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THE VIRTUE MENTALITY
IN LESBIAN LAND PROJECTS, QUEER UTOPIAS, AND FEMINIST FICTION

by

RACHEL ECKHARDT

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York
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ABSTRACT

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by
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Advisor: Professor Carrie Hintz

In my study of early feminist fiction and contemporary queer intentional communities, highly ambitious and nearly impossible aspirations emerged as a singular uniting theme. From early feminist novelists to the intrepid founders of lesbian lands, utopian women share a passionate commitment to transform the world. This thesis engages with feminist concepts of virtue and how they influence utopian projects in both fiction and in life, whether the word “virtue” itself is used to describe the project or not. Virtue has made a lasting impact on contemporary feminist utopian projects that sometimes creates conflict and often undermines its liberatory aspirations. When we look at the areas that most challenge contemporary queer utopian projects, we find clear connections to early modern feminist utopian fiction. In some ways, this ambitious moral legacy has led to revolutionary ways of being a family. In other ways, the legacy of early feminism resides at the roots of racist and classist power dynamics that persist within contemporary queer families and communities.

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Introduction: Virtuous Aspirations in Feminist Fiction and Feminist Life

In my study of early feminist fiction and contemporary queer intentional communities, highly ambitious and nearly impossible aspirations emerged as a singular uniting theme. From novelists and the intrepid founders of lesbian lands, I am going to discuss feminists who share a commitment to transform the world. These great ambitions are often expressed in the language of high morals. They are often attached to visions of change aimed at society, personal relationships, and individual identity. Though feminist concepts of moral virtue take many different forms and appear in many different settings, they never fail to make an appearance. For the eighteenth century utopians, virtue encompassed qualities like chastity and charity. Some of the nineteenth century utopians stressed equality and progressive ideals. Contemporary utopians also stress progressive politics and high standards for self and others.

This thesis engages with feminist concepts of virtue and how they influence utopian projects in both fiction and in life, whether the word “virtue” itself is used to describe the project or not. I am also using the word “ambitious” to describe the level of virtue to which authors and participants aspire. Both the fictions and the utopian projects emerge from the feminism of their times and demonstrate a powerful urge to be and do better than their respective contemporary societies. Both feminist writers and feminist utopians aspire to visions of a more perfect world, visions that grew out of their own experiences and the experiences of women around them. But what are the consequences of countering patriarchy with moral superiority?

First I am going to discuss contemporary feminist projects from the past century, and then two particularly relevant examples of early feminist fiction. I am deliberately looking at more recent projects before looking at the fiction that influenced them. I decided to go out of chronological order because my own interest in feminist utopian projects comes from years of

living in queer chosen family households, and finding the fictional versions later. Another reason I am going out of chronological order is to prioritize the aspirations, values, and conflicts in contemporary projects, and then highlight the ways in which they contain the legacy of much earlier visions.

The early feminist emphasis on moral righteousness created a legacy of challenges and internal contradictions that remains evident. I started my research with an interest in queer chosen families, which expanded to collective households and utopian land projects. As I was reading, I found the broad advice on how to live as described and exemplified in some classic feminist literature to be both inspiring and problematic. Virtue in particular has functioned in ways that produced a residual impact for contemporary feminist utopian projects that sometimes creates conflict and often undermines its liberatory aspirations. When we look at the areas that most challenge contemporary queer utopian projects, we find clear connections to early modern feminist utopian fiction. In some ways, this feminist legacy has led to revolutionary ways of being a family. These are courageous and risky ongoing experiments in personal relationships that defy patriarchy. In other ways, the legacy of early feminism resides at the roots of racist and classist power dynamics that persist within these chosen families and communities.

Ascending to the moral high ground has inspired some, but for many others, the role of virtue has been to deny, exclude, and disempower. In this paper, I will argue that queer utopians and other feminists need to address the rigid thinking at the origins of our liberated families and communities. We may have left Christian femininity behind, but we can still find its influence in our most radical projects. Even where Christian virtue has been critiqued and discarded, we can often find a residually rigid way of viewing the world in terms of moral ranking. I am interested in the way this sense of virtuousness has operated in the feminist realm, taking virtue in the

largest sense of the word. Virtue sometimes emerges as a drive to be righteous and just in every aspect of life, and lends itself to the radical questioning of all power dynamics. But at the same time, change and progress are often described as being achieved through moral superiority.

When I think of virtue as infused through feminist projects, I think of chastity, prohibition, anti-pornography feminism, and the rigidity sometimes found in discourse about politically correct language. Rather than looking at specific Christian virtues, I want to examine virtue as a mode of thinking. To begin to understand how this large concept operates, we see the influence of more than a desire to be ethical but a standard of goodness being applied to self and others with a sense of natural and unquestioned authority.

I began to examine the non-fiction personal accounts of women living on lesbian lands in the 1970s and 80s, followed by the rare accounts and commentaries of more contemporary queer utopians living in creative families of choice. These contemporaries, and even I myself, are the intended audience of all this fictional and nonfictional advice, these instructions on how to embody feminist values in our decisions of where and how to live. I started to notice how virtue operated in the non-fictional utopias, in debates about separatism, and desires to purify themselves of patriarchy. I also noticed frequent references to how their flaws and conflicts were connected to the inability to truly free themselves from their race, class, and cultural upbringing. Instead of striving for Christian concepts of purity, these feminists were evoking purity implicitly with their expressions of regret at the imperfections and flaws in their break from the larger society. They do not make explicit reference to purification, but they present us with a single-mindedness and determination that all but makes the connection for us. Their high aspirations and repeated disappointment is not unrelated to a vision of virtuous perfection, of living every single one of their values to the utmost and creating a flawless new world that is cleansed of

every aspect of patriarchal influence. There are clear indications that they want to overcome oppression through superiority. I believe this supremacist mentality connects to the white supremacy and classism that plagued lesbian lands as thoroughly as it plagued early feminism.

In the novels I read, the women who came together to form utopian spaces are described as morally superior to other women. They resist patriarchy not only by wanting to be free of it, but by being better than it, being more peaceful and just and good and chaste. Chastity in particular is either highly valued or a simple fact of women-only life. Later in real world lesbian lands, there were sometimes moral dictates around how to conduct one's sexuality, all in the name of opposing patriarchal values, but actually serving to exclude some of the participants or create hardship for them. In both cases sexuality is regulated by the moral beliefs of the feminism of the times, and those beliefs act as controls on women's behavior. These controls lead to some of the conflict encountered in the real-life utopian projects as opposed to the conflict-free fictional women's utopias.

For fictional utopias, the source I started with is Sarah Scott's 1762 novel *A Description of Millenium Hall*. The novel imagines a group of women living together on their own terms, in a country estate one of them inherited and shares with others. Scott supports this utopian vision with accounts of the participating women's experiences in the larger patriarchal society. Bad experiences under patriarchy led each character to join the women's colony.

Initially I had started my project looking at queer created families or chosen families. I was looking at *Millennium Hall* in terms of romantic and familial organization. Beyond harkening to the family as a model, this utopia makes a moral contrast between the women who reside at Millenium Hall and the civilization surrounding them. The women are exceptionally virtuous in the context of their times and values, with their individual stories demonstrating how

men are dangerous and urban women are treacherous. They are moral role models for readers, engaging in productive work, learning, and charity at all times.

The qualities of conventional goodness play an important role in the formation of their utopia, and this leaves a legacy for future feminists. This is particularly exemplified in the characters' charitable actions towards those in need, and the alignment of authority with class advantages. In *Millennium Hall* the wealthiest women own the property and that ownership put them in the position of control. In this novel, leadership by the wealthy few is not questioned, even as the labor of poorer residents in the carpet facility supports the existence of the entire estate. In real life, we find their legacy in 1970s and 80s lesbian lands where wealthier women take up positions of authority but are strongly opposed by poor women. We consistently find a great deal of internal strife related to control over the land and ownership of property.

The other work of fiction I want to explore is the classic and highly influential 1915 utopian novel *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Like *Millennium Hall*, *Herland* is a fictional narrative where a man tells the story of a society of women who are virtuous, generous, and kind. The women of *Herland* are even further from the mainstream patriarchal society than the women of *Millennium Hall*, both geographically and socially. Yet the idea of being virtuous, which manifests as being maternal and seemingly asexual, is a major element in the character of their utopian project.

As I was reading early feminist utopian novels I noticed how serious and proper the women were. They were virtuous in every sense of the word except for the important fact that they lived entirely without men. The fictions are instructive; they tell stories in order to give advice or provide a paradigm on how to live a righteous and utopian life. The utopian women in the novels embody the feminine ideals of their times, like chastity and charity, or motherhood. I

became curious about how they uniformly rejected the compulsory culture of marriage but still adhered to a particular feminine virtue, and how that set of implicit values informed their utopian visions.

In both novels, relationships among the women are compared to familial relationships. Herland defines motherhood as a moral ideal, and even women without children aspire to the qualities of motherhood. The family model serves in part as a relatable point of reference, and much like contemporary LGBTQ activist narratives, it also serves to emphasize moral goodness, cultural acceptability, and adherence to societal expectations for relationships. Questions of family, chosen family, and belonging have been central to both conservative and radical contemporary queer liberation struggles.

