

ACCIDENTAL DYSTOPIAS: APATHY AND HAPPENSTANCE IN CRITICAL  
DYSTOPIAN LITERATURE

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of  
Texas State University-San Marcos  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of ARTS

By

C. Austin Sims, B.A.

San Marcos, Texas

December 2012

ACCIDENTAL DYSTOPIAS: APATHY AND HAPPENSTANCE IN CRITICAL  
DYSTOPIAN LITERATURE

Committee Members Approved:

---

Dr. Suparno Banerjee, Chair

---

Dr. Victoria L. Smith

---

Dr. Robert T. Tally, Jr.

Approved:

---

J. Michael Willoughby  
Dean of the Graduate College

**COPYRIGHT**

by

C. Austin Sims

Texas State University-San Marcos

2012

## **FAIR USE AND AUTHOR'S PERMISSION STATEMENT**

### **Fair Use**

This work is protected by the Copyright Laws of the United States (Public Law 94-553, section 107). Consistent with fair use as defined in the Copyright Laws, brief quotations from this material are allowed with proper acknowledgment. Use of this material for financial gain without the author's express written permission is not allowed.

### **Duplication Permission**

As the copyright holder of this work I, C. Austin Sims, authorize duplication of this work, in whole or in part, for educational or scholarly purposes only.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank my family in general for their moral support and I would like to specifically acknowledge my mother and my uncle Telly. I once wrongly assumed that my mother would not encourage my academic path. She has been consistently supportive. My uncle Telly has always been a source of great pride for me and I hope he can always say the same of me.

I would also like to extend my thanks to the members of my thesis committee. Dr. Banerjee seemed to come to Texas State at just the right time and I was thrilled to have his expertise, guidance, and enthusiasm throughout the research process. I had not met either Dr. Smith or Dr. Tally prior to searching for committee members and I would like to thank them for their immediate interest and support.

I would also like to briefly thank Texas State University-San Marcos, the graduate department of English, and my graduate peers. My time in the program has been immeasurably significant to me and I could never thank all of those involved individually.

This manuscript was submitted on 14 October 2012.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Page</b>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
CHAPTER	
I. Introduction .....	1
II. “The world re-existed”: The Critical Accidental Dystopian Thread in Ursula K. Le Guin’s <i>The Lathe of Heaven</i> .....	13
III. “Even some fiction might be useful”: Sociological Accidental Dystopia in Octavia E. Butler’s <i>Parable</i> Novels.....	41
IV. “Not real can tell us about real”: Margaret Atwood’s <i>MaddAddam</i> Novels .....	77
V. Conclusion.....	111
WORKS CITED .....	116

## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

Dystopian narratives are often born out of a reaction against social, national, technological, or environmental trends as observed by the author of the text and seek to depict a world which the author's contemporaries would identify as considerably worse than the reader's own (Sargent "Utopianism" 9). These narratives can range between the hopeful and the pessimistic, the utopian and the anti-utopian, and the militant and the pacific. Though they are often seen as the progeny of an older utopian tradition in literature and there are undoubtedly not-yet dystopian precursors—such as Samuel Butler's 1872 novel *Erewhon*—now more than a century old, the generic form did not take shape until the early twentieth century. As the form has matured, Tom Moylan, Raffaella Baccolini, Lyman Tower Sargent, and others have noted a decidedly critical turn in dystopian media which necessitated the coining of the "critical dystopia" term. In his book *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, Moylan establishes the "critical dystopian" framework and applies it to several dystopian texts from the 1980s and 1990s. These works are heavily political and resist narrative closure, and so they are foci of literary and social communication. Baccolini notes that critical dystopian novels blur the lines

between various genres, allowing the works to be “multi-oppositional” and to renew the “resisting nature” of dystopian sf (qtd. in Moylan 189). Interest in these novels seems to be driven by a difficulty to neatly classify and thus narrowly interpret their warnings, resolutions, and directions. In this thesis, I will adapt critical dystopian theory to explore a heretofore unexamined subcategory which I call the *accidental dystopia*.

It is common for literary criticism concerning science fiction, and dystopia, to point out contention in demarcating genres and categories. This should be acknowledged without unnecessarily starting from scratch, so some editorializing is necessary. The origins of science fiction are exceedingly contentious, with some placing the inception with the Greeks while others insist that science fiction is impossible prior to the Enlightenment (*The Routledge Companion*). This distinction is both fruitless and needlessly pedantic for the purposes of investigating dystopia which, unlike its literary precursor utopia, appears to grow both out of and alongside science fiction. Popular distinctions of science fiction are of greater importance to this study. Margaret Atwood, whose novels are the subject of chapter four, is of the ilk that sees a necessary distinction between what is commonly understood by the term science fiction and what she prefers to call speculative fiction. In her book *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*, Atwood claims that the latter depicts only that which is already possible while the former can take you to “Planet X” (69). Ursula K. Le Guin points out that concern over these terms leaves the reader to attempt to engage with the Atwood’s texts through the lens of

the realistic novel, which is to say that it leaves one unable to read it properly and diminishes a novel's effectiveness<sup>1</sup>.

The rules by which we read science fiction and dystopias are significant, especially when taken in tandem with the critical dystopian framework. For economy and clarity, I will use the shortened "sf" to address science fiction and speculative fiction as one genre, which Darko Suvin defines as "a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition" (Stableford 312). Carl Freedman, in *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*, adopts and modifies Suvin's definition "so as to emphasize the dialectical character of genre and the centrality of the cognitive effect" to claim that science fiction and critical theory serve much the same function (23). He goes on to claim that Utopia is a form of cognition, and thus a version of critical theory, which matures with the "critical resources of the novel" (83) in the late nineteenth century and forms the foundation for a late twentieth century consideration of a critical discourse in utopian and dystopian literature.

To a lesser extent, there are similar disagreements over the definitions of literary utopia<sup>2</sup> and dystopia<sup>3</sup>. From the Greek, 'utopia' can be taken literally to mean 'no place,' and narratives of that name depict "the good place" (Sargent "Utopianism" 138). By that definition, dystopia can be translated as "the bad place" (ibid.). However, both popular and literary discussions of utopian/dystopian

---

<sup>1</sup> For more on this, see pp. 72.

<sup>2</sup> I have stuck to the conventional "Utopia" to mean the field of philosophical thought or destination and will use "utopia" to mean those fictions that explore Utopia.

<sup>3</sup> For a thorough and widely accepted history of these terms, see Sargent's "Three Faces" and Moylan's *Scraps*.

literature are hardly this simple. For this reason, a great deal of scholarship has been devoted to fashioning a working definition of utopia and dystopia, as well as those works that exist on the spectrum in between. In his 1994 article, "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," Sargent focuses on the non-existent quality of the worlds depicted in both utopias and dystopias as well as the significance of the reader's interpretation of the world in utopias, eutopias, dystopias, utopian satires, anti-utopias, and critical utopias. For this final category, he bases his definition on Moylan's first book *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*. At the most basic level, Sargent's definition of the dystopia—"a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived" ("Three Faces" 12)—will suffice as a jumping off point.

Moylan cites Sargent's definitions in *Scraps* as a way to build up the argument, made previously in *Demand the Impossible*, for "critical utopias" and subsequently make his way towards the critical dystopia. Critical utopias present a utopian world—one which the reader would identify as better than their own—but shows it as still problematic, thereby taking a critical view of the utopian genre (*Scraps* 74). We cannot take a utopian narrative and simply invert it to depict a dystopian world, and so neither can the critical utopia definition be simply inverted to serve as a definition for the critical dystopia. Classical dystopia, which Moylan typifies with examples such as Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Zamyatin's *We*, and E. M. Forster's "The Machine Stops" (*Scraps* 158-166), exist on a scale between

utopian—those which end hopefully for both the protagonist and the reader—and anti-utopian—those which deny hope to both reader and protagonist—and generally have closed ending which allow for little doubt in interpreting the dystopia’s future. Critical dystopias, however, preserve hope in ambiguity and create a “counter-narrative” of “social possibilities that are radically other” (Moylan 191). It is:

a textual form that leads toward Utopia by way of dialectical negation, for it negotiates the conflict between Utopia and Anti-Utopia, not in a way that displaces or diffuses that historical contestation but rather invokes Utopia within its own cultural intervention in a time when such oppositional impulses are suppressed or compromised. (ibid.)

This effect is produced through various narrative devices, elements of plot, unexpected uses of language, and other methods, some of which must here be explained.

Though Moylan’s framework is perhaps the most useful for understanding and examining critical dystopias, it is by no means perfect and is at times unnecessarily restrictive. Moylan identifies critical dystopian literature as a response to a specific political moment and so claims the final two decades of the twentieth century as the critical dystopian era (*Scraps* 183). Due to his rigidity, some elements of the critical dystopia have been better explained or simplified by other theorists. In order to present the tenets of the critical dystopia as simply and as quickly as possible, I would like to highlight what I believe to be the three most important components, which are more thoroughly explained in subsequent

chapters with narrative examples. First, the critical dystopia places particular importance on what Moylan calls “the reappropriation of language” (149). Control of language has always been important in dystopian literature—this includes the journaling tradition in dystopian texts and totalitarian attempts as control of people through control of language—but in the critical dystopia, the reappropriation of language allows for the “reconstitution of empowering memory,” “the ability to draw on alternative truths,” and the ability to “‘speak back’ to hegemonic power” (ibid.) in a way unbroached in classic dystopias.

Also indispensable in discussing critical dystopian texts is what Baccolini call “genre blurring,” “an exercise in a politically charged form of hybrid textuality” (“A useful knowledge” 147) that “opens a space of contestation and opposition for those groups . . . for whom subjectivity has yet to be attained” (189). That is to say that the mixing and blurring of genres within the critical dystopia allows the form to reclaim dystopia’s resisting nature for any disenfranchised group. Finally, critical dystopian novels “resist closure, and in so doing they allow their protagonists and readers to hope” (Baccolini “Memory” 130). Bacconlini says “the ambiguous, open endings of these novels maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work, for characters and readers alike” whereas hope can exist only outside the story in classic dystopias (ibid. emphasis in original). This preservation of hope along with the expression of “an emancipatory, militant, critical utopian position” within the narrative creates what is now called the critical dystopia, which Fredric Jameson notes “lets us apprehend the present as history” (Jameson qtd. in Donawerth 29).

The criteria and vocabulary established by Moylan and Baccolini enable the reader to engage critically with this newer form of dystopia and is for the most part well coded and executed, but can be restrictive. Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven*, released in 1971, is excluded immediately by Moylan's time frame, but I will argue that if the novel does not necessarily take the form of the critical dystopia, it certainly contains a critical dystopian thread. Much of Le Guin's work, while not specifically utopian, engages in utopianism; indeed *The Dispossessed* has been called a critical utopia (*Scraps* 166). Chapter two of this thesis will address the much overlooked *Lathe*, Le Guin's most dystopian novel, as it fits with the criteria of the critical dystopia. Octavia E. Butler's *Parable* novels, on the other hand, are frequently cited as critical dystopian works; Moylan dedicates a chapter in *Scraps* to an examination of both *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*. These works by the 1995 MacArthur Foundation Award recipient, addressed in chapter three, are perhaps some of the most often read dystopian novels of the 1990s. The trajectory of the dystopia presented in the novels "suggest that awareness and responsibility are the conditions of their protagonist" (Baccolini "Memory" 130). The fourth chapter of this thesis discusses Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam<sup>4</sup> books, *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*. These novels, which depart greatly from the dystopia presented in her 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, deal with the near-future of our morally deficit, do-nothing-science-obsessed world. Published quite recently, these novels have not previously been explored as critical dystopias.

---

<sup>4</sup> So called because of the forthcoming third book of the series, which centers on members of the MaddAddam social activist group.

However, the distinction appears to remain appropriate. It should be noted that though all of these novels are frequently indebted to Eastern ideas or the effects of globalization, they are all Western dystopias and thus reflect the Western dystopian/sf tradition. The scope of this thesis, sadly, could not encompass the Eastern tradition as well.

Using these three works, I will explore my concept "accidental dystopia," which is a designation specifically relating to what the author is attempting to indicate about the nature of the worlds-gone-wrong as well as, perhaps to a lesser extent, to how the world itself becomes dystopian. Both of these meanings are significant and the latter certainly informs the former. Accidental dystopias are not flawed utopias, though they bear some similarities. The critical dystopia takes neither utopia nor dystopia as a set or fully achieved condition, and thus neither title works fully. A flawed utopia is a world that appears, initially, to be perfect but is later found lacking. Critical utopias posit that this is the case with ALL utopias but we should still strive for utopianism. The accidental dystopia is to be read as a fully dystopian world, but one that arises through inaction as well as accident and one that must be evaluated on the basis of the counternarrative presented in the text being examined. The inverse of this would be a guided dystopia; while no one specifically sets out to realize a dystopia, many dystopian worlds are the result of purposeful attempts to seize power, control, money, or resources. The regimented world of "The Machine Stops" is not malevolent but the conditions of humanity's loss of control stem from a mechanical attempt at a perfect world. In Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Gileadean government seeks to hold power through religious

hegemony and the oppression of women. Instead, the accidental dystopia depicts a world made worse not through purposeful effort but rather through apathy, inaction, and myopia. It is the world extrapolated from our own if corrective action is not taken. It is also a subset of the critical dystopia, so the blame for the dystopian accident is placed on everyone but that knowledge is not meant to instill pessimism.

Frequently, classic dystopias possess some causative agent which is revealed or described during the narrative. In Huxley's *Brave New World*, Zamyatin's *We*, and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, there is some apparent director behind the curtain whose motives are unveiled. In cyberpunk novels of the 1980s, which must be largely excluded from the critical dystopia designation for their pessimism, puppet masters are still at work even if they at times seem to possess flawed or incomplete control. Within the critical dystopian form there is a category of novels that must be called accidental—rather than intentional—dystopias because no simple causative agent exists. Even in instances where the conditions of the world can be traced to a point of origin, the author's treatment of human psychology and agency precludes the reader from seeing any one person or group as culpable; instead, responsibility for the conditions of the world must be shared by characters and readers like. These dystopian accidents take form in multiple ways, and each chapter of this thesis will address one mode of the accidental dystopia.

In Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven*, we see what I call the psychological impossibility of Utopia presented through a struggle between Daoism and western rationality, psychiatry and spirituality, an examination of the nature of man, and well-meaning megalomania. In Butler's *Parable* novels, I will explore the idea of

sociological inevitability and dystopia by chance in a significantly degraded, near-future America. Society's complicity in these dystopian novels is explored through themes of slavery, corporate hegemony, puppet government, lack of security, economic breakdown, ecologic disaster, religious fundamentalism, racist resurgence, and societal breakdown. The final chapter will explore a variation similar to the first chapter through Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*. Rather than dealing with a psychological impossibility, Atwood presents the effects of one man's hubris in attempting to remake the world through ecological disaster, corporate hegemony, societal breakdown, resurgence of class structure, corporatization of education, genetic engineering, species-wide genocide, rigidly controlled scientific development, and sexual control. All three authors also present the opportunity to examine power structures between those in and those out of power, including gendered, racial, ethnic, and species hegemony.

Ursula K. Le Guin, Octavia E. Butler, and Margaret Atwood are among the most highly regarded late twentieth century sf voices. Their various critical dystopias deserve significant consideration for the complexity with which systemic psychological and sociological issues are addressed. That all three authors choose to present a dystopian world that originates through some dystopian accident is at once enthralling and terrifying. Their similar themes point to some shared fear of the world's current course and this thesis will attempt to parse the critical trajectory of their novels in a way thus far unseen. It is my belief that melding social theory with the critical dystopian framework, as the accidental dystopia does, can serve to bring greater attention to the prescience of these, and other, dystopian writers and

can take the discussion of these works out of a purely academic literary discussion and into a greater theoretical discussion of the ever better world we want to create.

## CHAPTER II

### “The world re-existed”: The Critical Accidental Dystopian Thread in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Lathe of Heaven*

Both utopia and dystopia are in an important sense tied to the specific place and moment of their creation. Thus, these works are highly subjective and must be viewed in light of the events, ideas, and conditions surrounding the author. In the late 1960s and 1970s, Ursula K. Le Guin wrote several novels that Tom Moylan classifies as “critical utopias,” a category discussed in the introduction to this thesis and concerned with depicting a utopian world without dismissing the issues inherent in building a perfect world. Like others of the time, Le Guin wrote complicated, ambiguous, and ultimately “critical” utopian works that refused to show Utopia as something reached; rather, her novels from this period point out the deficiencies inherent in utopian world-building and instead favored progress towards Utopia without an expectation of reaching it. She sheds light on these deficiencies first by injecting into her utopian narratives ideas and devices generally reserved for dystopia stories—and sometimes using these to better the narrative world—and second by reversing common utopia themes, characters, and settings to show them as problematic or actually dystopic. Though Le Guin’s *The*

*Lathe of Heaven* was written during the 1970s resurgence of utopian literature, it contains a significant dystopian thread that instructs a more thorough reading of the novel. Many of the novel's seemingly utopian elements, such as benevolent altruism and a dreamer with the literal ability to dream new worlds, are problematized by the novel's favoring of a Daoist approach to human interaction and distinctly dystopian tropes and ideas are employed in an effort to criticize the idea of attained Utopia. Further, the novel exemplifies a particular kind of critical dystopia that I have termed the psychological accidental dystopia, which springs from the uncontrolled mind without purposeful intent.

It is perhaps appropriate that much of the criticism dealing with *Lathe* does not take a firm stance in interpreting the novel as either utopian or dystopian. Even so, in those criticisms not centrally concerned with any type of utopian reading, a bias towards one reading over another can be found. This is, in part, the reason why a discussion of this novel as dystopia must first be concerned with identifying its utopian and dystopian threads. The ways in which *The Lathe of Heaven* departs from Le Guin's work before and after also seems to hold a lot of sway over how it has been examined. By having the narrative take place on Earth, rather than an imagined, far-away stand-in for Earth, and dealing largely with philosophical ideas within the same culture/species, rather than cultural interactions between distinctly different cultures/species—as with *The Dispossessed* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*—Le Guin has created a problem for some critics by—in a sense—changing the rules she previously dictated for reading her fiction. Nevertheless, some synthesis of (critical) utopia criticism of *Lathe* can be achieved centering on the

novel's clashing of the "Judeo-Christian-Rationalist West" (*Lathe* 82), embodied in Dr. Haber, and George Orr's natural Daoist approach to action and inaction as well as Le Guin's "parodic reworkings of familiar elements from utopian, dystopian, and science fictions" (Franko 87).

Daoism<sup>5</sup> has defied a cohesive definition for as long as it has been contemplated, yet to properly discuss *The Lathe of Heaven*, some understanding of Daoism must be achieved. Though Daoism's progenitors lived in China sometime between 800 and 400 B.C.E., it was not identified until the Han dynasty, around 100 B.C.E., as one of several schools of classical thought ("Taoism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). Then, as has often been the case since, it was compared religiously with Confucianism, despite being philosophically at odds with that school of thought. When Laozi and Zhuangzi—Daoism's originators—lived, "the assumed role of government [was] cultivating moral character, that is, instilling the *same* moral *dao* in everyone whether by education, attraction or force" (*ibid.*, emphasis in original). However, Daoism may be discussed religiously or philosophically, and the latter is of greater importance in *The Lathe of Heaven*. Daoism is characterized philosophically by ambivalence in regards to a proper *dao*, or way, and is thus inimical to governmental coercion. For this reason, it is often associated with anarchism, as will be discussed later. Daoist philosophy has been negatively classified as nihilist, anarchist, determinist, or fatalist, but such claims are generally answered, in the source texts, with ambivalence and ambiguity. Rather

---

<sup>5</sup> Though the spelling "Tao" has a long tradition in English, I've gone with the more recent Chinese Romanization "Dao."

than being centrally concerned with any one of these classifications, Daoist may alternately use any of them. Harmony, permissiveness, and tolerance are of greater importance, and in this way, Daoism would seem to be less politically concerned than any of the classifications previously mentioned. A testament to Daoism's indefinability can be seen in *Lathe's* central character, Orr, who possesses Daoist proclivities. Le Guin has attempted to condense an outsider's understanding of Daoism both in the chapter epigraphs and in Orr's mentality. In doing so, she identifies its inaccessibility and resistance to codification.

