his grandfather remembered when children didn’t kill each other,” she says. “But that was a long time ago when they had things different. They believed in responsibility, my uncle says. Do you know, I’m responsible. I was spanked when I needed it, years ago. And I do all the shopping and housecleaning by hand” (30). Clarisse counteracts the post-war rise of automated labor-saving devices in the home and affirms the benefits of old-fashioned discipline against more lenient parenting styles popularized in the 1940s and 50s through the likes of Dr. Spock’s *Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*

⁴³ Emphasizing even further the importance of fertility in the narrative, François Truffaut’s 1966 film adaptation makes sweeping changes to both Mildred’s and Clarisse’s characters: Clarisse is no longer a bubbly teenager but a teacher, and she and Mildred are played by the same actress, Julie Christie. While Clarisse’s youth in the novel does not preclude her from rousing Montag’s interest, aging her and making her an explicit complement to his wife eliminates any paternal feelings and sanctions their romance. Truffaut adds lengthy sex scenes with Mildred that emphasize Montag’s normal sex drive, ensuring he is not complicit in the dystopian asexuality apparent in the book. Montag reconnects with Clarisse at the end of the movie to merge the romantic resolution with the utopian resolution and to ensure a viable future among the book people. On critical responses to the film, see Antoine de Baecque and Serge Toubiana, *Truffaut*, trans. Catherine Temerson (New York: Knopf, 1999), 193 and Tom Whalen, “The Consequences of Passivity: Re-evaluating Truffaut’s *Fahrenheit 451*,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 35.3 (2007): 181-190. For more on women in Truffaut’s films, see also Annette Insdorf, Chapter Four, “Are Women Magic?” in *François Truffaut*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 105-143.

(1946).⁴⁴ By aligning herself with Montag as the potential parent of such an obedient and responsible daughter, Clarisse flatters Montag's paternal desires and verifies that although he has no children, it is not because of deficiencies in him. At the same time, she upholds an exceedingly traditional view of the nuclear family as dominated by parental authority and strict notions of discipline, responsibility, and restraint—values that, it is implied, will flourish among the people of the book who create New Jerusalem after dystopia burns.

The world the novel strives for is therefore not one of radical change but a return to pre-war, pastoral ideals defined by conservative family values and clear gender roles. Surely this vision speaks to *Fahrenheit 451*'s particular moment: the critique of Nazi book-burnings, the rise of Cold War censorship, the preoccupation with gender roles after men returned from war, the ongoing anxieties over new technologies and changes to the nuclear family. But to read the novel's idealization of utopian fertility and the energies of an exuberant young woman as wholly a post-war project would be to miss how this plotline persists in later critical utopias. Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* contends with questions of pleasure and desire absent in Bradbury's utopian ideal, but its feminist and utopian imaginings remain restricted by its investment in a nearly identical plot. Although *The Dispossessed* has been said to use the innovations of the feminist critical utopian form to counter the gender problems of earlier, masculinist utopias like Bradbury's, reading *The Dispossessed* alongside *Fahrenheit 451* will underscore how the novel's feminist and utopian possibilities compel the reader to imagine a world more similar to Bradbury than might be expected from a feminist critical text.

⁴⁴ On representations of juvenile delinquency and childcare in *Fahrenheit 451*, see Evan Brier, *A Novel Marketplace: Mass Culture, the Book Trade, and Postwar American Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 66-67.

The Utopian Feminism of Ursula K. Le Guin

The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia takes up the mantle of the 1970s feminist movement to challenge the norms of contemporary society and the male-dominated field of science fiction, imagining a more egalitarian utopia with broader ideas about gender and hierarchy. Considered “a touchstone work,” and “perhaps the best known and the most popular of the critical utopias published in the 1970s,”⁴⁵ its treatment of the tensions between individualism and communalism, competition and cooperation, revolution and stabilization, capitalism and anarchy, has encouraged countless readers to consider the ways political, economic, and social structures shape human relations, moral imperatives, and ideas about what is possible in the world. Le Guin was the first female writer to receive the Nebula and Hugo awards for science fiction, in 1974 and 1975, and has long been recognized as one of the leading feminist science fiction writers of her time.⁴⁶

A number of scholars, however, have provided cogent readings of the problematic ways gender is constructed in the novel, despite its position as a landmark feminist text. In particular, Tom Moylan, Sarah Lefanu, and Samuel R. Delany argue that *The Dispossessed* tends to glorify heterosexual masculine achievement while relegating both women and homosexuals to secondary, subservient roles. For Moylan,

There is a conflict between the sexual and gender emancipation asserted and the actual words, images, and narrative produced: a conflict that calls into question

⁴⁵ Moylan, *Demand*, 92, 91.

⁴⁶ On Le Guin’s popularity as a feminist writer, see Anne K. Mellor, “On Feminist Utopias,” 241-262; Alexis Lothian, “Grinding Axes and Balancing Oppositions: The Transformation of Feminism in Ursula K. Le Guin’s Science Fiction,” *Extrapolation* 47.3 (2006): 380-395; Lisa Hammond Rashley, “Revisioning Gender: Inventing Women in Ursula K. Le Guin’s Nonfiction,” *Biography* 30.1 (2007): 22-47; and William Marcellino, “Shadows to Walk: Ursula Le Guin’s Transgressions in Utopia,” *The Journal of American Culture* 32.3 (2009): 203-213.

the radical quality of her overall vision. By her choice of a male protagonist... and restriction of strong female characters to supporting roles, Le Guin continues to write within the rules of the male-dominated publishing game—even after being criticized by feminist readers for this tendency in her earlier works and even after she had achieved the status of a major author who could afford to risk the disapproval of the publishing and reading majority.⁴⁷

Moylan details the ways a nurturing woman functions to care for her man while auxiliary characters are denigrated to maintain a heterosexist, patriarchal paradigm centered on the male lead's personal and political growth. My own reading does not seek to reproduce this important work but rather to expand on analyses of these restricted figures and reconsider the larger feminist claims of the text and the scholarship about it.

For though I wholly agree with Moylan's criticisms, I am less sure of the conclusions he draws from these observations. Moylan suggests that in the problematic constructions of gender and family throughout the narrative, Le Guin consistently undermines her own feminist project. He cites a "traditional male-identified, heterosexual, monogamous nuclear family bias that undercuts her textual assertions of personal emancipation," and later reiterates, "The text here betrays itself as present ideologies undercut her intended subversive vision."⁴⁸ The idea is that a number of instances in the text stand out as being at odds with the novel's overall message of emancipation. This seems true, and yet such a position presumes the novel is striving for a liberatory feminist ideal in the first place. I find less of a contradiction between the utopian world Le Guin creates and the gender roles that maintain it because I question whether such an ideal is actually present in the text. The novel's set gender roles, the use of functional female characters

⁴⁷ Moylan, *Demand*, 101.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 101, 102.

to minister to the male protagonist's needs, and the valorization of the traditional heterosexual nuclear family as the embodiment of the utopian ideal certainly limit the feminist utopian potential of the text to imagine other worlds. But I read these elements as constitutive of, rather than contradictory to, the feminist vision put forth.

This is because the utopian ideal of *The Dispossessed* turns out to advocate—not subvert—a rigidly gendered society and conception of home and family that is surprisingly similar to that of *Fahrenheit 451*, with both texts identifying stereotypical heterofeminine gender roles as the key to utopian change. Pairing *The Dispossessed* with *Fahrenheit 451* thus draws out the extent to which the gender problems in Le Guin's novel are not aberrations unique to this text but are central to driving utopian transformation. *The Dispossessed* centers on the personal and intellectual development of a heroic male who depends on the ministrations of others to show him that utopia can be found in a return to the normative heterosexual home. In contrast to Montag, who looks to shake up his banal world, Shevek is only able to embrace change if it comes with an assurance of stability and connection made possible by the utopian wife. His ministering woman guides him to fulfill his intellectual potential and realize the benefits of utopia while providing a traditional home and family to whom he can return.

But it is important to note that it is not only Shevek's wife who facilitates utopian possibility. Shevek comes to associate sexual contact with personal growth, and his other lovers also help facilitate his intellectual and political becoming. In addition to a sexual encounter with his gay friend Bedap, of particular importance is also his sexual attack on a woman of dystopia, Vea. While the dystopian woman in *Fahrenheit 451* serves as a foil to the utopian ideal, the role of the dystopian woman in *The Dispossessed* is more complex. Vea embodies all that is wrong with the dystopian world in order to highlight the improvements of the utopian society, but

unlike Mildred, she also, perhaps paradoxically, functions much like the utopian wife by allowing for contact and sexual release that aid Shevek's development—even as the violent nature of that contact further distances her from the utopian wife Takver. While utopian scholarship has discussed the role of Takver as a nurturing woman, a major blind spot remains the crucial role that Shevek's near-rape of Vea plays in facilitating his growth. Showing how these seemingly disparate characters fulfill similar roles in bringing about the utopian dream—roles that echo the function of Clarisse in enabling change—highlights how the nurturing figure persists in a variety of forms within the feminist critical utopian imagination.

Nurturing the Utopian Man

The Dispossessed centers on a young physicist named Shevek who lives on Anarres, a moon of the planet Urras. Shevek spends the novel working to develop a General Temporal Theory which would unite the opposing theories of Sequence and Simultaneity and prove that multiple instants can exist at once. Anarres is meant to offer a preferable alternative to Urras; its anarchist settlers eliminated money, government, and much of the trappings of a centralized power system while fostering an ethical code based on communalism and mutual care. Urras, meanwhile, supports two major superpowers, A-Io and Thu, modeled after the U.S. and U.S.S.R. The “profiteering” capitalists and the equally corrupt and power-hungry communists enjoy the lavish abundance of resources and wealth on their planet while perpetuating vast inequalities based on class, race, and gender. However, in a twist that addresses the “ambiguous utopia” of the subtitle, Anarres appears less than ideal when its leading physicists resist Shevek's work, believing it folly. Rebellious against his society, Shevek becomes the first Anarresti to re-open communication with Urras and travel to A-Io to meet with its university's scientists. The travel

leads Shevek to compare the two societies, realize the strengths and flaws of his homeland, and rekindle the revolutionary spirit that marks Anarres as a possible utopia.

Although Shevek is the capable hero who reinvigorates the utopian spirit, he often appears like a struggling poet in need of a muse, passing long stretches unable to work and in desperate need of an inspiring, animating force to guide him. He quickly surpasses the abilities of his teacher, who reminds him, “It’s your duty to seek out the best, Shevek. Don’t let false egalitarianism ever trick you,” but then discovers how hard it can be to work without any community.⁴⁹ Frustrated and alone, he laments, “The work came first, but it went nowhere. Like sex, it ought to have been a pleasure, and it wasn’t” (138). Equating intellectual breakthrough with orgasm—both come out “with desperate spurts and struggles” but render him ultimately “dry” (141)—the novel establishes a pattern whereby sexual encounters liberate Shevek to work by helping him overcome what prove to be crippling bouts of isolation. Robert Philmus maintains, “He is blocked...by his own inability to conceive how the temporal synthesis that

⁴⁹ Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 50-51. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text. In a society meant to be equal, the fact that Shevek immediately stands out as intellectually superior is a testament to the importance of distinction even in Anarres’s otherwise egalitarian structures and an indication that “the utopia in *The Dispossessed* is a system founded by the exceptional individual.” Heinz Tschachler, “Forgetting Dostoyevsky: or, The Political Unconscious of Ursula K. Le Guin,” *Utopian Studies* 2.1/2 (1991): 67. The “exceptional individual” could also be Anarres’s female founder, Odo, whom I discuss below. The emphasis on exceptionalism and on Shevek’s masculine heroics draws on rhetorics of both nation and gender dominant during the Cold War. Although Le Guin is equally critical of capitalist A-Io and communist Thu, Anarresti communitarian principles have clear overtones of wartime patriotism, with “willing self-sacrifice for the good of the nation” and a “cultural narrative of individual volunteer heroism,” as Shevek and Takver sign up for especially taxing jobs to serve the society during a difficult drought. Robert D. Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 39. On the “ideology of masculinity” informing Cold War politics, see also Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood*, 3-4.

preoccupies him might be worked out and demonstrated.”⁵⁰ But Shevek’s difficulties are not simply the result of demanding science, nor do his discoveries come solely from his intellect. Shevek is profoundly lonely; if his intellectual production is a form of masculine creation, what Moylan calls “creative potency,”⁵¹ then it becomes apparent that a sexualized other is necessary to facilitate the emergence of his utopian ideas. This figure helps him “conceive” of the theoretical framework to facilitate the permanent state of anarchist revolution Le Guin identifies as a utopian ideal, much in the same way the muse helps the male poet write.

Even when the sexualized other is a man, he is still subsumed into a heteronormative framework and used to further the protagonist’s pursuits. After bouts of crippling loneliness, Shevek’s first mental unblocking occurs after he runs into an old friend, Bedap, a “token homosexual” and the “only on-stage homosexual in the book,” despite the novel’s supposed emphasis on sexual freedom.⁵² Bedap educates Shevek on the workings of their society, leading Shevek to rethink his position in the community of scientists after he realizes another, jealous physics teacher is limiting his discoveries. But Shevek does not profit from conversation alone. Shevek presents taking Bedap to bed as an act of generosity, a way “to reconfirm the old friendship.” This patronizing tone reinforces Bedap’s subservient position as the one who benefits from Shevek’s “tenderness and obstinacy,” rather than an equal partner in friendship and sex (151).

Yet it is Shevek who gains the most from the encounter. Sex with Bedap reestablishes Shevek’s place as a connected member of society, allowing him to overcome his mental

⁵⁰ Robert M. Philmus, *Visions and Revisions: (Re)Constructing Science Fiction*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), 230.

⁵¹ Moylan, *Demand*, 110.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 101, and Samuel R. Delany, *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction* (Elizabethtown, NY: Dragon Press, 1977), 257.

blockage brought on by isolation. The contact “changed Shevek’s life, and Shevek knew it, knew that he was going on at last, and that it was Bedap who had enabled him to go on.” The caveat that “there was no strong sexual desire on either side to make the connection last” even further stresses that the motivation for their coupling is Shevek’s development (151). Le Guin thus gestures toward sexual tolerance while confirming that Shevek isn’t “really” attracted to men. Bedap is not the right gender for this appropriately heterosexual hero, and his manner in shaking Shevek out of his complacency is too abrasive for Shevek’s tastes. Shevek complains, “Bedap’s conversation was all too much like a Criticism Session,” a time when community members air grievances, many of which are directed at him (154). Shevek seeks someone who will be kinder, gentler, and easier on him—in other words, a stereotypical woman.

Through Bedap Shevek meets Takver, who echoes Bedap in her forthright criticisms of Anarresti society but who embodies stereotypically feminine virtues of connectivity, compassion, and care. Like Clarisse, Takver is overtly connected to nature. A biologist and fish geneticist on an arid planet that cannot support animal life on land, “Her concern with landscapes and living creatures was passionate. This concern, feebly called ‘love of nature,’ seemed to Shevek to be something much broader than love. There are souls, he thought, whose umbilicus has never been cut. They never got weaned from the universe” (162). Shevek’s tone here evinces a respect for Takver, but it is a respect that distances him from nature and from her connection with the natural world.⁵³ He is “the scholarly male... who is somehow above such earthly,

⁵³ Veneration should not be confused with gender equality; Joan M. Hoffman explains, “This process of domination and dehumanization through idealization does not outwardly degrade women. On the contrary, a superhuman ideal is created; the woman is placed on a pedestal and perceived, in social and literary settings, as nothing less than a fragile being embodying what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar call... ‘eternal feminine’ virtues.” Joan M. Hoffman, “‘She Loves With Love That Cannot Tire’: The Image of the Angel in the House Across Cultures and Across Time,” *Pacific Coast Philology* 42.2 (2007): 265.

female matters, who is an adult rather than an eternal fetus, who faces the ‘harder realities’ of death and separation.”⁵⁴ Takver’s stereotypical association with nature infantilizes her as inhabiting a lower stage of development at the same time that it establishes an overall female spirit of “kinship” (Le Guin, *Dispossessed*, 19).

Shevek’s encounter with Takver is as clichéd an account of “love at first sight” as any romance novel. Although they had met once before, “Shevek, meeting her eyes, knew that he had committed an unforgivable fault in forgetting her and, in the instant of knowing it, knew also that he had been forgiven. That he was in luck. That his luck had changed” (155). In the breathless fragmentation of the language, the lovers feel their instant connection and the sense that, as Takver puts it, “what I saw in you was what I needed” (159). The fantasy that you can meet someone and instantly “know” that he or she is “the one,” as though that person has been waiting all along to fulfill you, uses the conventions and ideals of romance to propel the narrative forward and advance the utopian aims of the text. For Shevek, Takver is an ideal romantic partner because she instantly sees into him and understands him, promising to change his life much like Bedap did but with the benefit of forgiving his faults as Bedap did not.

Central to the couple’s connection is the shared conviction that in this largely non-monogamous society, they are looking for a lifetime of committed partnership. Both admit to finding sex less satisfying than in adolescence: Takver says, “It was exciting, and interesting, and pleasure. But then... I don’t know. Like you said, it got unsatisfying. I didn’t want pleasure. Not just pleasure, I mean” (157). What she needs is “the bond... The real one. Body and mind and all the years of life. Nothing else. Nothing less” (158). Then and there they decide to bond “now and for life” (160). There is no word for marriage, no ceremony, no social pressure, and no state to

⁵⁴ Moylan, *Demand*, 111.

confer legitimacy, but their dedication and sense of fulfillment mirrors the vision of marriage in the west as a union of body and soul. Le Guin eliminates the political trappings of marriage and its history as a capitalist institution to renew what is seen in modern society as its rootedness in “commitment and free choice between equals choosing the bond.”⁵⁵ There is definite radical potential in this conception of marriage. Yet its valorization over the myriad social and sexual relationships allowed in Anarres upholds the primacy of normative heterosexuality, as though to reassure readers utopia will not be too much of a change.

In this way, although *The Dispossessed* addresses desire in ways largely absent in a classic utopia like *Fahrenheit 451*, it is quick to contain the potential explosiveness of the sexual revolution. There may be greater sexual freedoms, but they offer what Sheila Jeffreys calls “a timely adjustment to the fine-tuning of the heterosexual institution.” To many feminists, the “revolution” adapted and even expanded patriarchal marriage, rather than overturning it. Allowances for sex outside marriage gave women greater sexual freedom but also increased men’s access to a new generation of educated and financially independent young women who had left their father’s houses but had not yet “[come] under the wardship of a husband.”⁵⁶ Likewise Shevek and Takver show that sexual experimentation can still lead to proper union. Meanwhile, those who pursue sex outside normative heterosexual marriage are relegated to the background of the novel—like the supposedly non-monogamous Anarresti we never actually meet—or are visible only to “jazz up” heterosexual relationships, as Bedap does.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Ibid., 100.

⁵⁶ Sheila Jeffreys, *Anticlimax: A Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Revolution* (London: The Women’s Press, 1990), 93, 106.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 111. According to Jeffreys, sex writers in the 1960s may have seen “homosexuals as worthy of tolerant understanding and as having the right to a sexual life... [but warn] readers not to treat sex with their own gender as anything other than a way to jazz up their heterosexual relationships” (110-111). The only extended conversation Shevek has about sexual relationships

In other words, the sex that will change the world will not change the traditional heterosexual nuclear family as the emotional and political foundation of social life. When Shevek asks Takver if she wants to have children, she says yes, “When the time comes.” Shevek’s response is, “I want to get a job done” (157). Despite her successful career and many capabilities, Takver’s major ambition—equated to Shevek’s temporal theory—is to have kids. Although Shevek’s question at least opens the possibility that child bearing is optional and Takver could say no, Le Guin’s supposedly non-sexist utopia denies Takver significant ambitions beyond parenting. Shevek, meanwhile, seeks Takver’s partnership to advance his career, using romance to combat his long years of “sterility on all sides” (157). Forgetting that he also experienced a breakthrough with Bedap, Shevek upholds a specifically heteronormative model for overcoming his impotence. Linking utopian development and male creativity to female sexuality, understood to be caretaking and maternal, Shevek imagines women will use their bodies to help men produce in ways that serve utopian social aims. The novel offers no critical distance from Shevek’s perspective, suggesting the book upholds, rather than condemns, this instrumental use of stereotypical female characters.

This woman’s assurance of lifetime fidelity and partnership lets Shevek intellectually soar. As he listens to Takver spout the ideals of monogamy, he recounts, “Joy was rising mysteriously in him... He had a feeling of unlimitedness, of clarity, total clarity, as if he had been set free” (158). Utopia becomes the assurance that someone understands you fully and sees

on Anarres is with a minor character who serves as a mouthpiece for sexist homilies about the benefits of long-term, committed monogamy in a heterosexual dyad, saying “Eighteen years is just a start, all right, when it comes to figuring out *that* difference [between men and women] At least, if it’s a woman you’re trying to figure out. A woman won’t let on to being so puzzled by a man, but maybe they bluff... Anyhow, that’s the pleasure of it, the puzzles and the bluffs and the rest of it. The variety. Variety doesn’t just come with moving around... [I] go home to the same partner—and I never been bored once” (270, emphasis original).

you as the one person he or she needs. It also becomes the promise that a woman's fidelity will ensure a man's realization of his fullest aspirations. As soon as they move in together Shevek is able to work again, and the difficulties of the past years of solitude and frustration turn out to have been the groundwork for his new productivity: "his wretched years in this city had all been part of his present great happiness, because they had led up to it, prepared him for it" (161). The utopia guarantees that the female love object will act as a muse whose emotional support and correct sexual practices liberate men to reach their potential as individual thinkers and creators and advance the broader society dependent on their intellectual gains.

Although Shevek at first gives Takver the highest compliment he can think of, telling her "I knew you were my equal" (159), he later makes clear that she exists to serve him: "Takver, like any man or woman who undertakes companionship of the creator spirit, did not always have an easy time of it. Although her existence was necessary to Shevek her actual presence could be a distraction" (164). She is "necessary," it turns out, for sex and caretaking. As the "creator spirit," Shevek benefits from sharing in the "passionate delight" that helps keep him socially connected and mentally acute. And because "the usage the creator spirit gives its vessels is rough," Shevek constantly "needed looking after" (165). At least Clarisse only had to ask Montag questions—Takver must attend to Shevek's physical, mental, and material needs, although we never hear of him reciprocating or see her equally supported by him. Tom Moylan bemoans the fact that Takver "is reduced to the role of the 'good woman' behind the 'great man,'" and Sarah Lefanu likewise laments, "Poor old Takver, the token strong woman, keeps the home fires burning while Shevek is off changing the future of mankind."⁵⁸ For all the work

⁵⁸ Moylan, *Demand*, 111, and Lefanu, *Feminism and Science Fiction*, 141.

Takver does to care for Shevek, her efforts seem hardly remarkable; the novel is far more preoccupied with building excitement around Shevek's scientific breakthroughs.

Takver tends to Shevek and their children so he can pursue his career, but she is portrayed as so naturally giving that it hardly seems a like work. As Kathi Weeks explains, "Certainly one of socialist feminism's major achievements in this period [the 1970s] was to rethink dominant conceptions of what counts as labor and attend to its gendered relations in a time when work was typically still equated with waged production of material goods."⁵⁹

Included in this immaterial labor is what Hilary Rose calls "the labor of love" or the "affective labor of the heart" that goes into caring for others and ministering to their emotional as well as physical needs.⁶⁰ Arlie Hochschild explains in *The Managed Heart* (1983) that such emotional labor "requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others."⁶¹ Hochschild is referring to jobs that require portraying an affable personality, such as sales, but Weeks points out that "efforts to affirm, enhance, and celebrate the well-being and status of others" constitute a form of "shadow labor"

⁵⁹ Kathi Weeks, "Life Within and Against Work: Affective Labor, Feminist Critique, and Post-Fordist Politics," *Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organization* 7.1 (2007): 235. Recognizing domestic emotional labor as labor stands to advance feminist aims by including the private sphere in the production and circulation of value, "embracing the otherness of caring labor as a potential critical lever and site of agency." However, such arguments have proven problematic for feminists because "women's laboring practices in the domestic realm, the realm of reproduction... are thereby posed as nonetheless fundamentally different from men's laboring practices in the realm of production," maintaining a separate notion of "women's work" without denaturalizing what constitutes women's roles. Weeks, "Life Within and Against Work," 237, 238.

⁶⁰ Hilary Rose, "Hand, Brain, and Heart: A Feminist Epistemology for the Natural Sciences," in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, ed. Sandra Harding (New York: Routledge, 2004): 74.

⁶¹ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1983), 7.

in the private realm as well.⁶² *The Dispossessed* ignores these forms of female labor in the home, presenting Shevek as the primary laboring body while Takver recedes into the background as his support.

Takver's shadow labor echoes the traditional expectations of a heterosexist, patriarchal arrangement in which women function to serve male heads of house. Ann Oakley lamented in 1974, the same year as the publication of *The Dispossessed*, that women are primarily seen as "servicers of men's and children's needs" in order to ensure that "the men are free *from* child-socialization and free *to* work outside the home."⁶³ This service has been so extensively feminized and naturalized as to seem not like work at all, but an innate and inevitable aspect of female identity. Janice Radway writes, "This social fact [of female caretaking], documented also by Mirra Komarovsky, Helena Lopata, and others, is reinforced ideologically by the widespread belief that females are *naturally* nurturant and generous, more selfless than men, and, therefore, cheerfully self-abnegating." In other words, "A woman's interests... are exactly congruent with those of her husband and children. In serving them, she also serves herself."⁶⁴ *The Dispossessed* echoes these views of women by presenting Shevek as the laboring body while assuming Takver is simply there to care for him.

Another way of understanding Takver's character as an ideal woman who fulfills her duties at home so her man can perform his public role is to see how she personifies the traditional ideals of the Victorian Angel in the House. Although a stark contrast to the ebullient

⁶² Weeks, "Life Within and Against Work," 240. See also Hochschild, *Managed Heart*, 165-167.

⁶³ Ann Oakley, *The Sociology of Housework* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 179, emphasis original.

⁶⁴ Radway, *Romance*, 94, emphasis original. See also Helena Znaniecki Lopata, *Occupation: Housewife* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); Mirra Komarovsky, *Blue-Collar Marriage* (New York: Random House, 1964); and Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein, *Women's Two Roles: Home and Work* (London: Routledge, 1968).

Manic Pixie Dream Girl, the Angel in the House is another take on the nurturing woman, the flat and subservient female who leads the male protagonist to develop and change. The term comes from Coventry Patmore's 1854 poem of the same name, a "long and sentimental poem on ideal marriage" that "depicts the betrothed woman in abject subservience to her fiancé, her own self and identity eradicated."⁶⁵ The enormously popular image grew to "refer to any woman of the period who embodied the ideal—the selflessly devoted and submissive wife and mother."⁶⁶ The traits required of the Angel include: "a deft 'woman's touch' in the home, a calm unruffled demeanor, personal beauty, and physical fragility, a modest shrinking from public view, and a mute martyrdom, constant self-sacrifice to the greater good of the family."⁶⁷ This is the ultimate manifestation of the traditional wife.

There are certainly differences between Takver and this rarefied ideal: she is not fragile, can be ruffled, and works as a geneticist while also completing manual labor that all Anarresti perform for the community. Nor does she exhibit the Angel's typical demeanor as an "untainted" and "asexual being."⁶⁸ And yet, what do we really know about her sexuality or her life outside the home? Donna Glee Williams maintains, "The feminist position of *The Dispossessed* is manifest in female characters free to live lives of positive accomplishment" and finds Anarresti women like Takver "undistractedly living the productive lives that their talents, tastes, and values dictate."⁶⁹ But the novel never actually depicts Takver at work outside the home or engaged in other activities beyond caretaking, and so she remains, like the Angel, "limited to a

⁶⁵ Helene E. Roberts, "The Exquisite Slave: The Role of Clothes in the Making of the Victorian Woman," *Signs* 2.3 (1977): 555.

⁶⁶ Hoffman, "She Loves," 264.

⁶⁷ Schaffer, "Tethered Angel," 50.

⁶⁸ Hoffman, "She Loves," 265.

⁶⁹ Donna Glee Williams, "The Moons of Le Guin and Heinlein," *Science Fiction Studies* 21.2 (1994): 166.

private place within the realm of the family,” where she is expected “to maintain a harmonious atmosphere in the household; to provide spiritual support for her man; to tame his baser instincts; and to uphold the all-important bourgeois social values of order, peace, and happiness.”⁷⁰ Takver thus updates the traditional Angel figure to accommodate the changes of the sexual revolution, ensuring that sex before and outside marriage will not fundamentally alter a woman’s commitments to her partner and home. This woman, then, is the utopian ideal the novel puts forth, her goodness sharply contrasted to an Urrasti woman who represents all that goes wrong when women disregard proper roles.

The Body Profiteer

With Takver waiting at home, Shevek finds himself busily furthering his career through another noteworthy sexual encounter.⁷¹ Shevek’s flirtation and subsequent attempt to rape the Urrasti woman Vea have been largely ignored by scholars; those who mention Vea emphasize the ways in which she figures as a dystopian contrast to Takver’s feminine ideal. Yet Vea plays a central role in advancing Shevek’s career and, as a result, his realization of a utopian society. Contending more fully with the way Vea works within the text to advance the utopian plotline will reveal how she serves less as a dystopian foil to Takver than as another woman who aids the male protagonist’s development. Shevek’s act of sexual violence should, I believe, affect the way we read his character, the ideals he puts forth, and the imaginative world the text imparts as focalized through his perspective.

⁷⁰ Hoffman, “She Loves,” 265.

⁷¹ Shevek does at least consider how much Takver would like visiting Urras, granting her independent interests that go beyond serving him. But he thinks she would like the planet for its biodiversity, meaning her only independent quality is, again, her love of nature.

When Shevek travels to Urras to meet with physicists in A-Io, he is plagued by the same blockage he experienced prior to meeting Takver: “He seemed unable to work. There was something lacking—in him, he thought, not in the place” (114). Like the difficulties that led Shevek to invite Bedap into his bed, the problem he faces is again an absence of connection. On Urras “he was lonely, stiflingly lonely... he was not *in touch*. He felt that he had not touched anything, anyone, on Urras in all these months” (127, emphasis original). He has not reached anyone with descriptions of his alternative way of life, and he has literally not touched or been touched. Sterility makes him unproductive, so it is with relief that he lavishes attention on the wife of a Urrasti scientist, exclaiming, “It was so good to be talking with a woman again! No wonder he had felt his existence to be cut off, artificial, among men, always men, lacking the tension and attraction of the sexual difference” (128). Despite Shevek’s surprise that there are no women scientists in Urras, unlike in Anarres, the reason he seeks female company is to revel in female sexuality, the other half of a natural and universal heterosexual dyad. The equal education of women and absence of gender divisions in labor reflects the non-sexist policies of Anarres, but for Shevek what women really contribute to society is sexuality that benefits men.

It is ultimately Veä who provides the sexual encounter that spurs Shevek to work. Robert M. Philmus finds that “[Shevek’s] connection with Veä... appear[s] as a travesty of a true bond, the sort of bond he has with Takver.”⁷² But such a simple comparison of the two women ignores Veä’s contributions to Shevek’s science while overplaying Takver’s independence, in effect missing the ways both these women serve to nurture Shevek’s scientific and political discoveries. There would be little narrative tension and interest if Shevek simply traveled to Urras, completed his hypothesis, and came home; because he has previously been motivated through sexualized

⁷² Philmus, *Visions*, 231.

muses, he has to find someone on Urras. She must be seemingly opposed to Takver so as not to threaten the position of the central nurturer, complicate the portrayal of the commodified women of Urras, or undermine the status of Anarres as the more desirable world. But she must effectively fulfill the same role.

The demands of the narrative structure require a love interest, but despite the amorous possibilities in his society, Shevek has emphatically espoused the benefits and ideals of monogamy. Having found the “true bond” with Takver, what could compel him to pursue another woman? The answer is given straight away, for immediately upon seeing Veä, Shevek cannot take his eyes off her:

Her breasts, shoulders, and arms were round, soft, and very white. Shevek sat beside her at the dinner table. He kept looking at her bare breasts, pushed upward by the stiff bodice. The notion of going thus half naked in freezing weather was extravagant, as extravagant as the snow, and the small breasts also had an innocent whiteness, like the snow. The curve of her neck went up smoothly into the curve of the proud, shaven, delicate head (172).

It seems to go without saying that Shevek pursues Veä because Veä is sexy. But the tautology that Shevek is attracted to her because she is attractive assumes Shevek’s attraction is innate, relying on a universal heterosexual male instinct to override his professed disdain for the display of female bodies on Urras. Samuel Delany argues, “The kind of behavior Veä exhibits toward Shevek men must *learn* to respond to as erotic,” but there is nowhere Shevek could have learned to find this alluring—it is presented as simply a fact of manhood.⁷³ The effect is a caricature of

⁷³ Delany, *Jewel*, 253, emphasis original.

male sexuality as distorted as the women of Urras, only without the element of critique present in Le Guin's attack on Urrasti gender norms.

The ostentatious exhibition of Vea's breasts is clearly meant to condemn the commodification of female bodies for male consumption. Vea represents the extremes to which the patriarchal capitalist system curtails possibilities for women and reduces half the population to decorated vessels for the other half. But this criticism of the dystopian gender norms on Urras is undercut by the fact that Shevek finds Vea so enthralling, creating a visual picture of her more detailed than anything else in the novel. Shevek eagerly participates in this commodification, associating her with nature, novelty, and pleasure, like the snow he plays in for the first time on Urras. There is no critical distance to suggest the novel undercuts rather than supports this objectification; Le Guin is unable to step far enough back from Shevek's ogling to launch an effective critique of that which Shevek so effusively enjoys.

The second time Shevek sees Vea she is even more ornamented, glittering with "tiny flecks of mica dust" with her bare arms "softened and sheltered" under a "filmy shawl" (186, 187). The final touch is the transformation of her body itself into a decoration: "Her wrists were laden with gold bracelets, and in the hollow of her throat a single jewel shone blue against the soft skin" (187). As Tony Burns explains, Vea is so heavily adorned that Shevek cannot help but see her as more of a thing than a person.⁷⁴ Shevek says, "She was so elaborately and ostentatiously a female body that she seemed scarcely to be a human being" (186). This account criticizes the commodification of women by blaming women for their objectification, rather than considering the more complex ways exploitation occurs. It suggests Vea's "thingness" originates in Vea and is something she makes of herself, giving her sole responsibility for the ways she is

⁷⁴ Tony Burns, "Marxism and Science Fiction: A Celebration of the Work of Ursula K. Le Guin," *Capital and Class* 28.139 (2004): 143.

interpreted by others. In noting “shoes, clothes, cosmetics, jewels, gestures, everything about her asserted provocation” (186), Shevek distances he who is provoked from she who does the provoking. Such a rhetorical gesture allows Vea agency only as a seductress while downplaying Shevek’s role as the one doing the objectifying.

The novel thus condemns Vea’s sexuality as the result of a destructive sex-gender system at the same time that it relies on her sexuality to justify Shevek’s interest in her. Shevek’s flirtation with Vea leads him to feel better than he has in months. As he walks her to the train station, “he felt well and vigorous, pleased by the bright air, the warmth of the well-made coat he wore, the prettiness of the woman beside him. No worries or heavy thoughts had hold of him today” (173). Both his new jacket and the affected beauty of Urrasti women had once seemed extravagant to Shevek—the greatest insult to Anarresti, who consider anything excessive to be “excremental” (86). But with Vea, these things are now satisfying. Neil Easterbrook explains Shevek’s transformation by suggesting he has been seduced by the “tantalizing charms” of Urras.⁷⁵ But we have no indication of Shevek thinking like a capitalist, patriarchal, “profiteering” Urrasti on other subjects, such as science, property, or freedom. In no other ways does he seem to succumb to Urrasti mentalities. Yet he does not question the notion that Vea is there to please him—perhaps because he is used to women, such as Takver, playing a similar, servile role.

Although Vea seems the direct opposite of Takver, both women provide the sex and attention Shevek needs to work. When he feels “sick of holding back, sick of not talking” (180) and wonders “But where could he go?” (184), he immediately thinks of Vea. In his moment of need, a woman comes to him as the one who will give herself and her time to help him. They

⁷⁵ Neil Easterbrook, “State, Heterotopia: The Political Imagination of Heinlein, Le Guin, and Delany,” in *Political Science Fiction*, ed. Donald M. Hassler and Clyde Wilcox (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 57.

spend the day together, drinking and flirting, leading Shevek to feel “half awake and wholly roused” (191). Vea fulfills Shevek’s longstanding need for sexualized company and the connections necessary for scientific and political growth. Although the others Shevek pursues on Anarres are not as overly sexualized as Vea, distinguishing between Vea’s profligate sexuality and the more muted norms on Anarres obscures the extent to which Takver and Vea both minister to Shevek’s desires and ensure he develops personally, intellectually, and politically as a result of their attention.

Shevek claims he seeks Vea as someone to talk to, and yet “he had not expected any subtlety of mind from her” and simply “took pleasure in her inconsequential talk just as he did in the sunshine and snow” (174). Viewing her in the same sexist way Urrasti men see women, he mostly thinks about how they talk about sex without stating anything directly. At Vea’s house, he muses, “she knew he had a partner, and he knew she did; and not a word about copulating had passed between them. Yet her dress, movements, tone—what were they but the most open invitation?” (191) With this justification, he drunkenly pursues her into her bedroom, where they kiss. Vea then pleads for Shevek to stop, but Shevek “paid no attention.” The situation quickly escalates, with Vea resisting both verbally and physically, “but he could not let her be.” Initially, it seems Shevek misinterprets Vea’s interest because of his unfamiliarity with Urrasti customs around clothing and sex. But Shevek knows full well Vea does not want to have sex with him and is aroused by her opposition: “He took a step backward, confused by her sudden high tone of fear and struggle; but he could not stop, her resistance excited him further” (201).

The scene reveals important differences between Urras and Anarres, showing the problems of limiting women’s options for expression and agency in a male-dominated society while highlighting the benefits of promoting forthright discussions about sex. But though Shevek

may be confused by Urrasti displays of sexuality, he still understands what “no” means; he is, after all, from a society that values open communication. He clearly recognizes Vea’s struggle against him, and the fact that her resistance arouses him *even more than her consent* paints him as a rather frightening date rapist—a far cry from the hero scholars want to applaud. That Shevek assumes her dress and demeanor are wholly for his pleasure and serve as substitutions for consent follows a longstanding view in patriarchal society that women’s clothing and behavior justify male sexual advances. As attorney Dana Berliner explains, “Some behavior by women (e.g., dress and friendliness) may be interpreted by men as indicating sexual availability when it is not so intended.”⁷⁶ In other words, Vea was “asking for it.”

A number of scholars have excused Shevek’s behavior as a drunken misunderstanding while blaming Vea for using her femininity to excite a man’s natural urges to the point where he can no longer be expected to control himself. Neil Easterbrook is one of the few scholars to call Shevek’s actions at least “close to rape,” but he claims the event happens because Shevek finds his “social conscience sedated by alcohol (unavailable on Anarres),” absolving Shevek of responsibility by criticizing Urrasti conventions instead.⁷⁷ Daniel Jaeckle blames Vea as “the woman who has made a life by exploiting her sexuality,” as though she deserves what she gets.⁷⁸ Though Vea asserts that she is happy and that the women of Urras have power in ways Shevek cannot understand, Jaeckle dismisses these convictions as “delusional or inauthentic” and allows Shevek a privileged insight into this woman he has met only twice, maintaining “he understands

⁷⁶ Dana Berliner, “Rethinking the Reasonable Defense to Rape,” *The Yale Law Journal* 100.8 (1991): 2696-2697.

⁷⁷ Easterbrook, “State, Heterotopia,” 57.

⁷⁸ Daniel P. Jaeckle, “Embodied Anarchy in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*,” *Utopian Studies* 20.1 (2009): 87.

her better than she understands herself.”⁷⁹ This perspective allows Shevek to convince himself that Veä really does want to have sex with him, even though her body and voice tell him no. Donna Glee Williams adopts this same dismissive approach when she disparages “the limited, manipulated, wasted lives of women like Veä on Urras.”⁸⁰ Likewise, Peter Fitting’s study of violence and utopia mentions Shevek’s struggles against the power structures of Anarres and references a fight between Shevek and another man but gives no mention to the violence Shevek perpetrates against Veä, whose fight for her body is not seen as a worthy struggle.⁸¹ Chris Ferns writes that “it is through the contrast with Urras that the splendor of the utopian dream is restored” and gives no word to Veä or how her abjection facilitates the restoration of utopian glory.⁸²

I certainly agree that Anarres is the more desirable society, but dismissing Veä as inauthentic, limited, a waste, or unimportant, while highlighting only the contrastive benefits of Anarres, overlooks how the narrative is focalized around Shevek’s privileged male perspective. We learn about Veä through his view—is it possible she is reduced to her sexuality because that is already how Shevek sees her, as he searches for a woman to serve him? The sense is that because Veä is a “body profiteer,” the insulting Anarresti term for “women who used their sexuality as a weapon in a power struggle with men,” she cannot be raped (186). But it is Shevek who claims Veä’s adornment makes her “scarcely to be a human being” and Shevek who dehumanizes her to the point that her consent is not necessary (186). The presentation of Veä’s character has been filtered entirely through his lens, making it important to recognize how the

⁷⁹ Ibid., 88. When Shevek asks Veä, “And you too are self-content?” Veä responds, “Indeed I am” (188).