I will connect these novels to present day feminist utopian projects by looking at stories of more contemporary queer intentional communities in *Lesbian Land* by Joyce Cheney and several other sources that include data collected through interviews. The fact that *Herland* is a fictional utopia of women who reproduce through parthenogenesis and a selection process is directly related to the racism faced by women of color who were trying to live in lesbian land colonies with the wealthy white women who started those colonies. There seems to be a sense in which the supremacist ideology of *Herland* and the eugenic principles at the foundation of this fictional women's utopia persist in liberal feminism and in more contemporary lesbian separatist and queer community projects. I am not arguing that the fictional exclusion of certain disapproved women on the basis of eugenics and the real life alienation experienced by women of color in predominantly white feminist spaces are the same thing, but I am planning to indicate the similarities in patterns of utopian thinking about aspirational moral goodness and patterns of conflict and difficulty in non-fiction first person narratives.

Both utopian fiction and non-fiction individual narratives of utopian living use story telling for political purposes. The authors' and interviewee's relatively transparent political ends form a common thread connecting fiction and nonfiction over several centuries. The fictional and non-fictional stories serve to explain and justify desires for life to be different, making the possibilities more real and compelling. The non-fictional narratives present the struggles of everyday life outside the mainstream, whether those struggles are creating rules for a separatist colony and building consensus, or educating the neighbors about three-person parenting and grappling with privilege and adoption. In the context of all these stories, utopia can be a place in the present where a better future is possible.

The practice of asking questions and making deliberate, politicized decisions about how and with whom to live, in what relationship and for what purpose, creates a continuum from carefully constructed families to utopian household and community projects. Within these visions of a better future, I want to explore the role that virtue as a mentality has played in formulating new kinds of families, and the influence it has in the conflicts that arise in lesbian and queer utopian projects. While the desire to do what is right and virtuous is on one hand an important motive for resisting the injustices of patriarchy, on the other hand it leads to rigidity, racist and classist exclusion, and contaminates many feminist utopian projects with a conservative, restrictive, and/or elitist element.

I was initially interested in lesbian land projects and contemporary queer utopians in terms of chosen family relationships and reproduction. For contemporary queer utopians there is some creative technology for reproduction or creative relationships for co-parenting of children. There is not much comparison to the parthenogenesis in *Herland*, other than the clear control that people are exerting over how and when they have children, and who raises them when it is not

simply decided by biology. Then it occurred to me that both call these relationships “family.” The connection is that the word family itself indicates that the relationships be within the realm of the wholesome and morally upright. I found myself again looking at the role that being “good” plays in feminist utopian projects. No matter how creative our relationships are and how many partners we have, when we call the whole thing a “family” we are on some level evoking virtue. As much as a lesbian land project, a chosen family aspires to moral goodness too.

In the first chapter, I will discuss the patterns of values and conflicts for Lesbian Land Dwellers, and how relatively recent queer feminists have taken up those challenges in urban utopian environments and household settings. I will look at the way they tell their stories and give advice, the values they express, and the conflicts they experience. The second chapter will more explicitly connect the feminist values in our world now with the values espoused by fiction writers responding to the needs of their own times. We will look at how virtue is described, advice is given to readers, and how chosen kinship relationships are formed. Feminist aspirations are influenced by the context of their times, but the act of aspiring to goodness, virtue, and a politically perfected way of life is ongoing.

Chapter 1: Advice From Lesbian Land Dwellers & Contemporary Queer Utopians

What are the ethical lessons offered by people who create social experiments with their own lives? In order to explore this question, I will begin with women's narratives from the book *Lesbian Land*, and then look briefly at some more contemporary queer experiences of utopian experimentation with family structures and systems from *A Critical Inquiry Into Queer Utopias*. *Lesbian Land* is a collection of first person narratives of women who lived on women's land and farm projects in the 1970s and 1980s. *A Critical Inquiry Into Queer Utopias* is a 2013 anthology of articles about queer spaces and utopian projects. I plan to examine the underlying values and concepts of virtue revealed by patterns in both content and language.

Joyce Cheney put together a unique document of lesbian community organizing in the 1970s and 1980s. She herself lived on a lesbian land project, and she went to women's gatherings and festivals, requesting people's stories. She put out calls and visited rural lesbian spaces across the country. While there are articles and books documenting the feminist movements and debates in cities and in academia, the nature of lesbian separatism has kept it relatively secret and prevented extensive cultural documentation. Cheney's *Lesbian Land* provides a rare inside view of subculture that protected itself through privacy.

I plan to explore these texts and a few others with special attention to how people tell the story of their radical living experiments, reveal their priorities through story telling, and have an intended audience or outcome in mind. I want to look at who the perceived audience might be, and the motivation for the narrators and writers to share their experiences. Did they experiment to improve the world for everyone, or to create private worlds where they could live exactly the way they wanted? In *Lesbian Land*, the different narrators seem to share the view that they were overly idealistic and took on too much all at once, but that they generally feel positive about their

intentions and the idea of lesbians living together in varying degrees of separatism. They hold themselves to very high standards, as becomes apparent in one narrative after another where lesbian land dwellers are proud of what they accomplished but also devastated by the disappointments and imperfections of their projects.

In many instances, the narratives offer explicit advice. Juana Maria Paz directly addresses lesbian readers when she says, “Writing this retrospectively, hoping to dispel the ghosts that plague me and impart some hope to the new warriors, the ones who start out fresh and enthusiastic, the ones who have not been crushed by the dream— like me” (Cheney 73). She tells us up front that her story is both a warning and encouragement, even as she describes her experience of being “crushed.”

STORYTELLING

The Lesbian Land Dwellers demonstrate relentless self-criticism in addition to their inherent critique of patriarchy. They reveal much in how they speak, what they choose to share, and what they resent. Some of them seem critical of all current social values and practices. Others are clearly striving to be morally right and do what is morally good. I often observed this moral motivation taking form as an especially strict mentality that is linked to feminist concepts of virtue. Still others are simply trying to enact and embody an improved way of life. The goals and impulses that lead people here show through in what they say and how they say it, with the careful use of language demonstrating not only their political positions but also their rigorous commitment to detail.

Nearly every narrator in *Lesbian Land* uses varied spellings of the words “woman” and “women.” While we might find this practice of invented spelling outdated, contemporary queer people have long lists of gender identities representing what to any outsider would be extremely

minor and subtle variations in our outward presentation and inward identification. I myself identify as both butch and trans, the first of which would be familiar to lesbian separatists, the second of which has only come into usage as a stand alone identifier rather than a prefix to “man” or “woman” over the course of the current decade. There is a queer legacy of recreating our worlds through language, or at least crafting worlds where we recognize ourselves. Some utopian efforts could be seen as a way of re-describing reality with a political end in mind, maybe as part of the process of creating a utopian vision. Creating new words and new ways of naming themselves shows their desire to leave nothing unchanged or unexamined.

INSPIRATION AND REALNESS

The lesbian land movement was already waning when *Lesbian Land* was published in 1985, which makes Cheney’s book seem all the more compelling. It is currently out of print and I felt fortunate to find a used copy. Aside from *Lesbian Land*, I looked at an article in *Sex in Public*, an Australian sex radical anthology that has been in my personal collection since the 1990s. I also found a brief narrative in the classic feminist publication, *Off Our Backs*.

While Cheney put out calls for participants, her way of gathering information was very different than sending out a call for academic articles or stories for an anthology. Much of her work was done by networking at women’s events and word of mouth. She wrote and received letters, and mentions having documents stored in the trunk of her car. The book includes a geographically wide range of narratives within the United States, and from lands of all sizes, some with 2 residents and up, and tales of 70 women showing up for meetings and many more for festivals and celebrations.

In the *Communal Studies* journal, describing the difficulty of studying single-sex, secular communities, researcher William Metcalf goes so far as to claim, “Occasional ‘insider’ self-

published accounts, such as of the Womanshare Collective, are generally self-serving, indulgent, and of little use to researchers” (Metcalf 148). Fortunately I am not looking for an objective study here, but more of what these major life experiments can teach us about freedom, and what they reveal about the individuals who participated in them. I would like to welcome all the “self-serving” narratives as a valuable legacy of queer culture.

Many of the lesbian land dwellers are narrating not from their present moment, but reflecting on their time on lesbian land. Rather than being nostalgic or idealizing their experiences, they have a tendency to be critical and emphasize how much they had to learn and how unprepared they were for the outdoors, for farming, and for collaborating and sharing productively with others. At times, their motivation seems to be to compel the reader not to replicate their mistakes, as if they were giving instructions on how to form lesbian collectives in the future. While women-only lands are few and far between today, and the category of “woman” itself has purposefully been made more complex, the impulse to teach is not lost on me. As a queer organizer who has witnessed and participated in conflicts undergirded by differences in racial identity and class origin, I can see the wisdom in assertions and warnings that these differences are not neutralized by shared values or shared space. All of my personal queer organizing has been done in mixed gender spaces, where differences in gendered upbringing and assumptions often lead to misunderstandings and unintended but very real slights to women, trans people, poor people, and people of color.

Cheney explains, “I had a phone conversation with a woman who decided not to write because she didn't want to be involved in a “Pollyannish book;” that is, a book where writers were encouraged all along to tell land stories from as positive a perspective as possible... she said that lesbians have a tendency to romanticize, deny, or trivialize the hard parts” (Cheney 9). The

reality turned out to be quite the opposite. Many of the women speak extensively about the hardships of their time on lesbian land.

