POSTMODERN UTOPIAS AND FEMINIST FICTIONS

This study examines feminist speculative fiction from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and finds within it a new vision for the future. Rejecting notions of postmodern utopia as exclusionary, Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor advances one defined in terms of hospitality, casting what she calls "imaginative sympathy" as the foundation of utopian desire. Tracing these themes through the works of a dozen fiction writers, including Margaret Atwood, Octavia Butler, Doris Lessing, Susan Sontag, and Jeanette Winterson, as well as those of well-known Muslim feminists such as Nawal El Saadawi, Shahrnush Parsipur, and Fatima Mernissi, Wagner-Lawlor balances literary analysis with innovative extensions of feminist philosophy to show how inclusionary utopian thinking can inform and promote political agency. Examining these contemporary fictions reveals the rewards of attending to a community that acknowledges difference, diversity, and the imaginative potential of every human being.

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For Len and Jonathan and to the memory of my mother,
Barbara Jane Wagner (1927–2012)

Contents

Preface

In an interview following the publication of *Paradise* (1998), Toni Morrison observed that "all paradises, all utopias," whether envisioned in literature, history, or holy books, "are designed by who is not there, by the people who are not allowed in."[1] *Paradise* is an extended meditation on exactly this observation, and "what on earth" a utopia would look like if that were not the case. In so identifying this aspect – she does not say "flaw" – of any representation of utopia, Morrison indicates the starting point of this study.

Postmodern Utopias and Feminist Fictions advances the following proposition in response to Morrison's dilemma: that postmodern utopia be conceived in terms of an absolute and therefore open-ended hospitality. The logic of exceptionalism that characterizes "all utopias" derives from an assumption that absolute hospitality is impossible. But the evidence of contemporary speculative fictions suggests the emergence of an alternate utopian logic, deriving not from *Logos*, but from *Eros*. Crucial philosophical implications emerge through and from this shift, and I come at this proposition from the philosophical angle first. But in contemporary fiction fully aware of its lineage in literary utopia and speculation, a radical shift from *Logos* to *Eros* has critical narratological and hermeneutic effects. These effects will mean tracing the entanglements of desire in the forms and figures, even the "function," of each text, as each author speculates on those that might accommodate, even welcome and celebrate, alterity.

It is no accident that an alternative conception of utopia should be derived from a feminist standpoint. The history of utopian and speculative narratives written by women is just one expression of feminist resistance – but it is exemplary. Feminist fictions confront not only the ways in which women's alterity has been and continues to be defined. They also confront ways in which specific communities – and even the very notion of community – do or do not integrate, or permit, others within their

boundaries. A feminist standpoint must stake not only ontological but epistemological claims. Within the context of women's fiction-writing, this necessary intervention also means a narratological inventiveness.

Postmodern Utopias and Feminist Fictions begins therefore by introducing a figure who can advance those claims. Extending well-known feminist epistemological positions, I introduce the notion of a *speculative standpoint* and/as the figuring of a feminist traveler who stands there. A speculative standpoint signifies not only the "as is" (*speculum*), or the making visible of reality "more objectively," as a feminist standpoint proposes. Speculative standpoint also aspires to make visible the "as if," the projecting out or performance (*spectacle*) of possibility. These possibilities are different from what utopia theorists have called seeds of prediction; they are more like catalysts that capture the urgency of aspirations. One more sense of the word "speculative" adheres in this context: the sense of speculation as *risk*, which comes with the recognition of unpredictable, unseen, or unacknowledged possible futures. The agent of such risk is a speculator, and *Postmodern Utopias and Feminist Fictions* features the critical role of the speculative hero in disrupting what and how we "come to know" what we do.

