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

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Citation

Anli, Z. (2024, September 6). *Hope, destruction, and rebirth: acts of recovery in gender separatist feminist utopian literature*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4082491>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

3. Tabula rasa as a clean slate – or uncleanable slate

The motif of destruction serves as a pivotal breaking point from a male-dominated historical narrative. In gender separatist utopian novels, the notion of an intentional or perceived tabula rasa that emerges in the aftermath of destruction becomes a driving force, motivating the imagination and construction of a feminist utopian society from the ground up - a society built on a fresh foundation unburdened by history. The previous world is destroyed due to the poor life conditions of women and it appears that a new eutopian condition can only be formed when the ashes of that old world have settled down. The question, however, is whether such ashes ever really settle down in a way that one can speak of a clean slate in the concept of tabula rasa.

In this chapter, I concentrate first on one of the fundamental motivations behind the concept of tabula rasa and how it relates to historiography and the concept of rebirth. Then I move on to exploring the history and theory of matriarchal societies in gender separatist utopian novels based on a sociopolitical structure that is formed on the foundation of a *tabula rasa* right after a form of destruction has taken place. The condition of tabula rasa acts as a convenient metaphor, then, for the enterprise of creating a new society, which is why the reduction of tabula rasa to “blank slate” in the historical and theoretical evolution of the term requires a closer look. I will do so in the next section. In the end, I examine how the idea of tabula rasa interacts with utopian hope in general.

There is some variety in how gender separatist utopian literary works express the motif of tabula rasa. *Daughters of a Coral Dawn* (1984) by Katherine V. Forrest and *Ammonite* by Nicola Griffith (1992), for instance, are utopian examples that utilize a tabula rasa motif without any case of explicit destruction preceding the foundation of their societies. Instead, these novels employ more passive and implicit methods of cleaning the slate in their plots such as compulsory interplanetary relocations. From the same literary period, *The Y Chromosome* (1990) by Leona

Gom and *Califia's Daughters* (2004) by Laurie R. King are novels in which the concept of tabula rasa follows a clear instance of destruction fueled by genetic viruses that kill only men and/or as a direct consequence of the actions of men. Another example is Sheri S. Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country* (1989) in which the destruction has been caused by a catastrophic nuclear war. In either case, the plots have one starting point in common: the tabula rasa stage in which the communities rebuild their societies, regardless of whether this takes place before or after recapitulating their pasts. Recognizing the nuances of this concept can provide a better understanding of the interconnected nature of destruction and rebirth in my corpus.

Tabula rasa, herstory, and historiography

The theme of tabula rasa aims to problematize and undo *history*. The first course of action it inspires is starting over with a new and improved society after a catastrophic event that destroys the old status quo. This process of unearthing and emphasizing a so-called *herstory* instead of a history underlines the achievements and capabilities of women that have been systematically overlooked in the written records of older patriarchal societies. In this context, the word *herstory* has transformative feminist energy: the use of this newer term is aimed at reclaiming women's space in history and rewriting the dominant male-centric narrative. Consequently, subverting an existing term to express *her* instead of *his* acts as an example of metaphorically destroying a word whose narrative traditions prioritized the justification and glorification of male achievements. Instead, *herstory* presents a term that emphasizes women's historical past and accomplishments.

When one takes a closer look, however, the etymology of the word *history* does not have any clear connection to the third-person male singular possessive determiner word *his*. The root of the word is *historia* from Latin, which means “expert, witness”¹⁸¹ and *his* is not the male

¹⁸¹ For the extended etymology of the word *history*, see <https://www.etymonline.com/word/history>

possessive determiner in Latin nor does it have a concrete connection with the Latin equivalent of *his*, which is *suus*. Therefore, the use of *herstory* as part of feminist terminology signifies a postmodern reshaping of the word as opposed to a *reclaiming* of the word from the male paradigm. In other words, the term *history* actually never excluded women's experience and achievements semantically. Therefore, there is no direct, etymological correlation with changing the word into *herstory* to facilitate the inclusion of women's experiences and achievements within the realm of history-writing. The way history has been interpreted and written, however, has immensely affected the representation of women's experiences and achievements throughout history. This is why I think the creation of the word *herstory* is undoubtedly valuable in the awareness it creates and the rewriting/reclaiming of the history it facilitates. In the literature I am studying, the concept of *herstory* transforms the fantasy of total destruction into an act of stepping away from the traditional understanding and supposed continuity of history.

The term *tabula rasa* is related to 'birth' in the context of gender separatist utopian novels. In this subgenre, it is presupposed that human nature is imperfect but somewhat redeemable. I reach this conclusion because education has always been a fundamental concept in woman-only utopian spaces. While there exists the belief that men are inherently aggressive and harmful, there is also the belief that women can be educated in such a way that they conform to the ideals of the post-destruction eutopia. Therefore, education is one of the core concepts in the re-imagination of the new society, based on the idea that a human being (or at least a woman) starts life without any preexisting traits such as aggression. However, at this point, I am especially interested in the different connotations attributed to the term *tabula rasa* rather than an examination of human nature itself.

Etymologically, the literal translation of *tabula rasa* from Latin is "scraped tablet," meaning the writing on the tablet has been erased, making the tablet available for use again.¹⁸²

¹⁸² For the extended etymology of the word *tabula rasa*, see <https://www.etymonline.com/word/tabula%20rasa>

The act of scraping is different from receiving a brand-new and clean surface to write on. The tablet carries the traces of the previous writings. Nonetheless, “blank slate” is the most common translation and terminological usage of *tabula rasa*. The conceptual discussion of *tabula rasa* can benefit from a brief discussion of its theoretical history; therefore, here I will look into some of the most consulted definitions and argumentations around the concept of *tabula rasa* from philosophical history. In the following pages, I briefly examine the work of René Descartes, John Locke, and Sigmund Freud in this context. Through this interrogation, some intersecting and perhaps conflicting notions around *tabula rasa* may arise and these can facilitate a better understanding of the inner workings of the destruction and rebirth motifs in gender-separated feminist utopian literary works in my corpus.

My list makes a rough start from the Enlightenment era. Seventeenth-century French philosopher and mathematician René Descartes holds a theologically creationist view in terms of *tabula rasa*, believing that there is an innate design and inherent logic behind human behavior and characteristic features, regardless of the processes of experiences and observations to which any child has access. Below is an excerpt from the dialogue in his work *The Search for Truth by Means of Natural Light* where he questions the first concepts that are known by people, what their “soul” includes by birth, and how he argues that this is an imperfect state to begin with:

It seems to me that all this can be explained very clearly if we compare the imagination of a child to a *tabula rasa* on which our ideas are to be traced, these ideas being like portraits drawn from nature. Our senses, inclinations, teachers and intellect are the different artists who may work at this task, and among them the least competent are the first to take part, namely our imperfect senses, blind instincts and foolish nurses.¹⁸³

¹⁸³ Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes Volume 2*, 406.

Descartes starts by likening the mind of a child to *tabula rasa* and then relating that connection to an artist's painting. If nature is mirrored in this work of art, there will be several factors that cannot be fully controlled. He mentions that the least competent of the faculties (“imperfect senses, blind instincts and foolish nurses”) will be the first to be imprinted on the child while still a baby. Descartes concentrates more on how to correct this imperfection. Following this presentation of the problem, Eudoxus, with whom Descartes is having the dialogue, suggests that it would be better to “wipe [the imperfections] off with a sponge” instead of wasting time by trying to make corrections.¹⁸⁴ They relate the example of the painting back to the mind of a child. They agree that when a child reaches an age of maturity, they could reframe their thoughts accordingly. However, this brings Descartes to his first point that the first imprints are not only the least competent but also the most deeply etched ones.¹⁸⁵ In his conceptualization, *tabula rasa* cannot be a clean slate, therefore, because it will at least carry the deepest imprints that were the first received.

Regardless of the dialogue from Descartes above, English philosopher and physician¹⁸⁶ John Locke is usually attributed as the first person to use the term *tabula rasa* in the context of “blank slate.” He argues that any child starts life from a blank state and then learns certain skills and behaviors through empirical experiences:

All ideas come from sensation or reflection. Let us then suppose the mind to be,
as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas:- How comes it to
be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store which the busy and boundless

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Although whether Locke was a medical doctor or not is disputed, it is accurate to state that he had comprehensive medical knowledge.

fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from EXPERIENCE. In that all our knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives itself. Our observation employed either, about external sensible objects, or about the internal operations of our minds perceived and reflected on by ourselves, is that which supplies our understandings with all the materials of thinking. These two are the fountains of knowledge, from whence all the ideas we have, or can naturally have, do spring.¹⁸⁷

Locke refers to tabula rasa as “white paper” in this quote and reflects that the paper is completely void of anything it could hold. For him, everything comes from experience and observation of both external and internal happenings. He argues that we need to draw from both of these sources to fill our tabula rasa effectively. His ideas on the nature of a child’s brain upon birth emphasize that people have the opportunity to obtain different experiences and observations to form their opinions, behaviors, and skills. He does not believe in the existence of innate ideas in a child’s mind. This line of thinking also supports Locke’s legacy as the father of liberalism, as evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker argues. This argument against innate opinions or qualities rules out the assumed differences among people from different ethnic groups, gender expressions, economic class, or other sociopolitical backgrounds.¹⁸⁸

Here I will jump two centuries ahead and explore tabula rasa from the viewpoint of the Austrian neurologist and psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. The human psyche comprises a significant portion of his work. The concept of tabula rasa plays a role when he concentrates on factors external to the psyche of the individual. In his essay “Notiz über den „Wunderblock“” he

¹⁸⁷ Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 17.

