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Fantastic Visions: On the Necessity of Feminist Utopian Narrative

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Fantastic Visions: On the Necessity of Feminist Utopian Narrative

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of Women's Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
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Dedication

for me

(WUNJO)

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My thanks to the helpful and honest members of my committee, particularly Marilyn Myerson, without whom this text would have remained unwritten. She has my sincerest gratitude for her regard for this subject about which I am so passionate. She has been both a mentor and a friend, and my only regret concerning this thesis is that its completion will result in graduation, in my leaving the USF Department of Women's Studies, and in the loss of the program's most enjoyable and sustaining benefit: frequent hugs from Marilyn.

My thanks to my family: my patient spouse, my impatient son, my persevering and indispensable mother. The steadfastness of your love makes me, in large part, who I am today.

To the Four Guardians and the One of One Thousand Names: gratitude, gratitude, gratitude, in every step.

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Fantastic Visions: On the Necessity of Feminist Utopian Narrative

Tracie A. Welser

ABSTRACT

Works of feminist utopian literature project longing for and predict political change while confronting current social inequities. Often, they effectively interrogate Western models of citizenship and the institutions which reify them, suggesting alternate models. Here, I define Western citizenship as determined by the maintenance of the nation-state through gendered social roles that restrict women to the private sphere and men to the public. This thesis asserts that feminist utopian literature, like politically conscious music, art, and other forms of feminist praxis, is a politically necessary component of feminist consciousness because it facilitates much-needed visions of a more equitable future for all citizens. Here, patriarchy, separatism, socialism, and radical democracy, as well as attendant difficulties in implementation and ramifications for women, will be considered through the following works: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground*, Ursula K. LeGuin's *The Dispossessed*, Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, and Starhawk's *The Fifth Sacred Thing*. The thesis also comments on some of the narrative devices and themes of works discussed, such as nonlinear structure, avoidance of closure, altered states of consciousness, and exile. Analysis of these works relies in part on a growing body of speculative fiction criticism while also considering feminist theories of difference and

vision. The thesis concludes with recommendations for utilizing feminist utopian literature as a part of feminist pedagogy.

Word Count: 220

Introduction to Utopian Narrative

PAN: I never did like smart-ass utopians. Always so much healthier and saner and sounder and fitter and kinder and tougher and wiser and righter than me and my family and friends. People who have the answers are boring, niece. Boring, boring, boring.

ARC: But I have no answers and this isn't utopia, aunt!

PAN: The hell it ain't.

ARC: This is a mere dream dreamed in a bad time, an Up Yours to the people who ride snowmobiles, make nuclear weapons, and run prison camps by a middle-aged housewife [...].

“Pandora Converses with the Archivist of
the Library of the Madrone Lodge at
Wakwaha-na,” *Always Coming Home* by
Ursula K. LeGuin

Defining Utopia

The American Heritage College Dictionary defines utopia as “an ideally perfect place, especially in its social, political, and moral aspects.” Far from the word’s origin as the imaginary island (“no-place”) in Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia*, published in 1516, the term now generally connotes an impractical but noble social construct which ultimately results in failure. Sociologist Krishan Kumar asserts that the concept of utopia as an “ideal otherness” (quoting David Plath) is not universally present across cultures, as

evidenced by mythology and literature (19). Instead, he argues, utopia is a distinctly Western concept, influenced by “prefigurations” such as classical social treatises like Plato’s *Republic* and More’s *Utopia*, as well as Christian traditions of utopia and millennialism.¹

The utopian imaginary in America is not a recent invention; while mention of such might bring to mind so-called “hippy” communal living arrangements of the 1960s and 1970s, the utopian ideal could be considered a founding principle of the nation. As Kumar notes, “America, it is often said, was invented before it was discovered,” and its invention as a land of utopia, and the early settlement of the continent, was often predicated upon a sense of the New World as a new Eden (70). While utopia cannot be seen as a static or archetypal concept, the modern utopia is generally “egalitarian, affluent and dynamic” (32). In short, the location of utopia is not a “no-place” at all, but instead corresponds with a perfectible state in the post-Enlightenment imagination, existent in the mind and simultaneously awaiting construction in a physical realm of ready but unused potential.

In contrast to the utopian narrative is the dystopia. Rather than propose a hopeful reconfiguration of society which eradicates collective ills, the dystopia envisages the worst possible future in which utopian dreaming has been subverted by repressive forces. The ideal is thrust upon citizens; homogeneity is dictated, and the implications of the imposition of sameness (enacted by the powerful upon the less powerful) are extrapolated. As suggested by Nanelle and David Barash, in dystopian novels, societies tend to disallow the biological functions of their citizens, often replacing individual choice with governable dictates (1).² Barash and Barash take Aldous Huxley’s *Brave*

New World as their example, which depicts a world that separates sex from reproduction and affection from sex, replacing family and relationships with wholly technological reproduction and loveless sexual liaisons. The power of novels such as Huxley's, they write, is invoked partly through "the horror of a society that runs roughshod over our instincts, forcing people to be, literally, inhuman" (1). Notably, reading and political expression are often disallowed or controlled in dystopia as well to limit exposure to dissenting opinions, pointing to a conclusion that Barash and Barash do not reach; the "denial of biology" prevalent in dystopias demonstrates a price of forced sameness. *Brave New World*, while arguably a satire, is one example of the utopian impulse gone wrong, wherein the desire for universal happiness results in newer and more disturbing forms of repression. In this way, dystopia can be seen as a form of reflection, rather than the antithesis of utopia. Politically, it may serve as a warning in specific historical moments, or an admonition about the tricky business of *doing* utopia, by providing significant extrapolation of utopian desire that utopian narrative itself may lack.

As dystopian narratives may point out, scenarios that explore utopia as a basis for politics are not without problematic elements. The desire for and formulation of ideal community models is often predicated upon an assumption of the superiority of a homogenous, common identity; wholly utopian narratives may posit socially fallacious solutions which identify difference as *the* social problem, rather than pinpointing the interpretation and stratification of difference itself as a source of unrest or injustice. Management, eradication or simple dismissal of difference may be provided as strategies for perfecting the ideal community; in these narratives, unity in the family of humanity is all that is necessary for the achievement of perfected social order. Unfortunately, the

result of this formulation is the reproduction of the “inherently dystopian concept of a homogenous enclosed community” (Melzer 2). Here, the only distinction between utopia and dystopia is the consent of its citizens. As Frederic Rouvillois concludes, utopias “with their obsession to rehabilitate man...condemn him to happiness” (quoted in Abbott, 44). As a model for community, this formulation fails to incorporate diversity or acknowledge the possibility of dissent and may, in theory, look suspiciously as though it replicates some of the very social machinations it seeks to critique. So, to regard the pursuit of utopia as an inherently noble project of itself is not a goal here; rather, I am suggesting that utopian fiction is an excellent site for examination of the desire for perfectible society, and feminist utopian fiction often incorporates that examination into its own narrative.

Utopia, Dystopia, and Feminist Critical Utopia

What constitutes feminist utopian narrative? Firstly, the working definition of feminism assumed here most closely matches bell hooks’:

Feminism is the struggle to end sexist oppression. Its aim is not to benefit solely any specific group of women, any particular race or class of women. It does not privilege women over men. It has the power to transform in a meaningful way all our lives. (26)

Feminist utopian narrative as defined here includes fiction that explores difference in the context of feminist discourse, meaning that in the search for ideal community, it considers both the existence of social stratification based on difference and the “humanist ideal of sameness” to be problematic (Melzer 1); as with feminist theories, difference

may not always be problematized in the same ways in these narratives. As Frances Bartkowski states, “The feminist utopian novel is a place where theories of power can be addressed through the construction of narratives that test and stretch the boundaries of power in its operational details” (5).

A definition of feminist utopian fiction is incomplete without note of its tendency to violate the conventional genre boundaries of the traditionally masculinist genres of utopian and dystopian fiction. Many feminist scholars agree that the genres of utopian and dystopian literature are too narrow as categories. While utopias such as Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* project desires for the perfect human community and dystopias like Orwell’s *1984* predict dim futures as cautionary tales, feminist fiction tends to project its desires for perfect community *and* to investigate problematic elements of those desires. As such, many are neither utopian nor dystopian *per se*. Raffaella Baccolini states that women writers expand the boundaries of the traditional utopian genre by creating works that “contain both utopian and dystopian elements,” and by utilizing narratives that resist closure. She terms these works “critical or open-ended dystopias” (13). Ann Keinhorst argues that “‘critical utopias’ depart from the traditional definition of ‘utopia’” in two ways. Critical utopian narratives may distance themselves fantastically from the present in time and space in order to better highlight its inequities, but they relentlessly return the reader to a critique of current realities. They “offer possible historical alternatives to the present” (91) that are rooted in a “flexible and alterable” *now* rather than a “predetermined” future (96). The critical utopia differs from the traditional utopia in that it is “the vision of a future way of life... which presently carries the seed of potential historical reality” (98). Secondly, she notes that critical

utopias such as Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères* and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, unlike traditional utopias, have a specifically feminist rather than humanist "emancipatory orientation" (97), one that is firmly rooted in interrogating both the present and the place of women in it. "Feminist utopia," she states, "will not be replaced by 'humanistic' utopias –as long as the full humanity of women remains a utopian goal" (98).

Political Necessity: Projection, Prediction, and Confrontation

Why explore feminist utopian narrative? This literary genre, often lumped together with science fiction, is a noteworthy medium of political expression as significant as art, drama, speech and other forms of feminist praxis, and this type of narrative should be considered an important form of praxis for movements that seek to, again in bell hooks' words, "end sexist oppression" (26). When beginning a conversation about any subject connected to science fiction, one supposes that reactions will fall along two basic lines: those who consider the genre noteworthy and literary in nature and those who do not. The distinction is based upon assumptions of quality, of distinctions between "high" culture and "low." Low literary forms, such as science fiction and fantasy, are typically considered escapist while high fiction is recognized as having artistic merit and social relevance.

Realistic or high fiction, according to Margaret Atwood, appeals to normative values, and is preoccupied with the tragic defects of otherwise normal people. Characters in realistic novels often discuss or become embroiled in the effects of social problems.

However, those novels themselves do not have the luxury of exploring alternatives, as in utopias. Realistic fiction “inspects the present,” while science fiction works include those things which “we can’t yet do.” Atwood suggests that there is some space between these two forcibly divorced genres in the field of speculative fiction, which “employs a means already at hand” to suggest changes of organization in society, explore human limitations in relation to technology and the universe, and to provide cautionary tales about the misuse of technology and power (Atwood 2005). In these ways, *unrealistic* fiction may pursue an emancipatory or otherwise political agenda and present the reader with imaginative options which are firmly rooted in reality and require that reality be examined.³ Perhaps not coincidentally, science fiction, fantasy, and other speculative fictions such as utopias are not always recognized for relevant contributions of this type, as observed by Ivana Milojevic and Sohail Inayatullah, who suggest that “the marginality of science fiction in society is in direct proportion with science fiction’s radicalism” (9).

