Hope, destruction, and rebirth: acts of recovery in gender separatist feminist utopian literature

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1. Hope as theme and incentive for the creation of feminist utopian spaces

With its persistent and transformative utopianism, feminism is a politics of hope. Whether feminist thoughts and actions aim at policymaking, consciousness-raising, or subtle personal acts of resistance, feminist theory and practice are based on projections and possible implementations of a better future for society regardless of the gender of its citizens but aiming specifically to support women. Just like feminism, utopianism is in itself a wide spectrum of political thought, which provides ample opportunities for fruitful speculation and holds space for gender separatist feminist utopianism. In my research, I focus on studying one literary expression of feminist utopianism while giving contextual attention to feminist utopianism outside of the realm of fiction. Following the ideas of Ernst Bloch on utopian thinking as an instance of the not-yet, feminist utopian scholar Frances Bartkowski states that "[f]eminist fiction and feminist theory are fundamentally utopian in that they declare that which is not-yet as the basis for a feminist practice, textual, political, or otherwise."[60] In line with Bartkowski, I consider progressive feminist acts utopian in and of themselves, and I claim that separatist feminist utopian fiction is an expression of these feminist and implicitly utopian acts.

In this chapter, I examine the expressions of feminist utopian *hope* in gender separatist utopian literature as a motivation and starting point for the creation of new (e)utopian worlds. I follow the practical definition of literary utopias provided by the influential utopian scholar Lyman Tower Sargent, in whose formulation hope plays an important part:

> Literary utopias have at least six purposes, although they are not necessarily separable. A utopia can be simply a fantasy, it can be a description of a desirable or an undesirable society, an extrapolation, a warning, an alternative to the

[60] Bartkowski, *Feminist Utopias*, 12.

> present, or a model to be achieved. And the intentional community as utopia adds a seventh purpose, to demonstrate that living a better life is possible in the here and now. The utopian views humanity and its future with either hope or alarm. If viewed with hope, the result is usually a utopia. If viewed with alarm, the result is usually a dystopia. But basically, utopianism is a philosophy of hope, and it is characterized by the transformation of generalized hope into a description of a non-existent society.[61]

The major distinction that Sargent makes, here, between hope and alarm, is strongly but not uniquely related to the genres of utopia or dystopia. Sargent underscores, moreover, that hopeful theorization and conception molds the utopian principles into a tangible definition and description of a new and hopefully improved society which need not be a society of the future: "a better life is possible in the here and now."[62] As we will see, I will contend that hope and alarm in dystopias and eutopias can exist simultaneously. My argument is that it is possible to observe an underlying utopian hope in dystopian settings despite the warnings and alarms inherent in such dystopias, while it is also possible to observe the dangers and lessons to be learned in eutopian spaces that are built on positive hope. Nonetheless, I contend that hope as an overarching concept is one of the foundational elements of feminist utopianism and of feminist separatist literature in particular.

Premodern utopias, such as *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405) by Christine de Pizan, *Utopia* (1516) by Thomas More, or *The City of the Sun* (1602) by Tommaso Campanella, mostly projected blueprints of perfection in imagined ideal societies – even if these societies were dealt

[61] Sargent, *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction*, 8.
[62] Ibid.

with satirically, as some interpretations of More's *Utopia* contend.[63] Feminist utopian literature, or those utopias written by women authors and focusing on the problems that directly concern women at the time the texts were written, have often followed the pattern of *critical* utopias. Sargent's definition of critical utopia is a useful place to start situating my argument within this realm:

> Critical Utopia - a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as better than contemporary society but with difficult problems that the described society may or may not be able to solve and which takes a critical view of the Utopian genre.[64]

By taking a critical approach towards the utopian genre, critical utopias hold space for the co-existence of both eutopian and dystopian elements of the societies in the literary works, showing both sides of the mirror and its myriad reflections. The societies depicted are not always ideal societies such as the ones portrayed in blueprint utopian narratives. Rather, this type of utopian literature resists closure and is open to evolving with the changes and momentum of the society in question. The undesirable parts of the plot are to be seen as warnings, and the methods with which the community tries to solve the problems of society within the narrative world constitute the critique of society in reality and exhibit suggestions to overcome these problems.

Traditionally, a fictional utopian society is expected to be geographically and/or chronologically separate from the society to which it is contrasted. In this way, the utopian space

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[63] For a more detailed look at the satirical aspect of utopianism, see Heiserman, A. R. "Satire in the utopia." *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America (PMLA),* vol. 78, no. 3, 1963, pp. 163–174, https://doi.org/10.2307/460858.

[64] Sargent, "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," 9.

is showcased via the efforts of a protagonist who discovers and explores this new location and implicitly and/or explicitly compares this utopia with the undesirable condition of their present world. This specific tradition can be observed in several blueprint utopias, such as Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1916). Novels like these show utopian literature's liminal position at the edge of travel literature, in which voyages of discovery are glorified, and are examples of metafiction in that the text is self-conscious of its constructed nature. This narrow definition and practice of blueprint utopias also played a role in the exclusion of utopian projections that fall outside the perimeters of the utopian imaginations in the main canon, which is especially the case for feminist utopian literature and other non-mainstream utopias. Consequently, through the research efforts of utopian scholars, the unearthing of the works of women authors within the utopian genre, such as Annie Denton Cridge, Christine de Pizan, Mary E. Bradley Lane, and Sarah Scott, has brought new and contrasting examples to the field of utopian literature.

It remains important to examine why the unearthing of the works of these women authors of utopias was necessary in the first place. No scholarly debate on utopianism starts without mentioning Thomas More's *Utopia*. However, while it is true that he coined the term *utopia*, one could also honor, for instance, the medieval women's literature that preceded More's work. Christine de Pizan (1364-1430), for one, wrote *The Book of the City of Ladies* in 1405, which is a good example to examine and locate a history of, or the herstory of, feminist utopian literature. In this utopian work, de Pizan builds an allegorical city of ladies by using famous women, such as Mary Magdalene, Helen of Troy, and Medea, as paradigms in her speculative and didactic fiction. De Pizan, however, is not one of the first names that come to mind or that get mentioned in publications that set out to provide an overview of utopian literature.[65] Both the act of

[65] A quick search and comparison of number of publications about Christne de Pizan against Thomas More in the records of JSTOR (https://www.jstor.org/) shows that while More has been mentioned in item titles and/or abstracts 4.108 times, de Pizan has been mentioned only 372 times (date of access: September 2022).

imagining or dreaming of a new world from scratch and the privilege of constructing the canons and curricula about such utopian worlds have often been worked out in the domain of the rich and the powerful, who usually happened to be men of political, racial, and financial privilege, especially during the pre-modern periods of literature. When the question is posed whether there is hope within and towards achieving a eutopian world, the politics of historical equity and privilege concerning women's position in society as well as in the literary profession make it necessary to look further than the traditionally presented dominant canon and examine alternative genres and traditions within utopian literature and also eutopian practice.

While exploring the concept of hope within the context of feminist utopian literature, I can situate my position better within the utopian theory of Bloch, who is known for his generously broad definition of utopianism as an overarching concept, as opposed to a fixed blueprint definition. In her analysis of Bloch's work, utopian scholar of sociology Ruth Levitas mentions that Bloch's work has been considered a principal defense of utopianism.[66] This defense is particularly instrumental in examining feminist utopianism. The urge to define utopianism broadly is especially constructive in the case of feminist thought and literature precisely because sociopolitical restrictions have limited the publication of women's work, or have limited the study of existing works.

Bloch sees utopian thought in diverse types of genres and works of both fiction and non-fiction. He defines any attempt motivated to move beyond the constraints of a current situation as utopian, due to the inherent wish to change the world for the better. This is part of what he refers to as wishful thinking, which is not to be understood in its common meaning of having no relation to reality; on the contrary, utopianism for Bloch is both a wish for and a promise of possibilities, a progressive mentality that produces new routes for possible solutions to societal problems. As Bloch lays out his ideas on the concept of utopia in his seminal work *The Principle*

[66] Levitas, "Educated Hope: Ernst Bloch on Abstract and Concrete Utopia," 13.

of Hope, he asks some significant questions about the Marxian desire for a classless society: "Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going? What are we waiting for? What awaits us?"[67] With questions so comprehensive in scope, the clues of utopianism can be observed everywhere around us.

To give just one example of a eutopian practice that asks us to step out of the confines of dominant canons and libraries, The Sisters of the Valley, also known casually as the Weed Nuns, demonstrate a different way of building a eutopian existence that falls outside of fiction but is nonetheless valuable for unconventional definitional purposes. On a mission to "heal the world" via medicinal marijuana, Weed Nuns consider themselves heirs to the medieval Beguines. The Beguines were members of an identically-named Christian spiritual order of semi-monastic groups that lead pious lives, living together as a self-sustaining commune, but without any formal vows.[68] Founded in 2014 in the United States with ten core members, The Sisters of the Valley consider themselves Beguine revivalists due to their devotion and self-proclaimed spiritual bond with the Beguines. As the first organized nurses in Europe, Beguines are believed to have used hemp and other herbal remedies to help sick people who could not receive proper relief from existing medical interventions. In the context of contemporary Weed Nuns, this practice refers to the use of medicinal cannabis for chronic pain and anxiety management.[69] This group of women is an example of a consciously created community, formed on a voluntary basis, centered around shared principles and responsibilities. While this community is not fictional, its conceptual foundation is relevant to women's experience of utopianism, and it is a practical expression of hope and the wish to create a better-confined space in a group effort.

