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# Whose Imagination Are We Living In?: An Examination of Feminist Utopia through the Lens of Pragmatism

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## Abstract

Pragmatic feminism is a philosophy which utilizes and merges the fundamental concepts of pragmatism, such as its emphasis on pluralism and lived experience, with feminist theory in hopes of inciting social change. The main goals of pragmatic feminism are to recover the work of women who were influential in the popularization of American pragmatism but were also excluded from the history of philosophy, to analyze the “canon” of lauded pragmatist philosophers through a feminist lens, and to yield pragmatist philosophies as a weapon for contemporary feminist activism. In my study, I argue that feminist utopian literature can be a serviceable asset to the philosophy of pragmatic feminism. I analyze a range of works spanning centuries, from early feminist utopias such as *City of Ladies* by Christine de Pizan and *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, to more contemporary novels such as *The Female Man* by Joanna Russ and *A Woman on the Edge of Time* by Marge Piercy. Through a careful, analytical exploration of Gilman’s imaginary universe, I derive a plethora of critiques of modern society, with an eye to how the text reconciles with the subjects of language, motherhood, and race. I then utilize these critiques as anchors in the process of analyzing a variety of works by contemporary authors of varying perspectives and backgrounds, so as to create a comprehensible roadmap of the pro-women movement through the lens of utopian feminist literature. Through analysis of feminist texts spanning decades, I show that the utopian genre can be a practical asset to social change by providing a vision for a society ailing from social systems that disadvantage women.

## Introduction

This thesis arose from the simultaneous occurrences of three seemingly unrelated events: a friendly quarrel, an emerging social movement, and an assigned reading. The synchronized collision of these phenomena blew up the foundation of my literary and social imagination. The idea for this paper emerged, vulnerable and unformed, from the rubble, a breathing composite of latent thoughts that had never found footing in the conscious realm.

The site of the explosion was Paris, France, on a chilly January evening in 2021. I, along with three friends, had been saving up for months to fund a long-awaited trip to the City of Love. Three days in, an argument broke out among the group. The inciting offense entailed one of us pulling out her phone to snap a picture of a quaint Parisian alley, to which another friend, the only male member of the group, remarked, “Social media is such a sad addiction.”

After a few scathing back-and-forths, the argument morphed into something very ugly. It became increasingly apparent that our friend was deriding social media addiction because he construed it as a feminine ailment. We tried to explain that his logic played into misogynistic tropes which dictated that women's preoccupations are frivolous or that a woman's anguish, mental or physical, is less intense than a man's. “I don't see how that's sexist. I'd really have to hear a female perspective,” he said to his three female travel companions.

Later that evening, the argument was reignited at dinner, where we were joined by several male friends that were studying at a French university. To my surprise, they all took an impartial

stance, thereby lending gravity to the implicit suggestion that women's suffering is trivial compared to men's. One of the university students turned to me when everyone else was out of earshot to offer his insight: "I mean, I get what you guys are saying. But you were starting to sound a bit hysterical."

Several courses (and beers) later, the male segment of the table seemed to have forgotten about the heated argument which had divided the group an hour ago. But as I exchanged wary glances with my girl friends, I felt a heaviness in the air. To us, there was no novelty to the discourse. It felt as if we had experienced a flare-up of an illness that was said to be in remission, the unmistakable provocation of some invisible wound. It wasn't a big deal. And yet, I couldn't shake the feeling that it was, that something about the evening's events spoke to the presence of a sinister force that had unfurled its tendrils into the ground around us centuries prior.

In this paper, I attempt to apprehend the nature of this intangible entity that Western feminism seeks to annihilate with the emergence of the fourth-wave. Unlike previous generations, who battled blatant discrimination, contemporary hurdles to true gender equality have become less overt, more slippery, and difficult to articulate. Some scholars have even begun to conflate this elusive quality with the nonexistence of women's oppression, evidenced by their use of the term "postfeminism" interchangeably with "fourth-wave feminism." In their edited collection of essays, *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity* (2011), Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff argue that postfeminism might suggest that feminism is a thing of the past. This is also linked to the notion, articulated by Angela McRobbie, of postfeminism as a backlash against feminism, which asserts feminisms' success in claiming that

equality has been achieved, while simultaneously undermining social progress by suggesting that feminism has gone too far.

This ideological paradox has cemented itself as the one universally agreed upon feature of fourth-wave feminism, which is typically categorized by a degree of internal discord and critique. Gill's assessment of the cultural phenomenon as "the contradictory nature of postfeminist discourses and the entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes within them" (149) is probably the most accurate characterization of the fourth wave to date. Feminist scholar Elizabeth Evans seconds this notion, elaborating that the disorientation surrounding the trajectory of modern feminism is "in some respects its defining feature" (49).

This overwhelming lack of consensus stems from a multitude of factors. While feminists share a commitment to advocating for gender equality and challenging patriarchal systems of power and oppression, some focus on individual experiences of oppression, while others emphasize systemic analysis and seek to challenge and dismantle structures of power that perpetuate inequality. Furthermore, feminism is not immune to the influence of broader social and political factors, such as race and class, which can also shape perspectives and priorities.

Despite these internal inconsistencies, a self-inflicted implosion of the feminist movement in the next few years would be incredibly premature. A social justice movement should contribute to its own obsolescence only after the societal shortcomings it was designed to address have been corrected. Yet gender equality remains unfinished business across the globe. Due to the scope of the issue, this paper will focus on gender disparities in the United States,



specifically. Women and girls in this region are still subjected to objectification, sexual harassment, workplace discrimination, and misogynistic rhetoric on a daily basis.

My aforementioned experience with the latter was just a nanoscopic tip of the iceberg. Growing up in a conservative, immigrant neighborhood, it was also hardly the worst, and surely won't be the last misogynistic sentiment I'd ever had to grit my teeth through. But it did serve as a chilling, unwarranted reminder that sexism could rear its ugly head at a friendly dinner with students of a progressive university located in one of the most liberal cities in the world.

The experience also temporarily paralyzed my feminist sensibilities. Throughout the past century, the surfaces of social and political counters had been scrubbed clean of overt declarations of female inferiority. Yet the foundations of sexist social structures, though invisible to the casual observer, remained intact and immovable, often transcending the corporeal plane by infecting the grey matter of all members of a binary world. Women could demand fairness in opportunity, but to demand fairness in unconscious perception would constitute a mental tyranny that has no space in a free society. There-in lies the ideological standstill from which this paper sprouted: the fourth-wave must either champion a total deconstruction of sexist systems of thought, or cease to exist. The issue is that such schools of thoughts have long been deemed an irrefutable fact of the world, now and forever.

That is, until I learned of the existence of a different world. During a discussion surrounding Charlotte Perkins Gilman's body of work, my American literature professor mentioned *Herland*, a utopian novel about an isolated society composed entirely of women. I had downloaded the novel onto my Kindle just prior to my flight to Paris and resolved to explore

Gilman's matriarchal universe as soon as the pilot announced lift-off. Upon reading, I found myself immersed in a world void of the unconscious bias which marred reality like a pox.

Gilman had successfully extracted an ideal social order, free of war, conflict, and domination, from the filaments of her imagination. This begged the question: whose imagination are we living in?

In this paper, I argue that feminist utopian literature is the foothold fourth-wave feminism needs to reach its potential. It's the radical element that'll rescue feminism from the unimaginative funk which has splintered the movement into hundreds of different nonviable pieces. Utopian literature doesn't just recommend alterations to reality. Instead, the genre pictures alternative futures that challenge and subvert patriarchal norms and systems of power. These visions of a more just and equitable society can serve as a source of inspiration and motivation for feminist activism and social change.

The corollary challenge would be bringing utopic values down to Earth. I'll demonstrate how feminist pragmatist philosophy can serve as a framework to tether and fuse utopian ideals to real-world systems and structures. Feminist pragmatism, a branch of philosophy that emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century, emphasizes the intersection of feminist and pragmatist thought, exploring the practical and experiential aspects of gender inequality and discrimination. Feminist pragmatism highlights the importance of focusing on practical solutions to address gender inequality, rather than theoretical or abstract ideas. Instead, it seeks to incorporate the insights and experiences of those affected by gender inequality into practical solutions that are grounded in the realities of people's lives.

A utopia is an imaginary land typically conjured up by an author to serve as an example of an idealized version of earthly society. It is, by definition, impractical. Yet pragmatic feminist Grace Lee Boggs famously called on activists to “imagine how they might operate outside of the current structures in order to create the ‘revolutionary philosophy’ needed for sustained, systemic change” (146). By combining the insights and approaches of both utopianism and pragmatism, it is possible to develop revolutionary solutions to age-old feminine grievances grounded in the realities of women’s lives and experiences.

I show this through the careful analysis and comparison of utopian texts spanning centuries. In chapter one, I provide relevant context of the history and evolution of utopian literature, from ancient religious texts to Renaissance Humanism and beyond. The inherent subjectivity of perfection and the limitations of literary expression make the realization of utopias challenging, leading some authors to embrace anti-utopianism in recent years. However, a recent reframing of utopias as a process rather than a “blueprint” has reignited interest in the genre as a tool for social betterment. This reworked understanding of utopia was particularly serviceable to feminist writers who had already been sidestepping the blueprint model, which drew on top of patriarchal foundations, for some time. The process-oriented character of feminist utopias makes them highly compatible with the pragmatist impulse.

In the following section, I discuss feminist utopias and their attempts to deconstruct societal biases surrounding gender. This sort of defamiliarization is a helpful tool for social critique, inviting the reader to question cultural norms that are typically accepted as fact. I also discuss the limitations of different modes of gender reallocation, the effects of patriarchal ideology on various social systems, and the need to reject both gynolatry and misogyny in the

pursuit of gender equality. This chapter focuses on two feminist science fiction novels, *Herland* and *The Female Man*, which challenge traditional notions of gender and highlight the importance of understanding that gender is a social construct open to change based on environmental conditions.

In the third chapter, I utilize Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* as a case study of a universe that defies the conventions of the prevailing culture. Through a diligent exploration of how the book reflects feminist grievances of the time, I narrow down three topics which are frequently invoked in the text: language, motherhood, and race. Gilman's treatment of these issues in her utopia are a direct reflection of the goals, values, and shortcomings of first-wave feminism. For instance, Gilman reconciles the androcentrism of American English with the creation of an alternative communication system unburdened by masculinist biases. She also centers her imaginary universe around matriarchal values to demonstrate how women's oppression is fueled by the decentralization of motherhood in American society. But these positive aspects of Gilman's utopia coexist with its constitutive limitation and the first-wave's original sin: the widespread omission of race from feminist theory and purpose which contributed to an exclusionary attitude toward women of color and working-class women.