Why are there no Pollyannas here? Being relentlessly self-critical makes it difficult to feel good about accomplishments. Being relentlessly critical of social structures and hierarchies makes it very difficult to organize. Yet this self-critical and political way of being is part of the commitment to separating from society. By making a break from society, they set themselves up to be hard on themselves. It seems that when you are changing the whole world, or even when you are just starting a new way of living and communing with others, seldom is anything ever really good enough. There is a parallel here with the way virtue is sometimes used as a concept, as an impossible ideal or as holding oneself to a standard that is difficult to actualize in the real world. Lesbian land dwellers do not explicitly strive to be virtuous women, but they demonstrate time and again how their projects and efforts do not live up to their own high standards.

In contrast with the Lesbian Land Dwellers, in *A Critical Inquiry Into Queer Utopias*, editor Angela Jones observes the pragmatism of her contemporary queer narrators: “This book aims to begin to give insight into the quotidian ways in which a diverse range of queer utopic visions are emerging without casting judgment or launching a pseudo-scientific evaluation aimed at qualifying, categorizing, judging, and/or punishing those who do not measure up to our own desires and choices. We resist the temptation to normalize one vision of queer utopic potentiality over another” (Jones 15). In other words, rather than evaluate the successes and failures of contemporary utopians, Jones argues there is good reason to avoid valuing any one vision over any other. The case could be made that this approach allows more people to participate in utopian life building, without having to move away from civilization, but the case could also be made that they are just tinkering with normal lives under our imperialist, white supremacist,

capitalist patriarchy. That said, the Contemporary Queer Utopians have a strong sense that what they are doing is radical, and set compelling examples of life outside society while still located in society. While making major life commitments to cultural change, they are also making a remarkable shift away from the all-or-nothing aspirations of lesbian land dwellers.

The contemporary queers are entering into their utopian projects from a standpoint of finding out what they can do and how far they can take their beliefs and values into reality. There is much discussion of creating hope in the present. Many seem to be staking out their own variations on family life that co-exist in the same society with more conventional families. This practice is more accessible and more inclusive than lesbian separatism, but it remains to be seen whether it is more or less successful in creating changes in society or even for its participants. Chosen families are still families, where many of the Lesbian Land Dwellers do not use the word “family” at all to describe their experiences in communal land. Family would be the thing you leave behind to join a lesbian separatist colony.

There is a clear world-changing motive to some of the contemporary descriptions of queer family: “In addition, more nonnormative ideas of family open up possibilities for creating and raising children outside the nuclear family, inviting friends into a typically closed connection between romantic partners, or forging family by sharing sperm donors and helping other LGBTQ people through the process of pregnancy and birth” (Heston 261). This aspiration to challenge the boundaries of the family sets an exciting example for both queer and straight people to challenge patriarchal norms through their own life choices. The ambitious quality of their goals connects the lesbians in *Lesbian Land* and the queers in *A Critical Inquiry Into Queer Utopias*. The larger inclusivity of contemporary utopian projects seems to me like the single largest difference from their ancestral lesbian separatists.

SEEKING UTOPIA IN RESPONSE TO SUFFERING

In the Australian sex radical anthology, *Sex in Public*, a lesbian describes being on separatist land for the first time: “my strongest memory of the land has little to do with the landscape. It was my first inkling of an existence not hedged with fear” (Ion 101). She finds herself released from a fear she was barely conscious of, and it creates a powerful healing experience for her. We see here that for the lesbian land dwellers, the land is more than a political idea because it invokes concerns about basic safety and security.

For Contemporary Queer Utopians, still embedded in patriarchal culture, being subversive in their own way brings relief: “Given that happiness is a normative and regulatory construct, it seems fitting here that the construction of queer utopian spaces does not hinge upon happiness, but rather are simply autonomous spaces in which to breathe” (Jones 3). Putting happiness itself under scrutiny as a social construct is certainly a break from mainstream society where it is taken for granted that all humans seek happiness. In both cases, physical safety and breathing room are evoked as major motivations for utopian living.

As much as Jones notes that utopian spaces do not allow for the complete emancipation that the lesbian land dwellers were seeking, she has in common with them the desire to radically question cultural assumptions. Where they questioned participating in society, Jones is questioning the very urge to find happiness. The utopians in Jones’ collection are engaged in projects to “reconstitute the present by examining the events of ordinary life,” (Jones 2) finding their radical practice not in breaking free and starting over, but in undermining values taken for granted in our culture: “The authors do not offer a linear or predetermined program for the establishment of queer utopic spaces but rather focus on the everyday acts of resistance and affective forces that create the potentiality for pockets or cleavages of queer utopian spaces”

(Jones 2). Instead of following a rationally worked out structure for a utopia, queers are creating moments and spaces of liberation that disrupt patriarchy and dwell in possibility.

VALUES AND VISIONS

While feminism can hardly be considered a single unified set of values, its existence as a cultural and social movement gaining momentum in the 1970s is arguably the reason why women started thinking about creating spaces free from men. A tipping point was reached where the feminist utopia was no longer consigned to fiction, but a project where new values and new ways of life could be enacted in the real world. Women who moved onto lesbian land were making a huge commitment. For example, the level of commitment at Redbird is described as “We all worked from waking to sleeping. We had the best motivations. We were building a home raising children, and saving the world. It all had to be done right away” (Cheney 119). They were not merely idealistic but also ambitious and driven. There is a moral urgency in describing their own motivations as the “best” and their mission as “saving the world,” and it elevates their projects into a level of importance that makes maintaining a queer colony seem like a bold first step towards creating a just society.

Some visions are more romantic than others. In *Off Our Backs*, Corky Culver describes her thirty years on lesbian land as, “We danced ballets of bare-breasted women toe-ing in joists, taking turns hand drilling heavy rough-cut lumber. Our stages were the open framing and platforms of the pole houses: our backdrops, trees and sky; our curtains, the Florida summer afternoon rainstorms” (Culver 46). While her language is fanciful, she is still capturing the fact that hard work and manual labor were required.

SEXUALITY & CHALLENGING PATRIARCHY

One of the ways Lesbian Land Dwellers want to resist patriarchy is by questioning the nature of romantic and sexual relationships. Being proud lesbians is one way of defying patriarchy, and in the context of the 1970s that was a lot more radical and arguably required more courage than it does now. Many lesbian land experimenters describe systems designed to counteract patriarchal conditioning around relationships. In the Nozama (Amazon spelled backwards) Tribe, “During Sexuality Week we had daily masturbation circles at which we'd all masturbate together. A highlight of Singles Week was drawing names from a hat for sleeping partners” (Cheney 156). The women made commitments with their bodies to un-learn social values about sexuality and desire, and were taking action to teach themselves new ways of experiencing both pleasure and intimacy.

Pelican Lee explains, “During this time, non-monogamy was “politically correct.” Monogamous couples felt an undercurrent of criticism of their relationships. Many women had several lovers on the land. It was difficult to get away from relationships one might not want to witness. Sometimes dealing with our feelings around our multiple relationships took so much energy that we had little left for anything else” (Cheney 161). They made their most intimate relationships the site for political change.

At Redbird, “We were also committed to smashing romanticism. We reasoned that one falls in love because of a lot of conditioning (e.g., tall and slender), that everyone is loveable, and that if one focuses on the specialness of each person, one can love anyone” (Cheney 120) This strikes me as a desire to ignore not only the larger culture’s ideals but also to question the very basic internal desires one experiences; they are holding themselves to a standard of being above societal norms and even above personal desire.

FAR FROM IDEAL

Exiting society and starting a new social world takes a different kind of commitment than joining a consciousness raising group, a political movement, or even doing feminist organizing. Women left their world behind and went to live on new land, either with people they knew, or by traveling to places learned of by word of mouth, or by simply setting off on their own. Something was present in the culture that sparked the idea that reforming the existing society was futile, that the only way to live with integrity was to create a new social order according to feminist values. There must have been a great deal of optimism to begin with, even as many of the voices in *Lesbian Land* reveal more reflective attitudes about what was realistic and what was not. Pelican Lee explains, “Growing up in capitalistic patriarchal America had not prepared us for living the kind of life we desired” (Cheney 161).

Martha Courtot from Nourishing Space in Arizona explains, “I think an important story about the seventies, and women on land, would be how we really could not start fresh, but carried with us all the worst parts of the predominant culture- the greed, the lust for power, the abuse of sexual freedom, the abuse of ourselves and each other, the class and race walls which keep us apart still” (Cheney 103). Her disappointment is clear, especially in the contrast drawn by using the word “abuse” repeatedly in describing a project entitled “Nourishing Space.”

Joyce Cheney describes the women of Redbird in Vermont, “We thought we were doing something so radically different. In some ways we were. In other ways, we brought the patriarchy with us” (Cheney 124). Patriarchy proved to be much more persistent than these women expected, and they were disappointed in themselves and in the difference between their ideals and their reality.

