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Transgressive Utopian Dystopias: The Postmodern Reappearance of Utopia in the Disguise of Dystopia¹

Abstract: With utopia's heyday of the second half of the 19th century long gone with only a momentary flare up as feminist utopia in the 1970s, utopian literature seems to remain in limbo. Indeed, many critics have agreed upon a diminished belief in a potentially better world if not upon the disappearance of utopian literature and the impossibility of utopian thought altogether. Yet utopia is very much alive: it has reappeared in the disguise of novels, initially set as dystopias, predominantly in the contemporary feminist dystopias of the past twenty to thirty years. These 'transgressive utopian dystopias' resist neat categorizations of utopia/dystopia; rather, they present utopian strategies as integral part of the dystopian narrative. While the described dystopian societies are riven by manifold dualisms, the suggested utopian impulses aim at their transgression. These utopian strategies can be single glimpses of hope, as Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) illustrates, or contain the very downfall or subversion of dystopia *and* the actual process of building utopia, as in Suzy McKee Charnas's *Holdfast* tetralogy (1974-1999).

1. Postmodern Obituaries: The Death of Utopia

The age of postmodernism has, as Chris Ferns so aptly claims, poured out an unprecedented list of obituaries, proclaiming the “[d]eath of the Novel, and of the Author, but also the End of Ideology, and even – in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet bloc – the End of History” (Ferns 1999, 1).² To this postmodern list of obituaries we can add Francis Fukuyama's sepulchral claim that this is an age devoid of imaginative hope and speculation, an age that “cannot picture [...] a world that is *essentially* different from the present one, and at the same time better” (Fukuyama 1992, 46) and Russell Jacoby's provocative study *The End of Utopia* (1999), gravely announcing that the “utopian spirit – a sense that the future could

¹ This article is based on my book *Worlds Apart? Dualism and Transgression in Contemporary Female Dystopias* (2005) and on a paper, “The Rag Ends of Language’: The Poetic Discourse of Survival in Atwood's Future Visions,” presented at the 20th Annual Convention of the Modern Language Association in Philadelphia in 2004.

² Postmodernism, too, has been added: “Postmodernism is dead, finally killed off, after years of sickness as a result of mortal injuries sustained on 11th September 2001” (Baggini 2002, 10).

transcend the present – has vanished” (Jacoby 1999, xi). It seems that at the end of the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century utopia is extinct.

Getting back at radical notions, above all at feminism, postcolonialism, and postmodernism, Jacoby smugly notes a general “collapsing [of] intellectual visions and ambitions” (Jacoby 1999, xii) and concludes that the “belief that the future could fundamentally surpass the present [...] is stone dead. Few envision the future as anything but a replica of today [...] There are no alternatives. This is the wisdom of our times, an age of political exhaustion and retreat” (Jacoby 1999, xi-xii). Inasmuch as Jacoby addresses literary utopia understood as the *universal blueprint of perfection*, his charge seems very much justified. In his eagerness to debunk utopia, Jacoby, however, gazes exclusively at classical and modern utopian texts, and completely disregards contemporary literary dystopias, where a disguised literary utopia is very much alive and kicking. Considering that in the 1970s there was a short period in which literary utopia blossomed in the form of feminist utopias, it is perhaps not surprising that the contemporary literary utopia can be found predominantly in feminist dystopian texts.

2. In Search of Utopia: The Hybridization of Genres

The ongoing postmodern dissolution of narrative boundaries and the cross-fertilization of genres have strongly influenced the genre of science fiction (sf) in particular, sf being the umbrella term under which utopia, dystopia, speculative fiction, fabulation, science fiction, and the like are often interchangeably lumped together.³ Generally speaking, due to the heterogeneous nature of this particular literature, utopia and sf are probably two of the least and most defined terms in genre history. As the grand doyen of sf, Isaac Asimov, writes, “Science Fiction is an undefined term in the sense that there is no generally agreed upon definition of it. To be sure, there are probably hundreds of individual definitions, but that is as bad as none at all” (Asimov 1953, 158).⁴ Arguments have raged over what exactly sf is and what it is not; generic demarcations are disagreed upon at large and become increasingly confusing and, indeed, rather irrelevant as contemporary utopian, dystopian, and science fiction converge, intersect, and ultimately implode these very generic distinctions, just as sf originally emerged from a cross-fertilization of, among others, Gothic and scientific romances, fantastic literature, travelogues, the tall tale, and adventure/voyage stories. Many literary works are therefore listed under various labels, depending on the critic’s approach and use of definitions, but also because a definite and unambiguous classification is unattainable. It is almost impossible to agree upon and probably not even desirable to construct rigid defining categories in postmodern times of increasingly murky generic boundaries and crossovers. There are, however, a

³ The contemporary use of sf as an inclusive genre name can subsume fantasy, fairy-tale, folk-tale, myth, alternate history, and utopia/dystopia.

⁴ Gary K. Wolfe lists a vast number of sf definitions in the encyclopedic *Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy* (1986).

number of important distinguishing features common to utopia/dystopia and sf, and to sf and fantasy.⁵ Yet, despite the numerous differences, a shared concern with the future, nourished by a discontent with social realities and technological progress, and joint narrative strategies, such as defamiliarization, extrapolation, and alternate societies, forge a generic interrelationship between sf, utopia, and dystopia. Thus, over the past twenty-five years utopia, dystopia, and sf have undergone a generic fluidity and a thematic dialogue, so that classifications such as dystopia/utopia or sf are indeed in many cases obsolete, whereas until recently, the distinction between the two traditional antagonists utopia and dystopia has been maintained.⁶

In particular, feminist texts – sometimes situated in a sf frame – hybridize utopia and dystopia, and present them as interactive hemispheres rather than distinct poles, contesting the standard (classical) reading of utopia and dystopia as two discrete literary subgenres and exposing the artificiality of such rigid classifications. These utopian/dystopian texts not only negotiate the continuum between utopia and anti-utopia, to paraphrase Tom Moylan (cf. 2000, xiii), but, and this is what I want to stress, constitute a dystopian-utopian continuum. In other words, these texts interweave utopian and dystopian narrative strands.⁷ And this is where utopia went undercover: as utopian strategies contained in contemporary, predominantly feminist dystopias. Tom Moylan argues similarly when he identifies the ‘critical dystopia’ as the new literary motor of utopian agency, providing “a space for a new form of political opposition, one fundamentally based in difference and multiplicity” (Moylan 2000, 190).

