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Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

Speculative standpoint and feminist intervention

THE NARRATIVE TASK OF UTOPIA

At the conclusion of her 1985 study, *Writing Beyond the Ending*, Rachel DuPlessis anticipates the narrative strategies that women writers might deploy as they move into the twenty-first century. Opening with a promise to survey the ground(ing) of narrative in romance, she maps the deceptively stable “‘place’ where ideology meets narrative and produces a meaning-laden figure.” The meeting place is the “hard visible horizon” beyond which feminist narratives might aspire, rejecting the “conventional narrative resolution [including] all the endings of romance and death.”¹ In the deployment of narrative strategies that resist “the pleasurable illusion of stasis,” these texts reject every “happily ever after” conclusion, and insist instead on gaining access to the future(s) that might disrupt the illusion that “choice is over.”² Such narratives offer “muted” utopian content, pushing toward an alternative to the conservative ideological imperatives that animate the form and content, the ways and mean(ing)s, of the traditional novel.

This book revisits the narrative strategies of feminist speculation, focusing primarily on novels that have appeared since the beginning of the new millennium DuPlessis anticipates. These are feminist fictions in which utopian content is occasionally muted, but more often amplified. Contemporary critics of feminist narrative since DuPlessis continue attending to the kinds of theoretical speculations, narratological inventions, and strategic interventions that stake out new grounds for exploring a feminist utopia as such, and feminist utopianism more broadly. Previous critics have defined feminist utopianism as “the sighting (in terms of the gaze) and siting (in terms of emplacement) of another possibility”³ for female subjectivity and for feminist community. This study certainly follows in that tradition. *Postmodern Utopias and Feminist Fictions* extends a critical path cleared by DuPlessis, Nancy Miller, and other early feminist

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narratologists, particularly those interested in the specific developments of utopian and speculative fictions. Frances Bartkowski's *Feminist Utopias* (1989) was a model study – in fact the model I had in mind when I began this book; Sarah Lefanu's study appeared the same year. Following those were important books by Marleen Barr (1992 and 2000), Angelika Bammer (1991), Jenny Wolmark (1994), Jennifer Burwell (1997), and Lucie Armitt (2000). Barr, Bammer, and Armitt have been especially useful in their explorations of the relationship of feminist fabulation (Barr) to a masculinist postmodern literary canon offering "theoretical visions which define utopia as a Nowhere for women."⁴

Critical to my concerns is Bammer's critique of Fredric Jameson's notion of the unimaginability of utopia. Because, argues Jameson, utopian discourse is not so much a "mode of narrative [as] an object of meditation" he proposes that such discourse is therefore essentially plotless or characterless, its primary function to "jar the mind into some heightened but unconceptualizable consciousness of its own powers, function, aims and structural limits." Bammer contends, however, that not only *are* there plots and characters in the utopian discourse we call literature, but also both plot and character emerge "out of an impulse to narrativize."⁵ This distinction between "utopian discourse" and utopian *literary* discourse, including speculative and utopian narratives, is critical. Utopian narratives may never represent the achievement of some ideal utopian neutrality as Louis Marin proposes.⁶ But neutrality has never been a goal of feminist narratology, which seeks to mine narratives of difference, not sameness, for ways of deconstructing master narratives. One of those master narratives *is* the narrative of Utopia. Furthermore, should feminists countenance the notion that a utopian consciousness is impervious to conceptualization? Contemporary utopia theorists argue that utopia is both an object of self-reflexive meditation *and* a process.⁷ In that case, feminism needs to conceptualize a utopian consciousness that can be enacted by the *practice* of critical thinking.

The central claim of this book is that feminist narratology, drawing from broader developments in feminist epistemology, does take on the task of discovering a figure of a feminist utopian consciousness. For this task, contemporary speculative fictions have proven themselves powerful formal tools for revis(ion)ing the shape of history and revaluing the role of imagination. Indeed this investigation participates in the ongoing recuperation of the imaginative faculty from postmodern skepticism. The imagination is defended not only as politically viable but as politically necessary, and the role of feminist epistemology is central to my defense.

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Feminist epistemology is therefore more than just my starting point. It is the context for fleshing out as it were a figure of critical situatedness that I call *speculative standpoint*, whose “knowledge base” as it were is not only the empirical but also the imaginary.