Juana Maria Paz explains that rejecting patriarchy had unanticipated emotional consequences, “If we follow the theory that everything is patriarchal and needs to be thrown

overboard, what does that do to the fact that nearly everything on the planet has some patriarchal influence- from the socks we wear to the books we read? How much rejection and casting out can one movement stand, and shouldn't an adjustment period be allowed for?" (Cheney 74). At least here we can see a hint of mercy in the desire for some time to disengage from the ubiquity of sexism.

Women land dwellers wanted to break from patriarchy but also to follow their own beliefs and form better family structures and relationships, structures that were more liberating and empowering than the ones they came from. More than escaping, they were trying to form a new social order that was not hierarchical, and was instead collaborative and valued everyone's unique contributions. They experimented with self-reliance and degrees of separation from society. One after the other, they express criticism of their projects and the ways they fell short. Yet all these criticisms have an instructive ring to them, as though warning future feminists how to better prepare themselves for such projects. They also express urgency around the idea that we must do better.

HEALING

In some cases, women on lesbian land discussed spirituality and healing, but not as often as I had expected. In discussing some of their challenges, many mention living with women who had issues with alcoholism and drug abuse. Oppressed people often have a lot of healing to do, and I would have thought moving out of city or suburban life to be in the country with others of one's own kind would be about healing from the trauma and abuse of being part of an oppressed class, being women and/or queer and/or poor and/or of color. With a few important exceptions, however, narrators describe their political reasons more than their personal, internal motivations. I suspect this is a product of their desire to tell their stories in a politically compelling way. The

experiences they describe deeply personal, and yet at the same time, the narrators speak from political conviction and reveal their liberatory and feminist agenda frequently, through what they choose to describe and how they choose to describe it.

As people who are seeking healing and shelter from an oppressive society, “The issue of substance abuse was an issue that strongly affected- or had affected- individual and group life at many lesbian lands. Some of the lands have made policy statements of chemically-free-healing space. Some have acknowledged the effect of substance abuse but have decided against rules for fear of alienating womyn or restricting access” (Cheney 11). It seems natural to me that recovery would be one of the highest goals of lesbian separatism, but it might turn out to be more resonant with the contemporary narratives.

Healing is explicitly named as a goal by some of the women. Dolphin at Dragonland explains, “we strive to create a sane and safe place for wimmin, to weed out all those insanities and dangers in our own heads and in our community that have made the culture we grew up in such a pathetic and horrifying mess” (Cheney 48). Dolphin explains how Dragonwimmin are withdrawing from patriarchy and making their individual dreams come true, but that those dreams differ widely.

In discussing the community called Golden, Hannah expresses a desire to start a new land group, where “The main affinity, the main focus, would be spirituality. We’d like it to be a retreat for wimmin, a self-healing center” (Cheney 51). She goes on to explain how she had been injured and unable to do manual labor and felt “persecuted” for it by the other women, and how she observed the “persecution” of another woman who “chose to take a lot of time to heal her body and her soul in meditative ways” (Cheney 51). It is clear here that the women disagreed about the value of healing and self-care, or at least in how that was to be enacted and how much

time could be spent on it. The use of the word “persecution” is very revealing, where she could have said “criticized” or “resented” or “misunderstood as selfish.” Her repeated use of “persecution” suggests the level of moral self-righteousness that many of the women were bringing to their land projects. It is not merely a disagreement about what is valuable use of time, but becomes escalated into a human rights issue.

Gwen of Silver Circle encapsulates much of the needed healing in her description of their work: “changing our patriarchal programming regarding inferiority feelings, competition, compulsivity, tragic life tapes, deprivation mind set, possessiveness, body shame, manipulative behaviors, intolerance, and spiritual beliefs” (Cheney 129). When healing is evoked, it is mostly in reference to patriarchal oppressions. At the same time, the healing is part of the work to resist those oppressions and create new ways of life.

SEPARATISM

Separatism plays a huge part in the structure of the lesbian land dwellers lives but by the time we get to the contemporary queer utopians, separatism is not even mentioned. I suspect the multicultural discourses of the 1990s and transgender liberation movements of the 2000s ruptured not only the desire for separatism but the concept itself. Contemporary queers do not necessarily consider “woman,” “man,” or “transgender” as unifying identifications. There is a dated simplicity to the way lesbian land dwellers unthinkingly refer to themselves and others as “women,” however they chose to spell that word.

The Michigan Women’s Music Festival is referenced by the editor of the collection as a place where she learned about all these women’s lands and was able to put out the call to participate in the book by meeting people there and spreading the word. The final Mich Fest was held in summer 2015. The festival had fallen under criticism for at least twenty years, first for its

exclusion and later for unclear policies on the admission of transgender women (assigned male at birth). The concept of separatism is strained under an increasingly sophisticated understanding of gender as a social construction and an identity that one can name for oneself rather than something assigned by biology. There is a chapter in *Lesbian Land* dedicated to Mich Fest, a dialog of how it transformed women's lives (Cheney 96). There is also a list of rules from the Wisconsin Womyn's Land Cooperative with an explicit and unapologetically transphobic rule about who gets to be considered a woman (Cheney 136). It would be remiss to ignore the unfair and unkind exclusion of transgender women from lesbian lands. It would also be unfair to hold Lesbian Land Dwellers of the 1980s to current standards of respect for transgender people, as radical as they were, and with all they accomplished. I can only wish they were more compassionate with trans women, and while we are at it, more compassionate and forgiving with each other too. The Michigan Women's Music Festival has come to an end, and maybe with it the women-born-women-only variety of separatism is ending too.

Judith Ion, who described her own experience of liberation on separatist land, just as accurately describes how separatism is often perceived: "Separatism is a source of embarrassment referred to in hushed or contemptuous tones by non-separatist feminists; it is a term that is frequently and unconditionally aligned with man-hating, hairy-legged, overall-clad lesbians; it is a position criticized for its perceived long-term impossibility in terms of population regeneration; it is a strategy criticized for its perceived racist, classist, ageist, lesbianist, able-bodiedest underpinnings" (Ion 98). Separatism has some built-in challenges that emerge in many of the narratives, especially when it comes to male children of lesbians.

There is also a sense in which the lesbian land dwellers are separatist in that they are breaking or simply "separating" from the dominant culture. One of the major differences of the

lesbian land dwellers from the utopian queer families is that the land dwellers have sought to physically distance themselves from the mainstream. There are of course queer land projects in the current moment. They are relatively easy to find online, usually because they are trying to raise money for some aspect of their work or for their continued existence. Yet these projects most often consist of radical faeries and/or a more diversely gendered population of queers. They are separated from mainstream society, but not by gender. Even the mainstream and respected New York Times has recently written stories about queer land projects, stating there may be about twelve in rural Tennessee and evoking the utopian fictional trope of discovery: “The woman who came out looked surprised. She told him that he was on a commune for gay, lesbian and transgender people and suggested politely that he leave” (Halbertstadt 1). The ostensibly objective journalist proceeds to describe the wonders he encounters on the land, in some ways echoing the narrators of *Herland* and *Millenium Hall* more than any contemporary utopians.

CONFLICT AND CONSENSUS

Many Lesbian Land Dwellers were invested in abandoning patriarchal models of authority and championing consensus as a way of making decisions. They speak of forming circles and discussing all decisions at length, and it often comes up that this labor intensive process is one of the things that exhausted them and kept them from spending their entire lives on lesbian land. They worked through consensus for a number of years, and then either wanted to have more personal say in life decisions or wanted rest from lengthy discussions.

Courtney Culver boasts, “The secret is cooperation- the grueling process of compromise and empowerment needed to make a collective work” (Culver 44). Even describing it as “grueling,” Culver seems to want to let us in on something that inspires her. She is sharing a secret to becoming empowered through collaboration, and warning us of the difficulty.

On OWL Farm, Pelican Lee describes the practice of forming circles to share ideas: “We talked in small circles and large circles, danced, sang, and massaged each other. We meditated, envisioning our new land. It was exciting to hear so many different visions women had of women's culture on land. These ranged from farming and political work to festivals and sculpture parks” (Cheney 158). In Maud’s Land in the Ozarks, “They have been working for over two years now on writing a contract with each other which is intended to cover all the issues that might come up. They are going through a highly collective process of regular meetings with facilitation to deal with every issue imaginable, in order to have individual freedom and private property (Cheney 87). The circles seem symbolic of a non-hierarchical discussion process, as does the idea of facilitated meetings intended to be the solution to anything and everything that might come up.

In describing contentious discussions of degrees of separatism, Senecarol of the Daughters of Earth Farm notes that “A great deal of energy and time went into many more meetings and two retreats to deal with angry and hurt feelings, and ultimately, the establishment of a conflict resolution policy” (Cheney 133). At WomanShare, Billie Miracle explains how their lives and goals evolved over time. “The collective process has continued, expanded, contracted. We now focus more on land work—gardening, carpentry, raising chickens—and less on holding workshops for city women” (Cheney 146). Billie laments how the idealism is fading from the movement. She tells a story about a woman who used to live on the land, who said she never found a place where women were so committed to find a way to live together, “no matter how hard things got” (Cheney 149). There seems to be a belief that hurt feelings are an unavoidable part of the process, and persisting through difficulty is one of their accomplishments.