3. From Classical Utopia / Dystopia to the new Transgressive Utopian Dystopia

Various critics, including Angelika Bammer (1991), Raffaella Baccolini (2000), and Tom Moylan (1986, 2000), have noted a shift in form and narrative content in the predominantly feminist utopian literature of the 1970s. Moylan asserts

⁵ In very general terms, utopia and dystopia foreground socio-political issues and strive to move the reader to a more critical awareness, and to compare unfavourably his or her own society to the future society (in the case of utopia) or to recognize tendencies in contemporary society that might lead, if continued, to the very dystopia s/he just read about. Utopian and dystopian literature thus desires a consciousness raising, if not the readers’ active engagement in bringing on change. In contrast, science fiction at its best aims to impart an understanding of science with the means of aesthetic interpretation; yet, very often, science fiction novels cum space operas ravel in escapism and western style stories of (cow)boys gone rampant in outer space.

⁶ These generic hybridizations often include sf, myth, quest, adventure tale, fantasy, fairy-tale, and satire. The postmodern novels mix discourses, fact and fiction, and feminist, transgressive utopian dystopias in particular use multigenerational cluster characters and single characters; societal and individualized narrative voices; and create a polyphony of alternating voices and multiple perspectives.

⁷ In his introduction to *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* (2000), Moylan also once uses the term ‘utopian dystopia,’ not to emphasize a successful and continuous utopian subtext, but merely to denote the insertion of *oppositional* strategies within these new dystopias.

that these ‘critical utopias,’ (e.g. by Joanna Russ, Marge Piercy, Ursula Le Guin, and Samuel Delaney) refrain from the classical utopian notion of perfection and stasis, and “reject utopia as a blueprint while preserving it as a dream” (Moylan 1986, 10), a dream of a better but not of an ideal and fixed society. In contrast to classical utopias, Moylan argues, feminist critical utopias thus remain ambiguous. Similarly, Bammer claims that contemporary feminist utopian texts preserve a ‘partial vision’ of utopia. Significantly, Bammer’s ‘partial visions’ or Moylan’s ‘critical utopias’ no longer implement the state as the superior principle of order, but stress taking *individual action*. This change in content is also reflected in a changed narrative form that – compared to classical utopias – accentuates character development, non-linear narratives, and multiperspectivism. According to Moylan, these texts, focusing on self-criticism, the element of process, and the very construction of a utopia that is never attained, “dwell on the conflict between the originary world and the utopian society opposed to it so that the process of social change is more directly articulated” (Moylan 1986, 11). In contrast, classical utopia obscures its very origin and revels in the very *absence* of historical progress and process. With a less fixed, non-normative content, the feminist utopian texts of the 1970s and onwards do not present a finished ‘product,’ but rather the exploration of the very construction of an alternative and improved societal vision. Such a notion of “imperfection within utopian society itself” (Moylan 1986, 11) creates a dynamic interaction between fictional present and future and, therefore, allows a mode of diversity, difference, and a multiplicity of perspectives.

This essentially postmodern view of utopia as a pluralistic society that values heterogeneity, diversity, and difference intersects with what Michel Foucault has called ‘heterotopia.’⁸ Potentially, heterotopian space as a destabilizer of the present can also be read as a transgressive concept that “preserves the utopian impulse, releasing it from the traditional utopian genre” (Moylan 1986, 161). In contrast to the imaginary realm of utopia, Foucault situates heterotopia in reality as “counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites [...] are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places [...] I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias” (Foucault 1986, 24).⁹ Unlike utopias that reside in the spatial and temporal no-place or fictional elsewhere, heterotopias then exist in the real realm of society, a position that reflects Foucault’s critical view of utopia and his

⁸ Reappropriated by postmodern narrative strategies, heterotopia as an aesthetic principle celebrates, in Gianni Vattimo’s terminology, the liberatory function of differences, multiplicity, and heterogeneity, and embodies a carnival of utopian visions that refrain from metanarratives.

⁹ On the intersections of heterotopia and utopia, see also the articles anthologized in Tobin Siebers (1994), especially Judith N. Shklar’s essay “What is the Use of Utopia?” (40-56) that explores the emergence of the postmodern heterotopia of disorder and of individual subjectivity from the classical utopia of order and collectivism, and links heterotopia to the philosophy of the Frankfurt School, reformulating utopian desire on the grounds of diversity and multiplicity.

insistence on replacing utopian dreaming with real experiences and experiments lived in the here and now.

So, where has utopia gone? Can we only glimpse its remnants in heterotopia? The ‘critical utopias’ Moylan and Bammer refer to seem to have dwindled since the 1970s. Is utopia indeed dead, as Jacoby has proclaimed? In search of literary utopia in the 1980s and 1990s we have to look somewhere else and, indeed, we do find a new type of utopia. It has gone widely unnoticed. This undercover utopia can be detected where we would least expect it: snuggled into the narrative of its ‘ugly’ sibling, dystopia.

Strictly speaking, the classical dystopia has often (if not always) contained a utopian, but a defeated, utopian core: the protagonist’s rebellion against the totalitarian system. With the inevitable defeat of the rebel, however, classical dystopias depict the reinstatement of a totalitarian order and preclude any notion of progress. The utopian subtext of contemporary feminist dystopias can be found precisely in this gap between the narrated dystopian present and the anticipated *realization* of a potential utopian future that classical dystopia evades. Sarah Lefanu has recognized this as a “hidden utopian streak” (Lefanu 1989, 75) and Raffaella Baccolini has identified this gap as the “utopian core [...] a locus of hope” (Baccolini 2000, 13). These postmodern dystopias initially present a dystopian world, and then move on to a point of transition where we catch glimpses of the historical processes that lead from dystopia to utopia. However, in contrast to a classical utopian narrative and like the ‘critical utopias,’ they resist narrative closure (perfection). Without ever narrating or exactly defining utopia, these new feminist dystopias map not a single path but rather several motions and changes that may lead to a potentially better future.

According to Baccolini this utopian element is contained in the aforementioned generic crossovers¹⁰ and in the ambiguous ending. In analogy to Moylan’s earlier term of ‘critical utopias,’ both Baccolini and Lyman Tower Sargent classify these dystopias as ‘critical dystopias.’¹¹ Instead I argue that the utopian subtext is interwoven as a *continuous* narrative strand within the dystopian narrative while the collapse of generic boundaries essentially produces hybridized ‘utopian dystopias’ (rather than just a ‘critical dystopia’).