Betsy Huang does not address the novel's place within the utopian (or dystopian) literary tradition. Instead, she looks to *Lathe*, as well as Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, as an illuminating Western novel that presents Dao in a way that does not rely on clichéd and offensive tropes, noting that both rely on a Westernized brand of Dao as the principle device of what Darko Suvin terms cognitive estrangement (Stableford 312), the "Way" to a different reality in Western conceptions of utopia and the necessary "progress" to achieve it" (Huang 25). More specifically concerned with *Lathe*, she notes that "[for] Le Guin, Daoism is an ideal device of cognitive estrangement, one that presents alternate moral and existential epistemes to Western scientific positivism or Christian morality" (26-7). In her only reference to the idea of utopia—for the novel's displacement of the dominant Western mindset with one of Daoist passivity must be seen in the novel as a change for the better—she claims that Orr's brief refusal to dream and invocation of Daoist values "constitutes the fable's moral revelation" (30). Huang's criticism serves to both ground *Lathe* in sf, by connecting Daoism to Suvin's cognitive estrangement,

and in the utopian tradition, by illuminating how and to what ends Le Guin employs Daoist thought as a tool to combat what she calls “Western psycho-rationalist models” (28).

In a piece on “postmodern anarchism,” Lewis Call traces multiple utopian threads through Le Guin’s work overall from 1969-74, albeit through a largely dystopian reading of the novels. Call’s arguments about *Lathe* as dystopia are thorough, and will be elaborated on later, but the utopian ideals to be pulled from the novel should be part of our synthesis of its utopian readings. He argues that the novel’s use of Western rationalist altruism and Daoist passivity creates a postmodern “*ontological anarchy*” (88) because Orr, the novel’s so-called victor, “is the living embodiment of deconstruction. He can have no teleology. He can never arrive at a final position” (97). This ontological anarchy is ultimately utopian in that the novel:

teaches us that if we would truly make the world a better place, we must abandon all pretense towards rational control. We must renounce all distinctions between ourselves and the rest of the world. Only when we know ourselves to be inseparable from the world can we dream the dreams that will change it. (95-6)

This is precisely how Orr, and the Aldebaranians, see and interact—or perhaps do not interact—with the world. The ontological anarchy created by the clash of Haber’s dominant worldview with Orr’s submissive one is, for Lewis Call, utopian.

Perhaps one of the best arguments for the critical nature of Le Guin’s *Lathe* is Carol S. Franko’s delineation of what she calls the “I-We dilemma” and how it

undercuts the “either/or of individuality versus community” that is often the disagreement between utopia and dystopia (79). More simply, it is often—but not always—the case that utopia devalues individuality in favor of community and dystopia vice versa, as a consequence of the narrative’s protagonist coming into conflict not only with his/her dystopia world but also those people who do not see the world for what it has become. The “I-We dilemma” is something Franko points out as an element of all utopian novels, which confront it “on at least two levels—at the level of the description of the utopian society and at a ‘meta level,’ that of an ‘I’ authoring a vision that is presumably desirable for a ‘we’” (76). She argues here for a strict allegorical reading wherein a “captive utopian unconscious” masquerades as “dystopian pessimism” (89). This argument seems to suitably blur the lines between critical utopia and dystopia in very much the same way that I contend Le Guin has done in *Lathe*. Rather than value community at the expense of individuality, as is often the case in utopian narratives, or the reverse, which often happens in dystopian stories, Franko says that this novel “[asserts] instead that discrete identity is a powerful and usually destructive fiction that masks the underlying fact of communality, or interdependence” (79). With each of Haber’s utopian ideas, the world of the novel becomes worse through often random changes, mimicking and sometimes directly referencing previous dystopias—as with the protagonist, whose name invokes one of the best known dystopian novelists—but Orr as the “captive utopian unconscious” renews the novel’s utopian impulse by the end by, in his words, “[doing] something. The only thing [he had] ever done . . . [by pressing] a button” (*Lathe* 170). In this way, “*The Lathe of Heaven* [invites] readers

to reflect on the imaginative and ethical process of constructing alternative worlds. In particular, [it] encourages meditation on the difficulty of merging subjectivity (the “I”) and utopia (the “we”)" (Franko 94-5), thus placing Le Guin’s novel firmly among the 1970s critical utopias as well as pointing out the importance of dystopian narratives to those utopias.

The strongest utopian thread through the novel is laid out in the clash between Dr. Haber, of the Western, action-oriented mindset, and George Orr, whose mind is naturally inclined towards and progressing into a Daoist approach towards life. This clash culminates in a utopian reading of the novel on two levels. First, the aliens—dreamt up by Orr to satisfy Haber’s dream of a “world at peace with itself” (Le Guin 83)—offer a commentary on Haber’s world view. The aliens are the only way for Orr’s effective dream to align with Haber’s prompting and thus, being born out of necessity, they negate the utility of Haber’s ideas towards human progress. Elizabeth Cummins Cogell, in an article examining *Lathe* as a “middle-landscape myth,” notes that “[the] distinguishing characteristic of [the aliens] is their unexplained connection with dream time and with the supernormal powers such as Orr exhibits. Their presence proves Haber’s viewpoint is wrong” by elevating Orr’s inaction—and subconscious—over Haber’s control (137). Second, and this perhaps elaborates on Cogell’s point, is that the novel ends with Orr living in a world “not in good condition, but . . . there,” (Le Guin 167) while Haber is stuck forever in a terrifying dreamscape of unreality (171). The world at the end of the novel is more utopian than the one that we entered or worked through in the novel by virtue of

the network<sup>6</sup> of Daoist thought. However, the progression of the novel flips many of the expectations of a utopian narrative—thus blurring the lines between critical utopia and dystopia—and so a great deal more is understood about the novel through a dystopian lens.

*The Lathe of Heaven* resolves, insofar as Orr's acceptance of Daoist passivity and the individual's place in community can be called a resolution, as a more utopian world than the one introduced. The world has been malformed into incongruous pieces but Orr is better able to engage with it than before Haber's interventions. This resolution might prevent us from viewing the novel solely as dystopia, but commonalities with the dystopian tradition, purposeful allusions to prior dystopias, Orr's intense fear of himself, and Haber's need to code the world along his lines of utopia nevertheless create a significant and undeniable dystopian thread in the novel. The first two of these are directly connected to the importance of authorial intent in utopian and dystopian narratives while the latter two deal with the philosophical implications of utopian world building.

Prior to creating the dystopia of Orr's own mind or the near-total control Haber exerts over it, Le Guin makes use of common dystopian elements in an effort to inform how the reader approaches the text. In this way, she employs what she calls the "dialect of the language" of dystopia to engage readers familiar with dystopia (Walsh 195). The rules of reading dystopia are apparent from the beginning of the novel as, unlike traditional utopias, the narrative begins in *medias*

---

<sup>6</sup> In a 1995 interview with William Walsh, Le Guin said utopia is "all network" and that "small causes have very large results" (205).

res. Tom Moylan explains that “[since a dystopia] opens *in medias res* within the ‘nightmarish society,’ cognitive estrangement is at first forestalled by the immediacy, the normality, of the location” (*Scraps* 148). By forestalling cognitive estrangement, the “nightmarish society” is for a time read realistically and the reader’s intellectual distance is temporarily suspended. This novel’s particular use of beginning the story *in medias res* is made even more unsettling in that Le Guin never gives us a signpost which might tell us when this dystopian world took hold. George Orr’s effect dreams are retroactive—they change past, present, and future—so they erase the very fact that they have happened. After a particularly haunting effect dream, Orr thinks about its ramifications and is able to feel less guilty, if only for a moment: “In *that* life . . . I dreamed an effective dream, which obliterated six billion lives and changed the entire history of humankind for the past quarter century. But in *this* life, which I then created, I did *not* dream an effective dream” (80). Given that all of Orr’s dreams in one sense erase the past, the reader cannot know to what extent the world of the novel on page one has already been changed by dream upon effective dream.

Le Guin also plays with and problematizes the differences between utopia and dystopia in how the protagonist relates to the world of the novel. Utopia generally uses what Moylan terms a “plot of dislocation” to introduce the reader to a foreign, utopian society (*Scraps* 148). This means the central character is usually an outsider who comes to know the utopia and—in most cases—returns home with his/her knowledge of a better world. Through the character’s journey, we the readers also learn without the need for extraneous and dull exposition. Dystopias,

on the other hand, are usually centered on an insider and create a “critical encounter that ensues as the citizen confronts, or is confronted by, the contradictions of the society that is present on the very first page” (148). George Orr does not fit neatly into either category. He is an insider in the respect that Portland/the West has always been his home and he is as much a part of this world as any other Portlander/Western. However, he is also obviously an outsider. This is apparent not only to himself, as he is unable to feel either part of his world or morally right in changing it for much of the novel, but also to others. In a discussion of how Haber has been using Orr’s ability, he comments that Orr is “of a peculiarly passive outlook for a man brought up in the Judaeo-Christian-Rationalist West” (82). By being both the strange outsider and estranged insider, Orr’s character is able to situate the novel in both traditions and thus augment its critical nature. Indeed, Orr’s place in his surrounding is not the only way in which he is difficult to classify. We will factor in his ambivalences shortly in discussing the dystopia from Orr’s perspective.

In addition to common dystopian elements—of which there are many more—Le Guin uses to inform a thorough reading of *Lathe*, she also inserts literary allusions to well-known and respected classical dystopias. The most obvious of these, indicated and elaborated upon by Laura Johnston in her comparison of this novel to *1984*, is the similarity of George Orr’s name to George Orwell. Carol Franko also points out that the federal constitution mentioned in *Lathe* was drafted in 1984, and notes similarities to Huxley’s *Brave New World*, Zamyatin’s *We*, and Butler’s *Erewhon* (90), but Le Guin goes past some of these commonalities of form to directly

reference some of these works and their influence on her novel. She almost directly references Huxley's novel through George Orr's thoughts on an effective dream: "But that was in the old world, now. Not the brave new one" (88). She may be indirectly referencing Huxley again when Haber blames Orr for the "Child Centers," which reflect the methods of child-rearing used in *Brave New World*, calling them Orr's "anti-utopian" "invention" (143). She may also be indirectly referencing one of the original—perhaps even the first—classical dystopias, Forster's *The Machine Stops*, when Orr wonders if the people, so affected by Haber's sole personal use of the Augmentor, will die unable to cope with the world as it has come to be (168). With elements common to dystopias as well as frequent, purposeful references to well-known dystopian works, Le Guin is undoubtedly urging a dystopian investigation of *The Lathe of Heaven*.

Le Guin's use of common dystopian elements and allusions to earlier works serve as clues to instruct the reader's interpretation of the novel but they do not make up its dystopia. As mentioned previously, the novel's dystopia exists on two levels, with one of the dystopian worlds essentially creating the necessary conditions for the other to exist. That is to say Haber's reason-based need to control and create the world on his own constitutes the novel's dystopia on one level and stands in for the whole of Western, rationalist thinking that traps Orr in the dystopia of his own mind on another.

Dr. Haber's motivations and actions should not be denigrated for their intent but rather for their hubris and, from the prospective of Orr and the novel,

illegitimacy<sup>7</sup>. Haber is not to be viewed as an evil man, but certainly a wrong-headed one. Indeed, Le Guin opens chapter four with an epigraph from H. G. Wells in which he states that the only thing that remains certain is “the mind of a pedant” (44). In a chapter devoted to Orr seeking help in dealing with Haber, the pedant here referred to would have to be the psychiatrist. Haber more so than anyone ought to appreciate the complexity and randomness of the manifestations of the subconscious mind, but he does not. He reaches megalomania through a mixture of his want for a better world and his belief in how such a world should be achieved. His approach to psychoanalysis, pure reason, masculinity, and utopia are all indicated to the reader in his conversations with Orr, his brief inner-monologues through the novel, and indeed even his name. Franko points out that “Haber's name in German connotes both being full of one's oats and bogey, or specter” (93). From these two meanings we can take two possible readings of the man; Haber might be a humorous, perhaps even laughable, man or he might be a threat without obvious weakness. Through the course of the novel, we see more of the latter than the former. He is patronizing to his patients (23) and Heather Lelache, a professional supposedly sent to him from the government (58); he exerts control over Orr numerous times with little effort and only veiled threats; he places himself into high positions of power—by using Orr—with great ease (53); he even scientifically deduces a way to make himself like a god by copying Orr’s gift into his own mind

---

<sup>7</sup> This chapter is concerned with the psychological origination of an accidental dystopia. Chapter 4 deals with the accidental dystopia which originates from an individual's/organization's hubris in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*.

(160). Perhaps the only way in which he seems laughable—and darkly so—is that he essentially proves himself wrong by going insane (171).

Haber's actions should not be viewed as the missteps of one man. In a way, his German name and similarity to Nazi scientists—unethical experiments on unwilling participants—should be read in light of the finding of the Nuremberg Trials of 1945-6. The problem with Haber is not individual but a collective mindset held by many and expressible, again, as a Western rationalist drive which equates utopia to never-ending progress and so must seek to improve the world through direct action. Le Guin shows this kind of approach does not result in utopia but rather leads to increasingly worse unintended consequences. The novel casts Western, action-driven progress in a negative light by having Haber, the educated, seemingly altruistic actor, continually feed Orr's failing dreams. Worse yet, as the world improves along Haber's lines, we see the world going to hell. As Haber promotes himself to "Director of the [Oregon Oneirological Institute]" (53) and Orr to a house exponentially larger than his old apartment (74), he also makes drastic changes to the world around him and simply blames the short-comings of these changes on problems with his tool—Orr—rather than on a limitation stemming from the conscious mind attempting to control the subconscious. Indeed, adopting Haber's language, Orr tries to point out Haber's error: "You're trying to reach progressive, humanitarian goals with a tool that isn't suited to the job. Who has humanitarian dreams?" (86). Undeterred by Orr's moral hesitations to impose change on others, Haber shouts that they are working on "freedom" and that Orr

must not worry about controlling his effective dreams but bestowing them on the world (88).

Haber's failure to express even one actual step towards utopia is as much an indictment of the idea of attained utopia as it is of the Western drive toward progress. The harder Haber pushes, the worse things get. At one point, his attempt to alleviate starvation creates a devastating plague (65). At another, his efforts towards peace initiate a war in space (85). In yet another attempt, he tries to make "the modern way of life . . . togetherness," and in doing so creates a world of truly murderous sports and legal—indeed, compulsory—street euthanizations of cancerous individuals (130-1). Despite any indication of his unsuitability to reshape the world, for Haber, the ends always justify the means. His world view is dealt its ultimate blow when, upon using Orr's brainwave on himself for the first time, Orr is only barely able to stop him from unmaking the world (165-6).

As a man of Daoist proclivities tortured by an incomplete understanding of his effective dreaming, Orr's mind—from which he cannot expect to escape—becomes a personalized dystopia by way of his living in Haber's world. By being both an insider and an outsider, Orr has no appropriate way to engage either with his moral inclinations or his society's belief in progressive actions. Thus, the novel begins with Orr having nearly killed himself in an attempt to stave off effective dreaming (8). This action puts him into contact with Dr. Haber by way of so-called "Voluntary Therapeutic Treatment," a name of the Orwellian ilk meaning the first phase in mandatory therapy (9), and thus Orr begins to interact more directly with the problematic Western rationalist mindset; no longer at odds merely with his

environment, he must now deal with a necessary interpersonal relationship with Western progressive action. Under Haber's supervision, Orr alternately trusts and distrusts the doctor. During his second meeting with Haber, the narrator indicates that "Orr had a tendency to assume that people knew what they were doing" (33), but this tendency put towards Haber does not last. By being thrown into such direct conflict with ideas disparate to his, Orr is presented with his "critical encounter" and can act as the dystopian insider confronting the "contradictions of his society." However, Orr's impression of Haber's illegitimacy in acting on the world does not immediately lead to his belief in his own legitimacy as one who accepts his place in the world. He is far too afraid of the results of his effective dreams and feelings of being lost in a world at odds with his morals to immediately question the doctor. That is to say that through the novel, Orr only slowly comes to accept his passive inaction as an appropriate counter to Haber's action.

For much of the novel, Orr is not able to resist Haber's Western progressive methods. Lewis Call points out that "Orr consistently refuses the comforting but restrictive binary logic that characterizes the modern Western mode of thought," (97) but this refusal is not without problems. It is only through his work with Haber that Orr is able to realize that the man's efforts, though laudable, are insufficient for a man in and of the world:

We're in the world, not against it. It doesn't work to try to stand outside things and run them, that way. It just doesn't work, it goes against life. There is a way but you have to follow it. The world *is*, no matter how we think it ought to be. You have to be with it. You have to let it be. (136)

This confrontation comes only towards the end of the novel. Up to this point, Orr has been a prisoner both within his own mind and under Haber's thumb. He knows that no one has the right to change the world along his/her own lines, but his unconscious mind instills such fear in him that he places himself at the whims of a man whose beliefs run completely counter to his own. He tells Heather Lelache as much during their first meeting, but also insists on defending the man (48). He is unable to view the world in a dichotomous black *or* white way. He does not exist, act, or think along polar lines but instead views everything as containing a greater deal of complexity, which only augments his inability to confidently resist Haber or even interact with or relate to the world. Orr's dystopia of the mind is made up not just of his subjugation to Haber, but that the subjugation is necessary because he so fears his effective dreams. Though he believes that Haber takes the wrong approach in trying to change the world, he nevertheless thinks, for a time, that Haber intends to cure him. Instead, the doctor's dream suggestions continue to impose Orr's ill-suited mind on the entire world by literalizing his psychological troubles.

In order for Orr to in any way escape this psychological dystopia, he has to come to terms with what Donald Theall calls the "ambiguous utopian dialectics" of the novel (256). Le Guin indicates very much the same in the epigraph to chapter three: "To let understanding stop at what cannot be understood is a high achievement. Those who cannot do it will be destroyed on the lathe of heaven. – Chuang Tse: XXIII" (30). As mentioned previously, the central tension of the novel—and now we may also say its ambiguity—comes from the clash of Western and Daoist ideas. Theall puts this a little differently but in presenting *The Lathe of*

*Heaven* as an ambiguous utopian work, his thesis would seem to argue for the novel's necessary dystopian reading:

The very nature of the collision between the processes of history and of utopianizing creates an ambiguity, which so many critics attempt to resolve in utopian novels in order to have a definite outcome. Le Guin, though, is too aware of the tension in the tradition and the fact that it arises out of the process of estrangement which is bound to occur in intercultural communication. (261)

Orr is able to “let understanding stop at what cannot be understood” following the effective dream that results in his meeting with the Aldebaranians. From a confluence of Haber’s ideas and Orr’s mind, Orr is given the necessary tools to embrace inaction and work as an element of the world. Moylan, elaborating on the intricacies of dystopias, notes that “language is a weapon for the reigning dystopic power structure” and that in “regaining language [one also recovers] the ability to draw on the alternative truths of the past and ‘speak back’ to hegemonic power” (*Scraps* 149).

For Orr, the Aldebaranians constitute this “regaining [of] language.” Initially, the Aldebaranian’s are created out of Haber’s attempt to create a “world at peace with itself” (85) and merely resemble an unknown Other. As we come to know them later in the novel, it is clear that Orr’s mind has created exactly what it needs to resist Western binaries. The Aldebaranian’s come to Earth and are either altered at the last possible moment by Orr’s dreams or are at least finally revealed to be peaceful. Upon meeting Orr, they are immediately sure of what he is—*iahklu*

(119)—but backtrack when they find that he doesn't know himself. This term *iahklu* is never defined in the novel but seems to at once encompass Orr's Daoist inclination and the self-knowledge he must obtain. Once integrated into Earth society—surprisingly as merchants and culture peddlers—the mind of the Other is at once foreign and familiar to Orr. The moment we might call the “reclamation of language” is somewhat humorous. Orr visits an Aldebaranian “JUNQUE” shop (147), speaks briefly about *iahklu* (148), is given “With a Little Help from My Friends,” a record by The Beatles (149), and goes home to get high with his landlord (150). In his torpor, Heather returns—albeit altered as I will address shortly—and Orr comes to embrace the utility of interacting with the world through inaction. In this sense, the scene acts as the dystopian “reclamation of language,” but takes place in the novel more so as the protagonist finding himself not to be matched unfairly, but instead up to the task of his clash with Haber. Rather than gaining the ability to “speak back” to existing hegemony, he is able “to draw on the alternative truths of the past” to counter Haber. About the world around him, Orr thinks “it *is* on my side. That is, I'm a part of it. Not separate from it. . . I breathe the air and change it, I am entirely interconnected with this world. Only Haber's different, and more different with each dream” (149-50). This finally places Western progressive thought at a disadvantage because it is shown to be inimical to individual rights and egalitarian community building.