Thus this book defends art of all kinds, and narrative in particular, for their “usefulness” – their practicality even – in imagining and implementing the practice of what I call “transitive imagining,”⁸ a process of conceptualizing transition and transformation. Performance and storytelling in particular reveal themselves, in nearly every novel treated here, to be “practical technologies” of the imagination in action. In this regard, this book aligns closely with several recent studies, including Phillip E. Wegner’s *Life between Two Deaths, 1989–2001* (2009) and John Su’s provocative and rich *Imagination and the Contemporary Novel* (2011). Wegner’s expansive analysis of American cultural texts from the “long Nineties” constitutes a sophisticated defense of the imagination deeply compatible with my own. His study appeals, as mine will, to “a shared commitment to a horizon of possibility that promises to transform everything.”⁹ It also requires a recuperation of the imagination as itself a powerful source of “information,” which Wegner sees expressed characteristically as *allegory*, regarding the structures and occlusions of ideology. Su’s excellent study focuses as well on the work that imagination does, while locating the vitality of new affiliative options in the urgencies of imaginative sympathy, or what our authors even call “love.”

One of the overarching themes of this volume is, therefore, *work* – not the traditional utopian text’s vision of efficient labor, but rather the speculative text’s vision of “the work of art” itself as a (trans)active process making visible the outlines of desire.¹⁰ This book launches a parallel inquiry into a specifically feminist reclamation of the imagination in speculative fiction. The feminist speculative fiction writers treated here characteristically defend the value of imagination and art – just one form of transitive imagining – in catalyzing feminist utopian movement. Ultimately, this valuation returns to epistemology, but to an epistemology of the *imagination* comparable to, and in dialogue with, traditional epistemological models. By extending feminist standpoint theory to include a *speculative* standpoint, this study reclaims speculative narrative as a robust challenge to claims that the imagination is politically useless. I argue that imagination is at the heart of art’s “utility” in this world. Its “use-value” is not one of efficiency. The feminist speculative standpoint, partaking of information from rational inquiry as well as imaginative inquiry, is a figure of inventiveness that incites both narratological and

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historical disruptions. Its impulse is to narrativize difference, to propose risk, to anchor hope.

Each of the many authors touched on in this study no doubt concurs with Margaret Atwood's claim that "the full range of our human response to the world – that is, what it means to be human, on earth" is offered by art. The truth of art's fictionality will reside just here, in the artistic capacity to express "something that is true to itself. . . . That seems to be what 'hope' is about in relationship to art."¹¹ Art is the technology with which we measure the moral compass of individuals, societies, cultures, histories. In claiming, therefore, an ethical motive at the heart of these novels' attention to the imagination, this study proposes that both the speculative novel, as a form, and the imagination, as a faculty, cultivate sites of difference that hold at bay the modern drive to sameness. These works renew attention to the ways and means by which transitive imagining locates its own kinds of truths. This may be the only robust source of "hope" in the face of Fredric Jameson's challenge to the arts: that they offer some "coordinated" response, "philosophically and theoretically," to "the global frontier of capitalism" that has a stranglehold on our historical moment. Jameson proposes that we begin at just that "frontier" – the frontier that is also "the horizon of all literary and cultural study in our time." It is just here "where we ought to begin."¹²

WITH KNOWING IRONY

The postmodern suspicion, even hostility, toward the imagination as a form of false consciousness and "outdated humanist illusion" has been a formidable obstacle to a contemporary epistemology of the imagination. Richard Kearney's defense of the imagination as both historical and ethical is a starting point: "[t]he kind of imagination required to meet the challenge of post-modernism is, then, fundamentally historical. It is one capable of envisioning what things might be like after postmodernism. And also, of course, what things were like before it."¹³ This is an apt description of the "narrative task" of utopian and speculative narratives, which are always meditations on the course of history, "archaeologies of the future," as Jameson memorably puts it, looking backward and looking forward to possible futures.