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[67] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope, Volume 1*, 3.

[68] For more information on the history of beguines, see De Cant, Geneviève, Pascal Majérus, Christiane Verougstraete, Régine De Hemptinne, and Eléonore Grislis, *A World of Independent Women: From the 12th Century to the Present Day : the Flemish Beguinages*. Riverside: Hervé van Caloen foundation, 2003.

[69] For more information, see https://www.sistersofthevalley.org/our-story

Weed Nuns are but one example of how utopian creations can materialize anywhere and, in any shape, only if the contemporary definitions of and expectations from utopias can be expanded to be more inclusive ones. In my analysis of hope in gender separatist utopian novels, I trace a genealogy of hope in women-authored utopian works of literature. This genealogy reaches back in time to Christine de Pizan's already mentioned *The Book of the City of Ladies* (fifteenth century) in which a metaphorical and didactic utopian city is built, further back in time in works of medieval authors such as Hildegard of Bingen (twelfth century) and Hadewijch of Brabant (thirteenth century), and closer to the contemporary period in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* trilogy (twentieth century), in which the separatist world-building practices revolve around a colonial allegory. It is valuable to scrutinize these gender separatist utopian works of literature in that they simultaneously present the peaks of hope and also the depths of hopelessness. In a way, there is always hope for the future that gets its motivation and inspiration from the hopelessness of the present.

If my going back in history shows that gender separatist eutopias had their hopeful beginnings centuries ago, the genealogy also shows the contemporary demise of the genre, as when scholars speak about 'the death of utopia.' This 'death' would be manifest in a political context, but can also be felt where the production of feminist eutopian novels has recently decreased compared to earlier publications in the twentieth century. As publication houses observe the rise of feminist dystopian literature – a paradigmatic case is Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* – it becomes a challenge to posit feminist eutopian literature within the context of the traditional utopian novel. I presume that many readers will already be aware of the focus and the strength of the feminist message in *The Handmaid's Tale*, I will nonetheless give a brief summary to emphasize my argument. The novel takes place in a Christian totalitarian and white supremacist military dictatorship. The narrator is one of the handmaids who are women that are forced to become reproductive slaves. The main exposition of the novel underlines the lack of

agency for women's bodily autonomy. Aside from losing their bodily rights, women also become the lowest caste of the class and lose, in the process, many financial and legal rights. The Republic of Gilead came to power in a revolution and it likely lost power in a revolution as well, since this historical period is referred to as the Gileadean period, emphasizing that the period has passed. Published in 1985, the novel did not attract so much political interest. However, in our current political climate in the global west, especially in the United States, we can observe the rampant attack on women's reproductive rights. Unfortunately, the cautionary tale of Atwood does not seem very distant anymore, which is also a strong reason why women's utopian dreams reflect a more dystopian reality.[70]

One specific question thus arises: Is there still hope for women authors of utopian tradition to imagine a better world through projections and representations of eutopia or has a dystopian mentality become dominant after all? While the utopian intention is still present and strong, what I want to call the precarious aspect of hope demonstrates that representations of eutopian imagination may not result in outcomes as positive as it is hoped and expected to be.[71]

In the following sections, I concentrate first on protofeminist eutopian sources of hope. The phrase 'source of hope' is a double one: it indicates both that the texts under consideration express a certain hope, but also that the texts themselves can be considered as sources of hope in a history that for a long time has been neglected, and that needed and still needs uncovering. To that order, I diverge from the utopian canon and touch upon alternative genres of feminist utopianism. Genres are largely affected by ideologies of the period in which they arise and become popular. It is sometimes the case that women engage in different types of utopian representations and may make use of alternative genealogies of feminist utopian thought. In

[70] For more in-depth analyses of Atwood's dystopia, see Harold Bloom, *Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale (Modern Critical Interpretations)* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2004).
[71] For a critical look at the concept of death of utopia from an apocalyptic standpoint, see John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (London: Allen Lane, 2007).

order to share diverse spaces of utopian imagination, I go back in time to find examples from the works of Christine de Pizan, Hadewijch of Brabant, and Hildegard of Bingen, but also look closer to home in spacetime when considering a groundbreaking text by Donna Haraway as eutopian. In the second section, I focus on the intersection of hope and the alleged contemporary death of utopia. Hope creates and fosters the idea that there is an attainable goal that may act as an improvement of the current situation. The question is what happens when a genre that embodies hope and is motivated by hope, seems to disappear as a viable genre in light of the rise of its counter-genre: dystopia. In the last section, I focus on my corpus in order to consider the utopian impulse in feminist dystopias. I argue that a utopian impulse can still exist in dystopian and critical utopian novels because these pieces of literature show dystopias as warnings instead of blueprints or methods. This is to say that critical utopias, with their resistance towards closure, can still advocate a utopian projection. In that sense, feminist dystopias are simultaneously expressions of feminist utopian despair and hope. As will become clear through my reading, feminist utopias are not dead at all. Even if dystopias seem to suggest the death of utopia, they imply nevertheless forms of hope, albeit expressed in warnings of catastrophes. In its essence, the politics of hope necessitates the community to go through the stage of imagining, designing, and possibly failing.

Recovering hope: protofeminist utopias before and after More's utopia

Utopia presents itself as a transhistorical genre, with diverse works from different cultures and consisting of different subgenres that resist exhaustive definitions. Because More's work has been such a dominant point of reference to all definitions of utopianism, I aim to unravel the central position of More's *Utopia* in relation to what came before and after. Taking a look at some of the core secondary literature on utopian fiction reveals how women's utopian literature has been cast aside and overlooked, even in studies that are critical of More's centrality. For

instance, one of the most published scholars of utopian thought and literature, Lyman Tower Sargent, published an article in 1976, in which he contended that most utopian studies focus on canonical works while there are various other valuable works in the periphery.[72] Sargent explains further that he would rather concentrate on works that are on the peripheries, and this could have included women's utopian writing. However, I did not come across references towards, for instance, Christine de Pizan or Margaret Cavendish in this article which at its core suggests decentering the bibliography of utopian literature. Sargent does touch upon, as he puts it, the "woman question" but he does so briefly and as an isolated matter:

> The "woman question" still exercises many writers, but they had little to add to the debate. And the other themes of the earlier period, reason, religion, science and technology, also continue. The only significant addition to the patterns involved is in the numbers of anti-utopian novels that are produced.[73]

I find it problematic that gender issues are almost dismissed as "the woman question" in such a brief mention without getting into the works of some of the women authors that are systematically overlooked. The statement "they had little to add to the debate" is one that is left unexplained by Sargent. Instead of bringing the overlooked into the picture, then, Sargent's article rather also requires an awareness and vigilance for the genealogy of women's utopian literature as those that are in the periphery.

To trace the genealogy of utopian literary histories, in this case women's utopian literature before More, it makes sense to start with consulting one of the fundamental works in the field of utopian literature: *The Utopia Reader* compiled by Sargent and Gregory Claeys, first

[72] Sargent, "Themes in Utopian Fiction in English Before Wells," 275.
[73] Ibid, 279.

published in 1999 and last updated in 2017. This core secondary source does not mention de Pizan or other women authors of utopias. In this reader, early utopias can be found in Hesiod's golden age, in Greek and Roman myths, in Vergil's *Fourth Eclogue*, in Saturnalia, the Feast of Fools, Carnival, and Cockaigne. Plato's *The Republic* is presented as the most cited early Western example of utopia. In my research of core secondary sources on utopian literature, it looks as if these important reference works are reciting the same authors and books after another, also in recent editions, concentrating on which author got published first or which author coined the term. Utopian works before More by women authors are easily neglected out of what seems to be an academic habit. To give an example:

> In 1516 Thomas More invented the genre to which these works are precursors. Though the propensity to social dreaming existed well before there was any utopian genre, from that point on utopian literature began to have the formal characteristics specified in the definitions above.[74]

Even though Claeys and Sargent accept that More had precursors, they do not mention any women authors who had written utopias prior to 1516. For a fundamental research compilation of the genre, such as *The Utopia Reader*, this feels inadequate and non-inclusive.