The terminologies of heterotopia, critical utopia, and critical dystopia predominantly focus on the shift from static to dynamic, from the universal blueprint to plurality and diversity, and do not address what is potentially the greatest utopian shift in contemporary utopia and dystopia: that of a destabilization, a

¹⁰ Cf. the “use, re-vision, and appropriation of generic fiction that constitutes [...] an opening for utopian elements” (Baccolini 2000, 13).

¹¹ Cf. Lyman Tower Sargent (1994, 7). While Baccolini affirms critical dystopias as a new genre, neither Moylan (2000) – who in turn takes up Sargent’s term and, apart from providing a critical survey of the literary history of and recapping the academic criticism of utopia/dystopia/sf, discusses at length Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Gold Coast* (1988), Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993), and Piercy’s *He, She and It* (1991) as examples of critical dystopias – nor Sargent consider critical dystopias (nor critical utopias for that matter) as a distinct new subgenre.

subversion, and ultimately a transgression of binary categories. In her study *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism* (1996), the British political scientist Lucy Sargisson has identified such a radical shift towards transgression primarily in select feminist, postmodern, and political theories, and in feminist utopianism.¹² She argues that utopian spaces no longer present perfection and an ideal, but emphasize constant change, renegotiation, imperfection, and process. According to her, transgression criticizes and displaces meaning “constructed by a complex and hierarchical system of binary opposition” (Sargisson 1996, 4) and suggests an alternative approach that values difference and multiplicity.

Taking Sargisson’s findings as a starting point, I argue that these texts form the new subgenre of feminist ‘transgressive utopian dystopias.’ I suggest calling these hybrid texts transgressive utopian dystopias for two reasons. First, they incorporate within the dystopian narrative continuous utopian undercurrents. Second, these utopian strategies criticize, undermine, and transgress the established binary logic of dystopia. These ‘dystopias’ refuse a logic of sameness, dissolve hierarchized binary oppositions, and embrace difference, multiplicity, and diversity. Transgressive utopian dystopian texts discard the polarization of static dystopia and of static utopia, of thesis and antithesis, and thus never arrive at a definite synthesis that comprises the classical utopian notion of a blueprint for perfection. In the logic of transgression, thesis and antithesis do not exist; transgressive utopian dystopias are neither, and in a movement of fluidity they describe the interplay and incorporate both.

Transgression¹³ subverts meanings derived from binarism – in the language of binary logic, meaning is referential and to define the dominant term requires a subordinate *other* – and emerges from the interstices of feminist, postmodern, and poststructuralist discourses. Particularly feminism’s move towards an understanding of equality *not* as sameness within the ‘equality versus difference’ debate in the 1990s, which has repositioned difference as a relational concept. For Elisabeth Grosz, difference valued as “*pure difference...difference in itself, difference with no identity*” (Grosz 1990, 340) does not imply inferiority, lack, and deviance from a norm of sameness, but can be valued as difference in terms of desirable diversity. This notion of equality *and* difference as being interrelated serves as the pivotal issue from whence the prevailing binary logic can be transgressed. This (feminist) view of difference implies a flux of appreciation and connection,

¹² Sargisson favours the less restrictive term ‘utopianism’ over utopia that, she notes, verges on cultural imperialism because it exclusively reduces utopian moments to the form of the literary genre. Sargisson follows a trajectory that delineates utopian moments not as a definite oppositional movement but rather as an opening of utopian spaces in a variety of theories – here she finds feminist, postmodern, and poststructuralist theories particularly useful – and as a literary practice: “‘Utopianism’, then, the umbrella term, concerns the propensity or phenomenon, and under this umbrella I place utopian thought, utopian theory and utopias [...] eutopias, dystopias and utopian satire” (Sargisson 1996, 2). Sargisson sets out to explore and assess existing content-, form-, and function-based approaches to utopia(nism) and arrives at a broad understanding of utopia(nism) as ‘social dreaming’ and desire.

¹³ Sargisson associates ‘transcendence’ with a privileging of the mind over the body, and thus finds ‘transgression’ the more appropriate term.

and a plurality of choices. Such a move, as Sargisson states, “transgress[es] the binary position of either/or and say[s] both, neither and more [...] and either/or is no longer a meaningful position” (Sargisson 1996, 95). It might explain why *feminist* texts in particular have embraced transgressive moves.

The poststructuralist and postmodernist theories of Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, and Emmanuel Levinas also present potentially liberating approaches to difference, because they focus on dissimilarity as a welcome incommensurability.¹⁴ In Sargisson’s reading, Derrida’s deconstructivism and Hélène Cixous’s theory of libidinal femininity are profoundly transgressive discourses. Just as deconstruction tries to “expose and transform the text” (Sargisson 1996, 101), utopia(nism) aims at disclosing and transforming the present via extrapolation and defamiliarization. Where deconstruction defers meaning, transgressive utopia(nism) embodies “the endless displacement [...] of the possible;” as neither approach offers “the final interpretative word” (Sargisson 1996, 103), both thus resist logocentrism, the handing out of the (monolithic) truth. Both describe an open-ended process by inviting continuous change, and are thus profoundly resistant to closure.

Sargisson never succinctly defines transgression; yet this absence of a definition is perhaps consistent with the elusive nature of a concept that strives to abolish the fixed and the static. This is the closest she gets to defining transgression:

[Transgression offers] new conceptual spaces from which to reapproach the world in a non-dualistic way that is not driven by the desire to possess [...] the profit does not consist in the possession of truth, but rather in the opening of further alternatives and possibilities [...] [in] diverse conceptual shifts [...] [that] transgress dominant and restrictive ways of construing the world. This, then is, utopianism of process. (Sargisson 1996, 168)

Transgression, then, is a phenomenon that can be discovered in a variety of theories. It details fluid moments of suspended binary logic, when distinctions between either/or are nullified. Transgression, however, must not be misunderstood as the dissolution of binary order to produce a permanent unity; rather, transgression contests the notions of unambiguity and authenticity. It is a dynamic process of ‘neither and more,’ signifying multiple and previously unconceptualized possibilities beyond our persistent binary structuring. It is a phenomenon of overlaps, of slippage, of the interdependence of relational concepts taken out of and diluting the hierarchizing binary order and the limiting principle of dualistic choice. In summary, transgression occurs as hybridity, as transculturation, as the

¹⁴ Briefly put, the “silencing of a ‘player’ in a language game [...] The inability to articulate one’s cause in the same idiom or language creates a *différend*” (Sargisson 1996, 69). Lyotard’s *différend* connotes the unarticulated difference between two speakers, whereas Derrida’s *différance* addresses the very construction of language itself; and Levinas suggests with *alterity* the acceptance and celebration of the existence of the other not as referent but as independent from the self.

gift that does not take, as deconstructivism, and *différance*, and allows a particularly feminist oppositional position that is grounded in equality *and* difference.