*Lathe* differs greatly from Le Guin's other publications of the late 1960s and early 1970s. During that time, she wrote most of the Hainish cycle, a number of sf novels which are written in the same *milieu* but which take place on remote worlds

with various near-human species, and several works which take place in Earthsea, a fantasy realm of her creation. Thus, *Lathe* is obviously exceptional for taking place on a then-future Earth in the year 2002. The consequence of this is that themes which Le Guin generally deals with on a species-wide or culture-wide spectrum are here explored between two white, middle-class men in America. The novel's only female character, Heather Lelache, is also the only minority given a voice. By foregrounding the two men and placing Lelache in the background, Le Guin ensures that the emphasis on the novel's dystopian thread is placed on the mind, or more specifically a certain kind of progressive mentality, rather than on social, economic, ethnic, or gendered struggles. That is not to say, however, that Lelache does not play a central role in the novel.

Heather Lelache exists in the novel as George Orr's love interest and, perhaps more importantly, friend. Her gender and race have somewhat different functions in the text, and should be dealt with in turn. As Orr's love interest, Lelache plays a very important role in distinguishing the novel's utopian and dystopian threads, as Carol Franko has identified:

In utopian novels, the love interest is used to affirm the value of the utopian society (Le Moine and Bogstad 115) and to cement the visitor's conversion to its new ways, and female characters represent sentiment, feeling. In contrast, dystopian novels use thwarted romantic love to symbolize the individuality and freedom denied by the totalitarian state, and female characters represent sexuality. The love interest in *The Lathe of Heaven* fits neither category.

Instead, Heather Lelache represents the recent history that Haber's and Orr's contrasting world views contend for. (93)

By referencing dystopian literature as a whole and referring the restrictions of a totalitarian state, Franko is more specifically referring to what is now generally called classical dystopia, but her assertion is nevertheless sound. In keeping with that idea of Lelache as “recent history,” Haber is, significantly, the only character in the novel that expresses sexist or misogynistic ideas. When we are given access to his thoughts in chapter five, he notes how “a man at the head of a big and complex research institution needs a loyal and clever woman in his outer office,” (53) and he is taken aback when he discovers that the inspector he believes to have been sent by the government—Lelache—is actually a woman (55). George Orr, meanwhile, is genuinely impressed with Heather’s legal acumen and generally how she handles herself (52). While Haber views her only as a nuisance—indeed he thinks about, and later does, get rid of her—Elizabeth Cummings says that the relationship between Orr and Lelache “epitomizes the bond within the human community” (164).

Lelache’s symbolic representation as the novel’s recent history is perhaps more directly linked to her race. At some point after Haber meeting Lelache, he induces in Orr an effective dream which does away with race altogether and makes everyone “the color of a battleship” (127). This results in Lelache having never existed at all because—as she says—she is wrapped up in racial contradiction; her mother was white and her father black. Her name has come down to her from a French slavemaster in Louisiana and mean, literally, “the coward” (102). Her own

extended family took her as “their token Negro,” and what tears her up the most is that what her race is, and thus it is neither (103). She refers to herself as “shit [colored],” to which Orr replies “the color of the earth” (ibid.). Once the underlying racial tension and history of racial and ethnic encounter and struggle is wiped, by Haber, from the map of human history, she no longer has a place within it. When she returns to the novel, by means of Orr’s effective dream—this time altered by THC and “With a Little Help from My Friends” by The Beatles—she is no longer the same person. While Orr is ostensibly happy to have her back, she no longer seems as self-possessed as she once did. The events of the end of the novel and Orr’s undoing of Haber’s mess ultimately result in the original Lelache coming back in the final pages. Upon seeing her, Orr realizes “his dry and silent grieving for his lost wife must end, for there she stood, the fierce, recalcitrant, and fragile stranger, forever to be won again” (175).

Taken as a whole Lelache stands for what is lost in the conflict between the world-views of Haber and Orr, as Franko suggest. It is from Lelache that the novel’s most beautiful and frightening language comes. After Haber creates the conditions under which the moon becomes a contested trophy of war, it is Lelache that considers the ramifications. “It was no longer pleasant to exchange glances with the moon. It symbolized neither the Unattainable, as it had for thousands of years, nor the Attained, as it had for a few decades, but the Lost” (93). She alone is able to see in Orr a strength based on his unwillingness to force change and his “infinite possibility” as “the uncommitted, the nonacting, the uncarved” (95). She is able to stand in for the composite of all human experience, lost for a time to totalizing

Western progress and brought back by a Daoist respect for human difference. *The Lathe of Heaven* can thus be called a critical dystopia, as defined by Moylan and Baccolini, for its perseverance of hope. In various other stories, Le Guin generally criticizes utopia by creating ambiguous and/or failed utopias which correlate more to our own world than we would ideally like to see. When these worlds approach something quite close to the world in which we already live, we struggle to continue to see them as utopian. In *Lathe*, she goes a bit further in presenting a world with utopian potential that falls easily to the problems inherent in building a utopia and passes straight on to an accidental dystopia. Thus, the only way to fully engage with this narrative is to identify the particular dystopia thread.

George Orr possesses a capability which frightens and confuses him, and though he is used by a man with altruistic intent, a dystopia arises nonetheless. As is frequently the case in Le Guin's fiction, the apparent solution to the novel's problems leads not to resolution but rather forces a critical look ostensibly promising axioms.

The kind of dystopia presented in through the clash between Dr. Haber and George Orr is not particularly exceptional in dystopian literature. The protagonist in *Lathe* comes into direct conflict with a man that embodies the dominant mindset of the culture at large. This is, on a simplistic level, what makes for the foundation of the dystopian narrative. However, Orr's opposition to the cultural world he inhabits is not presented as one of self- or communal-interest; that is, he does not exactly fit an archetype of a man simply resisting unfair and unrelenting oppression. Instead, he is of a mind that is at odds with his environment quite naturally. His Daoist

proclivities are not the result of purposeful study but are rather a core part of his mind. Thus we can call his innate opposition to the progressive, Western mind not reactive but accidental. The dystopian conditions of the novel are arrived at by nothing more than happenstance. That the narrative of the dispossessed—here George Orr—does not intend to come into direct opposition with the novel’s power paradigm is significant. Orr seeks instead to carve out an altogether different niche from the Western mind. The novel’s critical dystopian counternarrative—to use Moylan’s terms—thus situates the accidental dystopia as a subset of the critical dystopia. Only the critical dystopia appropriately frames the dystopian narrative to make productive a discussion of a work as an accidental dystopia.

The dystopia that exists in or because of George Orr’s mind, previously referred to as his ‘psychological dystopia,’ can be related more specifically to this new accidental dystopian subset. The psychological aspect of the accidental dystopia can be understood as something more than a person’s mind simply imprisoned—be it carceral or otherwise—by his/her difference from the powers of society. Instead, it can be understood as a mind so at odds with itself and its surroundings that it sees any action attempting to assert change as illegitimate, ineffective, or impossible. It is, however, simultaneously clear that remaining at such odds indefinitely is not possible. For this reason, the means of escape from the psychological accidental dystopia can only be finding some measure of “relative autonomy” (Olivier 292), be it individual or communal. We may adapt something

Bert Olivier says about Foucault's ideas on "self-mastery" for our discussion of possible<sup>8</sup> narrative resolution in these kinds of dystopias:

[Self-mastery] does not depend on 'information' as much as on the difficult, painstaking development of the ability to distance oneself from those agencies that constantly tend to 'infantilize' people, by treating them as if they are children, incapable of thinking and acting as (relatively) autonomous beings. (295)

The only minor change we might make to Olivier's assertion is that rather than distancing oneself from external agencies, in the psychological AD, it is the conflict of cognitive dissonance that must be—at least partially—dealt with.

Orr's development in *Lathe* perfectly fulfills this psychological accidental dystopia. The character to which the reader is introduced on the second page has very nearly killed himself in an attempt to self-medicate his problematic dreams. We must be careful, however, to not lump Orr in with what Olivier calls "marginalized people such as the insane, [actual] prisoners, slaves and (in most societies) women, [who] do not have the opportunity to engage readily in acts of problematization" (Olivier 299). Including these "marginalized people" under the psychological accidental dystopia subset would make the designation so broad as to be useless. To be clear, Orr could certainly be argued as a marginalized person, but given that his innate mentality places him at opposition to his world, it seems more worthwhile to consider him as "the most vulnerable and insubstantial creature,

---

<sup>8</sup> The distinction "possible" is particularly important here because of the insistence from Tom Moylan (among others) that critical utopias/dystopias resist narrative resolution in favor of hopeful or pessimistic ambiguity.

[having] for its defense the violence and power of the whole ocean, to which it has entrusted its being, its going, and its will" (Le Guin 7). Orr's psychology cannot be better elucidated than Le Guin does in metaphorically introducing him as a jellyfish just before he awakes at the urging of medical technicians. The jellyfish can neither expect—insofar as it has the capacity to do so—nor enact substantial change on its environment. As with Orr, it can only send the slightest of ripples out as the result of its action.

This metaphor must partially break down, however, for the novel to achieve anything like a resolution or even climax. Orr's dreams and Daoist inclination bring him into contact with his polar opposite and he is thus thrust into an unacceptable position. This is where the second condition of the psychological accidental dystopia comes into play. Though the conditions of Orr's mind are theoretically inescapable, they are also unbearable in the long term. With no apparent recourse in the physical world, Orr is only left with one possible means of assistance—his own mind. Under Haber's instigation, he invokes the Aldebaranian's and, as previously discussed, creates the conditions which will ultimately allow him to both halt Haber's progression and carve out a contented niche for himself. This does not mean, of course, that the novel's dystopia is resolved. In critical dystopias, tidy resolutions are not only avoided but shown to be impossible. The world is in quite terrible shape and, though the conflict of the novel has been determined, the fate of virtually everything else has not. Orr's future lies in his love for Lelache. We the reader can neither expect nor want anything better at the novel's close.

While *Lathe* is perhaps Le Guin's sole dystopian novel, the focus here on Orr's mind as the impetus for the accidental dystopia brings the book into line with much of her other work. Though Le Guin is best known for her high fantasy and sf works, the tropes of each are generally used to explore her interest in humanism, sociology, and interaction with alien culture. In *Lathe*, the alien is found within our own minds. This is not outside of the ordinary for Le Guin<sup>9</sup>, but this is perhaps one of the few instances where she does not veil that discovery. In this novel, she brings the Lacanian model of complex subjectivity—arguably present in all of her main characters—down from the macro-level and applies it directly to Orr. He remains part of the power dynamic in achieving his autonomy when he ceases Haber's world-destroying progression. However, to do so, he requires the opportunity presented by the Aldebaranians and the Beatles' song. By being beholden not only to himself but also to the world, Orr gives Le Guin the opportunity to bring into consideration the problems of asserting power on others that are associated with personal autonomy.

The battle between seeking help with his dreams and asserting autonomy lead to the novel's accidental dystopia and, in doing so, give insight to Le Guin's own ideas about the individual's place in the world. Referring again to Daoism, we can see that Le Guin does not believe in clean answers to virtually any question. In effect, all answers are relative and subjective. While this idea often leads her works towards a critically examined utopian, in this particular instance, it leads the world

---

<sup>9</sup> For other examples, look to the treatment of dreams and the mind in her *Earthsea* books or the Athshean's lucid dreaming in *The Word for World is Forest*.

to dystopia, readily and without purposeful action. While *Lathe* could be taken as a rare instance of dystopian pessimism on Le Guin's part, given that it was published along with a flurry of her other, more utopian works from the late 1960s to the early 70s, it seems instead to indicate her cautious and appropriate skepticism of uncritical utopian world building.

The final chapter of *Lathe* brings the novel to its loftiest point with George Orr communing with the Aldebaranians, "his dreams, like waves of the deep sea . . . profoundly harmless, breaking nowhere, changing nothing" (170). Haber remains in a "bad dream" (171), and Heather Lelache returns as she was first introduced, "forever to be won again" by Orr (175). With this solution to the events of the novel we must view the narrative, as we have already said, as a critical utopia or at least as a utopian dystopia. There is no simple resolution. The world is no better than the reader's world and we might argue that, as a result of Haber's work, it is a bit worse off. However, from the view of George Orr, it is finally a world with promise. Through Orr's acceptance of his part in the world, from his interactions with the Aldebaranians, the story is turned back significantly towards utopian hope while still refusing to accept Utopia as a possibility. Without the dystopian thread woven through the novel, Le Guin's critical world building would lack much of the power it has here. Though it is perhaps one of her least discussed work, it is certainly no less deserving of attention.

## CHAPTER III

### “Even some fiction might be useful”: Sociological Accidental Dystopia in Octavia E. Butler’s *Parable* Novels

Octavia E. Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* and its sequel *Parable of the Talents* share some similarities to Le Guin’s *The Lathe of Heaven*. Just as *Lathe* seems a departure from Le Guin’s other publications of the late 1960s and early 1970s, so do Butler’s *Parable* novels differ from her other series by focusing the story on Earth in a relatively familiar world over a much shorter period. Both of the *Parable* novels cover only 66 years and begin just 30 year after their publication dates. Beyond that, *Lathe* and the *Parable* novels diverge quickly. While a dystopian reading of Le Guin’s work requires that a significant foundational argument be made, Butler’s *Parable* novels are quite evidently dystopias. They depict a world removed just far enough from our own that Butler’s concerns about America in the early 1990s—insufficient education funding, budget cuts to the space program, corporate greed and hegemony to name a few—have time to grow into her nightmare. In these novels, Butler depicts a future California that is far more insular than its contemporary day corollary due to arson, gang violence, drug abuse, robbery, and

rape in *Parable of the Sower*, as well as state-sanctioned religious persecution and enslavement in *Parable of the Talents*.

As has been previously established, a work's categorization as an accidental dystopia is contingent upon its prior classification as a critical dystopia because it is only by using rules for reading critical dystopias that the accidental dystopian subset carries any weight. Unlike the other works covered in this thesis, Butler's *Parable* novels have been well established as critical dystopias. In *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, Tom Moylan uses both novels as informative examples of the critical dystopia (223-45), though characteristically he devalues the critical dystopian qualities of *Talents* because of what he sees as something closer to political closure than existed in the first novel. At best, he sees the ending of *Talents* as a "search for a 'third way' that only appears to move beyond the existing social order" (242). An alternate reading of the second novel's counternarrative seems more appropriate, especially given the unfulfilled possibility that Butler intended to write a third *Parable* novel had her untimely death not prevented it. Moylan's critique of both novels is nevertheless invaluable and will be addressed later in this chapter.

The accidental dystopia that comes out of these two novels can be called sociological because of Butler's impetus of their writing. She presents a non-programmatic dystopic world that makes the reader question whether it is in fact sociologically inevitable. The ever developing dystopia of the *Parable* novels comes about through chance predicated on legislative myopia and corporate empowerment. In these novels, Butler creates a critical dystopia of an early twenty-first century America filled with rampant crime, drug abuse, environmental

degradation, economic collapse, extensive privatization of public works, re-instituted slavery, unprecedented corporate power, and extreme religious and racial zealotry through her elaborate use of “genre-blurring” (Baccolini) and Earthseed dogma. Although the world of the novel presents us with several traditional dystopian power hierarchies, Butler’s sociological accidental dystopia depicts her contemporary concerns about the fluid manner in which this world is very likely the future of our own.

Genre fiction, such as dystopian novels, has moved increasingly towards hybridity in the past few decades in what I believe to be—at least in part—an attempt to escape the trappings of literary ghettoization. This has had the added bonus of making sf better able to function on the same level as critical theory by creating a continuous osmosis between genres and sub-genres. Raffaella Baccolini claims that this “genre-blurring” is a necessary condition in allowing critical dystopias to join the critical discourse (“Gender and Genre”), as genres are “drenched in ideologies” (“Persistence” 519) and thus blurring acts as an extra-textual act of ideological subversion. Though we see some of this genre-blurring in Le Guin’s *Lathe*, it is far more prevalent in the dystopian fiction of Octavia Butler and Margaret Atwood. Peter Stillman even notes that Butler’s particular use of genre-blurring creates “a shock of familiarity rather than estrangement” (Stillman 16), thus adding critical complexity not only to the dystopian subgenre but also the central thrust of sf literature. As is the case with their status as critical dystopias, the *Parable* novels’ hybridity has been elaborated upon by many.

At their simplest level, the *Parable* novels resemble the earliest and best known of the classic dystopias. In keeping with her authorial predecessors, Butler writes these novels as journals kept in real-time, thus allowing for the impression of a curated document without losing the immediacy of action that would be observed if the events were actually unfolding before the reader. Moylan notes that “journal entries set within the familiar sf account of new beginnings in a post-apocalyptic world constitute the primary vehicle for her ‘parables’” (223). Just as we are able to unexpectedly experience D-503’s Great Operation in Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We*, in Butler’s *Parables* the journaling story-writing technique allows for the dystopian story, begun *in medias res*, to unfold as a real, palpable world thus cultivating “cognitive estrangement” (Stableford 312). In *Sower*, the journaling is performed exclusively by Lauren Olamina, the at once self-assured and ever-conflicted protagonist of the series. In *Talents*, however, a second level is added to the journal story-telling. Lauren’s entries, written between 2032 and 2035, are interspersed with writings from Lauren’s husband, Taylor Franklin Bankole, and brother, Marcus Olamina/Marcos Duran. They are also introduced with stories from Lauren’s daughter—given name is Larkin Beryl Ife Olamina Bankole and Christian American adoptive name is Asha Vere—thus giving the second novel the ability to simultaneously build the character of both mother and daughter.

Butler has been called by many a writer of *Bildungsromans*<sup>10</sup>, for the *Parable* novels as well as her other series and stand-alone novels. Both *Sower* and *Talents* are concerned with the development of Lauren Olamina over the decade which

---

<sup>10</sup> See Andréolle, Federmayer, and Smith.

includes her late teens and early twenties. The first novel focuses on her last three years of adolescence, during which she loses her family, home, security, community, and what counts for her innocence. At the same time, she begins etching out Earthseed—her religious beliefs—as well as a new familial community culminating in the founding of Acorn, the group's enclave and safe-haven. Even before the massive attack which destroyed her suburban community Lauren is sure that their way of life was fast becoming an anachronism. At odds with her father's religion and management of the house, she accrues the knowledge she knows she will need to survive outside the gates. When the time comes, she is ready in every practical way. There is little a young woman can do to prepare for the loss of her family, however, and Lauren—ever the pragmatist—is devastated. Nevertheless, she remains rational at all times. Her moments of weakness, of which there are only two in the series, are reserved and held in private. She maintains a constant veil between her emotional self and her role in the community. With the insight her journals offer, the reader is able to see through those times when only her façade is flawless. Because Lauren is a decidedly honest person, the first person narratives of *Sower* and *Talents* give a nearly omniscient view of Lauren's mind. She uses the journals as a way to come upon the core of her thoughts about the world so that the only boundaries which remain between perceived and actual reality are those barriers about which Lauren knows nothing. Thus, the *Parables* tell the coming-of-age story of the woman whose movement will eventually launch mankind into space and on towards the stars.

The second novel, to a lesser extent, develops the coming-of-age of Lauren's daughter Larkin, albeit through recollection at a later date. Due to the narrativizing Larkin places on the events of her life, we cannot really call *Talents* Larkin's *Bildungsroman* as well. Instead the parallels between Lauren's journaling and Larkin's commentary offer another layer of complexity to the novel. Larkin spent the first few months of her life under Lauren's care before being stolen away by the Christian American fundamentalist sect and adopted out to its parishioners. Aside from a single meeting very late into Lauren's life, Larkin—I use this name though she keeps her adoptive name in the novel—has no further contact with Lauren. The closest link to her biological family is the life she spends with her Uncle Marcos—Marcus Olamina—the Christian American preacher. Through Larkin's bitter contemplation of her dead mother's life and words, *Talents* is able to present a multi-generational picture of this dystopian 21<sup>st</sup>-century America. Larkin's post-adolescent rebellion against her mother's religious ideas mimics Lauren's own rebellion against her father's world-view. In *Talents*, Butler is able to depict some of the intricacies involved in the parent-child relationship while devoting relatively few pages to actual family interaction between Lauren and Larkin. In this way, Lauren never assumes the classical dystopian part of the alienated unbeliever, alone in her/his rebellion against the world. Instead the entire family—and community—becomes significant to the novel's counternarrative.