Three useful functions of the genre as previously defined will be demonstrated here: utopian literature *projects* longing for political change, it *predicts* future manifestations of current social and technological experimentation (what Margaret Atwood has termed “forecast journalism”), and it *confronts* current social problems by increasing their visibility, often in exaggerative terms. This projection, prediction and confrontation, which I will term collectively as “fantastic vision,” effectively interrogates Western models of citizenship⁴ and the institutions which reify them, and often suggests alternate modes of citizenship which are more equitable, ethical and fulfilling for all participants. Where they fail to do so, the narratives provide opportunity for discussion and analysis of the utopian impulse. In this way, feminist utopias should not be dismissed

as escapist fantasies simply because their subject matter appears to be fantastic; instead, they should be thoughtfully considered as unique tools for investigating manifestations of power and extrapolating new directions for feminist discourse. One of those new directions could include application to feminist pedagogy to foster the development of critical consciousness.

Explanation of Methods

Here, patriarchy, separatism, socialism, and radical democracy, as well as attendant difficulties in implementation and ramifications for women, will be considered through the following works: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground*, Ursula K. LeGuin's *The Dispossessed*, Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, and Starhawk's *The Fifth Sacred Thing*. These particular works were chosen out of the enormous body of literature that fits my definition of feminist utopia in order to demonstrate a spectrum of feminist utopian impulse in time, from Gilman's *Herland* (1915) to the work of Starhawk and Butler (1993). The expressed desire for a more egalitarian existence remains similar, but the methods for achieving it vary greatly in scope, as do the specifics of each work's focus although each contains a separatist element. I have chosen to isolate examination of *Herland* in its own chapter in order to explore it more fully because of its historical significance. I have paired the other selections together based on thematic elements and time of publication. *Herland* and *The Wanderground* were chosen because they both present women-only cultures in order to highlight gender inequity; however, they fail to consider the pitfalls of desire for sameness. The pairing of *The Wanderground* with *The Dispossessed* (both published in

the 1970s) highlights the separatist theme they share, although *The Dispossessed* is more concerned with juxtaposing capitalism and socialism. *Parable of the Sower* and *The Fifth Sacred Thing* were chosen and paired to demonstrate the possibilities of utopian desire expressed in tandem with skepticism regarding its realization and maintenance in the face of oppression. Analysis of the works will explore the usefulness of each in terms of models presented and problems overlooked. I will also comment on some of the narrative devices and themes of works, such as nonlinear structure, avoidance of closure, altered states of consciousness, and exile. Analysis of these works relies in part on a growing body of speculative fiction criticism while also considering feminist theories of difference and vision. However, because my intention is toward broad application, the reader need not be familiar with these fields. I will conclude with suggestions for the application of feminist utopian narrative as a pedagogical tool.

Feminist dystopian works have intentionally been left out of this analysis, not because they are unimportant or less than feminist in scope; on the contrary, works such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Sherri Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country* make significant contributions to ongoing feminist dialogue regarding personal liberty, reproductive choice, patriarchy and citizenship. My primary intention is to explore themes of desire for utopia rather than warnings about repression, and my focus is not on categorical distinction, except where relevant to distinguish feminist narrative from humanist utopia. Non-western narratives are also absent; this is not to say that utopian narrative is distinctly western (Kumar and I differ on this point, see endnote 1) or that western feminist desires are universally applicable. However, western women writers of color, notably Octavia Butler, have redefined feminist utopias by demanding that

ideals of sameness be discarded, and in this way have contributed to and expressed the ongoing re-conceptualization of difference in feminist discourse (Melzer 3).

In summation, this thesis will consider five texts of feminist utopian fiction and through analysis of them, demonstrate the usefulness, indeed the necessity, of the genre to the ongoing development of feminist emancipatory consciousness. I will consider problematic elements of the individual works as well as thematic and narrative devices. Primarily, the thesis will explicate the three most useful functions of feminist utopian narrative as I see them: projection of utopian desire, prediction of political change, and confrontation with aspects of Western models citizenship and the institutions which reify them.

Chapter One: Longing for a Motherland: The Lost World of Charlotte Perkins

Gilman's *Herland*

“The woman-soul is rising, in despite of thy transgression –
Loose her now, and trust her! She will love thee yet!”

“Proem.”

--*Women and Economics*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman

On Gilman Herself

Herland was written in 1915 and serialized in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Forerunner* periodical. Like Gilman herself and her works of social and economic philosophy, it was rediscovered in the 1970s; *Herland* was hailed as a revolutionary example of matriarchal utopian fantasy. I chose to include this work and afford it its own chapter because of its historical significance, and because although *Herland* offers a significant alternative view of female citizenship and scathing commentary on masculine privilege, the narrative is fraught with paradoxical actualizations of Gilman's vital but problematic critical work which make it imperative to discuss some of that work. While much of Gilman's writing such as the well-known and frequently anthologized *The Yellow Wallpaper* continues to enjoy feminist acclaim, her other works have drawn

criticism for their racist and classist underpinnings. *Herland* is among the works subject to these analyses, some of which call her status as feminist foremother into question.

Contextual consideration of Gilman's work is weak without some mention of her family life, as she wrote so prolifically of marriage and child-rearing. Gilman spent her childhood in a woman-dominated household; her father divorced her mother when Gilman was thirteen, and she and her mother moved into her grandmother's (and great-grandmother's) household. Gilman attended Rhode Island School of Design but did not graduate; she married a fellow artist Charles Walter Stetson in 1884 after nearly two years of indecision. She resisted marriage at first, wishing to remain focused on her career: "I felt strongly that for me it [marriage] was not right, that the nature of the life before me forbade it, that I ought to forgo the more intimate personal happiness for a complete devotion to my work" (Gilman, *Living* 83). However, she did marry, and her daughter Kate was born the following year. After her initially joyful experience with motherhood, Gilman became depressed, so much so that she sought out a trendy cure for depression and anxiety, prescribed particularly for men and women exhibiting failure to conform to traditional gender norms. Men were advised to partake of outdoor activity and exercise, while women were confined to bed and encouraged to spend time with their children. Under this treatment, Gilman's depression became more acute, an experience she fictionalized in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Eventually, Gilman left her husband, who married her best friend in 1894 and often cared for Kate while Gilman pursued her career. In 1900, she was married again, this time to her first cousin George Gilman, an attorney who helped finance the publication of *Forerunner*, in which *Herland* originally appeared.

Between her marriages, she lived again with her mother (*Women* 1998 introduction xiv-xxv).

To situate this work in historical context, it is important to reflect on the situatedness of Gilman as an author and social critic. To this end, I will discuss some of her influences and briefly outline one of her most acclaimed works, *Women and Economics*. Gilman sometimes considered herself a feminist and a socialist but preferred to be known as a humanist, and while her feminism is evident in both her fiction and social commentary (more well-known to her contemporaries) it is a very different feminism than that of the audience which enthusiastically embraced its rediscovery in the 1970s.⁵ The visions she suggests in both are thoroughly informed by the influence of evolutionary theory. Darwinian social thought of the time provided a scientific grounding for Victorian notions of essential female nature and the superiority of European races over others. According to Jennifer Hudak, Gilman sought to utilize evolutionary theory in reformer fashion, influenced by Lester F. Ward's "Our Better Halves" (459). Ward's 1888 article discussed Darwin's theory of evolution, but unlike his contemporaries, Ward made use of it to demonstrate "the natural superiority, rather than the inferiority, of women" (Hudak 460). Ward posited the female, instead of the male, as the normative example of human physicality to which science should look, and felt that this reversal would serve as a civilizing principle (460). The influence of Ward upon Gilman's thinking is evident in her work and in her estimation that, Lester Ward was "the greatest man I have ever known" (Gilman, qtd. in *Women* 1998 introduction xxi).

The influence of evolution as a social as well as biological theory is clear in Gilman's writing, and according to Frances Bartkowski, it is easy to read in her work

“the progressivism, racism, and nationalism common to reformist, even radical, thought” during the period in which Gilman wrote (26). The subtitle of her 1898 work, *Women and Economics: a Study of the Economic Relation between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution*, makes obvious the connection between her influences and her politics, as does its content. In the text, Gilman compels the reader to consider the social impact of economics on behavior and evolutionary developments, first with survival-driven behavioral necessities of animal behavior as an analogy to human gender relations, and then with “race-modification” of Jews “under the social power of a united Christendom” (3-4). “The Jew,” she states, “was forced to get his livelihood by commercial methods solely” after being driven away from agricultural pursuits (4). According to Gilman, women, like Jews, have been forced to modify their natural behavior to survive in economic dependence. All troubles in human life, she asserts, can be shown to link to the “heart or the purse,” in other words, gender relations or economics (25). However, these two factors are not separate in her theory; they determine one another in ways that impede the evolution of “the race,” even in the case of disease.⁶ “To be ill-fed or ill-bred, or both,” she admonishes, “is largely what makes us the sickly race we are” (25).

While Gilman was rediscovered in the 1970s and lauded as a feminist foremother, “her humanism” according to Hudak, “when read in the light of her nonfiction works, was more complicated” (456). Gilman’s humanist ideology informed her feminism to the extent that she felt the uplift “the race” into a state of greater efficiency and harmony was impaired by the oppression of women, because the practice prevented social growth and biological evolution. In *Women and Economics*, a book that enjoyed enormous popularity during Gilman’s lifetime,⁷ she declares that socially accepted norms of feminine beauty,

which women are bound within in order to attract males on whom they are economically dependent, are enhanced unnaturally in women as a survival strategy at the expense of their humanity. The “over-sexing” of women, she says, prevents economic progression as well as fulfillment of female potential, hence preventing the evolution of humankind (Hudak 460-461). Moreover, she argues that men are to blame for the perverse creation of “the woman” as a “hideous paradox,” whose natural inclination to love (in the form of motherhood) is compelled to “get gain through love” (qtd. in Hudak 460). The influence of this kind of thinking in *Herland* is clear, as Gilman’s mono-gendered society removes men from the economic picture entirely in order to demonstrate the growth potential of women (and consequently, society) when these constraints are eliminated. Bartkowski asserts that Gilman, “who in other texts used other voices,” seized upon the use of the “utopian voice” to illustrate the *feminist* components of her *humanist* social reform philosophy. “Such a philosophy,” Bartkowski states, “was conceivable only if it posited the full humanity of women as subjects, not objects, in the world” (24). Though hailed by critics such as Bartkowski as a foremother of contemporary feminism, Gilman cannot be viewed as such without a careful accounting of the historical context which informs her work. Similarly, the agenda of *Herland* should not be viewed as separate from that of her critical writing.