Likewise, *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, edited by Claeys in 2010, has two categories listed in its index: "History" and "Literature." In the latter part, there is a chapter titled "Feminism and Utopianism." This section witnesses the first mention of de Pizan, which also demonstrates that, as an important author, she has not been mentioned in the previous sections despite having written a utopian work before More's *Utopia*. The *Companion* treats literature written by women as a special interest group so much so that important utopian

[74] Sargent and Claeys, *The Utopia Reader*, 3.

scholars refrain from mentioning these authors during their survey of the literature and add them separately as a minor detail. Apparently, also in the field of utopian studies, being a woman is a part of the secondary human experience whereas being a man is taken as the default human experience. This internal gender-biased aspect of both publications and research can also be observed in how utopian works of literature are perceived. This has been noticed by North American professor Alessa Johns, an expert on British literary and cultural history of the eighteenth century, who is the author of the section "Feminism and Utopianism." There, she argues that More's utopia could not have been considered a utopia for women:

> Women in particular have fared poorly in traditional blueprint utopias, where they have been forced to labour endlessly and bow to humourless patriarchs. Consequently feminist utopian authors and critics have generally sidestepped the blueprint form to privilege instead a 'process' or 'reproductive' or 'critical' model. What is surprising, and what will be explored here, is that this form of process-oriented feminist utopianism is not new. I will argue that it is not merely the product of what is called the first-, second and third-wave femnism of the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Instead, process-oriented utopianism characterizes a large part of feminist utopian writing beginning in the late middle ages and continuing to today – from Christine de Pizan to Sarah Scott to Ursula K. Le Guin – and it appears emphatically in Enlightenment Britain: that is, before what is considered the modern women's movement.[75]

As Johns points out, in traditional utopias laid out by male authors, women have been assigned domestic roles or slave positions. Consequently, if feminist historians were writing the history of

[75] Johns, "Feminism and Utopianism," *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, 174.

feminist utopianism, they should not start from More's work since the utopian blueprint in his work does not provide betterment for women's rights and sociopolitical conditions. Johns argues this is also why women authors have moved away from blueprint utopias toward critical utopias in which the lack of closure of the text provides for a more free space to speculate different futures.

For now, what remains surprising in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* is that de Pizan is mentioned in one of the chapters within the context of feminism only, so it may be self-evident that non-blueprint or process utopias existed before More. Nowhere is de Pizan's work mentioned in the sections that give an overall survey of the utopian genre. This also holds for another frequently consulted secondary source: Sargent's *Utopianism* from the *A Very Short Introduction* series of the Oxford University Press. Again, de Pizan, who created a eutopian space in *The Book of the City of Ladies* as early as the fifteenth century, is not mentioned anywhere in this book either. This act of excluding the works of pre-modern women authors contributes to the cycle of overlooking and silencing utopias written by women and therefore feminist utopian voices. This not only perpetuates the idea that utopian literature is a genre dominated by male authors, but it also implies a certain blurring out or destruction of alternative histories of hope for everyone.

The strongest reason why women's literature has had to be unearthed is that genres, just as canons, are political constructs of the status quo and reflections of the power structures of their time. In eras when women were considered unfit to write, vote, or rule, their access to financial freedom, freedom of expression, and opportunities for publication were also limited, if not restricted to different degrees. As can be observed in the examples from the popular secondary core literature in the field, genres are largely affected by the prevalent ideologies of the authors, of literary critics, and of the period in which published works arise and find popularity among popular and academic audiences. There are many cases, however, of women

practicing and producing different expressions of, or subgenres of, utopian representations. Here I want to highlight some women authors of utopias that were published before and after More and at points did, but more often did not, find an appropriate place in the utopian canon. Furthermore, I want to highlight some utopian practitioners who may perhaps not have published utopias but actualized them in practice.

One medieval example of women's utopianism has already been mentioned in the previous section: the 'order' of Beguines. Beguines were not a religious or institutionalized order or movement. They did not follow a ruler; however, they did have a common way of living, dedication to chastity, humility, and godly commitment. They lived in beguinages "which could be single houses for as few as a handful of beguines or, as in Brugge, walled-in rows of houses enclosing a central court with a chapel where over a thousand beguines might live - a village of women within a medieval town or city."[76] It is by itself a feminist utopian act, albeit defined as such anachronistically, to survive in a medieval society ruled by men and under unchallenged patriarchy, and to form self-sufficient (monastic) communities of women. These communities have usually existed on lands with medium to low economic value but on lands where the women could work the soil and benefit from the harvest, thus leading a self-sustaining life. While some women lived alone in a house of their own within the community, others lived in some form of a dormitory. These micro-utopias welcomed several studious Beguines. According to a recent publication on beguinages, the historian Walter Simons explains that while the movement attracted many women from different walks of life for various durations, the pejorative connotation of the meaning behind the term used for these women ensued.[77] As a testament to their strong will, it is also in the records that some of these women left their

[76] Swan, *The Wisdom of the Beguines: The Forgotten Story*, 2. More practical information on beguinages can also be found on the UNESCO World Heritage entry: https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/855/
[77] The word "beguine" has some negative connotations, as can be seen here: https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=beguine

husbands, parents, children, and other relatives to start another life in these informal communities of women.[78]

One such Beguine was Hadewijch of Brabant from the thirteenth century, who wrote extensively and whose writings are considered among medieval masterpieces today. On her several works – unpublished at the time – Belgian medievalist Veerle Fraeters notes:

> In contrast to the works of the few other female religious authors of her era and region whose writings we know today (Hellgardt; Poor; Bollmann), Hadewijch seems not to have attempted publication of her work during her lifetime, nor to have trespassed against the limits prescribed for women: they could assume the role of religious leader within their community but could not preach, and so spread their thoughts in the public domain, without explicit authorization from the Church. […] Hadewijch seems not to have found, and probably did not even seek, the clerical support needed for promotion in the public sphere as a spiritual authority who had produced a book in the sense of an authoritative sacred text.[79]

Even if these humble Beguine authors wished to be published, as can be seen above, it was not easy or even possible for them to be published without approval from religious authorities. This limitation is one reason why the knowledge and the rich heritage concerning the utopian works of these women authors have reached the readers much later than they could have. At the time, one would have to formally ask for an endorsement from their beguinage and then permission from the pope, which is not an easy route for publication.[80]

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[78] Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries*, 12-1565, 35.
[79] Fraeters, "Hadewijch of Brabant and the Beguine Movement," *A Companion to Mysticism and Devotion in Northern Germany in the Late Middle Ages*, 51.
[80] Ibid.

In a period when women's writing, publication, or dissemination was not encouraged, exaltations of More as the formal initiator of the genre dominated literary scholarship. Literature professor and medievalist Karma Lochrie writes in this respect about "unmooring," that is, eliminating the notion that More's *Utopia* is where utopianism in literature has started:

> Reading forward, counter-historically perhaps, from some of the medieval experiments in utopian imagining, has the advantage of unmooring More's work from the insularity of its conception—that is, of reading it as if it were not the very first text in English literature to imagine an ideal commonwealth, because it is not. In addition, this reverse historicism has the potential to render the category of utopianism more capacious and flexible than it currently is under More's umbra.[81]

Lochrie's reading against chronological and canonical literary history may overturn the still untouchable superiority of More's utopia as one of the foundational texts, alongside Plato's *The Republic*, and gives the utopias of women authors a chance to be academically acclaimed and appreciated for their visionary, deconstructing, and eye-opening qualities. She suggests that reverse historicism can widen the category of utopianism so as to include more variations. She recommends, consequently, a more flexible and fluid understanding of utopianism:

> Instead of beginning our inquiry with the text of Thomas More's *Utopia* and all the presumptions about what constitutes utopianism derived from that text, what if we consider utopianism as a project that takes more than one literary form, incorporates more than a single philosophical perspective, spans religious and

[81] Lochrie, *Nowhere in the Middle Ages*, 183.

> secular realms, and even anticipates some of the quirks as well as the characteristic features of More's own utopia? In other words, what if we begin with a more capacious understanding of utopianism within which we might plot More's work, but in addition, many other texts that might *or might not* resemble it?[82]

Lochrie's notion invites inclusivity that contributes to the optimism of utopianism. Historically, women have engaged in different subject matters as well as (sub)genres compared to utopias authored by male authors. On the one hand, it is usually the case that utopias written by women authors focus more on the aspects of the private sphere such as the education of the children (as in Gilman's *Herland* series), the re-distribution of household tasks (as in Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country*), reproduction (as in, among many others, Russ' *The Female Man*), and responsibilities concerning the family (as in Lessing's *The Cleft*). Environmental and ecological awareness is also one of the frequently emphasized aspects of utopian literature written by women (as in Gearheart's *The Wanderground*), though that is mostly because women are traditionally associated with a motherly and nurturing nature figure, which also leaves breadcrumbs for the relevance between the global climate crisis and utopian women authors' common choices for sustainable futures. On the other hand, utopias written by male authors take all facets of public life into account without much emphasis or radical change in the circumstances surrounding the private sphere, children, family relations, gender-based division of household responsibilities, or the issues that women face in life even though they comprise at least half the utopian population. With respect to this, utopian scholar Jane Donawerth states in her work on women's utopian fiction that while More focused on a journey outward, feminist

[82] Ibid, 6.

narratives concentrated on the journey and the life inward.[83] This pattern can be observed in various feminist utopian and dystopian works of literature from different eras, as also mentioned in this chapter.