SELF-RELIANCE

The lesbian land dwellers often refer to the desire to rely only on themselves and other women. They speak about the struggles of doing everything for themselves, especially those who have no experience with building or farming and are looking to start everything from scratch. There is an individualist streak expressed by some, but also a pride in women doing things together and for themselves and not relying on men. In some cases, not relying on capitalism either, but as we will see, ownership of land and property is a major factor in the overall management of living together.

Ion explains that her time was spent on things like “subsistence, creating and community building: tending massive vegetable gardens, building horse yards, horse riding, digging shitters (toilets), carting water from the creek,” making explicit much of the work that was required for self-reliance. She also includes some of the more pleasurable activities, including “walking, visiting other women, meditating, talking, healing, celebrating solstices, making music, getting high, fucking, sleeping...” (Ion 106). She paints a portrait of women’s experience being created wholly by other women and the land itself, expressing a kind of self-reliance where all experiences center on the fact that she is on lesbian land.

Questions of independence and interdependence are central at Beechtree, where the goal is “to develop space for disabled people to live autonomously” (Cheney 41). Started by Connie Panzarino, women usually live there for a few months at a time, with several staying for a few years. Panzarino describes the extensive modifications made to the house, and plans for having enough supplies on hand for emergencies. As far as independence goes, she explains, “I live on my own garden produce and have three gardens. Every year I question whether I will be able to garden. Will women be here to tend it? Then women come up from the city and are glad there is a garden, and somehow the work gets done” (Cheney 44). In this short description of her garden,

she captures the tension between self-sufficiency and the collaborative values held simultaneously by many of the Lesbian Land Dwellers. They want independence from society, but support from other women is essential.

CONFLICT & VALUES: MONEY

One of the major areas of contention and conflict among women seeking more equal relationships was money. Not everyone came with equal resources but everyone came with equality as a value. Some managed to work out systems of sharing but others developed deep and lasting conflicts based on money and control. The ownership of the land was one of the main areas of contention. Often stories of sharing are also stories of conflict and criticism. For instance, “The Herland collective was often accused of elitism due to their shareholder co-op structure...” (Ion 110). In a structure where shareholders are decision makers, there is an unequal distribution of power. (In the novel from which they took their name, there are no shareholders but instead a fictionally abundant land.)

Some women were able to buy their land up front, others were never able to own any land but found ways to live there. The final chapter of *Lesbian Land* addresses the politics of land, and contains information on forming a land trust. This placement of resources at the end of the book suggests to me that when you are done reading, you will be ready to get to work on finding land and forming a land trust. It adds to the sense that *Lesbian Land* is not merely an historic document, but an instruction manual.

CONFLICT & VALUES: RACE

There was a powerful desire to start over and make a clean break from society, but in so many ways it is impossible to break entirely from our culture of origin. People come with different experiences and understandings of power relations. There are questions of racial

differences and misunderstanding by white women of the experiences and needs of women of color.

The lesbian land projects seemed to be really segregated by race, with white women noting that they value racial equality and diversity but then explaining that their group consists entirely of white women. One narrator even notices that there is not much racial conflict because there are no women of color present. As explained by Dolphin of Dragonwagon, “Similarly, why have no wimmin of color chosen to live at Dragon? But better the wimmin of color give the answer to that one” (Cheney 48). She actually leaves it at that. It is unclear if she is unsure how to proceed with explaining, or ashamed, or wants to make room for women of color to have their own voices. With this level of white passivity, it is no wonder women of color formed their own spaces. In a description of the women of color land Arco Iris, “White womyn that come here must always be prepared and willing to deal with their racism. They must accept that this community is specifically for womyn of color and that our needs are to be respected here” (Cheney 37).

Shosana, describing her experience on women’s land in Denmark, says “The questions of race and class did not divide us, as they tend to do in America. We were all white women from all classes, though mostly middle class, bringing different skills with us. Many women had experience from left wing groups. There was much diversity” (Cheney 62). Her remarks demonstrate a very limited understanding of the word “diversity,” and she seems to exemplify the kind of obliviousness that women of color found so challenging.

Some of the women of color in *Lesbian Land* openly express their pain and feelings of exclusion from white women’s land. They explain their experiences of isolation and the lack of awareness of the white women who fail to see that different people have different needs from

community. There is a desire expressed for the white women to do their own internal work around racial justice, but also sheer exhaustion from educating them. This is a familiar refrain in contemporary queer community: “Racism takes on many forms, forms that it has taken us several years to recognize and will take some white womyn many more years to even accept” (Cheney 37). Here is a clear request for white women to work on their understanding of racism, but also to be patient and know that it is a long process, and that it will not be easy for anyone: “Regardless of whether they are sincere in their efforts, this does not make the problem any easier on the womyn of color who are living in that situation. It is always very painful and very difficult for the womyn of color” (Cheney 37).

Juana Maria Paz describes her struggles to share space with white lesbians. “I arrived at Sassafras womyn's land in Arkansas in fall of 1979 to find that the collective had just split up, and on very bad terms. The rich white womyn who originally bought the land, was struggled with and convinced, after much bitterness and tension, to deed the most remote part of the land to womyn of color” (Cheney 71). Class and race struggles combined to form a powerful challenge to lesbian separatist perceptions and expectations of their own level of progressive ideals.

FAMILIES OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN

Not all of the Lesbian Land Dwellers refer to themselves as families. In fact only a few of them do. One in particular, the Nozama Tribe, calls themselves a family because the same core group of women had lived on multiple different lands for different periods of time. Other narrators speak about changing patterns of residence, small core groups and large numbers of visiting women, and do not use the language of family to describe their group even when they are raising children. Pelican Lee describes the Nozama Tribe as “a family of women and children

with many personal changes, through different places, changes and growth, over a period of ten years, 1975-1984” (Cheney 152). For the Nozama Tribe, persistent membership creates the family.

One of the common threads about raising children on lesbian land was the idea of shared childcare, reducing the pressure on mothers to do all the work of raising children. Beyond distributing the work of childcare, the idea of instilling feminist values in children is described in more than one interview. In the Nozama Tribe, “The children's lives were enriched by having so many mothers and friends to learn from. The children that are growing up in our land-based lesbian culture are experiencing things that most American children never dream of. They are becoming strong, yet gentle, young women and men who see the world through exceptional eyes” (Cheney 160). Childcare becomes part of their vision for a better world.

For Lucia at Arco Iris, childcare is one of the central values of the land. “Now our situation is getting more together and we are always looking for more dependable, reliable, determined womyn to come and live here with us and we are always interested in taking care of children of color for their mothers if they're having a hard time doing that at the time” (Cheney 40). At Arco Iris, childcare is part of a larger solidarity in support of other women of color who may be struggling or who may simply want more dependable adults in their children's lives. Childcare becomes part of the shared responsibilities of living together.

CREATING QUEER FAMILIES

Jane Ward, writer of one of the contemporary queer narratives in the Utopian anthology, stakes out the radical position that children are their partners and collaborators in creating a utopian family unit. They are working together as co-creators: “I, too, have refused normative, celebrated, and ‘appropriate’ modes of parenting, not only for the sake of the queer pleasure it

brings, but also for the sake of the work that my child and I are doing, as comrades, to live together queerly” (Ward 232). Ward’s queer utopian vision includes partnering with children to form a way of life where both are included as central and not secondary members of the family.

Ward has made a commitment to refrain from determining her child’s gender for them; she will allow her child to make their own decision. When others have viewed her as somehow endangering the child, she argues “from a queer perspective, experimenting with nonintervention and self determination are precisely the seeds planted in the present with the hope of building a more just and nonviolent world” (Ward 234). Ward has hope that queer parenting can liberate not only the child being parented, but also the society that assigns everyone a gender at birth. Her way of childrearing is intended to raise a liberated child and create an impact on the larger culture.

To parent queerly, then, “means actively providing all children with genderqueer possibilities to offset coercive gender normativity... that the gendered present is remarkably unfinished and underdeveloped, and that we, as children and adults, have a lot of social experiments to enact together in order to imagine it differently” (Ward 243). Viewing the children as collaborators in creating a utopian queer future is radical in an entirely different way from our Lesbian Land Dwellers, but similarly approached with an instructive tone. Ward conveys great enthusiasm for collaborating with children and respecting their self-determination. Contemporary Queer Utopians and Lesbian Land Dwellers share a sense of moral righteousness and a vision of creating a better world as essential to raising their children.

In “Utopian Kinship,” Laura V. Heston explains “In these families, children become vehicles for imagining new familial relations and ways of being” (Heston 246). Heston interviewed members of extended queer families. An interview subject describes the parental

role he plays as a gay male friend of a lesbian couple with a child, who everyone assumes is either a biological parent or a sperm donor, but is actually acting as a parent with no legal or biological connection to the child. Heston uses the term “chosen parenting” to name the phenomenon of adults who have no biological or legal connection to a child, nor any romantic connection to the child’s parent, who take up parenting anyway (Heston 256). In light of chosen parenting, children participate in chosen families and queer alternative families not by being adopted but by being in relationship to parental adults, “and nieces and nephews to their parents’ close friends and/or sperm and egg donors” (Heston 248). Like Ward’s enthusiasm for queer parenting, Heston’s exploration of chosen parenting is full of optimism for liberating individuals from patriarchal family roles while providing more adult guidance, support, and care for children.