Text Synopsis

Herland relates the adventures of three male explorers who search for and ultimately discover a country on an unnamed continent, their interest having been

sparked by a native tale of “a strange and terrible Woman Land” (2). The country they dub “Herland” is peaceful, harmonious, and populated entirely by intelligent, physically-fit women, who are extremely curious about the ways of the outside world. Good-natured interrogations of the three male visitors, Vandyck Jennings (the narrator), Terry Nicholson, and Jeff Margrave, provide a medium for Gilman to discuss the gross gender inequities of the early twentieth century. Gilman utilizes an explorer-diary device as a vehicle for exposition of the early twentieth-century belief that women are passive and dependent if feminine and unfeminine if strong or intellectual and Gilman’s primary interest, of course, women and economics. Paradoxically, while *Herland* depicts a culture with no need for men or traditional family, it also is concerned with lauding motherhood as a perfectible calling and a key to social progress, an interesting aspect illuminated by Gilman’s intense attention to mothering in her non-fiction.

Gilman presents the reader with three very different but equally sexist fellows who come to be the minority males in an all-female land. They are taken prisoner, taught about the culture of Herland, and eventually welcomed as members of it; along the way, the author cleverly juxtaposes the perfection of utopia with the failings of American society and follows the three travelers through discomfiting confrontations with their own unexamined preconceptions. Prior to their discovery of “Herland,” the companions have widely divergent notions about what they expect to find in the land of women: Jeff, recounts the narrator, “was a tender soul,” who hoped for a land “blossoming with roses and babies and canaries and tidies”; Terry, a rich chauvinist, probably “had visions of a sort of sublimated summer resort –just Girls and Girls and Girls” in which he would enjoy popularity; and the pragmatic narrator Van envisions a primitive Amazonian

culture based on “matriarchal principle” where “men have a separate cult of their own” (6-7).

When the companions at last come upon the location they have sought, they note the efficient and pleasing cultivation of the land as a sign of civilization and thus remark that “there must be men,” a belief that they cling to for quite some time despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary (10). They encounter three agile young women (as Terry breathlessly admires, “peaches!”[13]) who take flight after Terry attempts to seize hold of one of them. The chase ends in a lovely, well-designed village, where they find themselves overwhelmed by a large group of unarmed older women and then subdued with anesthetic, despite Terry’s attempt to appease them with brightly-colored scarves and jewels, and then to frighten them with a revolver. This leads to their interrogation and eventual integration into Herland society, both instructive in the juxtaposition of their gender norms and values with those of their hosts. The process of exposition on the ideal nature of “Herland” in contrast to the flawed one of the “outside world” is begun.

Projecting Desires: the Supremacy of Motherhood

After the setting is established, Gilman constructs each subsequent chapter as an individual treatise on various gendered social issues.⁸ The women of Herland literally interrogate their visitors, eagerly and good-naturedly questioning the men about aspects of American social life in a manner that produces in Van “a queer little indescribable feeling” whenever conversation turns to the subject of gender (40). “Their lines of

interrogation,” he says, “would gradually surround us and drive us in till we found ourselves up against some admissions we did not want to make” (43). Through this questioning, Gilman approaches the familiar as though it is unfamiliar to focus her critique and suggests alternative social arrangements.

Herland overwhelmingly projects utopian desire for equality, efficiency and progress. Women of Herland are strong, patient, gentle and healthy, as well as athletic and intelligent, but above all, they are equal as citizens. To address the problems of inequality under Western models, much of the text’s energy is spent expounding upon the “inconveniently reasonable” manner of the women of Herland, the centrality of motherhood, and the meticulous development of the country’s land (47). Overall, the women share the “the most perfect patience and good nature,” but not the fawning or frivolousness the men have come to expect from women (40). Additionally, in this narrative, motherhood is a function of citizenship so pervasive that it is the primary institution and shaper of culture and progress. Van studies written histories and discovers that the women evolved to reproduce through parthenogenesis, bearing female children exclusively; a natural disaster followed by a slave revolt resulted in an all-female population isolated to peacefully develop on its own. Motherhood is exalted here, partly because of its miraculous occurrence in a formerly heterosexually (or as Herlanders put it, “bisexually”) reproductive culture. Depicted as a sacred calling, it is one that has been studied comprehensively and perfected into a specialized profession; as Van relates, “the power of mother-love, which we so highly laud, was theirs of course, raised to its highest power” (49). Their spiritual practice is even centered on a “Loving Power” that is

understood in maternal terms (97). The women are “Conscious Makers of People” who approach motherhood with near-religious zeal (58). Moadine, one of the tutors, explains:

Motherhood means something to us which I cannot yet discover in any of the countries of which you tell us...the children of this country are the one center and focus of all our thoughts. Every step of our advance is always considered in its effect on them –on the race. (56-57)

The replication of ideas put forth by Gilman in *Women and Economics* is an obvious one, and the influence of evolutionary thinking can be seen --motherhood, as a duty of citizenship, should be concentrated through education on the improvement of the people as a nation as well as individuals. In this way, Gilman’s utopia is constructed as the ultimate nation and sisterhood, one of sturdy, intelligent women who are both unfeminine in their strengths and pursuits and feminine in their gentleness and “mother-love,” and who are intent on the uplift of their race through “conscious improvement” (66). In this sense, “mother-love” is a requisite for citizenship. This notion of motherly duty as the basis of citizenship may have been suggested by Gilman’s historical context: nationalist rhetoric of the time suggested that selfish couples who failed to have more than two children were traitors to the nation who were endangering the future of “the race” by practicing “race suicide” (Bell and Offen 139).⁹

The perfection of reproduction extends to the land, where the flora and fauna has been systematically limited to efficient utility. “By the most prolonged and careful selection and exclusion,” Van relates, “they had developed a race of cats that did not sing” and which kill only rodents, not birds (42). Additionally, every tree has been cultivated to be either fruit-bearing or shade-providing, and there are no wild animals; it

is like a new Eden. Esthetically pleasing and functional, each element of their environment has been gently mastered through centuries of planning. This included the elimination of undesirable species, a development that goes unproblematized in Gilman's social order.

Interrogating Institutions by Way of Reversal

As has been shown, *Herland* predicts political change by positing the potential of evolutionary social change to actualize those desires. And at every turn, it confronts institutions and social practices that reinforce sexist oppression and impede Gilman's vision of social progress. Much of the humorous social commentary of the story is based on reversals of power and the revaluation of power, in many instances uncomfortably so. During their capture, for example, Van ironically relates that the three men find themselves helpless, "in the position of the suffragette trying to get to the Parliament buildings through a triple cordon of London police" (19). At the same time, Van is given the apparent privilege of narrative control as he records from memory the events that transpired.¹⁰ The balancing act performed by the narrative, of positioning males as both privileged central figures *and* evidence of the cultural absurdity of male privilege, is central to Gilman's project.

Upon meeting the inhabitants of Herland, the trio is immediately confronted by the limitations of their preconceived notions regarding femininity, the same notions which commonly informed social practices of Gilman's day. The incredibly divergent beliefs espoused by the explorers about the nature of women demonstrates their "arbitrary

nature”; one of the strengths of this narrative is that it “explodes all views of women that are dependent on secondary sexual characteristics” (Hudak 462). The “peaches” they encounter who behave more like athletic and intelligent boys than feminine (read: frightened, passive) young women. And in the village, the men are confronted by women unlike any they have ever known:

Their attitude was not the rigid discipline of soldiers...they had just the aspect of steady burghers... Never, anywhere before, had I seen women of precisely this quality. Fishwives and market women might show similar strength, but it was coarse and heavy. These were merely athletic –light and powerful. College professors, teachers, writers –many women showed similar intelligence but often wore a strained nervous look, while these were as calm as cows, for all their evident intellect. (19)

The women are not passive or hysterical; this constitutes a wholly unexpected situation that leaves the men powerless to act. “It makes me laugh, knowing all I know now,” Van reflects, “we seemed to think that if there were men we could fight them, and if there were only women –why, they would be no obstacles at all” (18). Subdued by the throng of “steady burghers,” they find that even Terry’s gun, representative, perhaps, of male power, is ineffectual against the startling determination and strength of the women. The women easily overpower them; even as they resist “manfully,” they are “held secure most womanfully” (20).

Various situations yield comparable results that do not fulfill the men’s expectations of feminine temperament, and some leave the men feeling as though they themselves, while under the control of the women, have been feminized or unsexed.

Terry comments that life as captives, while not physically uncomfortable, makes them feel “like a lot of neuters” (23). Similarly, Van states repeatedly that he feels like an errant child or schoolboy, helpless and embarrassed. Positions being reversed, they refer to their captors in masculinized terms. Their instructors, Somel, Zava and Moadine, are older short-haired women of serious natures and strong physiques who Terry mockingly refers to as “the Colonels.” (24) ““If I thought there was nothing in the country but those grenadiers,”” he laments, ““I’d jump out the window”” (25). The deadpan, serious nature of their tutors leave the hyper-masculine Terry in particular hungry for the sight of “girls,” but when the opportunity arises to speak to an audience of girls, he is equally unhappy with the young women he meets. “Call those girls!” he fumes, “Nothing but boys, most of ‘em. A standoffish, disagreeable lot at that” (75). His macho behavior, inscrutable to the women, is to blame for the sourness of the encounter; Van notices how Terry’s “suave and masterful approach,” apparently “irresistible” in the usual context, aggravates the young women, and “his too-intimate glances were vaguely resented” (75). The socially constructed nature of gender, as a *performance*, is highlighted here; behaviorally speaking, as relatively asexual people, Herland’s women do not perform as expected, causing considerable distress to the men who respond with bewilderment or hostility. For the men, their own sense of masculinity is undermined by the lack of a recognizable, corresponding femininity.

Another limitation of the trio’s conception of femininity is confronted when the men are forced to acknowledge that women can be capable and intelligent. The architecture of the villages, along with the cultivation of the fields, is taken as evidence of the presence of men, without question: ““why, this is civilized country!”” Van remarks,

“there must be men” (10). All indications of careful planning are taken as signs of male involvement by design. The general acumen of women is also discounted; later, during an escape attempt, the men retrace their steps to reach their plane and discover it has been secured with a tarp, whereupon Terry exclaims, “Covered, too, by jingo! Would you think they had that much sense?” (34) Clearly, this is the sort of remark that indicates Terry’s appraisal of female intelligence, especially in relation to machinery as a male province. His supposition appears ironic when he and the others are retrieved by the women in electric cars.