⁸⁰ Williams, “Moons,” 166.

⁸¹ See Peter Fitting, “Violence and Utopia: John Norman and Pat Califia,” *Utopian Studies* 11.1 (2000): 91-108.

⁸² Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 225.

novel is focalized through a sexist narrator without simultaneously critiquing or interrogating the chauvinism that informs Shevek's views.

The scene ends in embarrassment when Shevek prematurely ejaculates on Vea's dress, vomits, and passes out, an anticlimactic conclusion to deflate the tensions of the rape scene and shift focus away from Vea. Shevek takes the spotlight as the victim, nursing his hangover and the shame from his inability to copulate (rather than his violent behavior). Thus the novel supports Shevek's view by ensuring there are no negative repercussions for his actions. In fact, the sequence of events rewards Shevek for his advances: as he rehashes the events of the night, he suddenly has a breakthrough about his work. The epiphany is two-part: he comes to rethink the philosophical concepts of togetherness and otherness underlying existence, and it is this rethinking of alterity that leads to the discovery that enables him to complete his General Temporal Theory. According to the novel's plotting, then, Shevek's final political and scientific achievement is the direct result of his attempted rape of Vea, as one outburst leads directly from the other. His breakthrough is not "the inspired instant wherein he sees that he can attain" the hypothesis he has been working towards, as though success is an inexplicable moment of inspiration.⁸³ His inspiration comes directly from Vea, when he realizes that just as one cannot possess people, one cannot possess certainty at all.⁸⁴

The Certainty of Home

⁸³ Philmus, *Visions*, 244.

⁸⁴ Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest* (1976) also uses rape as an empowering act for men that leads the hero to action, while its effects on women remain secondary. Selver is driven nearly mad by his wife's rape and murder, but this madness compels him to become a god-like leader among his people.

The key to Shevek's scientific theory becomes the principle of living with unprovable realities. Uncertainty liberates Shevek's physics from the paradox of how to account for both simultaneity and sequence, the foundations of his temporal theory. Much has been written about the ethical dimensions of this philosophy in Anarresti anarchism, but I want to focus on what has not been mentioned: how Shevek realizes the importance of uncertainty at the same time he affirms there must be certainty in the "foundations of the universe" (245), lest everything fall apart.⁸⁵ For despite the lack of centralized power, Anarresti anarchism remains cohesive. Tony Burns explains, "Le Guin maintains that in both science and ethics the world is intrinsically an orderly and not a chaotic place."⁸⁶ What has gone unnoticed, however, is how this order is based on a kind of imagined solidity offered by women. For Shevek, women are the ineffable "simplicity" that contains "all complexity, all promise" (244). Women embody the promise of certainty that stabilizes the principle of uncertainty structuring the universe, since they alone are said to provide a stable home to which men can return.

The novel considers how society can live peacefully without centralized power structures, and Shevek's response is to elevate the bonds that keep people together. *The Dispossessed* opens with a mob of people angry that Shevek is deserting his homeland for Urras, but in that mob "there were as many emotions as there were people" (4). The unity of a mob acting in concert is

⁸⁵ For more on Le Guin's anarchism, see Lyman Tower Sargent, "A New Anarchism: Social and Political Ideas in Some Recent Feminist Utopias," in *Women and Utopia: Critical Interpretations*, ed. Marleen S. Barr (New York: University Press of America, 1983), 3-33; Peter Stillman, "*The Dispossessed* as Ecological Political Theory" and Winter Elliott, "Breaching Individual Walls: Individual Anarchy in *The Dispossessed*," in *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed*, ed. Laurence Davies and Peter Stillman (Lexington, VA: Lexington Books, 2005), 55-74 and 149-164; Samar Habib, "Re-Visiting Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*: Anarcho-Taoism and World Resource Management," *Nebula* 4.2 (2007): 334-348; and Lewis Call, "Postmodern Anarchism in the Novels of Ursula K. Le Guin," *SubStance* 36.2 (2007): 87-105.

⁸⁶ Burns, "Marxism," 140.

unknown in Anarres; the group is a community, not a collective. What kind of unifying factor makes these people a society as opposed to a conglomeration of individuals? The novel suggests the answer is family. Even though “Things are... a little broken loose, on Anarres... [and] nobody is quite sure what happens next” (336), family allows Shevek to deal with instability and uncertainty in his society. He can handle anything, for “Whatever happens, I am coming home” (338). And Takver, whose caretaking makes possible his journey, is assured of his return: “Look how far away he is, he always is,” she thinks. “But he comes back, he comes back, he comes back” (281).

This principle of return becomes the focus of Shevek’s journey, as his breakthrough allows him see “the way clear, the way home, the light” (244). He realizes:

You shall not go down to the same river, nor can you go home again. That he knew; indeed it was the basis of his view of the world. Yet from that acceptance of transience he evolved his vast theory, wherein what is most changeable is shown to be fullest of eternity, and your relationship to the river, and the river’s relationship to you and to itself, turns out to be at once more complex and more reassuring than a mere lack of identity. You *can* go home again, the General Temporal Theory asserts, so long as you understand that home is a place where you have never been (48, emphasis original).

Underlying the emotional gravity of this passage is something quite simple: the basis of Shevek’s life work is the concept of home.⁸⁷ In this lyricism is the appealing declaration that opposed

⁸⁷ Although Shevek’s scientific breakthrough promises to change relations across the universe by allowing for instant communication across space and time, it does not alter the power dynamics among the colonizing peoples of the known worlds. It is arguable that the presence of the ansible, the communication device made possible by Shevek’s theory, alters these dynamics when it appears in *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and *The Word for World is Forest* (1976),

ideas can be united and the reassurance that one can be whole in a vast, changing world. This wholeness, however, stems from female domesticity, as Shevek's final quest is not to go out into the world and share his theory but to return home to the woman waiting for him.

What seems a huge theory about temporality and the universe and a basic principle of utopian anarchism thus turns out to be deeply psychological. Shevek speaks of constructing "cities of fidelity: a landscape inhabitable by human beings," imagining utopian spaces as livable societies based on loyalty, what he calls "the roots of human strength" (292). But despite the soaring rhetoric, Takver attributes Shevek's esteem for loyalty to something simpler and much more personal: being left by his mother. "He feels that he lost something essential—he and [his] father both," she says (318). Feeling abandoned by his mother—even though she followed the common Anarresti practice of allowing her child to be raised in communal housing—Shevek desires a wife who will be a reliable caretaker. The General Temporal Theory becomes a way for Shevek to go home again, in theory, and return to the childhood he didn't have while embracing the family that now cares for him. In this way, Shevek's development as a male hero is also a process of infantilization that returns him to the maternal care he feels he lacked, echoing Montag's nostalgia for childhood and the memories of his mother that Clarisse's presence invokes.

Shevek's assertion that meaning and fulfillment come from home and family means that despite what Jameson has called "the sexual license of utopia in TD [*The Dispossessed*]," Le Guin is quite clear in promoting heterosexual reproduction and the nuclear family over alternate

but its impact is far more complex than simply revolutionary and is not alluded to within *The Dispossessed*.

forms of social organizing.⁸⁸ Even Bedap feels that without children and “the one intimacy he could not share” between father and daughter, he has done “nothing... Meddling in other people’s lives because I don’t have one.” Worse, Bedap then concludes that “if he would be saved, he must change his life” (323). As Delany points out, this “change” can only refer to one thing: Bedap’s sexuality. Delany is “sure my reading of the text is *not* the one Le Guin intended” and in fact “suspect[s] her identification with Bedap during the envisioning of the scene.” But despite what intentions may have gone into the writing, “it is very hard to ignore the letter of the meaning.”⁸⁹ The fact that what is on the page is so clearly heterosexist suggests we have to read what is written, not what we wish Le Guin might have said (or even what she might have wished she had said).

Tom Moylan may think that “in this non-sexist, tolerant, non-nuclear-family society, such a ‘failing’ on Bedap’s part does not fit the social image Le Guin asserts,”⁹⁰ but the image the novel puts forth is that of a nuclear family with set divisions between male and female roles. To suggest this utopian family does not “fit” the world the novel compels the reader to imagine seems a misreading of the novel’s ideals. The reason for this misreading is perhaps confusion of Anarresti society as it is portrayed with the utopian society Shevek wants Anarres to be. Moylan points out, “while Le Guin’s utopia expresses a libertarian and feminist value system, the gaps and contradictions in her text betray a privileging of male and heterosexual superiority and of the

⁸⁸ Fredric Jameson, “World Reduction in Le Guin: The Emergence of Utopian Narrative,” *Science-Fiction Studies* 2.3 (1975): 225. See also *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2005): 274.

⁸⁹ Delany, *Jewel*, 293, emphasis original. Throughout the novel, “We have only been given three tangible factors about Bedap’s life: he bites his nails, he holds certain political beliefs, and he is a homosexual. His political beliefs at this point are one with Shevek’s; so that cannot be the life-element to be altered. Some pages earlier, the author told us he had gotten over his nailbiting. This leaves only one thing in the universe of the novel for him to change.” Delany, *Jewel*, 292.

⁹⁰ Moylan, *Demand*, 102.

nuclear, monogamous family.”⁹¹ This privileging is true, but it is not contradictory. The trajectory of the novel culminates in Shevek’s defiance of Anarres and realization that although many things are better on his home planet, the society has been in error. The novel suggests Shevek’s valuation of lifetime partnership and the nuclear family represent more desirable options than the way of life promoted in Anarresti society at large. It is this new world gestured toward at the end of the novel—not the community described as a desirable but flawed utopia throughout the book—that we are meant to read as the utopian ideal.

Shevek’s concluding commitment to reinvest the society with the lost utopian principles of innovation, anarchism, and change suggests he will help make the ambiguous utopia unambiguously better. Anarresti society was initially founded by an anarchist woman named Odo, and Shevek strives to remind his society of Odo’s teachings: “his return to Urras symbolizes the recovery and reinterpretation of the world that ‘had formed in Odo’s mind.’”⁹² Anarresti society developed its polyamorous leanings after Odo’s death; she remained faithful to one male partner. Thus there is a clear reason why, as Moylan complains, “Le Guin valorizes the nuclear family of Shevek, Takver, and their children whom they choose to keep at home with them over against the individual and communal structure which is presented as the norm on Anarres.”⁹³ This is not an oversight, or a shortcoming, or a contradiction. By focusing on Takver and home, Shevek corrects what he perceives to be a turn too far from his society’s founding principles, which leads to a loss of the centrality of family and home.

Thus, we cannot read in this novel “Le Guin’s radical desire to express a vision that would critique and transcend” a world of male privilege, because such radicalism is simply not

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Tschachler, “Forgetting,” 67.

⁹³ Moylan, *Demand*, 102.

present in the text.⁹⁴ Ultimately, as in *Fahrenheit 451*, the desire for utopia is a desire for nurturing women, not radical change, and it is precisely such a vision that both texts impart to the reader. For Catharine Stimpson, “Vigorously rethinking the family, feminism, at its wisest, has rethought the larger communities of which families are a part.”⁹⁵ *The Dispossessed* does not seek to rethink the heterosexual reproductive nuclear family, but to show how those bonds can be strengthened in the utopian world. As such, the imaginative work of the utopian world put forth in the novel serves to reinforce domestic ideals based on heterofeminine roles, rather than subvert gender assumptions in ways that would encourage readers to visualize alternative social and political organizations in a radically different world. Reading this vision as part of a trend in utopian thinking that goes back to ideologies from the 1950s suggests the instances Moylan critiques as aberrations are in fact integral to the critical utopian imagination put forth. In my next chapter, I consider contemporary feminist critical utopian work from the 1970s and the 2000s that shows how these problems with the utopian investment in the romance plot resurface in the work of Le Guin’s contemporaries and in later feminist critical utopian texts.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 119.

⁹⁵ Stimpson, “Feminisms,” 2-3.

Chapter 3

The “Female Principle”: Sentimental Motherhood in *Woman on the Edge of Time*, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Year of the Flood*

If women cultivate the household sphere through forms of affective and immaterial labor, such labor requires both physical and emotional work. Kathi Weeks explains that reproduction involves “the work of creating and sustaining social forms and relations of cooperation and sociality.”¹ Women reproduce utopia through forms of care described in Chapter 2, and through the creation, nourishment, and nurturance of children in the new world. They give birth to the next generation of utopian subjects and metaphorically give life to the utopian dream, their bodies as well as their hearts pressed into service for the utopian good. This maternal labor is related to but distinguished from nurturing labor by a demand for sexual reproduction on top of the mandate to cultivate others. In the contemporary feminist critical utopias considered in this chapter, utopia emerges as a place for mothering, putting the responsibility for utopia on properly heterofeminine women who adhere to traditional reproductive roles. These novels reject as dystopian forms of motherhood that are coercive and nonconsensual and challenge the conviction that mothering is the only role for women to pursue. But their critique nevertheless serves to elevate another kind of maternity: a sentimental model of heartfelt care that underscores the important role women play as mothers in shaping utopian desire and the ideal feminist world. Such a model of care perpetuates normative forms of social participation, such that the imaginative worlds of the novel come to reiterate, rather than overturn, stereotypical women’s roles.

¹ Weeks, “Life Within and Against Work,” 235.

Maternal labor is at the center of a long-standing debate about how biological distinctions should factor into analyses of gender and figurations of feminist society. Susan Heckman explains that first-wave feminists tend to adopt the perspective of “the neutral, disembodied identity of Western liberalism,” picturing an individual who is “inherently rather than accidentally masculine.” Contesting this male-dominated view, second-wave feminists “define and valorise the general category ‘woman’” against the universal male, arguing for a reconceptualization of citizenship to incorporate women’s differences instead of excluding them.² This “difference” or “standpoint” feminism maintains that the dominant, male model for political and social life does not adequately capture the experiences and abilities that separate women from men.

In this view, one of the primary differences distinguishing women is the unique capacity for procreation. Whereas previously women’s reproductive bodies were cited to dismiss them from history, politics, and public life based on a characterization of women as weak, fragile, emotional, and unfit for exertion, difference feminists combat such a portrayal while citing reproduction as a sign of women’s special place in society.³ As Jane Alpert has declared, “female biology is the source of women’s powers,” with biology understood as “the capacity to bear and nurture children.”⁴ These powers are said to make women more community-oriented,

² Susan J. Heckman, *Feminism, Identity, and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 17. See also Mitchell Dean, “Pateman’s Dilemma: Women and Citizenship,” *Theory and Society* 21.1 (1992): 122; Kathleen B. Jones, “Citizenship in a Woman-Friendly Polity,” *Signs* 15.4 (1990): 782; Weeks, “Life Within and Against Work,” 237-238; and Londa Schiebinger, *Has Feminism Changed Science?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 4.

³ For an overview of this view, see Jones, “Citizenship,” 792-793.

⁴ This capacity is seen as innate to all women, independent of whether or not they procreate: “Motherhood must be understood here as a potential which is imprinted in the genes of every woman; as such it makes no difference to this analysis of femaleness whether a woman ever has, or ever will, bear a child.” Jane Alpert, “Mother Right: A New Feminist Theory,” *Off Our Backs* 3.9 (1973): 30.

peaceful, and caring than men; Nel Noddings argues, “For the mother, for us... our relationship to our children is not governed first by the ethical but by natural caring. We love not because we are required to love but because our natural relatedness gives natural birth to love.”⁵ This view is not restricted to the 1970s and 80s; writing in the 1990s, Sara Ruddick proposed that women maintain a special kind of “maternal thinking,” and Virginia Held celebrated “the power of a mothering person to empower others, to foster transformative growth.”⁶ In a 2002 interview Carole Pateman declared, “Historically and even today, motherhood is central. There are lots of different aspects to this—feminists have of course emphasized motherhood as something of particular value that women contribute as citizens that should be recognised as such.”⁷ Striving to expand women’s possibilities and roles beyond childbearing and the home, many feminists have simultaneously endeavored to elevate maternity as emblematic of women’s exceptional contributions and a sign of what grants the female sex “different ideas about human development, different ways of imagining the human condition, different notions of what is of value in life.”⁸

A number of critical feminist utopias take up these views to argue that women are uniquely able to bring about a better world because they are more caring, nurturing, and community-minded than men—a contrast particularly evident in the divide between the peaceful, egalitarian women of Zone Three and the militaristic male chauvinists of Zone Four in Doris

⁵ Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 43.

⁶ Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), and Virginia Held, *Feminist Morality: Transforming Culture, Society, and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 209. I will discuss below the questionable distinction between “mothering persons” and “mothers.”

⁷ Nirmal Puwar, “Interview with Carole Pateman: ‘The Sexual Contract,’ Women in Politics, Globalization and Citizenship,” *Feminist Review* 70 (2002): 128.

⁸ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 5.

Lessing's *The Marriages of Zones Three, Four, and Five* (1980). Such feminist futures build on a long tradition of feminist separatist utopianism, addressed further in Chapter 5, in which utopia emerges as a female space separate from other, less desirable bisexual or male-only realms. From Mary Bradley Lane's *Mizora* (1881) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915) to James Tiptree, Jr.'s "Houston, Houston Do You Read?" (1976), Shari Tepper's *Gate to Women's Country* (1988), and James Cañón's *Tales from the Town of Widows* (2007), separatist utopias solve political, social, and economic crises by turning to female-only worlds.

One of the central improvements offered by these difference-based societies is the elevation of motherhood. In Joanna Russ's *Whileaway*, the all-female utopia of *The Female Man* (1975), women reproduce among themselves, as do the Hill Women in Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground* (1978). The Riders in Suzy McKee Charnas's *Motherlines* (1979) procreate with horses, having evolved beyond the need for human males. These versions of utopian maternity depict various ways of revolutionizing motherhood, and, in turn, women's social roles. For instance, Robin Silbergleid argues that in *The Female Man*, the elimination of men from *Whileaway* "enables Russ to build a gender-free world from the ground up and imagine what a citizenship not premised on sexual difference might look like." Instead of laboring at home to care for husband and children on her own, "the Whileawayan has the responsibility to care for herself and her community and the right to health and individual prosperity."⁹ These novels invest motherhood with social importance while liberating women to experience other aspects of life. Women are leaders, healers, friends, sisters, warriors, artists, innovators, and more in societies where all children are wanted and cared for by the collective.

⁹ Silbergleid, "Women, Utopia, and Narrative," 162.

Yet despite such an appealing vision, many feminist critics have pointed out significant drawbacks to the model of motherhood put forth in these texts. As Kathleen B. Jones explains, the image of the utopian mother “may validate the idealized image of an all-nurturing, all loving woman even as it rejects the patriarchal system that created that image.”¹⁰ The elevation of motherhood in women’s separate spheres risks perpetuating reductive stereotypes about women’s essential roles and limiting possibilities for utopian change. Jenny Wolmark notes, “The women-only communities established in *Motherlines* suggest that women can be free only in the absence of men, a proposition that ironically leaves exiting gender relations intact and posits an unproblematic relation between women and the category of Woman.”¹¹ Chris Ferns calls *The Wanderground* “true to an ahistorically conceived essential femininity” and Jennifer Burwell contends that in the novel, “As a result of basing the ideal society on the figure of the mother, the women fail to differentiate themselves from one another and from nature and also participate in a collective rejection of agency.”¹² Despite the importance of validating female contributions to society, including around childbirth and childcare, feminist critical utopias expressly organized around motherhood risk reproducing gender stereotypes and constrained roles, limiting their potential to imagine something else.

Disputing the maternalist ideologies at the basis of difference feminism means arguing for a more open and fluid conception of gender identities and roles. As Chantal Mouffe

¹⁰ Jones, “Citizenship,” 809. Seth Koven and Sonya Michel define maternalism as the “ideologies and discourses that exalted women’s capacity to mother and applied to society as a whole the values they attached to that role: care, nurturance, and morality.” Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, “Introduction: ‘Mother Worlds,’” in *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States*, ed. Seth Koven and Sonya Michel (New York: Routledge, 1993), 4.

¹¹ Jenny Wolmark, *Aliens and Others: Science Fiction, Feminism, and Postmodernism* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994), 84.

¹² Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 197, and Jennifer Burwell, *Notes on Nowhere: Feminism, Utopian Logic, and Social Transformation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 81.

maintains, it is necessary to reject essentialism and the unified conception of categories like “woman” and “mother” in order to understand the multiple relations of domination and subordination that shape political and social life. She asserts:

I certainly do not believe that essentialism necessarily entails conservative politics and I am ready to accept that it can be formulated in a progressive way. What I want to argue is that it presents some inescapable shortcomings for the construction of a democratic alternative... I consider that it leads to a view of identity that is at odds with a conception of radical and plural democracy and that it does not allow us to construe the new vision of citizenship that is required by such a politics.¹³

Much like Elizabeth Grosz’s plea for “unknown, unthought discursive spaces,” Mouffe strives to articulate new ways of theorizing gender to imagine forms of citizenship that enable inclusive democratic alternatives. Such alternatives, she maintains, are not possible when addressed through the lens of difference feminism, which “defend[s] a set of values based on the experience of women *as* women, that is, their experience of motherhood and care exercised in the private realm of the family.”¹⁴

Examining the intersections of race, class, and gender in utopia, dystopia, and current society, Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1974) initially appears to fulfill Mouffe’s

¹³ Chantal Mouffe, “Feminism, Citizenship, and Radical Democratic Politics,” in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 370. Mouffe is specifically concerned with conceptions of citizenship, but related questions of legal status, political participation, social conduct, and the relationship between the individual and the collective apply to the construction of the utopian world as well

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 374, emphasis original. In this definition of difference feminism, Mouffe is drawing on Ruddick’s *Maternal Thinking* and Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice*, among others. This does not mean we cannot conceptualize collective subjects like “women” (or men, whites, the upper class, heterosexuals, etc.), but that in doing so it is important to recognize the ways the subject positions ascribed through those discourses will exceed their unstable bounds.

call to “theorize the multiplicity of relations of subordination”¹⁵ without relying on a universal and unchanging category of womanhood to bring about the better world. The novel takes great strides to combat the essentialism that impairs texts like *Motherlines*, *The Wanderground*, and *The Female Man*, unraveling sexual differences to imagine new roles for both men and women in the utopian world. Much has been written about how *Woman on the Edge of Time* breaks with normative gender roles, especially around motherhood and the nuclear family, by using extrauterine technology to eliminate female gestation and disrupt the gendered family unit built on heterosexual procreative sex. The novel would therefore seem a radical reimagining of feminist utopianism that breaks free from the utopian romance with its basis in normative sex and gender roles.

I find, however, that a closer look at the way utopia is presented in the text, the motivation that compels the utopian turn, and the characterization of the female lead instead reveal a strong commitment to what can be described as sentimental motherhood. Despite the surface ways reproductive technology unsettles the maternal ideal, Piercy appeals to deep and tender feelings of maternal love to signify the benefits of the utopian world, much as the Manic Pixie Dream Girl and the Victorian Angel in the House speak to a desire for nurturance and care. Reading the privileging of sentimental motherhood espoused in this novel leads me to two later texts that further illustrate how good mothers are used to validate and enable the ideals of utopia, while bad mothers are blamed for dystopian decline. Surprisingly, it is these examples from the twenty-first century that express an even more conservative outlook than Piercy’s 1970s text, by relying on the maternalist ideologies of difference feminism to uphold an essentializing account of utopian motherhood in ways even Piercy once tried to critique. Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and*

¹⁵ Ibid., 372.

Crake (2003) and its sequel *The Year of the Flood* (2009) are not typically read with attention to mothers, but examining the novels alongside Piercy's reveals that although Atwood is usually seen as challenging normative gender roles, she too uses women's reproductive bodies and "natural" propensity toward emotional maternal care to define the horizons of utopia and dystopia and propel the narrative toward the better world. Atwood and Piercy disagree over the role of technology in the maternalist utopia and the potential to effectively disrupt aspects of social formation predicated on female reproduction, but both grant women privileged status as caretakers of the next generation and the ones on whom the new world depends. Considering how motherhood is figured in these novels thus suggests that assumptions about women's reproductive bodies and maternal capacities remain salient even in texts commonly celebrated for their feminist ideals.

The Tyranny of Biology: Reproduction, Technology, and the Feminist Revolution in *Woman on the Edge of Time*

Considered alongside Ursula K. Le Guin as one of the preeminent feminist writers of the 1970s, Marge Piercy expands upon the radical potential of the sexual revolution and the women's movement to imagine an egalitarian and sexually permissive utopian community in the twenty-second century. *Woman on the Edge of Time*, often judged her "masterwork," has been traditionally read as a paragon of the feminist critical utopian genre, rethinking gender, labor, and family as the basis for social and political life.¹⁶ But reading *Woman on the Edge of Time* through the lens of the romance plot reveals how the feminist innovations of Piercy's utopia paradoxically reinscribe traditional gender norms for women by valorizing heartfelt and devoted

¹⁶ Carol Farley Kessler, "Woman on the Edge of Time: A Novel 'To Be Of Use,'" *Extrapolation* 28.4 (1987): 313.

motherhood. Many have celebrated Piercy's futuristic vision of reproduction, which severs biology from procreation and disrupts heterosexual family structures and norms. But despite these changes, *Woman on the Edge of Time* upholds the fundamental assumption that women are hardwired for maternal care. By reinforcing a maternal sentiment presented as lacking in current society, the novel insists that utopia harness women's innate capacity for mothering.

Piercy's protagonist Connie is an impoverished Chicana woman living in New York City in the 1970s, imprisoned in an insane asylum after defending herself against her niece's abusive boyfriend and pimp. Subjected to horrific mental experiments by the medical-industrial complex, Connie also discovers she has a gift: she is a receiver, able to telepathically connect with a woman named Luciente from the society of Mattapoissett in the year 2137, and, at another point, to travel to an alternative dystopian future as well. Connie is transported to Mattapoissett throughout her confinement and learns how different this society is from her own. Mattapoissett is a place "where human potential is valued" and where "the people work together to provide the necessities of life for everyone."¹⁷ The community is diverse, egalitarian, and based on "a fundamental principle of connection, creation, healing."¹⁸ Tom Moylan gives a glowing account of Mattapoissett's opportunities for "personal transformation," "cooperation," and "coordination."¹⁹ Piercy herself calls it a "vision of a reasonable society" that is "cooperative, respectful of all living beings, gentle, responsible, loving, and playful."²⁰

¹⁷ Elham Afnan, "Chaos and Utopia: Social Transformation in *Woman on the Edge of Time*," *Extrapolation* 37.4 (1996): 335, 333.

¹⁸ Kerstin W. Shands, *The Repair of the World: The Novels of Marge Piercy* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 3. The novel leaves ambiguous whether Mattapoissett is a "real" future or a schizophrenic hallucination, but either way, the central role that motherhood will play in Connie's journey illustrates the singular focus the novel grants women in search of better lives.

¹⁹ Moylan, *Demand*, 125.

²⁰ Marge Piercy, *Parti-Colored Blocks for a Quilt* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983), 100, 215.

But rather than embrace this utopian world wholeheartedly, Connie is immensely troubled by a startling aspect of Mattapoissett's society: women no longer give birth. A marked contrast to all-female utopias in which women procreate among themselves, Mattapoissett is a world in which women are separated from reproduction. The novel therefore seems a direct refutation of difference feminists like Alice Rossi and Adrienne Rich who "discern[ed] utopian potential in women's ability to bear children" and "imply[d] that mothering could be wonderful if women could recognize and take pleasure in their procreative and maternal capacities and if these were not taken over by institutional constraints and alienated understandings of mothering."²¹ Piercy parts company with these thinkers by suggesting it is not only patriarchal conditions but mothering itself that is part of the problem.²² Turning to a radically different second-wave feminist, Shulamith Firestone, whose well-known *Dialectic of Sex* (1970) argues that biology constitutes the basis of oppression, Piercy creates a world that eliminates sexism by severing women's reproductive bodies from reproduction itself.²³

For Firestone, the primary demand of the sexual revolution is "*the freeing of women from the tyranny of their reproductive biology by every means available, and the diffusion of the childbearing and childrearing role to the society as a whole, men as well as women.*" The result

²¹ Susanne Gross, *The Pleasure of the Feminist Text: Reading Michèle Roberts and Angela Carter* (New York: Rodopi, 2009), 100, and Nancy Chodorow and Susan Contratto, "The Fantasy of the Perfect Mother," in *Rethinking the Family: Some Feminist Questions*, ed. Barrie Thorne and Marilyn Yalom, 2nd ed. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 196.

²² Chodorow and Contratto note that feminists writing about motherhood such as Rich and Rossi "focus on the conditions—those of patriarchy—in which bad mothering takes place, in which mothers are victims and powerless in the perpetuation of evil. But this implies that if only we could remove these patriarchal constraints, mothering would be perfect." Chodorow and Contratto, "Fantasy," 195.

²³ On Piercy's indebtedness to Firestone, see Kathy Rudy "Ethics, Reproduction, Utopia: Gender and Childbearing in *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*," *NWSA Journal* 9.1 (1997): 29; Anne Donchin, "The Future of Mothering: Reproductive Technology and Feminist Theory," *Hypatia* 1.2 (1986): 130; and Alice Adams, "Out of the Womb: The Future of the Uterine Metaphor," *Feminist Studies* 19.2 (1993): 272.

is “to threaten the *social* unit that is organized around biological reproduction and the subjection of women to their biological destiny, the family.”²⁴ Whereas difference feminists elevate female biology, Firestone sees it as a hindrance that tethers women to gendered roles. *Woman on the Edge of Time* imagines what such a vision might look like in practice: the people of Mattapoissett have given up motherhood as the necessary last step in “women’s long revolution.” Babies are now made at “brooders,” and men who want to “mother” take hormones that allow them to nurse.²⁵ Connie is at first appalled by “the bland bottleborn monsters of the future” (106), but those in Mattapoissett insist, like Firestone, that the gender equality their society enjoys depends on severing reproduction from biology to prevent women from being valued or devalued for their reproductive bodies. No longer tied to procreative heterosexual unions predicated on a gendered division of labor, social units develop into more open and fluid sexual and kinship networks. Mothers of both sexes elect to care for children, and individuals experience a rich variety of social and sexual bonds.

Critics are overwhelmingly enthusiastic about how the brooders liberate women from compulsory maternity and allow both genders more varied and equal roles in society. Tom Moylan, Kathy Rudy, Carol Farley Kessler, and Susan Matarese all agree that the brooders “eliminate sexism” and “radically redefin[e] the character of the nuclear family.”²⁶ Robin Silbergleid launches a cogent critique of the essentializing logic underpinning difference-based feminists like Gilligan, Patemen, and Ruddick and then reads *Woman on the Edge of Time* as a

²⁴ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: William and Morrow, 1970), 233, 234, emphasis original.

²⁵ Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1976), 105. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

²⁶ Kessler, “To Be Of Use,” 313, and Susan Matarese, “Death and Community: Insights from the Utopian Vision of Marge Piercy,” *Utopian Studies* 3 (1991): 106. See also Rudy, “Ethics, Reproduction, Utopia,” 27-28 and Moylan, *Demand*, 134-135.

welcomed alternative, explaining, “Mattapoissett abolishes the sex-gender system, replacing heterosexual union with mechanical ‘brooders’ used for reproduction. In this way, Piercy interrogates the relation between reproduction and sexuality necessary within the sexual contract. Birth, rather than providing the ideal end of heterosexual union, serves the communal good.”²⁷ For Silbergleid and others, eliminating heterosexual sex as the means of procreation definitively revolutionizes sex, sexuality, gender roles, and child-rearing norms.

There is much to learn from Piercy’s experiment, and much that is valid in these interpretations. It is certainly true that the reproductive technology “subverts a fundamental law of the patriarchal sex-gender system with its overdetermined concern for paternity.”²⁸ Is it possible, however, that the brooders might have more potential to disrupt normative arrangements and imagine other social arrangements beyond even what is granted in the text? I am concerned that overstating their revolutionary impact has lead scholars to miss more nuanced ideologies about motherhood that are ongoing throughout the text but that lack the novelty of bobbing embryos. If Silbergleid critiques maternalist feminism for relying on the same essentializing stance theorists sought to refute, why does she miss what I will suggest is a parallel logic in Piercy’s text? Perhaps this oversight stems from reading the brooders somewhat out of context, emphasize their exciting, atypical status instead of seeing their place in the narrative overall. For instance, Moylan writes that “the use of extrauterine reproduction... reveal[s] the radical feminist basis of Piercy’s vision,” but then quickly moves on without interrogating or justifying how the brooders serve that vision.²⁹ There seems to be a commitment

²⁷ Silbergleid, “Women, Utopia, and Narrative,” 165.

²⁸ Frances Bartowski, *Feminist Utopias* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 77.

²⁹ Moylan, *Demand*, 134.

to upholding the text as radical without providing attentive and detailed readings that would disclose how it may or may not live up to this ideal.

Placing the brooders within the larger narrative arc as it traces Connie's increasing involvement as a utopian subject and believer, it becomes evident that the narrative is largely organized around Connie's realization of sentimental utopian motherhood, even as the brooders divorce women from the biological imperative of maternity. Although the brooders effectively "liberate women from motherhood itself," they do not bring about "the end of motherhood."³⁰ Instead, they heighten overall attention to motherhood in the society. At times it seems Connie places too much emphasis on mothering, suggesting that although the narrative is focalized around her perspective, she may be missing out other aspects of utopian life when she focuses so much on this issue. She imagines Luciente chiding her for thinking only about birth, saying, "Our dignity comes from work. Everyone raises the kids, haven't you noticed? Romance, sex, birth, children—that's what you fasten on. Yet that isn't women's business anymore. It's everybody's" (251). But even as Luciente reminds Connie that mothering belongs to the community, not just women, she affirms that the community is just as focused on mothering as Connie is: it is everyone's business and everyone's concern.

Yet although the entire community is involved in mothering, the term itself presupposes gendered care. Mattapoisett has eliminated gender distinctions and hierarchies, even in its language, replacing gender pronouns with the all-inclusive "per." But if child rearing is equal, why not call it parenting? Why is parenting the one realm where gender distinctions remain?³¹ I

³⁰ Peter Fitting, "'So We All Become Mothers': New Roles for Men in Recent Utopian Fiction," *Science Fiction Studies* 12.2 (1985): 168, and Adams, "Out of the Womb," 287.

³¹ Nancy Chodorow reproduces this same problematic use of language, reifying childcare into a gendered conception of mothering: "Mothers are women, of course, because a mother is a female parent, and a female who is a parent must be adult, hence must be a woman. Similarly, fathers

disagree with Sara Ruddick's "refusal of the abstract 'parent' and the different 'father'" in justifying "the case for 'mothering' as a gender-inclusive and therefore genderless activity." Rather, I read in Ruddick's insistence that "a man or woman is a 'mother,' ... only if he or she acts upon a social commitment to nurture, protect, and train children" an ongoing commitment to gender roles that views such nurturance as a specifically female activity.³² As Barrie Thorne reminds us, "Nongendered language often masks specific gender assumptions. For instance, in *Haven in a Heartless World* Christopher Lasch usually means 'father' when he writes 'parent,' and 'son' when he writes 'child.'" Just as "'family' is sometimes tacitly associated with 'mother,'" so does "mother" signal "female" even in Piercy's otherwise equal world.³³ Thus when Lynn F. Williams writes that in *Woman on the Edge of Time*, "neither parenting nor loving is a selfish matter," she is misreading the novel's clear attention to the word "mothering" over "parenting."³⁴ The fact that, as Luciente says, "we all became mothers" shows the primacy of maternity over androgynous forms of childcare (105).³⁵

are male parents, are men. But we mean something different when we say that someone mothered a child than when we say that someone fathered her or him. We can talk about a man 'mothering' a child, if he is this child's primary nurturing figure, or is acting in a nurturant manner... Being a mother, then, is not only bearing a child—it is being a person who socializes and nurtures. It is being a primary parent or caretaker." This account of mothering "separate[s] child care from childbearing, nurturing as an activity from pregnancy and parturition." But because Chodorow has previously described "woman as mothers" and "men as not-mothers," the emphasis on mothering over shared or even non-gendered parenting undermines the argument divesting nurturance from gender. Chodorow, *Reproduction of Mothering*, 11, 16, emphasis original.

³² Sara Ruddick, "Thinking About Fathers," in *Rethinking the Family: Some Feminist Questions*, 2nd edition, ed. Barrie Thorne and Marilyn Yalom (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 187.

³³ Barrie Thorne, "Feminism and the Family: Two Decades of Thought," in *Rethinking the Family: Some Feminist Questions*, 14.

³⁴ Lynn F. Williams, "Everyone Belongs to Everyone Else: Marriage and the Family in Recent American Utopias 1965-1985," *Utopian Studies* 1 (1987): 128.

³⁵ It could be that the elimination of fathering in Mattapoisett is meant to abolish the legislative and prohibitive role of the paternal figure in the symbolic order. This does not explain, however,

Even as mothering is separated from biology, the idea remains that utopia is a space for mothering, meaning the transformations to social, political, and economic structures in the new world will be rooted in practices that allow for maternal care. Peter Fitting writes that *Woman on the Edge of Time* is one of several “fictive attempts to bring about a world qualitatively different from ours, especially in regard to the new roles for men which an egalitarian society would carry with it.”³⁶ But if this new role is that everyone mothers, the “new” paradigm is to expand the realm of the maternal, not reconsider it. Although Piercy enacts Firestone’s radical call for artificial reproduction, in which “children would be born to both sexes equally, or independently of either,” she does not commit to Firestone’s related insistence on “an honest reexamination of the ancient value of motherhood.”³⁷ As a result, the novel ultimately steps back from the full implications of Firestone’s demands by disputing Firestone’s hope that artificial reproduction will reduce overall interest in parenting. It is as though Piercy is trying to make Firestone’s unorthodox views more palatable to readers, who might agree that women are “at the continual mercy of their biology” but are not yet willing to eliminate the systems of family and procreation on which they may have based their lives.³⁸ If, as Anne Donchin explains, Connie “dramatizes the reaction of many feminists to Shulamith Firestone’s case for feminist revolution,” then Connie’s ultimate acceptance of the brooders will show how initial negative reactions to radical social change might be tempered to convert readers to more moderate ideas.³⁹

Reinstating the Feminine Ideal

why parenting would not be a preferable gender-neutral or gender-inclusive term for child rearing.

³⁶ Fitting, “We All Become Mothers,” 162.

³⁷ Firestone, *Dialectic*, 12, 227.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

³⁹ Donchin, “The Future of Mothering,” 130.

The importance of mothering in utopia is heightened by the characterization of dystopia in terms of violent abuse, an absence of love, and the devaluation of reproduction. In New York, which figures as a present-day dystopia in the novel, Connie's niece Dolly is financially dependent on her boyfriend and pimp, who forces Dolly to have an abortion because pregnancy is bad for profits. Connie herself understands that reproduction is a liability to a woman's sexual appeal and chances on the market when she drops out of junior college after becoming pregnant by a boyfriend who promptly leaves her. Connie is beaten by her father, her ex-husband, and by Dolly's pimp. Her one love Claud is killed in jail when he is injected with hepatitis as part of a medical experiment. She is branded an unfit mother and forcibly sterilized after a botched abortion. Her maternal failings resurface when her daughter Angelina is put into foster care. A social worker declares, "As a mother, your actions are disgraceful" (60). Connie is tormented by the absence of her daughter and longs for a world in which she could pursue an education and hold down a meaningful job, a world in which she would be able to share her life with her lover and child. It is no wonder, then, that utopia becomes a place where she could live out the life she never had. Yet it is important to note just how extensively this dream comes to hinge on the promise of a reproductive future.

When Connie visits a future dystopia and witnesses how her current world will worsen if left unchecked, the price of devaluing motherhood becomes all too clear. In this hellish society she meets Gildina 547-921-45-822-KBJ, a kind of sex-bot whose sole purpose is to satisfy Cash, an equally enhanced "fighting machine" who has contracted Gildina for sex for two years, at which point he may renew her contract or seek another as he pleases (298).⁴⁰ Gildina is "a

⁴⁰ Elham Afnan notes, "There are a number of pairs or groups of characters that represent the utopian/dystopian versions of the same person." Both Dolly and Gildina are explicitly associated with non-reproductive, non-marital sexual relations owed to the hypermasculine, abusive men

cartoon of femininity,” surgically altered to fulfill her sexual-economic role as “a genetically improved ape” in a highly regimented capitalist society (288, 299). This “corporate hell” has dissolved marriage for emotional, sexual, and/or procreative aims.⁴¹ When Connie asks if Gildina can get married, she responds, “This is. I mean you know the riches marry old-style. I heard [sic] they figure back generations. But this is how it is for us” (290). Connie then asks what happens if Gildina gets pregnant. Gildina explains, “If it’s in the contract. I never had a contract that called for a kid. Mostly the moms have them. You know, they’re cored to make babies all the time. Ugh, they’re so fat!” (290). There is clearly no hope here for the sentimental mothering Sara Ruddick considers “a deeply rewarding, life-structuring activity that tends to create in mothers distinctive capacities for responsibility, attentive care, and nonviolence.”⁴² Gildina’s world shows how technology can sever sex from reproduction in disastrous ways that enhance, rather than undermine, the sex-gender system.