In principle, feminist utopias concentrate on education, especially because historically women have had limited access to education. Education is thus seen as a method of liberation and gaining back power from women's immediate and structural oppressors. I see this as a legacy of Mary Wollstonecraft who was a pioneer advocate of women's educational rights. It is also one of the fundamental methods of forming a new sociopolitical structure. One such woman author who concentrated on the education of women was, as I previously mentioned in this chapter, Christine de Pizan, the fourteenth-century Italian author and poet in the French court, the first woman author on record to earn her living solely through her writing. Her eutopian work, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, is of great importance in the sense that it is a utopian literary work that shows positive examples of women in written literature in a period when these examples were not easily observed or consciously evoked in published literary works. In other words, women did not use to be the protagonists of literary works. It is also of importance to my argument that this is not a novel with a traditional narrative style that would conveniently fit the definition of More's utopia. This biographical catalog contains famous women from the past, using them as allegorical building blocks for the city of ladies. Christine is also a character in her own writing and works together with the personified virtues of Reason, Rectitude, and Justice. After they create the city together, Christine announces it as a safe haven for all women, asserting the solidarity of women and how they can be self-sufficient in educating and protecting one another.

Below is a conversation between Christine as the protagonist and the virtue personified as Reason:

[83] Donawerth, *Utopian and Science Fiction by Women: Worlds of Difference*, 6.

> "My lady, according to what I understand from you, woman is a most noble creature. But even so, Cicero says that a man should never serve any woman and that he who does so debases himself, for no man should ever serve anyone lower than him."
>
> She replied, "The man or the woman in whom resides greater virtue is the higher; neither the loftiness nor the lowliness of a person lies in the body according to the sex, but in the perfection of conduct and virtues."[84]

Breaking the prescribed and essentialist notions concerning gendered superiority, Reason provides the perspective that virtuous conduct is not gender-based, thus creating the grounds for equity within society. De Pizan's work was published in 1405, almost a century before More's work. As has been stated several times now, the book is still not generally known as one of the first utopian works of literature.

If I now move to utopias by women authors after More, one prominent example of utopian women's writing is from Margaret Cavendish (1623-1673), the Duchess of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, who published numerous essays, plays, and poetry in the seventeenth century at a time when women writers and philosophers had a challenging time being accepted equally as their male peers. She was the first woman who was allowed to attend the meetings of The Royal Society, which is an academic society that caters to the advancement of scientific activity in its fields of expertise. This was centuries before the Society officially started allowing women to become candidate members, namely in 1945. Cavendish's intellect was appreciated, that is, centuries before the achievements of woman scholars were officially recognized in that academic context. Her proto-science fiction work *The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing-*

[84] De Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 24 (ed. Earl J. Richards, 1982).

World from 1666 is the depiction of a utopian kingdom in another world that is divided into three parts: romancical,[85] philosophical, and fantastical. In these three parts, Cavendish lays out how a woman becomes the Empress of this world and how she (and by implication Cavendish) questions the seventeenth-century male-dominated fields of inquiry such as science, politics, and gender dynamics. Cavendish has a Hobbesian approach to government in that she is also a proponent of monarchy, believing that entrusting the agency and power of the whole society to one entity would be the right step in solving issues of societal inequity en masse.[86] She encompasses the distinct genre-based approaches of both satire and science fiction in her work, which became the subject of numerous academic studies comparing *The Blazing World* to More's *Utopia*.[87]

The book starts with a traveling merchant falling in love with a noblewoman who would not marry him due to his lower status. This mismatch in socioeconomic position between them urges the merchant to abduct the woman by ship. However, a *deus ex machina* storm kills everyone on board but for the abducted woman. The ship moves further towards the North Pole as if the winds are pulling it there, and then enters a parallel world populated with animl-like creatures that walk on two legs and speak an unfamiliar language. The woman is taken by the bear-like inhabitants to their city which is made up of underground caves. While being taken to the court of the Emperor of this world, she gets to see fox-like creatures, goose-like bird creatures, satyrs, and green-colored people as well. These people who speak the same language and live in what seems to be a harmonious co-existence are also very well equipped

[85] Here the word "romancical" refers to romance literature which concentrates on stories of chivalry, adventure and glory.
[86] See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan or The Matter, Forme and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil* (1651) for Hobbes' illustration of his model of the social contract theory which essentially concerns the relationship of authority between the state and the individual.
[87] For more information on the life of Cavendish, see Douglas Grant, *Margaret the First: A Biography of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, 1623-1673* (1957)

intellectually: they are philosophers, astronomers, politicians, chemists, and architects, among other professions and expertise.

In this book, absolute monarchy is chosen as the uniting force and the sacrifice for a hopeful eutopian future. This notion of monarchy is presented as the element that caters to the peaceful harmony of their world: "[…] nor no more but one Emperor, to whom they all submitted with the greatest duty and obedience, which made them live in a continued Peace and Happiness."[88] Upon meeting the woman, the Emperor "made her his Wife, and gave her an absolute power to rule and govern all that World as she pleased."[89] As a side note, no details are provided in the text about how this marriage took place or whether it was consensual. I interpret this choice as Cavendish taking and giving absolute governing power to her woman protagonist, regardless of the price she has to pay. It is also telling that the Empress actually receives so much governing power and the involvement of the Emperor in the text becomes less and less. Therefore, here we see two male characters, the merchant and the Emperor, trying to possess a woman while their actions only lead to giving her more and more power to design and create her own utopia. This turn of events also emphasizes that utopian hope shows up in unexpected places.

After her rise to power, the Empress then goes on to discuss the natural sciences with all the different groups of animal-like creatures and share her knowledge from her own world. In the end, the Empress observes that these people have no knowledge of Christianity or the Christian deity. Consequently, she builds churches and converts everyone to Christianity. Furthermore, the Empress goes into lengthy philosophical dialogues with the spirits about heaven, Adam and Eve, and the meaning of life. These spirits offer to send her a scribe spirit for her studies but the Empress has to choose a body for this spirit to fill in. After her suggestions of many influential

[88] Newcastle, Margaret Cavendish, *The Blazing World and Other Writings*, 130.
[89] Ibid.

male philosophers from history, the spirits advise her to pick a simple woman who would not mind working under a woman, like the "Duchess of Newcastle." The fact that men would be too proud or too misogynistic to work under her as a scribe, as contemplated by the spirits, shows that Cavendish had to put her hopes in a woman, or *any* woman, due to the fact that in her real life, she had to struggle among men to prove her intellect because of her gender and lack of formal education. In this context, it is important to remember that "Duchess of Newcastle" is Cavendish's title in real life.

Through the metafictional framing of this character, Cavendish finds a safe way to express her frustrations with the gender politics of her time. Together with the Duchess, the Empress decides to create a "celestial" world, seeing the impossibility of creating a sustainable eutopia as a "terrestrial" world. This move from designing an actual utopia to a fantasy utopia underlines the Blochian notion that utopian thinking itself is very crucial also for the creation of utopian worlds. To stress her utopian creative process even stronger, this is how Cavendish starts her book:

> The end of reason, is truth; the end of fancy, is fiction: but mistake me not, when I distinguish *fancy* from *reason*; I mean not as if fancy were not made by the rational parts of matter; but by *reason* I understand a rational search and enquiry into the causes of natural effects; and by *fancy* a voluntary creation or production of the mind, both being effects, or rather actions of the rational parts of matter; of which, as that is a more profitable and useful study than this, so it is also more laborious and difficult, and requires sometimes the help of fancy, to recreate the mind, and withdraw it from its more serious contemplations. And this is the

> reason, why I added this piece of fancy to my philosophical observations, and joined them as two worlds at the ends of their poles.[90]

Their celestial utopia is called Blazing World, which makes the book a metanarrative on the process of Cavendish writing a utopian book. Together they create many worlds that they deem to have failed because they will not be perfect for everyone. Even though Cavendish seems to favor absolute monarchy in her utopian thinking, she still sees the pitfalls it can create in the creation of a conflict-free eutopia. Consequently, in this protofeminist book, utopian hope is found and also recovered in a parallel world where the leader/author decides that the perfect utopia only exists in fantasies.

Here I will move on from philosophical visions to a real-life community in another protofeminist utopian work of literature. As a member of the Bluestockings, a women's suffragette society of education in eighteenth-century England, Sarah Scott (1720-1795) led a life plagued by disease, isolation, and poverty. After the dissolution of her marriage, she dedicated her life to social work, helping poor and abandoned women and children, which hints at her interest in imagining a eutopian society where women and children received nourishment and support by default. After the publication of her book, she left her husband to devote herself to the formation of separatist women's communities.

Written in 1762, Scott's *A Description of Millenium Hall and the Country Adjacent*, or with its full title *A Description Of Millenium Hall And The Country Adjacent. Together With The Characters Of The Inhabitants And Such Historical Anecdotes And Reflections As May Excite In The Reader Proper Sentiments Of Humanity, And Lead The Mind To The Love Of Virtue. By 'A Gentleman On His Travels'*, is formulated as an epistolary frame tale. It is narrated by a male character, named Sir George Ellison, who happens to discover the utopian space referred to as

[90] Ibid, 124.

the Millenium Hall and afterward decides to create his own utopia. Each section engages in the life story of one of the inhabitants of the Millenium Hall.