The title of Chapter Six, “Comparisons are Odious,” captures Van’s acute discomfort as he and the others attempt, from their reversed position, to explain norms of Western culture informed by gender. The exposition of each issue discussed between the men and their hosts leaves the men grasping helplessly for more logical explanations with which to shore up their support for the seemingly indefensible practices and institutions of Western culture. The narrative demonstrates not only the reaction of the women to their answers, but the men’s own dawning realizations about the inequitable and often nonsensical customs of Western culture. Seen through the eyes of women, these customs make little sense, and hence, perhaps begin to make less sense to the reader. Of all the strange, barbaric and even wondrous-seeming customs described to the women, marriage is the first in which they are provided opportunity to participate. In order to confront the institution of marriage, Gilman stages an odd reassertion of heteronormativity in the narrative; the three men, now sufficiently educated in new language and history, begin to court. Curiously, although they are self-sufficient and have evolved to procreate without men, the residents of Herland are interested in re-establishing what they term a “bisexual”

culture and welcome the opportunity to scrutinize its development on this small scale (76). The women do not fully comprehend the desire of the men to hold a ceremony (or even their conjugal desires), but three women, “peaches” Alima, Ellador and Celis, consent to marriage. A ceremony of triple marriage takes place, and the squabbles that ensue provide more fodder for Gilman’s cultural critique in the form of cross-cultural courtship awkwardness and difficulties in justifying the construction of marriage and gender roles within the nuclear family. Here, again, the women do not meet the expectations of the men or perform the role properly, politely refusing to leave their work, set up house or take on last names, to the frustration of each man. Most frustrating, however, is the women’s lack of understanding of the conjugal privilege; the women are decidedly reluctant. Van relates his agitated attempts to convince Ellador of the joys of wedded bliss --“I did my earnest best to picture to her the sweet intense joy of married lovers,” but to no avail (108). She is intrigued that men and women indulge in relations “in season and out of season, with no thought of children,” but remains unmoved (108). As a result, Van eventually is compelled to overcome his frustration, and so learns to appreciate a deeper sense of love in companionship. The dilemma seems contradictory in the narrative; after all, the purpose of their unions was to re-enter into heterosexual relations and to produce children. Only Jeff’s wife Celis conceives, and while all seems to be well enough with Van and Jeff in marriage, Terry, still convinced of the superiority of men and invested in the false notion that women enjoy being mastered, impatiently attempts to rape his wife Alima. Terry is ejected from Herland; Van and his new wife Ellador accompany him, as the plane requires two crew members, and as Ellador cares for Van and does not want to be parted. Jeff elects to stay behind with Celis, saying that

not only has he no wish to return, but he is mortified that if his beloved Celis accompanied him, she would “die of horror and shame to see our slums and hospitals” (115).

Problematic Aspects: the Superior Race

Specific criticisms have been levied against *Herland* as well as against some of Gilman’s particular brand of feminism. Gilman’s rediscovery in the 1970s established her as an important early feminist thinker in regards to gender equality, but more attention is now being paid to racist and classist elements of Gilman’s thought overall. According to Jennifer Hudak, the author’s belief in a “eugenics” version of evolutionary theory influenced her social theorizing, and this translated into a notion popular at the time, that in order to build an ideal society it is necessary to weed out the wrong sorts, the mentally and physically inferior, which included non-whites and the poor (457-458). Hudak and others point to racist references to the superiority of whites in the text, which states that the women of Herland were of a definitely “Aryan” stock (Gilman 46).

Eugenics are also implicated in the way that Herland residents have worked, through breeding, to eliminate criminal tendencies in their population. Ellador relates that as a nation, “we have, of course, made it our first business to train out, to breed out, when possible, the lowest types” (70). It is notable how training and breeding are constructed as synonymous in Gilman’s evolutionary progression. Lowly “inherited... characteristics” she says, result in criminal behavior. If a woman is found to be of this type by “showing bad qualities,” she is urged not to bear; however, if she insists on having children or is

otherwise found to be less than “fit for that supreme task,” she would not be allowed to rear them (70). Here, the described duties of mothering reproduces the social agenda of *Women and Economics*, in which Gilman states that “if mothers can see it that children would be better cared for by another, then it would be the duty of motherhood to provide it” (212). While Gilman is still seen as an innovator by way of her suggestion that childcare and education be professionalized, this aspect of *Herland* smacks of repression. It remains unclear who might be given the power to make those choices for women. Ellador’s insistence that a mother who is less than fit would gladly give over or share care of her child and yield to the “real superiority” of other women leaves Van unconvinced, one of the few open critiques the work turns inward on itself. However, Van’s voice can hardly be considered critical when the whole project of the work revolves around disproving the wrong-headed notions expressed by Van as the narrator.

Yet the issue of unfit mothers brings to light the absence of dissent (other than that of the men, of course) in this work, which is problematic. Since utopian narrative is about the desire for change, I think it is fair to say that the building of static utopia, what Melzer would call “closed utopia,” runs the risk of reifying existing oppressions or creating new ones. This aspect, along with considerations of Gilman’s social philosophy, should give adequate pause to those critics who wish to hail Gilman as a feminist foremother.¹¹

Conclusions: Compassionate New Model

As a model for exploring alternatives, *Herland* provides a definite vision of what society could become if women were allowed to fully participate as citizens. The work projects the desire for peaceful, efficient and egalitarian society, and predicts the possibility of obtaining that desire through greater freedom for women. In addition, it confronts limiting notions of femininity that were (and in some ways still are) used to justify the confinement of women to the private sphere and limit the scope of female citizenship to domestic duty. By exiling the male protagonists in a woman-land of the present rather than of the future, it presents a foreign view of these familiar notions that still have ramifications in the current reality.¹²

Unfortunately, the narrative presents this vision of perfect society in a way that places motherhood at the center of women's experiences and makes it the single most important institution of the nation. As such, the citizenship, duty, education and religion of *Herland* are constituted by motherhood. This model seems somewhat limiting as it still assumes one biological function to be a primary social duty, echoing nationalist rhetoric, and it reduces the destiny of women to this function in spite of the other freedoms they enjoy. Additionally, dissent is invisible in the narrative, creating a static sort of utopia; where progress is sought and enacted, it is always in the service of the state. This significant paradox is a troubling, and hence, useful point of departure for discussion of biological essentialism, and along with the work's other contributions, makes *Herland* an important work of feminist utopian narrative.

Chapter Two: Cultural Dissonance: Separatism, Sameness and Socialism in *The Wanderground* and *The Dispossessed*

“To be whole is to be part;
True voyage is return.”

Inscription on the tombstone of Laia Asieo Odo,
anarchist.

--*The Dispossessed*, by Ursula K. LeGuin

On Context

As with the previous chapter, this first section provides contextualization which is important to understanding these works. Firstly, both of the texts discussed in this chapter, Sally Miller Gearhart’s *The Wanderground* and Ursula K. LeGuin’s *The Dispossessed*, are novels of separatism that were written in the 1970s, during a significant moment in feminist political thought. The notion that separatism might bring about the realization of utopia is certainly not new, as evidenced by the popularity of communal living experimentation throughout U.S. history; however, it was an idea that gained ground during the women’s liberation movement, particularly in regard to the

development and celebration of so-called “women’s culture.” To put it rather simply, the debates between theories of difference and sameness, still central to feminist thought, were being formulated and tested in the context of a widespread social movement which took its most visible form as that of a movement to promote the political desires of white, middle-class women.¹³ In an effort to assert the validity of those desires in a patriarchal framework, two basic strategies were employed: a strategy of sameness which demanded that women be granted the same opportunities and legal protection as men on the basis of equal ability and equivalent humanity, and a strategy of difference which affirmed the value of qualities that women (and not men) were said to possess which were undervalued in patriarchal culture, such as greater affinity with the natural world, cooperation and the ability to nurture. In other words, and again, simplistically, the debate centered around two very divergent poles; either women are the same as men and therefore deserve access to privilege hitherto reserved for males and an acknowledgement of basic humanity, or women are different and perhaps even superior, but those superior qualities are discounted by male-dominated culture in favor of domination of nature and competition instead of cooperation and nurturance. While both strategies have their uses, flaws exist in each. The former strategy, that of sameness, may seem to suggest that the best way to gain recognition of the humanity of women as a gender is to base judgments about that humanity on a male model and integrate accordingly. The latter strategy, one based on difference, can also be considered problematic because it takes the risk of reifying the patriarchal notion of the existence of qualities inherent to female nature long used to justify the oppression of women. In order to affirm the value of difference in a

context outside of patriarchal discourse, women-identified or women-only spaces designed for various purposes became popular.

One can see the appeal and potential value of separate, women-focused spaces, especially in the political climate of the women's liberation movement, and it is in this space, in celebration of women, that Sally Miller Gearhart in particular situates her work. She maintains, "my love of myself as a woman and my love of other women motivates all my writing (and my creative existence)" (*Feminist Writers*). Gearhart was the one of the first openly lesbian women to be granted tenure at a major university, and she became involved in both direct actions and academic presentations in the 1970s to promote gay rights, notably in regard to the position of the church on homosexuality. She served as co-editor of the influential 1974 publication *Loving Women/Loving Men: Gay Liberation and the Church*, and she remains a vocal proponent of other causes, such as animal rights. These interests are evident in her writings, both fiction and nonfiction. In all of her fictional works, and much of her non-fiction, Gearhart is concerned with discovering the roots of violence and environmental destruction, and in some of her work maintains that if solutions cannot be found, the earth may be better off without human beings.¹⁴ Overwhelmingly, Gearhart asserts that men are inherently violent, and that women, while capable of strong emotional responses such as rage, are innately peaceful, more capable of consensus-building and closer to the natural world. An early work, *The Wanderground: Stories of the Hill Women* is a collection of interconnected vignettes that explores the possibility of separatism, a theme she carries into her more recent work, *The Kanshou* and its sequel, *The Magister* (2002 and 2003, respectively). In each, Gearhart

experiments with separatism, exploring gender as the abiding difference between people and the root of greed, war, and violence.

As for Ursula K. LeGuin, much has been made of the influence her parents' professions on her writings. Her father, noted anthropologist Alfred L. Kroeber, and her mother, psychologist and writer Theodora Kroeber Quinn, both studied and wrote about Native American cultures and individuals. One critic refers to her work as "an anthropology of the future" (*Feminist Writers*) wherein characters encounter cultures much different from their own, thus affording the reader with outsider views, a technique well-suited to explications of difference which point fingers at the familiar. Clearly, this is a technique that *reflects* difference by way of separation, by the dislocation from recognizable structures of an observer seeking to understand elements of current realities that otherwise go largely unexamined. According to Charlotte Spivack, "most of LeGuin's protagonists assume the role of anthropologist if not by profession then by circumstance" (qtd. in *Feminist Writers*). In the preface to her 1985 work *Always Coming Home*, LeGuin begins by stating that "the people in this book might be going to have lived a long, long time from now in Northern California," calling this collection of first-person narrative, poetry and plays "an archaeology of the future" (1, 3). However, while the novel is set in the future, she suggests at the same time that the present is always more vital than the past or the future, noting that "all we ever have is here, now" (1). Works in her so-called "Hainish cycle" are less self-conscious and follow more closely the narrative mode mentioned by Spivack, wherein a protagonist from one culture is sent in to observe another. The usefulness of questioning elements of the present (such as the stratification of difference) by reflecting them through an alienated lens of the future,

here clearly acknowledged by LeGuin and repeatedly illustrated in her novels, is one of the most important contributions of feminist science fiction.