¹⁸⁸ Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, 6.

concentrates on memory perception apparatuses in the formation of the psyche. While doing so, he uses the term paper (*Blatt Papier*) referring to a clean page.¹⁸⁹ The way memory perception works would necessitate the person to keep needing new clean pages as more and more information or memories need to be stored. At this point, he mentions an object named *Wunderblock*,¹⁹⁰ which is a copy sheet notebook made with a celluloid plate and wax paper. The papers in this notebook create a copy of the writings on the previous page while leaving permanent traces (*auerhafte Erinnerungsspur*)¹⁹¹ behind. The way Freud uses the terminology of *tabula rasa* underlines that it is an uncleanable slate. Since he is arguing in a cognitive development context, he also underlines that the slate is uncleanable; therefore, previous experiences can be remembered even when they become vague over time.

Let me, before I return to the function of *tabula rasas* in feminist utopian literature, sum up the main insights of this overview. The Cartesian view represents the existence of preconceived intrinsic ideas and models, thereby implying that the concept of a *clean* *tabula rasa* is impossible because there cannot be a blank slate. On the other hand, Lockean view puts the emphasis on a clean or empty start and the experiential learning process that fills the mind with knowledge. This view would be a better fit for the birth of a new world and the intended rebuilding purposes of the gender separatist utopian literary formulation. However, the way Freud uses the concept of *tabula rasa* through the example of the mystic writing pad (*Wunderblock*) provides many insights into the way *tabula rasa* is used in the gender separatist utopian subgenre. With his example, the past leaves its traces behind and it is indeed expected to leave traces behind so that those can be remembered. Even though the phrase *tabula rasa* may make us think of a *clean slate* and a fresh start free from history, the philosophical history behind

¹⁸⁹ Freud, "Notiz Über Den „Wunderblock“." *Internationale Zeitschrift Für Psychoanalyse* 10, no. 1, 1924, pp. 1-5. 1.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 2.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

the terminology reveals that a clean slate cannot be achieved. As both the warnings and nostalgia relating to the destroyed worlds in my corpus play an important role in how the new utopian spaces are imagined, created, and maintained, the *uncleanable but wiped slate* nuance of *tabula rasa* explains the narrative trope in my corpus in a more fitting way.

Semantic shifts and changes surrounding the term thus fluctuate between the perfection of a pre-existing clean slate – “formlessness prior to text” – and its exact opposite, namely an existing text being erased to make a clean surface on which new text can be written. The first option concerns a (textual) history that starts without a pre-history. The second option implies that textual production, and by implication history, is a process of permanent inscription, erasure, and new inscriptions. Both options are relevant, or operative, in gender separatist utopian novels, though with a different impact. The first option, of starting history from scratch, connotes a wish or a desire to be able to not have a pre-existing history. The second option connotes rather a plot structure of making history *anew*, and making history *anew* implies that there was a pre-existing history. In the following section, I will examine the operations and interactions of both of these options in my corpus.

American historian and literary critic Hayden White mentions that he treats history as “a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of *explaining what they were by representing them*.”¹⁹² He further explains how the “transformation of chronicle into story” happens via the arrangement of the events in a temporal order, organizing a beginning, middle, and end, and characterization of events into motifs.¹⁹³ In my opinion, the novels in this subgenre have a very specific way of telling the events of the past. In many instances, their narrative impact almost feels like a gathering around the campfire. This narrative of the past is usually told by a revered

¹⁹² White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe*, 2.

¹⁹³ *Ibid*, 5.

member of the community who is either old enough to remember the past or who is a historian that has access to archives. The way this historical narrative is presented acts as a justification for the decisions of the past but also as a catalyst for future decisions. I argue that the representation of history in this context thus also brings forth the verbal construction of herstory through the narrativization of past events.

This rewriting of history brings up the question of when history actually starts: with the incident of destruction or with the presentation of the narrative story of history within the plot. If there is no history without being written or told, does it then start when we are told about the events of the past? As destruction creates a *tabula rasa* state, the rewriting of history starts when the utopian communities learn about or think back at the historical state before destruction. The concept of *tabula rasa* in this subgenre problematizes the idea of rewriting history into herstory.

From *tabula rasa* to *tabula fixata*

As I reviewed in the previous chapter, the destruction motif in gender separatist and radical feminist utopian novels is a subversive act rooted in the historical desire to take back control from the patriarchal power dynamics that interpreted the active role of women in society and family from a passive viewpoint. Therefore, in the act of rebuilding a feminist society in these utopian novels, there is a cyclical motion from passive struggle to active revolution and rebirth. The choice of utilizing the concept of *tabula rasa* as a point of departure in this subgenre of gender separatist utopianism further emphasizes the belief that human beings are redeemable, which is a notion that aids the cultivation of hope in this subgenre of utopianism.

As I said previously, the desire for destruction and world-building becomes an integral part of radical feminist utopianism on the basis that a blank slate enables the possibility for human redemption. As the concept of utopianism constitutes a hopeful endeavor in gender separatist novels, redeeming humanity is one of the main objectives of the newly established

communities. These communities presuppose a birth without history or a start from scratch and rely on educational efforts to create a society that aligns with the new utopian ideals. These ideals are meant to be fixed and become common traits of that society. Thus, these utopian communities aim to establish a transition from a *tabula rasa* state to a *tabula fixata* state.

The aim of reaching a clean slate with the perceived dystopian world is mirrored via the efforts of reaching a clean slate with human beings that are born in this new society. In the novels, the debate of educating or conditioning certain traits out of society mostly concerns whether males are aggressive by nature or not. This is an extension of the debate between genetics (what cannot be controlled prior to birth) and environment (what can be controlled through social interventions after birth). The origin of the concept dates back to the surge of the political and ethical debates around eugenics in science at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁹⁴ What was once a debate of comparison and denial between the two sides of an assumed binary opposition, genetics versus environment, has evolved into a complementary research effort of these two factors and an understanding that both substantially affect the development of an individual in different stages at varying levels.

The timeline of the novels discussed in this chapter coincides with the period after the culmination of research from the schools of both social and biological determinism. How we are by birth and how we grow are no longer considered opposing forces. The ending of the novels reflects this idea as well. Even though the communities of women shun males *en masse* due to their assumed innately aggressive nature, the gender separatist utopian communities of women often become aware of this misattribution towards the end of the novel. This resolution comes up when the women notice the aggression and corruption within the women of the community and

¹⁹⁴ See Francis Galton, "On Men of Science, their Nature and their Nurture." *Proceedings of the Royal Institution of Great Britain*. 7 (1875): 227-236.

when they start realizing that some men are not as inherently aggressive as the community leaders have indoctrinated the men to be and the women to believe that the men are.

The process of re-education of the society becomes an integral part of the newly established one. This emphasis on education is placed in order to fix certain desirable traits that are considered to advance the life quality and survival rate of society. First and foremost, the transition from the catastrophic destruction phase to the eutopian tabula rasa phase presents an amalgamation of aspects of both the innate and unchangeable characteristics as well as the redeemable and educable characteristics of human beings. The main rationale behind destruction, starting over, and rebuilding a women-led and women-populated society is the belief that if the educational efforts employed in patriarchal societies are adjusted to reflect the needs of women, the outcome of the societal status could also create a more egalitarian society. This would, in turn, cater to the needs of women in a more profound and constructive way. However, when these fictional societies enter the tabula rasa stage after the destruction that wipes out their civilization or that kills off only men, the new women leaders act on the assumption that the nature of men is inherently flawed. This biologically essentialist assumption leads to the creation of a gender separatist paradigm in which men are kept away from women. This is not only because their nature is considered to be detrimental to the overall wellbeing of the eutopian society but also because their assumably flawed nature would corrupt the society due to the war technologies they might develop. In other words, the assumed unwelcome inherent nature of men is expected to negatively affect the way in which the new society is supposed to be functioning.

Furthermore, these eutopias rely heavily on the precautions against the factors that have given rise to the destruction of society in the first place. This precautionary state is also the case in the gender separatist novels in my research in which such precautions become the main principles and also the laws of the new eutopian community. The rules become the foundations of the principles of nurture. Consequently, education holds great importance in the re-

establishment of society because, in addition to reproductive practices, education is considered to be the central activity in the survival of the new communities. Educational efforts in this context most often cater to the immediate needs of the community, both practically and culturally. The fear of advancing science and technology represents the fear of a perceived danger originating from the unpredictability of human nature that could start wars and similar phases of destruction known from history. Therefore, the common plots of gender separatist utopian novels explore the amplification of these polar opposites and show a didactic and often satirical version of gender relations.