Millenium Hall portrays a community led by women of high social standing who work together to enhance the lives of those around them. They establish a rug factory providing employment to the less fortunate, enhance the environment by creating parks and gardens, advocate for the ethical treatment of animals, establish schools for local children, offer employment opportunities to the disabled, and arrange care for the sick. These initiatives can be easily characterized as utopian acts, reflecting an idealistic vision for societal improvement. Amid descriptions of their community endeavors, the narrative includes the women's poignant life stories, detailing their challenging pasts and underscoring their earlier suffering as victims before finding refuge in Millenium Hall. As in various narratives of women's utopias, the societal emphasis is first and foremost on education. Their society is centered around a devout religious life and women's companionship, which emphasizes the influence of the beguinage movement mentioned above.[91] All the sexual acts in the novel are in the spectrum of rape or another sin and there is no romantic love but only non-sexual and pious friendship.

The narrator Sir George Ellison, during a journey to his northern retreat, unexpectedly stumbles upon a delightful society known as Millenium Hall after his transport breaks down – a common colonial discovery narrative trope. This society is comprised of exceptional women who are actively involved in various intellectual and artistic pursuits. The narrator is deeply impressed by their talents, manners, and the overall harmony that defines their lives. Despite the unforeseen circumstance, the ladies warmly welcome this stranger man and his companion, urging them to stay until their transport is repaired. Their first evening there unfolds with a family concert that showcases the musical talents of the ladies and other performers. The narrator

[91] See Ana M. Acosta "Transparency and the Enlightenment Body: Utopian Space in Sarah Scott's Millenium Hall and Sade's The 120 Days of Sodom," edited by Brenda Tooley and Nicole Pohl. *Gender and Utopia in the Eighteenth Century Essays in English and French Utopian Writing*. Taylor and Francis, 2016, 107-119.

is entranced by the unique atmosphere of Millenium Hall and expresses a desire to extend his stay in the company of these extraordinary ladies. The narrative accentuates the virtues, talents, and benevolence of the ladies and offers a detailed glimpse into their daily lives and the enchanting surroundings of Millenium Hall.

The next morning when Sir George Ellison wakes up, he sees an old woman and asks her for more information about this commune and she responds:

> There are twelve of us that live here. We have every one a house of two rooms, as you may see, beside other conveniences, and each a little garden, but though we are separate, we agree as well, perhaps better, than if we lived together, and all help one another. Now, there is neighbour Susan, and neighbour Rachel; Susan is lame, so she spins clothes for Rachel; and Rachel cleans Susan's house, and does such things for her as she cannot do for herself. The ladies settled all these matters at first, and told us, that as they, to please God, assisted us, we must in order to please him serve others; and that to make us happy they would put us in a way, poor as we are, to do good to many. Thus neighbour Jane who, poor woman, is almost stone deaf, they thought would have a melancholy life if she was to be always spinning and knitting, seeing other people around her talking, and not be able to hear a word they said, so the ladies busy her in making broths and caudles and such things, for all the sick poor in this and the next parish, and two of us are fixed upon to carry what they have made to those that want them; to visit them often, and spend more or less time with them every day according as they have, or have not relations to take care of them.[92]

[92] Scott, *A Description of Millenium Hall and the Country Adjacent*, 17.

In this description, it is possible to envisage a beguinage formation a with communal cohabitation plan and an architectural layout. The ways in which these women support each other physically, financially, and emotionally underline the compassionate utopian tradition that the author follows. The main formulation is still monastic, that one should serve and help others as a religious way of living; however, this reasoning becomes a very strong hope for the community. The citizens do everything they can to make sure their utopia stays eutopian for the sake of going to heaven one day, arguably the most popular utopian narrative of all.

Here I will give one last example of hope in pre-modern feminist utopian literature. Annie Denton Cridge (1825-1875) was an English suffragist who moved to the United States where she became a lecturer and author, and published also with her husband. Her satirical work *Man's Rights; or, How Would You Like It?: Comprising Dreams*, written in 1870, is a narrative of dreams taking place in a society where traditional gender roles are reversed.

In this role reversal narrative that favors the rights of women, the emphasis is on gender equity, improving the conditions of women, and showing men the conditions of women through the framing of role reversal. Each dream illustrates a specific characteristic of gender politics and relationships. In some dreams, gender equality is prominent, while in others, there is a complete role reversal, depicting a scenario where men experience oppression. In one of the dreams, for example, the men have lives directly mirroring those of the stereotypical roles of overworked and underappreciated working class women. These characters not only encompass the traditional gender-based responsibilities associated with women but also the emotional labor that often befalls women traditionally. This gender-mirroring role reversal acts as a tool to enable the readers to witness and reflect on the daily experiences of most women in that society. Furhermore, in one other dream, we encounter a lecture that addresses the urgency and necessity for the rights of men:

> Let men be educated as liberally as woman; let him be made to feel the value of a sound mind, and that the brightest ornament to man, as well as woman, is intellect: then, and not until then, will he stand forth in all his beauty. We frequently hear that woman's mind is superior to man's, and therefore he ought not to have equal educational facilities. If, as is stated by the opponents of man's rights, men are naturally and necessarily inferior to women, it must follow that they should have superior opportunities for mental culture.[93]

In succeeding dreams, the main character keeps exploring men's rights in different time periods as women slowly lose political power, thus the gender roles are again reversed. The lecture on men's rights sounds as if a woman of that period could have written this for her gender-biased conditions. Lack of equal access to education, belittlement, and infantilization based on a perceived notion of women being of lesser intellect, receiving attention and glorification only for their external beauty, and rampant declaration of their mental and physical inferiority were very common in the period during which these protofeminist authors wrote their works.

At this point, I want to ask once more why it is important who named the genre. Why is the convention of naming, based on More's work, more important to mention than the women authors who wrote utopian narratives before or after More? Searching for the answer to these questions in secondary sources, I want to underline the first sentence of Sargent's book on utopianism: "The word 'utopia' was coined by Thomas More (1478-1535) as the name of the imaginary country he described in his short 1516 book written in Latin and published as Libellus vere aureus nec minus salutaris […]."[94] From a critical postcolonial lens, following the discovery of a land, naming, thereby christening, a newly discovered land is one of the most evident acts of

[93] Cridge, *Man's Rights; or, How Would You Like It?: Comprising Dreams*, 22.
[94] Sargent, *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction*, 2.

claiming that territory for oneself. In a way, the object of desire is baptized and defined in relation to and in comparison with the one who does the naming. Resembling baptism in this sense, South African postcolonial scholar Anne McClintock interprets Luce Irigaray's ideas on naming a child and attributes the idea of baptizing a child to naming an allegedly newly discovered land. As quoted by McClintock, Irigaray argues that not having a womb is the most unbearable shortcoming of men, as a man's contribution to reproduction is thus disputable.[95] To remedy this loss, McClintock argues, men reduce women's contribution to the process of reproduction and mothering: "Hence the imperial fixation on naming, on acts of 'discovery,' baptismal scenes and male birthing rituals."[96] In Christian baptism rituals, McClintock retells that the child is named by a male figure after the father, thus aiming to diminish the influence of the mother. She likens this to the discovery of inhabited lands as a redundant act: "During these extravagant acts of discovery, imperial men reinvent a moment of pure (male) origin and mark it visibly with one of Europe's fetishes: a flag, a name on a map, a stone, or later perhaps, a monument."[97] Not unlike naming a land, naming a genre is also setting its rules and defining its perimeter; what it includes, and what it excludes. As I had mentioned before, imagining and defining new worlds have been first and foremost within the scope of the privileged. Therefore, it is safe to argue that the worlds imagined by women may not have resembled the utopias of male authors of the pre- and early modern eras.

This gender-based double standard has for a long period stood in the way of dreaming, creating, producing, and sharing feminist utopias of diversity and autonomy. These restrictions are reflected in the availability and abundance of utopian literature written by women authors. The pervasive metanarrative of Plato's *The Republic* and More's *Utopia* being the earliest and greatest works of utopian literature has also been a theoretical restriction; syllabi, dissertations,

[95] Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 23.
[96] McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, 29.
[97] Ibid, 30.

citations, teaching, and research efforts are based on such metanarratives. This limited scope leads to neglecting the works of women authors from medieval eras, pre- and early modern pieces of literature, authors who diverged from the traditional genre of utopia proper, and from women authors who thought outside the box in their respective eras. If Bloch's definition of utopia is taken as the starting point, however, women's medieval or early-modern utopianism would more easily be considered among the foundational examples of utopian literature. The fiction and non-fiction works of women could be considered utopian, that is to say, if the definition of utopian literature would be wider – and not only in medieval or early modern times.

For instance, Donna Haraway's work "A Cyborg Manifesto" from 1985 can be considered a utopian work despite being located within a completely different field of critical theory, far removed from traditional utopian literature. Haraway bases her arguments on the concept of the cyborg and criticizes traditional notions of gender politics through this analysis of the cyborg:

> This chapter is an argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction. It is also an effort to contribute to socialist-feminist culture and theory in a postmodernist, non-naturalist mode and in the utopian tradition of imagining a world without gender, which is perhaps a world without genesis, but maybe also a world without end.[98]

Haraway starts the exposition of her critical manifesto by announcing the utopian aspects of her work. She imagines a post-gender world in a utopian sense, one that does not have an origin or an end, which runs counter to the classical idea of a utopia as a viable end goal. As Sarah Jones noted above, feminist utopias tend to be more process-oriented as the product is unreachable.