Using *Herland* as an anchor, the last chapter looks to trans-historical continuities between Gilman and contemporary writers to track societal progress toward gender equality, as well as identify the strategies that have been successful in inciting social change. More recent instances of feminist utopia represent a sharp departure from the perfectionist tendencies of their predecessors. This shift is visible in these texts' heightened emphasis on the realities of society's social and racial incongruity. I argue that examining the social and legal foundations of these

utopian societies can inform practical implementation of utopian solutions in real-world systems and structures. Lastly, I invoke the term “internal disjunction” to refer to society’s learned dissonance between extant social systems and utopic social systems. To achieve progress, society must collectively unlearn this disjunction and rebrand utopia as a moving target for betterment rather than a singular vision.

Utopian thinking is critical to filling the gap between feminist theory and every-day struggle. As Anne K. Mellor writes, “Feminist theory is essentially Utopian. Feminist theory is grounded on the assumption of gender equality, a social equality between the sexes which has never existed in the historical past” (241). As I will attempt to show in my readings of feminist utopian novels, pragmatism is the ideological fuel necessary for the feminist engine to propel itself into the future.

## 1. From Heaven to Earth: The Evolution of Utopian Literature

Utopian literature predates even the most primitive instances of what would today be classified as science fiction. Sir Thomas More was the first person to coin the phrase “utopia”, which he derived from the Greek *ou-topos* meaning “no place” or “no where.” His book, titled *Utopia*, imagines a complex, self-sufficient island society with a distinct set of religious, social, and political customs. To this day, More’s trailblazing novel serves as a paragon for philosophers and fiction writers alike.

The examination of perfect societies, however, is a cultural science that has existed for centuries prior to *Utopia*’s publication in 1516. The concept of utopia has infiltrated many literary works since the beginning of recorded history as an expression of human potential and achievement. The Bible, for instance, one of the oldest and most widely-read texts known to humankind, contains a running motif of a parallel realm called “heaven,” a place of love, community, and worship. Heaven, perhaps the most widely regarded utopia in human history, contains elements of real-world devices and institutions veiled in a layer of mysticism, creating a sense of familiarity that aids the imaginative faculty. Religious authorities have used the threat of restricted ingress to this conceivable yet unattainable utopia to shape the conduct and beliefs of humankind in the physical world.

However, heaven is rarely mentioned in conversations about the origins of utopian literature. This is because medieval people existed in a world under siege by military conflicts,

disease, corruption, and extreme poverty. They sought easement in the transcendentalist promise of heaven, which was acknowledged not only as an irrefutable reality but also the ultimate reality. Thus, the Bible conceives of utopia in the form of heaven, a final, untouchable destination to be arrived at only through death.

More later secularized the utopian impulse by bringing heaven down to Earth. From *Utopia* and on, paradise refers to a blueprint rather than a journey's end. Heaven becomes not only attainable in a mortal lifespan but also constructable and adaptable, an incarnation of the image reflected in a carnival mirror facing reality.

More was writing at a time when utopian literature began to see a true emergence amid the rise of the Renaissance Humanism movement, which originated in 14<sup>th</sup>-century Italy and spread across Europe in the 15<sup>th</sup>-century. Proponents of Humanism recognized the importance of studying classical literature and the promotion of civic virtue, or the personal qualities associated with the healthy operation of a civil and political order. Humanism posited that the realization of a person's full potential through the study of moral philosophy, among other liberal art subjects, was vital to the development of one's self as well as society.

This was a direct departure from the widespread belief of the preceding era, which held that religion trumped all other subjects in importance and that knowledge/people were unchangeable. Renaissance Humanism argued that the examination of classic philosophy, rhetoric, and literature was equally tantamount to recovering reality as biblical texts, ushering in a wave of social criticisms that were quickly addressed by utopian hypotheses. For instance, Italian Tommaso Campanella's *The City of the Sun* (1623) mirrors several structural and thematic

aspects of More's *Utopia*, such as its advocacy of utopian socialism and its allusions to natural magic, a part of the occult which deals with natural forces directly. *New Atlantic* (1627) by Sir Francis Bacon expresses his aspirations for humankind by envisioning a society that embodies the future of human knowledge and discovery. Thus, Renaissance authors did not invent utopianism, which at its core is the presupposition of an alternate, better reality; but their concept of utopia certainly differed from all previous crystallizations of the utopian impulse.

In developing this immanent form of utopia, More and his contemporaries drew heavily from Greek classics that had been reinitiated into the cultural zeitgeist during the Renaissance. In around 375 BC, Plato authored *The Republic*, one such prefiguration of utopia, which entails a Socratic dialogue revolving around the order and character of a just city-state and the just man. Plato sketches the basic political structure of an idyllic city, Kallipolis, through speech. The Greek philosopher tackles two essential questions: "what is justice?" and "what is the relation of justice to happiness?" Plato engages with the literary tool of utopia to animate a sketch of his answer to various ethical and political questions. To the modern reader, however, the city described in *The Republic* is less ideal than it is totalitarian. The leadership of Kallipolis achieves a sense of egalitarianism through an increasingly absolute series of laws and regulations with little regard for the will of the governed. The city also features a rigidly surveilled caste system that inhibits social mobility for adults.

Centuries later, utopian writers are still struggling to maneuver around the structural and theoretical holes riddling the fabric of Plato's Kallipolis. One such logical quandary inhibiting a wide-scale realization of the utopias portrayed in literature, theology, philosophy, and political theory is the inherent subjectivity of perfection. The author of a utopian novel constructs their



fictional universe world so that it aligns with their personal worldview, which will undoubtedly vary from that of a person sitting to their left, a person ten years their senior, or a person three time zones away.

Thus, a society that boasts homogeneity in thought can be difficult to portray convincingly in fiction even if the reader applies suspension of disbelief. The occurrence of such a society in reality is sparse if not implausible. This understanding, among others, has prompted several anti-utopian authors in recent years to declare the genre of utopia on the brink of extinction. These scholars have grounded their claims on the notion that the world has experienced a sort of cultural retreat in the past century, indicated by a rise in dystopian literature produced by contemporary writers seemingly incapable of putting forward positive images of the future. In the novel *Phantoms of a Future Past* (2016), Mattias Ågren describes how a wave of Russian anti-utopian literature published in the late 21<sup>st</sup>-century “primarily manifested a black satire on the exhausted possibilities of the Soviet system, challenged fixed social dogmas, and in which the only possible future seemed to be a retrograde one” (3). This development continued at an increasing pace, prompting at least one scholar, Alexander Chantsev, to imagine the Russian literary landscape as the site of an “anti-utopia factory.”

Yet the backlash against utopian literature was hardly contained to Eastern Europe. At the end of the nineteenth century and in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, the utopian genre was co-opted by eugenicists and totalitarians to prop up the skeletons of socialist-communist projects across the globe. The ensuing two World Wars and collapse of several communist regimes soured attitudes across the globe toward idealistic interpretations of the present. The utopian genre, blemished by ideas of totalitarianism and impracticability, was forced to recalibrate its

scope of action. “Neither utopia as a concept nor as a literary genre is moribund; on the contrary, it is alive and well. We may have some difficulty in recognizing it because, once more, it has given proof of its extraordinary capacity to survive by reinventing itself” (19), writes Fátima Vieira in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* (2010).

This process of reinvention, Vieira elaborates, does not stray away from the idea of the future, but attempts to evaluate it through a more short-term lens. Unlike its ancestors, the political utopias of the nineteenth century, contemporary utopian literature distinguishes itself through a focus on a gradual change of the present as opposed to its complete annihilation and replacement. This era ushered in an influx of pragmatic utopianism, a phrase that would’ve perked ears years prior to its conception because of its paradoxical nature. The utopian genre reinvented itself as a process rather than a blueprint, and eventually became a silent but necessary cog in the machine of social betterment.

This version of utopia was a particularly serviceable asset to feminist utopian authors that had been sidestepping the “blueprint” form long before its widespread rebuke. Traditional utopias have overwhelmingly failed women, assigning them to subservient roles in alternate worlds run by stoney-faced patriarchs not unlike the authorities of the physical realm. Thus, feminist writers often found themselves incapable of raising utopia from the rubble of contemporary dogma. An essential first step to assembling a reality that the female sex could comfortably inhabit was resisting the temptation to build on top of the same foundation male writers traditionally incorporated into even the most forward-thinking works of utopia.

Instead, the author of the feminist utopia seeks to unpeel the subsidiary layers obscuring the vital forces and beliefs governing society by inverting the status quo. She snips at the tendons linking the past to the present, reconfigures them so that the time being is humming the tune of an alternative history. The author of the feminist utopia describes impossible places not to lull the reader into a bedtime-story induced trance, but acquaint them to a foreign plausibility existing conditions might have shut their eyes to. She examines gender roles first through a microscope then a kaleidoscope, dissects the anatomy of misogyny before testing how it would fare in a controlled environment. Jean Pfaelzer writes that, “Here in utopia the female author could fulfill all her desires and form characters in her own image, with no limits of time or space. Throughout its literary history, the feminist utopia has challenged the Lockean notion that patriarchy is a natural right” (283).

It is evident that the fervor surrounding the genre of the feminist utopia has heightened in times of significant restructuring of women’s social and political roles. Christine de Pizan wrote *City of Ladies* in 1405, an era when peasant women were restricted to domestic responsibilities, including preparing food, caring for children, and tending to livestock. The women constituting Pizan’s allegorical city, in contrast, are valued participants in society. Charlotte Perkin Gilman’s *Herland* (1915) surfaced within the context of women’s suffrage, women’s educational reform, and the advent of contraception. Decades later, Joana Russ’s *The Female Man* (1975) arose among struggles for equal pay, reproductive rights, wider access to both professional and non-traditional jobs, shared housework, childcare, and the removal of cultural stereotypes.

These distinct historical imbalances are reflected in the qualities of each author’s utopia, as well as through the literary tools wielded in the process of their assemblance. The structure of

Pizan's utopia most closely matches that of traditional, patriarchal models in that she describes an allegorical city populated by "good" women. However, their caliber is still evaluated in relativity to their male counterparts. The society Pizan describes is not insulated from men or the institutions they raised, but instead demonstrates how women might excel within them if unobstructed by their oppressor. To do so, however, the populace must embrace patriarchal concepts, such as virtue and chastity, to an extreme. Thus, Pizan's utopia signals to later feminist writers that the path to liberation is not through, but out.

Gilman incorporates many aspects of Pizan's *City of Ladies*, as well as More's writing, in her own alternate reality. Early utopian works tended to feature societies situated on islands, or regions that were secluded by naturally occurring barriers, such as mountains or rivers. The purpose of this remoteness was to promote a sense of fictionality which reinforces that such a place does not exist, yet still maintaining a level of realism which hints to the reader that it could. Gilman writes in this tradition by situating her imaginary civilization on a hidden plateau somewhere in the unexplored tropics. Her utopia differs from Pizan's, however, in that the women of *Herland* do not suffer from what Pfaelzer refers to as the "curse of contingency," or a contingency on males, in part because of the "monogendered" nature of the alternate reality. Gilman's society is also homogeneous in terms of race, gender, and class, making it impossible to impose its conditions onto the real world.