LeGuin herself has written on the topic of gender in science fiction, sometimes decrying the overly-masculine reputation of the genre and the need for more positive and realistic female characters, and often noting the potential of science fiction (including material with utopian themes) to effect real change in the world. Furthermore, she acknowledges her standpoint and impetus to write one of her most famous works, 1969's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, as a feminist one. In her essay collection on fantasy and science fiction, *The Language of the Night*, she relates:

In the mid-1960s... there was a groundswell gathering. I felt it, but I didn't know it was a groundswell; I just thought it was something wrong with me. I considered myself a feminist; I didn't see how you could be a thinking woman and not be a feminist...I began to want to define and understand the meaning of sexuality and the meaning of gender, in my life and in our society...But I was not a theoretician, a political thinker or activist, or a sociologist. I was and am a fiction writer. The way I did my thinking was to write a novel. (161)

Just as Gearhart posits female societies separate from men as a method for highlighting the roots of human aggression, LeGuin states that in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, she “eliminated gender, to find out what was left” (*Language*, 163). The elimination of gender was not a prescriptive, she qualifies, but “a heuristic device, a thought-experiment” (163). She endeavored to create a society whose citizens exist in a fluid state

of sexual cycles, but who are primarily androgynous. This experiment, this *play*, with difference, serves to “open up an alternative viewpoint, to widen the imagination” (168). In a gendered world, she notes, “divisions are insisted upon, interdependence is denied,” and it is in this space that she posits a different way of being in order to draw attention to problematic ways of being which already exist (169). The hope for change that LeGuin seeks to express in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, however, extends beyond gender to other bifurcation; in a world without gender, “the dualism of value that destroys us, the dualism of superior/inferior, ruler/ruled, owner/owned, user/used, might give way to what seems to me, from here, a much healthier, sounder, more promising modality of integration and integrity” (169). While LeGuin surmises that *The Left Hand of Darkness* is decidedly not a utopian novel, its hopeful, flexible and imaginative narrative demonstrates LeGuin’s tendency toward politically curious story-telling.

Text Synopses

In Gearhart’s *The Wanderground*, a collection of interwoven stories, humans occupy a world ravaged by greed and war. Remnants of cities exist, but the protagonists, the Hill Women, live outside the cities in the Wanderground, a wilderness that they control. Men do not venture outside the City except at great personal peril, and either some power of the Hill Women or of the land itself causes men who stray over the border into the Wanderground to become impotent. The women of the Wanderground possess supernatural powers of communication, sense, and flight; they commune with animals and plants in mutually respectful ways. Other less fortunate women remain in the City,

and Hill Women disguised as men make forays into the City to gather information and to help other women escape. Through narratives centered on individual women, Gearhart posits the possibilities of separatism as much as she critiques the present; several vignettes detail the horror of rape and the pathetic, clinging dependence of women living in the City. Implicit in her narrative is the inherent violence of men, which must never be forgotten by those living outside the City; in fact, they are encouraged to re-live acts of violence against women as part of their education, in remember rooms.

In *The Wanderground*, the fact of separatism is depicted as a vivid struggle between good and evil; the women absolutely distrust men and must be vigilant about maintaining their borders. In LeGuin's *The Dispossessed*, the separation is a more ambiguous and ideological one. On the small desert moon of Anarres dwell several million people whose ancestors voluntarily left their mother planet of Urras, around which Anarres orbits, some 150 years ago after staging a successful uprising. Inspired by the socialist writing of a woman named Laia Asieo Odo, the settlers resolved to create an entirely new society, language and culture based on anarchist and socialist principles.¹⁵ The story concerns a young Anarresti physicist named Shevek who chooses to leave his utopian home planet and return to the mother planet to share scientific knowledge that is unpopular on his own world. Intriguingly, LeGuin's narrative progresses in two directions simultaneously through alternating chapters, perhaps echoing Shevek's own theories concerning the movement of time; one sequence begins with Shevek's departure and concludes upon his return home, and the other begins with his childhood and moves forward until his decision to journey to Urras coincides with the first sequence's homecoming at the conclusion of the novel. The novel's structure gives ample

opportunity for contrast between the two societies, as the socialist values of Anarres are explicated chapter by chapter alongside the capitalist ones of the nation of A-Io, the global superpower of Urras.¹⁶ Gender and class differences figure prominently in the contrast, but race is not of particular concern here except as discussed in terms of alienness. The primary tensions of the novel involve struggles for individual and intellectual freedom in both settings in which Shevek finds himself; he comes to discover that while Anarres is not an ideal society, as he has been taught since childhood to believe, on Urras, the privilege to pursue knowledge is not without price where knowledge is a commodity.

Projection: Technologies of the Body, New Ethical Modes

Both *The Wanderground* and *The Dispossessed* fulfill the definition of feminist utopia given previously as fiction that explores difference in the context of feminist discourse. Both engage with the stratification of gender difference by positing clear alternatives to current inequities, though they do so in vastly divergent ways and reflect the pitfalls of those desires to varying degrees. Placing these two works together links the separatist theme they share and contrasts their methods, suggesting in small part the heterogeneity of feminist thinking surrounding sameness/difference debates. With *The Wanderground*, Gearhart engages in a presentation that clearly takes stock in the supposition of male/female difference and the superiority of “women’s” values and culture; her narrative expresses desires for the acknowledgement and development of these values in the present. *The Dispossessed* is more concerned with juxtaposing capitalism and socialism and asserting the humanity of women and men, their sameness,

in situations where suffering caused by social inequity is seen as a consequence of class struggle. However, LeGuin also takes the opportunity to suggest alternatives to gender stratification, and more so than Gearhart, points to the limitations of her utopia, examining intrinsic weaknesses in the actualization of social structures based on the desire for sameness.

Gearhart's foremost desire, beyond her explication of the roots of violence, concerns what Keinhorst refers to as "fantastic technology," powers of the body. Her women of the hills live in a territory without men, policing their borders and interacting with the natural world via heightened psychic senses. The Hill women *gatherstretch* to speak to one another, and *span*, reaching out with their inner eyes to keep constant watch for intruders. No man may enter their land without their knowledge, and crossing the border even causes men to become impotent. With other supernatural powers, women can communicate with one another mentally across distances and share vivid, embodied experiences of historical oppression. They have honed their mental powers of healing, and they can even go *windriding*, a sort of levitation that enables them to fly. Some of these same technologies are at work in Gearhart's later novels as well. Several critics read the paraverbal speech skill as a metaphor for interpersonal communication strategies Gearhart outlines in her non-fiction work, but Gearhart herself was known to say that "psychic power will soon substitute entirely for more cumbersome electronic or mechanical devices" (qtd. in Delrosso 214-215). The inclusion of these seemingly supernatural skills may represent the projection of a literal desire on the part of Gearhart.

Another desire evidenced in *The Wanderground* as well as *The Dispossessed* is the wish for a simpler way of life. In the future *The Wanderground* proposes, as with

other utopian works such as Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, courageous women and in some cases men have cast off oppression and now pursue lifestyles based on what Annette Keinhorst calls a Jungian-style "creative regression"(92). Here, the author creates a model of utopia based on an atavistic sort of prehistoric or Native American philosophy; primitive living and concern for and connection with the land is a central theme of her narrative as women escape from subjugation in the polluted City to harmonious living with other women and nature in the hills of the Wanderground. With their mental powers, women can converse with the animals and even plants. Pages of the book itself contain illustrations of feathers, pine cones, animal bones and other natural artifacts to further underscore the presence of this connection.

In *The Dispossessed*, necessity, as well as a strong social ethic against owning or hoarding possessions, results in a simpler way of living that can be seen as a projection of the utopian desire for more egalitarian social relationships. No system of money exists, as there is no need for it. Food, clothing, shelter and other supplies are available to everyone; hence, class structures are eliminated and theft of material property is unknown. Individuals live in dormitories and dine together at communal halls; citizens have very few personal possessions except handmade gifts, as owning is considered tantamount to sin.¹⁷ On Anarres, the "social organism" stands in place of the state, and individual conscience and peer pressure, not law, governs its citizens. Society is thought of in organic terms, as analogous to a body that all citizens share. "Excess is excrement," according to Odo, upon whose ideas the society was founded, and "excrement retained in the body is a poison" (98). Those who hoard will be chastised by their peers with the worst insults their language offers: "propertarian" or "profiteer."

Furthermore, the language of Anarres pointedly lacks words that indicate possession: when Shevek needs to wipe his nose after a tearful reunion, his four-year-old daughter remarks, “You can share the handkerchief I use” (316). The socialist system of community ownership, as well as regulations limiting the manufacture of unnecessary items, is so engrained in Shevek’s psyche that during his visit to Urras he becomes nauseated by the opulence of a street market. While the Anarresti system may seem oppressive when summarized in this way, its citizens are generally content, proud of their cooperative culture, and they show a high degree of appreciation for gifts and other simple items. However, the same idea regarding things unnecessary as wasteful, so useful to the social organism of a society living on a desert planet, is used against Shevek when he attempts to publish a book on theoretical physics that contains unpopular ideas.

Confrontation and Prediction: Borders and the Separatist Solution

As a utopia structured as both separatist and lesbian, *The Wanderground* is concerned with confronting male supremacy. In order to stage a confrontation with violence against women (particularly rape), gender norms of dress and behavior, and heterosexism, these practices must still exist in some form, but one that is distinct and separable from the utopian community. This comparative didactic approach is central in all of the works this thesis examines, and here, the existence of the City as a continuing male threat and use of the remember rooms present the basis for the text’s critique. In *The Dispossessed*, the existence of Urras, with its capitalist superpowers, warring nations and gendered citizenship, represents everything the Anarresti have worked to avoid in the

construction of their culture and language. In both texts a physical boundary indicates the ideological division both utopian societies desperately work to maintain, and each features a map that clearly shows the separation of the two societies it depicts. The border between the City and the Wanderground, only a line on the map, functions as a psychic and metaphorical barrier between the world of women and the domain of men.

Everything that is brutal and oppressive about the world resides on one side of this barrier, and all that is kind and intelligent lies on the other. The barrier itself represents wilderness versus civilization; however, in this case, civilization is associated with rape, exploitation, and hostility. Despite the developing psychic abilities of the Hill Women and their monitoring of the boundary between their wilderness and the rest of the world, the border is not of their making; the line that causes impotency in men who cross it is a result of what the women recall as “the Revolt of the Mother” (158). Bessie, a Remembering guide, relates the story of the Revolt to her pupils:

‘Once upon a time... there was one rape too many... The earth finally said ‘no.’ There was no storm, no earthquake, no tidal wave or volcanic eruption, no specific moment to mark its happening. It only became apparent that it had happened and that it had happened everywhere.’ (158)

The pupils then visit in the past, trancelike as with the other remembering scenes, the flight of two young women from a party of would-be rapists on a “Cunt Hunt,” complete with hunting dogs and rifles (160). The women, who were on their way to join a larger group of women escaping from the cities, manage to escape relatively uninjured when the men begin to fight one another in defense of their wounded pride after one man fails to achieve an erection. A group of armed women arrive during the scuffle and

encourage the men to retreat. This vignette illustrates the clear association of the border as a historically significant occurrence with the prevention of future violation, one the women had no part in creating but focus their lives on maintaining.