[98] Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, 150.

For Haraway as well, the described utopia is not something of the future but something that relates to the present, where the hope is that a feminist utopian existence can be established by means of political solidarity:

> I do not know of any other time in history when there was greater need for political unity to confront effectively the dominations of 'race', 'gender', 'sexuality', and 'class'. I also do not know of any other time when the kind of unity we might help build could have been possible.[99]

Haraway calls for a utopian momentum of intersectionality that would challenge the singular unities of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Since humanity is historically entangled in these dominant metanarratives, Haraway's subversive utopian vision is post-humanist, post-gender, and post-race, even though "A Cyborg Manifesto" is not a utopian work of fiction based on the definitions of blueprint utopian narratives.[100]

In "The Critical Manifesto: Marx and Engels, Haraway, and Utopian Politics," gender studies professor Kathi Weeks argues that manifestos can be considered utopian "as exercises in thinking collective life and imagining futurity."[101] The manifesto genre occupies a space between fiction and non-fiction:

> The manifesto form in particular demonstrates that utopian hope can be elicited as much from the analytical arsenal and stylistic practices of a text as from its specific claims and explicit purposes. More elusive yet, slipping through the

[99] Ibid, 157.
[100] See Stephanie Peebles Tavera. "Utopia, Inc.: A Manifesto for the Cyborg Corporation." *Science Fiction Studies* 44, no. 1, 2017, p. 21 for an environmental ethics perspective towards Haraway's cyborgs in the context of utopianism.
[101] Weeks, "The Critical Manifesto: Marx and Engels, Haraway, and Utopian Politics," 217.

> cracks of the boundaries of any specific form or genre, utopian expressions may also contain in the affective texture of a text—in, for example, the joyful rhetoric of Nietzsche philosophizing with a hammer but also in the dizzying creativity that generates and can be generated from Haraway's conceptual innovation and theoretical pastiche. Instead of the more typical manifesto's authoritative certainty and aggressive drawing of lines in the sand, Haraway persuades or even seduces the reader through her analytical agility and unexpected syntheses of ideas.[102]

Weeks argues that the poetics of manifesto writing can contain more utopian hope than the poesis. In this example, the form also conveys the function. Haraway's perspective on manifesto and utopianism joins the manifesto genre to utopianism while also delivering a more flexible and fluid analysis of the manifesto genre, blurring the lines between the two genres. This alternative approach to utopian thinking and formulation through manifesto writing is a transgeneric example of utopian writing. However, again, "A Cyborg Manifesto" is rarely considered among utopian writings. This work is one among many examples where the narrow definition of utopia plays a role in excluding women's various utopian narratives and creative endeavors from the scope of utopian literature, utopian theory, and utopianism as a whole.

Looking beyond the metanarratives of how the utopian genre should be defined, one may continue to see more and more feminist utopias in the past and in contemporary literature. This scholarly endeavor is relevant because it can provide us with a genealogy of feminist hope that could in turn function as a source of hope. This source has become more relevant in times when the light of feminist utopias seems to have been darkened by a growing number of dystopias. This growing number raised the question of whether the genre of utopianism in contemporary times should not be considered 'dead.'

[102] Ibid, 221.

The so-called death of a utopian literary imagination and the rise of anti-utopianism

The very idea of the death of utopia is understandable in a period where a rise in dystopian literature can be observed in mainstream media.[103] Utopian scholars, such as Thomas Moylan, Krishan Kumar, M. Keith Booker, and Lyman Tower Sargent, consider this development relevant in relation to the rise of late-stage capitalism, and the consequent oppressive politics and conditions throughout the world.[104] Thomas Moylan phrases it as follows:

> Dystopian narrative is largely the product of the terrors of the twentieth century. A hundred years of exploitation, repression, state violence, war, genocide, disease, famine, ecocide, depression, debt, and the steady depletion of humanity through the buying and selling of everyday life provided more than enough fertile grounds for this fictive underside of the utopian imagination.[105]

Moylan is explicit about the causes of death of utopia, that all find their ground in the twentieth century. There is a definite shift from eutopian prose describing paradise to dystopian prose describing hell on earth. Choosing to construct a dystopian setting instead of a eutopian one signals a lack of confidence in the eutopian thought's "capacity to be effective, as well perhaps as a failure of the utopian imagination."[106]

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[103] See Gregory Claeys, *Dystopia: A Natural History* (2016) for a comprehensive overview of dystopia: a theoretical and prehistorical account, the impact of centuries of totalitarianism in different spaces and contexts, and the reflection of the historical and political tensions in literature.

[104] See Thomas Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (2000) for an analysis of the modern dystopian impulse in fiction. See also Krishan Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-utopia in Modern Times* (1987) for a genealogy of anti-utopian thought in dystopian contexts. See also M. Keith Booker, *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature* (1994) for expanded analyses on utopian fiction as social critique. See also *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World* by Lyman Tower Sargent, Roland Schaer and Gregory Claeys (eds) (2000).

[105] Moylan, *Scraps of Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*, xi.

[106] Kumar, "The Ends of Utopia," 550.

Tales of catastrophe can be more alluring and effective in garnering more attention toward the conditions being critiqued, or it can be seen as a critical mode of resisting a status quo that has a dystopian quality. The question remains, then, what to do with Bloch's idea of wishful thinking as a continuous effort in the pursuit of a better life. For him, the spirit of hope and utopia is pervasive, regardless of whether this spirit is reflected in the form of novel or urban architecture, or lullabies.[107] In agreement with Bloch's line of thought, considering the utopian project a failure because the plot ends up transforming into a dystopian setting, in the end, implies the loss of the utopian hope that created the utopian project in the first place.

Apart from the supposed death of utopia, strong arguments have recently been brought forward against utopianism and utopian hope, such as those of the North American musicologist Richard Taruskin in his compilation of anti-utopian essays:

> But what utopians envision is not a better world. It is a perfect world - or in Kant's two-centuries-old formulation, "a perfectly constituted state" - that utopians wish to bring about. And that is what makes them dangerous, because if perfection is the aim, and compromise taboo, there will always be a shortfall to correct - a human shortfall. There will always be those whose presence mars your idea of perfection or mine, and if you or I really believe that we have the means of perfecting the world, you may feel justified in doing away with me, or I with you. When communism "fell," the intellectual world divided into two camps: those who said it was time to go back to the drawing board and those who said it was time to get rid of drawing boards. I am utterly of the latter persuasion, and have been devoting myself wholly - both as scholar and as journalist - to the destruction

[107] The ubiquity of utopias has become a contemporary topic and revived interest in Bloch's perspective on it. See Cooper, Davina. *Everyday Utopias: The Conceptual Life of Promising Spaces*. Duke University Press, 2014 and Balasopoulos Antonis. "Factories Utopias Decoration and Upholstery: On Utopia Modernism and Everyday Life." *Utopian Studies* 2014 pp. 268–298.

> of drawing boards, that is, the hubristic fantasy that people can design a perfect world and then, at whatever cost, bring it into being.[108]

Taruskin argues that utopians aim at perfection, not just betterment. The theorization of a perfect state and then supporting this state with establishments that would fix the state of perfection are the main building blocks of blueprint utopian literature. Taruskin finds this dangerous in the sense that there is not much room for compromise, let alone failure. For him, imperfection is an essential aspect of life and human nature. This resistance against the notion of utopian perfectionism rests on the idea that everybody's version of a perfect world will be different in either larger concepts or only in details. Taruskin finds such authors and scholars arrogant in their belief that perfection is attainable and fixable. And indeed, literary history has shown time and again that utopian projection tends to fail when perfection is the main goal. This is, however, largely a facet of blueprint utopianism whereas utopias written that focus on the improvement of women's rights and conditions steer away from close-ended eutopias and lean towards open-ended, critical utopias, which may even be dystopias. Perhaps the most important aspect of utopianism to which scholars object is the perspectivism that is inherent in blueprint utopianism. One person's utopia is theoretically another person or group's dystopia, which has been a considerable factor in the downfall of both eutopian and dystopian worlds in literature.

The supposedly natural "human shortfall" that Taruskin mentions above, which implies there can never be a perfect world, resonates with scholarly analyses of people striving for alternative worlds under one banner. In her work "Academic Feminisms: Between Disidentification, Messy Everyday Utopianism, and Cruel Optimism," Swedish gender studies professor Nina Lykke consults Judith Butler's ideas on political disidentification as a negative factor in group relations:

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[108] Taruskin, *The Danger of Music And Other Anti-Utopian Essays*, xii.

> Butler discusses how imagined political communities gathering under the banner of a unifying category (e.g. 'woman' or 'queer') must always fail to establish the unity which the signifier seems to promise. The performative political signifier can never capture the complex web of intersectional social relations in which the community's participants are always already embedded. According to Butler, participants will always be socioculturally more diverse than the singular category under which they organize. Some dimensions of the participants' diversity will always be excluded by the unifying signifier. [109]

In the gender separatist utopian novels I examine in this dissertation, the unifying category would most commonly be cisgender women. Choosing to separate from the rest of society and become self-sufficient in the absence of men is the fundamental act that initiates the eutopian projects of these women. However, without considering the intersectionality and nuances of sociopolitical factors of their condition, separating merely based on assigned sex ends up producing a failed utopia where people of all sexes experience disappointment and disillusionment from the eutopian mechanism. Apparently, homogeneity, one unifying category, or sharing one identity in this regard is not a feasible foundation on which to build a eutopia. This is one aspect of why gender separatist utopian novels do not have happy endings even though the need for a separate safe space is well-founded and the space itself is still maintained as it was intended.