4. Transgressive Utopian Dystopias

This utopian activity of transgression in its various forms – perhaps best captured in the image of borderwalking, of the borderwalker who recognizes but learns to disrespect boundaries and, thus changed, acquires a nomadic consciousness of polylogous perspectives – can be approximated in the imaginary realm of speculative fiction in particular. There are many feminist dystopias, published in the last thirty years, that incorporate transgressive utopian moves on various levels. There are, for instance, Angela Carter's *Heroes and Villains* (1969) and her *Passion of New Eve* (1977), Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) and her *He, She and It* (1991), Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue* trilogy (*Native Tongue* [1984], *The Judas Rose* [1987], and *Earthsong* [1994]), Suzy McKee Charnas's *Holdfast* tetralogy (*Walk to the End of the World* [1974], *Motherlines* [1978], *The Furies* [1994], and *The Conqueror's Child* [1999]), and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and her *Oryx and Crake* (2003). The thematic concerns of these 'dystopias' involve transgressions of subject/object, male/female, human/animal and human/alien or human/non-human, master/slave, nature/nurture, nature/culture, mind/body, sanity/madness, self/other, literacy/orality, codes/stereotypes, the relation between myth/history with regard to the (im)possibility of a representation of reality and truth(s). The texts reject "a determinist, teleological link between past, present and future" (Sargisson 1996, 225) and offer multiple or heterogeneous alternative views rather than the possession of *one* reality and *a* future.

A transgressive impetus clearly is not a simple matter of 'inverted dualisms equals utopia' or a tagged on utopian impulse. Even if a writer creates a distinctly utopian society transgressive of binary logic, however, this does not necessarily result in a successful narrative representation of such a utopian impulse. Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) describes such an example of how very tricky is the actual narrative representation of the envisioned transgression of bipolarity. On the content level, *The Left Hand of Darkness* invalidates dualistic human categorization into woman or man, but fails to do so narratively. On the planet Winter, peopled by sexually altered human offspring, Gethenians alternate between sexually inactive periods of androgyny and 'kemmer,' an oestrus period during which a Gethenian develops through hormonal secretion into a sexually active female or male, depending on whether female or male hormonal dominance develops during that particular oestrus period. Gethenians have no control whatsoever over this process. Although an intriguing thought experiment on eliminating gender and dualism, Le Guin, however, fails to address

adequately this transgressive change in sex and sexuality on the narrative level.¹⁵ This failure is partly due to the use of the generic pronoun 'he,' but more importantly to Le Guin's failure of "showing the 'female' component of the Gethenian characters in action" (Le Guin 1979, 168), as Le Guin herself has admitted.

While Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* or Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*, for instance, clearly position utopian strands alongside their dystopian narratives on both the content and the narrative level, other works, such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and her *Oryx and Crake* – the former often conventionally classified as a classical feminist dystopia – contain a utopian potential less obvious on the content level. Here, a utopian core is predominantly hidden within the protagonists' narrations and their use of language. On the other hand, Suzy McKee Charnas's *Holdfast* series and Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue* trilogy – both canonized feminist dystopian novels written over a long span of time (25 and 20 years) – demonstrate exceptionally well the development of a utopian subtext within a narrative that starts out as a dystopian text on the content and the narrative level.

American sf and fantasy writer Suzy McKee Charnas looks at the inter-relating categories of gender, race, and class, and presents us with a harsh (eco)feminist comment on extreme dualism, hierarchical patriarchy/matriarchy, and colonialism.¹⁶ Within feminist sf, the *Holdfast* series is unique in that it not only reflects twenty-five years of feminist theorizing,¹⁷ but, unusual for the 1970s, also voices in the first book, *Walk to the End of the World* (1974), post-colonial concerns, a topic revisited especially by the fourth and last book, *The Conqueror's Child* (1999). The dystopian society Charnas creates in *Walk* is riven along well-known binarisms that she simultaneously undermines from the start by re-mixing some stereotypical bipolar equivalencies, such as homosexuality and white men. *Walk* is set in a post-holocaust environment; the 'Wasting,' caused by white men's abuse of science and nature, which is conveniently blamed on women, people of colour, and rebellious youth, all subsumed under the umbrella term 'unmen.' The surviving white males (re)build a patriarchal society,

¹⁵ Readers and critics have repeatedly pointed this out and Le Guin has noted herself: "the Gethenians seem like men, instead of menwomen" (Le Guin 1979, 168), although she clearly perceives her central character Estraven "as man and woman, familiar and different, alien and utterly human" (Le Guin 1979, 168).

¹⁶ *Walk to the End of the World* and *Motherlines* won the Retrospective James Tiptree Jr. Award in 1996, *The Furies* was short-listed in 1994 for the annual literary James Tiptree Jr. Memorial Award, awarded to the best sf novel exploring gender-bending and expanding gender roles in new ways, which *The Conqueror's Child* then received in 1999.

¹⁷ Charnas has defined feminism as the challenge "to treat women as full-fledged human beings" (Charnas 1988, 157), and claimed favouring "an economic model" of feminism as money is the "primary standard of value [in Western culture]," therefore "a feminist is someone who insists on equitable income policies and their enforcement" (Mohr 1999, 10). The fact that the social structure, the cultural and sexual practices of the Grassland fictionally implement feminist political theorizings induced Gwyneth Jones to the sarcastic comment that the series reads like a "transliteration of feminist theory" (Jones 1999, 185).

the Holdfast, divided along age and gender lines, where the surviving ‘fems’ (a cruel pun on females and feminists) are used as breeders and slaves. Sexual intercourse serves only reproductive purposes, as the Holdfasters practice inter-generational homosexuality. This dystopian content is mirrored on the narrative level: the larger part of *Walk* is a linear narration from successive limited male perspectives, whereas female characters are physically and textually absent. The mostly silent female protagonist Alldera appears only in the last part of the novel. Only after having been raped by two of the male characters, Alldera breaks her narrative silence and speaks “words, her only weapon” (W 166) and thus acquires the status of a narrative “I,” “the equalizing name for the self” (W 166), claiming subjectivity, humanity, and narrative space.