In spite of the suggestion implicit in her work that men are incurably violent, Gearhart's narrative predicts the possibility for reunion of the sexes. She ventures to unsettle her own diametrical opposition with the later introduction of the Gentles, men who reject male violence and voluntarily chose an impotent life. In this way, the border dividing the Wanderground from the City, men from women, is shifting. The Gentles are crossing over, and are committing to non-violence as a way of life, although it is not an unproblematic transgression and they bring mortal danger (from other men) upon themselves with their actions; the Hill women still distrust them as males, even when they offer to assist in covert operations in the City. The two separatist parties reconcile somewhat after the Gentles reveal that they have developed their own psychic abilities. This coalition does not come easily, however, as Hill woman Evona questions the motives of the men's development and the implementation of their new abilities:

“I am not scorning any one of you or your discovery,” she said, “or even your intent. My mistrust is of a deeper thing.”

Labrys spoke. “Our maleness.”

Evona nodded.

“Then only time will tell,” he said. (180)

LeGuin's point of separation, both symbolically and literally, is the rough wall, more “an idea of boundary” than a practical one, which divides the whole of Anarres and its citizenry from the port (1). For the port, trading shipments of ore from Anarres,

retrieved by Urrasti freighters, are exchanged for electronics from Urras. This exchange represents the limited contact made between the two worlds, and the only business of any kind transacted on Anarres. The wall stands as an ideological boundary; citizens of Anarres strive to be equal in every way, and on Urras, a desperately poor underclass prepares for revolt while women (who Shevek learns can not do science because they supposedly lack the intellect) are hypersexualized and treated as second class citizens. The image of the wall that segregates the two worlds figures heavily into Shevek's departure and return, as well as in his anxious nightmares about the loss of his mother's love and the scientific principle suspended tantalizingly at the edge of his conscious mind. Shevek makes the decision to transgress the boundary of the wall after he forms a syndicate, a committee to advocate for a group, and is accused of being an "egoizer" (a person who grandstands to further his or her own importance); Shevek, his family members and other colleagues in the syndicate are ostracized by the community when they propose the building of a transmitter to share scientific ideas with Urras. He then realizes that the wall that separates the two societies must be surmounted, if only to prove that the original impulse toward anarchy upon which Anarres was founded is being undermined, and that the cooperative structure that holds their social systems together is becoming more like a state institution. This is the point of the narrative of *The Dispossessed* that offers a bit of hope for the future. Though Shevek feels compelled to leave his world to pursue intellectual freedom and to prove that Anarresti society cannot endure if it refuses to accept challenges to its order, he experiences dissatisfaction and guilt in A-Io because he learns that the country wants the political power his work may provide the government. He eventually flees from government officials and manages to

impart the information to the Terrans, visiting alien ambassadors who are committed to fostering goodwill between peoples, so that his ideas will not become any one nation's property. Before his return to Anarres, he learns that the new syndicate he fostered has gained ground in its struggle to be recognized and has garnered sympathy from other citizens who can also foresee the problems that failure to acknowledge dissent could produce for their relatively young society.

Problematic Elements

Although at first glance the stories of *The Wanderground* seem to form fantastic individual vignettes about women flying, healing, communing with nature, or educating other women about the outrages of the past, Gearhart weaves information and characters together from story to story to form a complete arc, a plot that moves toward hope for humanity in the form of an alliance between the Hill women and the Gentles, who have both chosen to reject life in the City. As for her utopian strategy, some would see her use of telepathic development, imagined as a part of the natural growth of women freed from domination and control and positioned in contrast to the brutish, un-evolved behavior of men and women in the City, as essentialist and unhelpful to the feminist project of equality. June Howard typifies this opinion, as she feels that the innateness of male violence and female connection with nature posited by Gearhart reifies existing male/female stereotypes. In addition, in Gearhart's utopia, she argues, women are "essentially powerless on any terrain which resembles the present" because of the improbability of the psychic powers they wield (*Feminist Writers* 2-3).

Similarly, Jennifer Burwell states *The Wanderground* is a utopia in which citizens are compelled to define their present in terms of past violation by and the present threat of men, and in this sense, is “not forward looking but backward looking” (85). Remember rooms are consistently employed to remind Hill Women not to forget what has gone before, and they are used to educate new generations about the violent threat that men of the City pose. Burwell notes that while this remembering may be useful as part of Gearhart’s critique of the present, it creates a failure of agency, as it denies Hill Women any other way to constitute their reality:

“While the women’s memories of violation function critically to expose and condemn contemporary sexual abuse, these memories also compose the basis for their utopian identity...the integrity of their utopian space relies for its definition on the continuation of an oppressive order in which they occupy a disempowered position” (85-86).

I would dispute Howard’s assertion that the powers of Gearhart’s utopia renders women “powerless” in the present because Gearhart’s political imagination is what lends itself to the creation of these new, “fantastic technologies” (Keinhorst 93), and the proposed ways of knowing open up spaces for discussing the root of desires for those new ways. Additionally, thinking about Gearhart’s psychic development as metaphor rather than as suggestion for living celebrates the “utopian potential of people” (Keinhorst 93). Keinhorst seems to indicate that individual and “unlimited capacity for development” is as important a vision as social development; human potential is the root of utopia itself in the conventional sense (93). While Gearhart’s strategy leaves her narrative open to attack as essentialist and even man-hating, her attempt to stimulate

thought about gender relations is a successful one; as Keinhorst relates, the “imaginative alternative lifestyle” typical of utopian fiction is also its strength and most significant construction in terms of potential: “confrontation with a strange world provokes alienation from inequality which hitherto has been familiar” (98). However, I agree with Burwell’s observation that the construction of identity for women of *The Wanderground* is problematic as it centers on opposition to the men of the City and their past and potential crimes. Here, remembering is “rigorously institutionalized and functions as the primary means through which the women establish a communal identity” (69). At the same time, this kind of remembering positions women as victims in a marginalized society. This is, I agree, is a limiting way to construct individual and communal identity and is not a helpful model for future citizenship.

As for *The Dispossessed*, the presence of dissent in this utopia points to tensions surrounding the desire for sameness and stable community acknowledged by LeGuin. More critical of itself than *The Wanderground*, dissatisfaction is part of the project. The subtitle of the text, *An Ambiguous Utopia*, makes clearer the ambitions of the author to challenge the assumptions of sameness while recognizing its benefit. Uneasiness regarding commitment to family and partners indicates further drawbacks of belonging to a Brotherhood in which every citizen is expected to have mobility in order to meet labor demands, but again, these are problematic elements explored by the narrative, not failings of it. The single shortcoming of the text may be its failure to address racism in any detail.

Conclusions: “True Journey is Return”

Both *The Wanderground* and *The Dispossessed* pose interesting alternative visions to citizenship, emphasizing that separation is sometimes required in order to actualize those visions. *The Wanderground* projects the desire for new ways of knowing and communicating and for the revaluation of women as strong, active agents who are entitled to freedom from oppressive practices, and the narrative seems to predict that women may achieve these desires through self-development. Additionally, it confronts the injustice and brutality of oppressive practices like rape as part of a larger critique of male supremacy. A citizen in *The Wanderground* can best serve her (of his) society by bettering herself and participating in consensus. *The Dispossessed* projects the utopian desire for a more egalitarian society, initiated by revolutionary anarchic impulse and actualized as socialist culture, and predicts the inevitability of dissent and asserts it as a positive indicator of healthy society. It also confronts the competitiveness, greed and class and gender inequity that are hallmarks of Western capitalist democracy while acknowledging the difficulties of communal living. Successful citizenship for Anarresti requires unselfish fulfillment of civic duty, and according to the narrative’s primary tension, *should* involve dissention.

While each work occupies a different side of the sameness/difference debates, for both societies presented, the willingness to surmount the boundaries that hold them separate from that which their citizens abhor is the most hopeful and instructive model for citizenship each offers. The separation posed in each work offers a new vision of what could be, but the tendency to test the boundary and seek coalition is one that returns the critique to the present in concrete ways. As Patricia Waugh notes, when utopian

desire for separation is actualized and then fixed, it “is paradoxically the *death* of desire” (qtd. in Burwell 65). To achieve utopia is not only an inadequate way in which to effect widespread change, its containment creates a dangerously static climate of sameness which limits new ideas and expression, one in which “support[s] a disciplinary gaze” (Burwell 65). Stasis and containment foster the dystopian possibility of repression from within. While neither of these extrapolations can claim to be ideal, the author of each takes the risk of suggesting the possibilities of reintegration; they build up walls in order to break them down.

Chapter Three: Revisioning, Reclaiming: Spirituality and Embodied Technologies

in *Parable of the Sower* and *The Fifth Sacred Thing*

“Belief

Initiates and guides action –

Or it does nothing.”

EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

--*Parable of the Sower*, Octavia Butler

Context

To contextualize these authors, I will briefly consider some of their background and previous works; however, because they are relatively contemporary authors, it does not seem especially necessary to situate them historically, except to say that both are writing in a time when recognition of the need for a diverse range of voices in political movements is growing exponentially. Both writers are living and theorizing in a time when coalition has become vital to the survival of the movement against oppression. Audre Lorde’s 1984 statement that “the future of our earth may depend upon the ability of all women to identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of

relating across difference” remained quite true for political work of the 1990s and continues to be accurate today; in these texts, Butler and Starhawk work to generate some of the new definitions and new patterns of which Lorde spoke (qtd. in Melzer 1). Their work demonstrates a move away from the sameness/difference debates of the late 1970s and 1980s in favor of exploring identity-based politics and the praxis of creating coalition, a shift that can also be seen in feminist critical theory.

Octavia Butler is generally recognized as one of the few well-known black female writers working in science fiction, and much-needed dialogues about race consistently appear in her works. Even in texts which do not make racial analysis a core component, the presence of personally powerful black women is an important contribution to the unsettling of the generally white authorship and readership of science fiction. Butler recalls witnessing her mother, who worked as a maid, receiving treatment as a “non-person” (“Octavia Butler”); experiences such as this inform her consistent portrayal of confident women of color who are often leaders. However, her depiction of black female characters has sometimes made it difficult for her to publish in the science fiction market in which such depictions are marginal at best and considered unappealing to the market’s target audience. One text, *Kindred*, was published in 1979 as general fiction although time-travel was the story’s most necessary device.¹⁸ Recognition of one’s history, along with culturally-diverse community building, has been an important element in Butler’s work. In her acclaimed *Xenogenesis* series of the late 1980s, humans from a dying earth are forced to interbreed with aliens who possess extraordinary skills of genetic manipulation, and the text’s protagonist fights to retain her humanity and sense of history even as she helps re-establish new primitive communities on Earth. Interestingly, on the

subject of utopia, which involves community building as a central concern, Butler states that the genre fails to interest her because of the impossibility of realizing utopia: “I don’t write utopian science fiction because I don’t believe that imperfect humans can form a perfect society” (“Octavia Butler”). Although Butler may not define *The Parable of the Sower* as utopian, many of her commentators certainly do, pointing to the impulse toward utopian community it contains. In fact, Melzer asserts that *The Parable of the Sower* is a specific response to the feminist utopias of the 1970s which is especially critical of the avoidance of conflict in those works (3).