At the time of Gilman's writing, the field of philosophy experienced a resurgence of interest in American pragmatism. Part of the energy of that resurgence was due to feminist interest in pragmatism, which developed into a fully-formed offshoot called pragmatic feminism somewhere in the 1990s. This philosophical tradition drew upon the understandings of both

feminist and pragmatist theory to amplify philosophical thought. Pragmatists reject a bird's eye view of the world, which entails that objective knowledge can be attained by proximity to a single account of reality, but instead propose that there are multiple realities. Feminism, specifically intersectional feminism, is fundamentally akin to pragmatism in this respect, as it promotes inclusionary epistemologies that are derived from gendered life experiences.

Both ideologies defy the boundaries of traditional philosophy by encouraging people to consider the future as a guide to analyzing the past and molding the present. Utopian presuppositions are therefore significant, practical, and theoretically consistent with pragmatic thought. In her paper *The Task of Utopia: A Pragmatist and Feminist Perspective*, Erin McKenna argues that utopias are necessary because “what we imagine as desirable future possibilities determines how we will organize ourselves in the present and how we organize ourselves in the present will determine what is possible for the future... [A]s we begin to modify the present, we must continually re-evaluate both the end-in view being sought and the methods being employed” (5).

This sentiment is particularly pertinent to the trans-historical study of feminist utopian literature. Written in the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century, the narrative style employed in Russ' *The Female Man* represents a complete departure from the utopian tradition of Gilman's time. Throughout the novel, Russ describes four realities which differ from present-day society, with the two most radical alternatives being a dystopian world of women warring with men and a utopian world populated only by women. She conflates and disrupts temporality by placing all of these universes on timelines that run both parallel and across one another, an early echo of the intersectional values that would come to define third-wave feminism. In this way, Russ

recalibrates the end-in view proposed by Gilman, who had already reworked the coordinates passed down to her from Pizan.

Yet all of these texts are symptomatic of two brands of utopia McKenna regards as unaccommodating to the progressive goals of feminist pragmatism. Pizan and Gilman's utopias both fall under the umbrella of what McKenna characterizes as an "end-state utopia," which envisions an ultimate and unchangeable ideal social order. She argues that this strain of utopia fails to acknowledge the inherent subjectivity of any version of the social ideal, as well as the impossibility of posing a fixed set of values on a dynamic world. Furthermore, the afore-mentioned realities described in Russ' novel can be classified as anarchist utopias, which McKenna finds problematic insofar as the realization of utopian ideals is dependent on a revolutionary change such that no resources exist in the current order to support its enactment.

I entirely agree with McKenna's criticism of both of these forms of utopia, however, I would argue that their rejection from the canon of pragmatic feminist literature is both unnecessary and unproductive. McKenna only offers to open the door for a third literary type, described as a "process, pragmatist utopianism." In this type, feminist utopias "embrace a notion of process and change, see the importance of diversity, and seek to avoid the division of means from ends. They see that how they get to the future is part of what they achieve" (139-140). In other words, these utopias exclusively imagine a society that strives toward ideal conditions for all of its participants, rather than the few perched at the top of a man-made hierarchy. Furthermore, this society will continue to generate and pursue new values through a democratic process as the needs and desires of its constituents inevitably evolve.

However, the dismissal of utopian texts that do not conform to this literary type goes against the fundamental principles of pragmatist philosophy, which entail a commitment to provisionality and growth of ideals. To derive real solutions from utopian thought, it is important for feminist thinkers to understand that all forms of utopia—end-state, anarchist, pragmatist, and so on—are in conversation with one another. Perhaps one text can better serve the purpose of helping to understand history, whereas another text can be productively dissected to aid in the discovery of utopic processes of thought or governance that can be implemented into real-world systems. For example, the following chapter will discuss how Gilman's *Herland* and Russ' *The Female Man*, despite their end-state and anarchist sentiments, utilize defamiliarization as a tool for a valid social critique of society's treatment of gender. This critique will come to inform later iterations of feminist utopia, regardless of which of the three literary types they align with, suggesting that all forms of feminist utopia can inform a brighter future so long as they're accompanied by the grounding weight of a pragmatist lens.

## 2. Reimagining the Gender Binary: Defamiliarization as a Tool for Social Critique

Utopian tales attempt to deconstruct fundamental tenets of reality such that scientific truths are momentarily rendered fallible. The author can take advantage of this rare, kinetic moment of suspended disbelief to expose the porous underbelly of usually impenetrable schools of thought. The feminist utopia is particularly interested in the examination of reproductive biology, a field of study that is ever-evolving in all but some crucial respects. In her essay, titled *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), Donna Haraway describes “the close ties of sexuality and instrumentality” as a societal curse which compels many to view the female body “as a kind of private satisfaction and utility-maximizing machine” (43). Feminist authors posit that if the forefathers of modern medicine were not influenced, in any capacity, by this sentiment, nor by any other sexist presuppositions, the fruits of their labor would’ve looked much different.

The feminist utopia attempts to correct for this bias through three modes of gender reallocation, identified by utopian theorist Isabel Knight: “monogendered,” “gender-merged,” and “gender-free.” Each of these modes lend themselves to theoretical inspection in different ways, but not without a unique set of limitations. In a “monogendered” utopia, such as Pizan’s *City of Ladies* and Gilman’s *Herland*, women are credited for the development and governance of their respective civilizations. Knight elaborates that while this category of utopia is an excellent outlet for the feminist imagination, it implies that “the problem of gender is insoluble” (30). Furthermore, “monogendered” utopias don’t necessarily account for the continued presence of women infected with the patriarchal residue of their former civilization. Pizan’s women are



still operating within the confines of man-made institutions. Gilman attempts to sidestep this issue by unbraiding societal structures down to the starting stitch; in doing so, she takes an educated guess as to what the social conventions of a population that evolved with zero male influence might be.

The “gender-merged” utopia balances traditional traits of both genders. *Native Tongue* (1984) by Suzette Hadin Elgin’s and *The Dispossessed* (1974) by Ursula K. Le Guin both feature utopian communities populated by members of either sex, where gender difference is either contentious or superficially abolished, respectively. Knight argues that such forms of utopias often fail to acknowledge that “the very constructs of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ are intrinsic to patriarchal ideology. To recommend that both sets of gender meaning be somehow internalized by both sexes simply puts the hierarchy of values inside instead of outside” (30). According to Knight, male and female are not complementary terms, but instead describe two “highly distorted meaning clusters which have been imposed on human beings, diminishing and contorting them” (29-30).

Thus, the traits associated with either sex cannot be laid neatly on opposite ends of a spectrum, nor are they particularly useful to anthropological study. French psychiatrist Franz Fanon recounts a similar phenomenon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, where-in he describes the plight of the previously colonized embracing liberation. He reluctantly concludes: “For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white” (12). Thus, if the destiny of any racialized subject is white, then the destiny of any gendered subject is inescapably man.

Though the women's rights and Civil Rights movement should not be conflated, there are certainly parallels that speak to universal truths of oppression. Fanon posits that instead of striving for true liberation, the oppressed seeks only to resemble their oppressors. This is because liberation is an arbitrary idea to those that have never known freedom, whereas the oppressor is a ready picture of privilege and power. To advance in a society designed for men, women have no choice but to embody traditionally masculine qualities. Consequently, the masculine semblance becomes the desirable suit in a vying game played loudly in office parlor rooms and privately around kitchen tables.

Knight's last mode of gender reallocation, the "gender-free" utopia, describes a sort of dialectical androgyny where-in biological transformations annihilate gender antitheses. This category refers to utopias such as Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), which flip traditional gender roles on their head. June Singer, in *Androgyny: The Opposites Within* (1975), argues that humans are already androgynous, yet the expression of this primordial aspect of our existence is suppressed by an internal disjunction which coaxes the character toward one extreme or another. A society unhinged from a male-dominant, sex-stratified social system can only begin to realize itself if the populace makes an earnest, collective effort to unlearn this disjunction.

Such a male-dominated system, also known as the patriarchy, can be roughly defined as a framework for constructing a reality compatible with patriarchal teachings. This is the process by which biologically assigned sexes are merged with socially constructed genders, to which certain traits are attributed and then hierarchically arranged. Even language, which Knight describes as "the very instrument of thought," is heavily influenced by gender and contaminated with generic

masculine terms, such as mankind or brotherhood, that exclude women. Fundamental understandings of how to navigate the world “reflect and reinforce ideological assumptions about gender-differentiated behavior, roles, character, and purpose.” Real-world institutions begin to emerge that claim to account for socially-imposed gender differences in the integrity of their construction, according to medical, psychological, educational, theological or philosophical canons. Knight writes that “the reciprocal validation afforded by these multi-leveled interlocking systems has made the ideology governing their construction all but invisible. They appear to be, simply, explanations of the way the world is” (19).

The utopian perspective argues that the world could have been otherwise. That the so-called reality most people take at face value is a production imagined and puppeteered by male-dominant entities of a specific history. Contemporary utopias, however, differ from their predecessors in one crucial respect, which is that they have embraced the idea that idolatry of feminine attributes is equally as unserviceable to the feminist cause as the praise of masculinity.

A closer examination of the gynolatrous and the misogynistic reveals that the two seemingly contradictory modes of gender argument are reflected in each other “so that, in spite of the reversal of values, the idealization of women is structurally identical to her debasement” (21). Knight analyzes four texts, two of which are gynolatrous and two of which are misogynistic in nature — George Gilder’s *Sexual Suicide* (1973), Jules Michelet’s *Woman* (1860), Otto Weininger’s *Sex and Character* (1903) and Norman Mailer’s *Prisoner of Sex* (1971), respectively — to find that they all employ varying approaches to reach the same conclusion: the man is the model of humanity, whereas the woman is an angel or a womb. In terms of the gender binary they uphold, misogyny and gynolatry are one and the same. Abhorred or fetishized, the

implicit purpose of women in a world founded on patriarchal principles will invariably be to serve as the accessories or assistants of men.

Utopias from the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century and prior stand somewhere near the threshold of this existential truth, but are still decades of ideological refinement away from crossing over. Older instances of utopia are still awash with references to masculinity and femininity, trying desperately to impose pro-women lines of thought onto a land rendered finite through patriarchal influence without falling off. However, these instances can also serve as trail marks to track the evolution of feminist perspectives on gender.

For the purposes of this paper, I'll pick up the thread from Gilman's writings, which are sufficiently representative of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century conceptualizations of gender. In her autobiography, Gilman discusses the notion of "primitive femininity," a neologism she'd developed to refer to women on their way to individuation. Her use of such terminology demonstrates the curbs of radical thought from the nineteenth and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century, which was still steeped in masculinist biases that were not always apparent to feminists of that period. At the time Gilman was writing her autobiography in 1935, women had the right to vote, greater access to education, and were entering the workforce in droves. Gilman writes that "there is now nothing to prevent women from becoming as fully human in their social development as men" (316), implying that the feminist movement had achieved its goals.