In my next chapter, I will look at some fictional precursors to these real-life lesbian separatist communities, and queer utopian families. I will focus on two important examples from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The advice, the tension between lofty goals and reality, and certainly the emphasis on ambitious social improvement are present throughout. It might seem like a surprising choice to go so far back in time, but I believe much of the ethics, politics and lived dynamics of the contemporary examples are foreshadowed in these earlier fictional examples.

Chapter 2: Advice And Instruction From Utopian Feminist Fiction

Sarah Scott's 1762 novel *A Description of Millenium Hall* provides a utopic vision of a country estate owned and populated entirely by women. The women are exemplary in their kindness and charity. In the 1915 novel *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, we have another utopic vision of a society populated entirely by women. In *Herland*, the women have created a culture free from strife, engineered to perfection over generations of improvement. I am going to look at the underlying ideological beliefs for insights on how those beliefs both inspire and create challenges for contemporary feminism. While the ambitious nature of these utopian novels is powerful in itself, I also believe their emphasis on moral superiority has created a legacy of rigid thinking and exclusivity that contributes to problems faced by present day feminist and queer utopians.

Both *Millenium Hall* and *Herland* employ male narrators as visitors and guides to women's utopian communities. The reader learns a lot about the structures of Herland as a nation, and Millenium Hall as a household estate, through the male narrator's curiosity. In both cases, there are question and answer sessions between characters that serve as a vehicle to explain the origins, fundamental beliefs, and relationships among the women. Male narrators provide a familiar lens for the reader. They are also a device to create the need for extensive description highlighting the exemplary way of life created by women on their own: "For Gilman's purposes, Van is the perfect narrator—a 'rational' social scientist, he cannot deny the civilized progress of Herland" (Hausman 495). With men serving as the voice of reason, both novels create a sense that the logic of the women's decisions about how they live their lives is inarguable. Not only can a skeptical reader identify with the narrator, but also the narrator creates

an opportunity for the female characters to provide instruction in their way of life. When it comes to feminist utopia, an instructive tone runs through both fiction and nonfiction.

VIRTUE AT MILLENIUM HALL

In classic utopian style, Sir George and Mr. Lamont arrive at Millenium Hall through an accident on their journey. They find an unusual estate owned, run, and populated primarily by women. The women welcome them, and Mrs. Maynard escorts them around and tells them all about life at Millenium Hall. The home was established by Miss Mancel and Mrs. Morgan, life-long friends who met in school and made every effort to remain close until finally Mrs. Morgan's jealous husband died and left her the estate that became Millenium Hall. In total, six women combine resources and to start a manufacturing business that expands and maintains their estate.

The founding women's stories show them to be very virtuous by their contemporary standards, or for some of them, to have learned a lesson and become virtuous. By the time each arrives at Millenium Hall, she has had some bad experiences with men, inherited money or property, and shown herself to be different from her female contemporaries. They invited neighboring women who could meet the following qualification: "any gentleman's daughter, whose character was unblemished, might, if she desired, on those terms be received into that society" (Scott 116). It follows that Millenium Hall is a utopia with selection criteria, a family one has to be qualified to join.

In her essay "Mothers and Monsters in Sarah Robinson Scott's *Millenium Hall*," Linda Dunne presents a parallel between the so-called monsters who reside safely away from society at Millenium Hall, and the women themselves. The women create a safe haven from male domination, because "from the perspective of the society they reject, those women are misfits

and outcasts, either willfully or by misfortune" (Dunne 68). Dunne compares the economic difficulties and exploitative experiences faced by Millenium Hall residents to the difficulties faced by people with disabilities: "The similarities between the exploitation of the 'monsters' and the economic situations of the women are made fairly obvious in the histories that immediately follow in the novel" (Dunne 67). The residents of Millenium Hall stand outside of society not only by choice but also by exclusion. Millenium Hall is a refuge for women who do not or cannot fit in to society, so it makes sense that they would in turn create a refuge for socially excluded disabled people. In contrast to their current contentedness, the women and the so-called monsters are all survivors of some kind of abuse or the unavoidable oppressive circumstances of patriarchy.

Yet it is not only exclusion and oppression that set these women apart; it is also their character and conduct. James Cruise points out how the stories of each of the women highlight their exceptionality. Each has their bad experiences with men, but each also has her differences from other women: "By exposing the vanity, invidiousness, and competition that characterize female relationships," two valuable and related lessons emerge (Cruise 562). First, there are few examples of female excellence to be found in the world, and second, widespread assumptions about women's roles only reinforce very narrow and specific types of character. From this perspective, the women's personal histories depict the consequences of nonconformity (Cruise 565). Some of them express a simple but countercultural determination to avoid marriage altogether, quite apart from male behavior. Miss Mancel and Miss Selvyn in particular are motivated by the desire to remain unmarried. After her patron dies and she learns of his ill intentions, Miss Mancel simply determines that she will never marry, despite the skepticism of the wealthy and high-ranking men who pursued her (Scott 156). Miss Selvyn gives a perfectly

reasonable explanation for her refusal to marry: “for enjoying perfect content, she had no benefit to expect from change; and happiness was so scarce a commodity in this life, that whoever let it once slip, had little reason to expect to catch it again” (Scott 206). In other words, she sees marriage as a potential threat to her happiness, quite an outsider’s perspective for her times.

Charity is central to the character of Millenium Hall. "These charities provide a means for women of all classes, who by choice or circumstances fall outside the normal world of heterosexual marriage, to live useful, free, and fulfilling lives" (Dunne 59). Charitable works also set them apart from the female characters in their background stories, who were often only out to increase their advantages and enhance their own wealth or reputation. For instance, Lady Melvyn schemes to marry off her daughter-in-law, and the vain Lady Brumpton is generous but constantly seeks “to be admired for various merits” (Scott 190). The values of these women are set up as clear contrasts to the values of the protagonists.

Millenium Hall provides a place for women to be different. They form close relationships outside of the patriarchal family. Their lives do not revolve around men and they are not under the control of fathers or husbands. As Lady Mary explains, “Reason wishes for communication and improvement; benevolence longs for objects on which to exert itself; the social comforts of friendship are so necessary to our happiness, that it would be impossible not to endeavor to enjoy them” (Scott 110). In other words, they live together in order to improve themselves, do good work, and find happiness through friendship. These virtues are the foundation of their household.

VIRTUE IN HERLAND

Charlotte Perkins Gilman originally wrote *Herland* as a serial story that she published in 1915 in her own monthly feminist magazine, *The Forerunner*. *Herland* was not published as a complete book until 1979, concurrent to the rise of lesbian separatism. Terry O. Nicholson, Jeff

Margrave, and Vandyck Jennings are young, adventurous explorers who hear legends of a “strange and terrible Woman Land” and set out to find it for themselves despite warnings (Gilman 2). Vandyck, or Van, serves as the narrator and a moderate perspective, where Terry serves as the voice of misogyny and Jeff provides something of a foil for Terry by idolizing women and femininity.

The women in *Herland* live in a state of abundance and have no concept of poverty. They ask Van, Terry, and Jeff to explain what the men mean when they describe some women from their world as “poor.” Van struggles to explain that the “fittest reach the top,” while the “poorest of all the women were driven into the labor market by necessity” (Gilman 53). In *Herland* there is no conflict over having enough or fear of poverty because there is no such thing. Gilman eliminates money, one of the fundamental sources of conflict in real lesbian lands. Instead of imaging women of different means and how they managed to create a more just distribution or how they navigated conflict and distributed power, work, and decision making, we have a financially level society.

Van exclaims his admiration of the upstanding Herlanders: “Such high ideals as they had! Beauty, Health, Strength, Intellect, Goodness—for these they prayed and worked” (Gilman 51). The women’s morality is unquestioned by the narrators. In Sharon Jansen’s *Reading Women’s Worlds*, she argues: “There is no strife, no bloodshed, no violence, and no ‘plunder’ in Herland, for the simple reason that there are no men. The women of Herland thus have no need to be warrior-women” (Jansen 105). The idea that the women are peaceful because of the absence of men is reinforced by the text and the history of their civilization, but it is important not to neglect the eugenic action taken by these women in order to further eliminate conflict: “Patience, gentleness, courtesy, all that we call ‘good breeding’ was part of their code of conduct” (Gilman

97). The connection between their culture and their reproductive control is made explicit throughout the text.

The dark side of the virtuous women of Herland is the fact that they are selectively breeding out “the lowest types;” they boast about how they have not had any criminals for six hundred years (Gilman 70). They have removed all the variation from reproduction to create their perfect society. Their eugenic framework for reproduction is actually quite consistent with the way they design their forest and breed their cats with explicit goal of controlling productivity and improving outcomes. They want to create more women who will live up to the virtues of Herland, so being true to their ideals is a critical factor in deciding who gets to be a mother: “The conventional ideal mother becomes, in Herland, the ideal human being: giving, strong, controlled, gentle, wise, fruitful. Freed from male dominance and oppression, the citizen of Herland is able to direct her maternal virtues to the development of the arts, science, agriculture, and other forms of creativity” (Lees 225). Not only is motherhood an honor, it is the ambition of all the women who live there. The ideal mother is the ideal citizen of Herland. This ambition toward virtuous motherhood represents their departure from patriarchy, but also their strict social control.