The second book, *Motherlines*, excludes all male voices and shifts to a female focus, depicting two all-female societies. The Riding Women’s alternative all-female potential utopia and the escaped Free Fems’ matriarchal dystopia. The Riding Women of multiracial descent, modelled on Amazons,¹⁸ living on the cultural margin in the uncharted desert (the ‘Grasslands’), a geographical metaphor for their ‘otherness,’ take in the pregnant Alldera, symbolically the bearer of a hopeful future. In contrast to the Free Fems’ hierarchical and abusive society, their culture is structured by non-possessiveness, communality, cooperation, and tribal kinship. While the Riding Women reproduce parthenogenetically (designed in pre-holocaust laboratories) and ‘sharemother’ their offspring, the Free Fems face their own extinction if they do not return to the Holdfast and mate, one way or another, with men. Remarkably, *Motherlines* thus envisions hybridity long before Homi Bhabha analyzed these issues, and, with the Amazonian culture of the Riding Women, *Motherlines* anticipates Donna Haraway’s transgressive concept of the cyborg, if not in the technical sense of the human/machine fusion, then as a merging of human/animal, since the Riding Women mate with horses to trigger parthenogenesis.

Most explicitly in *The Furies* – which abandons the utopian Grasslands and fully returns to dystopia – Charnas investigates the raging war of the sexes and the slow and grim process of change leading from dystopia towards an emerging potential utopia transgressive of bipolarities.¹⁹ Alldera leads the Free Fems in their victorious return to the Holdfast, where they build a New Holdfast, yet with merely reversed roles of victimization. A large part of the plot revolves around

¹⁸ Both Donna Haraway and Ania Loomba criticize the potentially supportive function of the Greek Amazon (cf. Haraway 1991, 180) and the alien, “deviant femininity” (Loomba 1998, 154) of the subaltern, non-European, Amazonian woman. Yet Charnas re-appropriates and challenges the gender stereotype embodied in the Greek Amazon myth of mutilated and androgynous femininity. The virtually re-membered Amazonian Riding Women with two breasts represent female agency, desire and volition as *positive* features of the *other* woman. Unlike the Amazons of Greek myth, Charnas’s Riding Women do not legitimize the status quo, but subvert it. Their femininity, independent of generic man, questions and their existence destabilizes rather than fixes the essentialist universal of male/female.

¹⁹ This description of a literal war between the sexes is quite unusual and remains as yet extraordinary for the genre, although Monique Wittig’s *Les Guérillères* and Sally Gearhart’s *The Wanderground: Stories of the Hill Women* also include to some extent the war of the sexes.

the remaining question of progeny: how can the sexual act be imagined without violence? It is this necessity of a factual working through anger and pain, the experience of oppression and victimization as well as mastery, that allows the release of rejuvenating energy and a final catharsis. Alldera's re-encounter with one of the young men, Eykar, who raped her, leads to a mutually painful but hopeful process of recognizing their shared humanity, despite all the disparities dividing them. Their attempts at reconciliation without negating their shared dystopian past and present form a utopian nucleus within dystopia. As Alldera remarks: "We aging warriors [...] of both sexes, are more alike than not" (CC 208).

As the sole character present in all four novels, Alldera emerges as the unifying narrative link (a role her daughter, Sorrel, inherits). She becomes our utopian guide travelling "not through time [...] but between histories and identities" (Bartkowski 1989, 96), and between societies. In the last book, *The Conqueror's Child*, Sorrel inherits Alldera's narrative role, but she – having grown up as a free woman among the Riding Women – is the guide from utopia who gives us a tour of dystopia.

In *The Conqueror's Child*, the New Holdfasters struggle with their liberty and how to resist the corruption of power. Sorrel arrives with a male child that she initially passes off as a female 'bloodchild' (i.e. her own child), another symbol of a potentially better future. This cross-dressing signals the most pressing question of *The Conqueror's Child* – essential to a healing process – of how to bridge the chasm between the sexes and the generations, despite the atrocities committed on both sides. In other words, how can (wo)men rehumanize themselves? At the conclusion of the series, Alldera and the 'utopian' Riding Women have vanished, leaving the plains and their history as a gift to the New Holdfasters. The imagining and building of the future now becomes the responsibility of both sexes, in league with the other races represented by various other populations and the hybrid cultures evolving around the New Holdfast.

Exploring the pathology of our society's sexism and racism taken to extremes, and alternately inflicted by both sexes, Charnas even-handedly criticizes masculine and feminine domination, and the colonial attitudes of the Western world. The series thus oscillates between the possibilities of a (re)formation of dystopia and a negotiation of a transgressive utopia that we, however, never witness. The *Holdfast* series moves from the feminist dystopia of *Walk* to the almost pastoral separatism of *Motherlines*, to a masculinist dystopia and establishment of a neo-colonial system in *The Furies*, and finally arrives at a potentially utopian reconciliation of the two sexes and the races in *The Conqueror's Child*. Unlike many feminist dystopias and utopias, Charnas does not stop at describing the outcome of patriarchy, or at focusing on women's struggle towards full humanity, but returns to consider men from a different angle. With *The Conqueror's Child*, in many ways a revisiting and rewriting of the previous books, Charnas comes full circle and formulates perhaps one of the most important remaining gender questions: How can men undo their past deeds? How can men recreate masculinity to

acquire full human subject status? In this sense, the last book of the saga envisions the dystopian destroyers of the world of *Walk* as co-builders of the utopian future.

Charnas does not suggest specific utopian projects; instead, all societal and personal aspects take part in the transformation of society. According to Charnas, the far too often monopolized and monolithic past, in its various manifestations of history, religion, and myth, must be counterbalanced and replaced by multiple perspectives, allowing previously muted groups and the subaltern voices to be heard.²⁰ External oppression will be eternally inflicted if internal programming does not change. The Western concept of relationships, based on master/slave binaries, needs to be restructured according to principles of non-possessiveness and non-violence. Charnas also stresses the necessity to shift from biological to psychological ties, to move from the destruction of the nuclear family to families of affinity, and to separate possession and progeny, i.e. to let go of genetic parent-child relations and to turn to generational progeny. The absence of fathering and stereotypical masculinity that contributed in particular to destructive patterns of bonding is met by new roles of masculinity and shareparenting, modelled on the Riding Women's sharemothering. Only the experience of both roles, of being victim and oppressor, slave and master, breaks up the dualism that previously permeated all aspects of Holdfast life. This individual experience that transcends the double bind of being master *or* slave, man *or* woman and the recognition of the coexistence of two or more modes of being, leads to the societal disruption of cluster oppositions.