Gilman also believed that sex distinctions were overplayed and had an unnecessarily large role in informing women's tasks and functions. She betrays the limits of her progressivism by promoting an essentialist understanding of femininity and masculinity. While the feminist

author ventures to prove that such notions of sex distinctions derive from cultural exchanges rather than science, she also “accepts certain distinctions as biologically and psychically immutable” (27). Gilman also believed that feminine qualities were a necessary combatant to the destructiveness caused by an overexertion of the masculine impulse on society’s operation. Thus, a balance must be struck for there to be cultural and natural growth. According to Frances Bartkowski, this notion was deemed unproductive by radical feminists from the 1970s, who attempted to reconcile demands of equality with an acceptance of differences by striving “to rescue the idea of difference from its connection with other hierarchical and dualistic systems of thought” (27).

Regardless, Gilman’s *Herland* contains a reworking of the concept femininity that superseded the outdated description conveyed in Coventry Patmore’s narrative poem *Angel in the House* (1858). This work presented a picture of womanhood that served as the foremost example of the feminine ideal for decades following its publication. In his prelude to *The Rose of the World*, Patmore writes that women have a “countenance angelical” and a “disposition [that] is devout.” Another feature portrayed women as “amiable and innocent.”

But by the end of the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century, the idea of the “new women” was gaining popularity as a woman who was “variously, a feminist activist, a social reformer, a popular novelist, a suffragette, playwright, a woman poet” (Ledger 1997: 1). In life and in literature, the “new woman” was portrayed as an opinionated, decadent, self-sustaining woman who was typically uninterested in traditional gender roles or relationships. This figure represented ideals which paralleled the objectives of the women’s rights movement.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Gilman presents a rebuttal to Patmore's *Angel in the House* as well as, to a lesser extent, the concept of the new woman. The female narrator in Gilman's story is far from a dignified housekeeper; instead, she is a bereft housewife experiencing hysteria as a reaction to untreated postpartum depression and a rocky marriage. The ideal women depicted by *Angel in the House* and the concept of the new women are both performances of femininity, whereas Gilman's narrator represents the raw, unfiltered torment of womanhood. She appears to portray the opposite side of the coin in *Herland*, where-in the women are described as "highly intelligent" and "athletic-light and powerful." The narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, in contrast, is helpless, confined to a singular room by her patronizing husband. However, the woman intuits that if she "had less opposition and more society and stimulus," she might be capable of regaining sanity. Thus, Herlandian women are not per contra the narrator; instead, they might be the answer to her question, the purest expression of femininity if uninhibited by male involvement.

*Herland* is implicit in its criticism that males establish the bounds of femininity in accordance with a masculine worldview, which is ultimately damaging to both sexes. The use of the word "sex," rather than "gender," here is deliberate; as Bernice L. Hausman puts it, "It is helpful to reorient our analysis historically, because it is too easy to read historical texts according to the categories of the present" (490). Since "sex" is the old term for what would now often-times be referred to as "gender," it is crucial to review and reconsider what pregender feminists intended to convey when writing "sex." This analytical tool allows feminist literature to be accurately situated among their historical context and fosters more productive discourse surrounding contemporary disagreements on the categorization of gender and sex.

Along these lines, Gilman's *Herland* is heavily influenced by evolutionary feminism, making it an unlikely choice for contemporary feminists to emulate, but does "offer an alternate view (within current debates) of the body as the locus of biosocial problems for women" (490-491). Despite this, the male gaze is central to the novel, which is narrated by Vandyck Jennings ("Van"), a male sociologist. Gilman likely makes this choice because a man's voice is thought to be more neutral than a female's; paradoxically, this is precisely the idea Gilman is disavowing. Regardless, a male perspective allows the reader to easily compare and contrast Herlandian social dynamics to that of the "real world." The narrator observes that the absence of masculine influence in the female-led society has also rendered femininity in the traditional sense obsolete, saying:

These women, whose essential distinction of motherhood was the dominant note of their whole culture, were strikingly deficient in what we call "femininity." This led me very promptly to the conviction that those "feminine charms" we are so fond of are not feminine at all, but mere reflected masculinity—developed to please us because they had to please us, and in no way essential to the real fulfillment of their great process. (50)

Vandyck's open-mindedness allows him to draw the same conclusion as feminist scholars of Gilman's time. His companions, however, are unsettled by the feeling of erasure evoked by their presence among a civilization that benefits from zero ideological or physical support from men. Terry, a wealthy womanizer who embarks on the scientific expedition for the sake of adventure, is particularly reluctant to accept his new environment: "...his intense masculinity seemed only fit complement to their intense femininity. But here he was all out of drawing" (Gilman 80).

Gilman points out that not only are the concepts of masculinity and femininity figments of humanity's imagination, but that their grip on the social consciousness is stunting progress. The performance of femininity tends to overpower women's drive for autonomy. It also reinforces in men an incorrect assumption as to the nature and limitations of feminine traits. In *Herland*, the population is free from external pressure to conform to false constructions of womanhood. The result is that positive traits associated with femininity, such as empathy, cooperativeness, and motherliness, manifest themselves outside of the domestic sphere, in all facets of society. This stands in stark contrast with reality, where masculinity tends to offset 'toxic femininity,' giving rise to the manifestation of negative traits such as submissiveness, hysteria, and so on.

Joanna Russ' *The Female Man*, written nearly sixty years following the publication of *Herland*, engages with this concept within a gender/sex paradigm, making it more applicable toward contemporary scenarios. The feminist science fiction novel is set across four parallel worlds that differ in time as well as space, and are each represented by one of four women with varying perspectives on gender roles, womanhood and sexuality. Each character is a product of her respective environment; she carries the social biases and customs of her homeland to every new land as the women jump from universe to universe, meeting and visiting one another in an epic, inter-universal social experiment.

Whereas *Herland* possesses characteristics of a "monogendered" utopia, *The Female Man* features all three modes of gender reallocation at one point in its narrative progression. The principal character, Joanna, hails from a universe that closely resembles Earth. She refers to herself as a "female man" due to the belief that she must deemphasize her female identity to earn



some semblance of authority, both among her peers and the audience to her musings. Her story can be roughly defined as a curious amalgam of “gender-free” and “gender-merged,” with the former pertaining to Joanna’s existence and the latter describing the demographics of the world around her. Meanwhile, librarian Jeannine Dadier lives in a close model of our reality, except for one crucial modification to the historical timeline which entails that the Great Depression never ended. This universe, which is “gender-merged,” contains the most glaring examples of gender inequality and female oppression out of the four worlds described.

Finally, Janet’s homeland is Whileaway, a futuristic world set 800 years after the male species was completely eradicated by a gender-targeting plague. Like *Herland*, this civilization is “mono-gendered”; however, the implication of this fact manifests itself very differently in both societies. The Herlandian women are maternal, egalitarian, gentle masters of nature with asexual tendencies. Whileawayan society proves rougher around the edges, as indicated by a culture that emphasizes age stratification, sexuality, and genetic modification. Whileaway is less idealized than the world of Herland; this pronounced imperfection is representative of the widening schism between the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century and late 20<sup>th</sup>-century feminist understanding of gender.

The last universe houses Jael, a soldier in an ongoing, 40-year war between men and women. It eventually surfaces that Jael is the entity responsible for uniting the four central characters because they are essentially “four versions of the same woman.” This confession underpins the argument behind Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, which roots gender in external signs and actions, as opposed to internal or natural origins. Butler elaborates on this idea in the first chapter of *Gender Trouble* (1990):

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender. (33)

According to Butler, Gender is a highly specialized process which entails that, after performing “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame” (45), a subject will be forced to make a choice of gender style from a limited array of options presented by society. This decision must be reached within a rigid time frame, before their debut as a conscious, fully-formed citizen; deviation from the course will inevitably lead to ostracization from the mainstream. The four women described in *The Female Man* are presumably identical at birth; however, each environment presents the characters with a handful of “costumes” from which to select their gender style. Every woman’s choice is limited, but some are better designed to promote self-autonomy than others. It is in this way that Russ conveys the importance of understanding that woman is a social construction, which is open to any type of change depending on the conditions of her environment in terms of its cultures and structures.

The final chapter of Russ’ novel describes Joanna, the Female Man, herself, as she stands before a mirror and reconciles with the unshakeable female identity she seeks to supplant. She earnestly chants a pro-women mantra before modifying the words to be more self-affirming, only to find that she cannot project the bastions of womanhood onto her person:

"Woman is the gateway to another world; Woman is the earth-mother; Woman is the eternal siren; Woman is purity; Woman is carnality; Woman has intuition; Woman is the life-force; Woman is selfless love.

"I am the gateway to another world," (said I, looking in the mirror) "I am the earth-mother; I am the eternal siren; I am purity," (Jeez, new pimples) "I am carnality; I have intuition; I am the life-force; I am selfless love." (Somehow it sounds different in the first person, doesn't it?)

Honey (said the mirror, scandalized) Are you out of your fuckin' mind? (205)

Joanna, as a fictional woman, finds herself approaching the same conceptual standstill most flesh and blood women grapple with, consciously or not, on a daily basis: how can I honor my womanhood without allowing it to define me? To limit me? The truth is that such an undertaking is impossible. Womanhood, not unlike manhood, is a prefatory sifter in a process of classification that commences at birth and persists past expiry. As stated both explicitly and implicitly by feminist scholars, gender is a construct and a cage. The projection of gender stereotypes of either sex onto a person inhibits movement, promotes internalized biases, and stunts societal progression. And yet, there's no escaping it. Even the feminist utopia dares not promise a world untethered to gender expectations.

Instead, contemporary examples posit how such expectations might vary depending on the environment in ways it might be extraordinarily difficult for a mind previously exposed to patriarchal teachings to conceive. In this manner, feminist utopias are a practical tool for investigating habits of thought beyond the scope of gender as well as within it. Examining stories with an eye to their speculative qualities and their conceptualization of gender generates new questions about the field which feed the sociological imagination. This circular process can lead to scientific breakthroughs and reinforce progressive thinking with respect to social constructs

that have proved immovable in the past. In this next chapter, I'll explain how feminist utopia could also be a pragmatic asset to the feminist approach to issues surrounding motherhood, language, and race, which, like gender, would also benefit from a utopic portrayal.

### 3. Herland Revisited: Examining a Feminist Utopia through a Pragmatic Lens

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* serves as an excellent case study of a universe that defies the conventions of the prevailing culture. In some ways, *Herland* can be seen as a reflection of pragmatic philosophy. The women of Herland have developed a society based on practical, empirical observation of what works best for their community. They have no preconceived ideas about gender roles or other societal norms, and are open to new ideas and experimentation. At the same time, however, *Herland* can also be seen as a critique of some aspects of pragmatism. The women who populate Gilman's utopia unanimously reject the notion that progress must always be tied to economic and technological advancement, and instead prioritize the well-being of their community over material gains.