The exaggerated sex-gender system of the male-dominated dystopia thus acts as a foil to the utopia; the novel emphasizes the emotional ties of mothering to distinguish Mattapoissett from Gildina’s horrific world. Such attention to the sentimental side of child rearing suggests reproductive technology and the separation of biology from sex needn’t subordinate women to what the novel presents as voracious male sexual appetites. My critique of this premise is in no way meant to suggest that is it reactive or regressive to imagine utopia as a warm and nurturing place where coercive sex and childbearing are unknown. Surely Mattapoissett offers a desirable alternative to Gildina’s world and an example of how disruptions to normative sex and gender

that claim access to their sexualized and nonmaternal bodies. Even their names reflect their status: Dolly the plaything, Gildina the gilded, made-up girl. At least Gildina is under contract; Dolly has no such guarantee. Afnan, “Chaos and Utopia,” 336.

⁴¹ Vera Neverow, “The Politics of Incorporation and Embodiment: *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *He, She and It* as Feminist Epistemologies of Resistance,” *Utopian Studies* 5.2 (1994): 17.

⁴² Ruddick, “Thinking About Fathers,” 179.

roles can benefit women's lives, even if only in the imagination. But the novel's focalization around Connie's perspective as she pines for her lost daughter makes it difficult to explore the benefits of Mattapoissett's world over Gildina's without falling into a trap of sentimentality that loses the critical focus and insight Firestone's thought experiment initially affords.

The problem is not the presence of emotions or the nurturance and support of the utopian world, but the ways in which these qualities are gendered in the text, building on typical associations between women and care like the emphasis on mothering over parenting.

Interestingly, *Woman on the Edge of Time* is frequently read as a "feminist novel of androgynous fantasy," the world of Mattapoissett "based on an image of unity in which 'male' and 'female' elements are poised in harmony within the individual and/or society."⁴³ Gender identities are not particularly clear-cut—Connie cannot tell if Luciente is male or female when they first meet—and both men and women exhibit behaviors that are typically gendered, like fighting or caretaking. Yet despite these examples, the community is nevertheless presented less as a

⁴³ Ellen Morgan, "The Feminist Novel of Androgynous Fantasy," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 2.3 (1977) 41, and Pamela Annas, "New Worlds, New Words: Androgyny in Feminist Science Fiction" *Science Fiction Studies* 5.2 (1978): 146. See also Joyce Treblicot, "Two Forms of Androgynism," in *Feminism and Philosophy*, eds. Mary Vetterling Braggin, Frederick A. Elliston, and Jane English (Totowa: Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1977), 74 and Neverow, "Incorporation," 20-21. Mattapoissett's fluidity with gender norms has also led some to read it as a transgender community. Lucy Nicholas asserts that because Mattapoissett has fewer "difference-based behaviours," it is "a society in which there is no sex distinction between humyn beings." But I would argue that rather than promoting "gender neutrality," Mattapoissett still includes what Judith Halberstam calls "compulsory gender binarism." For example, although Connie initially thinks Luciente is a man, she then rectifies her misperception and places Luciente into the "correct" category. Likewise the word "per" may be nonhierarchical, but unlike ze or hir, it ultimately attaches only to cisgendered beings. Lucy Nicholas, "A Radical Queer Utopian Future: A Reciprocal Relation Beyond Sexual Difference," *Third Space: A Journal of Feminist Theory and Culture* 8.2 (2009): np., <http://www.thirdspace.ca/journal/article/viewArticle/Inicholas/248>; Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 27. See also Judith Butler's argument in Chapter 3 of *Bodies that Matter*, "Phantasmic Identification and the Assumption of Sex," that constraining sexuality to a clear sexed position and identity normalizes heterosexuality. Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 93-119.

synthesis or balancing of gender roles than as an elevation of feminized traits. Recognizing how Mattapoisett comes across as a distinctly female space, Lyman Tower Sargent notes that Piercy “stresses the special role of women in healing” and Carol Farley Kessler applauds how women play a central role in the “public nurturance” of the community.⁴⁴ According to Barrie Thorne, such “values of nurturance and community... are symbolically associated with women and family.”⁴⁵ Mattapoisett comes across as not simply a caring community but a specifically female community, drawing on stereotypes about feminine virtues to depict an improved world.

Piercy thus maintains that there are female ways of knowing, living, and relating that do not directly correspond to female bodies but that are, nonetheless, set up in opposition to masculine norms. As Vera Neverow explains, the utopian and dystopian worlds in Piercy’s text “endorse conflicting epistemological credos, the progressive female-oriented cultures supporting a feminist politics of embodiment and the oppressive patriarchal cultures focusing on the coercive strategies of incorporation.”⁴⁶ The novel’s elevation of a “female-oriented culture” is precisely the kind of feminism Alice Echols rightly criticizes for presuming women’s liberation requires a clearly defined “female principle” that “has come to reflect and reproduce dominant cultural assumptions about women.”⁴⁷ By “contrasting life-affirming, female-identified cultures with destructive male-dominated cultures,”⁴⁸ Piercy positions the reader to desire a utopian

⁴⁴ Sargent, “A New Anarchism,” 31; Kessler, “To Be Of Use,” 314. See also Neverow, “Incorporation,” 17 and 20.

⁴⁵ Thorne, “Feminism and the Family,” 5.

⁴⁶ Neverow, “Incorporation,” 17.

⁴⁷ Alice Echols, “The New Feminism of Yin and Yang,” in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 440. Echols calls this strand of feminism “cultural feminism,” to separate it from the earlier ideals of radical feminism out of which it emerged.

⁴⁸ Neverow, “Incorporation,” 17.

world presented as feminine. The effect of this is to “encourage us to ‘maximize female identity’ without questioning the extent to which that identity has been conditioned.”⁴⁹

Because Mattapoisett is characterized as a place of female knowledge, insight, and care, it stands to enable Connie to develop the affective maternal capabilities she was denied by her heartless, male-dominated dystopian world. Connie’s hope that such a world would enable her to mother is crystallized when she meets Luciente’s daughter Dawn, “a brown-skinned girl with dark braids,” and “a scab on her small round, her heavily tanned, her kissable knee” (140). With a name symbolizing rebirth and renewal, Dawn evokes Connie’s maternal desire to love and care for a child. The sight of such a happy and carefree girl makes Connie call out for her own daughter, Angelina.⁵⁰ But the painful memory of all she has lost in her own life wrenches Connie out of her telepathic connection with Luciente and throws her back into her hospital cell, articulating the differences between the present society and the utopian future in terms of what both worlds offer Connie as a mother.

Back in her dystopian present at the mental hospital, Connie immediately and wholeheartedly reverses her feelings on the birthing and child-rearing practices of Mattapoisett, and therefore on the society as a whole. I quote her transformation at length:

⁴⁹ Echols, “New Feminism,” 445, quoting Ann Snitow “The Front-Line: Notes on Sex in Novels by Women, 1969-1979,” in *Women: Sex and Sexuality*, ed. Catharine Stimpson and Ethel Person (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 174. Echols adds, “Of course, many of the values commonly associated with the female or private sphere should be redefined as vital human values” (445).

⁵⁰ This moment highlights the symbolic role the child plays in compelling utopian discourse, and, in turn, the importance of motherhood in bringing this child (and, more broadly, childhood) into being. Lee Edelman explains, “We are no more able to conceive of a politics without a fantasy of the future than we are able to conceive of a future without the figure of the Child.” The child thus carries “the cultural burden of signifying futurity” and the possibilities of the future utopian world. Dawn, the embodiment of this future for Connie, stands in for the Child, for the figure of Angelina we never actually meet, and for the future ideal her society offers. Edelman, *No Future*, 11, 13.

Suddenly she assented with all her soul to Angelina in Mattapoissett, to Angelina hidden forever one hundred fifty years into the future, even if she should never see her again. For the first time her heart assented to Luciente, to Bee, to Magdalena. Yes, you can have my child, you can keep my child... She will be strong there, well fed, well housed, well taught, she will grow up much better and stronger and smarter than I. I assent, I give you my battered body as recompense and my rotten heart. Take her, keep her! I want to believe she is mine. I give her to Luciente to mother, with gladness I give her. She will never be broken as I was. She will be strange, but she will be glad and strong and she will not be afraid. She will have enough. She will have pride. She will love her own brown skin and be loved for her strength and her good work. She will walk in strength like a man and never sell her body and she will nurse her babies like a woman and live in love like a garden, like that children's house of many colors. People of the rainbow with its end fixed in earth, I give her to you!" (141)

Though Connie's powerful assent to utopia—her choice of Mattapoissett over New York, of the future over the present—stems from a vision of a child, it is based on a view of herself as a mother. In the dystopian present, she is "broken," "battered," and "rotten," unable to care for Angelina or shield her from the myriad harms of the outside world—the racism and sexism that make women fearful, ashamed, and endangered. Connie cannot live in utopia, but she can create that future for her own child and for children to come. In Mattapoissett, "The children are everyone's heirs, everyone's business, everyone's future" (183). Connie chooses utopia as a place where children can thrive and so implicitly identifies utopia as a place where she could

mother. Because she cannot care for Angelina in the present, giving her to the future is the next best thing.

In assenting to Angelina in Mattapoisett, Connie also assents to the brooders. But she is able to overlook this area of discomfort because although Angelina will never give birth in utopia, “she will nurse her babies like a woman.” The society retains principles of mothering to ensure Angelina will still mother and be mothered, a consolation that makes the technological form of reproduction less threatening to Connie’s desired way of life. Thus Connie is not convinced that Mattapoisett represents a more utopian way of life because it has subverted the sex-gender system—she chooses Mattapoisett in spite of, not because of, the brooders, and because in many important ways that sex-gender system still continues in recognizable forms. When the assent to utopia hinges on the desire for mothering, the ways in which the brooders disrupt “the reproductive difference between the sexes”⁵¹ are smoothed over because women, although sexually liberated and free from biological childbirth, remain tethered to ideals about childrearing, if not childbearing. In this way, the novel rejects some forms of maternity at the same time that it comes to echo Jean Bethke Elshtain’s maternalist conviction that “the family remains the locus of the deepest and most resonant human ties, the most enduring hopes, the most intractable conflicts.”⁵²

Thus Mattapoisett offers a feminist challenge to “the ideology of ‘the monolithic family,’ which has elevated the nuclear family with a breadwinner husband and a full-time wife and mother as the only legitimate family form,”⁵³ at the same time that it assures the protagonist she can keep her attachments to family. In addition to fulfilling her desire to mother, utopia also lets

⁵¹ Chodorow and Contratto, “Fantasies,” 197.

⁵² Jean Bethke Elshtain, “On ‘The Family Crisis,’” *Democracy* 3.1 (1983): 138.

⁵³ Thorne, “Feminism and the Family,” 4.

Connie experience sexual gratification in a way that was limited in her dystopian life. From the beginning of her sojourns to Mattapoissett, Connie associates one utopian male, Bee, with her lost lover Claud, thinking “Maybe she just had a weakness for big black men soft in the belly who moved with that massive grace” (103). When Bee takes Connie back to his space, he elicits in her the laughter and sensuality she associates with Claud—“only Claud had done that before” (188)—linking pleasure to parenting by creating utopia as a place for maternal and romantic love counter to the violence, loneliness, and despair associated with dystopia. Being in Mattapoissett therefore does not encourage Connie to explore other relationships, but allows her to recreate her same desires. In letting Connie imagine a world in which she can once more be with Claud as well as be a mother to Angelina, Piercy reproduces a normative nuclear family even in this society of fluid sexuality, nonmonogamy, and alternative kinship structures.

Yet even as the narrative uses this vision of romance to support Connie’s place in the heteronormative system, it is hard to critique Connie’s humble wish for love and family. The text leads readers to sympathize with Connie rather than condemn her. Kathy Rudy feels that “Piercy’s novel...caus[es] us to identify with Connie” by seeing the narrative “through her eyes.” She is compassionate toward Connie’s struggles and time spent “scrap[ing] together money,” trying to get by.⁵⁴ With the narrative focalized around such a sympathetic character, readers root for Connie through good times and bad and applaud her striving for the utopian world. Tom Moylan calls Connie “a strong female protagonist” and “a powerful figure in her own time,” characterizing her as a “strong female hero who resists victimization and successfully fights back, winning not in terms of the present social system but in terms of the revolutionary effort to

⁵⁴ Rudy, “Ethics, Reproduction, Utopia,” 27.

overthrow that system.”⁵⁵ Connie is portrayed as simultaneously a victim and a hero, beaten down but still fighting.

As a result, critics are remarkably forgiving when Connie pushes Angelina into a door, breaking her daughter’s wrist and landing her in foster care. Rudy stresses Connie’s efforts—“Connie had been trying to support herself but failing”—and then downplays her agency, noting, “She had lost custody of her daughter, Angelina,” without mentioning why. Neverow laments that Connie has been “forcibly deprived of her only child, her own flesh and blood,” as though their biological connection establishes Connie’s ownership over Angelina even in moments of abuse.⁵⁶ In a line I find particularly disturbing, Moylan expresses sympathy that Connie “beats her child once in the frustration parents sometimes feel toward their frightened and demanding children.”⁵⁷ These apologies suggest Connie is so circumscribed by the structures around her that it is impossible to imagine her any other way. It is vital to the success of the utopian narrative to blame Connie’s shortcomings on her dystopian conditions, not on her. We have to understand that in another, better society, things would have turned out differently for her in order to understand what it is about her world—our world—that Mattapoissett endeavors to change. Yet in order to recognize the benefits of the utopian world, we also have to think Connie *is* a bad mother, because to miss the failures of motherhood in dystopia is to miss the need for utopia and the opportunities for renewed maternalism it allows. We have to forgive Connie because she is

⁵⁵ Moylan, *Demand*, 150.

⁵⁶ Rudy, “Ethics, Reproduction, Utopia,” 27; Neverow, “Incorporation,” 29.

⁵⁷ Moylan, *Demand*, 123. Moylan is highly critical of Shevek’s shortcomings in *The Dispossessed* and finds in Connie a more sympathetic revolutionary. While I agree with much of his reading of Le Guin, I find myself at odds with his flattering portrait of Connie. I cannot help but wonder to what extent a powerless Mexican woman repeatedly characterized as a victim better fulfills his image of what the leftist rise against power should look like, perhaps revealing some of the biases embedded in his own assessment of utopian change.

the hero of the novel, and we have to condemn her to dystopia so we can pull her into utopia when the time comes.

The turn toward utopia thus depends on a stark contrast between utopia as a place that fosters mothering and dystopia as a place that denies maternal care. To Piercy's credit, this formulation places the responsibility and blame for utopia and dystopia on conditions that facilitate or denigrate mothering—not on mothers themselves. This allows Connie to envision herself as a different person in the utopian world—as the mother she was never able to be. Piercy make the utopian transformations structural, not personal, seeking changes even as she limits those changes by retaining the primacy of motherhood in the utopian world. In contrast, Margaret Atwood puts the responsibility for utopia on the maternal figure, rather than on structural change. Atwood groups technological reproduction in with masculine forms of capitalist production that facilitate dystopian conditions and goes even further than Piercy in positioning failed mothers—not just motherhood—as the root of dystopian evil while identifying female reproduction as the source of future hope. Writing thirty years after Piercy, Atwood's utopia thus comes across as more conservative and reactionary than Piercy's world, leading to questions about where the feminist critical utopian genre is going in the twenty-first century and how the intervening developments in feminist thinking are and are not influencing the ways the form imagines alternative worlds and processes of change.

Margaret Atwood and the Nightmare of Male Creation

We might expect a later feminist critical utopia to do more than *Woman on the Edge of Time* to disrupt the heterofeminine maternalist norms privileged by difference feminism and to imagine radically different worlds for women. Feminism has taken great strides since the 1970s

to debunk essentialist assumptions, and both feminist and queer theory of the 1990s and 2000s have been markedly open to nonreproductive relationalities and alternative romantic, sexual, and familial structures. The close relationship feminist critical utopian literature maintains with feminist thinking suggests the literature might pick up and even advance these trends. But Margaret Atwood's popular MaddAddam series, consisting of *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and a third novel forthcoming at the time of writing, presents instead a renewed commitment to what Naomi Mezey and Cornelia T.L. Pillard term "the new maternalism," a world in which "parenting and care work are cast in exclusively female terms, as a new—but fundamentally retro and feminine—maternalism."⁵⁸ The remarkable feminist vision of Atwood's dystopian nightmare *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) launches a scathing critique of forced reproduction, the reduction of women to anatomy, and the power structures that benefit from sexist exploitation. The novel maintains the primacy of reproductive heterosexual pair bonding, but it highlights the importance of choice, autonomy, and independence and effectively secured Atwood's status as a preeminent feminist writer. Yet the MaddAddam series largely stalls this progress by assuming women's reproductive bodies will save the world.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Naomi Mezey and Cornelia T.L. Pillard, "Rethinking the New Maternalism," *Selected Works of Naomi Mezey*, forthcoming in *Michigan Journal of Gender and Law*, 2012, 4. http://www.works.bepress.com/naomi_mezey/2.

⁵⁹ It may therefore seem surprising that I have chosen to write about the MaddAddam series rather than *The Handmaid's Tale*. I am interested in maternity in the MaddAddam series instead because it does not come across as so obviously concerned with mothering, which I think makes it all the more important to contend with just how central mothering actually is to the text. The fact that representations of women in the series have not been interrogated makes this a pressing concern, especially given what I will show to be Atwood's overall lack of critical perspective in the novels. My choice of text is to a certain degree also generic: as Stephanie Barbé Hammer explains, *The Handmaid's Tale* "possesses many formal and thematic features typical of traditional satire" and "in many ways presents a satiric text-book case." In addition to her use of irony and disguise, Atwood "boasts what is perhaps the most crucial element of satiric writing, namely, the clear existence of a topical political target, which here is very obviously evangelical Christian fundamentalism." As a satire, the novel is more stable and unambiguous in its critique

Oryx and Crake is typically read as “a cautionary tale written to inform and warn readers about the potentially dire consequences of genetic engineering,” a “chillingly brilliant” account of a brave new bioengineered world.⁶⁰ Snowman, née Jimmy, believes he is the last person on Earth after his best friend Crake, formerly named Glenn, unleashes a plague to destroy humanity. Crake endeavors to replace humans with a new species of gentle, non-hierarchical beings he manufactures at his company lab and names the Children of Crake, or Crakers. Jimmy, unknowingly vaccinated against the plague, anguishes about the past while struggling, not very successfully, to stay alive in a hostile land. Most scholarship on the novel centers on the scientific and environmental aspects of the text, with only limited discussions of gender primarily focused on the two male leads. But Jimmy’s earliest memories, and much of the novel’s beginning, center on the absence of maternal care, suggesting an important gendered dimension to the text. Like Winston Smith of *1984* who repeatedly recalls his mother receding from him, Jimmy spends his solitude remembering how his mother failed him. She is a minor

than most critical utopias, and its imaginative impact more concerned with warnings than with inspiring positive change or imagining what other worlds could be. Stephanie Barbé Hammer, “The World as it Will be? Female Satire and the Technology of Power in *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” *Modern Language Studies* 20.2 (1990): 39. This emphasis on warning also suggests the dystopian elements of the novel fit more with the classic rather than the critical tradition of utopian writing. Classic dystopias focus on outlining problems rather than opening up new spaces of critique. Peter Fitting calls *The Handmaid’s Tale* “the model of the critical dystopia... for it holds out the prospect of hope,” but I think Tom Moylan is right when he argues instead that the novel prefigures the critical form, saying, “Atwood... continues in a more classical dystopian mode... [that] *anticipates* the emergence of a critical dystopia.” Peter Fitting, “Beyond This Horizon: Utopian Visions and Utopian Practice,” in *Utopia Method Vision*, 262, and Tom Moylan, “‘The Moment is Here... And It’s Important’: State Agency and Dystopia in Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Antarctica* and Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Telling*,” in *Dark Horizons*, 137, emphasis original.

⁶⁰ J. Brooks Bouson, “‘It’s Game Over Forever’: Atwood’s Satiric Vision of a Bioengineered Posthuman Future in *Oryx and Crake*,” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 39.3 (2004): 140-141, and Jeanette Winterson, “Strange New World: Review of *The Year of the Flood*,” *The New York Times*, September 20, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/20/books/review/Winterson-t.html?pagewanted=all>.

character, never named and rarely addressed by scholars except in passing,⁶¹ but the amount of space Jimmy devotes to remembering her absence awards her a prominent place in the narrative.

Jimmy's mother is conspicuously unable to fulfill her maternal obligations. She once worked as a microbiologist to prevent infections in the coveted pigeons, genetically modified host animals that grow extra organs for human transplant as part of "Operation Immortality."⁶² Increasingly depressed, however, she quits her job as soon as Jimmy starts school, saying she wants to stay home with him. But Jimmy knows she has no interest in this maternal role, "because if she'd wanted to stay home with Jimmy, why had she started doing that when Jimmy stopped being at home?" Although Jimmy's live-in nanny leaves because "now Jimmy's real mummy would be there all the time... and nobody needed two mummies," Jimmy wryly comments, "Oh yes, they did... Oh yes, they really did." Jimmy needs this second mother who "called him Jim-Jim and had smiled and laughed and cooked his egg just the way he liked it, and had sung songs and indulged him." Acutely aware of his mother's negligence, he longs for a woman to be solely devoted to him—an infantilizing desire he hardly outgrows. Only on the rare days "when she appeared brisk and purposeful" and "seemed to be enjoying herself" does Jimmy feel "she was like a real mother and he was like a real child," as though she must play her role for Jimmy to feel his life complete. Despite being accustomed to artificial species like pigeons—"his animal pals"—Jimmy cannot see his own mother as "real" unless she fulfills stereotypical

⁶¹ For example, Jayne Glover writes simply, "Compound life is completely controlled and becomes a prison for Jimmy's mother, who is forced into a violent escape when she voices her horror at the instrumentalism practiced within compound walls." Jayne Glover, "Human/Nature: Ecological Philosophy in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*," *English Studies in Africa* 52.2 (2009): 54.

⁶² Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2003), 22. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

maternal roles. Nowhere, however, does he complain about whether his father makes him “a real lunch,” dresses up, or smiles (30-31).

Although Jimmy seems to think she would be a better mother if she kept her career, the other working women we meet in this dystopian landscape are hardly more caring. Jimmy’s mother may not be able to remember his birthday, but Crake’s mother, who “was out a lot, or in a hurry,” gives off the impression that “she couldn’t remember his name; not only that, she couldn’t remember Crake’s name either” (88). These women fulfill the imperative to procreate but do not provide the care and attention for children to grow up feeling loved. The entire system is resolutely against the emotional sides of mothering: women who work haven’t the time or inclination to care for their children, while women who don’t work are so removed from everyday life they cannot complete even basic tasks like making a sandwich. Working mothers may be able to hire help to provide maternal care, but like Jimmy’s mother they seem adrift as to how to love. Presenting only a slate of bad mothers too selfish, depressed, or career-focused to care for others, the novel equates dystopia with insufficient mothering due in part to women in the workplace who have stopped prioritizing their kids.

This hardly seems like a position a notably feminist author like Atwood would take. Does the novel give us any other way of reading these mothers of dystopia and the tensions they face between the public and private responsibilities of work and home? Perhaps we are not meant to take Jimmy’s word on his mother’s shortcomings. He clearly fails to see her as a multifaceted human being and entirely disregards her perspective. When he reads the letter she leaves for him explaining why she decides to run away and join a revolutionary group fighting the corporations, he fills it in with “blah blah blah” and then whines, “Wasn’t there supposed to be a maternal bond?” (61). But the reader who has not been desensitized to life sequestered in the corporate

compounds where Jimmy is raised might better understand her reasons for leaving. It's possible we are not meant to criticize Jimmy's mother the way Jimmy does because we are not meant to wholly identify with the narrator like we do with Connie. Jimmy is whiny, self-indulgent, irresponsible, and immature, unable to make it in this world of corporate scientists but too lazy to do anything about it. We may be inclined to read his mother counter to his claims, emboldened by her struggle against corporate powers and invested in the alternative life she seeks.

But although *Oryx and Crake* largely satirizes Jimmy's views, maintaining an ironic take on his corporatized world, it does not use the critical distance such irony affords to critique Jimmy's views of his mother.⁶³ Atwood's emphasis on the pathos of Jimmy's plight exhorts the reader to take him seriously instead of satirically. For example, when his mother runs away she also releases his pet rakunk, a rat-skunk splice. We might not be expected to take Jimmy's bereavement to heart and even deride him for mourning the loss of an animal more than the loss of his mom. But according to Hannes Bergthaller, "that she takes his pet... appears like an act of sheer ideological callousness which leaves her son entirely bereft of all emotional support."⁶⁴ Stressing Jimmy's devastation takes the instance out of the satirical register and uses it to leverage judgment against his mother—for what kind of awful person takes her son's beloved pet? Even when we step away from Jimmy's perspective in *The Year of the Flood*, we learn his mother's rebellion has been as ineffectual as her parenting. Because we never see her as other

⁶³ On Atwood's use of irony see J. Brooks Bouson, *Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Narratives of Margaret Atwood* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 78; Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor, "From Irony to Affiliation in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*" *Critique* 45.1 (2003): 83-96; and Fiona Tolan, *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 167-172.

⁶⁴ Hannes Bergthaller, "Housebreaking the Human Animal: Humanism and the Problem of Sustainability in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*," *English Studies* 91.7 (2010): 739.

than the failure he makes her out to be, we have no reason to question his version of events; the novel may characterize Jimmy unfavorably, but nowhere is he unreliable.

Without a mother to guide him and provide the emotional support Bergthaller suggests he has been denied, Jimmy grows up unable experience emotional depth or form meaningful connections with women. A “womanizer and sex addict,”⁶⁵ he has a series of affairs in college with “girls [he] accumulated” by “[finding] a woman, and then another one, and another one after that” (193, 250). These women are in relationships and see Jimmy only as a “pastime,” not someone with whom they might become seriously involved (251). Brenda, whom we later meet as Ren in *The Year of the Flood*, writes to him, “*just because I fucked you doesn’t mean I like you*” (231, emphasis original). Rather than lament this antipathy, Jimmy is glad: “One good thing, they never told him to grow up. He suspected they kind of liked it that he hadn’t” (251). Jimmy acts the part of the perpetual child, choosing needy women he can get a rise out of just as he used to seek a reaction—any reaction—from his mother. He seems to be replaying the same vacuous and destructive relationships, perhaps because he knows no other ways. The maternal abandonment that marks his childhood thus comes to overdetermine his future, highlighting the absence of emotion, care, and connection in the dystopian world.

Jimmy is a product of a society that views sex in terms of casual pleasure, making the body yet another commodity to discard. He and Crake grow up on Internet porn, watching *Tart of the Day*, *Superswallowers*, and a pedophilic site *HottTotts*. At the same time they flip to live executions on *shortcircuit.com*, *brainfrizz.com*, and *deathrowlive.com*, linking sex and violence in a spectacle of mindless entertainment:

⁶⁵ Bouson, “Game Over,” 148.

So they'd roll a few joints and smoke them while watching the executions and the porn—the body parts moving around on the screen in slow motion, an underwater ballet of flesh and blood under stress, hard and soft joining and separating, groans and screams, close-ups of clenched eyes and clenched teeth, spurts of this or that. If you switched back and forth fast, it all came to look like the same event. Sometimes they'd have both things on at once, each on a different screen (86).

The connection between sex and violence highlights the brutality of their society, reflecting Catharine MacKinnon's famous argument that pornography directly feeds a patriarchal culture of violence. MacKinnon contends that pornography is sex, sex is conduct, and conduct is real, much as Oryx tells Jimmy, "All sex is real" (144).⁶⁶ Taking porn out of the symbolic and showing it as real combats the extent to which the spectacularization of the body obscures the actual lives involved. "In pornography," MacKinnon notes, "women shown being beaten and tortured report being beaten and tortured."⁶⁷

Just as MacKinnon fears, Jimmy and Crake find that the spectacle of sex and violence, readily and anonymously available, makes both seem unreal and therefore without consequence: "None of those little girls had ever seemed real to Jimmy—they'd always struck him as digital clones" (90). The only time he thinks the children licking whipped-cream off an older man might not just be acting afraid is when he first sees Oryx, or the child he thinks is Oryx, on a website.

⁶⁶ "The second and most controversial way that MacKinnon argues that pornography is sex (and as such is conduct, not speech) is her contention that pornography causes men to respond to it with sexual violence." Margaret McIntyre, "Sex Panic or False Alarm: The Latest Round in the Feminist Debate over Pornography," *UCLA Women's Law Journal* 6 (1995): 195. On disputes within the feminist movement over pornography and sex work that erupted in the 1980s, see also Chapter 1, "Contextualizing the Sexuality Debates: A Chronology 1966-2005" in Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter, *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

⁶⁷ Catharine MacKinnon, *Only Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 27.

She seems to look “right into Jimmy’s eyes, into the secret person inside of him.” Her glance is the closest he gets to intimacy in the novel and the closest he gets to “real.” It is an instant he never forgets: “He saved that one moment, the moment when Oryx looked” (91). When Oryx sees into him, Oryx is real and not a “digital clone”; when his mother makes him lunch, his mother is likewise real. Jimmy never considers whether Oryx’s look is intentionally contrived to give male viewers the gratification that she has recognized their secret selves, or whether this discomfiting pleasure is something he grafts onto her out of his own longing. Instead, he predicates his view of reality and his sense of himself as a person—as someone with potential depth and interiority, suddenly guilty for what he is watching—on how women appear to connect with him. This connection is not a mutually meaningful experience but one expressed in servile ways, which Jimmy uses to feel good about himself.

The sense that nothing is really “real” leads to a worldview in which beings are present only for one’s pleasure and nothing exists beyond immediate enjoyment, making it easier to treat life as a game with few meaningful outcomes. Jimmy and Crake grow up playing games like Extinctathon, so when Crake actually makes the human race go extinct, he acts as though he has won a game, rather than done anything of consequence. Meanwhile the spectacles of TV and internet become the only ways Jimmy can process the world around him. When he finally figures out Crake created the plague that wipes out humanity and then kills Crake after Crake kills Oryx, he describes the real events in terms of the simulations he grew up with, saying, “What happened then was a slow-motion sequence. It was porn with the sound muted, it was brainfrizz without the ads. It was melodrama so overdone that he and Crake would have laughed their heads off at it, if they’d been fourteen and watching it on DVD” (326). At the height of tragedy, Jimmy can only think back to his childhood; the scene not only emphasizes how emotionally stunted the

protagonists are but raises the question of where the adults were when the kids were watching executions. If only the mothers had been paying attention, Atwood seems to be saying, none of this mess would have happened.

Masculine Knowledge and the Technologies of (Re)production

The fictitiousness of reality as experienced by Jimmy makes genetic engineering seem like a game to see who can come up with the most ridiculous combination: the snat, the rakunk, the wolvog. Earl Ingersoll reads these games as “the product of a boyish sense of ‘play,’ or, What kind of weird species can we guys dream up?”⁶⁸ It is an updating of *Frankenstein* (1818) to reflect the socioeconomic conditions of late-market capitalism.⁶⁹ Genetic engineering lets boys play at creation as though animals are Legos to be built in any combination and then destroyed, but it also grants them enormous power. Jimmy explains, “The rakunks had begun as an after-hours hobby on the part of one of the OrganInc biolab hotshots. There’d been a lot of fooling around in those days: create-an-animal was so much fun, said the guys doing it; it made you feel like God” (51). Just as the artists and technicians in Richard Powers’s *Plowing the Dark* (2000) combine play with power to make up new aesthetic worlds, the creativity of genetic engineering induces a sense of God-like mastery. But because the scientific developments are

⁶⁸ Earl G. Ingersoll, “Survival in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*,” *Extrapolation* 45.2 (2004): 165. This is not limited to male bodies—women like Jimmy’s mother and Crake’s mother are scientists, too, but they are implicated in this form of male creation by extent to which they are presented as unfeminized and unmaternal.

⁶⁹ Jayne Glover calls *Oryx and Crake* “a postmodern remaking of the Frankenstein story.” Glover, “Human/Nature,” 52. On Atwood’s indebtedness to *Frankenstein* as well as Mary Shelley’s apocalyptic plague novel *The Last Man* (1826), see also Jeanette Winterson, “Strange New World” and Fredric Jameson, “Then You Are Them,” *London Review of Books* 31.17 September 10, 2009, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n17/fredric-jameson/then-you-are-them>. In its preoccupation with male scientific creation the series also overlaps with more recent dystopian novels such as Richard Powers’s *Galatea 2.2* (1995) and *Plowing the Dark* (2000), as well as Michel Houellebecq’s *The Possibility of an Island* (2005).

ultimately intended to prolong life, like the pigeons that ward off mortality by generating organs for transplant, genetic engineering is not a game but a crusade to control human nature.

That this crusade is presented as a male enterprise has implications for how to understand the gendering of technology within the narrative. Ingersoll describes Crake as appropriately masculine when he is “identified as a boy-genius at genetic engineering and admitted to Watson-Crick Institute where he trains to become a major player in constructing the future.” He is contrasted to Jimmy, who “is relegated to Martha Graham Academy, where the arts and humanities have been prostituted to training schools to market what corporations produce.”⁷⁰

The word prostituted here plays on the sexual-economic relation that grants women and feminized men a serving role in the masculine economic system. Ingersoll reads Jimmy as feminized because he is left out of the world of genetic engineering and does not participate in making new species. Using technology to create new life thus alters a traditional divide between male capitalist production and female biological reproduction. Making becomes associated with masculinity, while female/feminized forms of reproduction are deemed no longer necessary for engendering the future.

Crake makes the next advancement in reproducing without women by fathering his own race of beings. Mary Ann Doane argues that technological efforts to manipulate nature reflect a fear of the maternal: “Technology promises more strictly to control, supervise, regulate the maternal—to put *limits* on it.”⁷¹ Harnessing technology to generate new life, Crake positions

⁷⁰ Ingersoll, “Survival,” 166.

⁷¹ Doane then describes the fear that these limits will fail and the maternal will infect the technological, citing “the recent spate of films that delineate the horror of the maternal—of that which harbors an otherness within, where the fear is always that of giving birth to the monstrous.” In the film *Alien* (1979), for example, the technological future cannot prevent or contain the eruption of monstrosity from within the body. Mary Ann Doane, “Technophilia: Technology, Representation, and the Feminine,” in *Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of*

creation as the ultimate act of power. He gives male Crakers a chemical in their urine to keep away predators, reasoning “they’d need something important to do, something that didn’t involve child-bearing, so they wouldn’t feel left out. Woodworking, hunting, high finance, war, and golf would no longer be options, he’d joked” (155). Crake’s joke reveals the logic informing his project: men engage in a range of activities because they can’t do that activity deemed most important of all: give life. The joke assumes that reproduction is the main thing women do and that men do not participate in child bearing or child rearing at the same time that it reveals Crake’s underlying desire to do something “important”, i.e. make life.

Crake’s God-like creation does not require women, but he does use women to acquaint his children with the world around them. Crake recruits Oryx to teach and nurture the Crakers just as the scientist-creator Avram enlists women to socialize the cyborg he manufactures in Piercy’s *He, She and It* (1991). As Ingersoll explains, Oryx, “pressed into service as a surrogate mother to the Children Crake has ‘fathered,’” combines “the only two versions of the female in the economy of [Jimmy’s] desire: mother or whore.”⁷² From her childhood as a victim of sex trafficking in an unnamed Asian country to her adult role caring for Crake’s children, Oryx has only two modes: lover to both Crake and Jimmy and mother to the Crakers.⁷³ In both versions, she is a projection of male fantasies of who she might be. As with Jimmy’s mother, we are aware of the limitations of Jimmy’s perspective and yet offered no critical distance to challenge or dispute his views; when Jimmy considers that Oryx is more complex than the surface character

Science, ed. Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller, and Sally Shuttleworth (New York: Routledge, 1989), 170, emphasis original.

⁷² Ingersoll, “Survival,” 169.

⁷³ Oryx is also associated with nature; after Crake and Oryx are killed, Jimmy tells the Crakers that while they are Children of Crake all animals are Children of Oryx.

she reveals to him, it is only to describe how enigmatic and “evasive” (110) she is, characterizing in terms of another stereotype, the inscrutable East.

The socialization of the Crakers entails teaching them about nature but does not involve initiating them into a sex-gender system like any found in human societies. Crake eliminates romantic desire from the Crakers, thereby abolishing the nuclear family unit based in heteronormative gender divisions.⁷⁴ This use of technology to alter the social ramifications of sexual reproduction is presented in apocalyptic terms, a stark contrast to Piercy’s optimistic vision. Crake exhibits limited interest in sex and sexuality, associating Jimmy’s active sex life with a feminized need to connect while upholding the intellectual over the erotic (love is “a hormonally induced delusional state” [193]). He keeps procreative sex only as an unavoidable necessity for survival; Crakers enter into heat like other mammals and have no way of determining paternity. Yet we never see this species grow or thrive, and the Crakers remain perpetually Crake’s children—innocent, questioning, and naive. Atwood suggests a link between human (hetero)sexuality and adulthood, arguing people must grow into adults to create the next generation of children rather than bypass maturation through technological feats.

The Crakers let Crake exert control over sexuality by excising the problem of human emotion from the mechanical necessity of procreation. Jeannette Winterson explains, “Crake designs out love and romance because he wants to design out the pain and confusion of emotion.” But Crake’s denial of love is hardly a utopian gesture, and “Atwood is very good at showing... what happens when human beings (usually men) cannot love.”⁷⁵ The inability to love is one of the most damning characteristics of the dystopian world, and so the Jimmy-Crake-Oryx

⁷⁴ On the human qualities that Crake eliminates from the Crakers, in particular the capacity for symbolic thinking, see Glover, “Human/Nature,” 57 and Bergthaller, “Housebreaking,” 734-736.

⁷⁵ Winterson, “Strange New World.”

love triangle necessarily fails because there is no room for romantic fulfillment in a dystopia predicated on economic gain and emotional voids: dystopias are not romances. J. Brooks Bouson calls the double-murder of Crake and Oryx “a dark twist” on the romantic formula,⁷⁶ but the twist is really that there is no romantic resolution to this triangle. Or, the twist is found in the Crakers, who no longer experience jealousy and competition among men for viable mates. Through his invention, Crake rewrites the love triangle to put the resolution in the Crakers’ rewired sexuality, not in the competition he faces from Jimmy for Oryx’s affection.

The subversion of the romance plot in this way is not indicative of a liberating utopian vision. Instead, the denial of love characterizes the dystopian world and makes the utopian corrective the promise of a world in which maternal and romantic love thrive and the romance plot can be fulfilled. Unlike *Woman on the Edge of Time*, which considers the potential of reproductive technology to further the feminist revolution, *Oryx and Crake* depicts the usurpation of female reproduction as a dangerous, dystopian threat. To counteract this demise, its sequel *The Year of the Flood* reinstates female reproduction as the key to creating a better world. In this way, Atwood offers a surprisingly sentimental solution for an otherwise misanthropic book, suggesting humanity must embrace the struggles of love. It is when two of Jimmy’s ex-girlfriends, Ren and Amanda, return at the end of *The Year of the Flood* that a new hope for romance and positive social change become possible for survivors of the plague.

Fresh Towels At the Spa: Female Survival in *The Year of the Flood*

Scholars have been quick to note how *The Year of the Flood* privileges the female perspective absent in the first novel; Fredric Jameson writes, “perhaps as the protagonists of

⁷⁶ Bouson, “Game Over,” 148.

Oryx were males, it seemed only fair to write a sequel for the female characters.”⁷⁷ If *Oryx and Crake* exemplifies what Coral Anne Howells deems “dystopian masculine discourse,” *The Year of the Flood* offers a more hopeful account of how women can band together to survive and rebuild the world men destroyed.⁷⁸ Like *Oryx and Crake*, the novel begins after the plague has struck and then goes back in time. It centers on a religious group called God’s Gardeners, briefly mentioned in *Oryx and Crake*, who are trying to slow the environmental damage wrought by destructive corporate practices. The chapters alternate between the perspectives of Toby, who escapes poverty and sexual abuse to find safety among the Gardeners, and Ren, whose mother joins the cult. Ren was one of Jimmy’s high school girlfriends and now works as a trapeze dancer at the high-end sex club Scales and Tails; her best friend Amanda also dates Jimmy in *Oryx and Crake*. These intersections answer questions about how the plague unfolded and anticipate a turn toward a more hopeful future. For Hannes Bergthaller, the novel’s “flagrant violation of narrative probability” remains “peculiarly appropriate” because it requires the very leap of imagination necessary to envision utopian change.⁷⁹

Paul Budra and Betty A. Schellenberg define a sequel as “a chronological extension of a narrative” and “a text that manages to repeat and somehow extend the representational field of a

⁷⁷ Jameson, “Then You Are Them.” Scholarship on such a recent text is just beginning, but the flurry of book reviews, especially by prominent authors and critics, gives a sense of how the novel has been received as a feminist response to *Oryx and Crake*. See also Winterson, “Strange New World” and J. Brooks Bouson, “‘We’re Using Up the Earth. It’s Almost Gone’: A Return to the Post-Apocalyptic Future in Margaret Atwood’s *The Year of the Flood*,” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 46.9 (2011): 9-26.

⁷⁸ Coral Anne Howells, “Margaret Atwood’s Dystopian Visions: *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. Coral Anne Howells (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 162.