The potentially utopian society of the Riding Women serves as an inspiring alternate model and contrasting experience, yet it is not an alternative to be unquestioningly transferred to human society. The Grassland society represents less a model for emulation than a stimulus for transculturation. Charnas advocates the experience of borderwalking, of slipping in and out of different societies and cultures, of transgressing binaries of self/other, male/female, master/slave, human/animal, sanity/madness: "The books attempt to show that if you can reach across some of those lines then you can reclaim that energy [needed to retain boundaries] as social and personal resource" (Mohr 2005b, 283). This energy, otherwise used to maintain stasis, can then be used for the dynamic process of borderwalking. The acquired double vision and the marginalization that turns into hybridity furthers the cultural, sexual, and ethnic transmissions essential for the making of a postpatriarchal, multicultural, and multi-ethnic society, imagining the fulfilment of human potential and new ways of utopian coexistence within the ruins of dystopia.

²⁰ Originally used for military officers below the captain status, the term 'subaltern,' as used by Spivak and other postcolonial critics, is "shorthand for any oppressed person" (Loomba 1998, 51), but denotes specifically the double oppression of native women under colonialism and patriarchy. With *The Conqueror's Child* Charnas moves from one patriarchal society in *Walk* to a plurality of five societies including various other ethnic populations, particularly the Pooltown people. With the story of Sallali – an oppressed non-white Pooltown woman – and her children Charnas gives narrative space to the previously silenced 'subalterns' of dystopia.

While the first two books thus juxtapose dystopia and utopia, the third and fourth sequels emerge as utopian-dystopian hybrids, as the New Holdfasters struggle with dystopian relapses and the reluctant realization that the building of utopia involves both sexes. In this respect, the single-sexed Grassland society cannot function at all as a desirable utopian model for the Holdfasters. Rather, the Grassland is a parallel world, a contrasting but imperfect society with its own brutalities. There is no perfection, not even in the Grassland utopia. Not at all a real alternative to be unquestioningly adopted, the Grassland serves predominantly as a foil, an inspiration for the New Holdfasters. The Riding Women's return to nowhere, to textual and physical absence at the end of *The Conqueror's Child*, indicates the negation of any ideal. Figuratively and literally, there *is* no utopia, no place to (re)turn to and no ideal to be achieved, *but* to go indeed by one's own imagination. The alternative Grassland society is thus *not* the utopian allegory of human society. Yet it is essential to the forging of the New Holdfast that the Riding Women's model of the transgressive single-sex interaction can be adjusted for the needs of a dual-sex human society. Quite appropriately, the Riding Women then disappear into what they verged on from the beginning: the realm of myth.

In contrast to Charnas, Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* parodies, on the one hand, the artificiality of *constructing* any utopian society at all, and particularly one devoid of (erotic) desire and the arts – such a society she considers to be doomed for failure – and, on the other hand, she describes a twofold dystopia: the dystopian society of the past before the apocalypse struck, and the post-apocalyptic primal world of the present.

Set in the United States of the 21st century, *Oryx and Crake* describes in flashbacks this progressively dysfunctional society, worshipping and misusing bioengineering and genetic splicing, segregated into the privileged rich, gated corporate compounds and the unruly, poor 'pleeblands' that supposedly caused this cataclysm. The dystopian society, however – now wiped out by an engineered genetic pandemic – in which the two male protagonists, the (word) artist Snowman (formerly Jimmy) and his nerdy childhood friend, the mad scientist Crake (formerly Glenn), grew up, remains sketchy. To see the world in gaps – as much as this is a typical Atwoodian narrative device – is also due to the fact that Jimmy and Crake could only access the world through the filters of television and the Internet. The narrator Jimmy believes himself to be the last human survivor in this post-apocalyptic world otherwise peopled by the bioengineered posthuman 'Crakers' (amongst whom Jimmy now lives), named after their god-creator Crake, a postmodern Frankenstein and the mastermind who carefully planned the destruction of civilization and humanity as we know it, turning "the whole world [...] [into] one vast uncontrolled experiment" (OC 267). Literally rewriting the human genetic code, he designed the society of the Crakers, intending them as the perfect version of 'humans,' as a posthuman 'utopia' to

wipe out humanity and with it the human historic cycle of dystopias.²¹ For this purpose, Crake created the Crakers as a posthuman race devoid of every feature that he considered destructive: religion, art, violence, and sexual possessiveness. Mocking Intelligent Design, genetic engineering, and old utopian images, Atwood presents the Crakers as polyandrous herbivores with specific breeding seasons. Yet we only catch glimpses of this new society, Atwood never shows how utopia (if ever Crake really intended one) is or could be built. Instead, since the Crakers begin to develop the very characteristics that Crake wanted to get rid of (apart from violence), Atwood seems to imply that (erotic) desire and creativity in particular are indeed irrepressible and necessary basics for any society and, indeed, the yardstick by which they are judged: “When any civilization is dust and ashes,” he [Jimmy] said, ‘art is all that’s left over. Images, words, music. Imaginative structures. Meaning – human meaning, that is – is defined by them” (OC 197).

Besides addressing the obvious issue of art (in the guise of Jimmy who brings the ‘gospel’ of art, mythology, and stories to the Crakers) contra science (personified by Crake, virtually the God of sciences) – whether a (utopian) society evolves (art) or can be constructed (science) – Atwood once again turns our attention towards language’s role in identity construction and its memory function as a cultural archive.²² In *Oryx and Crake*, language is thus restorative as well as creative, it provides the means by which Snowman remembers ‘Jimmy,’ his history, by which he teaches and relates to the Crakers; keeps his sanity in the form of remembered human contact and communication; and allows him to probe the (old and new) dimensions of words. Language empowers Jimmy/Snowman in his ordeal of and hope for survival. As Atwood has repeatedly stressed in almost all her prose fiction and in many poems: “[a] word after a word after a word is power” (*True Stories*, 64), or, in other words, “[p]owerlessness and silence go together” (Atwood 1984, 396). For Atwood language then causes reality, it restores the past and a potential future as anchors of thought for Jimmy, and it helps to create a whole new reality and new meaning for the Crakers. In *Oryx and Crake*, narration, story-telling, and a valorization of the multiplicity of language and words not only constitute forms of survivalist defiance, but also hope for the persistence of creativity.

In *Oryx and Crake*, utopian glimpses are thus contained in the very possession of words, of language itself as a keeper and bearer of utopia.²³ For the

²¹ Jimmy pits a long list of great art and scientific achievements against the history of human atrocities: “Homer [...] Paradise Lost. Mozart’s music. Shakespeare [...] Polio vaccine. [...] The Crusades. [...] The witch burnings. [...] Hitler. Hiroshima. Mao. Pol Pot. [...] Saddam Hussein” (OC 91).