Starhawk, also known as Miriam Simos, has been a leader and author of the women’s spirituality movement for several decades. Her landmark 1979 publication, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*, is filled with rituals, visualizations and spiritual guidelines that have become the foundation of much Goddess-centered practice in the U.S. Its publication and subsequent reprint editions have secured her place as one of the movement’s most influential writers. Active in non-violent protest of nuclear power plants and war in the 1970s and 1980s, in more recent years Starhawk has become an organizer and nonviolent action trainer for a number of causes, including water rights and World Trade Organization and World Bank protestations. She brings her activism and spiritual experience to bear in her first of three novels, which posits utopia in the form of an enclave of affinity groups founded by revolutionary women in futuristic San Francisco. The novel also incorporates Starhawk’s interest in pagan magic as a natural part of activist culture, as well as her famous reconceptualization of power from the “power-over” of domination to the “power-to” of personal empowerment, and to “power-with,” cooperation for power and change.

Text Synopses

Butler captures in her characteristically sparse prose a landscape of fear, survival and longing in *The Parable of the Sower*, a novel of the near future. The narrator, Lauren Oya Olamina, is a young Black woman who leads a motley collection of survivors out of post-apocalyptic suburbia in search of a place to call home. Along the three-year journey, Lauren, daughter of a Christian preacher, cultivates the seed of a new religion based on the acceptance of change rather than pre-determination. Each chapter, made up of Lauren's diary entries, is prefaced by a verse from the religion's completed written testament, *The Books of the Living*.¹⁹ In a world where simple survival is an act of resistance, this is a novel about the longing for utopia rather than the realization of it, and depicts so many failures to realize utopia that it may seem dystopic. The narrative utilizes a quest thematic to problematize more traditional notions of utopia as a goal of human social and political life.

In *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, Starhawk envisions a radically democratic community based in San Francisco that incorporates a non-violence ethic with sustainable living and cultural diversity. Religions of all varieties practice side-by-side, hospitals are staffed by teams that include traditionally trained specialists and healers who use magic, and new models of kinship make way for multi-racial families and sexually diverse practices. In contrast to this revolutionary community is the fundamentalist culture from which it has withdrawn, wherein The Millennialists, a slightly more extreme version of the Religious Right, control the government in tandem with global corporations. When people of the

community become infected with a virus that resists treatment, the enclave leadership believes that the virus may be a weapon of the government. The protagonists, Madrone and her male lover Bird, struggle to find a cure for the virus and to forge alliances with other groups who resist the corporate and fundamentalist government, while Madrone's ninety-eight-year-old grandmother, Maya, mothers, mentors and misses them. Starhawk's narrative voice, while in the third person, alternates between Madrone, Bird and Maya.²⁰ In the novel's climax, the peaceful values and consensus process of the community, realizations of utopia, are tested when it must protect itself from an invading government army.

Projection: Out of Violence

Parable of Sower depicts frequent scenes of murder and brutality as witnessed by Lauren Olamina and recorded in her journal. Overwhelmingly, the predominance of these horrifying images in the narrative represent a plea for the cessation of institutionalized, poverty-driven violence, and a call to create communities that practice cooperation. In this way, the primary utopian desire the narrative projects is for the creation of a utopia that does not yet exist; it seeks the possibility of escape from the dystopian formula, and finds that potential in the utopian dreaming of a young black woman.

Fifteen-year-old Lauren is what she calls "a sharer," a person who experiences empathetic pain when she witnesses the suffering of others; this affliction is the result of a prescription drug abused by her mother during pregnancy. In her violent world, sharing makes Lauren even more vulnerable, as her empathic responses can incapacitate her. As a

narrative device, Lauren's disorder, call "hyperempathy syndrome" guarantees that she will be more motivated to form cooperative relationships in order to survive than other desperate people. With this device as the only seemingly fantastic element of the text, Butler both suggests a social need for peaceful solutions and inserts an urgent, embodied individual compulsion toward the same end. This is especially true when Lauren later discovers that hyperempathy syndrome is more widespread than she originally supposed.

As with *The Parable of the Sower*, *The Fifth Sacred Thing* projects the desire for a healthier, more egalitarian world free from violence and corruption. The original founders of the enclave, a handful of women, have helped to turn the San Francisco Valley into a lush paradise in the desert through sustainable living; enough food and water exists for everyone, and each citizen has meaningful work. Governance of the enclave takes place through an often lengthy and argumentative consensus process among affinity groups or guilds, and a system of ethics based on earth spirituality guides the consensus process. The title of the work refers to the fifth element in Starhawk's own spiritual practice, *spirit*, the other four being air, earth, fire and water. Starhawk explains the significance of the elements in the book's epigraph, "Declaration of the Four Sacred Things":

To call these things sacred is to say that they have a value beyond their usefulness for human ends...no one has the right to appropriate them or profit from them at the expense of others... All people, all living things, are part of the earth life, and so are sacred.

It is reverence for life and the indomitable spirit of the enclave's people that helps them persevere, even as an army occupies their beloved city and begins randomly killing

and torturing citizens in an attempt to flush out a central leader who doesn't exist. Likewise, it is their strong foundation of nonviolent ethics that helps see them through; the only dissenters among their own people are the members of the Water Guild, who insist on blowing up dams erected by the occupying force to control access to water.

Prediction: No Future?

The Parable of the Sower predicts that if current trends continue, life in America in 2024 will be ruled by lawlessness and chaos: corrupt police and other emergency responders will not assist the people unless compensated, education will no longer be free, and global corporations will control the world's food and water supply. Perhaps worst of all, increasing violence and isolation will pit citizen against citizen. Before she is forced to embark on her search for utopia, Lauren lives in a walled suburban community that has been fortified like compound. No one goes in or out unless it is absolutely necessary. The wall of the community protects its inhabitants from desperate street dwellers and gangs of drug addicts with pyromania, and shields Lauren from their attacks and their suffering. In this future, it is "crazy to live without a wall to protect you" because those living outside the walls of suburbia are "desperate or crazy or both" and will kill to survive (10). When her neighborhood is destroyed, Lauren becomes one of those outsiders but is determined to survive without stealing or killing. Instead, she proposes cooperation to those she encounters.

Starhawk's prediction for the future of America is similarly bleak. In *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, the possibility of nonviolence is the main concern of the novel's story arc,

but it is interwoven with dire commentary on the consequences of ecological disaster, over-reliance on prescription medications and antibiotics, corporate control of water and food supplies, militarism, and the growing gap between rich and poor. Much of this is a commentary based on Starhawk's own observations as an activist: "The Global Justice Movement," she writes, "now must assert that water is a human right, linked to the right to life. There is no substitute for water; therefore there must be a limit to private ownership and control of water resources" (Starhawk, *Webs* 66). In this novel, water has been privatized in much the same way as it has in real developing countries and in some American cities, and the result here has been that the poor must steal water in order to survive. If caught, they are imprisoned in forced labor camps. The possibilities for human survival in this future seem grim, but resistance exists, just as Starhawk insists upon in current reality.

Confrontation: Challenging Oppression, Welcoming the Stranger

Just as both novels predict the expansion of current systems of oppression, they confront the institutions that support oppression and the practices they enable. However, at the same time, the protagonists actively encourage outsiders to join with them; unlike some of the other utopias discussed here, the narratives propose a more fluid boundary between dystopia and utopia through the hope of change instead of isolating utopian cultures from contamination. Each expresses concerns about conservative trends in American politics, especially those involving Christian extremism. Inevitably, they bluntly assert, the conflation of Christian rhetoric with politics will lead to greater

repression and inequity. Violence, particularly against women, is a practice confronted by both texts that is enabled by the political climate. In *Parable*, women and girls as young as eight years old are brutally raped by gangs, and Lauren disguises herself as a man while on the road to avoid being attacked. In *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, the army that clashes with the citizens of the city is a concrete illustration of what the narrative confronts: systems of domination and violence. However, the army that occupies the city is made up of the poorest members of society; when the soldiers realize that the peaceful citizens of the city treat them with more dignity than their superiors, they begin to consider defection. The citizens constantly offer the occupiers “a place set for you at our table,” an opportunity to be part of their community in spite of the atrocities visited upon them by the army (310). The persistent efforts of the nonviolent citizens to win over the hungry and poor troops, along with Madrone’s discovery of a method to cure the troops of immunobooster dependency, turns the tide in the direction of the resistance. The army’s own soldiers revolt and join with the citizens to expel the remaining officers and soldiers.

Utopia as Goal: Spiritual Quest Themes of *Parable of the Sower*

The fact that these narratives challenge conservative Christianity’s involvement in politics does not preclude the saturation of their own community design with religious inclinations. Instead, it is the basis of their hope. The uncertainty and pain of life in the walled community informs Lauren’s vision of a religion that is drastically different from her father’s, a god she does not name but instead defines: “All that you touch, you

Change. All that you Change, Changes you. The only lasting truth is Change. God is Change” (3). In this chaotic world, in which neighborhood children disappear without warning and homes are fire-bombed, the only thought for the future that gives Lauren optimism is the possibility of directing change, shaping it instead of suffering it. The power of change, so inescapable that it is God-like, must first be acknowledged, and then dealt with, re-visioned: “We do not worship God. We perceive and attend God. We learn from God. With forethought and work, we shape God” (17). She calls for a faith that can unite people in the pursuit of a future more hopeful than desperately clinging to what remains of America’s crumbling civilization. Lauren eventually gathers a small group of terrified but tenacious people to her cause, and in the book’s sequel, *Parable of the Talents*, they settle on a remote farm to begin their project, that of making Earthseed an international movement toward unification of people to a common goal: survival. However, the community they build, called Acorn, is not an end but a beginning. The end of utopian desire, reached by other members of her community only after her death, is the final destiny of Earthseed, “to take root among the stars” (84). As Lauren notes on the day of her revelation concerning the Destiny, “there’s always a lot to do before you get to go to heaven” (85). The function of the Destiny is hopeful challenge, a sense of purpose that is grander in scope and extends beyond the current dystopian realities of Acorn’s daily struggle to survive. Again, this is the utopian element, the strength of this work, found in the constant presence of hope and the possibility of agency presented in Lauren’s cosmology: “God is Change. We must find the rest of what we need within ourselves, in one another, in our Destiny” (245).

Conclusions: Radical Citizenship

Here in these works, as with others discussed, policy and decision-making based on consensus is the norm. The presence of dissent in both of these societies is presented as a healthy component of the process, and participation in the process is a measure of one's citizenship. In *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, the members of the enclave work to resolve rising tension between affinity groups when news that a government army is approaching their city. Some groups represented on the highly democratic council support preparations for offense while others insist on nonviolent resistance. While some dissent remains, the council decides on a nonviolent approach by majority vote and selects a welcoming committee to represent the community when the army arrives. It is this committee that first offers "a place at our table" to the commander of the invading force, and they suffer the first casualties. When the military occupies the city, members of the enclave are forced to choose between violent and nonviolent response. Some groups, like the Water Guild, are convinced that nonviolent resistance and negotiation are useless and engage in acts of violence, while others gladly give their lives in acts of civil disobedience. The presence of dissent here demonstrates that while disputes may hinder collective action, the process of consensus allows for it. Repressive practices are not replicated here as with more limited utopias that long for sameness. Starhawk's consensus process is practical model that she has applied in training for direct actions, and this is a very helpful model for feminists in particular, given the need for both cooperation and acknowledgement of difference in the work that must be done to build a widespread movement.