⁷⁹ Bergthaller, “Housebreaking,” 741.

prior text.”⁸⁰ *The Year of the Flood* does not simply expand upon *Oryx and Crake* but typifies postmodern sequels that “tend less to follow, serve, and continue than to select, incorporate, and transform their precursor texts, subjecting them in the process to more or less radical processes of fragmentation, distortion, and rearrangement.”⁸¹ Such transformations mean the sequel reshapes our understanding of the original; as Lynette Felber explains with regard to Anthony Trollope’s *Phineas Finn* (1869) and *Phineas Redux* (1876), “The sequel provokes a re-evaluation of the values and experiences of *Phineas Finn* which renders much of the original, viewed retrospectively, as exposition. The diptych structure bestows closure, the privilege of the last word, on the second volume, the sequel that undermines the finality of the first.”⁸² The ending of *The Year of the Flood* reworks the conclusion of *Oryx and Crake* to offer what many have read as a new and hopeful utopian turn. Yet in considering the gendered dynamics of utopian possibility put forth, I want to suggest the series is predicated on essentialized gender roles that counter the bad mothering of *Oryx and Crake* and both suggest and affirm that the way out of the dystopian future is through maternal care.

The women in *The Year of the Flood* are able to survive the plague because they aren’t helpless against the elements. Toby is frightened but “she’s prepared.”⁸³ Although she contemplates suicide, that she will survive if she wants to isn’t in question. When the plague hits, Toby is safely ensconced in AnooYoo Spa with fresh towels, pink outfits, and lemon meringue

⁸⁰ Paul Budra and Betty A. Schellenberg, “Introduction,” *Part Two: Reflections on the Sequel*, ed. Paul Budra and Betty A. Schellenberg (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 7. Thomas Carmichael likewise adds, “a sequel is a narrative production whose claim to authority ironically rests upon its intertextual traces.” Thomas Carmichael, “‘After the Fact’: Marx, The Sequel, Postmodernism, and John Barthe’s Letters,” in *Part Two*, 174-175.

⁸¹ Michael Zeitlin, “Donald Barthelme and the Postmodern Sequel,” in *Part Two*, 161.

⁸² Lynette Felber, “Trollope’s *Phineas* Diptych as Sequel and Sequence Novel,” in *Part Two*, 120.

⁸³ Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2009), 5. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

facial cream loaded with sugar to eat. She grows vegetables in the spa's organic garden and collects rainwater on the roof. It's hard not to favor her odds for survival over Jimmy, huddled in a tree and waiting to die. Meanwhile, Ren is quarantined in a sealed chamber called the Sticky Zone after a customer bites through her full-body Biofilm Bodyglover. She has to ration her food but will not starve. Amanda survives because she is making a conceptual art project in Wisconsin, far from any major outbreaks. Having made her way as a refugee from Texas, it's not a big step for her to cross the country once again. It's unclear to me why Atwood has her female survivors locked in such ludicrous situations, and why so few others make it through the plague when these three do so well, but the point seems to be that they are better able to use the infrastructure of the old world to their advantage and find creative ways to endure.

The women hold onto life because they firmly believe they are not alone. While Jimmy immediately assumes he is the only person alive because he was the only person vaccinated against the disease, these women rarely consider the prospect of humanity ending. As former God's Gardeners, they have been indoctrinated to prepare for a Waterless Flood that destroys humanity but leaves them untouched. More important than religious convictions none of them ever fully believe, however, is the faith that life will endure. Toby insists, "There must be someone else left, though; she can't be the only one on the planet. There must be others" (5). Ren practices positive thinking, repeating, "I'm lucky. I'm really very lucky.... First, I was lucky to be working here at Scales when the Flood hit. Second, it was even luckier that I was shut up this way in the Sticky Zone, because it kept me safe" (6). It's hard to imagine Jimmy thinking he is "lucky" to have been inoculated against the disease, yet the women maintain that better times will come.

Atwood suggests this divide between male and female approaches to survival stems from a fundamental difference in how each gender experiences intimacy. Jimmy wishes he were dead because he has no one to live for, but emotional connections come easily to women in *The Year of the Flood*.⁸⁴ Ren makes it through by insisting her best friend is still alive: “I tried to create the reality of Amanda,” she says, and the reality of others alive outside the Sticky Zone (284). Amanda shares the same conviction: “‘I knew you weren’t dead,’ said Amanda. ‘You get a feeling when someone’s dead. Someone you know really well’” (323). Growing up together—Ren says they have “a bond” and that having Amanda live with the Gardeners is “like having a sister, only better”—gives them someone to live for who makes them feel less alone (56, 83). For Jeanette Winterson, the novel uses the women’s survival to elevate female friendship over male isolation: “As ever with Atwood, it is friendship between women that is noted and celebrated—friendship not without its jealousies but friendship that survives rivalry and disappointment and has a generosity that at the end of the novel allows for hope.”⁸⁵

A potential alternative to romance as the motivating factor for utopia, friendship stands to expand the imaginative possibilities of critical utopian literature. Depictions of strong and capable women suggest solidarity can be empowering in trying times and show important ways female characters can challenge the norms of a violent and oppressive status quo. Yet I have reservations about how the novel bases this solidarity on the notion that women are inherently intuitive, united, emotional, and associated with life. Suggesting Toby, Ren, and Amanda are

⁸⁴ It is not uncommon for post-apocalyptic imaginings to depict women who don’t feel themselves to be alone while men insist they are the sole survivors. In *The Last Man*, Lionel Verney has no doubt he is the only one miraculously able to overcome the plague, while the 2007 film adaptation of *I Am Legend* has Robert Neville (Will Smith) shout at Anna (Alice Braga) that no one else is alive as Anna calmly asserts that a community of survivors exists in Vermont.

⁸⁵ Winterson, “Strange New World.”

able to survive by virtue of being female and so naturally connected to others echoes the claims of difference feminism that women have inherently different perspectives and abilities based on biological distinctions. But what in fact are these abilities? The women certainly fare better than most would under similar conditions, but they don't really do much to survive: Toby faces the most risk but is protected at the spa; Ren opens pre-packaged food in the Sticky Zone and waits for someone to find her; Amanda must face struggles crossing the country, but these trials are never described. Atwood's conviction that women are well positioned to survive risks essentializing qualities of connectivity and care instead of exploring how dynamic and inspiring friendships might spur characters to take bold actions to alter their lives. Rather than compelling readers to consider alternatives for women, then, the novel reiterates stereotypes about female passivity and emotionalism that continue to prove restrictive to the feminist critical utopian imagination.

Yet scholars and reviewers have celebrated the novel's depiction of women as more inclined than men to come together in support. Winterson describes *The Year of the Flood* as a novel in which "the women's past and present stories alternate and intertwine, bringing to life the world they must survive in," associating the women with communication, connectivity, survival, and life—a stark contrast to her depiction of "Jimmy the Snowman, who's wondering whether he should finish off the last of his own kind and leave the whole rotten and rotting show to the nonviolent, unclothed human herbivores cell-created by his best friend, Crake."⁸⁶ Likewise a review of *The Year of the Flood* in *The New Yorker* recounts that "while they [Toby and Ren] wait for signs of life from the outside they spend their days remembering past loves and not-

⁸⁶ Ibid.

quite-healed wounds.”⁸⁷ This description renders the women entirely passive and makes the book sound like it’s about a group of women sitting around, idly reminiscing. It is true that Atwood “emphasizes the feminist ideal of female solidarity,” but looking closer at what that solidarity entails and why it comes about in the text reveals the extent to which that feminist ideal is rooted in claims of female nature.⁸⁸

In imagining that sexual differences make women better survivors, ultimately able to engender a new utopian world, *The Year of the Flood* also shows how these sexual differences have been exploited in a sexist, misogynist dystopia. While Jimmy grew up in comfort among the elite in the HelthWyzer Compound, the women of *The Year of the Flood* are from the “pleeblands,” where the masses are further impoverished by consolidating corporate powers. Their trials highlight the disproportionate ways poverty impacts women. Toby faces tragedy long before the apocalypse hits: her mother dies from HelthWyzer vitamin supplements the company was testing before marketing and her father kills himself after he is forced to sell the family’s house to the company. Jimmy whines about his mother not making him peanut butter and jelly sandwiches while Toby buries her father in the backyard in a garbage bag, unable to reveal he killed himself with an illegal rifle. Increasingly desperate, she sells her hair and then her eggs, multiple times. Eventually she lands a job at SecretBurger—the secret is what animal protein, sometimes human, goes into the patty (26-28).

But the primary threat women face in this dystopian world is sexual violence. *The Year of the Flood* expands upon the exploitation evidenced in *Oryx and Crake* to reinforce the deleterious effects of dystopia on women, effects heightened by the novel’s focalization through

⁸⁷ Review of *The Year of the Flood*. *The New Yorker* 85.30, September 28, 2009, http://www.newyorker.com/arts/reviews/brieflynoted/2009/09/28/090928crbn_brieflynoted1.

⁸⁸ Bouson, “Using Up,” 22.

female characters. Many women in *The Year of the Flood* turn to prostitution—“a shame but what could you do, and at least she had something of marketable value, namely her young ass” (28)—while men like the main antagonist Blanco epitomize the “brutality and sadism”⁸⁹ of the typical dystopian male. Blanco is Toby’s manager at SecretBurger and he soon picks Toby to be his new girl. Her life as Blanco’s sex-slave is “torture” and a fellow employee warns her, “He’ll take a girl apart” (38, 35). Toby barely escapes with the Gardeners, forever knowing “she was lucky she hadn’t ended up fucked into a purée and battered to a pulp and poured out into a vacant lot” (103).⁹⁰ That Blanco commands Toby to “*Say you love me! Say it, bitch!*” and “demanded a thank you after every degrading act” highlights the obvious absence of love and pleasure in a dystopian world that no longer values women’s special status (97, 38, emphasis original).

The validation of Toby as a survivor of extreme victimization has resonated strongly with readers. Recounting Atwood’s “novelistic investigations of female victims and survivors” and “long-term interest in the victimhood and survival of women,” J. Brooks Bouson describes Toby as “a sexually vulnerable pleeblander woman” and as Blanco’s “female prey” and then details her “fierce acts of bravery and loving acts of human compassion.”⁹¹ Winterson describes Toby’s “rescue,” her “rise” among the Gardeners, and her retreat to the spa to “save herself” from Blanco.⁹² Toby’s trauma is wrenching and her endurance a testament to her fortitude in the face of overwhelming adversity. Such a clear condemnation of sexual exploitation in patriarchal society is complicated, however, by how uncritically Atwood characterizes Toby in terms of her

⁸⁹ Winterson, “Strange New World.”

⁹⁰ Toby’s situation is not atypical. Rape and sexual violence are disturbingly common in contemporary feminist critical utopias, such as *The Gate to Women’s Country*, *The Wanderground*, *Motherlines*, and Octavia Butler’s *Patternmaster* and *Parables* series (1977-1984 and 1993-1998), I would argue for many of the same reasons I address here.

⁹¹ Bouson, “Using Up,” 10, 12, 13, 22.

⁹² Winterson, “Strange New World.”

vulnerability and then her triumph. Losing the critical distance of a novel like *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Year of the Flood* risks undoing some of its feminist message by locking Toby into restrictive roles overdetermined by patriarchal norms, perpetuating a victim/survivor identity that still grants men the power to victimize.⁹³ The novel thus persists in constructing women “within two parameters: woman as victim, and woman as truth-teller,” reproducing a narrow vision of woman as injured party or savior.⁹⁴ For Rebekah Sheldon, this dynamic is pervasive throughout “the apocalyptic narrative itself, which positions the feminine as the abject ground of redemption.”⁹⁵ When we understand Toby’s struggles as part of a larger generic norm, it seems more troubling to resign women to dystopian horror to then justify a utopian turn.

Bouson argues that in highlighting the sexual violence of dystopia, the novel questions the implications of embracing female sexuality in the name of feminism. She notes that “while the middle-aged (feminist) Toby is aware of the potential brutality of male-female relations, the younger (postfeminist) Ren... seemingly chooses, or at least accepts, her own sexual commodification and humiliation.”⁹⁶ For Bouson, Ren is a victim of feminism itself, having misunderstood sexual liberation to mean sex as labor and sex without love. It is certainly evident that the novel presents the sexual liberation of Ren and Amanda as exploitative rather than empowering; the two never question the dynamic in which women serve men and use sex to get

⁹³ This victimization further ignores complexities of oppression and privilege; for more on “how a variety of forms of oppression intertwine systemically with each other” and “how the person who is disabled through one set of oppressions may *by the same positioning* be enabled through others,” see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 32, emphasis original.

⁹⁴ Chandra Tadmale Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 111. On Mohanty’s critique of this characterization of “women’s experience,” and “universal sisterhood,” see pages 109-117.

⁹⁵ Rebekah Sheldon, “The Rhetoric of Future Harm: Representations and Figurations of the Child in Contemporary American Discourses of Catastrophe” (PhD diss., CUNY Graduate Center, 2010).

⁹⁶ Bouson, “Using Up,” 14.

what they want or need. Yet I think there are problems with Bouson's insistence that Ren is so misguided, since she emerges as the voice of hope at the end of the novel. Moreover, the fact that she views Scales and Tails as the best available option and a job that is probably safer than many others does not necessarily mean she is oblivious to or celebratory of the sexism that overdetermines those circumstances. What Bouson also overlooks, and what I think gets at the heart of the novel's depictions of brutality, is how the novel uses the denigrated female sexuality of dystopia to construct the negative half of the dichotomy between mother and whore, creating a foil that prepares the reader for the utopian turn.

If *Oryx and Crake* presents dystopia as a world of male creation in which women have been excised from their natural roles as reproducers, then it seems one of the reasons sex in dystopia is so cruel is that women are no longer valued for reproductive capabilities. According to this logic, if women are no longer seen as necessary for giving life, then they are, like Gildina, only around to be sexually available to men. Men in turn become violent, aggressive, and animalistic in their pursuit of sexual pleasure because they no longer see women in a respected role. Dystopian sex is not only vicious and exploitative, but it is overtly nonreproductive and divorced from ideals of motherhood. The novel is thus poised to present utopian hope as a return to sexual roles that will be caring, intimate, consensual, and pleasurable, and will enable maternity once more. But while feminist critical utopias are typically read as critiques of the dominant social order, *The Year of the Flood* is hardly critical of such a social structure that depends on women adhering to stereotypical social roles. This next section considers how the novel engages female sexuality to send a message about women's potential roles as mothers—a message presented as unequivocally positive—even if motherhood is never explicitly named.

Maternal Salvation and the Utopian Turn

The mothers of dystopia in *The Year of the Flood* are notoriously ineffectual—Toby’s mother is murdered, Amanda is orphaned, and Ren might as well be on her own for all the care her mother provides. Instead, Toby emerges as the figure best capable of ensuring regeneration. Blanco’s violence leaves Toby effectively asexual; she does not experience desire, saying “she’d had no sex recently, nor did she miss it” (103). Instead, she develops into a matriarchal grandmother who will help the next generation survive. Toby represents an alternative kind of motherhood that, like the mothers of Mattapoisett, is based on caring for the community’s children.⁹⁷ She helps Ren reconnect with Amanda when Ren’s mother takes her away from the Gardeners and nurses Ren back to health after Ren is captured by a group of men including Blanco. When Ren arrives desperate and bleeding at the spa, “Toby sees it’s Ren. Beneath all the dirt and mangled glitz, it’s only little Ren” (354). Ren says of Toby, “I felt she was guarding me—protecting me with some space-alien type of force field” (298). Ren turns into a child with Toby, making Toby the nurturing mother she never had.

But biological mothers are still necessary to reproduce the future, which is why Toby is paired with the younger, sexually active Ren as the other narrator. Ren’s one love is Jimmy, whom she briefly dates in high school. She repeatedly conflates the desire to be with Jimmy with the desire to take care of him: they first sleep together after Jimmy’s mother leaves and she says, “I felt I was helping Jimmy and he was helping me at the same time” (223). When Jimmy dumps her soon after, she never lets go of her love: “Part of me thought I would find Jimmy again... and he would say it was me he’d loved all along, and could we get back together, and I’d forgive him

⁹⁷ Toby’s caretaking qualities also emerge through her connection with nature, when she tends the garden, cultivates bees, and learns important healing herbs and remedies from another older, female Gardener.

and everything would be wonderful, the way it had been at first” (229). After the plague, she declares that everyone left alive needs to “you know, rebuild the human race” (389). But she rejects an offer from another Gardener to do their civic duty because she doesn’t want to “rebuild” with just anyone, deciding, “All of a sudden I don’t want to have sex without loving the person, and I haven’t really loved anybody in that way since Jimmy” (394). The novel intimates that the Gardeners will form a new community and that Ren and Jimmy will finally reunite, providing the utopian resolution to the romance plot thwarted by the destruction in *Oryx and Crake*.

Whereas *Oryx and Crake* laments a lack of connection that leads to desperate loneliness among men, *The Year of the Flood* addresses how women can redeem that connection as mothers and lovers in order to make the new society possible. In *The Year of the Flood*, we learn the three mysterious figures Jimmy spies at the end of *Oryx and Crake* are Amanda, tied with a noose around her neck, and two criminals who have come from a war-like detention facility called the Painball arena and now have her hostage. The criminals represent one version of humanity, in which men are violent and women exist to be raped and discarded. Toby looks at them and can tell, “They’ve been killing things. Killing and butchering... They’re a menace, they’ll stop at nothing” (351). Toby represents an alternate, more compassionate version of humanity, as she gently kills Blanco after he is injured and refrains from shooting the other criminals. She does not become like them and reenact their logic of destruction, providing hope that the new world will be lead by compassionate women rather than violent, destructive men. Although Atwood does not assure us of the flowering of this world, she does end on a happy note. Ren says, “My body hurts all over, but at the same time I feel so joyful. We’re lucky, I think. To be here. All of us, even the Painballers” (428). And then they hear the Crakers sing.

While much of the MaddAddam series suggests a pessimistic, almost Swiftean view of humanity and “the problem of taming the human animal,” the “bitter-sweet, almost fairytale-like ending” of *The Year of the Flood* presents a decidedly optimistic outlook for humankind.⁹⁸ If Crake represents one flawed path to utopia through bioengineering and the God’s Gardener’s messianic preaching another, it is the women of *The Year of the Flood* who provide the possible path out of the morass of dystopia and gesture toward another, better world. The pessimism that marks so much of the dystopian realms in both novels is therefore largely restricted to men, and to those women like Jimmy’s mother who do not fulfill their maternal potential. Jeanette Winterson enthuses, “Atwood believes in human beings, and she likes women. It is Toby and Ren who take the novel forward from the last page, not the genetically engineered new humans.”⁹⁹ The women emerge as the key to salvation through the love and nurturance they provide as they reclaim the reins of creation from the capitalist male system and rebuild the world anew. The novels thus imagine a society in which female reproduction has been returned to its rightful place at the center of the heterosexual dyad, restoring the natural gender balance of a society in which women reproduce others biologically and through the care they provide.

This faith that good mothers will redeem the world from the bad mothering and violent, nonreproductive sexualities of the dystopian world grants women significant power. It is precisely this emphasis on the excessive influence of good and bad mothers that Nancy Chodorow and Susan Contratto argue against in their 1982 essay “The Fantasy of the Perfect Mother.” Criticizing the maternalist valuation of difference feminism, the authors note how the maternal figure becomes valorized as a supreme being credited with good or responsible for evil. In their words, “Belief in the all-powerful mother spawns a recurrent tendency to blame the

⁹⁸ Bergthaller, “Housebreaking,” 737, 741.

⁹⁹ Winterson, “Strange New World.”

mother on the one hand, and a fantasy of maternal perfectibility on the other.”¹⁰⁰ The all-powerful mother plays a functional role in utopian narrative as a vehicle for realizing the better world. She is elevated as the utopian ideal or held liable for dystopia’s shortcomings. Making mothers this important shows that women are vital to society, but it bases this importance on normative, restrictive, and essentialist roles while diverting narrative attention from other problems of dystopia and solutions utopia could imagine.

This is not to say feminist critical utopianism should ignore childbirth or pretend raising children isn’t important to society and a source of satisfaction to many. But as Lauren Berlant notes, “For so long, and apart from whatever changes in rights status American women have achieved, this promise of maternal value has marked an irreducible scene of what could be imagined as ‘woman’s power.’”¹⁰¹ Even if women in *The Year of the Flood* are not forced to procreate like Offred in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and women in *Woman on the Edge of Time* do not conceive at all, the idea that women will save the world through mothering hardly offers a liberating challenge to “the narrative of natural development from gendered womanhood to pregnancy and motherhood.”¹⁰² While Piercy disrupts this natural development by harnessing technology to separate biology from mothering, the effect is to enhance mothering throughout society. The elevation of sentimental motherhood in both Piercy and Atwood therefore suggests that disrupting the dominant narrative of maternal care that shapes opportunities for women’s lives requires more than imagining ways mothers can fulfill their natural roles for the uplift of society. Feminist utopian discourses about mothering can therefore benefit from critiquing the

¹⁰⁰ Chodorow and Contratto, “Fantasy,” 192. Lauren Berlant traces the power of the mother to the history of slavery and “the slave mother’s absolute power to determine the meaning and status of her child.” Berlant, “America, ‘Fat,’ the Fetus,” *Boundary 2* 21.3 (1994): 147.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid., 152.

essentialism of maternalist feminism, reconsidering not only the source of “woman power” but the structures of identity and conceptions of power at work in that formulation. Such a critique stands to open the genre to imagine what else might enhance or replace the accounts of motherhood that have remained so central to feminist critical utopianism over the years.

Chapter 4

Choosing Utopia: Courtship Narratives in Contemporary Young Adult Dystopias

Teenage girls have recently emerged as an important population called upon in utopian fiction to facilitate social change, and a number of popular feminist critical utopian novels have been published in the past decade that speak to young women as particularly poised to imagine themselves and their futures in new ways. YA utopias and dystopias represent one of the hottest trends in publishing, fueled by the success of other YA and children's sensations like the *Twilight* and *Harry Potter* series—crossover hits that appeal to adults and younger readers alike. In a study of contemporary feminist critical utopian fiction, it is important to look at what these bestselling YA novels reveal about the imaginative possibilities of utopian literature today, where the field might be moving in the future, and the range of effects the feminist critical utopian imagination might especially have on adolescent readers considering their place in the world and possibilities for their futures. While many of these novels have been praised for radically expanding possibilities for female protagonists to revolutionize the world, what futures do they in fact grant these teenaged heroines, and what forms of social change do they imagine?

Although there is no single definition of YA literature, I consider it any literature marketed to teens and pre-teens and focused on adolescent protagonists. The genre emerged as a marketing category after World War II, along with the contemporary conception of adolescence. While some scholars consider the first YA novel Maureen Daly's *Seventeenth Summer* (1942), which was originally written for adults but gained a following among teenage readers, others such as Chris Crowe identify S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967) as the first novel that “clearly established the realistic teenage book market.” Crowe defines YA literature as “all genres of

literature published since 1967 that are written for and marketed to young adults.”¹ Roberta Seelinger Trites considers the YA novel “a book marketed for teenagers, as a subset of adolescent literature, which is a larger category that includes novels that consider adolescents or adolescence, as *Little Women* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* do.”² There is an interesting slippage here between marketing, intention, and audience; YA literature is in part a marketing phenomenon, but it is clearly distinguished by a focus on the growth and development of the adolescent and the voice and experience of contemporary teenage life.³

It is telling that the rise of YA literature coincides with the development of critical utopias in the 1970s. YA critical utopias combine the concerns of both YA and critical utopian literature with development and social change, so that in the novels, “political and social awakening is almost always combined with a depiction of the personal problems of adolescence.”⁴ Both genres are expressly concerned with the imaginative experiences the reader undergoes; the awakening of the teenaged protagonist and by extension the (presumably but not necessarily) teenaged reader depends on a crucial confrontation with adult society that leads young people to envision new possibilities for existence. Like the critical utopian genre, YA literature speaks to a desire for rebellion, critiquing the confining strictures of the status quo and

¹ Chris Crowe, “Young Adult Literature: What Is Young Adult Literature?” *The English Journal* 88.1 (1998): 121.

² Roberta Seelinger Trites, “Theories and Possibilities of Adolescent Literature,” *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* 21.1 (1996): 2.

³ Michael Steig argues, “In commercial publishing, children’s literature and its various subcategories can be seen as artificially generated designations intended to target certain members of the reading public—parents, perhaps, more than children.” The same applies to YA. Michael Steig, “Never Going Home: Reflections on Reading, Adulthood, and the Possibility of Children’s Literature” *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* 181 (1993): 36. For more on the focus on the adolescent in young adult literature, see Carrie Hintz, “Monica Hughes, Lois Lowry, and Young Adult Dystopias,” *The Lion and the Unicorn* 26.2 (2002): 254 and Peter Hunt, *An Introduction to Children’s Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 147.

⁴ Hintz, “Young Adult Dystopias,” 255.

imagining alternative futures and more appealing worlds. Both consider how to address current problems, are often concerned with how to negotiate power structures and oppressive authorities, and tend to envision solutions that foster better ways of living, whether for the individual or the society at large. And both frequently evince an underlying aspiration for security and stability amidst tumultuous change. While they stress the need for critique and the reimagining of social possibilities, they often conclude with visions of harmony that place the protagonist back in a safe and comfortable world, emphasizing how his or her previous agitation ultimately leads to a contended place in society. Both genres, then, maintain a conflicted relationship with radical literature more broadly, seeking change but sometimes cautiously, maintaining an ongoing investment in secure social roles.

Given these overlaps, the YA critical utopias I consider in this chapter can be considered part of the critical utopian tradition. There is a precedent for making this connection; Maureen Moran defines Tanith Lee's Unicorn Trilogy (1991-1997) as a critical utopia,⁵ and Claire Bradford, Kerry Mallan, John Stephens, and Robyn McCallum argue that children's and young adult utopias are critical because they contain what Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini in *Dark Horizons* call "an emancipatory utopian imagination." The authors maintain that Moylan's description of the critical utopia "resonates strongly with the transformative utopianism informing texts for children and young adults, and with the versions of subjectivity which validate that position."⁶ Following Moylan's formulation, YA critical utopias critique the existing order and seek the critical mass necessary to institute change. Since the most recent

⁵ Maureen F. Moran, "Educating Desire: Magic, Power, and Control in Tanith Lee's Unicorn Trilogy," in *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults*, ed. Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry (New York: Routledge, 2009): 145.

⁶ Bradford et al., *New World Orders*, 4, 16. See also Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini, *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 2.

popular examples are expressly concerned with the voices and experiences of female protagonists, they align with the concerns of feminist critical utopias that seek to reimagine the roles and possibilities for female characters as they strive for social change. While many of these texts are marketed as YA dystopias because they describe dark futuristic regimes, I read them as utopian for the hope they maintain at the end of each text, holding out a sense that the teenaged heroine can and will improve the world. This optimism reflects a requirement in literature for young readers that “you must never turn out the light,”⁷ but it also reveals a commitment to utopian thinking and the conviction that literature can inspire readers to envision, and possibly enact, important forms of change.

Like so many other contemporary feminist critical utopias, however, YA feminist critical utopias tend to risk undermining their professed transformative aims by making the utopian world hinge on conservative ideals that restrict women’s roles in the so-called new society—despite all the attention given to the powers and capabilities of young female protagonists. This is especially evident in a number of texts explicitly concerned with romance, which use the romance plot to develop limited and reductive conceptions of change. Most recently, Ally Condie’s *Matched* (2010), Lauren Oliver’s *Delirium* (2011), and Meghan McCafferty’s *Bumped* (2011) describe repressive dystopian regimes that legislate romantic and reproductive choices. All three follow a nearly identical plot structure in which the adolescent protagonist enacts a limited and self-interested rebellion so she can be with the boy of her dreams. In *Matched*, Cassia defies the edict of her society’s Match Ceremony that coordinates marriages, falling for the rebellious Ky instead of the boy determined for her. It is to find Ky and build a life with him that

⁷ Monica Hughes, “The Struggle Between Utopia and Dystopia in Writing for Children and Young Adults,” in *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults*, ed. Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry (New York: Routledge, 2003), 156.

she turns against the path prescribed for her and strikes out on her own. In *Delirium*, love is considered a disease that everyone is cured of at eighteen, but Lena runs away before her procedure to be with alluring, uncured Alex. Like Cassia, Lena stops mindlessly parroting the rules of her society only when those rules keep her from her crush. Lastly, *Bumped* describes a future in which everyone over eighteen is mysteriously infertile. Melody is contracted to conceive with the perfect man but eventually rejects her controlling society in order to follow her heart. In each case, the dystopian world inhibits girls from falling in love, meaning the texts in turn imagine utopia specifically as a world that supports romance.

These are clearly formulaic potboilers, and yet they reveal a great deal about how romance functions in popular YA utopian fiction.⁸ Lela Moore explains that in these novels, “teenage girls are the most valued members of society. But there’s a twist: In these dark worlds, the heroines are more likely to be valued for their fertility or marriageability than for their intellect or athletic skill... Seems girls still want to believe in romance.”⁹ As Harmony in *Bumped* declares, “I dream of a life where girls don’t hide behind veils. And they can dress as they want to and cut their hair or keep it long if that’s what they like... A life where girls are free to fall in love.”¹⁰ The desire to choose a mate makes for a paradoxical equation between autonomy and pair bonding while keeping girls focused on questions like how to dress and wear their hair. It fosters a rebellion that places satisfaction, fulfillment, and resolution in the hope that

⁸ Other YA novels do slightly better by using love as a central—but not only—motivating factor. Carrie Ryan’s zombie apocalypse *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* (2009) suggests love might not be the only thing worth living for. But even YA critical utopias with larger concerns about family, friendship, and loss, like Staci Lloyd’s *The Carbon Diaries 2015* (2009) with its environmental message and Meg Rosoff’s anti-war *How I Live Now* (2004), both British novels, are structured around romances that help the protagonists through difficult times.

⁹ Lela Moore, “Teenage Girls in a Dystopian World,” *New York Times*, May 9, 2011, <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/05/09/teenage-girls-in-a-dystopian-world/>.

¹⁰ Megan McCafferty, *Bumped* (New York: Balzer and Bray / HarperCollins, 2011), 306.

the protagonist will find her love, doing nothing to address the problems of the broader society. And because the new world the protagonist seeks looks so much like our own, these novels effectively reinforce a conservative message about heterosexual reproductive marriage as the pinnacle of existence. The focus on romance thus serves to neutralize teenage rebellion, using the courtship narrative to bring young people into the social order.

In contrast, two best selling YA critical utopian series are typically read as significant deviations from these examples, developing more intricate and progressive utopian visions that ostensibly offer greater possibilities for female protagonists to challenge authority and remake their worlds. Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010) and Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* series (2005-2009) both revolve around a teenage girl who, through a mix of gumption and luck, becomes a central figure in a larger revolution against the violent authorities of a dystopian regime. Busy battling rulers and saving the world, Katniss and Tally have more on their minds than makeup and clothes. It therefore seems like these should be prime examples of contemporary feminist critical utopias that are not principally organized around the concerns of the romance plot. Indeed, the secondary material I have encountered is almost wholly celebratory of these novels, perhaps in large part for the significant way these new heroines deviate from the petty concerns of girls like Cassia, Lena, and Melody.

But although these tough-minded young women challenge authority to make the world a better place, they might not be as different from the above examples as they first appear. Like Cassia, Lena, and Melody, Tally and Katniss disrupt the norms of their societies less to compel readers to imagine completely different alternatives than to reinstate norms that are closer to the social and sexual expectations of our own world. A closer inspection of how the courtship narrative functions to actualize the protagonist's political awakening and utopian longing in both

series thus reveals how important it is to contend with the formulation of the romance plot in these texts and consider how romance shapes the imaginative possibilities of the narratives. The struggles depicted in these novels turn out to be primarily motivated by romance and the protagonists hardly immune to negative gender stereotypes that propel the courtship drama forward. To miss how courtship functions in these narratives is to overlook how romance is figured as essential to becoming an adult and to creating a utopian future; romance thus continues to delimit possibilities for women and shape utopian imaginings, even in texts that superficially seem to inspire more radical forms of change. I will suggest that Katniss and Tally remain thoroughly preoccupied with love, and that their concerns with courtship serve to reinforce gender stereotypes without challenging existing norms or creating new imaginative experiences. While I have suggested that these limitations create problems for readers in general, this issue seems especially pressing for younger readers who are presumed to be at a pivotal developmental stage that involves making choices about what kinds of people they want to be and what their futures will entail.

However, this chapter will not simply show how both *The Hunger Games* and *Uglies* are organized around the romance plot, because despite their overwhelming similarities, the series differ in one key way: their endings. *The Hunger Games* follows a typical plotline that equates romantic fulfillment with utopia, concluding with an insular, normative vision of a once-rebellious heroine at home with her husband and kids. Collins's utopian ideal, the hopeful turn at the end of a dark journey, has no political or social dimension beyond reproduction, affirming the safety and security of the nuclear family as the utopian antidote to dystopian suffering. But in a marked contrast from this vision, the third book in Westerfeld's four-part series starts to question whether Tally's romantic fantasies are sufficient to creating a meaningful life, let alone

the change her society so desperately needs. Tally retreats from society, much as Katniss does, but she stays involved in sociopolitical concerns that have nothing to do with gender or reproduction. She winds up with the boy who can help her save the world, not the one who enables her to settle down. In this way, Westerfeld rewrites the traditional *bildungsroman* to offer a utopian twist on the novel of development, using Tally's coming of age to provide an alternative model for utopian transformation based on continual growth and change outside of typical heteronormative structures. This model, I think, pushes the boundaries of the reader's imagination in ways Collins's narrative does not. While Westerfeld does not break with the romance plot altogether, the *Uglies* series will provide an important bridge between conventional utopian romances like *The Hunger Games* and the more radical feminist critical utopias I consider in the following chapter.

Domesticity and Desire in *The Hunger Games*

The *Hunger Games* trilogy has been widely celebrated for its portrayal of a rebellious young heroine who fights to topple a repressive dystopian regime and institute a more peaceful and egalitarian society in its place. Collins boldly flouts literary stereotypes that keep female protagonists waiting at home, proclaiming that girls can do anything boys can do, including strategize, make demands, and even hunt and kill. Readers across the blogosphere have written extensively about their excitement over Katniss and her fight. "I would encourage my daughter to read this series," writes one fashion designer. A former political science professor glows, "I am thrilled that a popular book series features a strong, kick-ass-and-take-names female

character.”¹¹ Feminist pop culture authority *Bitch Magazine* extols “Katniss Everdeen’s value as a feminist heroine” and includes *The Hunger Games* on its list of “100 Young Adult Books for the Feminist Reader.”¹² It is hardly an exaggeration when Meghan Lewitt declares this “tough-as-nails” protagonist “the most important female character in recent pop culture history.” “Katniss Everdeen is more than just a teen idol of the moment,” Lewitt insists. “She is a heroine for the ages.”¹³

But even as readers are raving about the ways Katniss can inspire young female readers by modeling a strong and competent heroine, a closer reading suggests that her character also imparts a very different message, one that tells girls the importance of growing up to find satisfaction in heterosexual love and the nuclear family. For all its attention to Katniss’s rebellion, *The Hunger Games* is, significantly, a love story, tracing Katniss’s fluctuating desires for two boys who fight alongside her. As one teen reviewer describes the second book in the series, “This is about Katniss and her love and how they manage to get called back to the Hunger Games and how they manage to outsmart the Capitol.”¹⁴ This reader is only thirteen and uses four exclamation points to underscore how “amazing” the books are, but her enthusiasm highlights the centrality of romance to the novel. Readers are as much on the edge of their seats weighing Katniss’s love options as they are wondering how the trio will outrun, outsmart, and

¹¹ Alison Gary, “Not Fashion Related: *The Hunger Games*,” *Wardrobe Oxygen*, October 20, 2011, http://www.wardrobeoxygen.com/2011/10/not-fashion-related-hunger-games.html#.TsU_lk-W5m0; Laura McKenna “Feminism and *The Hunger Games*,” *Apt. 11D*, November 15, 2011, <http://www.ap11d.com/2011/11/feminism-and-the-hunger-games.html>.

¹² Sarah Seltzer, “Hunger Pangs: Hunting For the Perfect Heroine,” *Bitch Magazine* 51 (2011): 40; McAllister, “100 Young Adult Books.”

¹³ Meghan Lewitt, “Casting ‘The Hunger Games’: In Praise of Katniss Everdeen,” *The Atlantic*, March 9, 2011, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/03/casting-the-hunger-games-in-praise-of-katniss-everdeen/72164/>.

¹⁴ Shelby, “Catching Fire,” *Genrefluent’s Bistro Book Club*, July 1, 2009, <http://genrefluentteentalk.blogspot.com/2009/07/catching-fire-by-suzanne-collins.html>.

outlast the enemy at their heels. Most adult critics tend to read the romance as a secondary concern, and those who do see it as more central to the novels tend to wish it wasn't.¹⁵ Yet if there are "a bunch of big ideas driving the book, from the injustice of a few people living in comfort while the rest of the world goes hungry to the priority placed on entertainment in a society where many do without necessities,"¹⁶ another driving force is undoubtedly romance. The love triangle plays a significant role in fueling the narrative progression toward a better world: each boy represents a different path out of dystopia, making the outcome of the romantic choice nothing less than what the future society will be. In this way, the utopian resolution hinges on the romantic resolution, turning romance into the reason for and outcome of the social transformation espoused. If the transformation works to create a world in which a young woman like Katniss can picture herself as a mother and wife, not as a revolutionary hero, then the courtship narrative demands greater attention for how it shapes Katniss's revolutionary potential and raises significant questions about her revered status as a feminist icon for readers of all ages.

The Love Triangle

The Hunger Games (2008), *Catching Fire* (2009), and *Mockingjay* (2010) describe a future United States known as Panem, comprised of a wealthy Capitol surrounded by twelve impoverished districts. As retribution for a long-ago rebellion, the Capitol makes each district select a boy and girl by lottery to compete in the annual Hunger Games. The twenty-four tributes are dressed up, paraded around, forced to perform for judges, and then placed in an arena where

¹⁵ See Lewitt, "Casting"; Stephen King, "The Hunger Games," *Entertainment Weekly*, September 12, 2008, 139, and Carol Stabile, "'First He'll Kill Her Then I'll Save Her': Vampires, Feminism, and the *Twilight* Franchise," *Journal of Communication* 61 (2011): E7.

¹⁶ Yvonne Zipp, "Classic Review: *The Hunger Games*," *Christian Science Monitor*, December 27, 2008, <http://www.csmonitor.com/Books/Book-Reviews/2008/1227/the-hunger-games-2>.

they fight to the death in a televised bloodbath. The last child remaining is crowned victor and his or her district given enough food to survive for the year. Katniss becomes a tribute when she volunteers to take the place of her younger sister, Prim. In the arena with her is Peeta Mellark, the baker's son, who once risked a beating from his mother to give Katniss a loaf of bread when she was starving. Katniss and Peeta manage to survive the Games in the first book only to be thrust into another Game in book two, this time with the tributes chosen from among the victors of past years. At the end of *Catching Fire*, Katniss escapes the arena and joins a rebel group, but the Capitol captures Peeta. In *Mockingjay*, she tries to save him while becoming the leading figure of a revolution bent on overthrowing the Capitol and establishing a new democratic republic in Panem.

Readers might protest that Katniss is surely not preoccupied with having a boyfriend, given that she repeatedly proclaims she's not concerned with boys or dating. When we first meet her best friend and childhood confidant, Gale, she maintains, "There's never been anything romantic between Gale and me," and even though she thinks he'll marry one of the girls who ogle him at school, she insists, "It makes me jealous but not for the reason people would think. Good hunting partners are hard to find."¹⁷ Yet as Laura Miller points out, Katniss can be unreliable as a narrator, especially in instances when her internal desires contradict her alleged wants. For example, while she turns up her nose at the Capitol's opulence, "her professed claim to hate it all is undermined by the loving detail with which she describes every last goody."¹⁸

¹⁷ Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2008), 10. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text as *HG*.

¹⁸ Laura Miller, "Fresh Hell: What's Behind the Boom in Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults?" *The New Yorker*, June 14, 2010, http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2010/06/14/100614crat_atlarge_miller. But perhaps Collins lavishes so much attention on Katniss's food and clothing when she's in the Capitol's clutches in order to provide ample fodder for marketing: *The Unofficial Hunger Games Cookbook* boasts "more than 150 recipes inspired

This does not mean readers should not trust when a female protagonist says “no,” but in traditional romance literature, a professed disinterest in love is easily remedied over time: “The hero makes the heroine accept what she craves while she gets to deny how much she craves it.”¹⁹ Based on the conventions of romance and Katniss’s own capriciousness, her insistence that she has no romantic interest in Gale instead draws attention to what Stephen King describes as the “sorta-crush” she is developing.²⁰

The contradiction between Katniss’s professed disinterest and her nascent desires becomes a productive source of tension throughout all three novels. In continuing her posturing against romance, Katniss is initially furious when Peeta works with mentor Haymitch Abernathy, who won the Games years before, to present themselves as star-crossed lovers rather than adversaries when they enter the Games. She complains that Peeta’s public declaration of love “turn[ed] me into some kind of fool in front of the entire country” and fears, “He made me look weak!” (*HG* 135). But while Katniss associates romance with vulnerability, their love story turns out to be an immeasurable aid. As Haymitch anticipated, the crowd goes wild over their tale, increasing their appeal to sponsors who send them aid like food, water, and medicine in the arena. Their appeal to the audience is also an appeal to the reader—romance makes a good story. The citizens of Panem are glued to their TV screens watching Katniss’s romance unfold just as the reader eagerly turns the pages of the book wondering how the budding triangle will resolve.