²² Interestingly, it is Crake who wakes up at night screaming, “[t]here were no words” (OC 255), unable to remember his unspeakable dreams, and eventually dies; while Jimmy, the keeper of memory, survives. Jimmy’s argument that in the end art is all that is left of a civilization seems to be proven true. Indeed, art can exist without science, Atwood seems to suggest, but not vice versa.

²³ From the very beginning of Atwood’s writing career, survival and thus the clinging to the hope for a better future, its literary representation in terms of poetic storytelling, and a

narrator and postmodern anti-hero Snowman/Jimmy in *Oryx and Crake*, poetic discourse and the remnants of language to which he clings offer redemption and the means for (psychological) survival and hope. Jimmy's narrative present consists of flashbacks to the past and his (sometimes nostalgic) memories thereof, his accounts of present happenings, and an uneasy anticipation of a potential future. Storytelling thus becomes a libratory narrative strategy that constitutes the means for survival and of hope for Jimmy in his isolation as the 'last man' on earth and, therefore, on the one hand, the remembrance of a (better?) time and, on the other hand, the hope for a better world. Here, not the actual building of a utopian society but the narrative strategy as such provides the novel with a distinctly utopian subtext. Storytelling, the invention of an imagined reader and Jimmy's function as a cultural and linguistic repository as well as that of a ventriloquist of (remembered) voices – for example, his remembrance of voices and words, and thus his self-conscious attempts at rescuing the richness of language from an otherwise potentially monologic (for a lack of human interlocutors) and, therefore, almost silent post-apocalyptic dystopian world – become the utopian glimpses that Atwood offers.²⁴

As much as Jimmy is Crake's chess figure in the cruel game "Extincathon," Jimmy also is an accomplice in the very destruction he describes and a major perpetrator of the Crakers' psychological evolution.²⁵ While Crake, the scientist, becomes the Craker's God, he has ordered Jimmy, the artist, to explain the world to them, to be Crake's prophet. Struggling with this legacy of Crake, Snowman, however, not only spreads the 'Gospel according to Crake,' but becomes their storyteller, making up a mythology. Jimmy becomes the point of reference as much for the Crakers as for the readers. Stories are in fact Jimmy's currency that he literally trades for food: "A story is what they want, in exchange for every slaughtered fish" (OC 117-118).²⁶ Here, storytelling does indeed become synonymous with survival.²⁷

Story-trading is, however, a one-way communication. Unsurprisingly, the post-apocalyptic castaway, Jimmy, desperately desires "to hear a human voice

valorization of (poetic) language have been recurrent major topics. In *Survival*, her seminal study of Canadian literary themes, Atwood claims survival as the "central symbol for Canada" (Atwood 1972, 32). Although set in the States, her two dystopian novels, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*, are thus ultimately very Canadian novels in that the protagonists' main concern is survival. Both protagonists, Offred/June and Snowman/Jimmy, can perhaps be seen as disguised *Canadian* heroes whose objective is not conventional heroism but "hanging on, staying alive" in a rampant post-apocalyptic wilderness in Jimmy's case; and in a social wilderness in Offred's case, where survival means an "awful experience [...] that killed everyone else" (Atwood 1972, 33).

²⁴ For an in-depth discussion of the transgressive utopian aspects in *The Handmaid's Tale*, see Mohr (2005a).

²⁵ Jimmy wrote the very slogans that tempted people into buying the BlyssPluss pill which spread the pandemic virus.

²⁶ For the vegetarian Crakers, humans are synonymous with carnivorous monsters, "a separate order of being" (OC 116).

²⁷ Similarly, Oryx trades her sex services for lessons in English, literacy, and stories: "He taught me to read [...] To speak English, and to read English words" (OC 166).

[...] like his own” (OC 11). In order to preserve his sanity despite being almost completely isolated, he needs to imagine a narrative ‘you,’ an alter ego of the past, that allows the transgression of his solipsism and implodes the divide between the past and the present. He thus replaces the lack of an actual *other* with remembered voices, various versions of the same event, anything that provides perspectives other than his own. Hence Jimmy’s mind is filled with a cacophony of voices, memories, and stories. Repeatedly his-story is interrupted or commented on by slogans, formulaic phrases, sayings, redundant everyday idioms of the past that have lost their meaning if ever they had one. The voices of his mother, his father, of a child, of school teachers, textbooks, self-help manuals, encyclopedias, cartoon characters and literary voices pop up. While the narrator Jimmy serves as a palimpsest that is re-inscribed with layers of quotes and memories,²⁸ the Crakers in contrast are a tabula rasa on which he inscribes knowledge, language, and meaning – “These people were like blank pages, he could write whatever he wanted on them” (OC 407) – although he and the Crakers neither share a collective memory nor a truly common language, particularly since the Crakers are of a low intelligence, and have a limited vocabulary and no notion of signs and signifiers besides their close environment.

For Jimmy, this notion of a potential ‘you’ grants the hope for survival, a time *after* his ordeal. Although for this postmodern Robinson Crusoe stranded among a “collective ‘Friday’” (Ingersoll 2004, 163), “any reader he can possibly imagine is in the past” (OC 45-46), Jimmy imagines an *other*, other survivors, “Suppose there are others. He wills them into being, these possible remnants who might have survived in isolated pockets” (OC 260). His imaginative insistence upon survival is eventually validated when he hears over an old CB radio another human voice. Although it speaks in a different language, Jimmy is elated: “There are more possibilities now” (OC 322). What remains an acoustic abstraction at first becomes even more real at the end of the novel, when other human survivors appear on Jimmy’s shore and indicate the survival of humanity.

Just as these surreal voices of the past echoing in his mind that turn into reality broaden his and our perspective, Jimmy’s unfixed narrative, juxtaposing different versions of what has happened, allows an interpretative variety by giving us various approximations of events, because language can only approximate events and emotions. For instance, Jimmy is very much aware that there exist at least three stories about the elusive Oryx, a former child prostitute: her own, Crake’s, and Jimmy’s story (cf. OC 133). From these story fragments he “piece[s] her together” (OC 132), but he knows that he will never approximate anything near a notion of her ‘true’ self.