Another anti-utopian resistance against blueprint utopias would be the totalitarianism that is inherent in the application of such top-down metanarrative projects. Without individual or

[109] Lykke, "Academic Feminisms: Between Disidentification, Messy Everyday Utopianism, and Cruel Optimism," 3.

group opposition, separatist utopias in the corpus I have found are totalitarian in their political regimes, as can be observed in various examples from literature, such as in Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country* where breaking the rules of their community results in exile or as in Joanna Russ' *The Female Man* which presents a parallel universe where some men who do not exhibit characteristics traditionally deemed masculine are surgically reassigned as women. Blueprints come with obligations to exercise the plans regardless of personal opinions and preferences within that group, which creates friction in the diegetic society, rendering the blueprint inapplicable in the long run.

Utopian scholar Jorge Bastos da Silva quotes Joseph Conrad writing to H. G. Wells, on the "fundamental difference in the impulse or temperament that drives" eutopian and dystopia imagination: "The difference between us is fundamental. You don't care for humanity but think they are to be improved. I love humanity but know they are not."[110] This quote emphasizes the importance of intention behind the motivation to portray a different and better way of life. In eutopias, the mechanisms of the narrative are beyond the time and space in which readers find themselves. That is, the readers are neither at the beginning nor the end of the existence and development stages of these eutopias. In this sense, they can never be conceived of as active participants in the establishment and improvement processes of a given eutopia. However, when dystopias are portrayed, there is more active motivation and proactive imagination in the plot to change the dystopia into a eutopia. Dystopias provoke the impulse toward the improvement of humankind, thus making use of hope in a more indirect, but perhaps also more constructive way. That is to say: even though dystopia is considered to be a negative approach to world-building, I believe there is more space and appreciation for hope in the darkness of dystopias than in the already established and perfectionist norms of blueprint eutopias.

[110] Silva, *The Epistemology of Utopia: Rhetoric, Theory and Imagination*, 555.

If utopianism is considered from a Blochian standpoint, the genre of utopia cannot be dead as ubiquitous wishful thinking is embedded everywhere in history and in contemporary culture. Hope resides in political theories, in social state government services, and in personal practices of improvement. Hope and the possibility of improving upon the human condition are supposed to be always present. In the gender separatist utopias I examine, the women, either collectively as a society or only within smaller councils, desire and implement a society without men in the hope this will improve their lives. Their fantasy of a good life concerns avoiding certain characteristics that have been traditionally attributed to men in their respective historical and sociopolitical contexts. As these texts also show, their notion of biological essentialism is defied by the impossibility of gender-based homogeneity across the society depicted. The fact that women's societies in these novels are motivated by the hope of creating a good place that is free from physical and emotional threats of violence, might make them seem an expression of what North American philosopher and cultural theorist Lauren Berlant defined as "cruel optimism," an optimism marked by the limits of the benefits of hope:

> A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being. These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially.[111]

[111] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 1.

In my corpus, biologically essentialist utopias, as the product of a desire for self-preservation, do not bring about non-violence, not even overall societal contentment. This is not the effect of hope blocking or impeding improvement, however. It is rather a matter of failing. If there is cruel optimism involved, it is when both women and men in the described societies suffer due to the decisions and actions that come with the cruel optimism of the gender separatist utopian mentality followed by the leaders in these novels.

As opposed to cruel optimism and as opposed to the idea that hope should always be expressed by and embodied in positive wishful thinking, Berlant proposes the following distinction:

> Utopia conventionally depends on stimulating desire and hope in order to inspire and motivate change. Dystopias, by contrast, aim to stimulate action in order to resist or halt what is feared to be emerging. Dystopic narratives assume change, that the world is not a static or stable place but moving toward, indeed in some cases already enacting, its own ruin.[112]

Berlant's distinction is inherently helpful in my dealing with eutopias that more often than not turn into dystopias. Even though positive utopian thought still exists, some aspects of utopianism itself may create false hope by suggesting that perfection is achievable, sustainable, or even desirable. While betterment rather than perfection is the more attainable goal and eutopias more often than not are mirror images of dystopias, the perception that dystopian representations are on the rise can be a sign of the failure in trusting eutopian imaginations or positive visualizations of the future. To announce the death of utopia, whether feminist, gender separatist, or otherwise, may be necessary precisely to open up the possibility of action, of resistance implied in

[112] Ibid, 31.

dystopias. In what follows I will argue that the tendency of considering dystopian narratives as a stance *against* utopian thought devalues their potential in providing opportunities for utopian change.

Feminist utopian hope in seemingly hopeless dystopias

The conflation of content, context, and intent in utopian literature is common. What I mean to say is that we, as readers, make positive or negative attributions of the input we receive. At times we do not fully know or estimate what the author intended to convey implicitly or explicitly. To decide whether an intentional space is meant as eutopia or dystopia is dependent also on our own context and the lens we are reading the text with. All factors considered, the concept of hope to be found in eutopias and dystopias alike is what I aim to examine in this section.

If the 1980s brought a dystopian shift in utopian literature, this shift seemed to imply a historical fissure. A classic utopian example of hope is Mary Bradley Lane's novel *Mizora: A Prophecy*, published in 1880. In this novel, Bradley Lane, a North American feminist science fiction author and also teacher, depicts a feminist utopian setting where women maintain their communities by reproducing via parthenogenesis and practicing eugenics. The history of this imagined land includes a military government that falls and brings chaos to the country. An all-woman sociopolitical order replaces the military rule of the past while the remaining men are ambiguously eliminated. In the novel, a Russian aristocrat and author called Vera stumbles upon Mizora during her travels after a shipwreck. After living with the Esquimaux for a while, she then sails into the open sea to find her footing. When she asks for the land she sees ahead, she is told that "'[a]cross that no white man's foot has ever stepped," and soon after she launches herself to the open sea with the boat the community constructed for her.[113] First, with every strong wave, she is moving with hope. Then, however, things get worse:

[113] Bradley Lane, *Mizora: A Prophecy*, 9.

> On and on, and on I rowed until the shore and my late companions were lost in the gloomy distance. On and on, until fatigued almost to exhaustion; and still, no land. A feeling of uncontrollable lonesomeness took possession of me. Silence reigned supreme. No sound greeted me save the swirl of the gently undulating waters against the boat, and the melancholy dip of the oars. Overhead, the familiar eyes of the night were all that pierced the gloom that seemed to hedge me in. My feeling of distress increased when I discovered that my boat had struck a current and was beyond my control. Visions of a cataract and inevitable death instantly shot across my mind. Made passive by intense despair, I laid down in the bottom of the boat, to let myself drift into whatever fate was awaiting me.[114]

Vera's account of the events starts hopefully and melodically as if she is singing a rowing shanty. Her hope slowly and gradually wears out as melancholy fills its place. In the end, she accepts her unfortunate fate and submits to the violent sea, awaiting death. It is exactly after this turn of events from hope to despair that she awakes to find her boat ashore in the land of women, Mizora. Her hopeful endeavor and perseverance have brought her to a newfound utopia.

The shift to the prevalence of dystopian literature in the 1980s shows that eutopias are not the only expression of the positive utopian impulse that drives the imaginary community towards a better society and sustainable communal growth. Eutopian ideas continue to be practiced and challenged in dystopian as well as critical utopian novels. These dystopian novels, such as Tepper, *The Gate to Women's Country* or *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, do not present blueprint eutopias that imply utopianism as method; rather, they reflect on the utopian ideas via a warning for what could befall the community if they are not careful. While eutopias present

[114] Ibid, 10.

society from a positive and enlightened perspective in which perfection is being achieved by following the utopian blueprint, dystopias portray this impression from the other way around where the blueprint has failed and precarious misery has overcome the society. In the former, one can see the positive projections and blueprints while in the latter the negative events can be taken as warnings. Critical utopias diverge from this axis in that they portray societies that set out to be better than contemporary society but with problems that are left open-ended in the course of the narrative progression. Russ' *The Female Man* is a great example of this with a narrative twist. Because the novel presents four intersecting plots in separate timelines, the reader gets to see warning signs between different worlds: one that looks like ours, one that looks like the Great Depression never ended, one that is a separatist feminist utopian paradise, and one that is the ultimate dystopia where women and men are at war. By employing this narrative technique, Russ was able to put critical attention to various sides of the feminist utopian project.

With regard to both critical utopias and dystopias, I argue that the feminist utopian impulse is technically not dead but precisely lives on in feminist critical utopias that can also be examples of dystopian literature. There is much to be said in defense of dystopias, as utopian scholar Keith M. Booker explains:

> If the main value of literature in general is its ability to make us see the world in new ways, to make us capable of entertaining new and different perspectives on reality, then dystopian fiction is not a marginal genre. It lies at the very heart of the literary project. […] Dystopian thought does not disable utopian thought, but merely acts as a healthy opposing voice that helps prevent utopian thought from going stale.[115]

[115] Booker, *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism*, 176.