Like her philosophical sister, the "scandalous witness" introduced by Donna Haraway, the speculative hero/ine's narrative is shaped from the standpoint of approaching *other* ways of knowing and other "ways of being nowhere."[2] The feminist speculator flees the nowhere that is everywhere, a universe of false objectivity created by a consciousness Haraway calls "the perfect knower," who is blind to the fantasy behind his own utopian constructions. The epistemology of that perfect knower is grounded in a particular form of rationality; his position is a privileged place. In contrast, the epistemology of the speculative knower is grounded in her acknowledged situatedness. But the imagination bears its own (inter)relational logic and extends its way of knowing to others. While "his" truths come from experiment, "hers" come from (situated *and* artistic) experience.

The role of art as the essential and ethical form of utopian work runs, therefore, through the entirety of *Postmodern Utopias and Feminist Fictions*. Readings of these texts reflect on the nature of each fiction's own form and genre, as well as on figures of those unforeseen conceptions and apprehensions of utopia itself. These figures introduce new subjectivities, new histories, new ways of being, new political economies. Other figures of alterity/alternatives are narratological. The achievement of speculation is often signaled by the apparition of a shifting "portal" (in Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber*, or Morrison's *Paradise*), or a staircase guiding "footsteps

on the air" (in LeGuin's *The Telling*). These are quite evidently invitations to connect multiple ways of apprehension, of knowing, and of being. They connect alternative dimensions of reality, sometimes temporally parallel, sometimes not. Like Wordsworth's transitory spots of time, these moments may not always look benign. But for those who attend to such moments, these epiphanies urge the possibility that utopia is not achieved, and never achieved: the epiphany is that the utopian horizon is always shifting. The imagination always goes further. The "achievement" of a speculative standpoint, therefore, is to apprehend that epiphanic moment and hold it open long enough to describe what, where, how it is.

And of course, this is what art is best at. Susan Sontag argued that novels educate our feelings and our sensibilities, our attentiveness not only to ourselves but especially to others, "the larger world, and [break] out of the confines of narcissism and solipsism."[3] Asserting the priority of *imaginative sympathy* as the true north guiding her journey in art and literature, she argues that the work of art must be "an extension of my sympathies to other selves, other domains, other dreams, other words [*sic*; for "worlds"?], other territories."[4] Sontag describes an ethical turn that does not contain or immobilize. Art's ethical turn, on the contrary, always opens out, leads us away from ourselves, educates us in the ways of the world so that we return home "other" than we were. Without that turn, the future threatens to be "the same old story," a history based on what we already know, making room only for persons, ideas, and aspirations already familiar to us.

Thus, in addition to hospitality and art, a major theme in this study is, inevitably, history. Any instantiation of utopia draws from the archives of history as it tries to conceive a "not-yet" in a better time or place. But in keeping with a notion of utopia as erotic, these texts typically try to recover and interpret what Jeanette Winterson calls "archives of the heart." One set of archives will tell us "what happened"; but the archives of the heart give much more information about why it happened, what it was "like," and what the sufferings and celebrations of people around the same history have to do with what happens next. Imagination is critical to writing, and living, a history that does not retell the same story. Imagination too must be accommodated. "*There must be room for the imagination to exercise its powers*," observes William Godwin, in an essay appropriately titled "Of Love and Friendship":

> we must conceive and apprehend a thousand things which we do not actually witness; each party must feel that it stands in need of the other, and without the other cannot be complete; each party must be alike conscious of the power of receiving and conferring benefit; and *there must be the anticipation of a distant*

future, that may every day enhance the good to be imparted and enjoyed, and cause the individuals thus united perpetually to become more sensible of the fortunate event which gave them to each other, and has thus entailed upon each a thousand advantages in which they could otherwise never have shared.[5]

There is a reason Godwin wrote political philosophy in the form of novels, and not just in treatises.

The concrete political implications of accommodating the imagination is explored most explicitly in the final section of the book (Chapters 4 and 5). Susan Sontag's *In America* portrays an immigrant's purposeful crafting of self and national identity aligned with the American myth of exceptionalism – betraying at once the strengths and weaknesses offered by this country's own aspirations. Sontag's novel of American utopianism leaves open the incompatibilities it exposes. Perhaps the irresolution is intentional, as it remains an open wound. But this irresolute stance is corrected in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, which exposes the crafty bigotry adhering to any vision of America that demands partisan compliance (along racial and gender lines, in this case) to exceptionalist visions of community. *Paradise*'s offering of an erotic utopianism holds out a vision of hospitality supported by an economy of the human body, presenting the potential (though not yet, of course, the reality) of a truer version of America's democratic ideals and utopian promise.