Because Jimmy cannot share a collective memory with the Crakers, he rehearses not only voices from the past but also old words that give him a sense of connection and comfort. It is the ‘artist as a throwback’s’ gift to have the “rag

²⁸ He also repeatedly censors himself: “Some tart he once bought. Revision, professional sex-skills expert” (OC 12), a reference to our helpless politically correct sanitization of language, a glossing over, without changing the practices or realities to which we refer.

ends of language [...] floating in his head: *mephitic, metronome, mastitis, metatarsal, maudlin*" (OC 175).²⁹ To "[h]ang on to the [...] odd words, the old words, the rare ones" (OC 78) is a crucial necessity of survival for Jimmy, because "[w]hen they're gone out of his head, these words, they'll be gone, everywhere, forever. As if they had never been" (OC 78) and, analogous, as if he, Jimmy, had never been. As long as he remembers words, as long as he narrates, he exists. Yet the dissolution of memory – "There are a lot of blank spaces [...] where memory used to be" (OC 5) – and even worse, the threatening loss of language always loom over Jimmy:

From nowhere, a word appears: *Mesozoic*. He can see the word, he can hear the word, but he can't reach the word. He can't attach anything to it. This is happening too much lately, this dissolution of meaning, the entries on his cherished wordlists drifting off into space. (OC 43)

Already as a student Jimmy habitually strung word lists together (much as his literary Atwoodian predecessor Offred did in *The Handmaid's Tale*) to defy his society's utilitarian thinking: "He'd developed a strangely tender feeling towards such words, as if they were children abandoned in the woods and it was his duty to rescue them" (OC 230). Now, it serves his need to ward off the loss of words and meanings and, symbolically, of civilization altogether. To whisper words calms him, as language is the tiny thread that keeps him sane.

While "words of a precision and suggestiveness" (OC 230), words of the arts, are considered useless in Jimmy's former society and fade out of the active vocabulary, in the world of the Crakers words that refer to things, machines, and cultural practices long gone have turned into signs and signifiers devoid of any meaning at all. Yet communication without a minimum of shared references is doomed to fail. If language is a heterogeneous process rather than a fixed structure or system, where "*all* meaning is contextual" and "isolated words or general syntactical structures have no meaning until we provide a context for them" (Moi 1995, 157), a changed context can change the constructed meaning of language. Like the vanished signifiers, Jimmy is incomprehensible to the Crakers. "Toast is me. I am toast" (OC 113), Jimmy muses after a failed attempt to explain the concept of 'toast' to the Crakers. Unsurprisingly, "[t]o them his name [Snowman] is just two syllables" (OC 7), a signifier signifying nothing, since the Crakers know neither snow nor a snowman. Hence the miscommunication between Jimmy and the Crakers stems exactly from this lack of shared words and cultural context. Yet, although the Crakers do not "go in for fancy language" (OC 406) and do not share Jimmy's cultural and linguistic context, they are eager for stories and mythological contexts.

One of the last images of the Crakers indicates their first steps towards art and symbolic thinking: they circle around a "scarecrowlike effigy" (OC 418) intoning a word that sounds like "*Amen*" (OC 419) to the boom of a makeshift percussion group. In an effort to bring Snowman safely home from his forages,

²⁹ Cf. "Valance. Norn. Serendipity. Pibroch. Lubricious" (OC 78).

they “made a picture of” (OC 419) him, an effigy. The Crakers’ developing religious cult points at Crake’s failure to eliminate religion, dreams, music, and the arts from this new species. Subversely, Jimmy has told the Crakers creation myths and tartly comments:

Symbolic thinking of any kind would signal downfall, in Crake’s view. Next they’d be inventing idols, and funerals, and grave goods, and the afterlife, and sin, and Linear B, and kings, and then slavery and war. (OC 419-420)

History proves to be cyclical: eventually, the Crakers will reinstate a Symbolic Order, poetic language will develop and it will probably only be a matter of time till the Crakers will develop from their sense of a collective self (they always speak as ‘we’) to individualism. In short, the posthumans evolve into humans.

Moving on a different intellectual level, the Crakers point towards a pretty mindless utopian future, whereas the last representative of the human race – “*I’m your ancestor*” (OC 123) Jimmy says – represents the articulate but dystopian past. Similarly, Jimmy’s nickname ‘the abominable Snowman’ points, on the one hand, towards the transitory existence of his, of any species, “Maybe that’s the real him, the last *Homo sapiens* – a white illusion of a man, here today, gone tomorrow, so easily shoved over, left to melt in the sun” (OC 263), and, on the other hand, towards the uncomfortably close resemblance between humans and post-humans: “Snowman [...] apelike man or manlike ape” (OC 8). The image of the Abominable Snowman “existing and not existing, flickering at the edges of blizzards, [...] known only through rumours and through its backward-pointing footprints” (OC 8), of a state of liminality points at the two possibilities Snowman and the Crakers face. Either the posthumans will eventually follow the humans’ way of destruction, or they, and perhaps any surviving humans with them, will invent a better future.

Both the Crakers as a constructed species and a designed society, and Jimmy are then essentially transgressive figures of liminality, “neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification” (Turner 1974, 232), living in a world to which they are strangers. Both are in a state of suspension: the Crakers are still an evolving species, drinking words and meaning from Jimmy’s lips, and as his two names indicate, Jimmy mentally lives in Snowman’s past or contemplates the future.

The ambiguous opening quote of ‘backward-pointing footprints’ also links up with the novel’s end. Like another re-invention of Robinson Crusoe, Snowman discovers footprints in the sand of “[s]everal different sizes” (OC 431) and leaves his own alongside, “a signature of a kind” (OC 431). As much as it is unclear into what kind of society the Crakers will develop, the potential contact between human survivors remains equally indeterminate: “What would they do? Scream and run? Attack? Open their arms with joy and brotherly love?” (OC 431). Will they relive history, as Snowman’s “rehearsing of the future” (OC 425) indicates? How might other humans react to the posthumans? Will they see the Crakers as “freakish, or savage, or non-human and a threat” (OC 425)? Snowman contemplates the cliché options he has: react with violence or offer peace, sharing

the treasures he does not possess. Once again the trading of stories could ensure survival: "But no, he has nothing to trade with them, nor they with him. Nothing except themselves. They could listen to him, they could hear his tale, he could hear theirs" (OC 432). Mutual understanding, the exchange of the verbal coin, seems the most likely, the third option, the one that could be the first step towards a different kind of human contact. However, an ambiguous future awaits Jimmy, as he decides to step into the "blank face" of "zero hour" (OC 433), where another, the same old, or a new history begins. Like isolated words, Jimmy steps out of his (dystopian) texts into new, potentially utopian textual or imaginary structures that have the meaning we as readers provide for them.

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