On the surface, the dystopian genre exhibits an undesirable turn of events; however, the interpretation and function of these negative fictional events can serve other purposes that simply portray a gloom of despair. For one, the tension between eutopias and dystopias may connote the tension between hopeful utopian thought as expressed in the novels and the dystopian reality of the worlds within which these novels appear. The "healthy opposing voice" challenges stagnant ways of being, and may motivate people to notice ways to improve. In Booker's words:

> In the final analysis, the most important contribution of dystopian thought may be to provide opposing voices that challenge utopian ideals, thus keeping those ideals fresh and viable and preventing them from degenerating into dogma. By taking dystopian fiction seriously and by using the dystopian impulse as a focal point for polyphonic confrontations among literature, popular culture, and social criticism we as readers can contribute to this challenge, which is ultimately a positive one. Indeed, it may be that dystopian warnings of impending nightmares are ultimately necessary to preserve any possible dream of a better future.[116]

For Booker, the most important aspect of dystopian thought towards a eutopian future is providing opposing voices that show the parts of the dystopia that can become dogma and, by implication, oppression and the parts that need opportunities for change and growth. Dystopian thought urges the reader and the critic to step outside the fictional narrative, observe the outside world, and bring healthy criticism to the contemporary status quo. Therefore, challenging utopian ideals with a dystopian voice can argumentatively contribute to the utopian impulse of betterment.

[116] Ibid, 177.

In arguments against utopian thought, utopianism is considered to be aiming at perfection and perfection alone. However, as utopian theory has evolved over the centuries of theory and literature, and more subgenres have developed without utopian thought, it has become evident that perfection is unattainable because of one decisive characteristic: it assumes closure. *Aiming* at perfection is the real utopian act; not *achieving* perfection and fixing a society forever at this stable point in time. Where there is closure, there is decay because the citizens of that utopia will continue to evolve while the blueprint becomes outdated every second. Constant betterment based on utopian hope and principles, as opposed to aiming at reaching perfection, may be ways to achieve a eutopia that fulfills its citizens' desires.

Aspects of utopianism that are not focused on blueprints for perfection can be traced in critical and open-ended utopias. This is the point where traditional utopian fiction establishes a connection with subversive speculative fiction, as the British utopian scholar Lucy Sargisson argues:

> [t]hey are openended texts that let go of the notion of perfection. By so doing, they escape the finality of utopias of perfection. Their content tends to be marked by various manifestations of discontent or wariness towards the concept of perfection. Rather than waxing lyrical about the nature of the perfect society that is imagined, these texts tend to focus instead on satire, on speculation, on ridiculing past universals.[117]

The notion of perfection in utopian literature necessitates the fixation on communal principles and requires homogeneity within the community, which hinders and debilitates the ongoing nature of continuous utopian improvement. Manifestations of discontent, which are expressed by

[117] Sargisson, *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism*, 20.

protagonists in utopian novels when they realize the disillusionment they feel within their community, are necessary emotional evaluations for the maintenance of truly utopian spaces, that is to say, open-ended spaces. Open-ended utopias without a fixed closure are especially crucial for the case of feminist utopianism due to the evolving and varying needs of women; needs that cannot be homogenized.[118]

A recent title, *Utopian Thinking in Law, Politics, Architecture and Technology*, with the subtitle *Hope in a Hopeless World*, interrogates the ubiquitous utopian thinking. In this book, Marta Soniewicka, professor of law and legal ethics, argues for the value and necessity of social imagination in connection with the concept of hope:

> Hope should neither be confused with optimism, nor with a mere expectation or prediction. Hope is rather a special kind of virtue – an attitude of trust in the unknown future, faithfulness in the hour of darkness in the source of inspiration and direct participation in the process of creation of the better world to come. […] Having hope does not mean denying the reality with all its atrocities; however, it is a refusal to accept the hopelessness of one's own situation or the world's situation. [119]

In the end, the problematization of hope focuses on whether that hope reflects empty optimism or whether it motivates action. Feminist critical and dystopian novels reject predetermined conclusions and closures and establish spaces that encourage the free exploration of a different life. Utopian hope, in this context, is obscured beneath the warnings pertaining to the past. I

[118] For further research on human nature in the context of utopian literature, see Gorman Beauchamp, "Imperfect Men in Perfect Societies: Human Nature in Utopia." *Philosophy and Literature* 31 no. 2, 2007, p. 280-293; and Nivedita Bagchi. *A Perfect World for Imperfect People?: Theories of Human Nature in Utopian and Dystopian Fiction*. BiblioBazaar, 2009.
[119] Bart van Klink, Marta Soniewicka and Leon van den Broeke, "Introduction: A return to utopia," *Utopian Thinking in Law, Politics, Architecture and Technology* (2022): 8.

would like to argue here that the hope discovered beneath the warnings is just as valid and fruitful as the perceived and at times biased positivity found in blueprint eutopias.

Conclusion: Unearthing optimistic feminist utopianism

In this chapter, I have argued against the notion that utopia, or utopian hope, is dead or that utopianism is an endeavor in vain. More importantly, I have argued that despite the abundance of feminist dystopias, feminist utopianism is not dead. It rather finds life in dystopias, even when the eutopian intention gets expressed through the expression of failed blueprint utopias. Italian utopian scholar Raffaella Baccolini's words resonate well with my perspective in this chapter: "Utopia is maintained in dystopia, traditionally a bleak, depressing genre with no space for hope in the story, only outside the story: only by considering dystopia as a warning can we as readers hope to escape such a dark future."[120] As mentioned, the 1980s brought a dystopian shift in utopian literature. Since then, open-ended critical utopias have been favored over blueprint utopianism. Resisting a fixed ending and closure, such feminist critical and dystopian novels create space that allows for a multitude of ideas to be conceived and explored. Utopian hope is buried under layers of catastrophic warnings. Or, so I want to argue, the hope that is found in dystopias is just as legitimate as the ones found in eutopias.

As mentioned before, the death of utopia as a concept mainly reflects the idea that the number of published eutopian novels has decreased. Likewise, feminist utopian literature seems to be on the decline when searched for within the confined context of the traditional utopian novel. Utopian wishful thinking, however, is still present even when it is manifested in different ways. Beneath the surface, women authors have found diverse ways of portraying utopian impulses in genres other than the novel such as the works mentioned in this chapter. In the various examples that I have shared so far, I find that gender separatist feminist utopian novels

[120] Baccolini, "The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction," 520.

merge the idea of eutopia and dystopia together, presenting a fictional world that operates on the border between fantasy and reality. The novels thus provoke the question of agency, as is also expressed when Berlant discusses the friction between fantasy and reality that stands at the center of her study:

> At the center of the project, though, is that moral – intimate - economic thing called "the good life." Why do people stay attached to conventional good-life fantasies - say, of enduring reciprocity in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets, and at work - when the evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear cost abounds? Fantasy is the means by which people hoard idealizing theories and tableaux about how they and the world "add up to something." What happens when those fantasies start to fray - depression, dissociation, pragmatism, cynicism, optimism, activism, or an incoherent mash?[121]

The "fantasies that start to fray" very well resemble the dystopias that constitute my corpus. Protagonists who are discontent with the eutopia they supposedly have are the clues to observing how the utopian fantasies start to fray and become dystopias, resembling "an incoherent mash" of disappointment, helplessness, hopelessness, crisis, and fallout.

However, utopian hope still has value in that even feminist dystopian novels question the patriarchal status quo that subjugates women. In a sense the novels perform a struggle that does not so much concern the impossibility of a perfect other society, but the imperfectness of the world in which the novels operate. Here, dystopian narratives are utopian in principle. With respect to this, Baccolini notes:

[121] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 2.

> […] the presence of Utopian hope does not necessarily mean a happy ending. Rather, awareness and responsibility are the conditions of the critical dystopia's citizens. A sense of sadness accompanies the awareness and knowledge that the protagonist has attained. Instead of providing some compensatory and comforting conclusion, the critical dystopia's open ending leaves its characters to deal with their choices and responsibilities. It is in the acceptance of responsibility and accountability, often worked through memory and the recovery of the past, that we bring the past into a living relation with the present and may thus begin to lay the foundations for Utopian change.[122]

Just as Baccolini states, awareness and responsibility are the building blocks of the continued betterment of dystopian conditions, thus leading to a never-fully attainable but also progressing eutopian condition. The ongoing process that Bacolini describes is in itself optimistic and meaningful because it implies change. Here, Baccolini's perspective is more optimistic than Berlant's, and I am on the more optimistic side as well. While I argue that all feminist acts and imaginings are eutopian in essence, the project of building a eutopia can still fail and become an example of what Berlant refers to as cruel optimism. This I unpack in the last chapter of this dissertation. First, we will have to discuss how the opening up of a better society implies the destruction of an existing one.

[122] Baccolini, "The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction," 521.