Butler's use of structural forms and tactics from African-American slave narratives is quite frequently commented upon in discussions of the *Parable* novels as well as *Kindred*. Rather than reaching forward, extrapolating only from her

present, Butler adopts the real-life dystopia of her racial past. In *Sower*, Maria Varsam says slavery is “depicted more broadly . . . to designate relations of economic dependence with the use of the term ‘debt slavery’” (“Concrete Dystopia” 210). In this first novel, Butler reintroduces slavery to America slowly by way of correlations to tenant farming, the *de facto* indenturement of the Reconstruction era, global capitalism’s pursuit of bottom-dollar wages, and the contemporary sentiments of those who feel bound by circumstance to their employment. When the transnational corporation Kagimoto, Stamm, Frampton (KSF) buys up the coastal town of Olivar, it is as much for the land as the “eager, educated work force” that already lives there (106-8). While Lauren’s stepmother insists the family moves there, Lauren and her father know better: “There’s nothing safe about slavery” (107). At this point in the narrative, national and state government exists for little else than to sign away its few remaining powers to private business. Thus, KSF is a sign of the rapidly hopeless times to come, as it has effectively become part of Louis Althusser’s “Repressive State Apparatus” (145), a category typically comprised on police, armies, prisons, and the like, albeit without an actual ‘state’ backing it up.

In the first novel, the only condition to actually affect the dystopic world’s collective consciousness is economic need. The aging former middle class still largely expects a return to normalcy and thus their ideas about culture, society, and governance, while pessimistic, are not greatly changed. It is not until *Talents* that there exists a concerted popular and governmental effort to alter the dystopian world’s culture. With the Christian American fundamentalist Jarret in the White House, inciting extreme religious persecution while apparently condemning it, the

effort to change the hearts and minds of the nation becomes apparent. When Acorn is taken over by a group of Christian Americans, they do not seek to rule exclusively through fear, though it is obviously their primary tool. In addition to lashings, confinement, and rape—to list only a few of their atrocities—the invaders seek to thoroughly indoctrinate the adherents of Earthseed, thus extending the physical conditions of their slavery into their minds. Varsam says that on a content level, “the concerns of dystopian fiction coincide with those of slave narratives in their discourse on freedom, inequality, and the nature of domination” (210). Butler seeks to extend that metaphor by problematizing our cultural memories of slavery by convoluting them with contemporary life. Rather than showing slavery as a distant but untenable aspect of our history, she makes it a very real, modern day concern which in turn adds to the critical depth of the *Parable* novels.

The final instance of “genre-blurring” I wish to draw attention to is found in the similarities between the *Parable* series and survivalist novels. The latter could include *On the Beach* by David Brin, *Alas, Babylon* by Pat Frank, or *The Postman* by David Brin and seems—in the West—to have gained much of its momentum from Cold War fears and the threat of mutually-assured destruction. As previously mentioned, a good deal of *Sower* is dedicated to Lauren’s pursuit of practical knowledge and skills: she spends a good deal of time learning the flora and fauna of coastal and northern California, knot-tying, and unarmed combat. From the novel’s start, she already knows how to cook, farm, use a firearm, and speak Spanish as well as English. Her efforts are specifically precipitated by the intrusion of thieves into her walled community, but they are far more based on the extant dystopic world of

the novel. It speaks volumes of the conditions of everyday life in the *Parable* novels that Lauren prepares not for the eventualities of an emergency calling upon her skills—as did the survivalists and preppers of the Cold War—but for the world she already inhabits. The world of the novel does not stand next to the cliff; it has already gone over the edge and Lauren recognizes the need for immediate action to prevent as much damage as possible. Her acquisition of practical skills never ceases. Instead of fading away, her pursuit becomes part of the fabric of Earthseed and is adopted by the community at Acorn. Even so, for much of the two novels, no amount of preparation alone is sufficient to save the group from frequent crisis.

Before delving into the series' critical dystopian qualities, it is necessary to familiarize oneself with a bit of plot summary. Though *Talents* acts as a proper sequel to *Sower*—something that cannot be said of the Atwood novels addressed in the next chapter—the two differ greatly in regards to the central crisis of the story, the ultimate criticism being made, the counternarrative to the dystopian world, the nature of the open-ended resolution, and so on. A powerful argument could be made for addressing the *Parable* novels as distinct from one another because of these differences.

If *Sower* can be said to show the consequences of our constant devaluation of education, *Talents* explores what becomes of America after prolonged crisis brings the country under the control of a conservative, fundamentalist religious sect. In a column in *Writer's Digest*, Butler claimed:

The ugly things in the novels happen because today's dangers—drug use, illiteracy, the popularity of building prisons coupled with the unpopularity of

building and maintaining schools and libraries, the yawning rich-poor gaps and global warming—grow up to be tomorrow’s disasters. (“How I Built” 14)

Certainly, then, it is an oversimplification to say the *Sower* is actually about the nation gone to hell from lack of education. However, the central importance of the novel’s class structure cannot be devalued. Lauren is far better off than many and possesses a thorough education, but her background and community allow her to give a great deal of insight into the uneducated, unassisted, disenfranchised poor of the 2020s and 30s. The problems facing her world are legion and not of the author’s imagination. In 2000, Butler quoted herself—no doubt from countless answers to similar questions—when she said “I didn’t make up the problems . . . All I did was look around at the problems we’re neglecting now and give them about 30 years to grow into full-fledged disasters” (“Brave New Worlds” 165). It seems that Butler’s concerns over these problems were so great that she found she needed multiple novels to explore them thoroughly (“How I Built” 13).

*Parable of the Sower* begins with Lauren describing her recurring dream of what is to come. Her father, a professor and the community’s preacher, is a carry-over from a now all-but-extinct middle class. She lives with her father, stepmother, and several siblings in a now-walled, tight-knit community under constant threat from desperate thieves (128), reactionaries lashing out at anything that appears privileged (145), and a group of face-painted addicts on a drug that makes arson a euphoric act (137). To compound the difficulties of her existence, Lauren is a minority female in a time of heightened racism and sexism as well as a hyperempath, a psychological condition about which little is known but which

allows—or forces—one to experience the physical pain of others around them (9-10).

The novel's early political crisis comes from the new U.S. President's wish to abolish the space program and repeal worker's rights legislation to "[put] people back to work" (24), both of which conflict with Lauren's values. The threats posed by what remains of the government as well as the increasingly terrible conditions outside the walls lead Lauren to prepare to survive outside of her community and her worst fears are confirmed when pyros burn their community to the ground, raping and killing and destroying everything in sight. The survivors of the community begin to make their way north along the freeway, a very dangerous enterprise. On the road, their group grows with trustworthy new people and fights off others. Among those on the road is Bankole, the man that owns the land that will become Acorn and who will become Lauren's husband.

Along the way, we learn first-hand of the atrocities that make up this dystopic world. Racism, sexism, rape, polygamy, cannibalism, sex and labor slavery, corporate hegemony, illiteracy, and more have come to fill the power vacuum created by America's enormous prison system, contributions to the worsening ecological climate, devaluation of education, and elimination of the middle class. To combat the despair incubated by her world, Lauren's faith in Earthseed, a religion of her own "discovery" (233), matures as she writes what will become its first holy book. The end of *Sower* has the group ready to carve out a niche—and extratextually a dystopian counternarrative—on Bankole's reclaimed land. *Talents* picks up roughly five years later with Acorn doing quite well until their nearest

neighbors are set upon in the night by what Lauren refers to as “something new. Or something old” (18)—a group of trained men in black tunics with white crosses who burn and kill virtually everything but steal nothing. This event presages the new political and social state of affairs in *Talents* and Lauren immediately wonders if these attackers are connected to the new president, a “demagogue” Christian American—henceforth called CA—fundamentalist, Andrew Steele Jarret (20).

In a lengthy section of exposition we learn how much further the world has decayed in the interim. Actual slavery, ostensibly still illegal, has been uncovered in Texas after a rich teen was unknowingly placed in a remote punishment collar. Perhaps even more frightening to Lauren is the prospect that new breakthroughs in cloning threaten to obviate women from reproduction just when fanatics seems poised to take control (81-9).

Following the birth of Lauren’s baby Larkin, things devolve quickly. The community recovers Lauren’s brother Marcus from a sex trafficker but his religious antagonism poses a problem. Acorn is attacked and occupied by vicious and often depraved militants from the church of the new President and no help is forthcoming. Lauren again loses the most important people in her life. After escaping captivity, Lauren’s search for her daughter turns into Earthseed’s revival. During the establishment and flourishing of Acorn, Lauren worried about the sustainability of their growth. This time, she adopts a pragmatic approach to conversion that yields quick results, seemingly sidetracking her search and likely fueling much of Larkin’s resentment.

Butler frequently mentioned (“Brave New Worlds” & “How I Built”) how difficult the *Parable* novels were for her to write. When she tried to begin writing *Sower*, she repeatedly threw away hundreds of pages. She believed she needed to grow intellectually before she would be able to put Lauren down on paper: “I hadn’t liked Olamina when I began *Parable of the Sower* because in order for her to do what she was bound to do, she had to be a power-seeker and it took me a long time to get over the idea that anyone seeking power probably shouldn’t have it” (*Talents* 412). Her difficulty was at once compounded and reversed when she attempted to start the second novel. She found that she had come to like Lauren “far too much” (ibid.). This is apparent when one reads the two together. *Sower* feels very much like a dystopian novel of survival in which the disenfranchised work to locate a third space to inhabit. *Talents*, on the other hand, feels like a novel of comprehension in which the dystopian protagonist is at war not just with a world gone to hell but also with herself. It would seem that Butler also makes an attempt to comprehend those around Lauren by including a much greater number of “sharers”—hyperempaths—in *Talents* than were in *Sower*.

Butler does indeed seem to know what she has done in these novels, though perhaps only in hindsight. In numerous interviews after the publication of *Talents*, Butler seems to have a firm grasp on the ambiguity and ambivalence present in each of the *Parables*. Thus, it seems appropriate to call *Talents* not only a novel of comprehension intertextually but extratextually as well, and this seems a necessary element of the critical dystopia. That is, *Talents* is a novel of comprehension intertextually for Larkin while extratextually for Butler and the reader. As Baccolini

has pointed out, these texts differ from the classic utopian dystopias in that utopian hope remains both inside and outside of the story (130). Not everyone holds that each novel should be assigned this classification. Tom Moylan, who established both the most frequently cited critical utopian and critical dystopian frameworks, is not willing to concede that *Talents* contains the same critical complexity as *Sower*. Still, his framework has been used on multiple occasions for one or both of the novels. Some attempts—such as Jim Miller’s—to codify a more broad definition for the critical dystopia go so far as to weaken the usefulness of the classification altogether, while others provide useful, but incomplete, criteria. For this reason—and especially for these novels—it is necessary to use Moylan’s work in conjunction with several other critics and theorists in order to appreciate the critical work being performed in the *Parables*.

In his discussion of *Sower* in his book *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, Moylan is quick to point out how significant Butler’s genre-blurring is to the novel’s critical element, saying that it serves to situate the narrative not in one time but within the context of all developing oppositional struggles. In this way, “she generates a counter-narrative in which a diverse group of individuals develops through struggle into a political collective that (at least for a while) constitutes a historically and theologically informed utopian alternative to the economic and political power that barely controls this broken society” (223). While the importance and utility of genre-blurring cannot be overstated in contemporary sf in general, and critical dystopias in particular, this comment also points out Moylan’s central crux in the critical dystopia: a directly oppositional political aesthetic. In a subsequent synopsis

of the conservative resurgence in the West in the 1980s, he attempts to situate *Sower* in the moment of its publication while also insisting that the novel's ambiguity and counter-narrative still serve to make the novel a timeless narrative of opposition. This too seems necessary, as a dystopia without direct ties to the paradigm in which it was written can hardly attempt to engage with political discourse in a critical way. Moylan notes that "Butler's absent paradigm suggests an even harsher version of millennial capitalism as it presents a world in which transnational corporations have prevailed, but only by destroying the social and natural ecology that had sustained capitalism through its many stages" (224). The response to this in Lauren Olamina's America is insularity in the best cases or fearful repression in the worst. He points to Lauren's childhood community, the community of her father and, at some point in the past, grandmother as "one of the last sites of 'normal' existence" with the new company towns as a new, altogether worse place. This transition is important not only to the critical dystopian quality of *Sower*, but also to the accidental dystopian quality to be discussed later in this chapter.

Later in the novel, with Lauren outside her childhood gates and further developing Earthseed, Moylan begins to see the possibility of cracks in the novel's critical dystopian narrative: "Lauren's narrative (and Butler's) works between a prophetic tone that requires the labor of Utopia *in* history and an apocalyptic tone that steps outside of history in the name of a fully transcendent alternative" (230, emphasis in original). For him, only the prophetic retains the ability to be critical because the apocalyptic tone necessarily precludes the counternarrative's

opposition entirely. Still, he believes that the creation of the community at Acorn preserves *Sower's* critical dimension.

He does not say the same of *Talents*. Instead, he claims that “a critical dystopian sensibility lingers” at the novel’s beginning but that it is undercut by Butler’s “emphasis on an entwined double plot,” “expository gambit” of relaying the bulk of the dystopic world through a single news disk, and Earthseed’s escape from Camp Christian (238-41). When Butler ceases to be concerned with making *Talents* about opposition and instead focuses on Lauren’s enslavement, her child, and ultimately the success of Earthseed’s Destiny, Moylan feels something significant has been abandoned. He quotes Raymond Williams when he says Earthseed in *Talents* “has become an alternative and is no longer an oppositional force” (243), and is thus not to be considered a critical dystopia. His devaluing of *Talents* for its more understated political aesthetic is troubling for many critics and it is not a reading I can support.

One of the strongest denunciations of Moylan’s reading of *Talents* comes from Deborah Taylor’s 2007 dissertation, which covers both of the *Parables*. Though Taylor sees the framework as useful, she finds Moylan’s political concerns unnecessarily restrictive:

Moylan expects people to read dystopias only to have their political beliefs challenged. Because of the value he places on the political activity of the reader, Moylan finds *Talents* more pessimistic than *Sower* because it ‘sets aside questions of immediate political opposition in favor of the abstract alternative of a stellar journey’. (106)

Taylor's biggest issue with this reading is that it "conflates aesthetics with politics," rather than viewing them as "connected, [yet] still distinct aspects of Butler's novels" (107). The implication from Taylor seems to be that distinguishing aesthetics from politics does not undercut the dystopias critical complexity, as Moylan suggests.

Taylor refers in her dissertation to a 2003 publication by Peter Stillman on dystopia, utopia, and human purpose in Butler's *Parables* in which he indirectly counters some of Moylan's criticism of *Talents*. Stillman notes that by the end of the novel:

[Larkin]'s criticism that Olamina uses religion to transcend conflicts on Earth is similar to criticisms made of Butler's writings themselves: that Butler is too theological, abstract, and apolitical, and so resolves dilemmas by transcending the current system, not trying to oppose and transform it by working from within through collective political action. (32)

This is evident in the fact that no one in either novel "has any faith in or desire to participate in politics" (22). However, Butler's inclusion of Larkin's opposition would seem to indicate not only that she is aware of criticism that she "is too theological, abstract, and apolitical," but also that she too believes that Earthseed does not need to be in direct opposition to the novel's dystopia for the narrative to remain critically relevant. The pursuit of a third place for humankind is a cogent counternarrative to the novel's regime.

In his 2002 paper on *Sower*, Jerry Phillips does not reference Tom Moylan's analysis but makes an argument strikingly similar to Baccolini's to assert a critical

dimension that, if applied to *Talents*, would seem to imply both novels are critical dystopias. Social life in *Sower* is organized exclusively along the lines of the market and private property (304). “On the one hand, Butler portrays certain aspects of late capitalism . . . as dystopia achieved. On the other hand, she intimates that the present has not yet exhausted its barbaric potentialities [and these constitute] a dystopia imagined” (ibid.). This reading of the first novel has two consequences for reading the *Parable* series. First, that in “[rejecting] fatalism in favor of emancipatory human agency” (307) Butler’s dystopia retains the ability to maintain utopian hope both inside and outside of the novel. In Baccolini’s criteria, this is more important than a political aesthetic in regarding a dystopia as critical. Second, and this will be very important to my reading the series as an accidental dystopia, that a multi-layered dystopian trajectory allows for a narrative to be tied to certain aspects of the classic dystopia—such as the Hobbsean Leviathan—while still remaining critical (305).

Moylan’s criteria for the critical dystopia are at times quite restrictive, thus necessitating the use of the criteria of others. At least one analysis, however, has used the *Parables* in an attempt to broaden the critical dystopian category so much as to uncut its utility. Jim Miller, in a paper published two years prior to Moylan’s *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, extrapolates out from Moylan’s previous publication on critical utopias. His criteria for including *Sower* among the as-yet-undefined critical dystopias would seem to be so broad as to include virtually any optimistic sf—dystopic or not—which is written by an historic Other, including perhaps women and racial/ethnic/religious minorities. While this might seem a lot to assume, he

does directly conflate the utopian novels of American women from around the beginning of the twentieth century—a time he says when any critical fiction from a woman ought to be considered subversive—with novels like *Sower* (336). This is certainly true, but as a criterion for the critical dystopia it is too broad.

This is not to say that he does not present important points which do indeed make Butler's work critical. Instead, it seems it is his coda which is incomplete. He points to one unique element of *Sower* which I have not seen addressed elsewhere: the lack of a technologically-sophisticated future such as is seen in numerous classic dystopias and contemporary sf. "Technological distractions can only exist, Butler reminds us, when people have the means to consume them. . . . In the world of *Parable of the Sower*, the government cannot use the spectacle as a vehicle for social control because most people are too poor to have access to it" (351). Though this places dystopian agency in *Sower* with the government, which it certainly is not, it also brings to mind what Fredric Jameson says of SF, and by extension dystopia: that it "lets us apprehend the present as history" (Donawerth 29). In Butler's case, *Sower's* near-future history includes a conservative resurgence, little or no education, reductions of worker's rights, a useless central government, and ecological disaster. Thus, for Miller, Earthseed's "Destiny acts as Lauren's Harawayan 'elsewhere' . . . or Blochian 'hope'" (355). This establishes a reading of *Sower* as critical without truly establishing a framework to be applied to *Talents*.

By working with Moylan's critical dystopian framework and analyses of the *Parable* novels in conjunction with the work of several other dystopian critics, it is possible to see the critical dimension of both *Sower* and *Talents* without inheriting

the unintentional bias of any one person. In the aggregated opinion of both seasoned and new dystopian scholars, it would seem that the *Parable* series holds up as a critical dystopia. Somewhere on a scale between Moylan's integral political aesthetic and Miller's inherited legacy, a fully functioning method for reading Butler's novels as critically dystopian emerges. With that in mind, there are several individual aspects of the novels—including the transnational corporation, Butler's view of our nature, and *Earthseed* to name a few—that require particular attention before we can truly decide whether they belong in the established accidental dystopia subcategory.

How and when to address the specter of global capitalism and transnational corporations in Butler's—and later, Atwood's—novels is problematic. For Moylan and others, the transnational corporations of critical dystopian novels have displaced the omnipresent state of classical dystopias. Indeed, the part of the corporation as aggressor can be seen more broadly in much of the popular sf from the 1980s to today; quite notably, corporations are nearly always antagonistic in the cyberpunk subgenre. The reason this becomes problematic is the agency of the corporation in these stories. In many instances—specifically in cyberpunk—they are malevolent. In Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, Hiro Protagonist fights against mafiosos, malicious hackers, and agents of the postmodern, corporate controlled, franchise city-states. Those in direct control of these disparate groups are often conflated with historical megalomaniacal rulers. Though the corporations are by no means the single controlling agent, they are still a very large part of the novel's ideological world. The same might be said of Marge Piercy's *He, She and It*, though

in some arenas, these corporations are perhaps even more powerful than Stephenson's by virtue of a population that, like Butler's, is largely made up of groups unable to afford the digital access necessary to become part of the digital infrastructure.

In the *Parable* novels, the transnational corporations work in a very different way. They seem less a part of the dystopic world's ideology—for the masses if not for the remaining state figureheads—but perhaps even more responsible for the state of things. Transnational corporations are undoubtedly at fault in all the current examples, as Miller points out in his attempt to identify the seat of power: "Butler's portrait of Olivar [the tenant-farm-cum-corporate-town] is suggestive of both the shift of real power in the world from nation-states to multinational capital, and the consequences of this shift for ordinary peoples' ability to control their economic destinies" (354). They are not, however, the central dystopic agent in Butler's story. Where corporations are malevolent and directly antagonistic to the protagonists in Piercy's and Stephenson's novels, they are simply greedy and circuitously antagonistic in the *Parables*. They have created many of the conditions of the dystopic world of the series, but Butler's criticism points to everyone's complicity in that fact rather than simply blaming everything on the faceless corporations. In the Atwoodian "eustopian" sense—which says all dystopias are by necessity someone's utopia—Stillman points out that Lauren's "2024 is a utopia for those who advocate a small government, low taxes, an unregulated market, unimpeded corporations, unchecked wealth and power, and the devaluing and denigration of political life and public projects" (17). The critical dystopian trope of

the transnational corporation as the nexus of ideology and hegemonic power is not the actual cause of Butler's dystopia; instead, the dystopia is accidental and everyone is culpable.