Tabula rasa vs the inscription of history: a case study

One of the novels in which the concepts of biologically essentialist innate characteristics and education play an important role is *The Y Chromosome*, a utopian novel written in 1990 by the Canadian author Leona Gom. In addition to publishing poetry, Gom has worked as a professor in the fields of women's studies and sociology. Her gender separatist utopian novel *The Y Chromosome* takes place in the future where an all-woman society is formed after a deadly virus attacks the Y chromosome, wiping off the male species from the face of the earth. The new society comprised of the remaining people is apprehensive of the violence recorded in the male-dominated past and is cautious about certain risk factors, such as returning to the conditions that caused the destruction, so as not to return to those older times when women suffered heavily under an oppressive regime.

As I mentioned in the previous section, in this subgenre, the exposition of the past is usually accomplished through the historian character trope. Just as in the novels from the previous chapter,¹⁹⁵ *The Y Chromosome* also has a historian protagonist, Delacour. Despite other

¹⁹⁵ In addition to *Daughters of a Coral Dawn* (1984) by Katherine V. Forrest, *The Shore of Women* (1986) by Pamela Sargent, *The Gate to Women's Country* (1989) by Sheri S. Tepper, *The Y Chromosome* (1990) by Leona Gom, *Ammonite* (2002) by Nicola Griffith and *Califia's Daughters* (2004) by Leigh Richards (from the

members of the community questioning the validity of her work, as a historian, Delacour feels dutiful towards her job of unearthing the past and enlightening the present for the sake of her community. When her friend Bowden says “It’s just – all this stuff about the male. The Change was more than three hundred years ago. You can’t assume everyone is interested in those times,”¹⁹⁶ Delacour’s outlook on her job and her passion for it stays unchanged. The idea that *history* is not worth being studied due to the assumed irredeemable character of men’s nature at times becomes a reason to socially isolate and ridicule historians in gender separatist communities.

An artifact from the past, which gives direction to the plot, is one of the highlights of *The Y Chromosome*: The book titled *The Journal of Adam Markov*, written by the allegorically named author Adam, the first man but in this case also the *everyman*, which is a stock character model based on the medieval morality play *Everyman* from the fifteenth century. The broad relatability of the everyman character makes the use of this trope effective in didactic literature; consequently, *The Journal* has a didactic effect within the novel.

This journal is one of the most important books in the community library and the main source of the community’s collective knowledge about the male-dominated past. It is the way the women’s society gets to learn about the ways of the past, how the virus developed, and how it spread enough to impact the whole world. On one of the first pages of *The Journal*, Adam writes “I just tried to read one of Elizabeth’s reports she brought home from work. ‘Sexlinked Immunodysfunction Syndrome.’ What a pretty name they’ve given death.”¹⁹⁷ As the research about the virus continues, the women feel secure with the knowledge that the virus is not affecting the X chromosomes while they are also emotionally distanced from how the men are

bibliography of this dissertation), *A Door into Ocean* (1986) by Joan Slonczewski and *The Cleft* (2007) by Doris Lessing also have a strong component of the historian character trope.

¹⁹⁶ Gom, *The Y Chromosome*, 18.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, 40.

feeling about this virus. The emotional hardship the males are going through and providing them with the emotional support they may need is not a matter of discussion. Before long, the chromosome damage starts to affect the Y chromosomes at conception, thus preventing the birth of male babies and presenting a threat of extinction. Feeling agitated and cornered due to these fast and relentless developments that threaten their survival, men start to riot, mostly aiming at locations of culture (versus nature) where they would assume to encounter women to kill. This act of violence stems from the notion held by men, according to *The Journal*, that women have stopped caring about saving men. During these riots, which are presented as examples of male aggression, the sperm banks are also destroyed, leading to the probable end of the male species. Therefore, this plot development proves the assumed aggression of men in the pre-catastrophic society. According to the plot, the aggressive men deserved this extinction, by also destroying the sperm banks themselves through their own assumedly aggressive nature.

Since men are not a part of their society anymore, masculinity and the idea of being a man are merely sterile subjects of study in the classroom. However, the women of this new society do not conduct an objective study of the men: “If the male-defining phallus had really been pride-stimulus, it would not have been so determinedly hidden. Photographs. Film. Art. We are commonly depicted naked. Not males. The phallus: obviously an attribute of shame.”¹⁹⁸ Their objectifying and intense dissection and criticism of the male body and assumed behavior show their efforts to make sure the community of women does not desire to seek out the men or wish to rebuild a society resembling the one in the past. The education in the classroom is therefore a reminder of the old times, underlining that the tabula rasa is not blank and that the past is still present.

This perspective is further emphasized by one of the two thematic options for interpreting tabula rasa, as I discussed in the previous section. To recap, this option suggests that textual

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 25.

production, and consequently history, involves a continuous cycle of inscription, erasure, and subsequent inscriptions. Rather than starting history from scratch, this option conveys a plot structure centered around the continual creation of history, which inherently implies the existence of a pre-existing history.

The all-woman society is conditioned under the assumption that men are aggressive. Therefore getting rid of their genetic heritage also meant getting rid of aggression in society. However, the same students still question the rationale behind the assumed aggression of men:

“But if the male was envious of us and felt inferior,” asked someone, “how do you explain their oppression of us, their war-making and aggression?”

Hythe shrugged. “Antithesis compensation. When one cannot emulate, one emphasizes difference. Elevate deficiency to superiority.”¹⁹⁹

As this quote makes clear, the women in the classroom have gendered assumptions on which they base structures of inferiority and superiority, strengthening the metanarrative of biological essentialism against men and in favor of women.

The clearest portrayal of how the women’s community of the post-destruction era has grown to recognize men as aggressive is provided in *The Journal of Adam Markov* in which Adam documents in detail how the riots progressed. He was watching as he “saw another women’s centre [...] in flames, the crowd of men around it shouting, frenzied, the police seemingly incapable of control.”²⁰⁰ It is evident from the account in *The Journal* that the riots are taking place as a knee-jerk reaction to the fact that the female species is not targeted or negatively affected by the virus. The reaction of the men is presented as evidence of their

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, 28.

²⁰⁰ Ibid, 56.

assumed aggression in a hyper-exaggerated way. Adam, however, stands as an example of a man who goes against his assumed nature, presenting the perspective that genetics-based prejudice and assuming inherent aggression in men is unfair and destructive in itself.

The riots have gone from being centered around women and spilled over to any location where rioters thought there would be women: “The attacks are getting more generalized. It’s still mostly women’s centres, but now the rioters seem to be taking on places such as libraries, museums, universities. Hospitals. Anyplace, it seems, where they think there’ll be women. Maybe anyplace that represents to them culture, civilization.”²⁰¹ Women’s presence in spaces of culture, education, and achievement is a good reference to the general gender binary association between men and culture versus women and nature. The rioting men are under the impression that while men are dying, women are not working toward the survival of the male species and are ignoring their plight. Therefore, some groups of men react by lashing out at women in an attempt to prove their own superiority in the face of their impending extinction. This is also another common incident that presents the aggression of men as justification for the occurrence of destruction prior to tabula rasa.

As can be seen, in this novel, society learns about the outcome of the past aggression of men from the historical records in *The Journal*. However, when the women encounter a new man at the doorsteps of their community, they are surprised by the nature of this person’s existence defying what they had been taught about the nature of the male species in the classroom through the gender-based assumptions upheld to maintain the status quo of the gender separatist society. Below Delacour is talking to one of the men from the visiting group:

“Gentle and kind?” That doesn’t sound like what we know of males. Isn’t he...
aggressive, dominating?”

²⁰¹ Ibid, 57.

He shook his head vehemently, determined to convince her. “He’s the least aggressive of any of us. Even less so than my mother. When the animals have to be killed, he refuses to do it.” [...]

If Delacour noticed anything, she didn’t pursue it. “I suppose there always were males like that,” she said. “But they were in the minority.”²⁰²

Delacour has difficulty believing that this man is gentle and kind, as she has been taught that men are aggressive and dominating. The comparison between the mother and this man not only opens up a new door to the past, but produces a moment of contact which may allow the people from the community to question their assumptions and the highly idealized tenets of their society. The information that even his mother is more aggressive than the men challenges the assumption that men are aggressive by nature:

“We’re not that different from you.”

“Don’t you see ways in which you think, feel, behave differently from the rest of us?”

“I don’t know. How can I tell if the way I am is the result of my just being an individual or of my being male?”²⁰³

Through this conversation, the generalization of group versus individual and biological essentialism is problematized. The seeds of the next rebellion are sown through encounters that question the validity of the educational efforts of nurture in the gender separatist utopian society.

²⁰² Ibid, 179.

²⁰³ Ibid.

When individuals from opposing groups engage in conversation about their own nature, the assumptions about the other group start to disintegrate.

There is considerable resistance, however, when the characters are faced with some societal and observational facts:

“Still – how do you explain the world we’ve made, so different from the male world? Consensus governments, no wars, no killing – except by very ill people, and there were only two in the whole country last year. Violence against others as it was before the change is virtually nonexistent.”