Herlanders make motherhood exclusive in order to not overpopulate, which is central to the abundance of their society. Beyond that, they make virtue the single most important criteria for being selected for child rearing. Herlander family bonds lack in conflict and instead give the impression of a kind of impersonal solidarity: “They were sisters, and as they grew, they grew together—not by competition, but by united action” (Gilman 51). The women who give birth turn over the care and education of their children to other women, who have also undergone training and proven to be the most qualified. Yet Gilman and her narrator insist this process is

not competitive. Instead of struggle and conflict, the women of Herland willingly participate in selection process after selection process.

ON KINSHIP AND COHABITATION IN MILLENIUM HALL

The Millenium Hall household family is both a radical move against patriarchy and an incremental move toward women's liberation. In addition to referring to themselves as a family, they also use the words "sisterhood" and "community" (Scott 121). Millenium Hall's version of kinship is utopian because it aims to create relationships outside of patriarchal control, outside of marriage and patriarchal families. This family provides a place for women to be different.

The refusal to participate in compulsory heterosexuality arguably makes this a queer family. Whether they are sleeping together or not, the women disobey society in very important ways. Their lives do not revolve around men and they are not under the control of fathers or husbands. In their kinship model, friendship and charity are the main values rather than husbands and children.

Naomi Tadmor provides extensive research on the household family that was relatively commonplace at the time *Millenium Hall* was published. "Very often, when English people spoke or wrote about 'families,' it was not the nuclear unit that they had in mind. 'Family' in their language could mean a household, including its diverse dependents, such as servants, apprentices, and co-resident relatives." (Tadmor 19) From detailed diaries from the times, Tadmor presents evidence that "Two main criteria qualified one to be counted as a member of the household family: co-residence and submission to the authority of the head of the household" (Tadmor 27). At Millenium Hall, the heads of the household are the founding members, and although finances are pooled, they maintain their authority as the primary investors and owners of the estate.

The household family signifies the space for the most liberated aspects of Scott's vision, where women freely associate, and also the one of the most conservative elements, where the wealthier members of the household set the rules for the low ranking members (Van Sant 5). From this perspective, we can see how the wealthier members of the household have been liberated and choose to be together. They are benevolent in their oversight of the rest of the organization, but there is an unquestioned, unequal distribution of power. Critic Sally O'Driscoll frames the hierarchy in a less than favorable light: "The women have constructed an elaborate class-based hierarchy in their utopia: the original group of women, who are well born and have money of their own, supervise a group of gentle but impoverished women who live separately but share some of the founding group's activities" (O'Driscoll 66).

The advantage of the engineered kinship model is that it is flexible and adaptive. The community can grow and people can pass in and out. In fact, when the space is not big enough for all the women who want to live there, they purchase another house (Johns 14). All of the unmarried women entered into something of a family compact, where each has her own space but also shares common areas, and take turns being in charge.

The kinship model is not without its perils. It is still hierarchical, and it does place the wealthy women in positions of power: "The household family model made it possible to imagine flexible living groups, but at the same time it extended the naturalization not only of social hierarchy but also of the family as a centre of discipline" (Van Sant 17). This argument raises larger questions about the place of the family in a feminist utopian project, whether it is just one small step away from patriarchy, and whether a hierarchical structure is inherently unjust. The hierarchy is a conservative element of Millenium Hall, but it does not take away from the radical proposition of their way of life. On the contrary, it reveals to a contemporary reader how hard it

was (and still is) to think outside of familiar models of living, and how far Sarah Scott went to set up her realistic and attainable reform rather than wholly unattainable fantasy. Women in Lesbian Lands often attempted to discard hierarchy, but struggled with persistent differences in power.

KINSHIP AND CITIZENSHIP BY EUGENIC DESIGN IN HERLAND

Before the explorers meet any of the women of *Herland*, one of their very first impressions of the land is revealing. Terry notices that he has never seen a forest as carefully groomed as the one they have entered. Every tree has been trimmed, and every tree is either useful for food or hardwood for building: “These towering trees were under as careful cultivation as so many cabbages” (Gilman 12). This is a small detail at the start of the novel, but it predicts much about the civilization the men encounter. They will find that everything is carefully planned and deliberately cultivated, from the forest to the education system, from the utilitarian clothes the women wear to the cats who have been bred to no longer meow (Gilman 42).

The women of Herland seem to experience their relational bonds in a secure yet impersonal way. They evoke sisterhood and at the same time, a clear level of detachment: “We had expected jealousy, and found a broad sisterly affection, a fair minded intelligence, to which we could produce no parallel” (Gilman 69). None of them are lovers, and their concept of citizenship revolves around being mothers, daughters, and sisters to one another. “The question of sexuality among the women is seemingly evaded; or perhaps the author simply relied upon nineteenth-century understandings” (Farley 236). If it is a nineteenth-century understanding, it is still absent of any romance.

There are no characters in *Herland* as close as the romantic friends who founded Millenium Hall. Herlanders’ attachments to one another seem more rational than emotional, and

there are no passages that could be interpretively stretched from romantic friendship into the realm of the suggestive. Jansen argues: “Thus, although Gilman emphasizes the asexual nature of this birth, it is also somehow the result of a deep and abiding love between women” (Jansen 114). If this is true, there is not as much evidence of this deep abiding love as there is of the flowery and devoted friendships in *Millenium Hall*. Herlanders seem to have lost their sexual desire, and when they discuss marriage with the male visitors they have a hard time conceiving of having sex for reasons other than procreation. When the three visitors get married to Herlanders, they have conventional patriarchal ideas of sex within the marriage. The Herlanders have only dual parent reproduction in mind. In discussing their conflicting expectations of married life, Ellador asks Van, “when people marry, they go right on doing this in season and out of season with no thought of children at all?” (Gilman 108). The relationships they have among themselves seem equally sterile. Gilman uses words and phrases like “good comrade” (Gilman 109) and “that close beautiful group feeling” (Gilman 92) to describe how the women relate to one another.

The absence of romance aside, kinship in *Herland* takes the form of a matter-of-fact solidarity with little emotional passion. This could be a product of the context in which Gilman was working on her monthly publication: “It may have been that the very implicit solidarity among women— a solidarity fostered by both conditions that separated the average nineteenth-century white woman from the male world, and by the organized feminist response to those conditions— which enabled Gilman to create and publish her feminist utopia” (Farley 236). Women’s togetherness in *Herland* is simple and matter of fact, maybe because of the simple fact of social segregation in Gilman’s lifetime.

Millenium Hall residents retreated from male society partly to ensure their own safety. In contrast, Herland women take safety for granted and are seemingly asexual. Instead of forming families, they produce citizens for the extended sisterhood. Instead of entering the lesbian continuum, they detach themselves from sexuality. Here, and to a lesser extent in Millenium Hall, I wondered if chastity was in fact their form of sexual liberation. At a minimum it represents control of one's own body; "Feminists have long argued that marriage structures sexual relationships into 'fixed' gendered roles, and the first utopian novels that presented alternatives to the dominant tradition were works questioning marriage... The idea of the good life without sex or with very little sex crops up regularly, and celibate (or supposedly celibate) religious communities were, and are, common" (Sargent and Sargisson 301). Chastity not only simplifies the lives of women in these feminist utopias, it serves to distance them from what in both cases could be described as the socially sanctioned rapist mentality of many of the male characters. When Van exclaims "You are more Christian than any people I ever saw" (Gilman 98), he draws our attention to how the women of Herland demonstrate Christian values better than the women he knows at home, and connects their virtue to their women-only space despite the fact that they are not actually Christian.

The connection between virtue and womanhood is related to the feminism of Gilman's times, as is the concept of citizenship by design. Gilman was involved with the eugenics movement and wrote about it in her nonfiction work. Alys Eve Weinbaum argues that contemporary feminists have discovered and celebrated *Herland* as inspirational by ignoring Gilman's racism in favor of her feminism. Weinbaum makes the case that we can discuss the merits of the novel but only by fully acknowledging her nonfiction and the racist underpinnings of the very structure of this women's colony. In other words, we can have a more sophisticated

understanding that *Herland* is both feminist and racist, much like the feminism of its time: “For if Gilman's fiction is read through the lens of her nonfiction it becomes evident that both forms of writing are driven by fears of racial mixing that neatly coincide with the discourse of ‘race suicide’” (Weinbaum 282). When mothers are carefully selected, we cannot ignore the fact that this ideal society is breeding people with the purpose of perfection.

In an article published a few years prior to Weinbaum's, Bernice L. Hausman provides further important insights into the feminism of Gilman's time. She argues that since there was not yet our contemporary distinction between sex and gender, we have to look carefully at Gilman's discussions of the distinctive sex differences. She warns us against reading “historical texts according the categories of the present” (Hausman 490). Gilman's eugenic parthenogenesis relies on the idea that learned traits can be passed down through heredity, or the Lamarckian theory of genetics. So not only are the citizens of Herland selectively bred, they are selectively educated and trained with the idea of producing better and better future citizens: “In Herland, Lamarckian practices of education for cultural improvement are bolstered by a form of eugenic birth control” (Hausman 499).

While Herlanders are consistently described as maternal, their feelings toward each other are expressed unsentimentally: “Their distinguishing characteristic is a pronounced communal, not familial, maternalism” (Hausman 496). Hausman makes an important observation about the family feelings in Herland. Their feelings do not amount to an emotional sense of motherhood, or even a personal love of children or individuals in the sisterhood. The women have all descended from a single bloodline and profess a kind of loyalty. They make community and citizenship their highest priority, and connect that priority to a shared sense of motherhood.