Moylan makes a comment about capitalism's trajectory in *Sower* which seems to indicate that he believes Butler wants to place the dystopian cause with corporations without assessing to them sole blame. Again, recall what he says about the "absent paradigm [suggesting a] harsher version of millennial capitalism as it presents a world in which transnational corporations have prevailed, but only by destroying the social and natural ecology that had sustained capitalism through its many stages" (224). This argument amounts to much the same as my own. We should, and will, consider everyone's culpability in the world that global capitalism and transnational corporations creates, because while collective culpability does not necessarily make for an accidental dystopia, it is a required component to some extent.

If everyone is culpable, Butler's view of mankind becomes a necessary detail to address. To be fair, the topic of the writer's view of human nature is important in any discussion of the critical dystopia. In this instance, however, it is of particular importance. Unlike in *Lathe*, the accidental dystopia in the *Parable* novel comes about sociologically, so we must concern ourselves somewhat with both Butler's idea of human nature as well as our social interactions. The clearest picture of these is found by examining Butler's use of religion—both Earthseed and Christianity—in the novels.

When *Sower* begins, Lauren has already begun to conceptualize what she identifies as her God (6), though Earthseed's scripture is not yet written. Thus, before she is actually able to explain Earthseed in her journals, she notes the shortcomings of her father's God, the antiquated middle-class idealism of her community, and the psychosis of her world. Inside the walls in Robledo, her brother Keith exists as a symbol of the immanent dystopic world:

Butler is clearly commenting on what . . . she calls the 'horrifying' phenomenon of how many kids 'raised in poverty' are 'raised with a great contempt for caring.' It is not Keith's parents who have taught him not to care, however, but the larger society whose callousness overwhelms his parents' efforts. Lauren, on the other hand, represents an entirely different response to hopelessness—compassion. (Miller 357)

The walls of a caring home, far from impenetrable, are actually quite permeable and the people within are heavily influenced by the decay of society without. A relatively strong, morally resolute family is not enough to counteract the "pyro addicts . . . with painted head . . . screaming mouths; avid, crazy eyes" (*Sower* 137), or the gang violence, theft, wanton destruction, rampant drug use, cannibalism, sexual assault, indenture and later enslavement and later religious violence and imprisonment. Nor will the pay-per-public servants who require direct payment by the victims of criminals and fires. This is why "Lauren is a relative anomaly in this collapsing society, a young black woman and a psychobiological misfit who turns her embodied difference into a force for learning about the world and eventually for organizing others to live in that world on radically different terms" (Moylan 228).

Thus, Lauren is formed by intelligence, education, foresight, and her hyperempathy syndrome. Lauren's ideas cannot come soon enough to—hopefully—displace religious modes she no longer sees useful.

Lauren notes a major progression in her religious ideas when, for the first time, she realizes that “God exists to be shaped / God is Change” (22). For the first time, her God has a name. Rather than accept societal degeneration as stemming from something that is simply wrong with humanity, she knows that a renewed purpose holds the key to stepping away from the socioeconomic nightmare—and indeed the Earth itself—of the 2020s. “To her, ‘God’ is ‘Change,’ the essence biological and historical mutability, and humanity’s mission is to ‘understand that God exists to be shaped’ so that sheer randomness, neglect, or error does not confine Change to the destructive force it has become” (Moylan 229). Moylan goes on to say that Lauren’s concerns about Earthseed’s advancement in both of the *Parable* novels shows that her view of history is “cyclical, not dialectical”, and thus only an “apocalyptic leap . . . out of the present” is sufficient (243).

Earthseed does not assume that we are autonomous subjects, acting to realize our intensions (Stillman 28). Rather, actions performed through social interactions undermine both the idea of and a need for autonomy and self-sufficiency. This has the effect of also undermining imposed boundaries and dichotomies, thus making Earthseed exceedingly more egalitarian by virtue of what Baccolini calls a “‘multi-oppositional’ diversity” (qtd. in Moylan 237). The view of man as complete only through social relations is present in all of the novels discussed in this thesis and is likely a function of the political atmosphere that

Moylan states as the impetus for the critical dystopia. However, in Butler's novels, it is the most central tenet in Earthseed's hope for humanity's next step.

An analysis of the chapter epigraphs is interestingly absent from virtually all examinations of the *Parable* novels. Quite frequently, one or two epigraphs will be invoked in an attempt to further support one reading or another—as when Moylan quotes the most common motif of the Earthseed verses, “God is Change,” to note that Lauren has named God—but never are they taken as a whole to provide greater insight to the narrative structure. This is somewhat understandable, as the epigraphs frequently do not tie into specific chapters events. At least, they do not do so reliably or sufficiently to found a significant point. The trajectory of the Earthseed epigraphs ought to be the topic of another discussion, but its absence from extant literary analysis and obvious importance to reading the novel deserves at least a cursory look. The epigraphs serve two important functions.

First, they temper how one reads the book. In *Lathe*, both *Parable novels*, and Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*, similarly styled epigraphs introduce every chapter. In *Lathe*, unlike the others, these epigraphs are all taken from familiar, previously existing texts, thus allowing Le Guin to invoke a modernist intertextuality. This could arguably serve a purpose similar to genre-blurring, but is more likely meant to force the consideration of Daoist texts and Le Guin's own pre-SF influences. Atwood and Le Guin also tie the meanings of these epigraphs more directly to the content of the chapters they introduce, hopefully planting a seed to determine how one interacts with the subsequent portion of text. Butler and Atwood write their own epigraphs. In all of the mentioned texts, the epigraphs have one thing in common;

they require one to engage with the text not simply as SF—and certainly not as a realist text—but rather like one would read a philosophical novel, albeit without the necessary baggage that accompanies that category. Put another way, conflating literary, scripture or oracular texts with the novel requires a critical dystopian engagement.

Second, and this is a feature only of the *Parable* novels, the epigraphs allow the audience a second level of access to Lauren’s mind. The journaling aspect of dystopia brings us into Lauren’s mind, but as stated before, this will only allow us to see Lauren as she sees herself. Thus, one could argue that our insight to the narrator is only as good as her cognitive bias allows. The epigraphs, however, give us a rough map of Lauren’s development as well as Earthseed’s. Her intellectual progress, maturation, and strategic thinking can be gleaned from the linear changes to “The Book of the Living” through *Sower* and *Talents*, as well as her textual discussion of the religion both with its practitioners and its detractors. In *Sower*, even before she realizes she has done so, she gives God a name: “Change” (3). At the end of *Talents*, she invokes this name in a passage that insists we must learn from our past but not be haunted by what cannot change (376).

The epigraphs in Butler’s novels are the second religious textual element that the reader encounters. Before chapter introductions have the chance to influence our reading, the titles necessarily prime us, at least in cultures with a predominantly Christian population or history. Indeed, each novel is effectively framed with its titular parable between the front cover and a final biblical quote (*Sower* 295 and *Talents* 407-8).

In *Parable of the Sower*, the interpretation can be both literal and, though figurative, directly correlated to the original biblical meaning. The literal reading stems from the novel's survivalist roots. Before the walls of Robledo are transgressed for the last time, Lauren begins to learn her local flora and fauna in an effort to build a toolkit of knowledge and skill that will sustain her on the road; she even does all she can to learn of the changes she'll experience as she moves north, away from a hostile working and climatological environment. Her literal knowledge as a gardener facilitates her practical uses of her other seed: Earthseed<sup>11</sup>. Lauren quickly learns from the betrayal of her best friend that the "seed" cannot be sown at home. Though she piques the interest of her remaining community as well as many of the group's new road companions, it is also largely impossible for her to attempt to set roots with no secure future in sight. Here, Lauren's experience is almost exactly that of the biblical sower; neither can expect that which falls "by the way side" or "among thorns" to flourish (King James Bible qtd. in *Sower*). Perhaps to drive home the biblical correlations, "the [traveling] group numbers thirteen (in the apostolic motif of one leader and twelve followers)" (Moylan 235). It is only once the group reaches the land that will become Acorn that there is finally—withheld—hope that the words of Earthseed will take root.

The namesake of *Talents*, which invokes the idea of the sower, depicts a lord who is pleased when his servants properly use their talents—that is, in the sense of a large sum of money—for the lord's gain. Simply maintaining or hiding one's

---

<sup>11</sup> Here, the cynical view could undoubtedly be that Lauren's name for the religion is a heavy-handed attempt by Butler to elucidate on the precise steps necessary to counter this future. I prefer to read it as an optimistic and pragmatic name for Butler's own understanding of her world.

talent, in either sense of the word, is wicked and punishable. For Earthseed, the lord of the parable is God, and thus Change, but the punished wickedness becomes a continued failure to direct and shape that Change. In keeping with Earthseed's view of God, the servant with one talent who hides it away for fear of losing it has no hope of moving beyond the terribly dystopic world in which they live. Lauren learns this mistake only by settling into Acorn too much. By remaining silent and growing slowly, her talent is not unused but rather underused. This allows religious fanatics aligned with the new president to seize power in the midst of chaos without any protestations. Her mistake nearly dooms Earthseed and the Destiny. It is only by being set up by the Job-like misfortune of losing her husband and daughter that Lauren is able to find her means and the will to pursue the growth of Earthseed by other, now successful, means. Whereas she learned to sow at just the right time, she very nearly missed her opportunity to use her talent. These biblical allusions instruct a critical reading of the novel by enforcing certain intertextual readings while also requiring that we be critical of our reading of the original canon; we can only apply a critical reading to the *Parables* if we will also apply a critical reading to the New Testament.

The *Parable* novels must be addressed as critical dystopias, as is clear not only from their previous critical attention but also because of Butler's portrayal of the transnational corporation, her view of humanity as evident in Earthseed, and the novel's indebtedness to world religions and advocacy for a new religious trajectory. The critical dimension necessary to considering an accidental dystopia is certainly there, but a significant counterargument comes immediately to mind. There is

undoubtedly a state-assisted or –affiliated dystopia, exacerbated by poor leadership and unchecked transnational capitalism in *Sower* with an extreme and directed religious dystopia added in *Talents*, but these spring out of the dystopian vacuum created by the novel’s accidental dystopia. Moylan points to Butler’s “absent [textual] paradigm” (224), but we can extrapolate this into a literal absence as well. While it is common for the dystopian world to appear worse as the narrative progresses, it generally antecedes the beginning of the story and the apparent deterioration of the world is often a function of the protagonist’s mental journey. This is partially the case in the *Parables*, where a different kind of dystopia exists prior to the story and various new elements of it develop over time. The pre-narrative dystopia is, in a cultural or a societal sense, the result of “[giving certain issues] 30 years to grow unabated” (“Brave New Worlds” 165). Exploring these issues and their interconnectedness will explain why the dystopian world into which Lauren Olamina is born is—at least sociologically—the result of a terrible accident and thus why we are all culpable.

The first, and perhaps most obvious, cause of the pre-narrative dystopia is the unchecked—and at times assisted—activities of transnational corporations which commodify people for selfish gains. Contemporary literature has grown fond of indicting global capitalism in our world’s demise, and Butler is by no means exonerating it from guilt, but *KSF* is not meant to be read in the same way as the malevolent corporations of cyberpunk novels. Their transgression is not the directed assault of individuals and usurpation of power but the undervaluing of human life and the worship of wealth accumulation. They have no interest in power

which does not directly translate into capital, as is evident from Olivar's private security; when representatives of Olivar arrived in "an armored KSF truck" to retrieve Lauren's best friend, she thinks that they "looked more like cops than movers" (*Sower* 123). In a time when corporations still possess useful supplies and martial force, Lauren's father says municipal police and firemen "may be able to avenge you, but they can't protect you" (*Sower* 34). KSF's resources are put towards building more and more wealth. We in the West have very little ground from which to attack these kinds of actions as we are a society which values individuality and loves rags-to-riches stories, and thus we implicitly condone the existence of entities with no greater motive than making money into more money. Her novels seem to indicate that Butler believed we should all address our complicity in a social system that allows for human commodification and that not doing so leads to self-destructive movements: "The 'burn-the-rich movement' never burns the rich; it destroys scapegoats just as much of the violence in [the Los Angeles riots of the early 90s] did" (Miller 350). Thus, an unresponsive society is to blame for the undirected, and thus accidental, dystopia that arises out of this time of economic inequity.

This leads us directly into considering the ubiquitous environmental and human degradation of the *Parables*. Nine months into *Sower* Lauren details a four-day rain storm, the first real rain in six years, and she wonders how many years they will go without more rain (41). Massive climatological changes have occur which lead people to move north in search of better land and thus employment. Alaska becomes one of the most desirable locations in America and declares itself

independent in 2031 (*Talents* 52), and Canadian money becomes the only widely accepted currency in North America (56). The destruction of the environment is a direct result of corporate growth and greed and, while many seem to realize that, people do little about it. Limited resources continue to be squandered frivolously. In the same vein as this ecological devastation, hyperempaths and pyros are the products of unethical biomedical research that continues to view humans as somehow separate from Earth's ecology. As transnational corporations grow, everyone suffers, but the economically depressed are disproportionately affected. Lauren's deceased mother, a remnant of the dying middle class, used Paracetco for a competitive edge. Though it assisted the user in faster reading, calculations, and conclusions, it led to many deaths and the children of users are frequently like Lauren (*Talents* 13). Hyperempaths are easily enslaved because very little is necessary to subjugate them. Pyros, another addict group stuck on designer drugs, burn everything in their path; without the resources to keep them out, the poorest communities suffer the most. Again, all of this could be considered standard fare for dystopian works and thus undeserving of a new classification, but when considered in conjunction with *Earthseed*, the reader must accept that it is the failure to shape God towards better ends that leads to this dystopic world and this makes for a critical sociological accidental dystopia.

In January 1999, Butler was asked by the White House to write a memorandum to the President on her view of the future. Writing the year after *Talent's* publication, she noted her meager upbringing and her life-long dreams: "At best I was treated with gentle condescension when I said I wanted to be a writer. . .

Without the excellent, free public education that I was able to take advantage of, I might have found other things to do with my deferred dreams<sup>12</sup> and stunted ambitions” (“Brave New Worlds” 166). What she states with temperance in her letter to then President Bush and as invective in the *Parable* novels is her disagreement with the foolish policies which undervalue and defund education. She shows, particularly in Keith’s case, that such policies are myopic and ultimately self-cannibalizing for the entire society. Lauren’s brother, after ostensibly being taught by the dystopic America of his youth to do as he pleases and only for himself, puts his community in great danger by losing a key to their gate somewhere in Los Angeles. With the partial education afforded him by his family, Keith prefers to test his wits in the largely illiterate ruins of the city. This gives him a privileged place to play games, steal, and act hedonistically. His despicable morals eventually outweigh his utility and he is tortured to death, conceivably by people much like himself. Lauren is exceptional in many ways and is thankfully educated and able to better herself and eventually her world, but in her memorandum to President Bush, Butler indicates that it could have so easily been another way. For those with virtually nothing else, education is the single most important factor in changing one’s station. Without it, greed crumbles the foundation under the once-impressive United States, leaving Lauren’s world.

Human commodification and a lack of education create a vast and ever-growing wealth gap between the rich and the poor. Lauren’s father, once a well-

---

<sup>12</sup> This wording could be a purposeful allusion to Langston Hughes’ “Montage of a Dream Deferred” (1951) and, if so, should invoke the possibility of explosion.

paid professor, remains employable only by virtue of his skills while the middle class disappears. Moylan—and many others—point to policies and practices which began in the 1980s as the genesis of the critical dystopia. Though a good deal of the economic inequality was already evident during Butler's life, she was still remarkably prescient in her view of the country's future. The massive population of impoverished people in Lauren's world makes any kind of perceived luxury appear the most incomprehensible decadence. Thus, the 'burn-the-rich movement' of the *Parable* series sees those with little more than they have as the enemy. Lauren says as much about the people who steal from and burn Robledo prior to the attack that destroys the community. She pities them and, perhaps by virtue of her condition, empathizes with their plight and misunderstanding. The conditions of late capitalism—or at least the unfettered freedom of transnational corporations—are no doubt at the center of virtually all of the problems of the dystopic world of the *Parables*, but that may be the very key to reading them as accidental. The society that creates and implicitly condones these actions is the true root of these problems. Capital does not primarily seek to destroy the environment, abolish universal education, and destroy the social fabric as a means of control; instead, it seeks more and more money for itself. It acts out of malicious greed with power as a means to an end. Where in some works, power has been used to create an ignorant populace, here ignorance is an unintended side effect of poor choices. For that reason, the particulars of Lauren's world are neither planned nor directed but only exploited. Accident may seem an apologetic term, but that makes it no less apt.

There remains one additional aspect of the novel's milieu that deserves attention and it would seem to occur roughly with the novel's beginning. Lauren's greatest concern about the soon-to-be-President Donner is his promise to put the country back to work by "[suspending] 'overly restrictive' minimum wage, environmental, and worker protection laws for those employers willing to take on homeless employees and provide them with training and adequate room and board" (*Sower* 24). Her concerns are about what will be legal, provided a person has "food, water, and a space to die" (*ibid.*). After he is elected, Donner legitimizes a legal framework that reinstates *de facto* slavery as a necessity to get the country back on its feet. Jerry Phillips identifies this kind of turn as remarkably similar to European events some 80 years earlier: "The bloody utopianism of Nazism has thrown into relief the dystopic aspect of modernity: not simply the advance of rationalism and enlightened civility, modernity is also the advance of rationalized barbarism and naked terror" (299). Donner's erasure of worker protection is perhaps the point when the cynical reading of the novels moves from purely pessimistic to realistic and indeed where Phillip's argument should be followed. This plot point is the first instance where the extant dystopia of the novel's beginning becomes the developing dystopia of the narrative and it is also the first instance we see that can no longer be called accidental. Donner's motivations are not clear because we lack insight to his mind, but his fulfilled promise is by no means an accident; he seeks to make the working environment much worse to somehow make everything all better. This change from the accidental dystopia to a

guided one is marked by Lauren's realization that the "big crash" she'd always expected wouldn't happen. Instead, the world falls apart "bit by bit" (*Sower* 110).

Part of what makes the dystopia of Octavia Butler's *Parable* novels so frightening is how well it ages. Though they work very well as critical responses to the 1990s and, to a point, Butler seemed to have the attention of many important people—think of the presidential memo and her recognition as a MacArthur fellow—they remain an appropriate criticism in 2012. Even with all that has changed in the twenty years since *Sower* was released, Butler's trajectory still seems all too possible. Perhaps this is because we have yet to collectively assume the narrative's dystopian guilt. Identifying the *Parables* as a sociological accidental dystopia is an important step towards looking at the critical dystopia not only as a possible extrapolation of our world, but as something we can and must actively change through community. Once she has convinced us of our collective culpability, Butler leaves us with very little in the way of answers; indeed, sculpting appropriate human action through the use of nascent religions has never seemed less plausible. Not even Butler puts much stock in the practicality of Lauren's approach. At a signing event after the publication of *Talents*, Butler was approached by a college journalist who asked her for the answer. She told him there wasn't one, meaning that "there's no single answer that will solve all of our problems. There's no magic bullet. Instead there are thousands of answers—at least" ("Brave New Worlds" 165). Sadly, the student journalist took from this answer the same lesson many people take from critically dystopian works: there is no answer.

## CHAPTER IV

“Not real can tell us about real”: Margaret Atwood’s MaddAddam Novels

This brings us to the most contemporary dystopias of this study: Margaret Atwood’s 2003 *Oryx and Crake* (*O&C*) and its “simultan-eul,” published in 2009, *The Year of the Flood* (*Year*) (Akbar). *O&C* and *Year* are only Atwood’s second and third dystopian novels, and make up virtually all of her sf works. Atwood’s preferences for discussing her sf makes her an interesting case because though she is well known for her first dystopia, *A Handmaid’s Tale*, and has had a life-long affinity for the genre, she very plainly claims she does not write science fiction. Like many before her, Atwood claims science fiction is a misnomer for her work because everything that occurs in her books has actually happened. She instead prefers the term “speculative fiction” (*Other Worlds* 4). Part of her argument against the appellation has to do with reader expectation. Her argument, eloquently established in her recent *In Other Worlds*, has merit even for those who have built a reputation in sf but wish to prevent misrepresentation to their readership.