Furthermore, the conditions of Herland cannot, of course, be practically superimposed onto reality, since any attempted recreation of Herlandian society would require (1) a total eradication of the male species and (2) a widespread eugenics movement to equalize the remainder of the population. As Thomas Galt Peyser puts it, "Herland itself may therefore be less of a prescriptive model than a prelude to a critique, a machine for dismantling popular prejudices with an eye to some future reconstruction" (1). It is, however, equally as necessary to heed the variables unaccounted for in Gilman's utopia as it is to acknowledge the comparative advantages of *Herland* that could stand upright without the crutches of fantasia. Susan Gubar argues that "women abused by the probable refuse it by imagining the possible in a revolutionary rejection of patriarchal culture"; "feminism imagines an alternative reality that is truly fantastic"

(139). In this vein, *Herland* subverts the confinements of realist thought committed to the unyielding acceptance of a patriarchal order. It is a portal to which the reader can escape and observe the unfolding of a foreign culture from an Archimedean vantage point too distant to lend itself to interference, but just close enough to foster relatability.

*Herland* was originally published as a serial in 1915 in *The Forerunner*, a monthly journal produced entirely by Gilman from 1909 to 1916. At the time of her writing, American women were effectively stranded from the formal structures of the public sphere—holding elective office, voting, serving on juries—as well as constantly subjected to overt sexism that rendered them secondary citizens. Though never formally expressed, this idea underlied the principles written in all of the country’s governing documents. According to the Supreme Court, women were not considered “persons” under the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which guarantees citizens equal protection under the law. A woman’s legal standing was inextricably tied to her marital status; she had no identity separate from that of her husband. She had no right to sue or be sued, to own property, to pursue a career, or to control her biological reproduction.

The first wave of feminism took place in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century, emerging out of a landscape transformed by socialist, left-leaning politics, and urban industrialism. Its unifying purpose was to amplify women’s role outside of the domestic sphere, with a focus on suffrage. Gilman’s political and philosophical meditations are widely regarded as the writer’s most valuable contribution to the early feminist cause. Historian Carl Degler argues that Gilman was the mouthpiece for feminine grievances which had previously festered sans articulation: “It is hardly an exaggeration to speak of her as the major intellectual leader of the struggle for

women's rights, in the broadest sense, during the first two decades of the twentieth century” (22). Curiously enough, not many analyses of Gilman's writings recognize the centrality of radicalized reproductive thinking to her feminism, though her work, as well as that of her critics, was often imbued with a subtle but potent obsession with personal, feminist, and national genealogy. This *idée fixe* is later echoed by critics that continue to celebrate Gilman as a “feminist foremother,” who, despite her frequent expressions of racist or nativist sentiments, should be situated as the origin of the genealogy of feminism. In so doing, early readings of *Herland* do not pay close enough attention to the relationship between issues of racial formation and nationalism to the contemporary output of feminist knowledge.

In Gilman’s fiction, alternative visions of motherhood and utopian reproductive scenarios are necessary rungs in the ladder to social betterment. Rather than confining women to the domestic sphere, Gilman charges them with designing an improved society and ultimately reproducing a racially “pure” nation. According to Alys Eve Weinbaum, “...Gilman, like a number of First Wave feminists, was involved in shoring up an evolutionary discourse about white civilized womanhood... Gilman’s ideals will continue to trouble contemporary feminism’s dominant self-conception—that it is possible for feminism to be antiracist—so long as scholars fail to employ a critical genealogical methodology in constructing the history of feminism” (273-274). Weinbaum argues Gilman’s work must be examined scientifically, using genealogy as “a form of historical inquiry devoid of nostalgia” (274). She recommends approaching Gilman’s racism and nativism symptomatically rather than moralistically; for the purposes of this paper, it will also be necessary to evaluate *Herland* from a pragmatic standpoint.

This chapter will engage the wisdom of contemporary feminist scholars like Weinbaum to exhume and inspect hallmarks of Herlandian society with modern applications, with an eye to tenets turned vestigial through disuse. It will also track the nature of this obsolescence to produce a timeline of when certain Herlandian suggestions at future reconstruction ceased to entice the modern imagination, and why.

Gilman molds facets of her imagined society in the shape of an answer to age-old feminist questions, but fails to detect that the foundational clay is polluted with patriarchal sediment. This oversight fuels the causality dilemma revolving around the observation that masculinity gives rise to ‘toxic femininity’ and femininity gives rise to ‘toxic masculinity.’ A more pragmatic line of reasoning, as opposed to a cul-de-sac, circular strain, would be to determine how both sexes might work toward a productive coexistence by offsetting positive characteristics inherent to the other. *Herland* does not propose a solution. However, the novel does make a concerted effort to identify feminine qualities that the patriarchy has subverted and repackaged as disadvantageous, such as warmth as weakness, humility as passivity. *Herland* envisions how those same qualities might be integrated into the governing philosophy to maximize social well-being.

Throughout her novel, Gilman evokes three significant feminist topics still debated among contemporary feminists: language, motherhood, and intersectionality. Herlandian citizens have their own language, which the three explorers must learn in order to communicate effectively with their hosts. Gilman demonstrates that language and culture are inextricably linked, one being indicative of the quality of the other. The Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, also known as the linguistic relativity hypothesis, refers to the proposal that the structure of one’s native



language strongly influences the world-view they eventually acquire. This theory, developed by Edward Sapir and his mentee Benjamin Lee Whorf, keeps with pragmatist tradition by addressing real-world trends through observation and repeated experimentation. Whorf concluded that language users “dissect nature along the lines laid down by [their] native languages” (213). In *Transcending Language in Gilman’s Herland*, Kallista Kidd points out that by juxtaposing the male characters’ language system with a “conversely gynocentric and egalitarian language,” the text exposes the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century United States English language as misogynistic and colonialist. Although Gilman does not invent a new language, the text implies that Herlandian speak is imbued with the same ideals of Motherhood and egalitarianism that are intrinsic to the culture. In doing so, “*Herland* inverts the logos upon which the language of Gilman’s ‘now’ centers in order to invite the reader to transcend her language system and culture” (31).

In addition to educating the explorers on the Herlandian tongue, the women also endeavor to learn their visitors' language. It is during these lessons that the discrepancies between American and Herlandian culture are the most apparent, as evidenced by the “word gap” between the two vernaculars. For instance, when Zava, the language teacher assigned to Jeff, inquires about the meaning of the term “virgin,” Jeff answers that it refers to “the female who has not mated” (47). He elaborates that this term can technically be used to describe a male; however, it is rarely utilized so. This imbalance reveals that American culture sensationalizes the concept of male virginity far less than female virginity. According to Kidd, “the virginity or lack thereof in males is inconsequential because the males are the active beings—the colonizers, the controllers of female virginity—while the females in the androcentric culture are passive, like a

section of land” (31). The virgin woman excites the masculine pioneer spirit because, like the western frontier, she is presently undiscovered and unconquered. Thus, the word “virgin” reinforces the perception of the male as active and the female as passive, thereby establishing the male as the ideal to be aspired to in the speaker’s mind.

In contrast, the Herlander language values femininity as the ideal. The recurring capitalization of the word “Mother” and “Motherhood” plays on the capitalization of “Father” in the English language to represent the Christian God. Van comes to discover that the Herlanders “were Mothers, not in our sense of helpless involuntary fecundity...but in the sense of Conscious Makers of People” (69). The phrase “involuntary fecundity” emphasizes the passivity Van associates with the process of human motherhood. In patriarchal culture, a mother does not necessarily get to decide when or with whom she’ll have to reproduce, nor can she always ensure her child’s circumstances. Herlanders reproduce through parthenogenesis, or the process of “virgin birth,” granting them the freedom to serve as arbiters of their own reproductive fate. The gynocentric Herlander language system therefore assigns an active role to mothers, as evidenced by the use of the term “Conscious Makers.”

Thus, Gilman’s solution to treating the gender imbalance fostered by language is the creation of an alternative communication system unburdened by masculinist biases. This is technically an impractical solution because it proposes a global-scale rejection of all languages that don’t promote gender distinctions. However, Herland is correct in proposing the furtherance of the feminist cause is highly dependent on a cultural metamorphosis that must be preceded by an alteration of speech to include women. Since Herland’s publication, the world has seen many movements to equalize language predicated on this notion.

One of the earliest efforts to make language more gender-inclusive was the adoption of "Ms." as a title for women in the 1970s. Prior to that, women were typically referred to as "Miss" or "Mrs." based on their marital status, which was seen by feminist thinkers as problematic because it suggested that a woman's status was defined by her relationship to a man. "Ms." allowed women to be identified without reference to their marital status, and it quickly became a widely accepted title. In the 1980s and 1990s, there was a growing awareness of the limitations of gendered language, which had traditionally used masculine terms as the default. This led to the development of gender-neutral language, which seeks to use words and phrases that are inclusive of people of all genders. For example, instead of using "he" as a generic pronoun, many speakers now use "they" or "he or she" to be more inclusive.

In recent years, there has been a growing movement to use gender-inclusive language in a wider range of contexts, including academic writing, government documents, and everyday speech. This includes using gender-neutral terms for occupations and roles that were traditionally seen as gendered (e.g. "police officer" instead of "policeman" or "firefighter" instead of "fireman"), and avoiding gendered terms like "mankind" or "manpower" in favor of more neutral alternatives like "humanity" and "workforce." This can be seen as a pragmatic means of countering the internal disjunction that leads people to evaluate the world in terms of gender with an unconscious partiality toward the masculine.

As the Herlanders continue to learn about American culture through the lens of language, they grow increasingly alarmed by the apparent decentralization of motherhood in the explorers' society. One commonality between 20<sup>th</sup>-century and contemporary feminists is their

determination to extricate the biological mother from the function of child-rearing. Gilman represents this desire through her staunch defense of the “cult of motherhood,” or a deeply rooted belief that taking on the role of mother is the most fulfilling thing a woman could do with her life. In Herland, motherhood is the highest possible calling. Motherhood is even central to the dominant religion, a sort of “Maternal Pantheism” that revolves around a Mother Goddess. Instead of worshiping a separate deity, Herlanders honor the life force that nourishes their society. The birthing process is described as “a period of utter exaltation [when] the whole being is uplifted and filled with concentrated desire” (27). The concept of afterlife is also understood in terms of their responsibility toward their children, which are considered to be extensions of the Herlander’s self.

Furthermore, the decision to bear children is “not a brute passion [or] a mere 'instinct'” (23). Anna Lanthrop posits that “the virgin birth capacity renders heterosexuality incidental, and allows Gilman the opportunity to re-imagine a new configuration for human relationships” (51). She also suggests that this possibility mirrors Gilman’s belief that the sexual relationship between men and women often belies an economic proposition; thus, economic dependence has led to “excessive sex-indulgence, and the inevitable evil consequence” (24). Gilman argues that the attraction between sexes is only exacerbated by their distinction, meaning that the wide-scale expression of hyper-masculine/feminine traits is part of a collective act of gratification that is degrading to the whole of humanity.