If we take *Herland* as advice, do our communes and projects succumb to its faults? Lesbian Land Dwellers demonstrate time and again a lack of capacity to understand the racist exclusion they are practicing on their lands. I am in thinking in particular of a description of the land project where one of the women volunteers that they have no racial issues there because they are all white: “The questions of race and class did not divide us, as they tend to do in America. We were all white women from all classes, though mostly middle class... There was much diversity” (Cheney 62). Her mentality seems to me a mirror image of *Herland*, where social challenges do not exist because of selective breeding.

RACISM

Herlanders are not merely perpetuating their society but populating it with a specific type of women: “Herlanders are carefully rendered: all citizens are female, all births timely and genetically refined, and all reproduction parthenogenic, and thus free of reproductive misplay” (Weinbaum 282). Reproductive misplay would represent the introduction of undesirable characteristics, and of course the determination of what is and is not a desirable characteristic is an incredible abuse of power. Herlanders shape their culture through designing every aspect of it, and the legacy of sameness and control persists in queer cultural spaces.

At Maud’s Land, one of the women (unnamed) states, “I would also like to see wimmin of color here, but I don’t want to put anyone into the position of being a token womon of color so I don’t know how that would ever work,” (Cheney 91). She demonstrates how queer white women have good intentions but lack awareness of how their passivity contributes to the space remaining all white. Much as in *Herland*, she expresses a desire to be good, to be inclusive and not racist, but ultimately prefers to perpetuate sameness in order to avoid conflict and difficulty.

Juana Maria Paz sums up the challenges of race and class in forming lesbian land: “The original blissful pronouncement that ‘we’re all the same here’ quickly turned to anger and bitterness as the womyn of color realized that most of the decisions about money were in the hands of white womyn” (Cheney 74). In *Herland*, we never arrive at this anger and bitterness, because the idea that “we’re all the same here” is enforced through reproductive control and training. Yet the women Paz encounters are also attempting to enforce sameness by asserting it, even as they encounter women of color who will not have their differences erased.

CLASSISM

Lesbian Lands would not seem so ideologically progressive if they had a requirement that women be able to pay into the household in order to be in the small group of decision makers, the way they did in *Millenium Hall*. For *Millenium Hall*, this was a neutral way to explain their continued existence, and novels of the time would explicitly state how much money people had. The wealthier characters hold more authority than the poor ones in both fiction and life, but in the non-fiction world there were a lot more resentments and efforts to equalize financial resources. In one of the individual narratives, Pelican Lee sarcastically notes: “Sharing wealth was talked about a lot at that time, and sometimes happened” (Cheney 155). There is no way for Lesbian Land Dwellers to narrate out their class differences and difficulties.

In *Herland* and *Millenium Hall*, women live together with little or no conflict. Conflict is minimal and readily solved. In *Millenium Hall*, their exceptionally moral natures have drawn them together. In *Herland*, the survival of their colony is the origin of their virtue. They are so relieved to have survived near-extinction that now everything revolves around motherhood and the values and way of life that are derived from it seem almost self-explanatory. There is no possessiveness or greed or envy in either of these fictional women’s communities. There is

material abundance in both novels, and in *Herland* they further avoid the potential scarcity of resources through minimizing the birth rate. This forms a contrast to the real-life financial challenges faced by queer people, as exemplified in a simple statement from one of the Lesbian Land Dwellers: “We shared money. Some women got welfare or unemployment and many got food stamps” (Cheney 159). Through fictional material abundance, the novels predict and readily solve one of the major challenges faced by Lesbian Land Dwellers.

VIRTUE MENTALITY

Herland and *Millenium Hall* are rooted in similar early feminist values that also produced social work and prohibition, a feminism concerned with women’s rights as much as with goodness, purity, and the feminine ideals of their times. More contemporary feminist utopians still find themselves deeply concerned with virtue. They may not use the word, but they consistently express deep concern with living up to their own moral standards. This concern can be seen in the Lesbian Land Dwellers’ struggles with levels of separatism, inclusion of women of color in predominantly white spaces, and class differences that shape expectations of women coming to live on the land. The conflicts take place mostly around race and class, as could be predicted by noting the most controlled elements in *Herland* and *Millenium Hall* respectively. They all share the ambition to attain and exemplify the very highest level of virtue. In real life this rigid way of thinking creates conflict, exclusion, and disappointment.

If we are reading both fictional and nonfictional accounts of utopian lives to imagine our own next steps, plenty of advice is offered. In *Lesbian Land*, many of the individual narrators describe their experiences with an instructive tone. This tone may be partly due the fact that some had moved away from lesbian land by the time they are sending their contribution to the editor, but also demonstrates an explicit desire to instruct future generations. In *Millenium Hall*,

the last phrase of the lengthy subtitle of Sir George's manuscript tells us all about the author's intentions: "Anecdotes and Reflections, As May excite in the Reader proper Sentiments of Humanity, and lead the Mind to the Love of Virtue" (Scott 51). The fact that Gilman published *Herland* in her own feminist journal speaks to the extent to which she hoped to inspire women to consider what a female society could accomplish, as much as her nonfiction hoped to inspire both advancement of women's rights and the maintenance of social stratification through selective breeding.

Within all this instruction, virtue is as critical to Lesbian Land Dwellers as to fictional utopians, even when the word "virtue" is absent. The larger concept of being a person who does good in the world is often revealed in their desire to improve upon the society they are leaving, and to radically question everything. But more tellingly, it comes up in their efforts to make everyone equal, and the difficulty of the widely different backgrounds of women coming to the land. They want to do better and be better than patriarchal society, and many of their efforts point as much towards this concept of improvement as towards their own personal liberation. The pursuit of doing better and being better is tremendously flawed in its rigidity and its supremacist way of evaluating self and others.

The fictional characters I encountered in my study would not be able to identify with the overt lesbianism and experimental relationships of the Lesbian Land Dwellers, but I see their strong sense of virtue when I read about lesbians creating new ways of life. A prime example is where the Lesbian Land Dwellers create relational systems where they practice nonmonogamy and conduct their most personal relationships as experiments, all in an effort to dismantle social norms and biases. In the separatist lands in New South Wales in the 1990s, "In the same way that choosing to live on the land was for many women a decision grounded in escaping patriarchal

culture, sexual relations on the land were often about challenging normative heterosexual behaviors, in particular that of monogamy” (Ion 113). They want to use their own lives and relationships to overcome biases they see as unjust. In other words, in addition to the challenges of abandoning society and creating their own, they also have the challenge of living up to their own standards of virtue, and wanting to instruct future utopians about how not to make the mistakes they have made.

Like the women in *Millenium Hall*, women who come to live on lesbian land are outsiders in mainstream society. In *Millenium Hall*, it was always because of their unique virtue and the desire to turn away from patriarchal pressures. In Lesbian Lands, the women are politically minded lesbians who also want to turn away from patriarchal pressures. There is an element of virtuousness to their politics; they want to question all they have been taught by mainstream society and they want to create new ways of living together.

In *Millenium Hall*, everyone falls in line with the hierarchy based on the benevolent use of wealth on the part of the founders. In *Herland*, morality has been bred into the women through careful selection of who is allowed to give birth. The fictional conceits of these two novels require some suspension of disbelief, where we can imagine the chastity and lack of strife in *Millenium Hall* as possible, in order to imagine *Herland* possible we move into the realm of science fiction, and beyond that, imagine that the application of eugenics could be ethical or even benevolent. The very areas where real world feminist utopians struggle, race and class, are the most fictionalized areas of the imaginary utopians.

This vein of virtue that runs through feminism and lesbian culture and later through queer culture has morphed and transformed over time but I think it has been present since the days of *Millenium Hall* at least. If we look at *Millenium Hall* and how they have their garden with

“monsters,” the disabled and injured who have been rejected by society, we can see what we would now call a terrible representation of disability but at the time what was an unusually compassionate inclusion of people who had been otherwise ostracized. In contemporary queer politics the conversation about accessibility is at the forefront of our learning about what it means for a social space to be inclusive. Today’s queer community is in the process of examining how ableism works to create disability by setting up structures both physical and social that are not designed to include every variety of person. We have language about intersectional feminism to help us, the Lesbian Land Dwellers struggled with getting ramps built and recognizing that not everyone who wanted to live on the land was able to navigate it physically, and the women in Millenium Hall had their monster garden.

Feminist utopian projects, be they fictional visions or real world projects, express a powerful ambition to revolutionize every aspect of life. The built-in challenge with this level of ambition is the tendency towards purity, expressed the notion that we must build better forms of the family, or rid our most intimate relationships of every trace of patriarchy. The virtue mentality reveals its flawed rigidity when white feminists make blanket statements about their opposition to racism but do not investigate their assumptions about sameness or their aversion to conflict. Virtue rears its head again when wealthier queer people become the landowners and figures of authority in community projects, believing themselves naturally empowered to make decisions through benevolence rather than inclusion. As we strive to create new forms of family and new more equitable ways of relating across differences of race and class, we need to be cautious about the legacy of virtue in our utopian aspirations.

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