It is for this reason, as I have mentioned before, that I have chosen in this thesis to use the shorthand “sf” in discussions of the genre<sup>13</sup>. In order to facilitate a

---

<sup>13</sup> Atwood seems to prefer this shorthand as well—at least lately—as she uses it frequently.

discussion of what sf does as a literary genre, we must dispense with the frequent pigeonholing and instead look at its generic commonalities. Le Guin, a long-time friend of Atwood's, agrees and chooses to make her point by reviewing *Year* in *The Guardian* using the inadequate—for sf—language of the “realistic novel”:

I could talk about her new book more freely, more truly, if I could talk about it as what it is, using the lively vocabulary of modern science-fiction criticism, giving it the praise it deserves as a work of unusual cautionary imagination and satirical invention. As it is, I must restrict myself to the vocabulary and expectations suitable to a realistic novel, even if forced by those limitations into a less favourable stance. (“The Year of the Flood”)

Atwood's reasons for distancing herself from the “science fiction” label, though semantically correct, also distance her from the volumes of compelling scholarship which seeks to engage with it and for that reason, I chose to ignore her insistence. Her work gains a great deal when it is addressed accordingly.

In *O&C* and *Year*, Atwood draws on her developed style to present a story that is partly dystopian and partly a story of the post-apocalyptic world to follow. Coral Ann Howells, in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, gets to the heart of Atwood's narrative intent when she says “The what if of *Oryx and Crake* is simply, *What if we continue down the road we're already on? How slippery is the slope? What are our saving graces? Who's got the will to stop us?*” (162-3). Atwood's connection to the dystopian tradition and to both Le Guin's *Lathe* and Butler's *Parable* novels thus becomes clear. As was the case with Le Guin, there has been little published about Atwood's *O&C* and *Year* to establish them as critical dystopias,

and so this chapter and my argument will necessarily follow a different path than the preceding chapter. Still, a great deal of scholarship on one or both of the novels exists—discussing ecology, familial relationships, psychoanalysis, and gender politics—and will be drawn upon. Just as in all of the previous novels, the dystopia's progression towards apocalypse is shown, but in Atwood we actually spend time in the resulting wasteland. In her characteristic style, much of the action takes place in the story's past and is recollected by the protagonists so that the bulk of the story takes place in a dystopian world recalled by a few survivors of a world-ending scenario. This gives Atwood's critical dystopias an interesting dynamic not seen in many other dystopias. Rather than a victim leaving documentation for some unknown, future witness—as is common in dystopian literature—the protagonists of these novels are both victim and witness. The dystopia of the narrative past, which has a great deal in common with the sociological accidental dystopia of Butler's novels, is not the accidental dystopia of Atwood's works. Rather than the degradation coming out of societal failure, Atwood shows it to be the result of much more directed and malicious action. Instead, the accidental dystopia of *O&C* and *Year* might be called one of hubris; if Haber had been imbued with Orr's ability throughout *Lathe*, he might have more in common with Crake. Crake, to whom considerable attention will be given, is the single most significant causative agent in Atwood's novels and constitutes the final type of accidental dystopia which requires definition. In *O&C* and *Year*, Crake embodies Atwood's critical dystopia as well as her insistence that man's ultimate folly is the belief that we, as products of an imperfect world, can hope to build a perfect, rational world.

Howells' companion to Atwood's work was published before *Year* but her insight into *O&C*—and comparison to *Handmaid*—largely applies to it as well. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a somewhat problematic book when discussing critical dystopias. While a good case could be made for the novel as a critical dystopia due to the troublesome frame provided the story by its "historical notes" (*Handmaid* 299-311), Tom Moylan makes a strong argument for why it ought to be considered in the classical dystopian camp or at most as a transitional novel in the dystopia's development (*Scraps* 163). Howells notes how Atwood "always includes 'something which isn't supposed to be there'" (Howells 164). In *Handmaid*, that something is a female protagonist in a subgenre traditionally dominated by a male point-of-view. In *O&C*, she features a male protagonist—a first for Atwood—and speaks in the third person, and then shifts everything at the novel's close when Snowman/Jimmy finds other living humans and the narrative seems ready to move into the present for good. The form and Atwood's narrative innovations are really the only elements which tie her earlier dystopia to these latter two. Howells points out Atwood's varied inspirations behind *Handmaid*—Orwell's 1984—and *O&C*—Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* (163)—but the differences are innumerable and obvious to any reader. Snowman/Jimmy, like Offred in *Handmaid*, "exists in a state of double consciousness, working by associative leaps between 'now' and 'then' in an effort to escape from a devastated world littered with the wreckage of late twentieth-century civilization reminding him daily of what he has lost" (172). Unlike the titular handmaid, in *O&C* and *Year*, Atwood gives the protagonists an alternative frame—the past—until the novel's end. This form is more common to Atwood's writing, as

mentioned previously, and her return to the familiar facilitates a progression from the questionably critical *Handmaid* to the undoubtedly critical later novels.

Unlike Butler's novels, *Year* is not a proper sequel to *O&C*; instead, Atwood has dubbed it a "simultan-eul," because it develops and continues the story of the first novel but the actions occur concurrently. Between *Year* and *O&C*, there are several overlapping characters, groups, ideas, and major events but things are presented in vastly different ways. *O&C*, which is presented through Jimmy/Snowman's eyes, is a story of the benign malevolence of his middle-class upbringing, his relationship with Crake, his love for Oryx, and his part in the traditional world-ending scenario. *Year* is told through two women, formerly of the God's Gardener's religious cult. Though each of the women spends a small part of her life living in a Compound like Jimmy's, much of the time they live in the urban slums, called pleeblands. Ren spends her formative years among the God's Gardeners—hereafter GG—and meets her dearest friend, Amanda Payne. Toby is roughly twenty years Ren's senior and has escaped into the GG to avoid a sadistic former boss. Each woman's survival unfolds with the novel. There are a great number of crossover elements between the novels—religious groups such as the GG, groups for social change like MaddAddam, Jimmy and various women he knew, BlyssPluss, news stories, etc.—including Glenn/Crake. During Ren's youth, Glenn visits the GG for what turns out to be his assistance to a dying member. They keep quiet about their past encounter, but he has a lot of questions for Ren, through which we see the development of what we might call his transformation into Crake. We gain a special kind of insight into Crake by virtue of Ren's observations of him

with *Oryx*. Though *O&C* does a fantastic job complicating the novel's greatest evil, in *Year* we gain further invaluable sagacity to the man who opens the floodgates.

These novels contain detailed, active plots and so rather than provide a lengthy synopsis, it will be more useful to deal with plot events succinctly as the need arises.

As an effort towards parsimony, I will hereafter refer to the novels as the MaddAddam novels, given that Atwood has recently revealed her work on the third book—which will go into greater detail in discussing the history and actions of that group—in what she almost certainly will not call a trilogy. With this understanding of the significant differences between the MaddAddam novels, as well as a rough synopsis for the sometimes busy plots therein, it becomes much easier to address how they interact to form a full picture of a critical dystopian milieu. There remain, however, some differences between the novels outside of plot that warrant mentioning. In keeping with her predecessors, Atwood employs the dystopian trope of language reclamation in each novel, albeit in quite different ways. In *O&C*, Snowman is quite aware of the slow but progressive loss of his atavistic vocabulary, perhaps the only quality that made him unique and interesting in the pre-Flood world. *Year* picks up with the established word play in *O&C* and makes it into a source of strength. These will be dealt with in detail later as part of the critical dystopian argument.

Atwood, in a move towards keeping some of the staples of the genre, features her first male protagonist in *O&C*. Later, she returns to a female protagonist in *Year*, thus flipping expectation again by giving us two females at different developmental

stages and of different schools of thought<sup>14</sup>. Rather than supporting the view of Atwood as a feminist writer, an idea to which Atwood objects (Atwood “In Context”), this seems to be her attempt at giving a totalized experience of her twenty-first century dystopia. There are other attempts at this in the MaddAddam novels, which will be dealt with only briefly later in the chapter, but which include secularity in *O&C* versus faith in *Year* and extreme and ubiquitous violence in *O&C* versus pacifism and vegetarianism—among the GG—in *Year*.

Thus far, Crake has been given far less attention than the MaddAddam protagonists. There is a good reason for this, as he is presented through the limited view of the protagonists and his motivations are never entirely clear. Our greatest insight into Crake from the first novel occurs relatively late. J. Brooks Bouson points out that “the ending of *Oryx* . . . leaves the reader in a state of unknowing, a gesture meant to compel, as many Atwoodian novelistic closures do, reader participation in the text” (11-2). Crake is perhaps the biggest enigma of the novels and an incomplete engagement with his character hinders any reading of the texts. Somewhat in passing, Howells refers to Crake as “the hero-villain of [*O&C*]” (162); this classification is apparent enough but the implications of Crake and his actions are integral to understanding the critical thrust of the MaddAddam novels as well as what sets them apart as accidental critical dystopias.

The reader learns about Crake primarily through Jimmy’s recollections and so the above synopsis largely addressed Crake in that manner, but as Bouson

---

<sup>14</sup> J. Brooks Bouson points out how a representative of second-wave feminism and a postfeminist, Toby and Ren respectively, seem to be juxtaposed here, introducing a critical discussion between characters which can only be contemplated by a third-party.

indicates, Atwood's ambiguous ending makes our participation in reading Crake a necessary element to the narrative. When Crake is first revealed in *O&C*, the important formative events of his life have already occurred. Though we do not find out until much later in the novel, Crake's "uncle" murdered his father out of some mixture of protection of his corporation's/Compound's bottom-line and evidently to assume his familial place. Crake shows some apathetic dislike for his mother and "Uncle" throughout the novel and he finds it easy to do as he pleases without concern for them. This includes using the uncle's logins and credit to peruse the awful web content he and Jimmy share. From his time with Jimmy during high school, we see that Crake is apparently a symbol in the novel of the "privation and loss" inherent in this world:

Crake has two computers, allowing him and Jimmy to sit back to back, even while playing virtual versions of traditional board games. This image, of two friends facing away from each other, intent upon a two-dimensional visual world that mediates their relationship, captures something of both the forces that violate human communion and the results of that violation. They neither look at, nor talk to, each other. In a sense, they are not present to each other at all, or perhaps virtually not present. (Dunning)

Stephen Dunning dedicates a great deal of this article to his psychological reading of *O&C* and thus dwells heavily at Crake's unexplored boundaries. He claims that Crake is the result of a world not based on "dystopian societies with hostile political structures, underwritten by oppressive metanarratives . . . but rather within the qualitative vacuum of a culture that has lost its 'great' narratives" (ibid.).

It is not possible to read Crake as a solitary monster, like Zamyatin's Benefactor, or as an agent of a Repressive State Apparatus, like Orwell's O'Brien. Instead, Dunning notes, the dystopia of *O&C* has far more in common with the Huxleyean mode. Many of Crake's actions we might imagine as extreme versions of Mustapha Mond, of *Brave New World*. Crake's nightmares, which Jimmy becomes aware of while visiting his friend at Watson-Crick, show us an uncertain, tortured man. This is why Dunning calls Crake a "Freudian with the technological resources to change radically what Freud took to be the permanent features of our psychological landscape" (Dunning). From within the confines of first a university and later a Compound, Crake works to eliminate the problems of humanity and replace them with creatures of his own devising, supposedly devoid of all that makes mankind untenable. "While Atwood obviously shares many of Crake's concerns . . . she effectively undercuts, and at times even mocks, the blindly overweening reach of his science" (ibid.). This is particularly evident in the towels that crawl away and the horticultural rocks that, sometime, explode and injure people (ibid.).

Defending Crake is not a popular enterprise, but to treat him as one would Big Brother is to do Atwood a disservice. Crake, for all of the inhumane and terrible things he does, is always meant to be read as a human, as flawed and haunted as any of us. He is the worst possible outcome Atwood can imagine of a world that no longer possesses any 'great narratives.' When he murders Oryx in front of Jimmy, Dunning notes that "we might initially read the murder as his attempt to possess exclusively in death what he cannot in life, and to bind Jimmy to lifelong misery. But

we have seen no previous evidence of sexual possessiveness, which Crake, in any case, would likely disdain as atavistic egoism.” Instead, Dunning says this “suggests that he is driven by qualitative forces undreamt of in his quantitative philosophy, even though these remain clouded for both him and the reader.” Perhaps for all of his study and inquiry, Crake knows himself little better than we do. This would seem to indicate two things about him: first, he is not some incomprehensible evil but is instead quite like any of us and second, this makes him a much more frightening spectre and criticism of our world.

The complexity of Crake does not extend to all of the villains in the MaddAddam books. Blanco, the wholly embodied violence of the pleeblands and Toby’s particular bane, is a symptom of his environment and is thus thoroughly terrifying but he has no further complexity. Crake’s complexity, and his position as the catalyst for the second layer post-apocalyptic-world-cum-dystopia, makes these novels unique among dystopian stories. Very often, dystopian stories focus on resistance to oppression; here, between what we know of Crake and the protagonists, Atwood creates critiques that are much harder to answer. She goes even further in the critical aspect of this dystopian story in how she presents issues of victimhood and familial relationships. These issues are quite hard to separate, as some characters are victimized by family, others are victimized by strangers, and many are victimized, to varying degrees, by both.

Katherine Snyder, in her paper on trauma in *O&C*, wonderfully marries the work of dystopian sf with trauma theory:

The doubled temporality of dystopian speculative fiction thus bears a marked resemblance to the doubled temporality of trauma. Whereas trauma theory conceives of the present in its vexed relation to the past, dystopian speculative fiction imagines the present in its vexed relation to the future. (472)

Put another way, each is concerned with “here and now” and what has been or will be lost (473). Thus, the traumatic pasts of various characters in the MaddAddam books serve to act as a conduit between those issues that Atwood seeks to illuminate for the reader and our speculative future. Kristi Myers, in her 2011 Master’s thesis, notes that the problems consistent across all of Atwood’s sf novels are “strict patriarchy, environmental destruction, unwise application of technology, and unquestioning adherence to religion” and seeks to add to this list “damaged relationships between mothers and their children” (1). Jimmy knows from an early age that he is a disappointment to his mother. When she takes off, she makes the abandonment so much worse in taking Jimmy’s pet rakunk Killer with her, promising to release the genetically altered animal into the wild and thus dooming it (*O&C* 61). Even so, Jimmy feels hopelessly guilty when he believes he has betrayed his mother to the CorpSeCorps (258). Where there ought to have been a significant bond between those largely disregarded by existing power structures—because neither Jimmy nor his mother represent anything useful to their world—there is only this painful schism. Crake’s mother, in the vein of *Hamlet’s* Gertrude, betrays him in her apparent complicity in his father’s murder, though as with most everything pertaining to Crake, we don’t realize this strained relationship until a

good deal into the story. Oryx is not neglected or directly mistreated by her mother but instead is sold to a stranger for the promise of a better life for Oryx and food for her other children (121).

Ren's relationship with her mother Lucerne is similarly damaging. At a young age, her mother takes her from a Compound to live with the GG not out of interest for what is best for her but in an attempt to hurt her distant father. Lucerne fights constantly with Zeb, the man she apparently ran to years before. Zeb is a surrogate father to Ren, a positive influence for many of the GG, and the apparent driving force behind the GG/MaddAddam schism. After Ren finally finds a place among the GG, Lucerne again rips her away, back to the Compound, with a story of kidnapping. Lucerne seems to change entirely, playing a part for her own comfort, and persuades Ren that she must sever contact with GG if she wants to protect them. When Ren's father is kidnapped by a rival international Compound, Lucerne abandons her daughter for another Compound man. Ren, as a result, can no longer stay in school and loses all contact with her mother to the point that, years later, Lucerne doesn't recognize her daughter as an employee of the day spa she frequents.

Toby's story differs from many others as she was quite close with both her biological and her GG families. Her trauma comes not from the actions of these families but from repeatedly losing those she loves and, at each instance, being forced into and then away from danger. The death of her mother and her father's suicide necessitates the abandoning of her life and she ultimately ends up under Blanco's thumb. She is safe with the GG long enough to find a place there, only to be

forced away again and eventually lose everyone to the Waterless Flood. Myers says that, “ironically, Toby’s survival hinges on her lack of a family. The spa where she worked as a supply manager shut down after the pandemic struck and the other employees went ‘home to be with their families, believing love could save them’” (48).

Some characters are able to use their familial trauma effectively while others are not. Ren and Jimmy are crushed so thoroughly by their broken familial relationships that nothing in the rest of their lives can serve to fix them. Crake bides his time and eventually exacts revenge on his mother and uncle in a horrific manner and shows that he is so formed by the trauma they inflicted that his escape is death. Only Oryx and Toby are able to use their trauma towards their survival: “Like Oryx, Toby hardens herself in order to survive, but her mothering instincts return when she flees that manager and joins the Gardeners” (Myers 49). Both women find utility in their pasts.

Myers notes that Atwood’s choice to open *O&C* with a quote from Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* serves to underscore the importance of absent families in the novel, and this extends to *Year* as well. “Jimmy, the “Snowman” of Oryx and Crake, relates his individual experiences in relation to his mother and his lover in suspenseful ways that foretell the global disaster he manages to survive” (29). The prevalence of family trauma in the MaddAddam novels is a function of a failing society at large. Snyder notes the effect that blurring victims and victimizers—such as Jimmy and Crake—has on plot:

Atwood's plotting of pandemic in the novel thus emphasizes the futility of attempting to quarantine an individual's subjective interiority from relations among historical subjects who are connected to each other in ever-widening, overlapping circles of power and obligation: the familial, the corporate, the national, the global, the non-human and the post-human.

(473)

Atwood uses the individual trauma of multiple individuals in juxtaposition to a pre and post-apocalyptic dystopic world to add new critical dimensions to the future history of our world.

I would like to move away from the elements of the MaddAddam novels that make them entirely unique among dystopian stories and towards dystopian tropes which Atwood either employs or distorts towards the end of making the novels function critically. Before doing that, there is at least one dystopian trope which Atwood employs that, while it is meant to be a contemporary criticism, does not directly connect with the criteria for critical dystopias: the all-powerful mercenary army. The CorpSeCorp, an obvious visual pun meant to evoke either that they are dead or solely concerned with death, are Atwood's jab at Blackwater/Xe and other similar private security forces which she says are a dangerous melding of "government and commerce" that result in "megacorruption" and "poisoning our kids" (Rothschild). We are introduced to the CorpSeCorp in *O&C* as corporate security. They garrison HelthWyzer and Watson-Crick and interrogate Jimmy ceaselessly about his mother's disappearance. Crake reveals that they have internal information detailing just how doomed the world actually is when he is explaining

the Paradise project to Jimmy (295). In *Year*, the pleedblander protagonists give a bit more insight to the corruption of the paramilitary organization. In addition to their ostensibly legitimate function, the CorpSeCorps are involved in racketeering, drug running, and the disappearing of troublesome people, to name but a few of their far-reaching enterprises. They represent the degradation of legitimate and democratic law and order and, for Fredric Jameson, a more malignant prognosis of our dystopian future than is seen in classic totalitarian dystopias:

A faceless power centre is embodied in the CorpSeCorps, which, as in medieval society (and quite unlike Orwell's universal surveillance), keeps tabs only on what it needs to know and does not hesitate to organise para-political goon squads when necessary; anything more destructively criminal can then be dealt with in the Painball facilities, in which teams of convicts are organised to kill each other off. (Jameson "Then You Are Them")

This would seem to indicate that the CorpSeCorp does not entirely fit among the classic dystopian tropes—as delineated by Jameson, Moylan, Baccolini, and Sargent—but also does not engage critically to the same degree as the ecological and religious thrusts which dominate *O&C* and *Year*, respectively. Perhaps because much of our direct knowledge of the CorpSeCorp is nonadjacent, their part in the novels does not serve to “let us apprehend the present as history” (Jameson qtd. in Van Steendam 31).

Atwood frequently breaks the dystopia mode—and perhaps “critical dystopian mode,” if it can be said that one exists—in her MaddAddam novels by subverting or inverting familiar tropes. She adopts elements commonly seen in the

dystopian genre and alters them in some way that requires the reader reexamine the traditional rules for reading dystopian literature. These breaks from the expected mode begin to push the novels in the direction of the critical dystopia and also show how differently the novels are read independently as opposed to as part of a series. I am seeking only to touch on what seem to be some of the major differences from the subgenre, so this list is by no means exhaustive; it includes the temporal and spatial foci of the novels, the relationship of the protagonists to some presumed external world, and some alignment with the classical dystopia in intent if not form.