Conclusions

In summation, this thesis explicates the three most useful functions of feminist utopian narrative: projection of utopian desire, prediction of political change, and confrontation with aspects of Western models citizenship and the institutions which reify them. Here, five texts of feminist utopian fiction are considered: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground*, Ursula K. LeGuin's *The Dispossessed*, Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, and Starhawk's *The Fifth Sacred Thing*. I have considered problematic elements of the individual works as well as thematic and narrative devices, and I have reached the conclusion that feminist utopias should not be dismissed as escapist fantasies. Thorough analysis of them demonstrates the political necessity of the genre to the ongoing development of feminist emancipatory consciousness. The vision they provide makes them unique tools for investigating manifestations of power and extrapolating new directions for feminist discourse. As such they should be thoughtfully considered as part of feminist and interdisciplinary pedagogy to foster the development of critical consciousness.

Chapter One of this thesis is concerned with *Herland*, a narrative that seeks to address the limited possibilities of women in turn-of-the-century America. In *Herland*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman provides a vision of change for society; if women were allowed to fully participate as citizens, the whole of society would benefit, and progress of the human race would not be impeded by the restrictions placed on women. The work

projects the desire for peaceful, efficient and egalitarian society, and predicts the possibility of obtaining that desire through greater freedom for women. Additionally, the narrative confronts limiting notions of femininity used to justify the confinement of women to the private sphere and limit the scope of female citizenship to domestic duty. Gilman's vision is one that is still relevant today in many ways, and her work has long been considered ground-breaking; however, appreciation of Gilman's fictional work and her place as a foremother of contemporary feminism needs to be better situated in her own historical and critical context. Any look at Gilman's work is incomplete without consideration of her intense interest in social evolutionary theory, and unfortunately, the racist and classist implications of her work, as well as other problematic elements, are often overlooked in favor of her otherwise progressive vision. These flaws, however, make *Herland* an ideal flashpoint for dialogue about those same implications; for example, *Herland* could be employed to stimulate discussion about the continuing paradox of the construction of motherhood and the pitfalls of maternal feminism.

Chapter Two examines *The Wanderground* and *The Dispossessed* as separatist utopias. *The Wanderground* projects many of the strong desires of many "difference" feminists of the 1970s, who longed for new ways of knowing and communicating and for the revaluation of women as strong, active agents who are entitled to freedom from oppressive practices. Gearhart's narrative seems to predict that women may achieve these desires through self-development. Additionally, this work confronts the injustice and brutality of oppressive practices like rape as part of a larger critique of male supremacy. As part of socially-conscious pedagogy, *The Wanderground* can be utilized to encourage conversations about violence against women, gender performance, women-centered

spaces, and theories of difference and sameness. Critiques pointing to the essentialism of the work actually confirm a useful manner in which *The Wanderground* can be utilized for purposes of discussion. Written during the same historical period but more involved in asserting sameness as a political strategy, *The Dispossessed* projects the utopian desire for a classless society. It predicts the inevitability of dissent and asserts it as a positive indicator of healthy society. The work also confronts the competitiveness, greed and class and gender inequity that are hallmarks of Western capitalist democracy while acknowledging the difficulties of communal living. *The Dispossessed*, with its juxtaposition of socialism and capitalism, and discursive practices regarding language and gender, is a useful text in numerous ways. Both works present unique and valuable narratives and provide widely divergent visions of perfect society.

Lastly, *Parable of the Sower* and *The Fifth Sacred Thing* can both be used to highlight tensions and resolutions in coalition-building and explore issues that are relevant today, such as water rights and sustainable living. Chapter Three analyzes these two texts as points of departure for imagining egalitarian and heterogeneous societies. Both texts project desire for a safe and environmentally viable future, predict disastrous consequences for American society and culture if progressive changes are not made in the present, and confront the systems of domination and violence that may lead to such consequences.

When analyzing these works, each with its ambitious projects and flaws both intentional and non-intentional, we might ask ourselves, just what kind of utopias are these anyway? Some appear to predict futures so grim that hope is only dimly visible, and some may seem too fantastic to offer any practical application. However, the crucial

vision that these novels provide enables conversations that are of a type at the heart of feminism, about what kind of world we have, what kind we want, and the lengths to which we will or will not go in order to achieve it. These conversations make up a complex dialogue, an important one, and in my opinion, quite possibly the most important one in the world as we know it. These texts ask vital questions about the ways in which current models of citizenship prevent the actualization of more equitable visions, and suggest that other modes are possible. In this way, they suggest that *change in the present* is also possible. At the risk of sounding as though feminist utopian narrative is the cure-all for the challenges of inequity in the postmodern world, I can confidently assert that the study of utopian narrative is one place of convergence, a nexus of possible interdisciplinary practice including but not limited to feminist theory, political science, American studies, material sciences and literature. Here, the potential for pedagogical application is as diverse as the disciplines themselves.

As a final word, I feel the need to assert that all interactions with literary text, whether fiction or nonfiction, can arguably be seen as temporary escape from one's own current reality. If distinctions of value or necessity regarding text are to be made, they should be based on that which occurs after reading has ended. Where does the text take us, and what may it give us for the return trip? As a respite from reality, fantastic fiction, and feminist utopian narrative in particular, forces a question asked by Ursula K LeGuin, albeit in a slightly different context: "From what is one escaping, and to what?" ("On Teaching" 23-24). Through examination of the alternate visions these works provide, perhaps readers, as citizens, will be encouraged participate in the creation of a world from which they are less inclined to seek escape, one more just and fulfilling for all.

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Notes

¹ As with most monolithic notions, Kumar's idea of the utopia as exclusively Western is contested, particularly as relates to utopias placed in the science fiction genre. For a succinct challenge to this, see Milojevic and Inayatullah's "Futures Dreaming: Challenges from Outside and on the Margins of the Western World."

² As evolutionary psychologists, Barash and Barash place an emphasis on denial of biological *instinct*, defined as "the deepest needs of human nature" (1). While their notion of sexual and reproductive function as "normal biological urge" (1) is not one I necessarily agree with, the point they seek to make regarding the control of biological function in dystopias is well-taken.

³ This being said, I am certainly not claiming that all science fiction is feminist or presents a critical view, since many science fiction writers have relied, and continue to rely, upon sexist, racist and colonialist representations of alien-ness in their work. This is especially true in the ways that some works represent self-other relationships, in which the self is always superior and more fully "human," legitimate and civilized. Feminist writers such Gwyneth Jones (see her "Metempsychosis of the Machine: Science Fiction in the Halls of Karma") and Ursula K. LeGuin ("American SF and the Other," in *Language of the Night*) have been quick to critique this aspect.

⁴ Here, I define Western citizenship in the context of social and economic systems that depend on the perpetuation of gendered social roles. As explained by Robin Silbergleid, social roles that maintain inequitable social systems are themselves upheld by traditional narrative "trajectories," romantic stories that convey an ideology of successful citizenship as a linear progression (particularly for women) from childhood to marriage to reproduction and education of offspring. The romance narrative culminates in reproduction, caring for offspring and maintaining the home, which upholds patriarchal structures and relegates women to the private sphere as second class citizens with less participation in the public sphere.

“Given the entrenchment heterosexual union and the romance narrative in the foundation of liberal citizenship and the social contract,” Silbergleid states, “any reconsideration of citizenship requires new narratives of family and civil society” (3).

⁵ While a feminist in the sense that she supported women’s suffrage, Gilman was uncomfortable with early feminist politics of sexual liberation. At the same time, some of her reformer ideas, such as professional childcare and communal kitchens, were too radical for her maternal feminist peers.

⁶ “The race” referred to whites, just as “the sex,” a common expression in Gilman’s time, referred to women.

⁷ According to Bartkowski, *Women and Economics* (1898) was available in seven languages, and in the 1920s, was used as a college textbook.

⁸ While reading this text, it is helpful to remember that it was originally published as a serial.

⁹ In a 1905 address, President Theodore Roosevelt admonishes women who refuse motherhood and praises mothers, and makes implicit connections between bearing children and duty to country. “The most important, the most honorable task which can be set to any woman is to be a good and wise mother in a home marked by self-respect and mutual forbearance, by willingness to perform duty, and by refusal to sink into self-indulgence or avoid that which entails effort and self-sacrifice... I am speaking of the primary duties, I am speaking of the average citizens” (138). To refuse motherhood would be to “merit contempt as hearty as any visited upon the soldier who runs away in battle” (139). Roosevelt states that the word “mother” itself is synonymous with “loving unselfishness and self-abnegation” and should be considered “holy” (140).

¹⁰ Frances Bartkowski speculates on the motive for Gilman’s choice of a male narrator: “The choice is one which might make male readers... more comfortable by giving them the privileged place of observer or storyteller; for female readers, however, Van and his friends are the objects of humor...female readers are situated with Van as outsiders but also distanced from him in their responses to a women’s world” (28). As Bartkowski observes, Van’s “narrative control reasserts his dominance,” in spite of its inadvertent humor and imperfection (28).

¹¹ For more on this, in the context of colonialism, see Weinbaum.

¹² This is particularly true of *Herland*'s sequel, *With Her in Ourland*, wherein Ellador and Van travel the world in order to view through the lens of Ellador's experience.

¹³ Sameness and difference debates also concerned (and still do) differences in race, class, and sexuality. For my purpose, I will not be detailing them here.

¹⁴ See Gearhart's "The Future—if There is One—is Female" and "An End to Technology: A Modest Proposal."

¹⁵ Alex Wright asserts that the work's social sensibilities regarding suffering and human nature are informed here, as with some of LeGuin's other works, by "the wisdom of the *Tao Te Ching*" (236). LeGuin has shown obvious interest in taoism elsewhere, and has also published a translation of the work.

¹⁶Not coincidentally, A-Io resembles the United States in many ways.

¹⁷ LeGuin may have fit in well as an immigrant to Anarres, as a self-described "a petty-bourgeois anarchist, and an internal emigré (sic)" (from Susan Wood's "Introduction" to *Language of the Night* 13).

¹⁸ In this work, Butler's modern-day protagonist travels into the Antebellum past to save the life of the white man who is to become her ancestor.

¹⁹ Butler states that she wrote the verses of the *The Books of the Living* just to overcome a writing block: "I knew that I wanted to my next book to be about a woman who starts a religion, but everything I wrote sounded like garbage" ("Octavia"). The poetry she wrote collect her thoughts became the protagonist's verses.

²⁰ Like Starhawk, Maya, who as an enclave founder represents the old guard, is a once-famous author of influential books on spirituality.