Real-world conceptualizations of parenthood play into this supposition by placing Father and Mother, like Man and Woman, at opposite ends of the gender binary. Father occupies an active role in all spheres except domestic, where he is a passive participant in his offspring's

rearing, whereas Mother is tethered to the child. A boy might observe this dynamic in his youth and then subconsciously seek to emulate it as a man. Both pragmatism and many versions of feminism warn against this rigorous individuation from motherhood demanded of boys as a requisite to obtaining their 'masculine' identity, as this implies that masculinity is defined in stark opposition to everything motherhood represents. In a *View from Nowhere*, philosopher Thomas Nagel espouses the pragmatist viewpoint that the disconnectedness of a male from natural, worldly processes, like motherhood, represents "a separation from the *maternal*—the immanent realms of earth, nature, the authority of the body—and a compensatory turning toward the *paternal* for legitimation through external regulations, transcendent values, and the authority of the law" (64).

In Herland, motherhood is not a burden, but a person's greatest contribution to society. Since no one—or no woman, rather—is untouched by the responsibilities of childcare, the priorities of Herlandian society are restructured around the education and oversight of youth. As Vandyck Jennings observes, "You see, children were the-*the raison d'etre* in this country" (31). Herlandian women are not subjected to the pressures of the biological clock, nor does their capacity to reproduce depend on a male presence. Herlandian babies remain with their biological mother for their first year, but are thereafter cared for by the rest of their community. Education is incorporated into every facet of life so that children are "taught continuously but unconsciously—never knowing they were being educated" (103). This child-rearing philosophy stands in stark contrast with that of the real world as described by Jennings: "...whereas our children grow up in private homes and families, with every effort made to protect and seclude them from a dangerous world, here they grew up in a wide, friendly world, and knew it for theirs,

from the first" (33). Even Herland's infrastructure is built with children in mind so that "baby-proofed designs" are the standard instead of an optional upgrade.

To this day, motherhood is still the subject of contentious debate. Consuelo Corradi posits that one of the prominent threads of traditional feminist thought has been a view of motherhood as "being the bastion of women's subordination in a patriarchal society." The corollary view therefore proposes that the liberation of women is only conceivable through opposition or, "at best, despite motherhood." Gilman demonstrates the opposite through her utopia; in her view, the collective embrace of motherhood, not just as a state of being, but also as a governing philosophy, is the only way forward. In some ways, this belief is more pragmatic than that of anti-maternalists, as it at least acknowledges that the role of mothering is and will always be central to society, and therefore cannot be diminished without the implied diminishment of the sex it is biologically assigned to. Aside from the inclusion of parthenogenesis, Gilman's vision of a society which designs policies to accommodate motherhood rather than tolerate it, and splits the responsibilities of motherhood evenly among its members, has many practical applications.

Many real-world societies have since taken strides to achieve this vision. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, women were expected to marry, have children, and prioritize their roles as wives and mothers over other pursuits. Contraception and abortion were largely illegal, and there was little access to prenatal care or safe childbirth practices. However, throughout the 1900s, there were significant shifts in attitudes toward maternity and reproductive rights for women. One of the earliest milestones was the passage of the Sheppard-Towner Maternity and Infancy Protection Act of 1921, which provided federal funding for maternal and child health services.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the women's liberation movement brought reproductive rights to the forefront of public discourse, with demands for access to contraception and safe, legal abortion. The landmark Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade* in 1973 legalized abortion in the United States, and the feminist movement continued to push for reproductive rights and access to healthcare throughout the following decades. In addition to these legal and policy changes, women gained greater autonomy and decision-making power over their reproductive lives, with more options for birth control and assisted reproduction. The concept of "choice" has become central to discussions of reproductive rights, emphasizing the importance of women's agency in making decisions about their own bodies and lives. There has also been a growing recognition of the importance of supporting women throughout the process of pregnancy and childbirth, with increased access to prenatal care and efforts to improve maternal health outcomes.

The early 21<sup>st</sup>-century, in particular, has experienced a flowering of *Herland*-reminiscent governmental structures which utilize a social-democratic framework to promote values Gilman also espoused in her utopia. For instance, countries such as Finland, Norway, and New Zealand are known for their family-friendly policies, including generous parental leave, affordable childcare, and access to healthcare. Scientific studies have validated the notion that societies which embrace such policies that promote maternal health and well-being tend to have higher levels of happiness among their citizens. Thus, a more egalitarian approach to child-rearing benefits both mother and father, creating a safer, brighter future for their offspring.

In the same vein, countries whose government's display a maternal love toward their citizens tend to experience more favorable social and economic conditions than those that don't. In 2019, Finland's government was led by a coalition of five female party leaders. The country

implemented policies such as universal daycare and extended parental leave to support families and promote gender equality. New Zealand's Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, has been noted for her compassionate leadership style and focus on issues such as child poverty and mental health. The country has also introduced policies such as a "well-being budget" that considers social and environmental outcomes alongside economic ones. These real-world cases indicate that Gilman's promotion of a matriarchal world order as a more just and socially conscious ruling style than those already at play is grounded in actuality.

Yet the shatterproof sense of harmony found in the all-women universe cannot be replicated on Earth because of one major prohibitive variable. Herlandian women all descended from one common ancestor, a "wonder-woman" that was the first to successfully undergo parthenogenesis. From her sprung an entirely new race "of Aryan stock," indicating that all Herlanders have approximately the same genetic characteristics, including skin color, build, and disposition. Weinbaum argues that Herlandian feminism entails a curated homogeneity that parallels racial nationalism, making it incompatible with the American population:

As Herlanders explain, their principal social achievement is the perfection of reproduction in all its myriad forms: the 'make(ing) of the best kind of people,' as well as the expansion of motherhood into an ethic that saturates their religion, government, education, science, and language-not to mention their collective consciousness of themselves as a people. (284)

Furthermore, Herland's origins can be traced back to a devastating stand-off between a troop of "infuriated virgins" and men of the slave caste. The former prevailed, motivated by sheer desperation, and a collective refusal to be conquered by members of an inferior tribe—in other



words, a refusal to engage in interracial reproduction. Whereas an illusory kinship unifies members of other nation-states, who might share a language or traditions, the citizens of Herland are all distantly related. As one citizen puts it, “Each one of us has our exact line of descent all the way back to our dear First Mother” (81). Every lineage is “pure,” unsullied by unknown histories and less than desirable forebears, and traceable to an identical point of origin. The universal history of all Herland citizens eliminates any of the obstacles to achieving feminist goals posed by the cultural and physical incongruity found among the multitudes within the United States.

*Herland's* stark nonacceptance of diversity is perhaps the novel's most glaring flaw, causing many feminist scholars to downplay the relevance of Gilman's writings to contemporary feminist discourse. Pragmatist thought dictates that knowing the world is inseparable from the ability to act within it. Gilman's decision to fill her universe with exclusively Aryan, genetically comparable women is not based on practical implications but rather on cultural biases and prejudices. Furthermore, the exclusion of people of color from the book undermines the central message, which is the importance of equality and cooperation in building a better society. By eliminating the concept of race, Gilman perpetuates the notion that only certain groups are capable of achieving success whereas others are inherently inferior.

This strain of logic, which was pervasive in early outputs of feminist theory, has since been treated through the popularization of intersectionality. At the time of Gilman's writing, the women's suffrage movement focused primarily on securing voting rights for women. However, this effort was largely dominated by white, middle-class women who excluded women of color and working-class women from their efforts. This exclusion sparked the development of black

feminist thought in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, with scholars such as Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, and Mary Church Terrell highlighting the intersection of race and gender oppression.

The civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s further amplified issues of racial inequality by highlighting the ways in which sexism and racism intersected to create unique experiences of oppression for Black women. In the 1980s and 1990s, feminist scholars and activists began to explore the intersection of gender with other forms of oppression, such as class, sexuality, and ability. These efforts were led by scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, who introduced the concept of intersectionality to legal theory, and Gloria Jean Watkins (also known as bell hooks), who wrote extensively about the intersections of race, class, and gender.

In the 21<sup>st</sup>-century, intersectional feminism has continued to evolve and expand, with a growing focus on issues such as transgender rights, reproductive justice, and climate justice. This evolution has been driven in part by the activism of marginalized communities, particularly women of color, who have demanded that their voices and experiences be centered in the feminist movement. The result of these efforts has been a widespread recognition that all aspects of identity inform a woman's lived experiences and compound the various oppressions and marginalizations women face.

Gilman absolves herself of addressing this nuance by eliminating the concepts of race, class, and disability from her utopia entirely. In so doing, she precludes Herlandian doctrine from qualifying as an ideology to be practically implemented in real world environments. Despite this, the fictitious civilization is an important designated control in an experiment yet to realize itself as such. Herland sets forth several groundbreaking ideas, such as a pronounced egalitarianism,

modified language system, and centrality of motherhood, which have either been rebutted or elaborated on in future imaginary universes. Using *Herland* as an anchor, the next chapter looks to the next generation of feminist utopias to track societal progress toward gender equality, as well as how such progress was effectively achieved.

#### 4. What Now?: Navigating the Pragmatist Applications of Contemporary Utopia

The true answer to the age-old question of gender inequality likely resembles a pioneering amalgamation of several utopian hypotheses that address questions raised by *Herland* and its predecessors. Contemporary instances of feminist utopian literature—specifically those produced during the third and fourth-wave—represent a sharp departure from the perfectionist tendencies of earlier writers that distorted truths about society which were incompatible with their utopian visions. Instead, authors such as Joanna Russ, Marge Piercy, Sheri S. Tepper, Margaret Atwood, Octavia Butler, and many more imbued their respective universes with qualities that nod at the unevenness of real-world demography, and in turn, reveal how social and racial incongruity presents an obstacle to realizing utopia.

At the same time, these utopias succeed in depicting inhabitants as different to man as opposed to the antithesis of man, thereby extricating themselves from the implicit patriarchal belief that womanhood can only be defined in relation to manhood. This led to the formation of societies based on systems that don't lean on reality for inspiration, nor do they optimize human nature to an unbelievable extent. Such universes land somewhere on the fault line between utopia and dystopia due to their portrayal of flawed inhabitants of imperfect societies that have in many respects surpassed real-world progress in achieving equality for female members.

Thus, this chapter will examine feminist utopia and dystopias produced in the last several decades to determine which social and legal foundations made such progress attainable. I will argue that constructive facets of utopian society can ultimately inform recommendations as to

how a utopian solution, or a combination of several, might be practically implemented into real-world systems and structures. This chapter will also take notice of how contemporary utopias approach subjects emphasized by *Herland* such as language, motherhood, and inclusivity, as well as if these issues lost or gained relevancy over time.