The focal point of the dystopian novel is quite often at the personal level. Lyman Tower Sargent suggests in his 1994 paper “The Three Face of Utopianism Revisited that unlike utopian literature, “which [describes] an imaginary society in some detail . . . [though] completeness will vary” (7), our insight in dystopian literature is generally limited to the alienated protagonist. Even though some small portions of *Lathe* are presented through the eyes of others, the world of the novel is mostly presented through Orr’s eyes. Likewise, in Anthony Burgess’ *A Clockwork Orange*, we are shown Alex’s world—of which he is an element of the widespread degradation—through his eyes. Atwood skews the rules for reading dystopian literature through a single, unreliable narrator in a couple of ways. The first has to do with the multiple dystopian layers of both novels. The pre-Flood world is already apparently a dystopian one consisting of eco-terrorism, corporate espionage and militancy, rampant sexual and otherwise physical violence, and more. The post-Flood world is an altogether different kind of dystopia. Crake’s genocide fits the

framework of a traditional world ending scenario in a post-apocalyptic story, but what comes after this is framed, by virtue of the past, as a second-level dystopia (Jameson “Then You Are Them”). Though we experience the dystopian past and present of *O&C* through a single protagonist and at times with a lot of ambiguity, the novel’s scale is far larger than is typical. On top of that, *Year* introduces two new narrative focal points, seeking to explore both dystopian levels from multiple vantage points. The narrative focus is thus pulled back from the localized individual to encompass globalized society. This change from the standard mode is made even more effective because the protagonists in the narrative present believe themselves to each be the last of humanity, even as we know differently.

This brings us to the next subverted expectation in the MaddAddam novels; for all of the protagonists, there is no supposed external world to consider. This is perhaps a minor change to the typical dystopian mode. Dystopian protagonists often contemplate another place or time to which they might escape. Winston Smith in *1984* comes to believe in Goldberg and the promise of an again idyllic world. Likewise in *Brave New World* and *We*, the dystopian opposition sees as possible the return to some previous, better state if not an entirely utopian dream. For most of the MaddAddam novels, the protagonists are robbed of this hope. While they can, to some extent, live through nostalgia they have no hope of a return or a progression because there is no one else to return to. Jimmy notes this directly when he comes upon his own journal entries from just after the genocide, entries ultimately meant not for some future witness—as is often the case in dystopian literature—but for himself (346-7). He “crumples the sheets up, drops them onto the floor” (ibid.)

because his words have no greater fate. Towards the end of each novel, this complete lack of hope is assuaged with some small promise of the persistence of hope. Howells, in discussing *O&C*, observes that “unlike everyone else, Snowman is not dead and his story continues into the new dystopian space of the post-apocalyptic world. [He] becomes the Crakers' rescuer, leading them out of Paradise into their new 'home' in the wilderness” (173). *Year* ends more hopefully with the protagonists finding others before they have lost their minds, but for much of the story, all surviving characters are essentially devoid of the hope necessary, at some point, for a dystopia's counternarrative and critical discourse.

The MaddAddam novels do not share a classical dystopian form but there is some alignment with the predecessor's intent. Though Robert McAlear claims it is an over-simplification (89), there is certainly something being said about metanarratives in the novels. McAlear's comments on a more nuanced reading of the novels as calling for an ethical underpinning to the arts make for an intriguing argument, but at some high level, Stephen Dunning is correct in his assertion that the MaddAddam world is one “that has lost its 'great' narrative” (“The Terror”). He claims that the intent in these novels is to show a vulnerability to “unprecedented disaster” coming not out of totalitarian dystopia but a “qualitative vacuum” of culture:

[The] novel . . . clearly suggests that we cannot do without such tales . . . if we wish to remain even marginally human. Thus, whatever solutions we may hope for must come at least partially by way of recovery, recovery of some form of great narrative that reestablishes culture firmly in the cultures from

which science has torn it. Indeed, taken together, Atwood's two dystopian novels demonstrate that even oppressive metanarratives are preferable to modernity's anti-narrative. (ibid.)

Atwood has hit at something of a core dystopian truth while also crafting a thoroughly critical dystopian narrative of our future history.

All three of these subversions of expectation serve to make critical Atwood's MaddAddam dystopia in some way. Tom Van Steendam, quoting Naomi Jacobs, says that "the classical dystopia's focus on the humanist perspective and the individual as the criterion, whereas the critical dystopia puts emphasis on society and the world as a whole that needs to be re-examined and reconfigured" (32). Further, he says that Atwood's "inscription of hope" for the protagonists is present throughout *O&C* and that she rewrites genre conventions to apply a strict morality to the prophetic message of the dystopia (59). The same is true of *Year*, which if anything only strengthens the argument with the dual views of Toby and Ren. The redirected views of the novels, preservation of hope, and rewriting of conventions makes possible the narrative hope necessary for opposition in a critical dystopia.

That the MaddAddam books ought to be read as critical dystopias is not yet a widely published argument. This could be because *Year* came out less than three years ago, but there is no real dearth of other critical review. The novels are frequently addressed along lines more familiar to Atwood's other work, including feminism, power hierarchies, survival, ecology, and trauma. All of these are of undeniable importance in the novels, but they are brought together in these dystopias to present a critique of our time so that the events that have befallen the

various protagonists feel as much a part of our future as they do a part of the narrative future. Jane Glover, in an article on ecological philosophy in *O&C*, implies the Suvin definition of sf early on in what seems an attempt to force the reading rules that Le Guin claims give the novels their meaning. Glover highlights all of the numerous ways in which Atwood shows scientists playing God and what this means in regards to ecological instrumentalism—“man’s presumption of his own apartness from nature” (52). An opposition between human culture and nature creates a novel that “highlights the darker side of utopia and the ambiguous nature of dystopia,” thus creating the constant balancing of the critical dystopia (54).

In a 2010 Master’s thesis on *O&C*, Van Steendam invokes both Tom Moylan’s and Fredric Jameson’s language to claim that the novel possesses a “critical and instructive undertone [that] is typical of critical dystopia” (31). Here, Jameson’s wording seems more useful and concise: the novel “lets us apprehend the present as history.” For me, this could be the best condensed definition of critical dystopia even though it is quite obviously too vague to serve as a critical framework. Van Steendam goes on to detail how Atwood reached her critical discourse:

By rewriting the conventions of literary genres which typically have a moralising and prophetic nature, Atwood manages to construct a novel that underscores the predictive and alerting function it serves, whilst also firmly placing the novel within literary traditions. The fact that the novel itself clearly has a hybrid form, only affirms its status as a parody serving a specific aim. (59)

Though he does not quote Baccolini here, this seems to be quite similar to the argument for genre-blurring—addressed shortly—as a way to convey critical complexity. Jameson reviewed *Year* himself for *The London Review of Books*.

Though he addressed the book through a utopian frame, he seems just as apt to see in them something like critical theory. He comments on the multiple dystopias in *O&C* and how they are “ingeniously intertwined” with utopian hope (“Then You Are Them”). Of *Year*, he commends Atwood’s use of “ecological, communitarian, cunningly organised in decentralised units” that remain relevant through their “regressive primitivism utilising computerised information and informers strategically planted among the elites” (ibid.). All of this is to say that while there is not a great deal of scholarship to rely upon in claiming the MaddAddam books as critical dystopia, what exists is admirable.

The critical dystopian tenets of unresolved opposition or tension, critical space, and the possibility of revelation are somewhat unexplored and incredibly complex. For the purposes of this thesis, I will have to address only one of the many possible lenses through which to view these elements: gender inequality; gender equality rather than feminism because of some of the unfortunate baggage—similar to the SF category—that can go along with the latter label and because the MaddAddam novels do a fantastic job of illustrating how much is lost by society in general from a loss of the gains made by women in the second half of the twentieth century. Bouson notes that Atwood “draws on and extends a related idea she has long made use of in her fiction—that of the ‘metaphoric consumption of women in North American culture’—as she exposes the sexual cannibalism of Blanco” in *Year*

(Hall qtd. in Bouson 13). In the same novel, Ren's only action towards the end of feeling any actual control over her life is taking a job at a SeksMart. These two views on sexual control and gender hierarchy are difficult to reconcile and are made even more so from the other side of the gender divide in *O&C*.

In the Pixieland Jazz chapter, it becomes clear that the reader can only know Oryx's past through Jimmy's eyes and that he is determined to find the victimizer or victimizers in her narrative, to essentially grasp her story so that he will feel more directly connected to the whole, adult Oryx. Put another way, he wants to possess the story and, by extension, possess Oryx. Dunning has suggested that Crake might be read as attempting to possess Oryx by murdering her, but also admits that this doesn't fit with what we know about Crake and thus their relationship dynamic must remain a mystery. Not even Ren's observation of Crake with Oryx gives us much additional insight (*Year* 306).

Bouson believes that "in *Year*, Atwood accentuates the fear, present in previous dystopias, that what women have gained [through the twentieth century] will be short-lived" (14-5). This fear remains at the end of both novels. Snowman is told by the Crakers that two men and a "blue" woman—*homo sapiens* women always appear ready to mate to the Crakers—came through while he was gone (*O&C* 364). He goes to seek them and the novel ends with his contemplation of what to do after having found them. We honestly know little more than the fact that at least one human female remains alive among three men. In *Year*, we find that these men are Painballers and the woman, whom they have taken and brutalized, is Ren's friend and Jimmy's former girlfriend Amanda Payne. *Year* ends with the situation diffused

and the Painballers incapacitated. Ren and Toby find that a collection of MaddAddam still exists, but again little more than that is known in the end. The possibility of gender violence is still very much alive at the end of both novels, but there exists now a reason for genuine utopian hope. Ren and Toby are ostensibly returning to something like a family, something which they both desperately need, and the Crakers will be—at least for now—left to their own devices. As Baccolini puts it, the hope exists both inside the narrative for the characters and outside the narrative for the reader, but no optimistic narrative closure is allowed, as any hope is balanced with the possibility of gender violence and oppression.

In addition to the ambiguous hope of these texts, and perhaps even as part of an effort to present that ambiguity, the MaddAddam books possess the genre-blurring which Baccolini identifies as central to most if not all critical dystopias. Again, Bouson has done a fantastic job of touching on a number of the elements Atwood uses in this “mixture of genres,” which include:

The dystopian end-of-the-world story; the castaway-survivor story; the coming-of-age story (Ren); the romance plot (Ren’s thwarted romance with Jimmy, the love triangles between Ren, Amanda and Jimmy and between Toby, Zeb and Lucerne); the political thriller and mystery story (as readers come to speculate on the connection or even collusion between Crake and the male leaders of the God’s Gardeners, Adam One and Adam Seven/Zeb).

(11)

These apply only to *Year*; we might also include from *O&C* the coming-of-age/arrested-development story (Jimmy), the love triangle (Jimmy/Oryx/Crake), or

the origin myth (Crake). In addition to these various genres, Bouson also points out something touched upon earlier in this chapter about the CorpSeCorps when he says that Atwood “draws on and literalizes the trope of corporate cannibalism” with the SecretBurgers franchise. “The worst rumours [say that] during the glory days of SecretBurgers, there were few [human] bodies found in vacant lots” (*Year* 33). We might also point to the fact that *Year* is presented in the form of a hymnal. To this list of acquired and blurred genres, Stephen Dunning adds Judeo-Christian mythology with the Crake-Snowman-Oryx “Christian Trinity” (“The Terror”). Out of the numerous genres Atwood has adopted comes a narrative that is increasingly difficult to categorize and the reader is left having to assume the rules for interacting with the story. When the expectations of dystopia are so skewed, and the endings left open, the critical dystopia emerges.

The final critical dystopian element I wish to devote attention to in the novels is what Moylan calls “the reappropriation of language” (149). The use of language by both the oppressor and the oppressed is of great importance in both classical and critical dystopian narratives. The power of language degradation is of central importance in Orwell’s *1984* as Newspeak’s ultimate goal is to control all thought through rigorously controlling language itself. The use of language reclamation is so common to the dystopian narrative that it might be easier to note instances where it is not used than ones where it is. Moylan remarks that “by regaining language [the dystopian misfits] also recover the ability to draw on the alternative truths of the past and ‘speak back’ to hegemonic power” in critical dystopias (ibid.). Atwood presents language issues and word play in quite novel ways in the *MaddAddam*

novels. In *O&C*, language is the only marketable skill Jimmy possesses. It is also a vestige of escape. Jimmy is able to use language to simultaneously present himself as intelligent and place a barrier between himself and the world around him. This same world also puts very little value into “word people,” as Jimmy is identified. His only way to capitalize off his knowledge of obscure, arcane words is in copywriting, which he does to such great effect that he finds that he eventually buys into his own claims. Following Crake’s genocide, Jimmy’s language takes on a different use altogether. As Snowman, he slowly crafts a mythos for the Crakers made up of symbolic language that starts with the very name he has chosen. In this way, every interaction with the Crakers might be viewed as Snowman’s subversion of the world Crake created with his new creatures and human extermination. On the other side of the coin, Snowman is quite certain that his mind is slipping. He is no longer able to recall words he once knew so well. The anxiety produced by this *presque vu* phenomenon leaves Snowman precariously hanging at the novels end.

In *Year*, we get an extended look at the pervasive word play that exists in the popular culture throughout both novels. While in *O&C* we are presented with terms like “HottTotts,” “HelthWyzer,” and “BlyssPluss,” in *Year* the continued degradation of the vernacular is on constant display. The pleeblands are completely packed with SeksMarts, SecretBurgers, AnooYoo day spas, and worshipers of the liobam. This kind of word play seems to be showing Atwood’s concern for the increasingly deficient language of the plebeians—soon to be pleeblanders—of our own world. This dumbing-down is not the only type of language reclamation to occur. *Year* presents many religious movements and cults which have reframed existing dogma

to meet their needs. We learn the most about the GG, and much of our knowledge of them comes from outside of the biased views of Ren and Toby. At each section break, we read their hymns and sermons and, from these, we are able to see at least one formal attempt at organizational language reclamation. We know that this alone does not protect or ensure the viability of the GG, but many individuals associated with them survive through a mixture of the GG's practical, ecology-based religion and a mixture of luck and preparedness. A semblance of control comes about through reclaiming and rediscovering language and that control allows for the hopeful prospect of autonomy.

The MaddAddam novels serve as an example of the final category of accidental dystopia, that which is created through the hubris of a group or—as in the case of these novels—an individual attempting to remake the world from the perspective of a participant in the world. This is contingent on many elements. First, because dystopias are by necessity stories of a world worse than our own which are guided by human efforts, this accidental dystopian category might be in danger of possessing no utility by virtue of the fact that it fits many classical dystopian narratives with largely or entirely closed endings. However, in order for the dystopian accident to carry any actual weight, it is already contingent on a critical dystopian narrative. Second, this particular kind of accidental dystopia can only arise in an already dystopic world. Many have identified these novels as possessing multiple different dystopias. The past of the various protagonists is already quite dystopic, even if it resembles our world far more than we want to see. The secondary dystopia—initiated roughly with Crake's genocide—begins with the

dystopian accident; that is, Crake's deliberate effort to rid the world of the scourge of mankind by widely distributing the apparently miraculous BlyssPlus pill results not in his intended post-human world but in a new dystopic world vastly different from the original. Crake's ability to so terribly affect the world is only made possible by its already degraded state, including physical and sexual violence, directionless citizens, a loss of 'great narratives,' ubiquitous devaluing of ethics, and general debauchery, as well as an infrastructure to exploit. The preconditions for Crake's apocalypse, if they have not been already, are being formed right now at alters to financial manipulation and in the devaluation of education.

Hope Jennings, in her 2010 piece "The Comic Apocalypse of *The Year of the Flood*," establishes a great case for why we ought to read Crake's apocalypse as the novel's second dystopia. After noting evidence, including quotations of Walter Benjamin, to the effect that we—readers—crave apocalypse knowing that it cannot thoroughly purge the world to start anew, she adopts from Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism* to explain the satiric intent of the apocalypse in *Year*:

Apocalyptic narrative might follow either a tragic or comic plot depending on one's 'framing of acceptance' with regard to the role and/or responsibility of the individual of community in averting or hastening the imagined end. The tragic plot accepts that evil is fundamentally rooted in guilt whereas the comic plot remains focused on "the exposure of fallibility" so that evil is viewed in terms of human error; thus redemption is contingent upon the recognition (and rectification) of mistakes rather than sacrifice and death; in

other words, tragedy demands victimhood and comedy permits agency. (12-3)

Thus what is important coming out of the apocalypse in *Year* is recognition of complicity and acceptance of agency. Just as a virtuous enterprise is not built solely on the work of one individual, neither is blame for the second-level dystopia to be laid solely at Crake's feet.

This appears to be approaching apologetics for Crake, but the argument has to be clear that Crake possesses a brilliant mind that is specifically shaped by his world. Crake is both victim and victimizer. Atwood knows this quite well and has created a narrative so lacking in understanding of Crake's actions which nevertheless engenders sympathy for him. These types of people are all too common and we err when we believe we understand the human mind well enough to assume that a person's terrible actions serve as an excuse to see them as evil incarnate. When asked in an interview if anyone had the potential to become a fascist, Atwood claimed that this question required knowledge about ourselves that, outside of "lifeboat situations," we just do not have. She went on to note that many "people facing fascism didn't become fascist" and that "we're in a lifeboat situation" now (Rothschild). We draw ever nearer to being forced to make decisions about bioethics and ecological devastation about which we do not yet know enough to comment. While many ignore Crake's complicity or write him off as a monster, others share my view that he is perhaps the most complex component of the novels. Returning to Glover, he simultaneously notes "Crake's arrogant assumption of his right to control the natural world" while also giving examples, like the Blood and

Roses game, of how human nature is very much held to scrutiny. Crake, far more than being evil, is just horrifyingly wrong and that seems somehow more frightening<sup>15</sup>.

It is quite difficult to briefly discuss Stephen Dunning's psychoanalytical reading of *O&C*. Dunning has been thorough in his tracing of our collectively psychological vulnerability and gives great examples of characters and situations in the first MaddAddam novel that correlate to more than a century of psychoanalytic thought. He identifies Crake as a Freudian with access to the tools to eliminate the human race and the environmental crisis at once ("The Terror"). He reads Crake's "drastic therapy . . . to remedy the ills of [the] world" as a response to more than three centuries of our advancement that make it increasingly unsuitable even for our own existence (ibid.). Of course he notes that Atwood frames Crake's logical conclusions with severe irony by invoking the Christian Trinity and the Craker's Edenic "Paradise." Ultimately, his argument returns to his focus on our need for great narratives. Crake is misguided precisely because he possesses such an ego while having no metanarratives to drive his (species) continued existence. Dunning suggests that "although the novel is understandably coy about the status of Snowman's sacred stories, it clearly suggests that we cannot do without such tales, not at least, if we wish to remain even marginally human" (ibid.). Given the right

---

<sup>15</sup> The insight Dunning and Snyder give to the psychological aspects of the novels bear a resemblance to Fredric Jameson's claim that there is a thread running through Atwood's fiction, from *Surfacing* to *The Year of the Flood*, where The Fall becomes "a fall into Americanism" ("Then You Are Them"). In other words, the critical dystopia in *Year* so effectively blurs the lines of victimization to make America both cause and effect. This cyclical blaming coalesces with the view of the MaddAddam novels as an accidental dystopia because no causative agent is truly accountable nor do they escape blame.

tools without an ethical underpinning, our self-destruction is certain and it is our very humanity that makes it so.

The first dystopia—the one that exists in the narrative’s past—bears a resemblance to the dystopia of Butler's novels but what I consider the accidental dystopia in those novels is not the accidental dystopia of the MaddAddam novels; in Atwood's novels, the dystopian accident exists somewhere between the pre-condition that allows for Crake to commit his atrocity and the post-apocalyptic dystopian world of the narratives present. The accidental dystopia exists on page one of each of the novels but in Atwood, its progression is recounted for us through memories. This final classification of accidental dystopia is for me as tricky to explain as it is necessary because of how much it has in common with so many classical dystopia stories. Surely in the classic dystopias of Zamyatin, Orwell, Huxley, Forster, etc, there is a psychological component behind the dystopian agency that can be explored. The major differences are how the author frames the supposed cause of the dystopia and how hope is preserved at the narrative’s close. In Atwood’s MaddAddam novels, we are shown Crake’s actions and continually reminded of the world that made him. In *Year*, we are shown much less of Crake but far more of the inner city that we know Crake to be familiar with. Where Butler created a dystopian world in which we are societally culpable for the state of things, Atwood has created one where the same appears to be true but she has allowed the perverted power of the world to fall into the hands of one man. In that way, this third and final classification seems a blend of the previous two.

The method by which Atwood achieves this framing is complex but relies in part on the separation of the past from the present, her treatment of corporate power, and her use of religion. By placing the protagonists of the novels in a dystopian future and also having them recall a dystopian past, Atwood almost flips what Jameson says of dystopian stories—that they let “us apprehend the present as history”—so that we must consider the narrative’s history as our present. Between Atwood’s satirical take on contemporary mercenary armies and her prognostications of the future of our corporations, i.e. Compounds, she gives us a taste of the popular scapegoat of so much dystopian and post-apocalyptic literature while also making them laughably malevolent. The result is that they possess significant resources and wield impressive power but are, in the end, largely ineffectual. For all the CorpSeCorp can do, Crake bests them and they have no idea to what end. Their demise is more ambiguous for them than the novel’s end is for us.