Initially, then, the performance of Katniss’s fake romance with Peeta draws the reader into the drama at the same time that it reiterates the spectacle of the Games, typifying all that is

by the Hunger Games Trilogy.” Emily Ansara Banes, *The Unofficial Hunger Games Cookbook* (Cincinnati: Adams Media, 2012).

¹⁹ Laura Miller, “‘The Hunger Games’ vs. ‘Twilight,’” *Salon.com*, September 5, 2010, http://www.salon.com/books/laura_miller/2010/09/05/hunger_games_twilight.

²⁰ King, “The Hunger Games,” 139.

wrong with the dystopian regime. The romance plot self-consciously calls attention to itself as a way of manipulating an audience's emotions to ensure its continued engagement: Collins takes pains to depict the pettiness of the makeup, camera crews, and reality-TV nature of the games, and of the publicized courtship. But as the drama progresses, Katniss starts believing the story of her love for Peeta. She reminds herself to act wild about Peeta when she knows the cameras are on her but also finds herself longing for private moments with him—for real kisses, not televised ones. When Peeta tells her he's been in love with her since they were five, she thinks, "For a moment, I'm almost foolishly happy and then confusion sweeps over me. Because we're supposed to be making up this stuff, playing at being in love, not actually being in it. But Peeta's story has a ring of truth in it... could it all be true?" (*HG* 301).²¹ At the same time, she wonders how all this kissing is going to play to her best friend back home. With Katniss's feelings for Peeta growing increasingly muddled, the novels transform romance from a strategy and ploy into a central and pressing concern. Even as Katniss is forced to keep acting out her love for Peeta in *Catching Fire*, the idea that she is utilizing the conventions of romance for political leverage against the Capitol is complicated, if not downright undercut, by how much her act becomes real to her.

I confess in my first reading of the trilogy to hoping Katniss would refuse the fictionalization of her life and the narrative of her love for Peeta that had been created without her consent. I thought she would wind up with Gale, not only because I agreed with *People*

²¹ That Katniss has that *je ne sais quoi* in attracting these boys (Peeta says, "She has no idea. The effect she can have" [*HG* 91]) is a popular trope in YA romances. In the *Twilight* series, Bella Swan has no significant personality traits besides clumsiness, and yet the angelic Edward Cullen is irrevocably drawn to her. Likewise Lena in *Delirium* can't figure out why stunning Alex is attracted to her and not her blond and bubbly best friend.

magazine's assertion that the "boy back home" was "Katniss's real soulmate"²² but because I thought choosing Gale meant choosing her own path and rejecting the stories constructed about her. My surprise and disappointment that Katniss winds up with Peeta forced me to confront the ways I had willfully misread the novels. Gale is the revolutionary figure, the one who rails against the Capitol, seeks to initiate change, and actually does things besides get injured and pine for Katniss. But subsequent readings revealed to me the myriad ways in which the novels set up Peeta to be the "right" choice for Katniss. In working through the logic that informs the resolution of the courtship drama, I came to better understand the novels' conception of change. What I missed in my first, hopeful reading is the extent to which the novels present Gale as the necessary but ultimately undesirable underside of revolutionary politics. Instead, Collins supports Peeta, loyal lover who dreams of a quiet and private home life as the end goal of utopia and the reason for social change.

Saving the Baker's Son

Katniss initially avoids courtship not because she dislikes either suitor, but because she feels she must avoid marriage and reproduction at all costs. The dystopian society is overwhelmingly hostile to the nuclear family, the social unit the novels will come to idealize as the antithesis to all the dystopia represents. Katniss's childhood was brutally cut short after her father was killed in a mining accident, and her "beaten-down" mother never recovered from her despair (*HG 3*). She recalls how, "at eleven years old, with Prim just seven, I took over as head

²² Sue Corbett, "Mockingjay," *People* 74.8, September 13, 2010, <http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20418879,00.html>.

of the family” because “my mother could no longer care for us” (*HG* 27).²³ But even if Katniss could one day give her children the safety and care she lacked in her upbringing, she could never protect them from being eligible for the Games. This is why Katniss announces in the first few pages of *The Hunger Games*, “I never want to have kids” and later reiterates, “I know I’ll never marry, never risk bringing a child into the world” (*HG* 9, 311). Nor can she picture an alternative; when Gale maintains that he might want kids if he didn’t live in District 12, Katniss retorts, “But you do” (*HG* 9).

Katniss’s inability to picture a world in which it would be safe to have children sets the stage for her utopian transformation as the narrative expands her horizon of possibility to include child-bearing as an option. In *Catching Fire*, after Katniss has survived the first Games, her sense of the possible starts to shift. In the arena one night in the second Games, Peeta announces he will sacrifice himself so she can survive. Katniss wonders if what Peeta says is “a reminder to me that I could still one day have kids with Gale.” She is quick to reject this option, because “that’s never been part of my plan,” but then considers another scenario in which Peeta survives to have kids.²⁴ “If only one of us can be a parent,” she thinks, “anyone can see it should be Peeta.” This notion of parenting leads Katniss to voice a new, utopian possibility predicated on reproduction: “As I drift off, I try to imagine that world, somewhere in the future, with no Games, no Capitol... Where Peeta’s child could be safe” (*CF* 354). This is the first time we hear Katniss “imagine that world” where children are not threatened by the Capitol’s violence.

²³ The parental abandonment that marks Katniss’s life as dystopic is a common theme in YA literature; the absent parent allows the protagonist to embark on adventures that would be impossible with an adult checking in. See Hintz, “Young Adult Dystopias,” 254 and Melinda Gross, “*The Giver* and *Shade’s Children*: Future Views of Child Abandonment and Murder,” *Children’s Literature in Education*, 30.2 (1999): 104-106.

²⁴ Suzanne Collins, *Catching Fire* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2009), 353. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text as *CF*.

Longing for this possible future, Katniss's rebellion is largely fueled by her desire for a stable family and home.²⁵ She yearns for a time back when "I knew what my place was in the tightly interwoven fabric that was our life," a time that "seems so secure" (*CF* 7). On the other hand, she also looks forward to being "able to afford the kind of love that leads to a family, to children" (*HG* 373). So while it is true that her "voice is seen having a deep effect on a wider society" through the revolution she instigates, rather than giving "young people the impression that they have the capacity to remake or revision society anew,"²⁶ the novel teaches her to use this voice for more a more modest and conservative purpose: creating the family she never had. It's possible to read such a message positively; Melissa Gross seems quite optimistic when she determines that the "wish for tomorrow presented" in YA dystopias like Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993) is not "material possessions, power, recognition, or fame... Amazingly, realistically, and simply enough, what these adolescents want is family love."²⁷ But to what extent does this wish for the safe and the stable risk eclipsing the transformative potential of both adolescent rebellion and critical utopian literature to imagine other worlds?

²⁵ Roberta Seelinger Trites suggests that children's books are primarily concerned with how a child "learns to feel more secure in the confines of his or her immediate environment, usually represented by family and home." The children's tale affirms the safety and centrality of the nuclear family, understood to include the child and his or her parents. For Trites, adolescent novels are different because protagonists "learn to negotiate the levels of power that exist in the myriad social institutions within which they must function." But what is the purpose of learning to negotiate power structures if not to find your own place within the structure? As *The Hunger Games* suggests, the place in that structure is primarily defined by family. Katniss leaves her family in order to establish her own, finding the security through family and home that Trites associates with children's literature. As I discuss below, Katniss's quest to create her own family also marks the series as a *bildungsroman*; her rebellion leads to her coming of age as an adult, with adulthood defined by marital and reproductive status. Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), 2-3.

²⁶ Hintz, "Young Adult Dystopias," 255, 263.

²⁷ Gross, "Future Views," 115.

That Katniss's revolutionary status is fueled by her wish to realize the normative family life embodied by Peeta's future children effectively circumscribes the impact of her rebellion, making his safety her primary concern. This is not to say that saving others is not a worthy goal, or that revolutionary justice is somehow legitimate only when enacted for ones we don't know rather than ones we do. My point is rather that since Katniss is so focused on Peeta, she only goes out on a limb in order to save him; her heroism is highly limited and determined by their romance and her idealized vision of family life. Hence at the end of the first Games, actions that are interpreted as revolutionary are less clearly motivated by a sense of political justice. When Peeta and Katniss are the last tributes standing, Katniss picks poisonous berries so they can commit suicide together, sparing her the responsibility of murdering him (only one tribute can win). Before the berries pass their lips, a broadcaster announces the rules have changed and both may live, lest the Capitol wind up with no winners at all. The gesture is interpreted across Panem as a rejection of the Games and defiance against the Capitol, but although it helps instigate revolution, it was never intended as a stand against authority.

With Peeta's survival, the desire to protect him as a future parent then comes to shape Katniss's revolutionary potential as an ostensible figure for social change. In *Mockingjay*, Katniss has been rescued from the arena by a group of rebel forces from District 13, an area once thought destroyed by the Capitol. The rebels see Katniss as "the face of the hoped-for rebellion" and want her to become the "Mockingjay," a "symbol of resistance" (CF 150). Katniss is reluctant to assume this role, in part because she does not trust the rebels and in part because she is loath to take on tasks that go beyond ensuring her personal survival. Only when Gale asks Katniss what she is going to do to save Peeta, who has been captured by the Capitol, does she finally announce what she has been resisting for the first thirty pages of the novel: "I'm going to

be the Mockingjay.”²⁸ Laura Miller reads this as “a free, affirmative choice,”²⁹ but it’s still one Katniss has been manipulated into, and it is only to protect Peeta. Romance cements Katniss’s cause to the revolution at the same time that it renders her a docile subject manipulated by both sides of the war.

As the Mockingjay, Katniss’s involvement in the revolution is contingent upon Peeta’s safety. The rebels stage a risky operation to rescue Peeta from the Capitol because Katniss is too distraught to function while he is endangered. As they explain, “We can’t lose the Mockingjay now. And you can’t perform unless you know Snow can’t take it out on Peeta” (*M* 164). The rescue goes a little too easily, though, because it turns out the Capitol wants Katniss to have Peeta back after they “hijack” his memories and brainwash him into thinking Katniss is evil. Katniss is devastated less by the loss of Peeta than by the loss of his love for her: “All those months of taking it for granted that Peeta thought I was wonderful are over” (*M* 232). Although she tries to run into Gale’s arms, the substitute is inadequate and she finds she cannot perform her heroics while Peeta is still in pain. Katniss’s rebellious acts are motivated by Peeta, not by politics; she realizes “my fixation with assassinating Snow has allowed me to ignore a much more difficult problem. Trying to rescue Peeta from the shadowy world the hijacking has stranded him in” (*M* 369). To the extent that Katniss’s fight is with the Capitol, it is over its treatment of Peeta and whether it will be possible to create a world in which he—and their future children—will be safe.

While Katniss is the symbol of the revolution and Peeta her muse, it is unclear what either of them actually do besides provide a face for the rebels. The one who engages directly in

²⁸ Suzanne Collins, *Mockingjay* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2010), 31. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text as *M*.

²⁹ Miller, “Games vs. Twilight.”

revolutionary activities is Gale. An expert hunter with uncanny ability in “thinking like our enemy” (*M* 98), Gale’s ruthlessness becomes apparent when he devises a plan to attack District 2, the last district to fall to rebel forces. Gale treats the district’s stronghold as a wild dog den, deciding they can either trap the “dogs” inside or “flush them out” (*M* 202). Instead of securing the den, the rebels bomb it out of commission, along with the victims trapped inside. Gale defends the costs of victory because “by taking them out, we prevented further attacks,” but he worries Katniss will think him “heartless” (*M* 222, 221). And she does: Katniss acknowledges the point of war is to kill, yet she fears Gale’s rationalizations could justify “killing anyone at any time” (*M* 222). She struggles to explain the problem with Gale’s approach, all the while knowing Peeta “would be able to articulate why it’s so wrong” (*M* 211). It is Gale’s final act of war that finally clarifies for Katniss the full costs of revolution: as silver parachutes drop over a horde of fleeing children, the kids rush to them, thinking they are aid. The parachutes then detonate in a fiery explosion that leaves Katniss’s sister Prim among the countless dead.

Susan Dominus recounts how Collins’s editor, Rosemary Stimola, didn’t want Collins to kill off Prim, such a “heartbreakingly innocent and beloved young character.” Stimola felt that while “the capacity of young-adult literature for dark messaging has been expanding since the early ’70s... this poignant loss seemed almost unbearable.” Dominus recounts Stimola’s conversation with Collins: “‘Oh, but it has to be,’ Collins told her. ‘This is not a fairy tale; it’s a war, and in war, there are tragic losses that must be mourned.’”³⁰ Prim’s death may be said to reflect publishing trends toward dark literature for young adults and up the novels’ sense of realism by not shying away from the reality of warfare, reminding readers that we don’t get to

³⁰ Susan Dominus, “Suzanne Collins’s War Stories for Kids,” *The New York Times*, April 8 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/10/magazine/mag-10collins-t.html?scp=1&sq=suzanne%20collins&st=cse>.

keep our friends and family just because we love them. It is part of a larger trend in dystopian literature, in which “innocent child victims (although rarely the main child protagonist) actually die in order to highlight the negligence and corruption of the adult-created world they have inherited.”³¹ It seems that from the moment Katniss takes her sister’s place in the games, we know she will inevitably die to showcase how the society has let down the children it is supposed to protect.

But what Dominus’s, Stimola’s, and Collins’s accounts overlook is how Prim’s death is not only necessary for the plot of the novel, to ensure the triumph of the rebels, but also helps enable Katniss’s development into an appropriately gendered adult. As Eric L. Tribunella explains, literature for children and young adults frequently includes the loss of a beloved object as the means for a protagonist’s maturation. In this way, bereavement becomes beneficial and even necessary to disciplining the young adult into the social order: “the narrative of traumatic loss is used to induce maturation... for both child protagonists and readers.” Such maturity is typically understood to include qualities like responsibility and self-control, as well as heteronormativity. Tribunella explains, “Mature adults are heteronormatively gendered. One of the key things a child must grow up into is a man or a woman, so to be a mature adult means to identify unambiguously as one or the other and to enact clearly conventional manhood or womanhood. To be heteronormatively gendered also means that one takes another heteronormatively gendered person of the other sex as one’s sexual and romantic object, or at least to demonstrate an interest in doing so.”³² Prim’s death will help bring Katniss into proper

³¹ Kay Sambell, “Carnivalizing the Future: A New Approach to Theorizing Childhood And Adulthood in Science Fiction for Young Readers,” *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 28.2 (2004): 250.

³² Eric L. Tribunella, *Melancholia and Maturation: The Use of Trauma in American Children’s Literature* (Nashville: University of Tennessee Press, 2009), xxii.

reproductive heteronormative adulthood by steering her toward Peeta and the reproductive future he offers.

Based on the structure of the narrative, it is Prim's death that facilitates Katniss's understanding of political power and the nature of adult heterosexual relationships, as this loss prompts her to reevaluate the two boys and the possible societies they represent. Even though the parachutes are essential for toppling the Capitol and winning the war, their use reproduces the same destructive logic the rebels are ostensibly oriented against. Gale justifies his violence with the incisive statement, "I have been following the same rule book President Snow used" (*M* 186), locking the perpetrators into an endless cycle of violence. Katniss rejects Gale's methods as a viable means of achieving a better future, yet that future remains predicated on the actions she condemns. Katniss herself is unable to escape this spiral; in the moment in which she is about to kill the former president Snow, she raises her bow and kills the new president Coin instead, toppling the rebel regime. It is unclear how Katniss's individual feat of heroic violence enacted against the concept of heroic violence initiates some kind of alternate world order, but somehow this instance leads to the installation of a replacement government and the triumph of a new society.

This kind of straight talking and merciless action has led readers like John Green and Yvonne Zipp to interpret Katniss as entirely unsentimental, but Katniss's insights into the nature of violence lead to a surprisingly mawkish reverie.³³ Deciding that love must help moderate her destructive sensibilities, Katniss concludes that she and Gale are simply too much alike. Her claims that he knows her better than anyone else, and that around him she can be herself, are in fact strikes against him. Eventually she decides:

³³ Zipp, "Classic Review," and John Green, "Scary New World," *The New York Times*, November 7, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/09/books/review/Green-t.html>.

what I need to survive is not Gale's fire, kindled with rage and hatred. I have plenty of fire myself. What I need is the dandelion in the spring. The bright yellow that means rebirth instead of destruction. The promise that life can go on, no matter how bad our losses. That it can be good again. And only Peeta can give me that (*M* 388).

Nevermind that it is Gale who helps Katniss survive when they are starving children in District 12—Katniss is more interested in the symbols of survival: springtime, yellow, flowers, Peeta. What Katniss suggests through this flight into lyricism is that proper heterosexual relationships cannot be between people who are too similar. She must balance the temperaments of the sexes to form a union suitable for fertility and growth.

It is Peeta, then, who offers the possibility of a future that will counter to the violent dystopian realm. Katniss repeatedly insists Peeta is “truly, deep-down better than the rest of us” (*CF* 277) because he never kills anyone in the arena (although calling him “a victor by chance” downplays the central role Katniss plays in keeping him alive [*CF* 277]). Uncorrupted by the harsh adult world (Katniss repeatedly calls him “boy” and “the boy with the bread”), Peeta is an ideal balance for Katniss's ruthless spirit. Before Katniss kills her, the new revolutionary president Coin proposes “a final, symbolic Hunger Games” using the children of those who had been in power in the Capitol. Katniss says, “I vote yes... for Prim” (369, 370). But while she votes for the renewed Games because “Nothing has changed. Nothing will ever change now,” Peeta holds out hope for another world: “‘No!’ busts out Peeta. ‘I vote no, of course! We can't have another Hunger Games!’” (*M* 370, 369). Peeta's vote is a vote for another kind of future. And while it is a vote against Katniss, the novel is clear that his path is the right one. We are supposed to feel Katniss has made the wrong decision in this moment; the point is that Peeta

countermands her. As Haymitch tells Katniss, “You could live a hundred lifetimes and not deserve him, you know” (*CF* 178). Peeta exists to remind Katniss of the better way.

A Feminist Utopia?

But although Peeta is meant to represent the better option, the choice of a suitor is one that Katniss is never allowed to make; she simply winds up with the one who pursues her back to the bombed out District 12 at the end of the war. There is no moment of decision, no expression of desire, and no evidence of Katniss’ agency or control over her life. Instead, the resolution to the triangle built up through all three volumes is entirely passive. After Prim’s death, we learn only that Gale has “some fancy job” in District 2, presumably working for the new government. Katniss feels “relief” and gives no more mention of her former friend (*M* 384). When Peeta shows up on her doorstep to plant flowers—again associating him with flowers and spring—Katniss suddenly overcomes her despair. Even as the novels drag out the question of which one she will choose, in the end, the men make the choice for her. Just as she did throughout her time as a revolutionary figure during the war, Katniss yields to others to make decisions for her, making the correct choice only when there is no choice left to be made.

The series’ conclusion in an epic heroine defaulting to a safe, stable, and highly insular heterosexual reproductive union—a union so much like the social and sexual status quo of our own world—raises questions about just what has been transformed by Katniss’s harrowing fight. The epilogue, much like the ending to the Harry Potter series, resolves in a vision of the next generation safe and smiling as Katniss and Peeta’s children run around on their “chubby toddler legs” (*M* 389). With no knowledge of the Games, these children are secure in their childhood and protected from the world in ways Katniss never was. This picture of childhood innocence thus

becomes the end result of all Katniss has fought for. If the upshot of overthrowing a dystopian regime is being able to settle down and have kids, then whatever happens in the rest of the country will not involve Katniss. We get no vision of what this new society looks like, how it is structured, or how Katniss spends her time with the few hundred others left in the district. But this end vision is utopian for the way it fulfills her dream of a seemingly impossible world without the Capitol, offers an obvious improvement over the previous dystopian regime, and highlights the possibility of enacting social change, however limited. This utopia is less a political arrangement than a conception of home as a stable, loving nuclear family, insular and protected from the outside world. The maternal vessel that brings this new world forward, Katniss plays the stereotypical female who functions to bring about the dream of the utopian home.

In showing us this tough fighter contentedly watching her children play, Collins follows what Deborah O'Keefe terms the "cop-out pattern" in which "heroines ultimately [give] up their independent vision and subside... into traditional behavior."³⁴ Annis Pratt calls this depiction of female growing up a kind of "growing down." Lorna Ellis elaborates, "The protagonists begin as self-assured young women who question their subordinate place in society, but the endings find them less active, less assertive, and reintegrated into society through marriage."³⁵ Feminists have been writing about this pervasive pattern as far back as the 1970s:

The actual cop-out may be only a crucial line, a paragraph, the last chapter. But somewhere a sexist compromise is made, somewhere the book adjusts to the

³⁴ Deborah O'Keefe, *Good Girl Messages: How Young Women Were Misled By Their Favorite Books* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 22.

³⁵ Annis Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1981), 30, and Lorna Ellis, *Appearing to Diminish: Female Development and the British Bildungsroman, 1750-1850* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1999), 16.

stereotyped role of woman, often for the sake of social pressure and conformity. The compromise brings with it a change, and this change is not only disturbing but often distorts the logical development of the character herself. Suddenly her development is redirected—or, rather, stunted.³⁶

That Katniss's cop-out comes across in a short epilogue does not diminish the importance of this concluding vision to the overall narrative. It re-frames the way we read the trilogy as it directs the energies of the narrative from imagining social upheaval to maintaining the reproductive status quo, ensuring that Katniss's rebellion serves to keep her an appropriately gendered, reproductive, and ultimately docile subject.

Thus even with the trilogy's seeming gender equality—girls can do anything, like beat the boys in the arena and assassinate the president—Katniss is hardly a feminist figurehead. As Elaine O'Quinn explains, "traditional fiction for girls encourages them to be suffering, passive, bystanders of life."³⁷ Katniss certainly suffers, and despite all her heroics with a bow and arrow, she is a passive heroine, manipulated into outfits, relationships, arenas, and TV shoots, trying to figure out what everyone wants from her while asserting little of her own needs and goals. When she does make demands, it is to ensure the safety of her beloved, as when she makes Peeta's immunity a condition of her assumption of the Mockingjay role. It is also hard to see Katniss standing up tall on her own when we contend with how duty-bound and wracked with guilt she remains throughout the war. Despite her brief moments of rebellion, she is deeply preoccupied with obedience (and her rebelliousness is always rewarded as the right thing to have done). In

³⁶ Feminists on Children's Literature, "A Feminist Look at Children's Books," *School Library Journal* 18 (1971): 21.

³⁷ Elaine J. O'Quinn, Review of *Good Girl Messages: How Young Women Were Misled by Their Favorite Books*, by Deborah O'Keefe and of *Declarations of Independence: Empowered Girls in Young Adult Literature, 1990-2001*, by Joanne Brown and Nancy St. Clair, *NWSA Journal* 15.1 (Spring 2003): 169.

being uncertain about whom to trust, she feels helpless and confused, oscillating between which man—Peeta, Gale, and even Haymitch—might best help her.

That Peeta is associated with utopian gentleness and Katniss with dystopian violence, upsetting stereotypical gender associations, should not lead us to think that their gender roles are truly reversed or that the text offers more open examples of gender possibilities. The potential disruption of traditional gender roles in making Katniss the savior and Peeta the one who needs saving is superficial rather than substantive; after all, the good girl is supposed to help others, not be helped herself. Although Katniss wins the Games, her mission to rescue Peeta reinforces the stereotype that “boys must win, so they need somebody to beat” while “girls must create harmony, so they need somebody to help.”³⁸ At one point, Gale says he knows Katniss will kiss him “Because I’m in pain... that’s that only way I get your attention” (*M* 130). Later, he compares himself to Peeta, concluding, “I’ll never compete with that. No matter how much pain I’m in” (*M* 197). That Katniss winds up with the boy who suffers the most, rather than reversing gender roles and showing a male character as helpless, affirms that despite her tough exterior, Katniss is still associated with caretaking.

Katniss’s passivity ensures that she isn’t too forward, too desiring, or too brash. Her reluctance to take the spotlight, rather than heightening any later heroism, assures readers she is not overly assertive. As Susan Fraiman explains, in “nineteenth-century views of proper development,” girls were taught that “to be exceptional is to be morally suspect.”³⁹ Katniss gets

³⁸ O’Keefe, *Good Girl*, 43. O’Keefe elaborates, “The books our elders urged us to read showed girls who wanted to help; any girl characters who wanted to *be* helped and supported were scorned in these books... The good girl’s goal was usefulness not happiness—though she was taught that usefulness was the same as happiness.” O’Keefe, *Good Girl*, 153, emphasis original.

³⁹ Susan Fraiman, *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 8.

around her unbecoming behavior by insisting she never wanted to stand out. Laura Miller's reading here is informative:

If Katniss sought the center of attention, if she chose to string along two handsome young men more than willing to give their lives for hers, if she wanted to have her every moment photographed and admired, if she dreamed of leading the revolution, if she longed to compete and to win—if she had any ambition at all—she would be a bad girl by such a standard.⁴⁰

Katniss is a hero to the extent that a symbol, rather than a decisive actor, can be heroic, and to the extent that she convinces us she never wanted to be a hero in the first place. Perhaps it is a step forward for YA critical utopias to allow female characters moments of success and offer readers glimpses of women in more empowered roles. But it is a small step if that success is only allowed to happen *to* female characters, despite their protestations, and if it primarily serves to uphold rather than transform the status quo.

Ultimately, the final image of complacent adulthood with husband and children in tow suggests that Katniss's instances of rebellion are permissible for girls, not women. Writers traditionally give children greater leeway with gender; it is only when girls grow up that they must lose their independent agency and adopt properly gendered behavior. For instance, Jane M. Agee argues that in Newbery Award-winning children's books *Caddie Woodlawn* (1935) and *Jacob Have I Loved* (1980), female characters are allowed to spend their youths as tomboys, but "authors seem to feel compelled to bring their characters back into conventional gender roles rather abruptly when the characters become young women."⁴¹ Girls like Caddie in *Caddie*

⁴⁰ Miller, "Games vs Twilight."

⁴¹ Jane M. Agee, "Mothers and Daughters: Gender-Role Specialization in Two Newbery Award Books," *Children's Literature in Education* 24.3 (1993): 180.

Woodlawn, Louise in *Jacob Have I Loved*, Jo in *Little Women*, Heidi in *Heidi Grows Up* (1938), Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm (1903), and Anne of Green Gables (1908-1921) skin their knees and dream about their futures, but their wayward adventures must eventually come to a close. Although Katniss is smart, resourceful, and a superior markswoman, her growing up involves removing herself from political involvement and retreating to the domestic sphere in order to raise children.

Katniss's preoccupations with romance throughout the series also ensure that even during her tomboy years, she is still appropriately feminine. With her hair in a beautiful long braid and her heart pounding for Peeta, then Gale, then Peeta again, she embodies a particular strain of "feminine tomboyism," which Michelle Ann Abate describes as a "form of gender expression...tied to femininity and, perhaps even more importantly, heterosexuality."⁴² The 1990s especially saw the rise of certain types of "gender bending female-figures" who may have seemed tomboyish but "were often nothing more than repackaged forms of femininity.... These figures remained feminine in spite of being fierce and girlish in spite of being tomboyish. Thus, they were appealing to men: they wore tight-fitting clothes, had long hair and repeatedly demonstrated that they were not lesbians."⁴³ Even as Katniss's tomboyism remains connected to her youth, her adolescent crushes and the ways she is made up to be pretty, feminine, and appealing to the audience watching the Games reinforce her femininity and foreshadow the proper heterosexual adult she will become.

Angela Huber suggests that such a condemnation of latent oppression as Agee presents and which I am echoing here is inadequate because it presumes a liberal paradigm, which

⁴² Michelle Ann Abate, *Tomboys: A Literary and Cultural History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 223.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 224.

imagines individuals as free agents able to make their own decisions while disregarding how larger social, political, and economic structures can limit personal choice. Huber makes the important point that “replacing stereotypical depictions of women and girls with liberated ones is insufficient to overcome women’s subordination,” because “no matter how strong and independent blacks and women might be, they cannot eradicate these systems of inequality simply by proving themselves or educating those in power.”⁴⁴ I agree, but I don’t see how that leads Huber to determine that “it is not crucial... to argue—as critics have done—whether the conclusion to *Caddie Woodlawn* or *Jacob Have I Loved* is feminist or a capitulation to gender stereotypes.”⁴⁵ Nor do we have to choose between these two forms of feminist activism. It is vital that we push back against popular interpretations of characters like Katniss as feminist agents and icons for young women and call out YA critical utopian novels that hinge on gender stereotypes. Flattening female characters into passive roles as mothers and wives risks reiterating that these are the primary or the only options for women, even in alternative future worlds. There are forces at work that shape the possibilities and opportunities of everyday life, yet literary representations of female characters participate in shaping these opportunities. Impacting the ways we imagine what is possible in our world and in the future, literature can work on the reader by reproducing and so further normalizing standards for female behavior and expectations for romance—or by expanding, subverting, and changing those expectations altogether. As Joanne Brown and Nancy St. Clair assert, “because girls’ stories have conventionally ended with a marriage or mating in which the female protagonist assumes a subordinate role, fiction about

⁴⁴ Angela E. Huber, “Beyond the Image: Adolescent Girls, Reading, and Social Reality,” *NWSA* 12.1 (2000): 89, 95.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.

empowered girls must find a way to subvert that ending.”⁴⁶ One important way for YA critical utopias to compel readers to imagine forms of social transformation that do more than reinsert female characters into conservative gender roles will be to start by complicating, subverting, or even downright rejecting the conventions of the romance plot that place women in such positions. It is to one possible rewriting of the romance plot and its conclusion in complacent adulthood that this chapter now turns.

“It Still Pretty Much Sucked, Being Fifteen”: Scott Westerfeld’s Rebellious Teens

Scott Westerfeld’s “wildly popular” and “extraordinarily entertaining”⁴⁷ *Uglies* series is an important starting point for considering the ways utopian narrative can engage with tropes outside of romance as a means of soliciting social change. Like Katniss, Tally Youngblood is motivated by love to become a revolutionary figure bent on overthrowing a dystopian system and instigating utopian change. But Westerfeld’s utopian vision moves past an idealization of gender roles to consider more pressing questions of freedom, choice, and social change, such that the novels start to work differently upon the reader than a series like *The Hunger Games*. Tally continues beyond the series’ open ending to bring about utopia through an ongoing, active insurgency—not through her functional role as a girlfriend or future mother and wife. Unlike Katniss, she becomes an agent of change who is not primarily motivated by the desire to establish safe spaces for reproduction. *Uglies* does not reject the romance plot, but it does suggest there might be more to utopia than creating space for normative, insular romantic

⁴⁶ Joanne Brown and Nancy St. Clair, *Declarations of Independence: Empowered Girls in Young Adult Literature, 1990-2001* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2002), 27.

⁴⁷ James Blasingame, Review of *Extras* by Scott Westerfeld, *Journal of Adolescent Adult Literacy* 51.1 (2008): 694, and James Hynes, “Looks Aren’t Everything,” *The New York Times Book Review* November 11, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/11/books/review/Hynes-t.html>.

relationships to thrive. Although Tally's courtship drama shares much with *The Hunger Games*, the ending of the *Uglies* series will suggest that Tally grows partially out of the limited roles and plotlines shaped by romance, developing greater self-confidence and agency at the same time that she starts to move away from the limitations and expectations of conventional romance.

Westerfeld's futuristic society exists after a civilization like ours called the Rusties has been killed off by a form of bacteria that eats petroleum. Centuries after the "ecological apocalypse,"⁴⁸ cities now exist in stasis with the surrounding wilderness. To keep humanity in check, all teenagers undergo full-body plastic surgery at age sixteen to become pretty. With everyone equally beautiful and partying all the time, there is no jealousy, competition, or even war. But it turns out the society actually runs smoothly because of lesions cut into the brain during the operation, which serve to keep adults docile, complacent, and too spacey for independent thought. *Uglies* introduces Tally to the dystopian side of her seemingly perfect world as she follows her best friend Shay to the Smoke, a secret group of urban refugees who elect to stay ugly and who teach Tally the truth about her society. In *Pretties*, she undergoes the pretty operation in order to serve as a test subject for a potential cure for the lesions. At the end of the novel, however, she is once again altered against her will, this time to join the elite fighting corps known as Special Circumstances, or Specials, that maintain order in the city. In *Specials*, Tally is enlisted to uphold the laws of the city, but the cure for pretty-mindedness has already unleashed a rebellion that cannot be contained.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Hynes, "Looks Aren't Everything."

⁴⁹ The final book, *Extras*, focuses on a fifteen-year-old Japanese ugly named Aya after pretty-mindedness has been abolished. As Tally makes only brief appearances, I focus primarily on her development throughout the first three novels and then consider what *Extras* contributes to our understanding of the utopian vision put forth.

Like Katniss, Tally is in some ways a significant change from the stereotypically helpless female, especially in the male-dominated field of science fiction. Kimberly Robinson praises Westerfeld for including “a full complement of strong female characters,” including Tally, Shay, and the calculating Dr. Cable, in charge of the Specials.⁵⁰ Gail Sidonie Sobat maintains, “Westerfeld has created a female protagonist with a bad-ass rep who matches any hero in athletic prowess, energy, drive, and pure pluck.”⁵¹ But while it is true that “young female readers should find the *Uglies* series to be a refreshing departure from a genre which is primarily male coded,”⁵² it is also true that Tally is more of a stereotypical female than her adventurous and aggressive qualities suggest. She is constantly plagued by uncertainty and self-doubt, and for all that she rises to meet new challenges, she is frequently passive and easily manipulated, often avoiding making decisions or dealing with consequences. Like Katniss, she has fame thrust upon her instead of seeking it out, saying “it had all just sort of *happened*,” and reminding readers that a female hero shouldn’t be too forward in seeking the spotlight.⁵³ And even more than Katniss, Tally is completely and totally boy crazy.

Before meeting either of her boyfriends, David and Zane, Tally can hardly be considered a radical subject. She never questions the benevolence of her city, a “paradise” that “feeds you, educates you, keeps you safe,” and “makes you pretty” (*U* 106). When Shay first suggests

⁵⁰ Kimberly Downing Robinson, Review of *Uglies* by Scott Westerfeld, *Interdisciplinary Humanities* 27.2 (2010): 153.

⁵¹ Gail Sidonai Sobat, “Why The Prince Bites It,” in *Mind Rain: Your Favorite Authors on Scott Westerfeld’s Uglies Series*, ed. Scott Westerfeld (Dallas: Benbella Books, 2009), 73. In Westerfeld’s terms, *Mind Rain* is like the gossip teen readers spread about the books but “with quotes and references and footnotes!” The collection of essays, by other YA authors, is lively and engaging and explores aspects of the *Uglies* series that have yet to be taken up in other scholarly circles.

⁵² Robinson, Review, 153.

⁵³ Scott Westerfeld, *Uglies* (New York: Simon Pulse, 2005), 49, emphasis original. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text as *U*.

traveling somewhere besides Uglyville or New Pretty Town, Tally wonders, “Where else is there?” (*U* 47). Only after she reluctantly follows Shay to the Smoke does she realize other possibilities exist. But even though Shay introduces Tally to the possibility of life without the pretty-making operation, it is Tally’s interest in David, who was raised outside the city and without the operation, that motivates her turn away from her dystopian society. Although Lili Wilkinson says that Tally “starts to reassess” her ideas on ugliness “when she finds out the truth about being pretty,”⁵⁴ Tally doesn’t decide to forgo the surgery when she hears about the brain lesions. Instead, she waits until later—until after David calls her beautiful and they kiss. She is only willing to “remain an ugly for life” because in the eyes of her beloved she is “somehow not ugly at all” (*U* 281). Tally thus challenges the Specials and resists the operation in order to secure a place where she and her new boyfriend can be together.

Tally’s budding relationship with David ultimately facilitates her growth into a revolutionary subject who challenges the existing order, but initially the relationship keeps her locked in conventional gender roles. Guilty for causing the destruction of the Smoke by betraying its location to the Specials, Tally sacrifices herself in order to “begin undoing the damage she had done” (*U* 369). She returns to the city to have the pretty-making operation and then become a test subject for a potential cure the Smokeys have developed. Her risk stands to change the entire city, because once the cure is deemed effective it can be widely distributed. But the motivating factor in testing the cure is David: “he would always remember what she had done, the lives she had cost with her secrets. This was the only way Tally could be certain that he had forgiven her. If he came to rescue her, she would know” (*U* 421). Tally creates a scenario where, instead of being the “amazing” and “brave” one who once tried to save her friend Shay

⁵⁴ Lili Wilkinson, “All That Glitters is not Hovery,” in *Mind Rain*, 10.

(U 324, 246), she is the helpless pretty “bubblehead” who needs to be saved.⁵⁵ The operation lets Tally be the damsel every romance needs, giving David an opportunity to prove his love while assuring Tally that her struggle against the city will bring them together.

Tally’s fairytale expectations are destroyed when David never comes. But rather than question her fantasies, she maintains her faith in romantic possibilities, taking up with a new pretty named Zane. Like David, Zane also represents revolutionary potential; it is his crush on Tally that helps enable her emergent political sensibilities, especially after the surgery makes her forget her time at the Smoke.⁵⁶ Zane recognizes his mind has been tampered with and tries to keep himself alert and “bubbly” by drinking coffee, starving himself, and taking risks that keep his adrenaline high. But as he informs Tally, the best way to stay bubbly is “kissing someone new. That works really well” (P 61). Romance provides the key that brings about change, and the relationship between Tally and Zane slips between staying bubbly to fight the city and staying bubbly because it cements their love. They split the pills a Smokey leaves for Tally in part to be cured of the brain lesions, but also because sharing a secret and fighting authority helps bring them together, allowing them to affirm, “We need each other now” (P 97). Tally and Zane seek change at the same time that the fight for change bolsters romance.

This elevation of romance is complicated, however, by the fact that it is ultimately not the pills she takes with Zane that help Tally cure her brain lesions. Tally manages to think her way

⁵⁵ Scott Westerfeld, *Specials* (New York: Scholastic, 2007), 62, emphasis original. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text as *S*.

⁵⁶ Zane, like Shay, says he has been “waiting for someone like [Tally] for a long time,” implying that Tally plays an important role in radicalizing him. That Zane seeks change also suggests he plays a similar role to Clarisse, indicating one way Westerfeld is moving away from the gendered assumption that women act as the muse to inspire and animate men. But the extent to which Zane is the one who guides Tally to become bubbly still suggests that he is the agent of Tally’s progression and not the other way around, which complicates the impact of Westerfeld’s subversion. Scott Westerfeld, *Pretties* (New York: Simon Pulse, 2005), 61. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text as *P*.

out of being pretty-minded, repairing the lesions out of sheer willpower. She discovers other ways of staying bubbly, such as by trekking alone through the wilderness, which affirm that she can change on her own. Eventually she concludes, “ Maybe she didn’t need a handsome prince... Maybe she’d always been bubbly, somewhere inside. It only took loving someone—or being in the wild, or maybe just a plunge in freezing water—to bring it out” (P 347). Love is one way of providing the excitement and adrenaline that crystallizes her mind, but it is not the only way. If love in this context is significant for how it shocks the brain, then it is reduced to a physical state equivalent to a dunk in cold water. Tally still believes in love, but it has lost some of its magic, becoming a catalyst for other changes rather than its own end. That Tally understands love as playing a functional role in manipulating her brain chemistry subverts the idea that loving someone and being loved are themselves sufficient to bringing about change.

Thus although Tally’s fight against dystopia initially extends only so far as it also fuels her relationship, the novels ultimately move beyond romance as the primary reason to fight for utopian ideals. Tally also discovers that her own personality, values, and sense of self are also at stake. Her priorities are often personal rather than political, intended to ensure Zane’s safety even if it means sacrificing her tenuous ideals. For example, when Tally is converted into an elite fighter by the Specials, her main regret is that Zane isn’t part of her clique anymore, complaining, “I don’t like the part where Zane looks *wrong* to me” (S 93, emphasis original). Being a frightening, aggressive, cruel Special now working to stamp out the Smoke instead of protect it doesn’t feel problematic to Tally; she resists only the part where she feels differently about Zane. Yet even as she tries to keep Zane a part of her group, she also considers how her choices shape who she is as a person. Tally betrays her friends in order to save Zane and continues to focus on Zane at the expense of broader societal concerns, but although she

continues to prioritize romantic love, it is important to note her conviction that deciding to save Zane also involves a decision “about who Tally Youngblood was inside, whether ugly or pretty or special” (*S* 172). Although this realization risks fusing her sense of self to her relationships, it at least suggests that she is thinking about herself in ways that can be lost when female characters are expected to sacrifice themselves for others—it’s certainly not a question that ever crosses Katniss’s mind.