“But perhaps that’s only because this world had an unnatural beginning. It would pick what it liked and discard what it didn’t. It seems to me that so much of life around us –” he waved his hand vaguely in the air “– the university, the way we work and think and live together – all that is chosen from the ways of the pre-Change world. This world didn’t have to struggle through centuries of trial and error, of primitive science and religion and medicine and survival of the fittest.”²⁰⁴

When Delacour questions how it is possible that there is no violence or wars in the community of women, the male visitor gives this explanation that speaks to the theoretical foundations of the subgenre. The motifs of destruction and tabula rasa provide the space for a calculated and careful reconstruction of the world. This consequently opens up the opportunity to build sociopolitical structures that can aim to avoid most of the social and communal evils and shortcomings that were observed in the past. This passage also articulates a comparison of blueprint and critical utopias in terms of how a blueprint utopia tends to cherry-pick desirable societal features and leave the rest out of the design of the new eutopian society. This way the new society is warded

²⁰⁴ Ibid, 180.

off from certain concepts that frighten them, such as destructive technology, possessive relationships, and obsessive regimes in general that may lead back to catastrophes or the return of unsatisfactory living conditions for women. All of this is possible because the tablet is not clean and because they get the opportunity to remember and learn from the historical past.

This debate on innate characteristics brings about another moral dilemma when the protagonist is pregnant with a baby from one of the new male visitors who appeared at the gates unannounced. One of the women is committed to killing this baby for fear of having a baby from an old-fashioned conception and having the accepted societal norms shaken: Men are the root of all evil and aggression, and reintegration is undesirable if not impossible. However, she does not find the task of killing a baby easy and deals with an impasse: “*I’ll kill the baby*. [...] Killing: what the males had done. Would they have justified it, too, as she was doing, that it was necessary, one small death balanced against a greater good?”²⁰⁵ She tries to come to terms with her desire to kill the baby by rationalizing the act of killing as “one small death balanced against a greater good;” the greater good being the continued exclusion of the men due to the assumptions based on their perceived aggressive nature. This rationalization is one of the rupture points of the tension between the ideals and ethics of the community and the individual. The utilitarian notion of the eutopian dream starts to fade and the belief in the concept of biological essentialism is challenged. Later, she meets the baby and humanizes him as something other than the embodiment of the idea of aggression against the community but as an individual that requires personal consideration. In the end, she comes to the conclusion that she should not kill the baby.

In conclusion, this gender separatist utopian novel that builds on the premise of biological determinism against the male species ends on a hopeful note. In the passage below, the historian Delacour elaborates that a new way of handling gender politics may be possible:

²⁰⁵ Ibid, 214.

“I’ve studied history. I *teach* history. I know what it was like before the Change.

But what caused the problems were overpopulation, poor political structures, class conflicts, resource shortages, pollution – males were trapped into them just as we were. But now, we don’t have those pressures; we’d be bringing them into an entirely different system.”²⁰⁶

Gender-based biological determinism is slowly put aside and the problems of the patriarchal society are placed more on the social, political, and economic factors that affect the nature and the nurture of people of all genders. Despite being reserved about initiating structural change, the historian character has doubts about the status quo. She is familiar with the actual causes of the gender issues of the past and reiterates that men have also been struggling under patriarchy. She fears that males would corrupt the system again as they had done in the past.²⁰⁷ The governing leaders and councils of these gender separatist utopian societies use this precarious fear regarding the recurrence of past catastrophes as a way of closing off the community to change, therefore protecting it from the catastrophes of the past. The re-integration of males into the all-woman community is continually under scrutiny:

“Or which they might contribute to and strengthen. Our world is hardly perfect now. People are still starving. Consensus doesn’t always work. We’re not all nice, nurturing people; we’re greedy and ambitious, too, just like they were –”

“We don’t make war. We don’t kill each other.”

²⁰⁶ Ibid, 207.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

“It’s all in what we’re taught. Males were taught to kill. If we taught each other to make war and kill, we’d do it, too.”²⁰⁸

Above is a conversation between two women from the community, one of whom is in favor of nurture and considers the mentioned traits to be aggressive and traditionally attributed to masculinity regardless of exceptions, and the other who thinks that the isolated all-woman society is a way to avoid wars and all other acts of aggression, oppression, and hostility. However, the conversation does not come to a logical end. It becomes clearer how much they value re-education as a means to resolving this clash of perceived gendered behavior.

This Socratic dialogue near the end of the novel gives hope of reintegration and a future with better prospects based on mixed-sex cohabitation. Thus the biological essentialism on which the women based their society is criticized and challenged to the extent that the decision is bound to change the foundation of the gender separatist utopian society. Through their practices of different methods of education, socialization, and exclusion, the community comes to realize that aggression, ambition, greed, and power struggles happen among women as well as men. Comparisons and encounters such as the one above demonstrate to them the flawed ways of adhering to outdated essentialist notions. The hope of re-educating a society with the expectation of making durable change against their inherent characteristics is nonetheless at the core of the motivation to initiate a destruction and *tabula rasa* narrative.

Matriarchal *tabula ficta* built on *tabula rasa*

In all the novels, after the event of destruction, one of the initial fundamental changes that take place is the establishment of a governing structure that is led and participated in only by women. This new structure is mostly referred to as matriarchal in the novels themselves and in the

²⁰⁸ Ibid, 208.

secondary literature about the novels. Establishing a matriarchy becomes an integral and natural step toward the improvement of their society. However, building a matriarchy does not supersede the commonplace issues of power relations. When the remaining community consists of only women, the newly established sociopolitical structure is bound to be woman-led and participated. The motifs of destruction and tabula rasa conceptually support the creation of a woman-led governing structure due to the absence of governments after catastrophes. Consequently, in this section, I look back at the history of the matriarchal tradition to uncover a possible literary heritage in the matriarchal fictional narratives in feminist utopian literature. There is an impulse to revert to pre-patriarchal times and write a herstory instead, which could be useful in understanding the matriarchal urge in the gender separatist utopian novels in my corpus.

To give an example, *The Y Chromosome*, as I introduced in the previous section, is built upon a matriarchal structure with a large majority of women and only a few men. Both the politics and the education of this matriarchal society rest on the societally accepted superiority of women and the sense of trepidation they feel about the violent sociopolitical history of patriarchy from the past.

The portrayal of the patriarchal past as a physically as well as emotionally coercive and aggressive phenomenon is emphasized through the socialization of the characters and also through the exposition of the laws and principles of the eutopian community. A relevant example is when Daniel expresses discontent over being rejected by Bluesky. “I wish I’d lived before the Change!” he says, “Things would have been different then. Bluesky wouldn’t have rejected me.”²⁰⁹ Even though his friend Highlands, again a woman, reminds Daniel that Bluesky has the right to reject his romantic interest, Daniel cannot seem to make peace with being rejected and accept not being able to possess the object of his desire. He goes on to insult himself and acts as

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 70.

the victim of this situation, hoping to garner compassion and approval from Highlands. Instead, he is left alone with his thoughts, temper, and woe. This behavior of entitlement and desire to possess a woman against her consent is a crucial issue frequently encountered and studied in gender relations in radical feminist utopian novels. In certain power structures, women could not or would not always be in the position to verbally and explicitly reject such unwelcome advances or voice their opinions without certain legal protections in favor of them in place. In gender separatist utopian spaces, due to the matriarchal sociopolitical structure and the lack of male majority sociopolitical power, women are emotionally and structurally less constrained to set clear boundaries enforced and protected by their own laws.

These types of micro- and macroaggressions support the foundational motivation for why women wish to create their own eutopian space and establish a matriarchal governing structure instead of an egalitarian one that would encompass and treat both genders equally. The destruction and the state of affairs before the destruction set the stage for the tabula rasa that follows after the destruction. However, the events of the past are never forgotten and they actively shape the present formation of the new society. Some teachings and laws are repeated in daily life as if they are mantras. This helps the women, as well as the few remaining men, to not ever forget and deviate from them:

“Before the Change was Chaos, and it was Male. Male is Danger and Death. Male must be Hidden.” First Law, what everyone on the farms had to learn almost as soon as they learned to speak. He knew he had challenged it. Nervously he twisted a fallen leaf around his fingers. [...] Finally she said, her voice cold and irritable, “Just don’t think life before the Change was better, for anyone. If you believe that,

even for a moment, you've learned nothing. Nothing at all. Don't make me doubt
I was right to amend First Law.”²¹⁰

The first law that is mentioned here is used in all post-catastrophe gender separatist novels in my study. Creating and perpetuating an aversion and avoidance towards the male species is considered a safety feature and warning against what could go wrong as it had gone wrong in the societies of the past. In my opinion, the all-woman communities need a strong rationale on which to build their sociopolitical foundations. It has to be repeated and practiced for long enough to create a ritual that replaces the collective memory and the desire of the patriarchal past. The repercussions for failing to follow the rules are usually exile or isolation of individuals in a comparatively emptier part of the world; therefore, there is a strong incentive and motivation for following the new matriarchal principles.

As observed in the plot of the novel above, this new sociopolitical structure involves gender role reversal against the patriarchal norms that existed before the destruction. In more detail, the society in question can be matriarchal, matrifocal, matrilocal, matrilineal, or any combination of these or all of them at the same time. Matriarchy is the sociopolitical system where the absolute power is wielded by women, whereas matrifocality is where the sociopolitical authority is focused on women even though men also have some form of power. Matrilocality is where the family lives on the mother's side, and matrilineality is the practice of tracing the bloodline from the mother's side. In the gender separatist, radical feminist, and matriarchal utopian novels in my study, these concepts co-exist harmoniously because matriarchies are built from scratch; however, the focus of the sociopolitical governing structure is comprised of governing councils of women and an overall concept of matriarchal practices.