Finally, Atwood’s use of religion between the two books is impressive and seeks to make a comment on how we use religion today and how we ought to. In the Parable novels—especially *Talents*—religion is used to guide psychology because Lauren knows that only religion will make people do so much in return for so little. In Atwood’s novels, religion is sought—unsuccessfully—by many out of a psychological need for origin myths and purpose. In *O&C*, Jimmy/Snowman adheres to symbolic language and religious mores seemingly out of spite for Crake but he nevertheless feeds a psychological need Crake was certain he had stomped out of his better-than-human Crakers. In *Year*, people who see the world’s coming

devastation prepare for the worst through education, sustainable living, and an attempt to reframe Judeo-Christian mythology along the lines of the green movement. However, Katarina Labudová shows that:

Atwood complicates the novels by ambiguous endings: by juxtaposing the apathy of passive consumers (like Jimmy) and political activists (such as Jimmy's mother, Maddaddams, God's Gardeners), who reject the endless elimination of species, materialism, and sexploitation, but, blinded by their political aims, they succumb to manipulation and contribute the Waterless Flood. (144)

There are no easy fixes for the world created in Atwood's novels, the world we are in the process of creating, and once one is a part of that world there is no easy escape.

As mentioned earlier, the dystopian accident exists somewhere between the dystopian world of the narrative's past and that of its present, where the protagonists are all but certain that they and their kind are doomed. The dystopian past of the novels sets the pre-conditions for Crake's mismanagement through hubris and the many unintended consequences that begets. Atwood seems as concerned with unintended consequences as Butler. We collectively ignore the ramifications of our actions and set up the possibility that such a world can arise. Atwood shows this not only by highlighting future consequences of our present actions but also by satirizing consequences we are already beginning to see. Crake, for all of his knowledge and skill, is just as blind to the consequences of his actions as the rest of the world. The disturbing logic of his attempts to remake the world

cannot be wholly dismissed—we are an ecological burden on the world and we do possess an alarming capacity for inexplicable violence—by it is problematized by the results of his actions. The Crakers still obviously possess the ability to create and revere gods. By the end of *O&C*, it is apparent that other humans have survived and by the end of *Year* that perhaps very large pockets have. Crake's failure creates an entirely new condition for humankind. Those left will have every opportunity to make exactly the same mistakes as existed in the old world or they may have just the knowledge necessary to begin anew with wisdom from our past destructiveness. The reader is truly unable to say which will occur.

The ambiguous endings of the two MaddAddam novels seek to cement a lament for our loss of "great narratives." In *O&C*, this is done by showing how resilient the need for myth is through the Craker's persistence. In *Year*, we see those who can balance practicality with metanarratives stand a decent chance of remaining viable in the post-Waterless Flood world. The world of Crake's upbringing, the world of our very near future, is set up to allow someone, anyone, to commit Crake-like atrocities. Crake has chanced upon his position by possessing the proper intellect along with the host of psychological issues and strengths that go with being a human being. Without reverence for something outside himself—a "great narrative"—his trauma leads him to commit unspeakable acts for which we are collectively culpable and which we are equally capable.

There is a great deal to be said about the MaddAddam novels and their connection to the green movement, ecological concerns, environmental devastation, and some kind of ecocritical narrative ethics; Tomoko Kuribayashi's suggestion of a

“regenerative potential of forgiveness” is based on the interconnectedness of gender and environmental studies (22). For her, environmental and gendered issues should be addressed in tandem to attempt to form the kind of ethics we need to address the problems of Atwood’s novels. Robert McAlear notes that *O&C* “calls for a narrative ground for ethics” but “ends without a community with a shared history in which to tell this narrative” (11), something I believe *Year* begins to do with the environmentalist GG and the more practical MaddAddam group. Atwood’s skepticism and a psychoanalytic reading of the novels would suggest that in addition to cultural metanarratives, we need an ethical underpinning to both the sciences and humanities to address the path we are on, both societally and globally, if we wish to avoid the apocalyptic dystopian accident which awaits us.

## CHAPTER V

### Conclusion

Genre definitions and classifications are inherently problematic. Even what one means by genre can sometimes be elusive as it might be conflated with the form or mode of a piece of literature. As generic classifications become more compartmentalized, the chances for debate become more frequent. This means that a discussion of genre and an attempt to coin a new classification must take a good deal for granted and expect resistance. In referring to sf, this thesis has glossed over the rigorous debate among sf theorists about what the genre means, what it does, and what it encompasses in favor of using Darko Suvin's widely adopted yet still contentious definition. Indeed, even I believe that Suvin's definition is at times oversimplified and quantitative rather than qualitative. Definitions of dystopian literature are perhaps less contentious but are somehow more fluid and thus harder to pin down. Attempts to establish a definition for dystopia have often resulted in vague, and thus useless, criteria or overly restrictive, and thus inapplicable, rules. Somewhere in the consensus between many different sf and dystopian theorists, a useful set of dystopian criteria emerge. From Moylan, Baccolini, Sargent, and many others, the framework with which we engage the late twentieth century critical

dystopia was developed. They addressed the increased inclusivity and openness of many new dystopias as writers began to be less pessimistic and more critical of negative, dystopic forces they saw in the world.

I have argued that among the critical dystopias there exists a subcategory which I call the accidental dystopia. These accidental dystopias use the narrative ambiguity and genre-blurring of the critical dystopia to engage with the degeneration of society, ecology, and human rights as seen by the author by insisting that complacency, apathy, and myopia make everyone culpable in the extrapolated hell on Earth. Whereas classical dystopias, as well as guided critical dystopias, present a dystopic world in which a causative agent exists, the accidental dystopia arises through inaction and happenstance. The author's particular treatment of human psychology and agency precludes a reading in which any one individual or group is culpable and thus humanity must collectively take responsibility. This means that the reader sees the narrative's characters as partially responsible. As Jameson points out, *sf* let "us apprehend the present as history," and thus the reader is likewise implicated. The accidental dystopian designation refers to what the author is attempting to indicate about the nature of their worlds-gone-wrong as well as to how the world itself becomes dystopian. Just as the ambiguous endings of critical dystopian narrative allow for the preservation of hope both for the characters and the reader so does the accidental dystopia require that the reader accepts her part in the world-to-come. It seems impossible to separate human psychology from the formative effects of society and the

accidental dystopia shows that this impossibility makes everyone culpable in the degeneration of the world.

The accidental dystopia takes various forms and I have attempted to present examples of what I see as the three forms. Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven* develops an accidental dystopia by addressing the psychological impossibility of Utopia. George Orr complains to Dr. Haber that men do not have humanitarian dreams and thus summarizes the novel's concerns over utopian world building. By presenting a struggle between Daoism and western rationality, psychiatry and spirituality, an examination of the nature of man, and well-meaning megalomania, Le Guin creates a dystopian work which conflates the impossibility of Utopia with the relative ease of a world slipping into dystopia.

Octavia E. Butler's *Parable* novels explore the sociological inevitability of dystopia in a world that undervalues education and turns to zealotry in the face of economic depression. Her near-future America shows collective complicity in a slow but ever worsening society. She addresses themes of slavery, corporate hegemony, puppet government, lack of security, economic breakdown, ecologic disaster, religious fundamentalism, racist resurgence, and societal breakdown to show how easily and completely self-serving, myopic plans destroy us.

In Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, we find an accidental dystopian variation on the guided dystopia. Whereas the dystopic world of *Lathe* comes about because of a lack of acceptance of man's limitations, here Atwood presents the effects of one man's hubris in attempting to remake the world through ecological disaster, corporate hegemony, societal breakdown, resurgence of

class structure, corporatization of education, genetic engineering, species-wide genocide, rigidly controlled scientific development, and sexual control. Though the post-apocalyptic dystopia of these narratives originate from the actions of an individual—Crake—the novels present that individual as wholly formed by a morally bankrupt world and society is again complicit in its own fall.

These variations of form within the accidental dystopia collectively present an argument regarding dystopian guilt. In classic dystopias, a protagonist is shown to be in some way different from the world he inhabits and he thus resists its influence or directly fights society's oppressors. Generally, these stories have closed endings that do not allow for speculation regarding the protagonist's future. She is either squashed or is victorious. In the critical dystopia, this simplicity is gone. Hope is preserved but never assured. In the accidental dystopia, hope is preserved and guilt is shared collectively. Dystopias center specifically on humans and what we do to one another, and the accidental dystopia presents the argument that anything less than actively attempting to fight injustice and oppression is complicity.

The existence of these accidental dystopias across nearly four decades seems to indicate a particular vein in the new critical dystopias that these authors see as significant. Moylan and Baccolini have already established that a critical turn occurred within the dystopian genre, and it is my belief that these authors represent a particular take on the new critically engaged dystopias. In these narratives, ambiguity and openness are of great importance, but so is the realization that dystopian stories should push us to resolve social and cultural issues. Rather than scapegoating, these accidental dystopias accept collective culpability and ask '*what*

*next?* Each individual author posits answers to this question, but in the form of the critical dystopia none extrapolates their own ideas to completion. In the accidental dystopia, it is enough to recognize the roots of the dystopian world. The label accidental dystopia is simply a new way to group the types of dystopian narratives that are more concerned with depicting personal responsibility and human psychology than with the resiliency of an individual in a dystopic world. Foucault believes that the limitations of an individual constituted by his society must be identified if anything like a relative autonomy is to be achieved. By accepting one's part in their world-gone-to-hell, it seems that a realization of one's limitations occurs. What happens next is, by necessity, vague.

## WORKS CITED

- Akbar, Arifa. "Margaret Atwood: 'People should live joyfully'." *The Independent* 4 Sep. 2009. *Independent.co.uk*. Web. 23 Apr. 2011.
- Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review, 1971. 127-88. Print.
- Andréolle, Donna Spalding. "Utopias of Old, Solutions for the New Millennium: A Comparative Study of Christian Fundamentalism in M.K. Wren's *A Gift Upon the Shore* and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*." *Utopian Studies* 12.2 (2001): 114-123. *JSTOR*. Web. 30 May 2012.
- Annas, Pamela J. "New Worlds, New Words: Androgyny in Feminist Science Fiction." *Science Fiction Studies* 5.2 (1978): 143-156. *JSTOR*. Web. 13 Nov. 2011.
- Atwood, Margaret (MargaretAtwood). "Gardening interlude today: planted shallots, peas, nasturtiums. Will they all freeze? :( Also wrote 1 page of Maddaddam. No freezing there!" 9 Apr. 2012, 8:20 p.m. Tweet.
- . *The Handmaid's Tale*. 1985. Reprint, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986. Print.
- . "The Handmaid's Tale and *Oryx and Crake* 'In Context'." *PMLA* 119.3 (2004): 513-517. *Modern Language Association*. Web. 12 Feb. 2011.

---. *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*. New York: Doubleday, 2011.

Print.

---. *Oryx and Crake*. New York: Anchor Books, 2003. Print.

---. *The Year of the Flood*. London: Bloomsbury, 2009. Print.

Baccolini, Raffaella. "Gender and Genre in the Feminist Critical Dystopias of

Katherine Burdekin, Margaret Atwood, and Octavia Butler." *Future Females, the Next Generation: New Voices and Velocities in Feminist Science Fiction*. Ed.

Marleen Barr. Boston: Rowman and Littlefield, 200. 13-34. Print.

---. "The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction." *PMLA* 119.3 (2004): 518-521. *Modern Language Association*. Web. 8 Aug. 2011.

---. "A useful knowledge of the present is rooted in the past': Memory and Historical Reconciliation in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Telling*." *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*. Ed. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan. New York: Routledge, 2003. 113-134. 224. Print.

Bould, Mark, et al. *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 2009. Print.

Bouson, J. Brooks. "'We're Using Up the Earth. It's Almost Gone': A Return to the Post-Apocalyptic Future in Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 46.9 (2011): 9-26. *Google Scholar*. Web. 23 Apr. 2011.

Brin, David. *The Postman*. New York: Bantam, 1985. Print.

Burgess, Anthony. *A Clockwork Orange*. London: Heinemann, 1962. Print.

Butler, Octavia E. "Brave New Worlds: A Few Rules for Predicting the Future."

*Essence* 31.1 (May 2000): 164-167. *ProQuest Research Library*. Web. 22 Mar. 2012.

---. "How I Built Novels Out of Writer's Block." *Writer's Digest* 79.6 (Jun 1999): 12-15. *ProQuest Research Library*. Web. 22 Mar. 2012.

---. *Parable of the Sower*. New York: Aspect, 1995. Print.

---. *Parable of the Talents*. New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2000. Print.

Butler, Samuel. *Erewhon*. London: Trubner and Co., 1872. Print.

Call, Lewis. "Postmodern Anarchism in the Novels of Ursula K. Le Guin." *SubStance* 36.2 (2007): 87-105. *JSTOR*. Web. 13 Nov. 2011.

Cogell, Elizabeth Cummins. "The Middle-Landscape Myth in Science Fiction." *Science Fiction Studies* 5.2 (1978): 134-142. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 Nov. 2011.

Donawerth, Jane. "Genre Blending and the Critical Dystopia." *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*. Ed. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan. New York: Routledge, 2003. 29-46. Print.

Dunning, Stephen. "Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*: The Terror of the Therapeutic." *Canadian Literature* 186 (2005): 86-101. Print.

Federmayer, Éva. "Octavia Butler's Maternal Cyborgs: The Black Female World of the *Xenogenesis* Trilogy." *HJEAS* 6.1 (Spring 2000): 103-118. *JSTOR*. Web. 30 May 2012.

Forster, E.M. "The Machine Stops." *Oxford and Cambridge Review* 8 (1909): 83-122. Print.

Frank, Pat. *Alas Babylon*. New York: J.B. Lippincott, 1959. Print.

- Franko, Carol S. "The I-We Dilemma and a 'Utopian Unconscious' in Wells's *When the Sleeper Wakes* and Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven*." *Political Science Fiction*. Ed. Donald M. Hassler and Clyde Wilcox. Columbia, SC: U of South Carolina P, 1997. 76-98. Print.
- Freedman, Carl. *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2000. Print.
- Garrand, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. New York: Routledge, 2012. Print.
- Glover, Jayne. "Human/Nature: Ecological Philosophy in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*." *English Studies in Africa (ESA)* 52.2 (2009): 50-62. Print.
- Howells, Coral Ann. "Margaret Atwood's dystopian visions: *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*." *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*. Ed. Howells. Cambridge: Cambridge R Press, 2006. 161-175. Print.
- Huang, Betsy. "Premodern Orientalist Science Fictions." *MELUS* 33.4 (2008): 23-43. *JSTOR*. Web. 14 Nov. 2011.
- Hughes, Langston. "Montage of a Dream Deferred." *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Ed. Arnold Hampersad. New York: Vintage, 1994. 387. Print.
- Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1932. Print.
- Jameson, Fredric. "Then You Are Them." *London Review of Books* 31.17 (Sept 2009): 7-8. *Google Scholar*. Web. 14 Oct. 2012.
- Jenning, Hope. "The Comic Apocalypse of *The Year of the Flood*." *Margaret Atwood Studies* 3.2 (2010): 11-18. *ProQuest Direct Complete*. Web. 8 May 2012.

Johnston, Laura. "'Orr' and 'Orwell': Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven* and Orwell's

*Nineteen Eighty-Four*." *Extrapolation* 40.4 (1999): 351-354. *Zotero*. Web. 14

Nov. 2011.

Kuribayashi, Tomoko. "Women, Nature, and Forgiveness in *The Year of the Flood*: An

Exploratory Consideration." *Margaret Atwood Studies* 3.2 (2010): 22-30.

*Proquest Literature Online*. Web. 20 Apr. 2011.

Labudová, Katarina. "Powers, Pain, and Manipulation in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and*

*Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*." *Brno Studies in English* 36.1 (2010): 135-

146. *Google Scholar*. Web. 23 Apr. 2011.

Le Guin, Ursula K. *The Lathe of Heaven*. New York: Avon Books, 1971. Print.

---. "*The Year of the Flood* by Margaret Atwood." *The Guardian* 28 Aug. 2009. *Google*.

Web. 14 Oct. 2012.

McAlear, Robert D. "Dystopian Resistance: Politics and Form in Contemporary

American Dystopian Fiction." Diss. University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2010.

*Google Scholar*. Web. 8 May 2012.

Miller, Jim. "Post-Apocalyptic Hoping: Octavia Butler's Dystopian/Utopian Fiction." *Science-Fiction Studies* 25.2 (July 1998): 336-361. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 Aug. 2011.

Moylan, Tom. *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*.

London: Methuen, 1986. Print.

---. *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*. Boulder: Westview Press, 2000. Print.

Myers, Kristi Jayne. "We come apart: mother-child relationships in Margaret

Atwood's dystopias." MA thesis. Iowa State University, 2011. *Google Scholar*.

Web. 8 May 2012.

- Olivier, Bert. "Foucault and Individual Autonomy." *South African Journal of Psychology* 40.3 (2010): 292-307. Print.
- Orwell, George. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. New York: Harcourt, 1949. Print.
- Phillips, Jerry. "The Intuition of the Future: Utopia and Catastrophe in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 35.2/3 (Spring-Summer 2002): 299-311. *JSTOR*. Web. 18 Mar. 2012.
- Piercy, Marge. *He, She and It*. New York: Ballantine, 1991. Print.
- Rothschild, Matthew. "A Progressive Interview with Margaret Atwood." *The Progressive* Dec 2010-Jan 2011. *Google*. Web. 14 Oct. 2012.
- Sargent, Lyman Tower. "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited." *Utopian Studies* 5.1 (1994): 1-38. Print.
- Shute, Nevil. *On the Beach*. New York: Random House, 1957. Print.
- Smith, Brenda R. "Reaping What She Sows: The Evolution of African American Female Bildung and the Journey to Self from Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*." *New Essays on the African American Novel: From Hurston and Ellison to Morrison and Whitehead*. Ed. Loyal King and Linda F. Selzer. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 123-140. Print.
- Snyder, Katherine V. "'Time to go': The Post-apocalyptic and The Post-traumatic in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*." *Studies in the Novel* 43.4 (Winter 2011): 470-489. *Project Muse*. Web. 8 May 2012.
- Stephenson, Neal. *Snow Crash*. New York: Bantam, 1992. Print.

- Stillman, Peter G. "Dystopian Critiques, Utopian Possibilities, and Human Purposes in Octavia Butler's *Parables*." *Utopian Studies* 14.1 (2003): 15-35. *JSTOR*. Web. 18 Mar. 2012.
- Stableford, Brian, et al. "Definitions of SF." *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. London: Orbit, 1993. 311-314. Print.
- "Taoism." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford u, 2007. Web. 14 October 2012.
- Taylor, Deborah. "Reading Utopian Narratives in Dystopian Times." Diss. University of Maryland-College Park, 2007. *Google Scholar*. Web. 8 May 2012.
- Theall, Donald F. "The Art of Social-Science Fiction: The Ambiguous Dialectics of Ursula K. Le Guin." *Science Fiction Studies* 2.3 (1975): 256-264. *JSTOR*. Web. 13 Nov. 2011.
- Van Steendam, Tom. "Paratextuality and Parody in a Post-cataclysmic Wasteland: Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*." MA thesis. Ghent University, 2010. *Google Scholar*. Web. 23 Apr. 2011.
- Varsam, Maria. "Concrete Dystopia: Slavery and Its Others." *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*. Ed. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan. New York: Routledge, 2003. 203-224. Print.
- Walsh, William and Ursula K. Le Guin. "I Am a Woman Writer; I Am a Western Writer: An Interview with Ursula Le Guin." *The Kenyon Review New Series* 17.¾ (1995): 192-205. *JSTOR*. Web. 13 Nov. 2011.
- Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. London: Hogarth Press, 1927. Print.
- Wyndham, John. *The Day of the Triffids*. New York: Modern Library, 2003. Print.

Zamyatin, Yevgeny. *We*. Trans. Mirra Ginsburg. New York: EOS, 1972. Print.

## **VITA**

Cody Austin Sims was born 12 August 1986 to Angela Renee Berry and Bobby Franklin Sims in Lufkin, TX. He attended Sam Houston State, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts in English. He lived in NYC briefly, working at Columbia University, before returning to Texas to pursue a Master of Arts in Literature from Texas State University-San Marcos. He credits his mother's encouragement and the public library system as the sources of his love for literature.

Permanent Email: [sims@txstate.edu](mailto:sims@txstate.edu)

This thesis was typed by C. Austin Sims.