Tally’s process of figuring out who she is and what she believes turns out to hinge on determining which boy has had the greatest effect on her. She remembers, “Being with Zane had changed her from the beginning, from that first kiss” (*P* 337). Fewer than ten pages later, she then recalls, “Of course, David had changed Tally too... Her reality had been transformed by those two weeks in the Smoke, starting... when? That first time David and she had kissed” (*P* 345). This equation between romance and personal transformation could signal yet another limited and self-centered model of romantic relationships as the basis of utopian change. But when the dystopian city is one that makes everyone “afraid of change” (*P* 341), Tally’s turn to embrace change indicates the first steps toward utopian becoming. That Westerfeld poses this question does not necessarily create new discursive spaces for a protagonist to develop, but it places an emphasis on growth and change, rather than on settling down into the status quo.

The conviction that both David and Zane impact Tally in positive ways helps counter the notion that there is one “right” choice or soul mate, but the novel does insist that one of these boys represents utopian possibilities lacking in the other. Unlike Katniss, Tally does make a choice, electing to stay with Zane. But her agency in making this decision is undercut when Zane dies undergoing morphological surgery to make him special enough for the newly enhanced Tally. Westerfeld has written that he “cheated” in killing off Zane because he didn’t know how

else to resolve the courtship drama, saying, “I wanted a triangle that even *I* didn’t know how to square.”⁵⁷ But he could have just as easily had David die, or left Tally with the choice she made. Instead, the novel suggests Tally cannot wind up with Zane because, like Gale with regards to Katniss, he is too similar to her to offer an alternative future. Tally understands that “Zane had wanted his old reflexes back, and better, so that she wouldn’t see him as weak and average” (S 303). Although he tells her the real problem is the brain damage she undergoes as a Special, not his physical limitations, he backs off from pushing her to rewire her brain like she did when she was pretty. Joining her, not changing her, becomes the only way he can envision them together.

This approach perpetuates the same mindset of the city, meaning that if the surgery worked and Tally and Zane were reunited, Tally would have everything she wanted. Since she has already insisted that her priority is Zane, not her fight against the city, it seems reasonable to assume that she would be too happy in love to care that she and countless others have been brain damaged to uphold a system of docile, senseless beings. David, on the other hand, has always represented the alternative path to the city’s repressive and controlling regime. A product of the wild, he will never be pretty because he will never think like a pretty.⁵⁸ David is the only one who can get Tally to rethink her surroundings and recognize the problems with being special. Like Peeta, he can temper the heroine’s edges and help her find a place in the new world. Yet the conclusion of the *Uglies* series differs from *The Hunger Games* in that the resolution to the love

⁵⁷ Westerfeld, *Mind Rain*, 55, emphasis original.

⁵⁸ “David doesn’t use slang. His language is completely dialect-free, and that makes him one of the most unique characters in the *Uglies* series. In a book where everyone is talking about whether bubbly is bogus, or whether their new surge is shame-making, or how many milli-Helens a new pretty might score, someone whose language is stripped of slang tends to stand out. And that’s how we know that David was born outside the City—he’s never been an ugly, and he’ll never be pretty.” Wilkinson, “All that Glitters,” 12.

triangle opens up possibilities for a new world that imagines utopia in terms of sociopolitical transformation, rather than romance.

“Grow Your Own Brain”: Rewriting the Utopian *Bildungsroman*

The *Uglies* series challenges Tally’s and the reader’s assumptions of what narrative resolution must look like according to both the utopian and the romantic plotlines. At the end of *Specials*, Tally finally stops believing in fairy tales that assign her a role as the helpless princess waiting to be saved. Even in the moment before she is despecialized, she is still waiting for her prince to save her, thinking “Her rescuer was here” (S 351). But the savior turns out to be the former leader of the Specials, Dr. Cable, not David.⁵⁹ The disruption to the typical fairy tale ending challenges the validity of the narrative Tally has been repeating, in which she winds up with a handsome prince who saves her from herself. Westerfeld relies on this narrative to shape the plot and structure of the series, but ultimately rejects its conclusions—in much the same way that the critical utopias are intended to utilize the form and content of traditional utopias while moving beyond their typical closure.

Specials concludes with an open-ended vision of utopian possibility that *Extras* elaborates upon but does not close. Westerfeld refuses to show Tally completely “cured” or the world entirely “saved.” Instead, he maintains that transformation—both personal and political—

⁵⁹ Tally cures Dr. Cable of her evilness by tricking her into absorbing some of a despecializing serum. This reformation rejects clear-cut notions of right and wrong but also suggests a female character can enforce harmony by changing those around her. Deborah O’Keefe explains, “Girls’ stories stress empathy and sympathy and include few characters who are really bad. Some are difficult or unhappy but can be cajoled by an understanding female person; others *seem* bad but turn out to be good inside or reformable through the power of feminine goodness. Boys’ stories, on the other hand, delight in grossly wicked characters and morally ambiguous characters. Boy protagonists defeat or escape bad people who challenge them; and they figure out the truth about the ambiguous characters... a male hero does not expect people to change...he does not hope to reform the bad or improve the flawed.” O’Keefe, *Good Girl*, 43, emphasis original.

is ongoing and often mutable, uncertain, and hard to predict. Once Tally realizes she can be saved without a boy, she is able to turn her attentions outwards, to the rest of the world. As she assures David, “I’m not the one who needs saving, David... Not anymore” (S 368). Tally comes up with a plan to use her special powers to keep the new world from spreading out of control and sabotaging the planet like the Rusties did. She announces that she and David will be out in the wilderness patrolling the borders, there to stop the cities from spreading too far. With this plan, Tally asserts a place for herself in the larger society that is not predicated on gender or romance; if she helps bring about a better world, it is through her direct actions, not as a function of her gender. David is the ideal person to patrol with her because he will never belong in a city, but she makes the plan prior to meeting up with him. Rather than making David the impetus for her action, as the narrative has been shaped up until now, Westerfeld allows her new relationship with David to grow out of her political plans instead of vice versa.

This utopian vision significantly alters the gender dynamic typical of other critical utopian romances. The qualities balanced in David and Tally are not connected to their genders, despite the fact that the romance plot that served to bring them together has up until this point been invested in gender roles. We have typically seen the male character associated with technology and aggression and the female with nature, coded as nurturing, passive, and penetrable. Keeping Tally Special and reliant on her own brain to constrain her aggressive impulses means she is not the perfect utopian female whose dystopian belligerence has been programmed out of her. Meanwhile David is the one who has to support her and keep her in check. But rather than simply reversing gender associations, Westerfeld divests the characters of the gender roles they have been assigned throughout the narrative and suggests that the balancing that facilitates utopia can be understood as a merger of broader traits, rather than a process

designed to complement specific gender roles. While the conclusion upholds a typical utopian association with nature as counter to the perverting technologies of cities, this association is stripped of its gendered connotations.

Moving away from gendered expectations allows the narrative to imagine other forms of utopian possibility and, perhaps, inspire readers to do the same. Westerfeld retains a normative ideal about the utmost importance of belonging to a heterosexual other who knows you completely and loves you unconditionally, as Tally is reassured that “no matter how her plan turned out, whatever awful things the world forced her to do, David would remember who she really was” (S 368). What is different about this conception of utopian romance, however, is the extent to which it is explicitly *not* equated with domesticity and reproduction.⁶⁰ Westerfeld’s preoccupation with the environmental impact of overpopulation suggests that in these novels, having Tally settle down to reproduce would be a dystopian, rather than utopian, ending. Moreover, Tally doesn’t seek the domesticity Katniss desires because it looks too much like the world she tried to get out of. Tally explains in the first few pages of *Uglies* that the surgery draws on biological and evolutionary messages that exploit supposedly innate impulses toward caretaking: “The big eyes and lips said: I’m young and vulnerable, I can’t hurt you, and you want to protect me. And the rest said: I’m healthy, I won’t make you sick... *If we had kids, they’d be healthy too. I want this pretty person....*” (U 16-17, emphasis original). The very basis of Westerfeld’s dystopian and utopian worlds flips the associations we have seen between dystopian violence and utopian care. By imagining dystopia as a world where everyone is *too*

⁶⁰ *Extras* leaves open whether Tally and David actually wind up together; Tally says that she hasn’t kissed anyone since Zane, but the novel’s conclusion depicts a degree of intimacy we are led to interpret as romantic.

protected, where a high premium is placed on vulnerability rather than resistance, utopia becomes the opposite, a place that rewards daring, risk, and deviation from the norm.

The problem is that rejecting protection is hardly utopian, either. Tally recognizes this double bind when she realizes that without the pretty-making surgery, humans' violent, jealous, competitive urges threaten to dominate society as they did during Rusty days. She realizes, "Violence was what the cities had been built to end, and part of what the operation switched off in pretties' brains. The whole world that Tally had grown up in was a firebreak against this awful cycle" (*P* 280). Since many of the qualities that characterize humans without the surgery are hardly desirable, "Tally wondered exactly what sort of future she had helped let loose" (*S* 344). But even as she fears for the future, she also recognizes the possibility that "Dr. Cable was wrong, and there was another way" (*P* 280). Dr. Cable's reign is predicated on the false notion that there are only two choices, destruction or pretty-mindedness. Tally's quest for a third way that rejects the possibilities put forth by competing powers suggests the utopian impulse requires a degree of critical thinking necessary to imagine alternative possibilities and new futures beyond the options that have been presented thus far.

That Westerfeld explores the benefits and drawbacks of living in a free and open society speaks to the novel's positioning as a critical utopia that upholds the importance of utopian thinking while reminding readers that the impulse to create a new world does not necessarily mean such a world will be better than the old, or will not have its own host of problems to go with it.⁶¹ His utopian vision keeps alive the impulse to question authority and challenge the norms we have inherited. In Tally's words, "Everyone in the world was programmed by the

⁶¹ This is especially apparent in District 13 in *The Hunger Games* and in the city of Diego in *Uglies*, both of which have developed outside of and in opposition to dystopian regimes but are not themselves utopian spaces.

place they were born, hemmed in by their beliefs, but you had to at least *try* to grow your own brain” (P 309, emphasis original). This struggle resonates especially for adolescent protagonists, who must find their way in a world whose norms and standards have been largely overdetermined by preexisting structures. Unlike Collins, however, Westerfeld doesn’t indicate that this striving ends with the end of adolescence. *Uglies* is open-ended; in the final installment, *Extras*, Tally, David, and Shay reappear to help that novel’s protagonist, Aya, negotiate her own set of issues around love, friendship, fame, rebellion, and a plot to threaten the world.⁶² Tally is still rebelling against the status quo, keeping alive the conviction that humanity cannot become complacent about its position in the world lest human nature allow itself to destroy the planet like the Rusties did.

In emphasizing Tally’s ongoing fight for justice and environmental protection, Westerfeld’s narrative suggests that one way to read the utopian potential of YA critical utopias is to consider how they imagine the results of adolescent striving—which is to say, how they imagine adulthood in the utopian world. Does the narrative reinsert the protagonist back into the dominant social order, as in *The Hunger Games*, or does it keep alive the rebellion that motivated the adolescent’s development in the first place? Asking how YA critical utopias depict adulthood suggests an important overlap between the YA utopian genre and the conventions of the traditional *bildungsroman*. The prototype of the *bildungsroman* is considered Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Lehrjahre*, published between 1794 and 1796 and translated by Carlyle in 1824 as

⁶² *Extras* does use the same conventions of the romance plot to depict Aya’s process of growth and discovery, however. As one teen reviewer writes, “I like this book because it’s action paced, full of adventure... and, oh, she meets this guy, who wouldn’t like that?” Samantha Correa, “Just My Opinion!: On *Extras*, by Scott Westerfeld,” *Books for the Teen Age* (New York: The New York Public Library 2008), 14.

Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship.⁶³ Its “principle characteristics” include “childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, the larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love, the search for a vocation and a working philosophy.”⁶⁴ The young protagonist leaves home, undergoes a series of trials, and then finds a place in the larger society. The narrative moves “from error to truth, from confusion to clarity, from uncertainty to certainty, from, as the Germans have it, nature to spirit.”⁶⁵ By affirming that the protagonist can overcome difficulties and be rewarded with success, understanding, and security, the novels reflect an optimistic view of the individual’s capacity for growth.⁶⁶

⁶³ Susanne Howe, *Wilhelm Meister and His English Kinsmen: Apprentices to Life* (New York: AMS Press, 1966). For more on the English and Germanic history of the genre and examples, see Jerome Buckley, *Seasons of Youth*, and James N. Hardin, *Reflection and Action: Essays on the Bildungsroman* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991). On how YA literature specifically functions as *bildungsromane* see Michael M. Levy, “The Young Adult Science Fiction Novel as *Bildungsroman*” in *Young Adult Science Fiction*, ed. C.W. Sullivan (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 99-118.

⁶⁴ Buckley, *Seasons*, 17, 18. Elizabeth Abel, Marianna Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland criticize Buckley for universalizing a particularly male model of development. The authors argue that “the heroine’s developmental course is more conflicted, less direct: separation tugs against the longing for fusion and the heroine encounters the conviction that identity resides in intimate relationships, especially those of early childhood.” Abel et al., *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1983), 11; see also 7-12. But Katniss’s and Tally’s development is closer to the male *bildungsroman* than the female. They are not shown as adults struggling to redefine themselves against the limitations of their social milieu, as in texts like *The Awakening*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and *Madame Bovary*. Instead, they leave home early and are independent from their families. That being said, when Abel, Hirsch, and Langland write of the protagonist of the female *bildungsroman*, “Her objective is not to learn how to take care of herself, but to find a place where she can be protected, often in return to taking care of others,” one cannot help but think of Katniss. Abel et al., *Voyage*, 8.

⁶⁵ GB Tennyson, “The *Bildungsroman* in Nineteenth-Century Literature,” in *Medieval Epic to the “Epic Theater” of Brecht: Essays in Comparative Literature*, ed. Rosario P. Armato and John M. Spalek (Los Angeles: University of Southern California Press, 1968), 137, qtd. in Trites, *Disturbing*, 11.

⁶⁶ See Howe, *Wilhelm Meister*, 6 and Trites, *Disturbing*, 9.

But although the genre is concerned with growth, it is not enough for the protagonist to simply grow up—the hero must actively change and develop.⁶⁷ It is generally presumed that an adolescent’s growth, development, and “personal harmony” involve getting married and having children. Robert Havinghurst’s theory of “developmental tasks” for becoming an adult says teenagers must “achieve masculine or feminine social roles” and “prepare for marriage and family life” before developing a career and “a set of values and an ethical system.”⁶⁸ The representations of adulthood offered by Collins and Westerfeld in the conclusions of their series highlight the ways in which their utopian visions, and the possibilities they offer women after the fall of dystopian regimes, differ in terms of what counts as a satisfactory ending and a conception of adult life. Although both *The Hunger Games* and *Uglies* draw on conventions of the *bildungsroman* to depict the development of their adolescent protagonists, only *The Hunger Games* equates development with adulthood and adulthood with properly gendered reproductive marriage. Maintaining an open-ended vision of utopian possibility that moves beyond conventional gender roles and romantic resolutions, Westerfeld subverts the expectations of the utopian romance as well as the conventions of the *bildungsroman*.

If the point of the utopia is to question, then growing up and accepting your place in the world hardly seems a utopian ideal. Westerfeld uses the utopian premise of the novels to put forth a vision of adulthood that is not premised on reproducing the status quo. Early in *Uglies*,

⁶⁷ See Levy, “The Young Adult Science Fiction Novel,” 100; Susan Ashley Gohlman, *Starting Over: The Task of the Protagonist in the Contemporary Bildungsroman* (New York: Garland, 1990), 13; and Trites, *Disturbing*, 11.

⁶⁸ Robert Havinghurst, *Developmental Tasks and Education* (New York: D. McKay, 1988), 61, qtd. in Michael Cart, *From Romance to Realism: Fifty Years of Growth and Change in Young Adult Literature* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 28. As G. Robert Carlsen notes, many of the most successful YA titles in the late twentieth century, like *Seventeenth Summer*, revolve around the protagonists’ completion of at least some of these tasks. G. Robert Carlsen, “Teaching Literature for the Adolescent: A Historical Perspective,” *The English Journal*, 73.7 (1983): 29.

before venturing out to the Smoke, Shay expresses disappointment that she can't have wild times with her other friends because "They all get turned pretty in the end" and never want to do any more "tricks" with the younger kids who are still ugly. "Happy ending," Tally says, but Shay only shrugs in response (U 67). Tally initially reads the status quo as a happy ending—all she wants is to become pretty and party in New Pretty Town. But for Shay, this prospect holds all the dread of a teenager who thinks life ends at thirty: "Once we turn, it's new pretty, middle pretty late pretty... Then dead pretty" (U 49). Shay's decision to run away, and Tally's later efforts to thwart this progression, are rejections of the happily ever after ending Tally once envisioned.

The logic of the city associates growing up with acquiescing to the status quo. Tally tells Shay that her not wanting the surgery is a sign that she's "afraid of growing up" (U 84) and Tally's mom tries to convince Tally to break her promise to Shay and lead Dr. Cable to the Smoke by saying, "we all make promises when we're little... but you have to grow out of it" (U 116). When Shay turns pretty and forgets her previous animosity toward Tally for stealing David from her and betraying the Smoke, she says, "Crazy love and jealousy and needing to rebel against the city. Every kid's like that. But you grow up, you know?" (U 394-395). Over and over, these dystopian voices equate growing up with losing the desire to rebel. Adults, we are told, are docile members of society, while only the young and immature need to act out. The society even has a structure in place to neutralize the energies of those who are particularly rebellious, as Dr. Cable handpicks future Specials from the "extra-tricky" young, co-opting rebellion against the city into a service for the city. Rebellion becomes a way of playing into the hands of the authorities, rather than a challenge to their rule.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ See J. FitzGerald McCurdy, "A *Special Hero*" in *Mind Rain*, 83-92.

By showing that growing up can mean continuing to question oneself and one's circumstances, Tally suggests that rebellion needn't always be co-opted by adults as a way to serve the status quo. Her plan to monitor the cities' borders shows the importance of keeping rebellion alive—not as a marker of adolescent turmoil, but as central to the utopian vision. In this way, *Uglies* challenges the idea put forth in *The Hunger Games* that growing up means growing out of your rebellious teens and acquiescing to heteronormative standards for adult behavior. By rejecting the *bildungsroman*'s resolution in adulthood, *Uglies* emphasizes instead the genre's interest in change, allowing the protagonist to continue to undergo a process of growth and discovery while resisting the tendency to assume that adulthood necessarily ends such development.

YA novels frequently use rebellion as a way for teens to find their place in the world, not as a way to reject, change, or transcend the norms of society. Many texts famously describe teen rebellion, such as *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and *The Outsiders*, but few allow this insurgency to continue. As Roberta Seelinger Trites explains, “the YA novel teaches adolescents how to exist within the (capitalistically bound) institutions that necessarily define teenagers’ existence.” In many instances, “Adolescents have to fail at one form of institutionally proscribed rebellion before they find an institutionally tolerated form of rebellion that paradoxically allows them to remain within the system.” When YA novels conclude with the adolescent protagonist safely within the system, it is clear that the effective rebellion “ultimately serves to sustain the status quo at some level.”⁷⁰ In contrast, Westerfeld's utopian narrative argues that it is not enough for young adults to dismantle dystopia only to turn around and create a new form of stability and complacency all over again.

⁷⁰ Trites, *Disturbing*, 19, 34, 36.

By showing Tally continuing to challenge authority and “rewire” herself, Westerfeld subverts the models for both YA and critical utopian literature that seek closure and completion through normative and complacent conceptions of adulthood, especially for women. Mattapoissett is a utopia that maintains a constant struggle to secure its borders, while Shevek in *The Dispossessed* imagines he can keep the constant questioning of utopia alive. But it is in Westerfeld’s YA series that we finally see what an ongoing engagement with questions of freedom, self-determination, and survival might actually look like in the literary world and can start to consider how this engagement uses the feminist critical utopian form to articulate forms of social change and imagine alternative possibilities for gender roles in the future society. Although he relies on the romance plot as the narrative device to get his protagonist to question her world, Westerfeld uses Tally’s questions to move her beyond romance and into a consideration of her larger society. In the next chapter, I look at a variety of texts that go even further in providing models for narrating utopia that turn away from romance as the means and ends of utopian realization.

Chapter 5

Approximating Paradise

Throughout this dissertation, I have discussed ways in which contemporary feminist critical utopias speculate about what feminist social change might look like and how it might be achieved. I have argued that despite offering significant innovations to the field of utopian literature, the representations of social change imagined in these texts have been less extensive and decidedly less radical and feminist than many scholars believe. This, I suggest, is due in no small part to the genre's continued investment in the romance plot as a structuring principle of utopian narrative. The romance plot reproduces stock female characters that play functional roles in motivating the turn toward utopia. Predicated on gender stereotypes about supportive and self-sacrificing mothers, lovers, and wives who both embody and enable utopian ideals, the romance plot ensures that highly normative gender arrangements will form the basis of the better world. Looking for examples of positive, progressive social change, especially for women, I have instead found innumerable representations of conservative heterosexual, reproductive, monogamous, and insular relations, indicative of the ways many of the worlds created in these texts reflect and reinforce the ideals of the present day, rather than transform them.

Many of the novels I have considered throughout this project do take tentative steps toward exploring new and radical feminist utopian ideas that stand to offer productive change. The brooders in *Woman on the Edge of Time* revolutionize childbearing and alter women's positions in society. Le Guin's moon Anarres has greater personal and sexual freedom than anywhere on Earth. Katniss's success toppling a repressive regime shows girls can impact the world. Atwood's satire of male violence argues for more egalitarian and humane ways of being.

But a few positive aspects, while significant, do not independently radicalize an entire text. In each case, the novel hardly builds on its moments of potential. Instead, it positions the technological feat, the alternative world, the defiant heroine, the scathing critique, within a larger narrative structure designed to tame these rebellious elements back into the fold. The novels may offer some new arrangements, but they do not interrogate or problematize the larger phallogocentric norms governing the work, nor its ultimate resolution in the status quo.

The question remains, what are more positive examples of the feminist critical utopian genre? Surely there must be cases that transcend heteronormative romance and stereotypical gender roles beyond the efforts shown in Westerfeld's series. And yet, as I recounted in the first few pages of this project, I have struggled to find these examples. The canon of contemporary feminist critical utopias consists mainly of the novels I have addressed here; many scholars, when asked for feminist critical utopias that move beyond the romance plot, cite the very texts I have critiqued, with *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Dispossessed* as recurring favorites.¹ Not only have I come up short in locating texts that reject the romance plot as organizing principle, but I have faced further limitations in finding those examples that move women out of their functional roles in bringing about the utopian world and that use the utopian form to imagine greater social change for women. This may reflect the inadequacy of my reading list, but

¹ On December 12, 2011, I sent an email to the H-NET discussion network for utopian studies asking for suggestions about "feminist utopian novels that are not organized around the fulfillment of the conventional romance plot," in particular "those utopias that resist the urge to put female characters into set roles (as mothers, wives, etc)." I received responses suggesting Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915), which culminates in not one but three marriages, as well as *The Dispossessed*, *The Wanderground*, and *The Marriages Between Zone Three, Four, and Five*—all of which I have discussed in these pages. Others, such as Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Ruins of Isis* (1978), have already been criticized for their feminist politics by Sarah Lefanu in *Feminism and Science Fiction*.

I have begun to think the fault is not solely mine. It seems the text I am seeking has yet to be written.

What is the utopian world I would like to encounter? The feminist critical utopian novel as I imagine it would combine Tom Moylan's account of the critical utopia with Elizabeth Grosz's conception of the feminist text to produce a creative, radical, and open narrative that imagines processes and outcomes of social transformation based on innovative and less restrictive possibilities for characters, plotlines, and literary worlds. It would offer women other images and ideas about what constitutes a full and satisfied life beyond the typical heterosexual model of marriage, motherhood, and a caretaking role in the nuclear home. For Moylan, "the shared quality in [critical utopias] is a rejection of hierarchy and domination and the celebration of emancipatory ways of being as well as the very possibility of utopian longing itself."² For Grosz, the feminist text problematizes the masculinist assumptions governing its production, reception, interpretation, and evaluation, while working, "in what ever way, to facilitate the production of new and perhaps unknown, unthought discursive spaces—new styles, modes of analysis and argument, new genres and forms."³ The ideal feminist critical utopian text would cast off repressive norms and embrace liberatory ways of being that challenge traditional, masculinist forms of domination. It would pursue entirely other ways of thinking and writing, imagining substantive social, political, and personal transformations that shatter the sex/gender system in previously inconceivable ways, thereby working to compel the reader to rethink previous assumptions and explore alternative ideals.

In practice, this discursive and narratological shift will necessitate a firm rejection of the romance plot as both cause and outcome of social change, and a concurrent refusal of the

² Moylan, *Demand*, 12.

³ Grosz, *Space*, 23.

embedded assumption that female characters play the stereotypical, functional roles as mothers, lovers, and wives that enable the romantic plotline to proceed. It will demand new, unconventional plot structures and opportunities for female characters to showcase positive examples of feminist utopian change, depicting other societies whose internal norms and expectations differ from our own. The critical feminist utopia as I imagine it would therefore not only depart from the conventional romance plot as the means of organizing the plotline and motivating the turn toward utopia. It would further transcend the romance plot's basis in normative gender roles and its resolution in the insular bonds characteristic of the reader's status quo. The text would interrogate its own axioms and the utopian vision put forth, in order to produce a more open conception of utopian possibilities that endeavor to transcend restrictive and functional gender roles.

I have found two texts that contain some, though not all, of the elements I cite, and one that more fully addresses my criteria for a feminist critical utopia text. From the initial heyday of feminist critical utopian writing, Robert C. O'Brien's postapocalyptic YA novel *Z for Zachariah* (1974) and Samuel R. Delany's *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia* (1976) present markedly divergent ways of critiquing the fantasies that underpin the romance plot. Emphasizing the shortcomings of romance in producing meaningful personal and social change, these novels highlight the limitations of the romance plot and issue a challenge to the notion that traditional gender roles are necessary in or effective toward producing a better world. While they do not necessarily depart from the romance plot altogether, they offer an important starting point for considering other ways of structuring plot, character development, and visions of social change. Illuminating these elements will suggest ways in which the genre can draw on key developments to move towards those unthought discursive spaces central to the feminist utopian text. But it is

in a text from over twenty years later, Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1998), that I ultimately find the fullest and most promising expression of the feminist critical utopian ideals I have been espousing. As flawed as any credible critical utopian world should be, *Paradise* nonetheless captures much of the openness, creativity, and critique necessary to move the feminist critical utopia toward a more radical conception of social change. It is to a fuller reading of the feminist utopian vision in *Paradise* that this chapter will ultimately turn.

I find it significant that the novels I address here are from the 1970s and 1990s, not the 2000s. In *Life Between Two Deaths, 1989-2001: U.S. Culture in the Long Nineties*, Philip Wegner argues that the time between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the attacks of September 11, 2001 saw an efflorescence of utopian imaginings in American literature and culture. For Wegner, the decade of the 1990s “moves from texts that respond to the end of the Cold War through a variety of attempts to imagine a new destiny for the United States... and in their own way try to think the utopian possibilities opened up by this situation.”⁴ Perhaps, then, the conservative turn in American politics and culture after 9/11 helps explain the relative absence of more radical feminist critical utopian literature in the last decade, with *Uglies* as a notable, although still limited, exception. Another critical utopia from the 1990s, Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* (1999), is, like *Paradise*, expressly concerned with racial allegories and critical of those utopian dreams that produce not radical possibilities but a stultifying status quo. I do not include *The Intuitionist* in this study, however, because I read its utopian vision as overtly nihilistic—the associations between a better world and death in the novel's concluding vision of the new utopian city does not offer much hope for doing the work of positing ways of being that

⁴ Philip Wegner, *Life between Two Deaths, 1989-2001: U.S. Culture in the Long Nineties* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), especially 8. See also 28-37. On how the attacks of September 11 “cripple[d] a nascent left opposition in the West,” see Fredric Jameson, “The Dialectics of Disaster,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101.2 (2002): 303.

challenge the reader's status quo and offer alternatives to heteronormative ideals. One might also be drawn to Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998) for their depictions of a female leader of a peaceful utopian movement that unfolds amidst a horrific war, but the novels' emphasis on the nuclear family as a primary source of meaning and fulfillment suggests any account of the radicalized 1990s shouldn't be taken too far. Nevertheless, it does seem significant that texts from the late 1990s like *Paradise* and *The Intuitionist* offer a more questioning and unsettled look at utopian longings than many texts that came before and after these years.

O'Brien and Delany: Questioning Romantic Ideals

One way to challenge courtship as an organizing principle for utopian narrative is, of course, to eliminate it altogether. Robert C. O'Brien's *Z for Zachariah* is a prime example of a feminist critical utopia that moves beyond a narrative structure that equates romantic resolution with utopian possibility. Read by many but little discussed by utopian scholars, this Cold War, postapocalyptic dystopia presents the diary of sixteen-year-old Ann Burden, the sole survivor of a nuclear holocaust. Ann lives sheltered from the elements in a valley where her family once ran a farm. When a mysterious man in a biohazard suit appears over the horizon and then falls ill, Ann takes him in and nurses him back to health, all the while entertaining fantasies of the future they will build together. Harboring the dream that someday "there might be children in the valley," Ann quickly capitulates to the expectations of female caretakers, wondering whether she should put on a dress to meet this "handsome" stranger and then sacrificing herself to work the farm, cook, clean, and help Mr. Loomis survive.⁵

⁵ Robert C. O'Brien, *Z for Zachariah* (New York: Aladdin-Simon and Schuster, 1987), 36, 37.

But as the novel progresses, Ann starts to wonder whether this romantic fantasy and its gendered division of labor is all she once hoped it would be. When Mr. Loomis turns out to be more frightening than she anticipated, she comes to “realize that my hopes were too simple. All men are different.”⁶ Having killed a man named Edward to get the biohazard suit, Mr. Loomis reveals his true colors when he starts repeatedly “scolding” Ann and making remarks about how “the important thing is not to let the species die out.”⁷ He is talking about the cows that will need to be bred if the farm is to survive, but the parallel to their own situation is clear. This explicit association between animal husbandry and marriage leads Ann to question the idealized vision of the future she once had. Ultimately, she comes to reject the overtly functional role she is expected to play in reproducing the next generation. When Mr. Loomis grabs her and tries to pin her down, she realizes, “He was trying to control me, just as he had, in his way, controlled the planting, the use of the gasoline, the tractor, and even my going to church. And, of course, the suit, and, in the end, Edward.” She desperately fights him off and retreats from the house he has now taken over. Although he shoots her in the leg to force her submission, Ann escapes and hides in the woods while he tries to lure her back with the demand that she “act more like an adult and less like a schoolgirl.”⁸ The house as metonym for domesticity and the regenerative nuclear family has become a source of danger, shifting the symbols of adulthood and survival away from the heteronormative ideal.

Ann puts a wrench in the narrative expectations of the utopian romance and the promise of rebuilding after apocalyptic destruction when she decides she will have no part in a future based on the masculine appropriation of her body. Although the valley and Mr. Loomis once

⁶ Ibid., 36.

⁷ Ibid., 141, 155.

⁸ Ibid., 162, 190.

embodied “all that I had hoped for,” she knows she must walk away from the only life she has known.⁹ Dreaming of others who might also have survived the radiation poisoning, Ann steals the biohazard suit and strikes off on her own, seeking her future in the unknown. Her departure is in part a critique of the romance she once expected to play out with her interloper, as she declares, “I don’t want to live with you hunting me as if I were an animal, and I will never agree to be your prisoner.” It is also an embrace of unrealized possibilities, of strangers, and of the outside world, citing a utopian conviction that “there is another place where I can live. And I am needed there.”¹⁰ The utopian turn she expresses hinges on a rejection of the functional view of women’s bodies pressed into service for the better world and of the related equation between the utopian future and the nuclear home. The novel thus rewrites the romantic formula, untethering utopian possibilities from female bodies and gender roles.

Why this text in particular subverts narrative expectations and stands out as such an anomaly is uncertain; suffice it to say I have come across no other example quite like it. Yet it is wrong to suggest that such a fairly simplistic parable is the paragon of the feminist critical utopian genre. It wouldn’t be very interesting to read an entire canon built around girls who dream of handsome saviors, are disabused of their ideals, and then strike out on their own. Ann’s goal in the outside world is to teach young children, a noble aspiration but one that binds her to traditional female labor based on nurturance and care. Nor is there much political backdrop given—we have no idea why the war started or who dropped the bombs. The utopian possibilities of the novel are not elaborated upon in any great detail, so one wonders whether Ann would be able to maintain her integrity as clearly if there were, say, a sequel introducing her to a band of survivors somewhere. The conventions of the utopian romance suggest she would

⁹ Ibid., 236.

¹⁰ Ibid., 247, 228.

meet her true soul mate there, having saved her virginity for a man younger, kinder, and better suited for procreation. It might not be useful to speculate about books that haven't been written, but the fact that the romance plot could so seamlessly extend from the end of *Z for Zachariah* to provide a more settled conclusion to Ann's world suggests there are limits to this particular text as an example of a feminist critical utopia that imagines something radically different.

Thus although *Z for Zachariah* disrupts the romance plot, it does not destabilize underlying assumptions that govern conventional narration. To affirm that a woman can say "no" and pursue another life is incredibly important, and it is not my intention to downplay this significance. Yet the novel still maintains the romance plot as a central organizing principle. Ann's rejection of unsuitable romance demands that the ideals of romance be present and recognizable; the shattering of her particular romantic ideal is not an unraveling of romantic ideals more generally. Ann seeks something new and unknown, but the novel has not convinced me that her rebellion will construct other ways of being beyond the romance plot, which therefore limits the work it can do to construct an alternative discourse. Romance may remain a central part of the narrative organization and the protagonist's ideals, waiting in the next page, the next chapter, the next novel, to reassert itself and assure both Ann and the reader that she will find a man and make a domestic utopia both with and for him.

What this suggests is that a fuller transition away from romance and from functional gender roles requires a deeper interrogation of the structures of the romance plot along with the shift toward other narrative resolutions. In this way, Samuel R. Delany's *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia* provides a useful counterpoint to *Z for Zachariah*. Written in response to Le Guin's *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*, *Triton* expressly subverts expectations for both sex and gender to explore how questions of identity and interpersonal relationships shape

the progressive and revolutionary potential of utopian worlds to denaturalize a reader's assumptions and inspire visions of change. The moon Triton has no taxes, provides employment through hegemonies rather than corporations, and covers basic needs for everyone, including clothing, food, shelter, education, and health care. More than these structural concerns, however, the novel focuses on Triton's extreme openness: anyone can change physical and/or psychological genders (the society has "forty or fifty basic sexes, falling loosely into nine categories"), sexual preference, race, or body type, and there are no sexual taboos other than lack of consent.¹¹ Citizens have their choice of a variety of cooperative houses that cater to assorted social, sexual, political, and personal desires. While anyone can give birth, only about twenty percent of the society chooses to, typically in five-parent household cooperatives, meaning reproductive technology has not made the family unit the center of society nor eclipsed it altogether.

But despite the progressive potential of this world, the novel's protagonist completely misunderstands Triton's mores, maintaining a domineering, masculinist attitude and binaristic outlook drastically at odds with those around him. Previously a male prostitute on the far more rigid and capitalist planet Mars, Bron is "the un-political anti-hero, who rather than helping to achieve or preserve the alternative of Triton resists it and remains a damaged self, a male supremacist and solipsist, unable to get beyond his early socialization on Mars."¹² The novel maintains a critical distance from this highly unlikable narrator, ensuring the reader will critique Bron's sexist ideals in a way that is not encouraged with Bron's counterpoint Shevek. Thus when Bron asks his love interest The Spike to "Join your life to mine. Become one with me. *Be* mine.

¹¹ Samuel R. Delany, *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 99.

¹² Moylan, *Demand*, 163.

Let me possess you wholly... I love you... Isn't that enough?" we are meant to condemn his efforts to dominate her and belittle her independent ambitions.¹³ When The Spike refuses, Bron makes up elaborate tales about her desperation to give up everything for him, calling her "shallow, and presumptuous, and worthless, and conceited... crazy *and* vicious... obviously deranged and sick."¹⁴ Such hyperbolic, self-delusional rants hardly earn him any sympathy from his peers, showing just how tragically out of touch Brown is with this fluid and open society.

This is a character unable to enjoy the fruits of utopia precisely because he continues to view others in terms of the roles he assigns them. For example, he maintains that his trouble with The Spike is that women "don't understand about *men*... ordinary, heterosexual men. They can't. It's just a logical impossibility."¹⁵ Holding fast to antiquated viewpoints and categories, Bron then impulsively decides to alter his physical and psychological gender and sexual preference in order to become the very passive, self-denying, masochistic woman he seeks. Now she is on the prowl to worship rather than woo, but she cannot find a dominant male to subordinate her as she thinks "real" men should. Bron's changes alter little about her as a person, suggesting new arrangements do not necessarily produce new ways of being. The surgeries do not force her to confront her misconceptions or realize the values of Triton's society. Rather, she continues her solipsistic retreat as she searches for the ideal heterosexual romance. Adhering to gender stereotypes and a patriarchal fantasy of heterosexual romantic fulfillment inhibits Bron's actualization of utopia, suggesting conventional roles may not constitute the utopian vision but instead impede it.

¹³ Delany, *Triton*, 176, emphasis original.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 194, emphasis original.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 212, emphasis original.

Yet while the novel critiques Bron's investment in finding romance, it never really offers an alternative. *Triton* shows the problems with the romance plot but still puts stock in its fulfillment, albeit in varied ways. The supporting characters, who are much more well-rounded than the protagonist, all find ways to move forward in life with loved ones by their side: Philip and Sam have happy families; Audri seeks a new female partner after a raise allows her family to expand into plusher housing; The Spike has started seeing someone new; even Bron's septuagenarian friend Lawrence finally leaves his static life on Triton to find new meaning as a musician touring on other satellites with an exciting new boyfriend. Like *Z for Zachariah*, *Triton* turns away from destructive romance while upholding the hope that better romances will make possible individual happiness and the social world promised by the utopian turn. Although both texts initiate a move away from the romance plot and the equation between utopian actualization and functional women's roles, they remain rooted to the romance plot to the extent that even its negation governs the text's organizing principles and its outlook of utopia. It is in the interest of finding a feminist critical utopia that moves beyond romance altogether to imagine other bases for social and political life and personal fulfillment that I now turn to *Paradise* to show how these examples can be developed more fully in a feminist critical utopian world.

Paradise: Feminist, Critical, Utopian

Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1998) is a prime example of a feminist critical utopian novel that subverts the romance plot as well as the expectation that female characters fulfill functional roles to enable the better society.¹⁶ It differs radically from the texts I have discussed thus far in

¹⁶ *Paradise* is the third installment in a trilogy preceded by *Beloved* (1988) and *Jazz* (1992). I will only be addressing *Paradise*, however, because the texts, although interrelated, do not rely on each other to change or clarify interpretation to the same extent as the other series and

that it places utopian potential in the transcendence of normative gender roles, rather than in their realization, and works to imagine how such transcendence might have broader benefits to individuals, both male and female, as well as society at large. The novel considers inter- and intra-communal race and gender relations as they shape the utopian aspects of two markedly different worlds: the planned, all-black town of Ruby, Oklahoma, and a house of women seventeen miles away, known as the Convent for its previous incarnation as a Catholic school for girls. The novel opens with a bloody massacre as the men of Ruby ambush the Convent, and then circles back to explicate how and why this battleground came to be. But although *Paradise* presents two contrasting utopias, it avoids any easy classifications. Richard L. Schur explains that “rather than offer a simple good town/bad town antithesis, Morrison draws a complex set of relations of desire between the two, with each pole of the binary harboring a range of people, all conflicted in different ways.”¹⁷ From the outset, Morrison embraces both a postmodern and poststructuralist rejection of master narratives and binarisms to eschew divisions between dystopia/utopia and good women/bad women that characterize many of the other novels I have addressed. The following pages will detail how the utopian community of Ruby is undone by its prevailing fantasy of heterofeminine ideals and then consider the ways in which the Convent offers an alternative way of being that best approximates the new and unthought discourses that feminist critical utopias stand to imagine.

trilogies I have considered. As Jill Matus notes, “If *Beloved*, *Jazz* and *Paradise* form a trilogy, as Morrison once envisioned, it is a very loose one.” Jill Matus, *Toni Morrison* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1998), 155. For more on the trilogy, see Justine Tally, “The Morrison Trilogy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*, ed. Justine Tally (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 75-91, and Justine Tally, *Paradise Reconsidered: Toni Morrison’s (Hi)stories and Truths* (Hamburg: Lit Verlag, 1999), 13-14.

¹⁷ Richard L. Schur, “Locating *Paradise* in the Post-Civil Rights Era: Toni Morrison and Critical Race Theory,” *Contemporary Literature* 45.2 (2004): 282.

Ruby originated as a utopian community intended to replicate a previous town called Haven, founded by the “Old Fathers” who first went west after the Civil War.¹⁸ It is now ruled by a rigid and uncompromising “hierarchy of patriarchs”¹⁹ led by the twins Deacon and Steward Morgan, sons and “rightful heirs” (113) of the original founders and men “whose very names identify them with holy office.”²⁰ On a mission to keep the town pure, holy, and closed to the toxic world outside, the twins’ authority over the mores of the town (and, not incidentally, over interest rates at the local bank they run) demands absolute fidelity to the “remembered and idealized”²¹ Haven. But this desire to fix and reproduce the past turns innovation, adaptation, and change into enemies to be beaten back at all costs. To maintain their insular ideals, “the fathers of Ruby must control interpretation, ‘revise’ the historical record, and reject their children’s questions and challenges as heresy.”²² Believing that “everything required their protection” (12), these men effectively “rule the town, enforcing its strict codes, rebuking and punishing transgressors, [and] silencing all those (women and youths) who lack their authority.”²³ The twins, who “agreed on almost everything” and “were in eternal if silent conversation” (155), thus “epitomize unified authority”²⁴ and the dangers of rigidity and resistance to change.