²¹⁰ Ibid, 71.

Having a class structure among the women within the matriarchy is also a common narrative trait. These women's communities of the post-destruction phase could have also established egalitarian ways of existing, embracing all the women equally and sometimes even including the non-traditional men who also survived and got scattered around the land. However, the preference towards matriarchal structures is prevalent in this subgenre. What are the reasons provided that explain the woman characters' need to establish a eutopian matriarchy from the ashes of patriarchy that has failed due to the actions of men?

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Gerda Lerner's study on the origins of patriarchy has been influential in understanding the history of gendered power dynamics that have existed throughout history. In her work *The Creation of Patriarchy*, she starts her discussion of women's past by making a distinction between the unrecorded past, which encompasses all the events that took place in the past, and the recorded, thus interpreted, past. Lerner argues that women have always been part of history and civilizations as active agents:

“Women have also shared with men in preserving collective memory, which shapes the past into cultural tradition, provides the link between generations, and connects the past and the future. This oral tradition has been kept alive in poem and myth, which both men and women created and preserved in folklore, art, and ritual.”²¹¹

It is through the narrative of history-making in written language that women have been excluded from societal functions that were interpreted to be crucial for the survival of any given community. Lerner concentrates on history-making as rooted in the invention of writing, which has a later historical starting point than oral traditions. The invention of writing has brought

²¹¹ Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, 4.

about the consideration of certain privileges concerning who is allowed to learn how to write, to use precious materials to write with and to choose what is considered important enough to be written down. Lerner emphasizes historians, priests, servants, clerks, clerics, and scholars as the most common writers in history. These professional positions have been held mostly by men, which still applies in the twenty-first century in various contexts and regions of the world. Lerner argues that “[w]hat women have done and experienced has been left unrecorded, neglected, and ignored in interpretation. Historical scholarship, up to the most recent past, has seen women as marginal to the making of civilization and as unessential to those pursuits defined as having historic significance.”²¹² In this regard, feminist utopianism, and especially gender separatist utopianism, provides ample space for restructuring the patriarchal patterns of history-making narratives.

On a meta-level, the subgenre of feminist utopianism itself, and efforts to unearth unpublished, unheard of, or dismissed utopian works of women, are also part of this reclaiming of history-making. With respect to this, Lerner argues that the ethnographic evidence that substantiated the arguments of the Swiss anthropologist Johann Jakob Bachofen and the German philosopher Friedrich Engels concerning the historical evidence on the existence of past matriarchies has been proven to be inaccurate based on recent anthropological research. She argues that the societies previously considered matriarchal were egalitarian or, at best, matrilineal and matrilocal.²¹³ These are different concepts from a matriarchal system where the sole political power lies with the women. Lerner argues that it is not theoretically viable to make a direct connection between kinship and the sociopolitical rights of women in a given society. Matrilineal societies included contexts in which the male relatives of the woman in power control the decision processes.²¹⁴

²¹² Ibid, 4.

²¹³ Ibid, 39.

²¹⁴ Ibid, 29; as cited by Lerner, from Martin and Voorhies, *Female of the Species*, 187.

Lerner reviews the egalitarian societies found in hunter-gatherer tribes, where the division of labor provided women and men with interdependency. While the women needed to have social access to a hunter (mostly men due to the absence of childrearing responsibilities) in order to procure meat for the children, the hunters needed a gatherer (mostly women due to childrearing responsibilities that made women's circle of movement more limited) who would prepare food from the hunt, provide food outside the hunting periods and when the hunt was not successful. This peaceful interdependency emphasizes an egalitarian existence over an oppressive communal structure.

The hunter-gatherer society paradigm as described above comes with its own connotations. The men do the hunting while the women protect the offspring; therefore, this romanticized story supposedly proves the superiority of men over women. However, it is clear from the abundant anthropological research that the gatherers/women have provided more food for their community than the hunters/men even though the meat from the hunts has been valued more and used as currency between tribes.²¹⁵ This interpretation of the hunter/gatherer society provides a perspective in which the sociopolitical system is more egalitarian as opposed to patriarchal or matriarchal, even if such societies have a matrifocal, matrilocal, or matrilineal structure. Consequently, in her study, Lerner finds no evidence or argument confirming the existence of prehistoric matriarchies.

The matriarchal sociopolitical systems practiced in gender separatist utopian novels in my study all refer to prehistoric power structures due to the plot choices that include a destruction motif. The motif of destruction not only destroys the physical world but also implies the continuity of another history. Therefore, history gets to be reset and restarted with the gender separatist radical feminist efforts and principles.

²¹⁵ Ibid, 30; as cited by Lerner, from Martin and Voorhies, *Female of the Species*, 190. For more information and different interpretations see Jean L. Briggs, "Eskimo Women: Makers of Men," in Carolyn J. Matthiasson, *Many Sisters: Women in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (1974) and Elise Boulding, *The Underside of History: A View of Women Through Time* (1976).

The concept of historical evidence, however, depends on the interpretation of the evidence. If matriarchies have never existed, it makes all the more reason to imagine one in literature. However, if there was not a matriarchy in history, then the sociopolitical reflex to create matriarchies does not rely on influence from the past but is a utopian political reflex on its own. Since the existence of past matriarchies depends on the interpretation of the core definition of that system, Lerner compares some definitions of matriarchy that she believes to be inaccurate or inconsistent, when Lerner argues that researchers:

...rest their case on evidence from myth and religion.²¹⁶ Others call matriarchy any kind of societal arrangement in which women hold power over any aspect of public life. Still others include any society in which women have relatively high status.²¹⁷ The last definition is so vague as to be meaningless as a category. I think one can truly speak of matriarchy only when women hold power *over* men, not alongside them, when that power includes the public domain and foreign relations and when women make essential decisions not only for their kinfolk but for the community.²¹⁸

Lerner makes a distinction between “any kind of societal arrangement in which women hold power over any aspect of public life,” “any society in which women have a relatively high status,” and “when women hold power *over* men, not alongside them.” Only the last one would represent a matriarchy in its current definition. Lerner defines matriarchy as a reversed mirror of patriarchy,²¹⁹ which is in line with how the matriarchies in gender separatist utopian novels are

²¹⁶ Ibid, 30; as cited by Lerner, from Abby Kleinbaum, *The War Against the Amazons*, 1983.

²¹⁷ Ibid, 30; as cited by Lerner, from Michelle Rosaldo, “A Theoretical Overview,” in Rosaldo and Lamphere, *Woman, Culture and Society*, pp. 12-42.

²¹⁸ Ibid, 30.

²¹⁹ Ibid, 31.

structured, and concludes that matriarchies within this definition have not existed in history.

Consequently, Lerner summarizes the findings of her research concerning the history of matriarchies:

- (1) Most of the evidence for female equality in societies derives from matrilineal, matrilocal societies, which are historically transitional and currently vanishing.
- (2) While matriliney and matrilocality confer certain rights and privileges on women, decision-making power within the kinship group nevertheless rests with elder males.
- (3) Patrilineal descent does not imply subjugation of women nor does matrilineal descent indicate matriarchy.
- (4) Seen over time, matrilineal societies have been unable to adapt to competitive, exploitative, techno-economic systems and have given way to patrilineal societies.²²⁰

Based on Lerner's study of existing research and her observation that matriliney and matrilocality do not give women political rights of governance and that matrilineal societies did not survive due to adaptation issues, matriarchies in gender separatist utopian literature may not be based on real matriarchal societies that existed in the past. The matriarchal sociopolitical systems created in gender separatist utopian novels resemble the gender-reversed version of patriarchy without any structural change in the foundations of its governing nature. If there is no concrete historical evidence for the existence of such a sociopolitical system as matriarchy, then the practice of matriarchy in these gender separatist utopian novels are alternative visions of the conditions that allow and foster the existence of this type of regime. The newly formed matriarchal societies are

²²⁰ Ibid.

still largely improved in terms of the crimes that affect women's lives the most. However, there is still oppression in this system among different sociopolitical and economic classes of women, and this oppression creates frustration and disappointment that is usually revealed at the end of the novels and often causes the disillusionment and dissolution of the utopia.

In the novels within the scope of my study, with the creation of a matriarchal structure, the remaining women's community is in fact aiming to create a distinct sexual class, which is one of the fundamental principles of radical feminism. Lerner emphasizes that while "men and women have suffered exclusion and discrimination because of their class, no man has been excluded from the historical record because of his sex, yet all women were."²²¹ The consideration of sex as a class resonates with some of the main principles of radical separatist feminism of the '60s and '70s. The action towards changing the sociopolitical structure when women have the authority and the space due to the motifs of destruction and *tabula rasa* underlines a revolutionary project in feminist literature and thought. This action also lets women move away from the victimization narrative they are historically attributed. Lerner concludes that "[t]his coming-into-consciousness of women becomes the cyclical force moving them into action to change their condition and to enter a new relationship to male-dominated society."²²² This coming into consciousness that Lerner is referring to becomes the motivating push behind various feminist movements and waves and starts restructuring women's place in sociopolitical and economic contexts. The gender separatist utopian literature is one of the many facets of this relationship.

²²¹ Ibid, 5.