This leads to the book's final turn toward a group of novels in which feminist utopian consciousness (or speculative standpoint), hospitality, and nationalism are considered from another "outsider perspective." In proposing a utopian hospitality confronting the "the strange that I am beginning to love,"[6] we face the question: Can a vision of humility and hospitality, even supposing it is achieved within one's borders, extend beyond a community or nation's borders? If we discover, as Octavia Butler's Lauren does, that our teachers are all around us, what lessons await from "others," not just inside our borders, but outside?

Indeed, it seems imperative to close this study on postmodern utopianism and/as feminist hospitality by reflecting back on ourselves. The final chapter therefore takes up the implied imperative: that we contest a contemporary Western rhetoric celebrating the "global community" while vigorously protecting its national interests and alliances, rather than seeking a standpoint toward others that is generous, humble, "accommodating" in a way that engages the other rather than merely tolerating her. There are also implications for thinking about global feminism and the kinds of affiliations it can or does propose. The Muslim feminist writers featured in Chapter 5 seem to offer visions of hospitality remarkably in

line with previously sketched utopian visions in earlier chapters. But the distinct cultural genealogy of Eastern notions of hospitality *as an enactment of utopian consciousness* is a critical advance that is frankly more robust. A feminist vision of utopia-as-hospitality resonates powerfully and differently in these narratives, as analysis of the rhetorical and structural tropes and figures will show. While every text included in *Postmodern Utopias and Feminist Fictions* stages a representation of women's aspirational motives, what differs in these last narratives is an insistence on "spelling out" conflicting motives and strategies of domination, on either side. These women are more explicit about the requirement that these aspirations and visions be voiced, re-presenting them outside of fantasy. Thus once again, the power of art's mediation of feminist social and political dreams is held up: the work of art is a form of political agency, and all the more so in its dissemination or dispersal.

Like Morrison's *Paradise*, these novels imagine the evolution of a feminist vision of hospitality that takes in a stranger "as she is" (Parsipur). But the voicing of this imperative – that the imagination must "go further" (El Saadawi) – is more forcefully avowed. This may be because of the persistent cultural celebrity of a complex female legend, Scheherazade, who uses storytelling, and particularly the art of suspense, to hold time at bay and hold a mirror up to the "the strange within." Cultivating both feeling and ethical sensibility, Scheherezade reflects back to her royal auditor and tormentor the deeply distorted form of personal justice enacted by a serial "invitation" to marriage, to be consummated by each woman's death. Scheherazade's own invitation to *see yourself in your world as "other" than you "know" yourself to be* means recovering not only the humanity of the Sultan personally, but the very possibility of a generation of the future.

Margaret Atwood has lamented in post-9/11 interviews how easily we hand over our own political freedoms, and violate those of others, in the face of such inchoate enemies as "Islamic extremists"; how quickly we harden our vision of the world against the other; and how insistently and ruthlessly we protect ourselves within the walls, literal and metaphorical, that we imagine will ensure our safety. The contemporary risks of our global community – the purposeful violences of intolerance and ignorance on the one hand, and of environmental disregard on the other – appear in many of the novels treated here. While we find positive figures for a new generation of human being we are consistently warned against being "doomed by hope," as Atwood's Crake puts it, that there is always something *more and better*. If the story of acquisition and domination leads us to our own doom, the fault, Atwood grimly proposes, will be our

own. The "privilege" of ignorance can easily betray us without the kind of anticipatory work that speculative art offers, and the ethical circumspection that imaginative sympathy demands.

"*What* are *our saving graces*?" Margaret Atwood once asked in an interview. In the study that follows, some of our best contemporary writers propose an answer.

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