¹⁸ Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (New York: Plume-Penguin, 1999), 6. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text. As Ellen G. Friedman explains, Ruby is modeled after all-black towns that developed in the U.S. during Reconstruction. Ellen G. Friedman, “Postpatriarchal Endings In Recent U.S. Fiction,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 48.3 (2002): 703. On *Paradise* as a retelling of the Exodus narrative, see John McClure, *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 108-111. On the novel as a rewriting of the Western, see Tally, “The Morrison Trilogy,” 77.

¹⁹ McClure, *Partial Faiths*, 112.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Linda J. Krumholz, “Reading and Insight in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*,” *African American Review* 36.1 (2002): 23.

²² Ibid.

²³ McClure, *Partial Faiths*, 112.

²⁴ Krumholz, “Reading and Insight,” 21.

But unlike the violent, male-dominated societies in other texts I have considered throughout this dissertation, Ruby is less a dystopia than a failed utopia, a world that evokes horror but also compassion. In turning Ruby into perhaps the most central character in the novel, much as she does 124 Bluestone Road in *Beloved*, Morrison arouses the reader's pathos for this struggling town. Readers may find themselves feeling for the men who have been shunned and understanding their desire to carve out a safe space in the world, however misguided their efforts become. As Patricia Storage explains, Ruby is, "in many ways, an honorable vision of a world of peace and safety, of considerable beauty, and Morrison does not covertly guide us to hold it in contempt... That the vision of the founding fathers becomes oppressive and fanatical does not obliterate the dreams of grace, freedom, and safety that informed it."²⁵ At the heart of Ruby is an ideal that is perhaps worth saving, "a safe haven where the people are physically protected and live away from the temptations and moral failings of the larger American society."²⁶

Much has been written about how Ruby's descent into a "cruel and cold town" stems from its spectacular blindness to the changes bearing down around it.²⁷ Despite its isolation, the town has been infected by the seething social and political turmoil of the 1960s: the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War give a national and global context to the agitated young men of Ruby who rise up against their unyielding and increasingly out of touch forefathers.²⁸ While the youth of Ruby embrace the symbols of black power, for example, Steward voices "outspoken

²⁵ Patricia Storage, "The Scripture of Utopia," *New York Review of Books*, June 11, 1998. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1998/jun/11/the-scripture-of-utopia/?pagination=false>.

²⁶ J. Brooks Bouson, *Quiet as its Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 193.

²⁷ Timothy Richard Aubry, "Beware the Furrow of the Middlebrow: Searching for Paradise on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 52.2 (2006): 358.

²⁸ For more on the historical and political contexts of the novel, see Holly Flint, "Toni Morrison's *Paradise*: Black Cultural Citizenship in the American Empire," *American Literature* 78.3 (2006): 585-612 and Schur, "Locating *Paradise*," especially 281-289.

contempt for the schoolchildren sitting in in that drugstore in Oklahoma City” and disparages Thurgood Marshall as “a ‘stir-up Negro’” (82). But although “the town’s cohesion is threatened by the changing politics of the younger generation,”²⁹ it is also, and perhaps more deeply, threatened by nonconforming women who induce a significant, though partial, unraveling of patriarchal mores. As one Ruby woman Pat Best intuits about the male leaders of Ruby, “everything that worries them must come from women” (217). The rebellious youth are, in a sense, symptomatic of a larger problem wrought by wayward women.

This preoccupation with women is due to the fanatical obsession with bloodline shared by the founding fathers of Haven and then of Ruby. The myth of Haven’s founding is kept alive by the painful memory of The Disallowing, “a story that explained why neither the founders of Haven nor their descendants could tolerate anybody but themselves” (13). “Turned away by rich Choctaw and poor whites, chased by yard dogs, jeered at by camp prostitutes and their children,” the one hundred and fifty eight freedmen are most surprised and devastated by the doors slammed in their faces by other black male homesteaders (13). The founding families incur this hostility because they are all “8-rock,” named for a deep, dark layer of coal. Yet they turn their rejection into a source of pride, determined to associate only with those unadulterated by the “dung” of lighter skin (201). Any who once dared to interbreed have been shunned for generations, excised from the mythology of the town’s founding and denied a place among the 8-rock elite.

To maintain the purity of the town and the power of the patriarchs requires extensive control over breeding to prevent miscegenation.³⁰ As a result, “in Ruby, where skin color

²⁹ Storace, “Scripture.”

³⁰ As Candice M. Jenkins explains, “The history of miscegenation in the United States has been largely a history of illegitimacy,” explaining why the 8-rock men associate “‘polluted’

determines how people are chosen and ranked, women hold the key to the racial purity of the 8-rocks” and the survival of this asylum for their families.³¹ The myth of the town’s founding dramatizes this phenomenon: Pat surmises that the deal Haven’s founder Zechariah struck with God was that the nascent community would remain “not only racially untampered with but free of adultery too” (217) in exchange for their survival (and, it turns out, immortality—no one dies within Ruby). The deal Zechariah makes literalizes the functional role I have suggested women play in the founding of utopias: the townspeople fear they will die and the town will perish if the women do not maintain the purity of bloodlines. At the heart of the power vested in leaders like Deacon and Steward is the authority they wield over women’s reproductive bodies. The role men play in propagation is conveniently unmentioned.

Pressed into service for the town, the women in effect become the town, a microcosm of the traditional characterization of the homeland as female and a sign that the struggle for utopia is, for the men of Ruby, a struggle to maintain the sexual arrangement that best serves the 8-rock line. Named for Deacon and Steward’s sister who died without a doctor or even a veterinarian willing to care for a black patient, the town of Ruby “captures the men’s ideal of women that underlies their dream of paradise.”³² The name itself recalls “the biblical feminine ideal of Proverbs 35, the good woman ‘whose price is above rubies,’ who work tirelessly and selflessly on behalf of her household.”³³ Describing “woman as both enshrined jewel and dangerous

blackness” with “sexual degeneracy.” Candice M. Jenkins, *Private Lives, Public Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 132, 133.

³¹ Bouson, *Quiet*, 204. See also Friedman, *Postpatriarchal Endings*, 703.

³² Krumholz, “Reading and Insight,” 24.

³³ Storace, “Scripture.” “Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies. The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil. She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life.” Proverbs 35.10 through 35.12. Storace argues that the townswomen’s names, “like the Ruby schoolgirls ‘Hope, Chaste, Lovely, and Pure,’ ... [are]

sexuality,”³⁴ the name also imagines woman as static and dead, memorialized through the men’s nostalgia for a fragile ideal. In this way, Patricia Storace explains, “the town Ruby, named after a woman, is a kind of woman itself, a kind of ideal woman constructed by men for themselves and their companion women.”³⁵ Ruby becomes a threatened female ideal faithfully guarded by her patriarchs, which helps clarify why the men go after the Convent to defend their values, their women, and their town.

For if “pure blood lines” require “sexual discipline for the town’s women,”³⁶ then Ruby is in trouble. The list of “young people in trouble or acting up” (83) is long:

A mother was knocked down the stairs by her cold-eyed daughter. Four damaged infants were born in one family. Daughters refused to get out of bed. Brides disappeared on their honeymoons. Two brothers shot each other on New Year’s Day. Trips to Demby for VD shots common (11).

Sexual and familial structures are allegedly unraveling, turning the world of Ruby upside down. And with the sons of Deacon and his wife Soane both killed in Vietnam, the current heir of the Morgan line, K.D., “their hope and despair,” hardly bodes well for the next generation (55).

“Servile to his uncles; brutal with females,” K.D. is more interested in “chasing tail” than leading the town (62, 105). Deacon’s musings on the family tree capture the extent of the crisis: “Soane

verbal equivalents of the carved reliefs of women on cathedral and courthouse walls, illustrations of allegorized virtues treasured and codified by men.”

³⁴ Krumholz, “Reading and Insight,” 24.

³⁵ Storace, “Scripture.” This Galatea is echoed in the vision of nineteen Negro ladies in summer dresses that Deacon and Steward watch posing for a photograph when they are younger. Deacon and Steward want to be the propertied men who provide for prized women like this: “the nineteen Negro ladies bear the markers of wealth that cement their status as members of a social aristocracy (hence they are described as ladies, not women), and that clearly mark them as the property of wealthy men... These nineteen Negro ladies are clearly legitimate members of a patriarchal order; they are the wives, mothers, and daughters of men who provide for them a life of relative leisure.” Jenkins, *Private Lives*, 140.

³⁶ Friedman, *Postpatriarchal Endings*, 703.

was burdened with the loss of two sons; he was burdened with the loss of all sons. Since his twin had no children the Morgans had arrived at the end of the line... But since part of the charge had been to multiply, it was a heavy hurt to know that K.D. was the only means by which they could” (113). With the patriarchs afraid they have reached the end of their reign, it is no wonder they are anxious about their rule.

Understanding the town’s intergenerational struggles in light of the decline of patriarchal lineage gives new insight into the central symbol of the town: the large, outdoor communal oven the forefathers built in Haven and brought to Ruby. Discord erupts when the younger generation rebels against authority by questioning the meaning of a damaged and enigmatic inscription on the oven, the pride of the founders and “one of the most potent symbols of patriarchal control in this novel.”³⁷ Linda Krumholz maintains that the oven symbolizes “both male and female, womb and phallus,” a site for women to nourish the town as well as a monument to masculine achievement.³⁸ But this reading mistakes monumentality as overtly male; Patricia Storace, in contrast, explains: “the oven seems a symbol of an ideally functioning woman crafted by the townsmen. The lives of their wives, too, both nourish them and monumentalize the refuge they have created within the nation.”³⁹ The central role women play in maintaining the town as refuge suggests the monument is a symbol of the female ideal. When the women recall “how the men loved putting [the oven] back together; how proud it had made them, how devoted” (103), it sounds like they are describing the proud, devoted men of Haven once they finally established a

³⁷ Delores A. Keller, “Toni Morrison’s Sermon on Manhood: God in the Hands of Nine Angry Sinners,” *Midwest Quarterly* 51.1 (2009): 50.

³⁸ Krumholz, “Reading and Insight,” 25.

³⁹ Storace, “Scripture.”

home for their women.⁴⁰ Through this language, the aggressive and impassioned dispute over the meaning of the oven becomes equally about female bodies, their significations, and the discourses of femininity and sexuality circulating through Ruby.

By thus locating the town's potential and the causes for its discontent in women's bodies and behaviors, the people of Ruby echo the binaristic logic of utopia and dystopia found in texts like *The Year of the Flood* and *The Hunger Games*. As in these novels, the patriarchs maintain that if the problem with society stems from a disruption of normative heterofeminine behaviors and roles, the solution must be to create the conditions that will bring women back into the fold and stabilize the normative family sphere as the site of utopian possibility. Yet Morrison draws on these gender dynamics typical of other feminist critical utopias not to mimic this pattern but to disrupt it. The novel is overtly critical of the men of Ruby and their decision to gun down the women of the Convent, suggesting instead that the society can improve only if the men release their regulatory grasp. To understand this utopian vision, it is therefore necessary to turn to the Convent and the ways in which its inhabitants reject the strictures put forth by the townspeople of Ruby. *Paradise* offers no set account of what paradise must look like, but it does suggest that a better world is possible when women are freed from the restrictive roles proscribed by both patriarchal society and the narrative conventions that keep such standards in place.

Outlaws on the Edge of Town: New Roles for Utopian Women

While Ruby predicates its utopian potential on rigid expectations for appropriate female sexuality and behavior, the Convent offers a space in which women can escape these incessant

⁴⁰ In Steward's account of the founding of Haven, "It was the shame of seeing one's pregnant wife or sister or daughter refused shelter that had rocked them, had changed them for all time" (95).

demands by stepping outside the patriarchal rule of the town.⁴¹ These “outlaw women” (169) are quite clearly “perceived as dangerously different from the ideal of Christian womanhood as constructed by Ruby’s male patriarchs.”⁴² Reveling in the “blessed malelessness” (177) of the Convent, the women are proof that women can survive without men to care for them. It is precisely this position outside male law that turns the Convent into a target for the town. Although the Convent peacefully coexisted with Ruby for years, it is ultimately when the women coalesce around their outlaw status and “crown themselves queens of their own ungoverned space...that the normative systems of patriarchy erupt in a violent rupture of gunfire.”⁴³ Unable to allow the women to rule themselves, the men of Ruby exemplify “patriarchal wrath against free women, women untethered to men or to patriarchal culture.”⁴⁴

While the women can be broadly understood as “unfit subjects for Ruby’s utopian design,”⁴⁵ it is important to note that they are unsuitable for Ruby’s version of paradise precisely because they stray from Ruby’s ideology of racial purity predicated on the inviolable nuclear family. The Convent’s unappointed leader is a woman known as Connie who then changes her name to Consolata, the consoler. She is an orphan from Brazil taken in by the Catholic nuns who

⁴¹ Women of Ruby also visit the Convent for this reprieve, though some wind up resisting the freedom they once sought. For example, Sweetie walks purposefully from Ruby to the Convent to escape the demands of her sickly children—the first time she has left the house in six years—but then cries to her husband, “They made me, snatched me” (130), blaming the women for her own desire to walk away from the incessant care she is expected to provide. K.D.’s girlfriend Arnette violently aborts her own baby but then runs to the Convent on her wedding night four years later screaming for her lost child, “transfer[ring] onto them her own disavowed guilt and shame.” Some women in Ruby are thus complicit in maintaining the town’s norms and targeting the Convent for its deviance. Bouson, *Quiet*, 203.

⁴² Keller, “Sermon on Manhood,” 47.

⁴³ Shreerexha Subramanian, “Specters of Public Massacre: Violence and the Collective in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*,” in *New Essays on the African American Novel: From Hurston and Ellison to Morrison and Whitehead*, ed. Lovalerie King and Linda F. Selzer (Palgrave Macmillan: 2008), 155.

⁴⁴ Friedman, *Postpatriarchal Endings*, 704.

⁴⁵ Keller, “Sermon on Manhood,” 51.

once ran a school at the Convent. Without discernible roots of her own, the green-eyed Consolata with “tea-colored hair” creates a family based on feeling rather than blood, calling the white nun Mary Magda “my mother” (223, 48).⁴⁶ In “rejecting blood ties as inherent to mothering, to family,” Consolata rewrites a narrative of kinship and origin that places care at the center of family ties.⁴⁷ The relationships among the Convent women build on this space of “negotiation and hybridity,”⁴⁸ in stark contrast to the construction of 8-rock purity found in Ruby. As a result, Sean Grattan explains, “Perhaps the most terrifying trait of the Convent for Ruby is the disavowal of lines of kinship delineated by patriarchal relationships in favor of a different form of familial organization—a non-genealogical family that is unintelligible to the men of Ruby.”⁴⁹

In constructing a house of women who set up a life together counter to mainstream, male-dominated society, Morrison clearly draws on the long tradition of separatist feminist utopias discussed in Chapter 3. In particular, *Paradise* seems in direct conversation with *A Description of Millenium Hall and the Country Adjacent* (1762), a British utopian novel by reformer Sarah Scott about a house of women in the countryside who join together to escape male dominance and start a life based on hard work, duty, moral education, and self-improvement. Each chapter

⁴⁶ “Consolata’s character simultaneously represents the concepts of African diaspora and of a specifically ‘black’ multiraciality in the text.” Jenkins, *Private Lives*, 147. This helps explain why Consolata is such a threat to Ruby. When Deacon and Consolata have a passionate affair, Steward is enraged by “the memory of how close his bother came to breaking up his marriage to Soane” and fumes, “just suppose the hussy had gotten pregnant? Had a mixed up child?” He calls the affair “treason against the father’s law, the law of continuance and multiplication,” which was the promise to keep the bloodline of Ruby pure (279).

⁴⁷ Magali Cornier Michael, “Re-Imagining Agency: Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*” *African American Review* 36.4 (2002): 653. While this sounds significantly like the construction of family in Piercy’s *Mattapoissett*, it should be noted that Morrison nowhere suggests that such care is inherent to women (nor, even, to the overtly religious). While the Convent is clearly a female space, inhabited only by women, this is by default rather than design; one man, Menus, stays at the Convent to dry out after an alcoholic bender, but most men choose not to enter the walls.

⁴⁸ Schur, “Locating *Paradise*,” 290.

⁴⁹ Sean Grattan, “The Beast in the Convent: Monstrous Utopia in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*” (working paper, 2011).

in *Millenium Hall* tells the story of how a resident came to dwell at the house, recounting tragedies of near-rape, sin, and loveless marriages while presenting the sexless piety of female friendship as the antidote to the ravages of heterosexuality. The Convent rewrites this conventional narrative about a utopian house of women removed from mainstream society by challenging a fundamental tenet of separatist utopianism, which declares women to be naturally kinder, gentler, and more connected than their violent and destructive male counterparts. Morrison upholds the need for a space where marginalized subjects can come together to heal from past wounds, but she disavows essentializing claims of female distinction. As I suggest below, she not only undercuts the idea of the Convent as a utopia for women, but further suggests that mainstream society is capable of change, eliminating the very necessity of a separate space at all.

Though “the women of the Convent carry no ideals of family or society in their wanderings,” this is not because they are inherently more open than the men of Ruby to alternative social structures, or because as women they are naturally predisposed to “creat[ing] an open house by challenging the social and historical strictures that surround them.”⁵⁰ The women carry no ideals because their ideals were mercilessly, brutally destroyed by the societies they leave behind in their long and difficult journeys to the Convent; it is precisely the loss of the fantasy of home and belonging that drives them to the Convent in the first place. Krumholz is correct in describing the Convent women in terms of Rosi Braidotti’s nomadic subject, “a figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity... [who] expresses the desire for an identity made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinate

⁵⁰ Krumholz, “Reading and Insight,” 24.

changes, without and against an essential unity.”⁵¹ But in considering the women to be embodiments of “movement, multiple meanings, and shared labor and goods,”⁵² it is necessary to root this formulation in the lived experiences of these women in order to show how this subjectivity comes to be and explain why it is that the women of the Convent represent such an alternative to Ruby’s norms.

Each Convent woman initially attempts to participate in traditional, male-dominated family structures, and it is her wrenching inability to succeed in this world that leads her to the Convent. The first woman we meet, Mavis, is “a failed mother” trapped in “a sleazy household and marriage.”⁵³ Mavis has just left her twin sons to smother in a mint-green Cadillac while she picks up “weenies” for her husband’s dinner (22).⁵⁴ Mavis’s horrific negligence suggests she has much in common with the cast of bad dystopian mothers prevalent in so many other critical utopian texts. Interestingly, though, the fact that the murders stem from an overriding need for Mavis to please her abusive husband by providing something other than Spam for dinner suggests a shift in blame from the bad mother to the merciless patriarchal system that gives rise to her. In showcasing Mavis’s maternal failings, the novel does not suggest she is emblematic of or responsible for a dystopian world. In fact, we get no impression that Mavis’s home life would improve if she were a better caretaker. Within the logic of the novel, it would be senseless to suggest that acting more loving toward her children would compel her husband to stop beating

⁵¹ Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 57.

⁵² Krumholz, “Reading and Insight,” 25.

⁵³ Krumholz, “Reading and Insight,” 28, and Storace, “Scripture.” On Mavis’s mothering see also Bouson, *Quiet*, 205.

⁵⁴ Jill Matus reads the “unusually large cast of twins,” including not only Deacon and Steward and Mavis’s sons but also Coffee and Tea and Brood and Apollo, as a sign of “Morrison’s critical emphasis on duplication” and the problems that arise when Ruby attempts to duplicate Haven without allowing the new town to develop or change. Matus, *Toni Morrison*, 161.

her, even though other novels have implied a similar correlation between maternal love and male behavior. The despair that constitutes Mavis's world prior to the Convent thus rewrites narratives of sentimental maternity and nurturing womanhood to advocate sweeping changes to the sex-gender system, not to demand that women act more loving in order to fulfill the functional roles said to bring about a better world.

Mavis's inability to live up to the normative ideals of domesticity fuels her impulsive decision to reject those norms altogether. Once she tried to adhere to her proper role, knowing, "You can't expect a man to come home from that kind of work and have to watch over babies while I go get something decent to put in front of him" (23). But as she brushes potato chip crumbs into the seams of the plastic cover of her sofa so the journalist interviewing her won't see the mess, it becomes evident her domestic world is but a tacky imitation of the ideal, like the flashy used car bought by a husband whose house has no window screens and no working TV. In the middle of the night, Mavis steals the Cadillac to escape her family and eventually winds up at the Convent, appropriating the symbol of her husband's faux-upward mobility into a sign of female freedom and rebellion against the constraints and expectations of a beleaguered mother and wife. Mavis's unsympathetic mother admonishes, "You still have children. Children need a mother. I know what you've been through, honey, but you do have other children," but Mavis is not going back (31). At the Convent she imagines she hears the sounds of her twins laughing, allowing her fantasies of motherhood without any of the obligations.

The other women who make their way by chance and circumstance to the sanctuary of the Convent are likewise unable to successfully navigate the demands and expectations of patriarchal romance and the corresponding nuclear home. The hypersexualized "Gigi and her screaming tits" lands in Ruby after being stood up by her incarcerated boyfriend Mikey (55).

Gigi's flaunting sexuality locates her well outside the boundaries of acceptable behavior for women, especially in Ruby; that she "embodies and expresses female sexual desire and desirability" therefore makes her "another disreputable type" destined for the Convent.⁵⁵ Gigi has been searching for Mikey's mythical town of Wish, Arizona and a rock sculpture that looks like "a man and a woman fucking forever" (63), but it's important to note that she is after more than a good time. Gigi's desire to see the couple "moving, moving, all the time moving" and her need for such constancy to be attainable and real expresses a romantic fantasy for eternal, unending love that "she held on to for dear and precious life" (64). Devoted to an unrealizable ideal, Gigi has been let down not only by her own relationships but by the very unattainability of her model of romance.

The other "social misfits who come to live at the Convent"⁵⁶ are likewise looking for a place to love and be loved at the same time that they learn to let go of their ideals. Seneca has been abandoned by her mother, whom she thinks is her older sister, and then sexually abused in a series of foster homes. As clueless as Mavis, Seneca misplaces her trust in men she barely knows; when her boyfriend is jailed for a hit and run accident with a child, she maintains "I forgot what he told me, but I know he wouldn't do that" (133). Like Gigi, she seems to be seeking a sign of constancy and love to hold on to. After she finishes a brief stint as the paid sex toy of a wealthy woman whose husband is traveling, she realizes she has become "like a pet you want to play with for a while—a little while—but not keep. Not love" (138). But significantly, the realization that she has fallen completely outside the normative structures of familial and romantic love that typically define and delimit the choices and possibilities for everyday life proves liberating rather than devastating: Seneca realizes that when "no one knew where she

⁵⁵ Krumholz, "Reading and Insight," 28, and Bouson, *Quiet*, 206.

⁵⁶ Bouson, *Quiet*, 207.

was,” she can go wherever she wants. Hitchhiking the ride that leads her past the Convent is “the first pointedly uninstructed thing she had ever done” (138), suggesting that coming to the Convent is as much a search for fixity and love as it is a rejection of those ideals.

Lastly, sixteen-year-old Pallas finds her romantic fantasy cruelly extinguished after she walks in on her older boyfriend, “the movie-star-looking maintenance man at her high school,” having an affair with her free-spirited mother (166). The spoiled child of wealthy parents, Pallas seems a far cry from the other women at the Convent. Yet she too suffers from aligning her life prospects with a man she has known only a few months, seduced by the excitement of eloping with “the coolest, most gorgeous man in the world” (166). Pallas’s last name, Truelove, is so bald as to be ironic—she clearly neither experiences nor represents the romantic fantasy she is seeking. Sexually abused after she runs devastated from the crumbling edifice of familial decorum, Pallas finds in the Convent relief from the dominant patriarchal culture and its founding narrative of romantic fulfillment. When her domineering father yells at her to come home, Pallas returns to the brutal world of high school.⁵⁷ But finding herself pregnant and alone, Pallas again rejects the supposed security of the nuclear home to return to the unquestioning, nonjudgmental outlaws of the Convent.

Seeking succor from these defeats, the women of the Convent create an alternative community outside the demands, expectations, and disappointments of the traditional, patriarchal romance narrative, much like the women of Millenium Hall. Yet it is important not to romanticize the Convent, nor its inhabitants, and to recognize the important differences Morrison posits between the Convent and other separatist, all-female worlds. Not only do they find

⁵⁷ Pallas’s father echoes the patriarchs of Ruby in lamenting the dangers of contaminated bloodlines. After Pallas goes home, “Milton pumped her about her mother. He had been warned about the consequences of marrying outside his own people, and every warning had come true: Dee Dee was irresponsible, amoral; a slut if the truth be told” (254).

themselves outside the norms of Ruby and the world at large because they have each miserably, spectacularly failed, but they also do not form a community that many would identify as necessarily utopian. Readings that overly celebrate the Convent risk misreading the home's communal values and utopian potential. For example, Ellen Friedman maintains that the Convent is "run on female utopian principles of nurture and egalitarianism."⁵⁸ But the house maintains a clear hierarchy: when Consolata assumes control she commands, "If you want to be here you do what I say. Eat how I say. Sleep when I say. And I will teach you what you are hungry for" (262). The rest of the women "did as they were told" (263). Meanwhile Mavis and Gigi fight tooth and nail, while Gigi taunts Seneca for her cutting herself instead of intervening in her self-harm.

Likewise, although Consolata allows the women to enter and stay as long as they like, she is hardly a nurturing, maternal figurehead; the care the Convent women extract from her stems more from their visions of what they want than from anything she seeks to give. This is an accidental nurturance, a far cry from the sacrificing mother and support system elevated in other texts. The women think of Consolata as:

This sweet, unthreatening old lady who seemed to love each one of them best; who never criticized, who shared everything but needed little or no care; required no emotional investment; who listened; who locked no doors and accepted each as she was... this ideal parent, friend, companion in whose company they were safe from harm... this perfect landlord who charged nothing and welcomed anybody; this granny goose who could be confided in or ignored, lied to or suborned; this

⁵⁸ Friedman, *Postpatriarchal Endings*, 703.

play mother who could be hugged or walked out on, depending on the whim of the child (262).

Imagining Consolata as an ideal who exists only to serve their needs, whom they can treat however they like, the women reproduce a functional view of the nurturing, supportive, maternal female who requires little investment or sacrifice in return.

When the narrative switches to Consolata's perspective, however, the reader gets an entirely different take on this dark and brooding alcoholic who rarely leaves the basement. Magali Cornier Michael describes the "patient, unconditional, loving attention" Consolata pays to Pallas, "demonstrat[ing] the warm empathy that Consolata feels for other women hurt by a cruel world."⁵⁹ But in reality, Consolata sees the women as "broken girls, frightened girls, weak and lying," and finds that "more and more she wanted to snap their necks... On her worst days, when the maw of depression soiled the clean darkness, she wanted to kill them all" (222-223). She is particularly critical of the aimlessness of her accidental houseguests as they cling to the fantasies of their pasts, lamenting, "Not only did they do nothing except the absolutely necessary, they had no plans to do anything. Instead of plans they had wishes—foolish babygirl wishes" (222). Consolata belittles their desires and insists that what they really need is to grow up. By showing how the women misread Consolata's affections, the novel critiques the impoverished view that reduces others to such caricatures. To assume Consolata figures as the ideal caretaker is a projection of what a woman in her position ought to do, not an inference based on her actual character.

What Consolata does do to help the women is to let them see and experience each other's perspectives. This reorientation happens through a mystical process of "loud dreaming" in which

⁵⁹ Michael, "Re-Imagining Agency," 656.

the women come to share their stories and pasts.⁶⁰ Consolata has the women lie down naked in the cellar and draw outlines of their bodies on the floor, creating avatars that allow them to share and articulate their past sufferings. Dreaming together, they come into each other's tales, to experience Mavis's sweltering Cadillac and Pallas's fearful run from the rapists who once pursued her. Together with Gigi, they watch a boy killed in a riot and "Each one blinks and gags from tear gas, moves her hand slowly to the scraped shin, the torn ligament" (264). As the women reconstruct these experiences through the templates of their bodies, they come together through their newfound understanding. For the first time, "They spoke to each other about what had been dreamed and what had been drawn" (265). They help Seneca learn, for instance, that the woman she thought was her sister is actually her mother, and when Seneca wants to cut herself, she marks the chalk body instead.⁶¹ The Convent women create a new community not by adopting stereotypical roles of nurturing or caretaking but by forging an entirely different orientation among themselves.

But loud dreaming does not, in itself, create the conditions for utopia. Open to each other, the women lose their sense of time and place and of themselves as distinct entities. This loss of their old lives produces "dynamic selves that are not completely constrained by the dominant

⁶⁰ While I find much potential in the loud dreaming of the Convent women, I am sympathetic to Geoffrey Bent's criticism that the scene is overly sentimental, especially when the women cleanse themselves in the baptismal rain. Yet although Bent indicts the whole novel as excessively didactic, its moralizing is far less than most utopias. Geoffrey Bent, "Less Than Divine: Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," *Southern Review* 35.1 (1999): 145-149.

⁶¹ The experiences the women share are scenes to which the reader has already been privy, through the narrative structure that brings us into each character's perspective as we learned what brought her to the Convent. The women in the Convent do not have this level of omniscience and need open communication to learn from one other what the reader has already been told. In this way, the magic in the text comes to work as fiction does, or fiction is itself revealed to be a kind of magic that can facilitate the open and aware relationships the Convent fosters.

culture or by communities, like Ruby, that have internalized certain dominant values.”⁶² But it is also dangerous; like Sethe in *Beloved* who stops eating and doesn’t leave the house after she reunites with the ghost of her murdered daughter, the women are so engrossed in themselves and their new relationships that they lose track of the outside world and miss the signs of the men who are hunting them. It is ultimately the attack that serves to bring the women back into their own separate bodies, and reminds them not to ignore the world. After the women are shot, all of them disappear, along with the car, leaving the citizens of Ruby mystified as to what happened on that fateful morning. Yet in the dissolution of the Convent the utopian vision of the novel comes forth, as the women then reappear (as ghosts, or perhaps not) in key moments of confrontation with their past lives.⁶³ They are armed, presumably to protect themselves after being caught unawares in the Convent, and although they travel together, they reemerge as individuals, supported but not subsumed by the group.

In the final pages of the novel, each woman reunites with a family member from her past. But perhaps surprisingly, none have returned to make amends. Gigi visits her father, who has been issued a reprieve from death row. But she gives him little information about herself or her mother, offering only the empty promise that she will write. He is the one seeking solace from her—comfort she no longer needs. A “beatific” (311) Pallas returns for one last visit to her mother’s house but renders her mother unable to speak. The daughter has nothing to say to or hear from the woman who betrayed her; she has come only to retrieve a pair of shoes she left

⁶² Michael, “Re-Imagining Agency,” 657.

⁶³ Many scholars have commented on the reappearance of the women. Justine Tally suggests they speak to an African tradition of spirits who return to life after violent death. Shreerekha Subramanian adds that they also evoke the magical realism of Afro-Caribbean traditions. See Justine Tally, “Reality and Discourse in Toni Morrison’s Trilogy: Testing the Limits,” in *Literature and Ethnicity in the Cultural Borderlands*, ed. Jesús Benito and Ana María Manzananas (New York: Rodopi, 2002), 35-50 and Subramanian, “Specters,” 161.

when she ran away. When Mavis sits down at a diner with her daughter Sally, whom she thought was going to kill her on the night she escaped, it is the daughter who keeps issuing demands for maternal love, asking Mavis to check in with the other siblings and confessing how scared she is of her father. Mavis just wants to talk about the food and then tells Sal she has to leave. Sal professes her love, but Mavis, hugging her, disappears into a crowd. Seneca is found by the mother who abandoned her, but when they finally meet, Seneca insists she has her mistaken for somebody else. Seneca's hands are bleeding, but it is another woman—presumably from the Convent—who intercedes to take care of her instead. As with Mavis, there is no heartfelt mother-daughter reunion, no warming resolution, no sense of closure to the family dramas the women left behind.

Through these encounters, the novel subverts the desire for traditional family units to be restored. This has left some readers dissatisfied; one comment on Amazon.com reads:

The emotions presented are flat and unrealistic. For example, after not seeing her mother for nearly 10 years, a young woman reacts with the intensity one might expect if she'd been in the kitchen and had been away for only a minute or two.

The mother, on the other hand, left terrified that this girl was trying to murder her, yet is not affected at all when running into her again.⁶⁴

But Morrison is intentionally moving the narrative away from conventions that would place the novel's sense of closure and satisfaction in a return to mother-daughter roles. Instead, by denying this closure, the women “represent a force moving toward a postpatriarchal beyond,”⁶⁵ constructing their own lives outside their proscribed roles as mothers, daughters, lovers, and

⁶⁴ Customer comments from www.amazon.com, July 31, 1999, quoted in Peter R. Kearly, “Toni Morrison's *Paradise* and the Politics of Community,” *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures* 23.2 (2000): 9.

⁶⁵ Friedman, *Postpatriarchal Endings*, 704.

wives. Rejecting the typical return to normative familial arrangements, the women grow into “self-sufficient and self-possessed women with an open future,”⁶⁶ transcending not only the traumas of their past but the very strictures of patriarchy that proved so traumatizing.

The disappearance and subsequent reappearance of the women suggests a refusal of both literary and gender conventions that typically allow women only marriage, or, if they fail at patriarchal romance, then death. (Although the women are gunned down, Consolata is the only character we know for certain is dead, and the novel ends with her reconnection with the mystical spirit, Piedade.)⁶⁷ Rather than conforming to narrative expectations, “in their refusal to stop being, there is apparent a resistance to hegemony,”⁶⁸ a collusion between the novel’s fantastical elements and the women’s transcendence of their gendered family roles. Magali Cornier Michael nicely captures the power of this supernatural ending:

On one level, the disappearance of their bodies functions as a rejection of conventional closure and a refusal to be coopted; they will not neatly and properly be buried within the patriarchal enclosure of Ruby. Moreover, that their bodies are somewhere ‘out there’ imbues the convent women with a mythical power that provides hope.... The disappearance of the murdered bodies thus further positions the convent women, or rather the idea of them, as indestructible in the sense that their engagement in such a dynamic, alternative coalition process grounded in

⁶⁶ Grattan, “Beast.”

⁶⁷ On religiosity in the novel and the influence of Candomblé and other mystical traditions, see McClure, *Partial Faiths*, 1-25 and 115. See especially pages 17-19 for an insightful reading of the supernatural in postmodern literature more generally.

⁶⁸ Subramanian, “Specters,” 162.

caring and intersecting subject positions in conflict with the patriarchal status quo will continue to emerge.⁶⁹

The women offer the hope of moving beyond traditional patriarchal gender roles, finding new ways of constructing the self and relating to others outside the status quo. It is not through the development of new genders or family arrangements that *Paradise* produces the unthought discourses that constitute the feminist critical utopian text, but in the emergence of unprecedented social relations.

While the women themselves offer one form of hope, another site of utopian potential can be found back in Ruby itself. The shooting and subsequent disappearance of the women produces the first signs of change in this stagnating town. It is an overstatement to suggest, as some have, that everything in the town has changed; it is not entirely true that “Ruby’s patriarchal structure, for instance, disintegrates” or that Ruby “seems poised, at the end of the novel, for a possible rebirth.”⁷⁰ But the assault on the Convent women “does produce a wake-up call for the town.”⁷¹ Although Ruby’s patriarchal structure remains intact, its authority is now fragmented. Some criticize Morrison for not adequately punishing the perpetrators of such horrific violence, but “healing means escaping the language of punishment, escaping the language of restriction that makes new options seem impossible and improbable.”⁷² For the same reasons the Convent women do not return to punish those who once wronged them, the novel strives to shift normative discourses of punishment and redemption in order to envision alternate ways of relating. The utopian potentiality of *Paradise* is not found in a direct assault on the

⁶⁹ Michael, “Re-Imagining Agency,” 658-659.

⁷⁰ Friedman, *Postpatriarchal Endings*, 704, and McClure, *Partial Faiths*, 116.

⁷¹ Michael, “Re-Imagining Agency,” 658.

⁷² Kearly, “Politics of Community,” 14. For critiques of Morrison’s treatment of the perpetrators of violence, see Keller, “Sermon on Manhood,” 53-54, and Bouson, *Quiet*, 211.

problematic structures of society but in the subtle disintegration of the preexisting power structures in favor of a new openness to previously unimaginable possibilities.

These new possibilities emerge through fleeting glimpses of an incredible realm associated with the Convent but briefly visible to some from the town. When Steward raises a gun to Consolata, she suddenly “narrows her gaze against the sun, then lifts it as though distracted by something high above the heads of the men” (289). It becomes apparent that she is seeing into another world, accompanied by a mystical presence that once came to her in the past. Deacon lifts his arm to stop his brother but Steward resolutely shoots, perpetrating the ultimate act of evil: he does not merely kill an innocent person but closes off access to this other world before any can know what she saw. For John McClure, “at the crucial moment in the kitchen, when Steward Morgan raises his gun to silence Consolata, something else is at stake,”⁷³ another kind of knowledge previously inaccessible to the close-minded rulers of Ruby. This realm is again visible to the Reverend Misner when he briefly spots an open window in a field, an entry to a beyond that none can fully fathom.⁷⁴

The knowledge of this other world suggests a turn toward more open, utopian possibilities for those members of Ruby receptive to change. After the murder prevents him from seeing into Consolata’s other world, Deacon finds himself no longer able to share his twin’s thoughts, reflecting a rift in their unified front. Splintering the authority of the town, he comes to seek out Misner, a previously unthinkable alliance. An outsider and recent immigrant to Ruby,

⁷³ McClure, *Partial Faiths*, 114.

⁷⁴ An outsider to the town, Misner sees an open window while his fiancé Anna, steeped in Ruby’s culture, insists it is a closed door. Their difference in perspective is based on their own preconceived notions of what is possible or not, suggesting the turn toward utopian possibilities will require a fundamental shift in mindset toward greater openness and a new sense of possibility. That they each see something different and construe the vision accordingly attests to the instability of evidence and interpretation throughout the novel.

Misner is a sympathetic voice throughout the novel; though he represents a form of patriarchal religious authority, he remains a counterpoint to Steward's rule. Misner firmly believes that although Ruby has been "an unnecessary failure," there is still "no better battle to fight, no better place to be" (306). He expresses the conviction that a better world is worth striving for but realizes there has been a paucity of imagination in envisioning what this world might be: "How exquisitely human was the wish for permanent happiness," he thinks, "and how thin human imagination became trying to achieve it" (306). Affected by the vision of the open window, Misner embraces mystery, questioning, and new possibilities, suggesting hope for the town reeling from unnecessary death.⁷⁵

Thus although the plot moves in a circle, starting and ending with the massacre at the Convent, the conclusion opens up new, fantastic opportunities that seemed impossible when the realist story began. For Patricia Storace, this breach in expectation for narrative outcomes proves one of the most liberating and hopeful aspects of the text:

Changing the reader's assumptions about founding fathers and American pilgrims, and the reader's certainties about good and evil, lynchers and victims, about what we are sure must happen, sets a grace and freedom alongside the cruelty of *Paradise*; its violence is the outcome of human history and will, but not intrinsic to blacks, whites, men, or women, not made inevitable by race or gender, but chosen, so that repentance and change are possible. By showing us how a story is crafted into a fate, [Morrison] is also showing us that a story doesn't have

⁷⁵ Bouson is right that "Most of the Ruby men involved in the massacre remain unchanged: for example, Sargeant Person appears 'as smug as ever'; an uncontrite Harper Jury assumes the role of the 'bloodied but unbowed warrior against evil; Menu's alcoholism worsens; and Steward Morgan remains 'insolent and unapologetic' (299)." But although Bouson notes that "Deacon Morgan, however, does change," I believe her emphasis on all that does not change overlooks the significance of Deacon's separation from his twin. Bouson, *Quiet*, 212.

to follow a compulsive trajectory, a story need not end the way it began, that stories can serve to create the possible as well as the inevitable.⁷⁶

Paradise creates the possible by breaking with the narrative expectations and conventional plotlines that limit the worlds and arrangements a text can imagine. Embracing other prospects, the narrative widens the possibilities for feminist critical utopian narratives to create new perceptions and ways of being for reader and character alike.

The Postpatriarchal Beyond

Feminist critical utopias can work to upend the status quo, they can reinforce it, or their effects can fall somewhere in the middle. What matters is that the genre itself is not by definition beholden to either a radical or a conservative position. In *Paradise*, “Morrison demonstrates that art is not necessarily created to bring insight; art can be used to reinforce blind acceptance of the status quo.”⁷⁷ For example, in the annual Christmas play, the children of Ruby tell the story of Jesus’ birth as a reenactment of *The Disallowing* but cut out founding families who have crossed the Morgans by intermixing. The play rewrites history by portraying the families as God-like figures bent on exacting revenge on those who turned them away. The holy families chant at the oppressors, “God will crumble you. God will crumble you... And sure enough, the masked figures wobble and collapse to the floor, while the seven families turn away” (211). The retelling bolsters the power of the founders by creating a collective narrative about the righteousness of seven holy families, not the desperation of nine impotent ones. In this way, Krumholz explains,

⁷⁶ Storace, “Scripture.”