²²² Ibid.

Tabula rasa as an uncleanable slate

After considering the nuances in the terminology of tabula rasa and biological essentialism versus a rebirth in relation to gender separatist utopian literature, I now ask if it is ever possible to obtain a clean slate after the occurrence of destruction in this subgenre. In the previous sections, I mentioned that tabula rasa is closer to a scraped tablet than a clean slate. In this section, I trace how this tablet continues to carry the traces of the past and is inevitably tainted by the events of the past. This raises the question of whether the attempt to have a birth without history can ever work, or whether destruction is ever able to fully erase the past. In this section, I will look at three representative examples from the subgenre where the concept of tabula rasa is used in different historiographies: of spatial distance through interplanetary escapism (*Daughters of the Coral Dawn*), of the historian character as a bridge in between (*Ammonite* and *Califia's Daughters*), and of history as a set of warnings (*The Gate to Women's Country*).

Moving to a different planet comes across as a swift and efficient method of erasing history and initiating the revisions of herstory. Written in 1984 by the award-winning Canadian American author Katherine V. Forrest, who mostly writes lesbian literature, *Daughters of a Coral Dawn* engages in the creation of a type of tabula rasa that is distinct from those that follow the destruction of the known world. In this novel, the protagonist Megan is expected to lead her community to establish a settlement on a new planet far away from planet Earth:

“Dear ones, the lines of history are intersecting again as the girls have just shown you. On this dreary planet it’s all so depressingly predictable. Males become spastic with terror everytime women break through to new choices and freedom. And this most recent freedom – no longer needing the poor things at all to make babies for us – well, have laws ever been passed more quickly? [...] “There is this possibility,” Hera intones. “On-planet relocation. We have the means, the

technology to remain undetected – with certain precautions, within certain parameters.”²²³

Megan’s family wishes to find a habitable and uninhabited planet where the fleeing community can start building their lives and institutions from scratch, unburdened by the fear of getting discovered and caught by the people in their former planet where the oppression from men was overbearing. In the passage above, Megan is giving a speech that motivates the move of her community to another planet. The statement “[m]ales become spastic with terror every time women break through to new choices and freedom” amplifies the frustration women feel with the oppression exercised by men and the patriarchal institutions they create and lead. Therefore, the women aim to leave for fear of the increase of coercion and injustice against the basic rights and needs of women. As much as it seems needed, the impact of leaving behind their planet (a symbolic type of destruction of their status quo) and landing on a new and empty planet (a symbolic type of tabula rasa) leaves its lasting mark on the community:

The mythology has already begun. Songs written of our departure and journey, her heroism. [...] While none of us can forget nor wishes to forget those precious ones we have left on Earth, as time passes we make the transition from our own lives there with greater ease.²²⁴

While the community is content with the repercussions of their decision to leave Earth and arrive at a planet they come to call Maternas, they still recognize that this interplanetary move also caused a separation from the women who had to stay behind on Earth. In the context of this

²²³ Forrest, *Daughters of a Coral Dawn*, 19.

²²⁴ *Ibid*, 105.

novel, remembering the state of their former planet reflects their urge to reminisce about the pre-departure period which shows that a tabula rasa state is not possible in this novel. The characters are haunted by what they left behind and the conditions in which those women on Earth survive while Maternas has been a very favorable location for both the physical and emotional survival of their community. Even when the women relocate to another planet to avoid the misogyny and oppression they are experiencing on Earth, their slate cannot be perfectly clean due to the women they had to leave behind and their persistent knowledge that the oppression continues to be a reality there.

The second thematization within the concept of tabula rasa is that the historian characters act as a bridge between the past and the present. The motif of the historian character in gender separatist utopian novels keeps the pre-destruction memories and narratives actively recited to the community while assuring that the current motif of tabula rasa would not provide a clean slate due to the recollection of memories. In his work on historiography, Hayden White shows that the creative difference between the historian and a fiction writer is not so broad and, in fact, it can be a thin line. He argues that the way a historian may choose and represent historical events can create a story:

The historian arranges the events in the chronicle into a hierarchy of significance by assigning events different functions as story elements in such a way as to disclose the formal coherence of a whole set of events considered as a comprehensible process with a discernible beginning, middle, and end.²²⁵

The arrangement of the events into a story of the past that contextually makes sense becomes a narrative tool in the novels in this subgenre. The beginning, middle, and end signify a cause-and-

²²⁵ White, *Metahistory*, 7.

effect relationship because history is narrated in context, as opposed to being a series of events. White calls this contextualization “emplotment”, as in “the way by which a sequence of events fashioned into a story is gradually revealed to be a story of a particular kind.” The emplotment in my subgenre, as I touched upon in the previous section, is one of warnings, destructions, and horrors; thus, an emplotment of tragedy ensues.

Written in 2004, *Califia's Daughters* also features a historian character. Its author, Laurie R. King, is an American author who mostly writes detective fiction but also wrote *Califia's Daughters*, which is a science fiction novel. She used the pseudonym “Leigh Richards” when writing this novel, perhaps in an attempt to explore certain themes around feminism, gender, and utopianism without getting criticized by her fans who know her from her detective fiction. The novel takes place in a peaceful community of women following deadly bombs, and afterwards, a virus that kills the men on the planet. This is how the initial exposition of the plot is conveyed on the first page of the novel:

“They kept only those few men whom they realized they needed for their race not to die out,” Rodriguez de Montalvo writes. Little had he anticipated the rapid-fire series of plagues, wars, and environmental disasters that was to tip humankind into a downward spiral during the first century of the third millennium, slashing the world’s population to a fraction of what it had been at the year 2000, overturning social orders, turning dearly held beliefs and mores to dust overnight. Particularly he could not have precited the propensity of one virus to attach itself to the male of the species, one generation after the next. By the time of this story, the world holds one male human being for every ten or twelve females.²²⁶

²²⁶ Richards, *Califia's Daughters*, 2.

The tabula rasa phase is presented through a direct and unforgiving explanation of the timeline of the events. The phenomenon of several catastrophes one after the other acts as a hint toward a biblical narrative where the exposition of the plotline resembles an eschatological end-of-times story. The virus that kills most of the men, also referred to as the “plague,” becomes the breaking point that concludes the motif of destruction and initiates the process of tabula rasa. However, the fact that there are men who survived the virus already creates a version of tabula rasa that carries people of the past to the supposedly all-woman future. The existence of these men is a constant reminder of the events of the past and the effects of these events on the present. The surviving men are protected by warrior women because these men are considered to be crucial to the survival of the species. With a group of visitors discovering their community, the women get to recognize that there were numerous men outside the walls of their community of women.

In the midst of all the destruction plotlines based on viruses, it is also true that not all viruses are purely destructive. The novel *Ammonite* is written by the British American author Nicola Griffith in 1992. Griffith is an award-winning artist and, like most of the other authors in my study, is also a teacher. The novel takes place on a planet called Jeep which was colonized by people from the Earth centuries ago. An expedition group that arrives on the planet for reconnaissance has all its members dead due to a virus that inhabits this planet. During the events of this novel in the current time, the new expedition discovers the native population consisting of only women. Just as in the novel *The Y Chromosome*, the virus on this planet is only deadly for men while women do survive the virus despite getting infected. The few women from the expedition party who survived ended up wanting to live with the native population instead of returning to their home planet. When these women are infected by the virus, they gain the ability to reproduce via a mystic storytelling technique called deep search without needing men. By killing men, the infection gives women the space and opportunity to connect to each other as a community and to connect to themselves at a deeper level to unlock mystic abilities. Here the

virus becomes a metaphor for the sisterhood as a key to opening the doors to their gender separatist utopian space and reproductive autonomy.

However, the common dystopian trope of warnings continues regardless. Kirsten the historian keeps retelling the stories of the past as a way of coping with the melancholia of that shattered past, countless deaths, and various unwelcome changes:

I am so tired, she thought to herself. I have seen too much, fought too many battles, tasted more adrenaline than one woman ought. Long, long ago I was granted a few sweet years of childhood; then the Troubles began, with images burned into our minds: planes slipping into buildings with a bloom of fire; a city school dead down to the last classroom pet; a small town littered with corpses from a bioweapon. The vocabulary of terror – virus and nanophage, genetic modification and dirty bombs – causing the collective mind to wince back from the horrors, that grinding fear of crowds that seized us all, and our powerful mistrust of all but the simplest of technologies, followed finally by the Valley's retreat into itself.²²⁷

The way the historian talks about the past is a constantly reminded warning by itself: how much the past was full of struggles and wars. The burden of the historian is to remember the past, distill the lessons from the catastrophes, and remind the communities of possible woes and foes, but still succeed in keeping themselves and the community motivated and hopeful toward the future, notwithstanding the hardships with which the society is dealing on a daily basis.

²²⁷ Griffith, *Ammonite*, 30.

Stories of historians do not always depend on hardships and warnings, though; their stories also reflect how gender relations and power dynamics used to be in the societies that existed before the destruction phase:

“As you know, in those days, when I was young, men were very different. [...]