The necessity of language reform, for instance, has been pushed to the forefront of feminist discourse in recent years. Several factors have highlighted the limitations and inadequacies of current linguistic norms, emphasizing the urgency of modifying and improving language to address contemporary linguistic, social, and cultural realities. In arguing for such modifications, feminists posited that language is not a neutral means of describing reality. Instead, language is assumed to codify an androcentric world-view. Susan Ehrlich and Ruth King comment that so long as sexist language evinces the presence of sexist social structures, “the continuing existence of such social structures throws into question the possibility of successful language reform” (152). Deborah Cameron makes a similar point:

Therefore, in the interests of accuracy we should strive to include the female half of the female race by replacing male terms with neutral ones. But the reality to which language relates is a sexist one, and in it there are no neutral terms... In the mouths of sexists, language can always be sexist. (90)

Yet this contention does not sufficiently consider the progress which has already been made toward enacting language reform. The advent of “names” symbolizing women’s perceptions and experiences, such as *sexism* and *sexual harassment*, are significant in this regard. A few years ago, Steinem points out, such incidents “were just called life.” The term sexual harassment, specifically, only came into use during the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century. Cornell University activists coined

the phrase in 1975 after a former employee of the school resigned from her job due to unwanted touching from her supervisor. In 1980, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) issued guidelines that officially defined sexual harassment and established employer liability for harassment in the workplace. These guidelines were later used as the basis for legal action in cases of sexual harassment. Six years later, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Meritor Savings Bank v. Vinson* that sexual harassment is a form of sex discrimination prohibited by Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In recent years, there has been increased attention on the issue of sexual harassment in the wake of the #MeToo movement. This has led to renewed efforts to strengthen protections against sexual harassment in the workplace, including proposed legislation such as the BE HEARD in the Workplace Act, which aims to expand protections and increase accountability for employers.

This indicates that while it might be impossible to banish sexist social structures in one fell swoop, their gradual abolishment is inextricably linked to the success of language reform. The evolution of speech contributes to the formation of terms that articulate injustices plaguing oppressed groups which had previously gone unaddressed. Such language obstructs the natural trajectory of sexist social structures, which are forced to evolve in reply, albeit slowly. Discussing the topic, Cameron is adamant in her belief: “The dream of a common language is impossible; but if we are to have a politics of affinity in difference, the drive to connect is indispensable” (10).

Like *Herland*, contemporary feminist utopias are relentless in their quest to uncover a “common language”, or a tongue that promotes egalitarian ideation. In Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*, inhabitants of the anarchist Moon colony of Anarres speak a language called

Pravic, which is juxtaposed with lotic, the language of A-lo, the sister planet of Anarres. The 1974 novel is written on an anarchist philosophical premise, which allows for some fascinating linguistic phenomena. For instance, since private property doesn't exist, the possessive form ("my", "your", etc.) is replaced by the definite article ("the"). Furthermore, Pravic does not contain a word for what a man does to a woman (or vice versa) during consensual sex. There is only the intransitive verb which means to "make love"; to describe sex as an act of imposition, the only alternative is the use of a transitive verb that translates to "rape."

Pravic, not unlike Herlander speak, downplays the authority associated with parenthood. The words for biological "mother" and "father" (*mamme, tadde*) can be used to refer to distant relatives or anyone involved in child-rearing. The text also implies that Pravic lacks pronouns as well as titles that do not refer to the actual function of a person. Shevek, the main character of the novel, is fluent in lotic. He ponders on institutions that lean heavily on gender such as "marriage" and "prostitution" in his native tongue, as there is no translation for them in Pravic.

Suzette Hadin Elgin's scientific novel, *Native Tongue*, reignites the ancient utopian dream of a common language, which would enable perfect communication among all peoples. The plot features lines, or families of linguists, whose ability to grasp foreign languages for the purposes of engaging in trade with alien entities is essential to their survival. Each family is ruled by a male linguist, which contributes to gender polarization within the society. The novel describes the rise of an all-female resistance movement brought into effect by the creation of a women's language. Láaden, the chosen name of the vernacular, is developed through the Encodings Project, which entails the formulating and naming of semantic concepts. The novel describes the process of encoding as "the making of a name for a chunk of the world that so far as we know

has never been chosen for naming before in any human language, and that has not just suddenly been made or found or dumped upon your culture" (22). Though the novel is not explicit in its description of the syntax of Láaden, the Encodings symbolize one means of feminist linguistic resistance.

The pragmatic application of the aforementioned utopian approaches to language reform lies in a neat union of the lessons derived from both Le Guin and Elgin's texts. Le Guin elaborates on Gilman's suggestion that the language of a perfectly egalitarian society will emphasize equality, cooperation, and mutual support through the use of gender neutral terms. In turn, any sort of antecedent gender hierarchy will cease to exist. This idea reinforces the understanding that language shapes culture, and vice versa, implying that real-world social structures would be positively impacted if language systems aspired toward Pravic's egalitarian properties, albeit a less extreme version (it would be unrealistic, for instance, to eliminate the possessive form).

Elgin's text propels this notion into actuality through her rendering of a fictionalized version of linguistic resistance to emphasize the human factor driving language reform. According to Ildney Cavalcanti, "coining neologisms to express culturally 'absent' concepts... is a way of inscribing women's experiences and perceptions in language and culture, and helping to shape what counts as reality" (162). Borrowing Cameron's phrase, this "drive to connect" could practically benefit communities of women across reality. The novel foregrounds the importance of women hailing from a variety of cultural backgrounds establishing a connection based on their shared experience of oppression. This nation-wide cooperation allows for political activity in the face of an all-powerful patriarchal ruling class. The implication of this is two-fold: firstly,



language reform is essential not only to uprooting sexist social structures, but also to unite women of various backgrounds by arming them with the language to articulate a common goal. Secondly, this notion challenges the pervasive belief that language is a natural entity subject only to change in accordance with the flow of mainstream culture. Elgin counters that intervention is possible, and often necessary, in language-making, meaning that proponents of feminism must assert politically motivated agency to enact linguistic change.

The ruins of the long-standing cult of domesticity is one example of a sexist social structure that language reform could aid in eradicating. Contemporary feminist utopias often follow in *Herland's* tradition of reimagining motherhood so that responsibilities of child-rearing are shared more evenly among members of society, rather than falling entirely on the biological mother. Often, language is wielded as a tool to describe egalitarian parenting styles that are supported and upheld by utopian social structures. A character in a novel by Harriet Beecher Stowe echoes the sentiment that the values of motherhood should be placed at the center of culture: “Shall MOTHERHOOD ever be felt in the public administration of the affairs of the state? The state is nothing more nor less than a collection of families, and what would be good or bad for the individual family, would be good or bad for the state” (37-38). Through the vessel of a fictional character, Stowe voices an ideological stance that later informs the writings of her grand-niece, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, as well as late 20<sup>th</sup>-century writers of feminist utopia such as Marge Piercy.

In the novel *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Piercy raised from literary ashes what many feminist scholars regard as the most politically workable future world ever presented through the medium of feminist utopia. For the American activist and writer, the most fundamental structural

change that must occur is what Robin Silbergleid refers to as the “maternalizing” of men.

Piercy’s novel follows an impoverished Mexican-American woman named Connie Ramos as she communicates with a figure from the future: an androgynous woman called Luciente. Connie is introduced by Luciente to the utopian Mattapoissett of 2137, a community which has effectively replaced the dyadic bond between mother and child with a system of multiple mothers of each sex. In one of the more shocking scenes from her novel, Piercy describes a male character androgynously named Barbarossa breast-feeding a newborn baby. Lucient explains to Connie that women had to relinquish “the only power we ever had, in return for no more power for anyone ... ‘Cause as long as we were biologically enchained, we’d never be equal. And males never would be humanized to be loving and tender. So we all became mothers” (105).

Piercy takes pains to ensure that the culture of her imagined universe does not exclusively link biological females to the role of mother. Thus, the initiation of males into spaces traditionally reserved for mothers/females begins as early as childhood. Both boys and girls are taught to identify themselves as future mothers, “and the exclusive dyadic bond which limits a child’s capacity to identify with a group, rather than one other individual, is broken” (Silbergleid 112). Piercy elaborates on this idea in a later interview with Michael Luzzi: “I think that’s a necessary step—that men be responsible for nurturing children—for things to change fundamentally. Being responsible for someone young, loving and dependent changes your relationship to the world.”

In recent years, many feminist scholars have raised concerns that Piercy’s utopian vision stands to backfire and delay equality. They argue that an excessive idealization of motherhood could potentially resuscitate a private, domestic sphere that’ll draw women in with whispers of

progress and trap them. Margaret Atwood's chilling dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale*, imagines such a future. Written in the context of 1980s second-wave feminism, Atwood's cautionary tale takes place in the world of the early Gilead era, where biological mothering is women's only identifiable social and political power. The survival of the protagonist is entirely dependent on her ability to give birth. If she or any other handmaid fails to conceive and bear a healthy baby after three years, she will be put to work cleaning up toxic waste in "the Colonies" until she expires. Atwood's dystopia thus demonstrates that conservative and radical notions of sex distinctions and the power of the female body and the unique, magical journey of motherhood eventually merge into one frightening logical extreme.

In the epilogue, "Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*," readers are offered a glimpse into a research conference, populated by both male and female academics, taking place in 2195. The attendees discuss the atrocities of Gilead, which has long been eradicated. However, it appears that the patriarchal ideology which enabled the Handmaids' suffering has lingered. The male keynote speaker's allusions to obsolete sexist language evokes laughter and applause, and he refrains from "passing moral judgment on the Gileadeans" (383). In this way, Atwood satirizes academic complacency to drive home the notion that cosmetically altering old structures will not bring about social change.

This view is not dissimilar to Elgin's point that activists must assert political agency to make a tangible impact in furthering women's causes. This is especially prevalent in terms of reforming cultural attitudes toward motherhood, as factors such as internalized oppression and widespread resistance to change might make it difficult for feminists to advocate effectively for all women. Women may internalize societal messages that motherhood is their primary role and

that working mothers are neglectful or selfish; furthermore, many people may resist change, especially if it challenges their traditional views of gender roles. These obstacles make it hard, but not impossible, to effect lasting change. In fact, there are several pragmatic solutions to the plight of biological mothers that have already been proposed in real-world contexts, including universal access to affordable childcare, paid parental leave policies, and flexible work arrangements. Yet none of these suggestions can actualize in full until activists can harness the language to portray them as achievable goals as opposed to utopic daydreams.

Another important lesson to be extracted from these two texts is that the responsibilities of mothering often present differently when traveling along different racial and class lines. Throughout history, women belonging to the highest social strata have displaced the more strenuous duties of motherhood onto working class and minority women. Evelyn Nakano elaborates, "Because they gain these privileges, white, middle-class women have less impetus to challenge an arrangement that ultimately oppresses them" (7). This division poses another hurdle in the path toward universal liberation by protecting the structural integrity of patriarchal formations.