In promoting the relevance of imagination, however, we must account for the role of irony. Irony has been suspect for its potential to undermine the foundation of any political stance and the value of any frankly utopian projection. That suspicion has weakened the attractiveness of

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utopian speculation throughout modernity: What is the “use” of a theoretical no-place when the play of irony short-circuits or neutralizes a commitment to any position? A philosopher such as Kearney, who ultimately seeks a foundation stabilized in an ethical and religious worldview, denies a positive role to irony’s destabilizing duplicities. But rejecting a role for irony is untenable in a study of postmodern literary texts,¹⁴ and particularly of utopian and speculative texts. A recuperation of imagination requires that irony prove itself more than a political disability and a rhetorical liability. From an epistemic standpoint, irony makes critique possible, and most powerfully so when irony provokes critique *and* self-reflexivity. Any robust novel (and arguably any robust work of art whatever) discerns the workings of its own form, displaying a formal reflexivity that heightens the reader’s awareness of the ways in which that text (or work of art) is tethered to its occasion and situated in literary history as well as in national and global histories.¹⁵

The centrality of irony to the evolution of the novel is a source not only of historical depth but also of hermeneutic depth, even where that depth is concealed. A conservative utopian vision that celebrates a naturalized, masculinist “culture of no culture”¹⁶ may have motivated the novel genre’s original rhetorical and political deployments. Indeed as Franco Moretti’s brilliant study, *The Way of the World* (1987), has explained the bildungsroman – a form I turn to in Chapter 1 – exemplifies the in-forming of a conservative, and masculinist, utopian imperative supporting an advancing bourgeois class. Irony’s role is critical to the form and function of the novel of education, designed to reinforce that advance: irony, Moretti observes, opens up an “accessible’ past,” thanks to its “ability to stop time, to question what has already been decided, or to re-examine already finished events in a different light.” Irony “will never suggest what would be done,” he adds; “it can restrain action, but not encourage it. . . . [To] live is to choose, and decision cannot be eradicated from human existence or from history.”¹⁷ But the choice offered by Moretti’s model is, as he acknowledges, limited by its own unacknowledged ideological greenwashing. Presenting itself as an exemplary “object of meditation,” the classic bildungsroman presents a vision of an end-utopia. However conscious of “its own powers, function, aims and structural limits,”¹⁸ the classic bildungsroman will – like any instance of utopian realization – disguise its designs on us by obscuring those limits as a closing off of invention and possibility. Moretti’s identification of irony’s conservative function makes sense, in that regard, and so does his claim that “therefore” the classic bildungsroman cannot accommodate “workers, women, and minorities.”

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But of course, postmodernism demands that we challenge those limits, insofar as one grants that irony *has* limits. Postmodern irony hardly aspires to stop time, but, at its most radical, to reimagine time. It thereby creates the conceptual time-space in/on which to imagine and to stage any number of possible futures. Linda Hutcheon's great study of "irony's edge" is helpful here. It is possible, she observes,

to think of irony not as saying one thing and meaning another ... but, instead, as a process of communication that entails two or more meanings being played off, one against the other. The irony is in the difference; irony makes the difference. It plays between meanings, in a space that is always affectively charged, that always has a critical edge.¹⁹

The Janus-like character of irony will be an ongoing thematic in this study. Irony is Janus-like because it looks both backward, critiquing past actions and ideas, and forward toward a future, the shape of which is barely outlined. Double-edged and dialogic, critical and creative, irony is crucial in defining the ways in which feminist utopian thinking could develop future literary production.²⁰ Feminist utopia is not neutral, *pace* Marin, nor "unconceptualizable," *pace* Jameson. It is always already ironical.

In this book I claim that contemporary feminist utopian/dystopian as well as speculative narratives are always already, and necessarily, structured by irony's edge. The readings presented here reveal the critical role of irony's destabilizing and political charge. The charge splinters plot lines and shifts "out of joint" the structures of literary form. It multiplies figurations of dimensional shifts, which are temporal as well as spatial. The plot of many of these texts is an epistemological journey of a particular kind: a way of learning that teaches one how to look for such dimensional horizons, a way of knowing that allows one even to see the horizon, and possibly, to see beyond it. It may be that the horizon is the figuration of irony's edge, but in any case, it will not be the "hard horizon"²¹ defining the separation of the past and the future.

It is hard – impossible? – to decide whether what happens at the horizon is revelation or creation. Irony may produce a moment of crisis in thinking and behavior. But the obverse is also possible and necessary. Irony is so Janus-faced that it both produces and is required by crisis. And the crisis may be more than "personal," but a crisis of the social space, of the community. This is why Nancy Miller has pointed out that textual stagings of crises of female subjectivity will "[call] for an ironic manipulation of the semiotics of performance" whereby feminist hope is negotiated "through [the production of] a new 'social subject.'"²² More recently,

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philosophical work on “nomadic subjects” has continued the rejection, “within the feminist framework,” of a passive nihilism or “cynical acceptance of the state of crisis as loose and fragmented. On the contrary, this crisis is taken by women as the opening up of new possibilities and potentialities. It leads women to rethink the link between identity, power, and the community.”²³ It leads women to think of their situation.