The menfolk made most of the important decisions and, more than that, they did all of the nasty, dangerous jobs, like digging up septic tanks and felling trees and running the farm machinery. Yes, Lilyanne, they did so. Boys ran wild, climbed trees, went hunting with rifles. Girls too, but boys more. Hard to believe, isn't it?”²²⁸

The historian continually reminds the surviving community of how gender relations and related power dynamics used to be so that they do not idolize and glorify the old ways. Informing the new community about the old ways of how gender relations used to be assures that the new generations would be careful and vigilant about protecting their rights. Just as mentioned in the passage above, the experiential knowledge Kristen has about gender relations is shared in a neutral tone: as a matter of fact, the men made most of the important decisions while they also did all of the dangerous jobs. The historian tries to reflect her knowledge without much bias, even though sometimes they are under threat or intimidation due to their precarious amount of knowledge. That said, the gender relations of the past nevertheless exhibit a substantial contrast compared to the gender relations of the new matriarchal community.

Even though the motif of history studies and sharing knowledge about the past contributes to the condition of the community in a constructive way, the newly established society nevertheless becomes one that is based on fear and anxiety about the way everything

²²⁸ Ibid, 36.

used to be, not a clean slate on which to build a purely positive eutopian society. Most often, the main goal is to avoid repeating the past which is still clearly legible on the current tabula rasa, making the slate impossible to clean. The existence of these hardships, the genealogy of which can be traced back to the times before the destruction, is one of the main reasons why the foundation of tabula rasa is not perfectly clean enough on which to build a peaceful feminist eutopia.

The last form of the tabula rasa that I will examine is using the events of the past as warnings and deterrents for the future. For that, I will examine a novel that depicts a gender separatist feminist utopia which turns into a dystopia for the women in the society as well as for the men. *The Gate to Women's Country*, which was written by the North American science fiction and mystery fiction author Sheri Stewart Tepper in 1988, portrays a totalitarian regime that gives the impression of extreme patriarchy administered by women instead of men. A council of women holds all the power and has access to classified information, thus rendering men dependent on only the partial knowledge made available to the male community by this council of women. These women constitute the ruling class that runs society by maintaining a structure of positive eugenics²²⁹ in combination with gender-based separatism on the one hand, and practicing negative eugenics using classified medical procedures on the other.²³⁰ After the nuclear wars that destroyed their world and left but a few people behind, mostly women and children, the emerging idea is to rebuild a society where aggression and wars would be staved off with whatever means necessary. Morgot, the leader of the town in which the bulk of the novel takes place, summarizes the history of and the reasoning behind the establishment of Women's Country, which geographically consists of a group of women's cities surrounded by walls:

²²⁹ Positive eugenics focused on improvements by encouraging people with the desirable traits to procreate.

²³⁰ See Patrick Parrinder, "Eugenics and Utopia: Sexual Selection from Galton to Morris." *Utopian Studies* 8, no. 2, 1997, pp. 1-12 for an overview of the use eugenics themes in utopian literature.

Three hundred years ago almost everyone in the world had died in a great devastation brought about by men. It was men who made the weapons and men who were the diplomats and men who made the speeches about national pride and defense. And in the end it was men who did whatever they had to do, pushed the buttons or pulled the string to set the terrible things off. And we died, Michael. Almost all of us. Women. Children. [...] Only a few were left. Some of them were women, and among them was a woman who called herself Martha Evesdaughter. Martha thought that the destruction had come about because of men's willingness - even eagerness - to fight, and she determined that this eagerness to fight must be bred out of our race, even though it might take a thousand years.²³¹

Believing male aggression to be the root cause of all death and destruction, the Councilwomen decide to breed this personality trait out of male children by invasively micromanaging reproductive practices. The Councilwomen start by creating a garrison outside the walls of Women's Country and employing a military honor narrative that, as far as they believe, attracts the males with this aggressive gene. The men who choose to become warriors are kept busy in the garrison with arbitrary skirmishes and wars between other towns while women residing in towns also lead a restricted life due to their functions in the society already laid out for them and due to the strict class structure within their society. The reverse power structure does not bring much freedom to women either, however. Tepper's gender separatist utopian world is ruled first and foremost by the established fear of any unruly behavior and consequently a possible recurrence of the past destruction. The novel, in the end, is a story of tragedy for both women and men regardless of whichever side of the wall they live. It is not a blueprint eutopian story of a happy and peaceful people.

²³¹ Tepper, *The Gate to Women's Country*, 301.

In the novel, the Councilwomen act as “a modest, suspicious power” with their nurturing presence and their anti-war stance. Still, they harbor secrets whose emergence could dismantle their society and the perfection they aim to reach and uphold. At the end of the novel, the whole garrison is killed for attempted mutiny and Women’s Country lives on, which gives enough indication that the Councilwomen’s disciplinary power is successful. The Councilwomen also make use of the instruments that French philosopher Michel Foucault mentions in *Discipline and Punish*: Hierarchical observation is done by means of micromanaging the society in all aspects, making major life choices for the members of the said society, and also observing the people living outside this society.²³² In the garrison, the General does the observing. Medical examinations are used to control who gets to have a child with whom and who gets to be sterilized. Harboring various aspects of totalitarian societies, Women’s Country runs closer to a totalitarian dystopia in a Foucauldian sense than a peaceful eutopia of hope.

By the same token, the Councilwomen have the authority to regulate free speech by deciding the type of education women and warriors would receive in separate camps, as can be observed in the conversation between Stavia and Chernon, the main protagonists:

“Genetics.”

“What’s that?”

“The science of how things pass on their characteristics to their offspring.”

There was a long silence. He sat down on the railing beside her, his head turned away. If she could have seen his face, she would have seen it concentrated in thought, in sudden inspiration.

“What’s the matter?” she asked him.

“You make me feel... you make me feel ignorant,” he said in a wounded voice. “I

²³² Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 170.

don't know about things like that."

She gave him an astonished look. "It's all in books! The garrison has a library."

"Romances, Stavia. Tales of battle. Sagas. Designs for armor. Hygiene.

Maintenance of garrison property. You know' Nothing about real things. Nothing about medicine, or engineering, or management."

"Those are women's studies."²³³

In this passage, the protagonists are speaking to each other through a hole in the wall that separates their countries. The difference in the type of books women and men are separately allowed to read raises concerns because this act of controlling the kind of information each gendered community would receive also determines the intellectual and emotional depth of their sociopolitical existence. While the so-called women's studies in this land relate to more scientific and productive fields of inquiry, the library of the garrison is filled with resources relating to the lives of warriors, tales of valor, and physical activities. As can be observed in the conversation, totalitarian regimes like these create diverse frictions in the newly established society, which seems antithetical to the project of utopia.

In essence, Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country* is a dystopian novel based predominantly on warnings, the most prominent warning is against totalitarianism that accompanies blueprint utopias. In Women's Country, women in towns build high walls around their space in an effort to keep themselves safe from negative external factors. By keeping aggressive males out and creating an off-shoot community whose *raison d'être* relied on fighting incongruous wars and glorifying their principle of honor, women aim to keep the warriors busy. This is the case up until the point that the men rebel, at which point they are slaughtered for their rebellion. Withholding knowledge and education from men who live outside the walls and

²³³ Tepper, *The Gate to Women's Country*, 78.

possessing technology the men have no knowledge of, the Councilwomen assert strategic and intellectual superiority over the male warriors.

The main storyline of *The Gate to Women's Country* is based on the notion of biological essentialism in that the Councilwomen believe there are certain inherent male and female characteristics to glorify or condemn. This moral stance concerning biological essentialism often reinforced by the leader of the town, Morgot, becomes more and more pronounced as the novel unfolds:

War is dreadful, daughter. It always has been. Comfort yourself with the knowledge that in preconvulsion times it was worse! More died, and most of them were women, children, and old people. Also, wars were allowed to create devastations. Under our ordinances, no children are slain. No women are slain. Only men who choose to be warriors go to battle. There is no devastation.²³⁴

With the constant reminder of their traditions, rules, and rituals, the Councilwomen uphold an atmosphere of fear-mongering and thereby keep their female and male subjects submissive under their rule. There are two main methods that the Councilwomen use to maintain control over women and men as a whole: the covert medical interventions and the elaborate military narrative they uphold. Meanwhile, the suffering the warriors must endure only because they 'chose' to be warriors is meant to be unresolved and made into an example. This example should have a deterring effect on younger men who can still choose not to be warriors. How genuinely these men choose to become warriors, however, is open to debate due to the undeniable influence of heavy socio-cultural indoctrination that encompasses their lives since they are five years old.

²³⁴ Ibid, 131.

As previously mentioned, by creating a garrison outside Women's Country and employing an alluring narrative of military culture, the Councilwomen maintain a space where men who choose to become warriors can rationalize their antagonistic behavior in the name of military ambitions and success. One important factor related to this is the notion that since the warriors are already assumed to be aggressive, physically and emotionally vigorous, and stubborn in the garrison, they are deprived of positive examples, encouragement, or incentive to improve their behavior let alone recognize it as problematic. Since they do not have access to any books, their potential for improvement is also limited by the totalitarian regime. The Councilwomen aim to impede warriors from gathering knowledge that would lead them to discover weapons of mass destruction; however, they also end up impeding the men's growth and consequential return to and integration with the Women's Country. As an unforeseen aftereffect of their well-intentioned blueprint in search of preventing wars, the Councilwomen find themselves systematically slaughtering garrisons to conceal their regular uprisings. This intersection is one of the instances where feminist utopian narratives that target men as the source of the evils of the past reach a point of disillusionment in their strictly held beliefs. In this novel, it is not a commonly-held belief that the Councilwomen have been wrong in restricting men's equal access to education; however, the seeds of hope for change are sewn in realization moments like these.