⁷⁷ Krumholz, “Reading and Insight,” 29.

“the play performs an historical erasure that reinforces the authority of the families currently in power while it masks its own revisionary process.”⁷⁸

The audience does not necessarily realize how its views of the founding are being shaped by this collective narration. Roger Best naively assumes the number of families simply has to do with selecting children to play the parts, saying, “Maybe they didn’t have enough for the usual size” (216). However, those like Misner and Roger’s ostracized daughter Pat Best begin resisting the town’s official history when they realize that narrative itself is complicit in constructing the authority of the ruling families. Pat voices her solidarity with the ways of the town when she dismisses Misner’s curiosity about why there are seven families depicted in the play, instead of the nine that actually founded the town. But later, she cannot stop thinking about how his question speaks directly to “the way people get chosen and ranked in this town” (216). The Christmas pageant celebrates Ruby’s history, but that story starts to look different when viewed in a larger context that incorporates the social and political struggles of the town.

In a sense, it is important for utopian authors not to be the ones who write such a pageant, enforcing hierarchy and repression instead of the possibilities the story was supposed to depict. It is equally important for scholars not to be the audience that cheers the production, whether from misunderstanding of the play or from thinking it the only story that can be told. Like Misner, I believe there is something worth holding onto in the utopian striving for a better world. And like Misner, I have also found significant deficiencies in the creative vision of what these better worlds might look like, how they might be achieved, and the imaginative experience they make possible for the reader. Too often, as in *Ruby*, the effort to depict the utopian future has come to depend on limited gender roles, imagining that the downfalls of society can be neatly and easily

⁷⁸ Ibid.

pegged to women who are then charged with uplifting entire communities. These inadequate representations of utopian possibilities have not only fallen short in imagining other possibilities for female characters beyond their stereotypical roles, but have further reduced utopia to a normative social and familial arrangement reminiscent of the reader's status quo. If, as Morrison suggests, utopian possibility involves uncertainty, indeterminacy, and openness to new experiences and relations, then it must also require letting go of these reductive views of women, seeking utopia in the transcendence of normative conditions rather than in their fulfillment.

If Ruby's central flaw is that it reproduces the same discourses it seeks to subvert, relying on dogmas of racial purity and masculine rule that reiterate, rather than repudiate, the closed and hierarchical society its founders sought to escape, then the alternative seems to be to continue to interrogate the norms and assumptions governing any kind of utopian project, in order to ensure that the values enacted are in fact the ones desired. Morrison herself has asked, "How do fierce, revolutionary, moral people lose it and become destructive, static, preformed—exactly what they were running from?"⁷⁹ The answer she gives in *Paradise* is a failure to interrogate: a loss of the kind of self-awareness that fosters questioning, embraces uncertainty, and allows communities to develop and change as people discover new ways of being and knowing each other. The trials of the men of Ruby help illustrate the reasons people reproduce problematic discourses—not simply unknowingly, but because those discourses can provide the security and stability missing in a world that will otherwise deny one his or her place. Yet to allow the town to change is not to lose the town entirely, just as to push for more critical readings of feminist utopian texts will not undermine the important position of this genre for readers and critics alike.

⁷⁹ A.J. Verdelle, "Paradise Found: A Talk with Toni Morrison About Her New Novel," *Essence* 28.10 (1998): 78.

Coda

Even as I maintain that feminist critical utopian literature does have the potential to imagine more just and liberatory societies, it is important to note that this is not the only genre predicated on progressive visions of social change. The commitment to transformative politics embedded in the definition of the critical utopia as an oppositional text that rethinks the status quo and compels readers to imagine other possibilities for social and political life strongly suggests the genre shares a number of characteristics with radical literature more broadly. Herbert Kohl has argued for a distinction between utopian literature and radical literature, saying that because Virginia Hamilton's *The Planet of Junior Brown* (1971) hopes for possibilities outside a dysfunctional system without confronting or transforming existing society, "I find it utopian rather than radical."¹ I agree that radical literature need not evince a utopian impulse, and I have endeavored to show throughout these pages that utopian literature is not necessarily radical. Yet although the distinction Kohl makes is important, I hope that it is not absolute and that there can be more significant overlap between utopian and radical texts.

What other forms of radical literature outside the utopian subgenre might lead to more emancipatory possibilities for female characters and feminist critical utopian worlds? Looking at how other radical texts have reimagined gender and broken down the romance plot stands to provide a model for how to imagine other plotlines and ways to narrate social change in addition to the elements evident in *Paradise*. While it would take another study to more fully investigate the broad field of radical literature in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (which itself has a complicated history of successful and less successful texts), this coda will sketch some key areas

¹ Herbert Kohl, *Should We Burn Babar?: Essays on Children's Literature and the Power of Stories* (New York: New Press, 1995), 78.

with particular relevance to the reconsideration of gender in feminist critical utopian texts and the advancement of the genre overall.

A prime example of a feminist text that reworks narrative conventions is Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* (1981). *Housekeeping* is "a dreamlike, quirky novel, sustaining terse social commentary while describing intense, interior lives."² Left at her grandmother's house on the outskirts of the isolated town of Fingerbone in rural Idaho, Ruth and her sister Lucille are raised by a series of women, most notably their eccentric aunt Sylvie. The novel is set during the Depression or just after and Sylvie has long been a drifter, riding the rails with other transients. Her housekeeping reflects her lifestyle: she eats out of cans, sleeps in her shoes, and simply moves upstairs when the first floor is flooded. Lucille ultimately turns her back on this "unorthodox mothering"³ and moves in with her Home Economics teacher to pursue a normal life. But Ruth finds herself more and more like her aunt, estranged from the town of Fingerbone and the mores it represents. When the townspeople eventually threaten to remove Ruth from Sylvie's care, the two set fire to the house and take flight, joining the masses of drifters making their way through the American West.

Charting this escape from the confines of domesticity, *Housekeeping* rewrites traditional plotlines about marriage and death by turning away from romance. As Maureen Ryan explains, "one of Robinson's rejections of the typical female plot is in [Sylvie's] indifference to sexuality," an indifference shared by Ruth.⁴ Sylvie was briefly married but hardly says anything about her husband. Meanwhile, her tales about the female drifters she has met expose Ruth to

² Maggie Galehouse, "Their Own Private Idaho: Transience in Marilynne Robinson's 'Housekeeping,'" *Contemporary Literature* 41.1 (2000): 117.

³ Maureen Ryan, "Marilynne Robinson's 'Housekeeping': The Subversive Narrative and The New American Eve," *South Atlantic Review* 56.1 (1991): 79.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 84.

other possibilities for female lives and “affirm... that the traditional female role—marriage, motherhood—fails to satisfy all women.”⁵ Robinson’s sensuous evocations of the Idaho landscape and the reverence paid to Sylvie’s ardor for trains and drifting suggest the novel does not dismiss desire altogether but instead engages with aspects of passion that do not have to do with or cannot be contained by the conventions and restrictions of heterosexual romance.

In thus rejecting traditional notions of housekeeping based on female labor for the heterosexual, reproductive nuclear family, Ruth’s story explores the experiences of ostracized women and evinces “female resistance to an oppressive, normative, and normalizing conventionality.”⁶ But readers may be uneasy with how Ruth and Sylvie break with social and sexual norms. Karen Kaivola notes, “On the one hand, this female escape from containment and reintegration into a repressive status quo is liberating and promising. But the only alternative to the status quo the text makes possible is transience.”⁷ Although Ruth is not forced into the heterosexual home, the text leaves open whether she is happy drifting or follows her aunt because she does not know how to make her own way. But even if readers wonder what kind of viable alternative transience offers, that the novel is focalized through Ruth’s perspective humanizes the figures of hobos and eccentric women who operate on the margins of literature and society. It compels the reader’s interest in unorthodox characters and nonnormative lives and so works to open new possibilities for characters and plots. As Maggie Galehouse explains, “Chipping away at conventional notions of vagrancy, Robinson fashions a nonidealized alternative to the nuclear family and to the spatial and cultural restrictions within which it

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Karen Kaivola, “The Pleasures and Perils of Merging: Female Subjectivity in Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*,” *Contemporary Literature* 34.4 (1993): 670.

⁷ Ibid., 671.

ordinarily moves. Without demonizing domesticity or disregarding the mostly female community she depicts, Robinson creates a new landscape for twentieth-century heroines.”⁸

Although the conclusion of *Housekeeping* does not provide a utopian alternative to the constraining world of domesticity from which the women escape, the novel offers an example of subversive feminist writing on which feminist critical utopian literature could draw. What would a utopian conception of home for characters like Sylvie and Ruth look like? How might their positions on the margins of the town enable the rethinking of feminist utopian ideals? How are the women able to resist the hegemony of the town without falling into stereotypes themselves? These questions suggest feminist utopianism can work to subvert traditional literary conventions in several key areas. Texts can chart the development of characters who emerge and thrive outside of conventional heterofemininity and other social and sexual norms. Texts can also play with perspective, reworking narrative focalization to grant previously marginalized characters greater agency and calling attention to the limited perspectives of traditional narrative styles. Finally, texts can use these strategies to facilitate the emergence of plotlines that do not culminate in marriage, death, or overall acquiescence to the status quo. Although the feminist critical utopias I have discussed in Chapters 2 through 4 develop some of these innovations, it should be clear from my readings that I believe more can be done to perform the subversive work for which the genre is known.

As I will suggest, each of the above areas impacts how a text conceptualizes community. Because utopian literature is ultimately concerned with society, I am interested in those works that involve groups of people coming together. The areas I consider here address how individuals conceive of themselves as well as others, and how the construction of self and other comes to

⁸ Galehouse, “Private Idaho,” 119.

determine the shape of the social body. I therefore do not include in this definition of radical literature texts that posit a solipsistic retreat from society. Nor do I argue that the radical potential of utopian literature is primarily a formal matter. Although I have talked about the formal structures of the romance plot, I have also emphasized the content of the utopian vision and the characterizations of women put forth. Therefore I am particularly concerned with those texts whose formal innovations are in the service of a larger social ideal. These examples may take place outside mainstream publishing, or they may be international bestsellers, but they are united by a concern with how individuals and groups look at each other and relate to each other in new and surprising ways.

In addition to *Housekeeping*, there are a number of texts that more fully rework the above conventions to articulate progressive and liberatory alternatives to the status quo in the ways outlined above. These categories are broad, but I have come to identify three areas in particular that provide valuable lessons on which feminist critical utopian literature could draw: radical children's literature and feminist fairy tale revisions, queer web comics and zines, and what British author China Miéville terms late-postmodern Radical Fantasy. These categories emphasize community relations and the construction of the self and other in an interesting mix of familiar and alienating landscapes. I find these genres deal more successfully with transformative gender politics and feminist social change than most of the feminist critical utopian novels I have addressed, as they grapple with representations of female characters and reconsider how those characters figure into mechanisms of plot, resolution, and narrative structure. Contending with the strategies of destabilization employed in these examples will illuminate some possible ways for feminist critical utopian literature to develop new discourses and interrogate axioms on which the genre has grown to depend.

Radical Children's Literature and Feminist Fairy Tales

Radical literature tells stories that don't get aired in mainstream literature and rewrites conventional narratives in ways not normally expressed. For Jack Zipes, radical literature "wants to explore the essence of phenomena, experiences, actions, and social relations and seeks to enable young people to grasp the basic conditions in which they live."⁹ Zipes is referring to children's literature, but radical literature for readers of all ages works to demystify assumptions about current society and imagine what models for existence could emerge instead. Much of the history of radical literature in the U.S. in the twentieth century has come out of leftist movements closely aligned with proletariat struggle. Julia L. Mickenberg describes radical literature as a rich and dynamic body of work produced by "class-conscious activists" whose fight for a better world "included a commitment to challenging fascism, racism, and imperialism; to promoting democracy; and to forging international, working-class solidarity."¹⁰ Radical literature is aligned with a broad array of leftist commitments that challenge oppression and invoke progressive struggles for political, economic, and social change.

Much of the recent work on radical literature has been in the realm of children's literature. As Mickenberg explains, children's literature has long been a fertile ground for imparting values of cooperation, communalism, egalitarianism, and justice: "The particular logic of the children's book field as it developed alongside, if not altogether with, the organized Left—on a course closely tied to trends in education—helped to make children's literature a key outlet

⁹ Jack Zipes, "Foreword: The Twists and Turns of Radical Children's Literature," in *Tales for Little Rebels: A Collection of Radical Children's Literature*, ed. Julia L. Mickenberg and Philip Nel (New York: New York University Press, 2008), vii.

¹⁰ Julia L. Mickenberg, *Learning from the Left: Children's Literature, the Cold War, and Radical Politics in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 10.

for leftists in the mid-twentieth century.”¹¹ The continued investment in radical children’s literature in recent history suggests the field has retained a privileged position as a site for educating children about social change. There is ongoing debate about just how subversive radical children’s literature may be; in 1995, Herbert Kohl lamented a dearth of options he deemed sufficiently radical, uncovering “an almost total absence of books, fiction or nonfiction, that question the economic and social structure of our society and the values of capitalism.”¹² Julia Mickenberg and Philip Nel, however, dispute Kohl’s insistence that truly radical children’s literature is hard to find, saying “the longer legacy of radical children’s literature is hidden” but not absent.¹³

Many stories celebrated by Mickenberg and Nel may indeed be less radical and more nuanced than the authors argue, including some fairy tales I discuss below. But one text that they cite strikes me as an interesting look at gender norms from which feminist critical utopian discourses could learn a great deal. Lois Gould’s “X: A Fabulous Children’s Story” recounts a “Secret Scientific Xperiment” in which a child is raised as an X, not a boy or a girl.¹⁴ Friends, family, teachers, and classmates don’t know how to interact with a genderless child and try to “prove” who X is to determine which “rules” it has to “obey.”¹⁵ But the scientists advocate

¹¹ Ibid., 5.

¹² Kohl, *Babar*, 59.

¹³ Julia L. Mickenberg and Philip Nel, *Tales for Little Rebels: A Collection of Radical Children’s Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 3. As they point out, however, children’s literature is open to right-wing ideologies as well. See Michelle Ann Abate, *Raising Your Kids Right: Children’s Literature and American Political Conservatism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

¹⁴ Lois Gould, “X: A Fabulous Children’s Story,” in *Tales for Little Rebels*, 234. The story was originally printed in *Ms. Magazine* in 1972 as part of a series entitled “Stories for Free Children” and then revised into a book in 1978. See Mickenberg and Nel, 233.

¹⁵ Gould, “X,” 240.

“plenty of bouncing and plenty of cuddling, *both*. X ought to be strong and sweet and active!”¹⁶

With such equal treatment X grows up a model child: happy, talented, and perfectly well adjusted. The story suggests gendered behavior is not intrinsic and instead stems from societal pressures to conform. In keeping X’s genitalia hidden (the family is not allowed to hire a babysitter, who might “peek” and ruin the experiment), Gould disputes connections between biology and behavior, questioning the claims of difference feminists to special status. As I suggest in Chapter 4, X is allowed to be “mixed up and happy and free” because it is a child; as soon as puberty hits, it will presumably be socialized into appropriate gender roles.¹⁷

Nevertheless, the story offers an important counterpoint to essentializing representations of gender and women’s special status common in many feminist critical utopian texts.

Exploring the effects of gender identity on development has also led a number of writers to reconsider the fairy tale. Traditional fairy tales are rife with beautiful, helpless princesses and ugly, vindictive old women. Feminist revisions develop alternative perspectives that critique convention and imagine new stories to tell. Mickenberg and Nel consider books like *The Paper Bag Princess* (1980) radical revisions because the disheveled princess dons a paper bag to save her prince, who snaps “Come back when you are dressed like a real princess” and will not accept her hand.¹⁸ But as Leslee Farish Kuykendal and Brian W. Sturm point out, “rewritten folktales and fairy tales claiming to be ‘feminist’ often simply reversed the normal gender stereotypes.” These “fractured” fairy tales “challenge gender stereotypes and patriarchal ideologies only at the

¹⁶ Ibid., 236, emphasis original .

¹⁷ Ibid., 235, 240. The story is also subject to criticism in that it exemplifies the model two-parent bourgeois household, exhorted to “Buy plenty of everything!” including both boy and girl toys (236). And because X’s exemplary behavior and talents are always emphasized, the reader is left wondering whether those who are not model students and don’t win the spelling bee or the relay race would fare as well as X in convincing others of the benefits of free and open play.

¹⁸ Robert Munsch, *The Paper Bag Princess* (Toronto: Annick Press, 1980).

story level of the text,” creating “false heroines” rather than genuine models for change.”¹⁹

Instead, the authors point to Donna Jo Napoli as someone who works beyond simple role reversals to develop new feminist discourses. As Hilary S. Crew explains, Napoli “changes generic conventions and reworks discursive formations in three main areas—narrative strategies used in telling traditional tales, the representation of male and female characters in regard to issues of gender and gendered relationships, and the renegotiation of patriarchal ideologies and values—in order to retell traditional tales.”²⁰ Napoli’s retellings provide an example of how to successfully imagine alternatives to timeworn characters and plots.

Napoli’s retelling of *Beauty and the Beast*, *Beast* (2000) has received significant attention for its unusual narrator, a Persian prince cursed to take the form of a lion until he wins a woman’s love. Although the story is told from his perspective, the novel yields insights into Belle’s character as well; his is a voice of great sensitivity and passion as he realizes the strength and capabilities of a woman he barely knows. But because the story shows Belle learning to love her captivity and the man who confines her, I find it hard to accept as a fully feminist revision, and I would like to see critics contend more with this aspect of the text. More successful and compelling than *Beast*, I think, is Napoli’s remarkable reimagining of Hansel and Gretel, which challenges stereotypes about age, beauty, and the nature of feminine evil. *The Magic Circle* (1993) is told from the perspective of the Ugly Sorceress, a midwife and healer prized by her community but whose hubris leads to her demise when she is transformed into a witch and forced to leave her beloved daughter forever. The witch builds a misshapen house far away so she won’t be tempted by devils to eat any children, and she covers it in candy as a tribute to the

¹⁹ Kuykendal and Sturm, “Feminist Fairy Tales,” 39, 40.

²⁰ Hilary S. Crew, “Spinning New Tales from Traditional Texts: Donna Jo Napoli and the Rewriting of Fairy Tale,” *Children’s Literature in Education* 32.2 (2002): 78.

sweet tooth of the daughter she left behind. In imagining what might account for the witch's behavior in the traditional fairy tale, Napoli paints a sympathetic portrait of a tragic woman who can no longer be dismissed as simply an ugly and evil old wretch.

Giving the witch a history and agency entirely recasts the traditionally story. As Crew explains, Napoli "draw[s] readers' attention to the discursive referent of the archetypal figure of the wicked witch." Even though the witch embodies traits of the typical ugly and ambitious wicked woman, the novel reframes these qualities so that "being active and strong-willed are made positive attributes in that they enable her protagonist to contend evil."²¹ A complex character herself, the witch also reevaluates others who are usually reduced to stereotypes. When Hansel and Gretel describe the wicked stepmother who casts them off, the witch tries to understand what might have motivated her behavior, saying, "I think of Hansel and Gretel's stepmother, looking ahead to a hard winter, wondering how she would feed these children. That must have been it. No woman would abandon these children for anything less than desperation."²² In empathizing with a character usually presented simply as evil, the witch suggests that previously maligned women, if allowed to tell their stories, might have something unexpected to say.

Napoli's revision depends on the triumph of the familial bond, as Gretel and the witch find in each other the mother and daughter they have each lost, but it shows how feminist literature can rework plot, character, and perspective to produce alternative tales. Whereas *Woman on the Edge of Time*, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Dispossessed* do not move away from the narrator's perspective to critique his or her biases, the protagonists in both *The Magic Circle* and *Beast* contemplate and confront the limitations of their views as they realize the women around

²¹ Crew, "Spinning New Tales," 81.

²² Donna Jo Napoli, *The Magic Circle* (New York: Dutton Children's Books, 1993). 99.

them might be more complex than simple stereotypes suggest. Feminist critical utopias tend to be focalized around characters who are not mouthpieces for the utopian world—Connie is an outsider, Shevek wants to change Anarres, Jimmy is immersed in the mindset of his dystopian upbringing, Tally wants a boyfriend, and Katniss just wants to go home. If the ideals of utopia are filtered and expressed through a character who wants love and family, not radical social change, then it becomes hard to promote a utopian world at odds with the narrator’s desires—unless the text intentionally showcase the shortcomings of those wants or the limitations of the narrator’s view. As Napoli suggests, perspective plays an important role in shaping reader’s judgments about which characters and opinions are marginalized and which are upheld. Such attention to point of view has implications for how readers might judge the benefits and drawbacks of utopian and dystopian worlds.

“No Permission Asked”: Queer Comics and Radical Zines

Another issue raised by Napoli’s exploration of character and perspective has to do with representation. What does it mean to present female characters and give voices to those who are usually silenced? Radical queer literature has long contended with this question, as such voices are largely absent from mainstream publishing. Operating outside the purview of major publishers, queer and feminist comics and zines have significant potential to reimagine gender and sexuality while provoking dialogue about what it means to grant visibility to previously invisible groups. Stephen Duncombe explains, “zines are noncommercial, nonprofessional, small-circulation magazines which their creators produce, publish, and distribute by

themselves.”²³ Zines emerged in the 1930s as science fiction produced “fanzines” to share stories and commentary. In the 1970s, punk rock groups started up fanzines to electrify a music scene that had been ignored by mainstream culture. Feminist and queer zines emerged out of this history of underground publishing and the rise of the grrrl punk music scene in Seattle in the early 1990s.²⁴ They represent “the variegated voices of a subterranean world staking out its identity through the cracks of capitalism and in the shadows of the mass media.”²⁵

Feminist and queer zines open spaces for those on the margins of mainstream society to share resources and foster dialogue. Creating alternative discourses rather than reiterating stable definitions, they articulate what Adela C. Licona describes as “ambiguity and contradiction.”²⁶ Zines represent queer and other marginalized subjectivities in ways that transform gender binaries and reimagine gender identities, sexualities, relationships, feelings, and forms of behavior. As an example, the zine *Brat Attack* (1991-1994) depicts aspects of a San Francisco lesbian S/M subculture even as it calls attention to the indeterminacy of such a community and the complexity of naming it as such. The zine is based in a desire to make visible alternative

²³ Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (New York: Verso, 1997), 6.

²⁴ Elke Zobl, who maintains The Grrl Zine Archive, a global network of almost forty thousand articles and zines published by women from around the world since 1980, explains, “With ‘grrrl and ladies’ I think of rebellious, resistant ‘girls’ (which does not mean you have to be born a woman!) who are not afraid to call themselves feminists! The term also refers to the riot grrrl movement and builds up on one of its many accomplishments— zines! The terms ‘grrrl’ and ‘lady’ are not meant to be exclusive, this project is definitely boy-friendly and open to all non-sexist, non-discriminatory, anti-racist/homophobic contributions and includes transgender issues.” The reclamation of terms like grrrl as an empowering bastardization of girl is different from the way Piercy attempts to incorporate men into her definition of mothering because it in fact changes the language, creating new slang that resists traditional definitions instead of adhering to stereotypes about women and girls. Elke Zobl, “About,” *Grrrl Zine Network*, <http://grrrlzines.net/about.htm>

²⁵ Duncombe, *Underground*, 2.

²⁶ Adela C. Licona, “(B)orderlands’ Rhetorics and Representations: The Transformative Potential of Feminist Third-Space Scholarship and Zines,” *NWSA* 17.2 (2005): 109.

strands of lesbian S/M in order to confront differences within the community. The front cover of the Summer/Fall 1993 issue shows two androgynous-looking women holding a knife to a third in what could be consensual or could be an instance of violent gay bashing. That the meaning of the comic is indeterminate, intentionally complicating attempts to read clear meanings into the depictions of sex and identity, leads Dana Collins to suggest that it “highlights the contradictory nature of representation and inevitably provokes multiple readings.”²⁷ The comic rethinks the coherence of identity and community to provoke discussion about what it means to challenge the status quo.

In addition to presenting challenging images of lesbian S/M, the zine also calls into question what such depictions might mean within the broader queer community. Another comic strip in the issue, “Differently Pleasured” by Keanne Franson, pairs together cartoons of women who appeal to different lesbian stereotypes, for instance someone with short buzzed hair in an anarchist t-shirt looking askance at a smiling blonde in a “Save the Whales” shirt. The images and accompanying commentary highlight the diversity of queer identities and call attention to the pernicious ways stereotypes can cause division and exclusion even within communities. The various figures in the strip compete over who can claim legitimacy, as one character yells at another, “You fuck with men... you’re not queer!!!” while the other shouts back, “You’re male-identified... you’re not a dyke!!!” Over the shouting, the strip asks, “Are we united by difference... or does it become a basis for division and exclusion?” Using humor to maintain a degree of critical distance necessary to reflect upon the queer community, Franson pokes fun at common disputes to ask what is served by the impulse to categorize and define. In the final

²⁷ Collins, “No Experts,” 66. See Fish. *Brat Attack: The Zine for Leatherdykes and Other Bad Girls*, Issue 4. 1993. Tammy Rae Carland Zine Collection. MSS 320. 2. 4. Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

panel, a heavily pierced woman wearing a shirt that says “whips turn me on” criticizes an older woman in plain clothes, thinking “She sure ain’t no S/M dyke.” But the woman in plain clothes surprises the reader by wondering, “Why do newcomers to the scene have such a need to scream about it?” The exchange compels the reader to rethink assumptions about what can be learned from other people based on visual stereotypes, highlighting the complexity of a seemingly coherent community in order to uphold Franson’s conclusion that “difference is relative.”²⁸

Promoting such indeterminacy within the lesbian S/M community emphasizes the problems that threaten to accompany political strategies based on representation. Collins explains, “Visibility is seen as a strategic site for intervention precisely because heteronormativity makes gay and lesbian sexualities, histories, and agencies invisible... [but] it fails to challenge the way the very act of representation reifies, mystifies and thus decontextualizes that which it seeks to present.”²⁹ Representation can promote the status quo by exoticizing those who are being made visible, and by upholding images of “good” gays and lesbians to distance and so further marginalize the “bad” ones who do not conform to heteronormative ideals (about sexual activities, gender presentation, monogamy, reproduction, and other standards for what constitutes a normal and meaningful life). Just as challenges to the romance plot can still keep the romance plot in place, “Reproducing dichotomies of good and bad, real and fantastic, leaves some of the primary power and limitations of representation unaddressed.” In contrast, *Brat Attack* “refuses to advocate a totalizing politics of representation to construct a single strategy for representing lesbian sex.”³⁰ Contending with difference, then,

²⁸ Keanne Franson, “Differently Pleasured,” *Brat Attack*, Issue 4, 27-29.

²⁹ Collins, “No Experts,” 74.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 74, 75.

allows the zine to promote an alternative politics without resorting to totalizing stereotypes about the groups it depicts.

Like zines, comics and blogs have emerged as another oppositional platform to mainstream cultural production that resists totalizing alternative communities into clear and stable groups. There are numerous comics devoted to exploring radical queer, feminist, anti-racist, inclusive communities, such as *Riot Nrrd*, *Girls with Slingshots*, *The Boy in Pink Earmuffs*, *Yu+Me*, and *What's Normal Anyway?* But one of the best known is undoubtedly Alison Bechdel's cult classic *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1983-2008), which details the ups and downs of an inclusive community of queer women and their allies in a small midwestern city. As Robin M. Queen explains, the humor of *Dykes to Watch Out For*, like "Differently Pleasured," "relies on the representation of characters who exemplify stereotypes commonly held among lesbians." Yet the characters are diverse in their attributes, and "the diversity itself calls into question monolithic definitions of lesbians and lesbian communities."³¹ Rather than resort to simple depictions, the series creates characters that are recognizable but multidimensional in order to explore the complexities and contradictions within an open and multifaceted queer community. *Dykes to Watch Out For* makes queerness visible, but not to normalize or stabilize identities, positions, or groups.

For instance, in a 2004 strip entitled "Get Me To The Clerk On Time," the mayor has just declared gay marriage legal and all the lesbians are running to City Hall. Amidst the hubbub, feminist academic Sydney Krukowski gets down on one knee, extends a bouquet of flowers, and asks her girlfriend Mo, "Will you do me the honor of paradoxically reinscribing *and*

³¹ Robin M. Queen, "'I Don't Speak Spritch': Locating Lesbian Language," in *Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender, and Sexuality*, ed. Anna Livia and Kira Hall (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 234.

destabilizing hegemonic discourse with me?”³² Simultaneously spoofing and upholding the patriarchal standards of heterosexuality, complete with bent knee, symbolic offering, and heartfelt vows, the proposal captures the slipperiness of interpretation: marriage can mean different things depending on how it is enacted and perceived, and every parody relies on the legibility of that which it lampoons. With pitch-perfect irony, Bechdel issues a challenge to heteronormativity at the same instance that she mines the limitations of that challenge. In Bechdel’s critique is an exploration of dualities, along with the question of duality itself; a consideration of queer and feminist axioms that may not in fact be self-evident; and a tension between how to live radical ideologies within the limitations and possibilities of everyday life. This tension is made possible through the warm yet critical attitude Bechdel retains over the course of the series, a stance that requires characters to be multifaceted and well-rounded enough to articulate such complex views.

Such questioning and critique holds multiple poles in tension throughout the unfolding drama of the series, yet this conflict enhances rather than undermines the queer and feminist possibilities of the strip, just as the ambiguities of a zine like *Brat Attack* contributes to rather than confuses its radical exploration of sexuality, identity, and subculture. As Stephen Duncombe explains, zinesters “are trying to construct a new model of community. No leaders,

³² Alison Bechdel, “Get Me to the Clerk on Time,” episode 436, 2004, in *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* (New York: Houghton Mifflin / Harcourt, 2008), 307, emphasis original. Rebecca Beirne notes, “Sydney is in many ways both a parody of the pretensions of queer theory and an acknowledgment of its seductive potential.” She publishes articles like “The Phallus Unzipped: Clinton’s Dick and the Detumescence of Oppositional Subjectivity” and teaches courses on *Post-Everything Feminist Theory* and *Gender, Class and Miniature Golf: The Social Construction of Leisure*; in another scene she claims her strap-on is “disarticulating the epistemological foundation of gender through the deferral and deconstruction of fixed sexual signifiers.” Alison Bechdel, “Enough Already,” episode 298, 1998, in *Essential*, 210; see also <http://dykestowatchoutfor.com/cast-biographies>. Rebecca Beirne, *Lesbians in Television and Text After the Millennium* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 178.

no rules, no permission asked. The new community will be based not in common understanding, but in shared dialogue. The new community will not be based in traditions or laws, but in recreating the community anew with each act of communication between individuals.”³³ There is no prescription here for emancipatory politics, but an emphasis on dialogue (which may lead to discord) and openness (which may mean a multiplicity of competing positions come through). Rather than fear this complexity will inhibit the viability of the text, this stance embraces indeterminacy as part of the radical project itself. Instead of pinning down a position, then, feminist critical utopianism might benefit from embracing contradiction and the instability of the utopian ideal, in order to more deeply explore ideas of representation, visibility, community, and identity that go in to imagining alternative worlds.

Radical Fantasy

The above examples are drawn from traditions of both realistic and fantastic literature: fairy tales account for miraculous transformations, zines tend to focus on everyday life, and comics can do a little of both. Realism may depict new possibilities for those who stray from normative ideals, as evidenced in a text like *Housekeeping*, but recent developments in fantasy literature also suggest another area on which feminist critical utopianism can draw. The 2000 publication of China Miéville’s *Perdido Street Station* arguably marks a decisive moment in the history of fantasy. *Perdido Street Station* is “one of the most popular fantasy fictions in recent years,” a phantasmagorical mélange of human, non-human, and artificial species jostling for space in a riotous steampunk urban underworld.³⁴ According to William J. Burling, the novel

³³ Duncombe, *Underground*, 70.

³⁴ William J. Burling “Periodizing the Postmodern: China Miéville’s *Perdido Street Station* and the Dynamics of Radical Fantasy,” *Extrapolation* 50.2 (2009): 326. On the hybridity of the novel

“exemplifies a wholly new form of the fantastic responding to historical developments in global capitalism in the *fin de siècle*,” a form he calls Radical Fantasy based on Miéville’s use of the term.³⁵

Contending with the material and dialectical conflicts that emerge out of the late-postmodern age, defined by rapid advances in capitalism and technology since the mid-1990s, Radical Fantasy uses the estrangement of fantasy to highlight the alienating and exploitative conditions and class relations of late-market capitalism and show how alternative coalitions can form. In the novel, an alliance among the devil, the mayor, and a crime syndicate is unable to stop a rare and powerful species of slake moth from sucking the dreams out of sentient beings, leaving them empty shells. It is instead up to a combination of humans and other species like khepri, vodyanoi, wyrmen, cactacae, garuda, and a giant artificial intelligence (AI) machine made from discarded appliances to slay the moths and save the city. For Joan Gordon, the heterogeneity of the group and hybridity of the species favors cross-pollination over purity and suggests change is cyclical, ongoing, and necessary for survival.³⁶ Adaptations can be frightening and grotesque, like the khepri who have humanoid bodies and the heads of scarab beetles. But in merging repulsion with attraction, the novel develops what Gordon calls “a

as fantasy, horror, science fiction, steampunk, etc., see Joan Gordon, “Hybridity, Heterotopia, and Mateship in China Miéville’s ‘Perdido Street Station,’” *Science Fiction Studies* 30.3 (2003): 456-476.

³⁵ Burling, “Periodizing,” 326. Miéville has said about *Perdido Street Station*, “The point for me is that the construction of a paranoid, impossible totality is at least potentially a subversive, radical act, in that it celebrates the most unique and human aspect of our consciousness. I like to make my radical points a bit more overt, so I often put some more or less obvious leftist *content* in there, too, but I emphatically deny the idea that it’s the only place where the ‘radicalness’ of radical fantasy resides, in the content.” Joan Gordon, “Reveling in Genre: An Interview with China Miéville,” *Science Fiction Studies* 30.3 (2003): 368, emphasis original.

³⁶ Gordon, “Hybridity,” 457.

normative grotesque.”³⁷ Miéville incites the reader’s horror and fascination with what he has described as his “surrender to the weird” while illustrating how monstrous and previously unimaginable positions become incorporated into everyday life.³⁸

This heterogeneity is central to the novel and part of what distinguishes the development of the genre. Burling explains, the hybrid coalition “must organize and innovate, and in doing so create the possibility for a better though admittedly indeterminate and unpredictable future. Radical Fantasy therefore projects a progressive, collective utopian impulse... [that] emphasizes dialectical conflict and ever-arising possibilities for future-oriented, collective political action.”³⁹ I am not sure I agree that there is a utopian impulse at work here; the alliance is intended to prevent the destruction of the city at the hands of the slake moth, not alter it or produce a new world order—the characters seem to revel in the grimy underside of the city and maintain this status quo, rather than overturn it. But *Radical Fantasy* expressly grapples with how to represent capitalism and the range of postmodern, posthuman responses to its totalizing reach, and it is this rich conception of political life based in difference and discord that I think the genre can offer critical utopias.

Perdido Street Station and Burling’s conception of Radical Fantasy do not contain specific strategies for addressing gender and romance in radical fiction. In fact, gender is one of the main areas in which I would say *Perdido Street Station* falls short and a significant component to progressive politics that Burling fails to take seriously. The main characters are male (or presented male even if, like the AI Construct Council, they have no sex), and they alone drive the action. The main female character Lin is a khepri artist characterized as sensitive,

³⁷ Ibid., 459.

³⁸ Gordon, “Interview,” 366.

³⁹ Burling, “Periodizing,” 332.

emotional, and weak-willed; she gets in over her head with the mob boss and then is ravaged by a slake moth when she defies the instructions of her male savior and human lover Isaac not to look at the moth's hypnotic wings. But despite the fact that Lin adheres to conventional stereotypes about women (though she has an insect head), Radical Fiction can inspire feminist utopian fiction in unique and innovative ways. The genre's attention to processes of coalition building across diverse collectives understands social change in terms of specific, historical modes of material production, challenging a designation like "fantasy" (or "utopia") as unchanging or universally true.

I do not want to see the emphasis on class relations subsume attention to gender, but greater attention to the historical specificity of material conditions can help reshape many of the universal, ahistorical, and essentialist discourses of womanhood found in feminist critical utopian texts. As Rita Felski explains, "One of the main achievements of contemporary feminism has been to show that gender relations constitute a separate and relatively autonomous site of oppression, which cannot, for instance, be satisfactorily explained as a mere function of capitalism. But it does not follow that gender relations can be viewed in abstraction from the complex web of historically specific conditions through which they are actually manifested."⁴⁰ Contending with the material conditions that manifest gender relations and identities suggests that expectations for proper gendered behavior—and consequently what roles women may fulfill within a narrative—hinge on historically specific conceptions of what constitutes female identity. Piercy, Atwood, Le Guin, and Collins pay attention to historical specificities, material production, and the relationship between gender and capitalism when they depict dystopias as societies in which extreme corporatization has overdetermined gender, sexuality, and family life.

⁴⁰ Felski, *Beyond*, 18.

Yet as I have suggested, this correlation tends to be quite simplistic and offers only a limited understanding of how the material conditions of the dystopian society impact women. Instead of probing the complexities of these dynamics, the novels posit an uncomplicated, timeless, universal womanhood as the solution to dystopian ills and the marker of utopian society. A turn toward developments similar to those that Miéville has brought to fantasy could mitigate these barriers and enable the production of new visions of dystopian nightmares and utopian ideals.

For a genre to change requires contexts and conditions to shift the discourses underpinning that genre, and a collection of individuals to innovate on previous trends. Tzvetan Todorov notes, “A new genre is always the transformation of one or several old genres: by inversion, by displacement, by combination.” Speaking about genres quite broadly—poetry, the novel—Todorov suggests that innovations upset the generic conventions of one form in ways that ultimately codify another, even as the process of transgressing those forms then begins again in earnest.⁴¹ In advancing the fantasy genre, or enabling new cultural production through comics and zines, or reworking old tales through radical children’s literature and feminist fairy tales, authors upset previous conventions. In doing so, they may wind up developing new sets of conventions that redefine past genres and create, in turn, new forms to work with and against.⁴²

⁴¹ Tzvetan Todorov, “The Origin of Genres,” trans. Richard M. Berrong, *New Literary History* 8.1 (1976): 161.

⁴² These developments depend on context and on individual writers. Amy J. Devitt notes, “Writings may follow others’ choices without being deliberate, merely by following what seems expected in the genre. Deliberate or not, individual decisions not only encourage or inhibit generic change but actively create that change. The generic changes that result in turn reinforce the contextual changes that are occurring, placing even more pressure on individuals to act in ways that further norms.” Amy J. Devitt, *Writing Genres* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 135. Delany and O’Brien made decisions that encouraged genre changes, for instance, but the overwhelming majority of feminist critical utopias published around and after them continued to maintain generic conventions. It remains to be seen if and how the innovations of Morrison and Westerfeld might be picked up and developed in other texts.

The process is ongoing, yet it is this striving that marks so much of the hope and potential of radical literature in generally, and feminist critical utopianism in particular.

As I have suggested with regards to many of the unusual arrangements found in feminist critical utopias, innovating on generic conventions does not simply mean doing something new, but doing something that works on the reader in a different way. As Franco Moretti explains, an innovation like Joyce's stream-of-consciousness "survives because the selection process does not reward novelty as such... but *novelty that is able to solve problems*. Moving beyond the horizon of expectations of the period, in itself, is of little interest. Constructing *a new perceptual and symbolic horizon*: this in indeed a comprehensible undertaking, and one with clear social value."⁴³ Lasting innovations solve problems that arise out of generic conventions, enabling a text to better fulfill the work it sets out to do. Innovations need not necessarily break with past forms. As John Brenkman notes, "Novelists also resuscitate older forms, as with Menippean satire in Grass, Rushdie, and Pamuk, and infuse them with new intentions."⁴⁴ Westerfeld innovates on the traditional *bildungsroman* to allow Tally to keep fighting for justice; Morrison innovates on the history of separatist utopias to complicate the Convent as a female utopian space. These developments draw on multiple forms to solve problems that have arisen through the feminist critical utopia's overinvestment in the romance plot. The forms of radical literature I have addressed provide additional areas of innovative work and radical potential on which feminist critical utopian forms can draw. My intention is not to produce a set of dogmatic proposals for what the feminist critical utopian form must be, but to explore what strategies

⁴³ Franco Moretti, *Modern Epic: The World System from Goethe to García Márquez*. (New York: Verso, 1996), 178, quoted in John Brenkman, "Innovation: Nihilism and the Aesthetics of the Novel," in *The Novel: Forms and Themes*, vol. 2 of *The Novel*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 819, emphasis original.

⁴⁴ Brenkman, "Innovation," 819.

might facilitate the creation of new, unthought discursive spaces that compel the reader to imagine more radical examples of social change for women. Just as contemporary feminist critical utopias innovated on the conventions of the classic utopian form, then, so may texts continue to transgress the ongoing conventions of the genre to advance the field overall.

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