Yet this issue is only sufficiently touched upon by instances of feminist utopias that were produced in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century. Their predecessors, including some of the works mentioned in this chapter, either miss or intentionally overlook the existence and plight of women from marginalized backgrounds when coloring in the outlines of their alternate realities. For example, the pragmatism of Elgin's vision in *The Native Tongue* is undermined by a lack of dissent among the women charged with constructing Láaden. Despite hailing from a wide range of backgrounds, the women do not accurately represent the diversity in thought that sprouts from

diversity elsewhere. Le Guin is also guilty of obscuring difference in *The Dispossessed* by confining the discussion to alien entities that belong to homogenous colonies and foster somewhat of a disconnect with the human concept of race.

Piercy is probably the closest to hitting the nail on the head with her treatment of race in *A Woman on the Edge of Time*. In Mattapoissett, a person's skin color is irrelevant to their culture and regarded as purely aesthetic. This renders racism virtually nonexistent, mitigating the hurdles multiculturalism poses to feminist theory altogether. Yet this approach also feels more like a strategic side-stepping of the issue of race than a head-on acknowledgment. Even in the process of compiling research for this paper, I noticed a substantial gap in academic sources on references to race/intersectionality in utopia compared to language or motherhood. Dohra Ahmad agrees with this observation in her novel *Landscapes of Hope*, writing that, "the black literary utopia has yet evaded serious study" (131). This chasm of academic thought seems to have also subsumed utopic renderings of Latina women, Asian women, disabled women, transgender women, and so on.

In *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, bell hooks postulates a theory as to the historical whereabouts of minorities in times when white, middle-class women have taken up all the seats in feminist spaces, real and fictional, utopian and dystopian. According to hooks, Black women have been stuck in no man's land (or rather, no woman's land) for centuries, a sort of socially-imposed purgatory: "Black women were placed in a double bind; to support women's suffrage would imply that they were allying themselves with white women activists who had publicly revealed their racism, but to support only black male suffrage was to endorse a patriarchal social order that would grant them no political voice" (3). For a long time, there was

no intersectional movement that brought awareness to the compounded experiences of both racist and sexist oppression. Yet literature that spoke to the “peripherality” of the minority perspective in a dominant white society has always existed—it just wasn’t necessarily afforded the platform shared by its white counterparts.

Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* is an example of a text that has only recently been rescued from one of the dust-covered nooks and crannies of the feminist canon and laid flat under a microscope for literary inspection. Naylor’s novel, which explores the folklore of a remote island called Willow Springs, piqued the interest of multiple reviewers, including Sanchez (2002), Sandin and Perez (2013), and Yavaş (2014), that have classified *Mama Days* as magical realism. Only a decade earlier, Erickson (1993) and Fowler (1996) tried to align Naylor’s story with Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, citing overlapping themes of reconciliation and spirituality. In their paper *Reading Heterotopia as a Site of Resistance in Gloria Naylor’s Mama Day* (1988), Soumia Bentahar and Nouredine Guerroudj make the case for a reclassification of Naylor’s novel as a “heterotopia,” a neologism coined by philosopher Michel Foucault to describe the limbo that stretches from the doors of utopia/dystopia to the threshold of reality.

Utopic spaces, according to Foucault, are distinguished from heterotopias in that utopias represent images of societies that can never be achieved and “have no real locality” (xix). In this thesis, I reject the notion that utopia is unattainable. Still, it is important to understand why alternative realities constructed by non-white authors more readily lend themselves to the category of heterotopia than its better-known relative. According to Foucault, a heterotopic mode of reality is a drying cast of the utopic mold:

There are....real places, actual places, places that are designed into the very institution of society, which are sorts of actually realized utopias in which the real emplacements that can be found within the culture are, at the same time, represented, contested, and reversed, sorts of places that are outside all places, although they are actually localizable. (178)

Naylor's community in *Mama Day* meets this criterion. Willow Springs asserts autonomy from mainland America by refusing to participate in bureaucratic exercises such as delineating its borders or paying taxes: "Georgia and South Carolina ain't seeing the shine off a penny for our land, our homes, our roads, or our bridge" (6). The fictitious island, located somewhere between Georgia and South Carolina but belonging to neither, is an all-black-owned space with its own distinctive cultural traditions.

Foucault elaborates that heterotopias can also be described as "counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (3). Naylor makes a poignant statement on the peripherality of the Black experience in America by wielding Foucault's concept of heterotopia as a tool to help interrupt and deconstruct prevailing mainstream ideologies. As Sanchez puts it, Willow Springs is a free territory where "a community that is deprived of its own culture and alienated in the mainland can escape white conventions and recover its own traditions, myths and way of life" (63).

In this way, utopian texts that feature non-white characters are simultaneously the most and least pragmatic in their tradition. In the novel *Parable of the Sower* (1993), author Octavia Butler describes a heterotopia set in a future United States that's crumbling from the detrimental

effects of climate change and gaping wealth inequality. The story follows a young woman named Lauren Olamina, whose only chance of survival is her unwavering belief in Earthseed, a religion grounded in utopian sentiments. In the African fantasy novel *Who Fears Death* (2010), Nigerian-American author Nnedi Okorafor writes about a bloody civil war between the Okeke and Nuru tribes of a future Sudan. Both Butler and Okorafor must ground their fantastic tale in real-world localities so as not to burst the bubble of suspended disbelief that, consciously or not, becomes precariously fragile for readers engaging in texts where minorities constitute the central figures and/or dominant power.

Naylor does something similar with the relocation of Willow Springs to a corner of the world with no known coordinates or temporalities could serve as the fatal pinprick which renders Naylor's universe less believable than even Le Guin's Anarres or Piercy's Mattapoisett. Thus, the *Mama Day* author's decision to write in the tradition of heterotopia is an act of resistance in itself, begging the question of why a Black utopia is so inconceivable in the first place.

Here, we may recall the concept of an "internal disjunction." June Singer uses this term to refer to a mental block which prevents most participants of modern day society from embracing progressive understandings of gender. According to Singer, progress can only be achieved once society makes an earnest, collective effort to unlearn the internal disjunction instilled in us from birth. For the purposes of this paper, I will apply the phrase internal disjunction to a broader field of inquiry than just gender studies. This learned dissonance between extant social systems and utopic social systems is majorly stiling progress on fronts such as gender, racial, and socioeconomic inequality. Furthermore, the subdued nature of women's oppression in the fourth-wave era has rendered the internal disjunction the most



powerful enemy of the feminist agenda. To enact change, it is imperative not to underestimate the power of belief, which will inevitably manifest as political action. Every generation has produced its own cast of believers—disruptors such as the suffragettes, civil rights protestors, etc.—that have profoundly accelerated the climb to utopia through their incessant challenging of the internal disjunction. But what if everybody was an active participant in the uphill battle for utopia? Imagine how much faster we, as a society, could make it to the top.

Perhaps the key to making this a reality is a rebranding of the concept of utopia to better reflect its pragmatic application toward the betterment of society. This new definition should not only lift the drawbridge trapping the utopian genre in the realm of fantasy, but also call off the race for “Best Utopia” that academia has been marshaling for decades. There is not one, singular vision of the future, procured by some mystic literary oracle, that represents humanity’s ideal fate; instead, utopia must be regarded as a moving target, a tremendous compound of thousands of philosophical offerings from writers of every background.

This rebranding might also help counter the unwillingness of the academic community to wholeheartedly recommend utopian literature as treatment for the internal disjunction. By annulling the paralyzing falsehood which dictates that the utopian genre is not a practical asset to change, we can perhaps simultaneously eliminate the restrictive thinking stifling progress in every field of study. Jean-Jacques Rousseau delivers a poignant statement on the service utopia serves to a society with an inadequate social order: “I shall have to discover the ends for moral action...in a form of social existence which does not yet exist.” It is time for literary critics and pragmatists to link arms and walk together down the path toward collective liberation. After all, our reality is undoubtedly the utopic musing of an expired generation, and the reality of a

hundred years time will likely resemble the utopic daydreams of today. The speed with which we arrive at such a future, however, depends on how willing we are to believe in it.

## Conclusion

On the first Friday of October 2016, the world heard an influential television personality, also a presidential hopeful at the time, brag about grabbing women “by the pussy.” In a recording from eleven years earlier, Donald Trump was caught engaging in “locker-room talk” with radio host Billy Bush, an exchange which involved charming remarks such as “I did try and fuck her” and “I moved on her like a bitch, but I couldn’t get there and she was married.” Luckily, *The Washington Post* had obtained and published the audio clip in the nick of time, only a month before the nation would set out to cast their ballots in one of the most vicious elections in American history. But despite this embarrassing leak—among various other sexism and harassment allegations—Donald Trump still secured a narrow victory over former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, making him the first president to take office with neither prior political nor military experience.

Nearly six years later, the U.S. Supreme Court officially reversed *Roe v. Wade*, declaring that the constitutional right to abortion, upheld for nearly five decades, no longer exists. Justice Samuel Alito said that the 1973 ruling and multiple subsequent high court decisions reaffirming *Roe* contained arguments which were “exceptionally weak” and so “damaging” that they amounted to “an abuse of judicial authority.” Within days of *Roe*’s falling, some states outlawed abortion with no exemptions for when the life of a pregnant woman is at stake, or in cases of rape or incest.

Across the globe in Afghanistan, women and girls have been deprived of virtually all their basic rights since the Taliban takeover in August 2021. Girls are barred from an education beyond sixth grade and women may not work, study, or even travel outside of the house without a male companion. Just over the Western border, women of the relatively more “progressive” Iran are risking their lives on a daily basis in protest of the oppressive regime which sanctioned the death of a young Kurdish woman arrested by the morality police. This unit of Iran’s police force is tasked with enforcing a hijab-mandate, which became obligatory for all Iranian women in April 1983. Today, thousands of women are walking the streets of Iran with their hair uncovered, a simple yet poignant symbol of resistance against the patriarchal power structure that dictates what women must wear, must say and how they must behave.

I cite these cases of gender injustice for several reasons. Firstly, a quick overview of recent history renders the argument that feminism has fulfilled its role irrefutably null. All around the globe, there are still rungs missing from the ladder to gender equality. In some cases, the ladder has been removed entirely. My recommendation to fourth-wave feminists hoping to finally reach the landing is to engage in a daily, persistent confrontation with the internal disjunction. The first step in doing so is to accept that, however liberal and intelligent we are, we all probably suffer from an unconscious bias that prevents us from endorsing the feasibility of utopia.

Secondly, the old adage still rings true: truth is often stranger than fiction. The possibility of Trump’s election and the fall of Roe were largely scoffed at by so-called progressives who refused to dress their pragmatic sensibilities with a utopian impulse. In a way, the world is just a hodgepodge of utopias and dystopias that assume their category depending on where one is

standing. Perhaps dystopias are simply versions of utopia that society has outgrown, shedding them for a bigger, brighter version of the future that's really just contemporary values repackaged in a speculative casing. Perhaps an Afghani woman might find elements of utopia in Iran, and an Iranian woman might find elements of utopia in America. Perhaps we should guide each other in the steps we have already taken, so as to reach a state of collective liberation years faster than if we'd braved the path alone.

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