These disparate communities represent different levels of repression and restriction of expression in order to maintain their totalitarian principles and the fixation on their utopian ideals. This brings to mind Foucault's concept of Victorian morality:

Sexuality was carefully confined; it moved into the home. The conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction. On the subject of sex, silence became the rule. The legitimate and procreative couple laid

down the law. The couple imposed itself as model, enforced the norm, safeguarded the truth, and reserved the right to speak while retaining the principle of secrecy. A single locus of sexuality was acknowledged in social space as well as at the heart of every household, but it was a utilitarian and fertile one: the parents' bedroom. The rest had only to remain vague [...]. If it was truly necessary to make room for illegitimate sexualities, it was reasoned, let them take their infernal mischief elsewhere [...]. The brothel and the mental hospital would be those places of tolerance.²³⁵

Just like in Foucault's conception of sexuality in the Victorian age, in Tepper's utopian world, sexuality is confined to close quarters, notably regulated, and only permissible during the reproductive carnival between specific people as part of a public procreation event. The medical interventions that are kept as governmental secrets so that society can function as planned via their blueprint constitute the foundation of the community's functioning. Sexuality is no longer considered an act of pleasure, but an act of duty in two out of the three communities in the novel: in Women's Country, sex is linked with reproduction and the prospect of producing warriors, while in Holyland it is linked with divine duty for men and normalized rape for women. Only in the liminality of the borderlands between these two communities can sexuality exist without any repression or limitation, which is the room made for "illegitimate sexualities" mentioned above by Foucault. In the context of this novel, these illegitimate sexualities refer to any practice of sexuality with the opposite sex without the intention of reproduction. These liminal experiences are also critiqued by the Councilwomen from a moral standpoint and misused by the warriors for their own pleasure while acting in emotionally and physically destructive ways toward women in those communities.

²³⁵ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol I: The Will to Knowledge*, 4.

In the end, this utopian novel is a eutopia turned sour, perhaps even an anti-utopia: The viewpoint of biological essentialism based on the assumed difference between women and men, with the assumption that men are considered to be more physically apt while women are more intellectual, suffocates the eutopian ideals adopted for peace and prosperity. It is this essentialist assumption that results in forcing men into garrisons and women into highly controlled intellectual lives. Men who do not wish to become warriors have to face group bullying, ridicule, and social exclusion while women who do not wish to live by the strict rules of Women's Country are either forced by the Councilwomen to abide by the rules or go outside the walls to live with "the gypsies" in borderlands. In essence, nobody is content in *The Gate to Women's Country*, and the Councilwomen aim at utilitarianism over happiness regardless of the informed consent and participation of the society. One of the Councilwomen, Morgot, talks to her daughter:

"Whether you ever feel guilty over what you do? You few who do all the doing."

She sat for a time without answering. At last she shifted in her chair and said, "I'll tell you what we call ourselves, among ourselves. That will answer your question."

[...]

"We call ourselves the Damned Few. And if the Lady has a heaven for the merciful, we are not sure any of us will ever see it."²³⁶

This passage makes clear that the Councilwomen are aware of their destructive methods and live with guilt and sadness over their actions. The pain humanity goes through with nuclear wars, as

²³⁶ Tepper, *The Gate to Women's Country*, 289.

well as the plight of women in general prior to the wars, convince the Councilwomen that they have to persevere to keep the ordinances strictly followed.

On the basis of my findings in this chapter, I believe that such gender separatist utopian novels, whether they are eutopias or dystopias, should be read as didactic pieces of literature. Utopian scholar Claeys argues that utopian authors aim to frighten the reader by showing how wrong things could go with regard to the moral, social, and civic responsibilities of the citizens.²³⁷ Similarly, dystopias follow the notion that human beings are incorrigible; thus they often end up showing what necessarily goes wrong when one tries to bring social and individual improvement. This is actually what the Councilwomen are doing to the warriors: “Physical pain, the pain of the body itself, is no longer the constituent element of the penalty. From being an art of unbearable sensations punishment has become an economy of suspended rights.”²³⁸ Warriors are thus penalized for a trait of aggression which the Councilwomen believe all men are born with. By putting them into a garrison and treating them as guilty without any evidence, the system actually perpetuates the cyclical structure of misbehavior. Considering the fact that men do not receive similar benefits of education, which keeps them further away from improvement, rehabilitation, and reintegration, the garrison, in this regard, acts as a prison where the aggressive males are kept busy but within their own echo chamber.

All in all, the world of *The Gate to Women's Country* starts at a post-apocalyptic dystopia of nuclear devastation, moves to a eutopian blueprint aiming at eliminating wars in the future, and ends up creating another dystopia of social ailments and orchestrated wars. Women's Country stands as a warning of the dire consequences of a blueprint-based utopia. Just as feminist dystopias, gender separatist utopias also succumb to the pitfalls of the desire to control every aspect of life out of fears pertaining to the future.

²³⁷ Claeys, *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, 17.

²³⁸ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 11.

The analysis of the plot emphasizes the challenges in attaining a clean slate, the role of historians in shaping the narratives, and the recurring theme of warnings from the past. Each example illustrates the complexities and limitations of striving for utopia, showcasing how even well-intentioned efforts can lead to new forms of oppression and dystopian futures. The passage is concluded by highlighting the didactic nature of gender separatist utopian novels, serving as cautionary tales about the potential pitfalls of attempting to create a perfect society.

Considering the reversal of gender roles prompts a reflective examination of the pervasive influence of historical contexts. Despite the gender role reversal, the indelible imprints of societal norms and historical expectations persist, necessitating a deeper exploration of alternative sociopolitical approaches. The idea that merely reversing roles may not offer a complete emancipation from historical legacies compels us researchers to seek novel and transformative paradigms that can genuinely transcend the constraints imposed by the past.

In envisioning a utopian society, the call for new ways of thinking is critical. Rather than imposing a predefined top-down utopia onto individuals, the notion of designing utopia as a communal practice presents itself as a valuable alternative, perhaps the only working alternative. This thought process advocates for collaborative and inclusive blueprints, where all women in the community come together to co-create and maintain a vision of their collective ideal society. By engaging people in the participatory design of their utopia, the blueprint of utopia becomes a collective endeavor that reflects the varied perspectives and values of the community, which supports a sense of shared ownership and responsibility.

Conclusion: Seeking hope in the concept of tabula unerasa

The concept of tabula rasa, the “scraped tablet”, aims to replicate a rebirth without history. It is the practice, or the attempt, of erasing history. Using the tabula rasa plot element underlines the notion that human beings are redeemable, that societies could start over, and that we could have

a different way of living. In gender separatist feminist novels, the *tabula rasa* doubles as an opportunity to break away from history, leave the burden of the past behind, and create an alternative feminist society. In this regard, the formulation of *tabula rasa* creates a platform for women's communities to attempt to realize their conceptualization of ideal life. The presence of an assumed cleaned slate aids in the creation of the new gender separatist governing bodies because the separation takes place when it is possible to reimagine all sociopolitical structures without any prejudice from the past.

However, the *tabula rasa* narrative faces a challenge due to one crucial peculiarity: Destruction is never total because there is always a hint, a book, or a survivor that informs the remaining community of the dangers of the past. In order for the concept of separatist utopianism to make sense, *tabula rasa* via destruction is a commonly used plot element as there is still a need for justification to show the new community that the old ways have to be disregarded and forgotten. Only in this way, the dystopian traits of the past can act as a warning. The experiences and knowledge of the destroyed past appear to stay intact in the present, time and again, explicitly or implicitly stored in the collective memory of the newly established communities.

In effect, however, this function of history, in the context of gender separatist utopian novels, turns the *tabula rasa* into an uncleanable slate; a slate on which the conditions of the past and the atrocities of the thematized destruction continue to linger, making eutopian projections unattainable. Consequently, this creates frustrations that cause a denouement in plots, which, in turn, may generate a crisis, chaos, or disillusionment. This, however provokes ideas for a better eutopia in the future, thus opening up a eutopian cycle. In this sense, the destruction and *tabula rasa* motifs contribute to the utopian hope I argued about in the first chapter because world-building for the future inherently includes hopeful speculation and optimistic utopian imagination.

The imperfection within the concept of tabula rasa does not diminish the revolutionary potential of the concept as a whole. As the utopian scholar Moylan mentions below, the function of utopia can be more valuable than its apparent form:

To write utopia is to indicate what cannot yet be said within present conceptual language or achieved in current political action. To write utopia is to perform the most utopian of actions possible within literary discourse. The form is itself more significant than any of its content.²³⁹

As a self-reflexive comment on the genre of utopian writing, including its numerous subgenres, Moylan's words above underline the notion that the subversive and transformational act of utopian writing establishes and communicates the intention of utopian thinking. Each new step practiced in the creation of a new and improved utopian world adds to the spectrum of possibilities within utopian literary discourse, be it in the shape of destruction, discovery, or rebirth.

²³⁹ Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, 38.