One of the central arguments of this book is that the forms of contemporary feminist speculation require irony, but not of the endlessly enervating kind. As Linda Hutcheon has shown us, textual irony can offer an empowering, critical imperative, and in doing so gives the notion of utopia the political charge that drives utopian narrative. Utopia’s critical edge requires irony’s edge to sustain its challenge to, rather than its endorsement of, ideologies of all stripes. It also demands a vibrant evolution in the literary forms which re-present possible pasts, presents, and futures. Thus each chapter in this study tracks the ironic charge of its featured narratives in order to clarify irony’s role in a specifically feminist epistemological project. From the beginning, of course, women had something to say about that. Recognizing the interests of the novel’s insistence on realism as its primary mode, women writers intervened early on, exploring, for instance, gothic modes that disrupted realism’s generic stranglehold. They told precocious tales of monstrous births – one of which stands, still, as a signal event in the history of speculative and science fictions. The nonsense they represented was figured, famously, as madness: the madwoman in the attic who raged her way into early feminist texts and literary criticism, and who lives on in modern and contemporary feminist literature. Monstrous women, however, must evolve as well, if they are to generate any “new woman,” or any narrative, novel or otherwise, not similarly de-formed but rather *informed* by a Janus-like duplicity.

“The chance of escaping the same”²⁴ has long shaped the motive driving modern feminist criticism of utopian, science, and speculative fiction; Jeanette Winterson’s brilliant 2007 science fiction novel, *The Stone Gods*, represents only the most spectacular of recent feminist utopian speculations on that theme. This novel is driven by the urgency of having a “second chance,” “begin[ning] again,” and having “the chance to be human.” The “capacity to affect the outcome” in a world that is “neither random nor determined” (181) can open up novel connections and correspondences via what Winterson calls “bridges of time.” Connecting the familiar and unfamiliar recontextualizes both in ways that are not likely to be, as it were, commonsensical. These ways may even appear nonsensical to the “unimaginative” reader, as several of these texts acknowledge.

But this study insists on a specifically feminist motive for the possibility that revisioning is more than self-replication or parody. Narratologically, therefore, the sense of the ending in these texts is not oriented by the resolution of familiar, happy endings. Rather, they are reoriented entanglements of the real, the imaginary, the possible, and the potential, under such tension that the very frame of the text has to bend, or fold, or extend, or even suspend.

SPECULATING ON THE WORK OF STANDPOINT

The notion of imagination's "narrative task" is rich in implication, not least in its proposal of an active relationship between narrative self and other, although it presumes that each is actually listening to the other. Kearney will speak of fidelity to the other, or "commitment," but how do we account for this relationship? Similarly, Su problematizes what and how the imagination helps us *know*, as well as envision. Both Kearney and Su logically base their claims on a notion of sympathy that will always require the faculty of the imagination, as the nineteenth-century Romantics well knew. Su cites feminist epistemologists (he names Linda Alcoff, Donna Haraway, and Sandra Harding) as giving him his lead in theorizing an epistemology that recuperates imagination as knowledge, and "address[es] questions of knowledge with respect to subjects who are located in history rather than universalized."²⁵ This nod toward feminist contributions to his epistemology of imagination is left undeveloped, however.

For my analysis of a specifically feminist utopian consciousness, achieved in and through contemporary speculative fiction, this contribution needs to be outlined more fully. Feminist epistemology enables us to extend the traditional notion of knowledge (and the faculty we privilege as the "source" of knowledge), and also the notion of utopia. In this context, the work of Donna Haraway has been central, as she asserts that acknowledging one's standpoint "mean[s] specificity and consequential, if sometimes painful structures of accountability to each other and to the worldly hope for freedom and justice."²⁶ These "structures of accountability" are crucial to the emergent nature of a feminist utopian consciousness and a speculative standpoint within feminist speculative narratives. Each of these texts is a structuring of accountability. As such, the meta-narrative of feminist utopian and speculative literature will always "be about" disjunction and desire, and especially about the confusion of reality and fantasy.

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This confusion, of course, we already know. The “perfect knower,” as feminist epistemologists have called him, has covered over this confusion. The traditional “modest witness” is Haraway’s term for the exemplary philosopher who uncritically regards his understanding of reality as absolutely objective and neutral. He is “modest” because he does not regard the claims he makes for reality as constructions, but “simply” a reporting of what is there, and true. In so asserting, this knower places himself in “the [transcendent] culture of no culture”²⁷ – a “god-trick,” according to Haraway, which allows him to regard his description of the world as unified and natural. This is, however, nothing more than self-regard. In her essay “Postmodernism and Political Change,” epistemologist Nancy Hartsock outlines the challenge to our inherited “faith in universal reason,” which postmodernist philosophers – particularly Foucault, Derrida, Rorty, and Lyotard – have mounted. But she goes on to uncover the ways in which some of these theorists end up “recapitulat[ing] the effects of Enlightenment theories that deny the right of some to participate in defining the terms of interaction.”²⁸ In other words, she argues, these theorists conserve the premises of what Lorraine Code calls the “monologic, self-interested enterprise”²⁹ undertaken by the disengaged nowhere-man, who does not recognize his own biases and exclusions.

Hartsock and Haraway thus challenge this accounting of “the world” as described by the so-called objective man of science, who conditions the very “nature” of our world. Haraway will spotlight this figure as “the witness whose account mirrors reality – [who] must be invisible, that is, an inhabitant of the potent ‘unmarked category,’ which is constructed by the extraordinary conventions of self-invisibility.”³⁰ These conventions condition our culture with “all the authority, but none of the considerable problems, of transcendental truth. This self-invisibility is the specifically modern, European, masculine, scientific form of the virtue of modesty” – and it is “one of the founding virtues of what we call modernity.”³¹ It is also a false speculation on the nature of “virtue” – and on the particular utopian foundation on which that virtue is constructed.

The perfect knower, we have seen, is typically described as being “nowhere,” and regards himself as being also “everywhere.” In putting it this way, it is impossible not to think of the association with the original “Utopia,” or No-Place. Originally troped as an island, utopia is located far from our own fallen lands, and its borders are characteristically and vigorously protected. Ever since that first sighting and siting, the feminist project has been to vex those borders, by way of reclaiming a land inhospitable to “others.” Toni Morrison observes that utopia is as much about

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who is excluded from it as it is about who is included. This is the crux of the utopian dilemma for feminism: accommodation of the other, and the connections between epistemology, community, and utopia. Feminist standpoint theory proposes that the observer acknowledges her locatedness, and the situatedness of knowledge produced by “located practices at all levels.”³² Haraway’s presentation of the weak, modest witness makes visible the false modesty of the invisible “we” who define the world from a standpoint grounded in a particular ideology that regards itself as self-evidently “virtuous” (a word etymologically coded as masculine, anyway),³³ but that can only be defended with violence.

The account that the “perfect knower” offers is not objective, nor transcendent, but riddled with subjective distortions. Two of these distortions are critical to the feminist project taken up in this book. First, these distortions lead to what Haraway calls “a separation of the technical and the political,” and a disavowal of the “sociotechnical relations among humans and between humans and nonhumans that generate both objects and value.”³⁴ A perfect knower does not see the seams and joints of his own constructions, or the political/ideological motives driving his production of knowledge. This knowledge production is itself a form of elaborate fetishizing of the abstract as concrete, avoiding analysis of “a cascading series of self-invisible displacements, denied tropes, reified relationships.”³⁵ That process of displacement leads to a second distortion. The “objective” and “elaborate” account leads to a devaluation of the body, even though the body indicates where we are situated. These types of divisions and diversions are of a piece with the deeply masculinist ideologies with which we are familiar: “female modesty was of the body; the new masculine virtue had to be of the mind.”³⁶ This devaluation of the body and/as femaleness has been, to say the least, a radical source of political crisis for women.

Rosi Braidotti, like Donna Haraway regardless of their allegiances to different philosophical traditions, reminds us that “central to [a feminist] project ... is the need to detach the female feminist subject – that is to say real-life women as agents and empirical subjects – from the representation of Woman as the fantasy of a male imagination. The struggle is therefore over imaging and naming; it is about whose representations will prevail.”³⁷ That detachment is major surgery, as it were, that is painful to both subjects. In representing or “staging” that operation of detachment, we can see the kind of connective tissue, much of it scarred, that binds “real-life women” to fantasy images. We might see, given the female subject’s freedom from ideological binds, new conceptions of woman, man,