

**“A COMPLEX AND DELICATE WEB”:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SELECTED
SPECULATIVE NOVELS BY MARGARET
ATWOOD, URSULA K. LE GUIN, DORIS
LESSING AND MARGE PIERCY**

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Abstract

This thesis examines selected speculative novels by Margaret Atwood, Ursula K. Le Guin, Doris Lessing and Marge Piercy. It argues that a specifiable ecological ethic can be traced in their work – an ethic which is explored by them through the tensions between utopian and dystopian discourses. The first part of the thesis begins by theorising the concept of an ecological ethic of respect for the Other through current ecological philosophies, such as those developed by Val Plumwood. Thereafter, it contextualises the novels within the broader field of science fiction, and speculative fiction in particular, arguing that the shift from a critical utopian to a critical dystopian style evinces their changing treatment of this ecological ethic within their work. The remainder of the thesis is divided into two parts, each providing close readings of chosen novels in the light of this argument. Part Two provides a reading of Le Guin’s early Hainish novels, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Word for World is Forest* and *The Dispossessed*, followed by an examination of Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Lessing’s *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five*, and Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The third, and final, part of the thesis consists of individual chapters analysing the later speculative novels of each author. Piercy’s *He, She and It*, Le Guin’s *The Telling*, and Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* are all scrutinised, as are Lessing’s two recent ‘Ifrik’ novels. This thesis shows, then, that speculative fiction is able to realise through fiction many of the ideals of ecological thinkers. Furthermore, the increasing dystopianism of these novels reflects the greater urgency with which the problem of Othering needs to be addressed in the light of the present global ecological crisis.

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*To live, that is to say, with thoughtfulness and with an attentiveness,
an attunement to both words and the world, and so to acknowledge
that, although we make sense of things by way of words, we do not
live apart from the world. For culture and environment are held
together in a complex and delicate web.*

– Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth*. (23)

Introduction:

Ecology and Speculations on the Other

We are subjects, and whoever among us treats us as objects is acting inhumanly, wrongly, against nature. And with us, nature, the great Object, its tirelessly burning suns, its turning galaxies and planets, its rocks, seas, fish and ferns and fir trees and little furry animals, all have become, also, subjects. As we are part of them, so they are part of us. Bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh. We are their consciousness. If we stop looking, the world goes blind. If we cease to speak and listen, the world goes deaf and dumb. If we stop thinking, there is no thought. If we destroy ourselves, we destroy consciousness.

– Ursula K. Le Guin, “Science Fiction and Mrs Brown.” (100)

Floods. Hurricanes. Tsunamis. Long, parching, bitter droughts. The weather has become more than a peripheral report, it has become news in its own right. More and more frequently climate change has become a matter of public awareness and political contention, as the Kyoto Protocol bears testament.¹ Even ten years ago, would the Nobel Peace Prize have been awarded to environmental activists like Wangari Maathai (in 2004) or former US Vice President Al Gore and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (in 2007)? Gore’s 2006 film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, has been followed by others: famous stars like Leonardo DiCaprio and Queen Latifah have lent their names to ‘green’ issues in films like *The 11th Hour* (2007) and *Arctic Tale* (2007). Similarly, the world-wide “Live Earth” concerts on the seventh of July 2007 brought together a wide variety of international musicians in order to highlight the enormous impact humans have on the natural world. The media tell us how to “Go Green” at the office (Forster 77), what products to use to “green spring clean” our homes (“How To” 128), give us the lay-person’s guide to climate change (Harper 36), and suggest easy “lifestyle changes” to decrease the burden humans place on earth (Seton-Smith 40-44). More bizarrely, magazine covers declaim: “The New Eco Chic” (*Elle* May 2007), and “Shop to Heal the World” (*Woman and Home* July 2007). Even the *London Review of Books* has recently devoted a full-length article to ecological damage and global warming (Lanchester 3, 5-9). Ecology, it seems, is science, news, entertainment and popular culture.

Yet, the use of ‘ecology’ in such a plethora of contexts begs the question: what does ecology really mean, and what has it come to symbolise? In its original sense, ecology refers to the science of the same name, characterised by the study of ecosystems or the interaction between biotic and abiotic organisms. In the wider academic milieu and

¹ See Flannery (223-231) for an overview of the complex ramifications of the Kyoto Protocol.

popular culture in general, however, it refers also to philosophies derived from notions of ecology and, sometimes, to environmentalism. In shortened form, ‘eco’ often refers to anything relating to the ‘natural’ world. Within the English academy, for example, ecocriticism has come to mean anything from the study of nature writing to a variety of critical perspectives linked together by their interest in the relationships between humans and non-human organisms, and how these connections are elucidated in literary texts. Ecology, then, has come both to represent the natural world and to signify the idea of interaction.

In this thesis I engage with ecology less as a scientific concept and more as an expression of a certain kind of philosophy or mode of conduct. An ecological ethic, as I argue in the pages to come, is a type of behaviour characterised by mutual interrelationships and respect for difference. The concept of the ‘Other’ (derived from Hegel) is vital to an understanding of these relationships. The Other, here, maintains its definition as that which is different from the Self, but, rather than treating the Other as inferior to the Self, an ecological ethic sees value in diversity and encourages responsible and considerate relationships with the Other.² Margaret Atwood, Ursula K. Le Guin, Doris Lessing and Marge Piercy all confront the problem of Othering in their work, and this kind of ecological ethic is a useful way to describe their utopian desires and dystopian fears, as inscribed in their speculative fiction specifically.

Speculative novels by women such as Atwood, Lessing, Piercy and Le Guin have been the focus of increasing critical attention since the 1980s, although this has mainly been from the perspective of feminist studies. Feminist science fiction as a whole has been theorised by critics such as Marleen Barr, Sarah Lefanu, Helen Merrick and Jenny Wolmark. They, amongst others, have noted that since the 1960s, the emergence of several female science fiction writers, who were interested in expressing ideas emerging out of the feminist movement, created a generic group that was easily identifiable against the backdrop of the classically white male SF field.³ Significantly, the feminist aims of these authors have been seen as leading to the re-emergence of utopian thinking within science fiction, as many of them use their fiction to imagine idealised worlds and societies without gender inequalities. In this thesis, I contend that the chosen science fictional novels produced by Le Guin, Piercy, Lessing and Atwood are not only examples of feminist

² This is dealt with in more detail below, from page 20 onwards.

³ Throughout this thesis I use SF interchangeably with, and to stand for, science fiction. SF does not, however, indicate speculative fiction.

speculations, but also address wider issues of discrimination based on race, class and species. Since the rise of the counter-culture movements of the 1960s, the prejudice against and abuse of women, 'minority' race groups, working-class people and the environment have been highlighted by many authors, as feminist, postcolonial and Marxist literary criticisms, and more recently, ecocriticism, have shown. While all of the texts under discussion in this thesis can (and often have been) fruitfully be assessed as feminist science fiction, the examination of these additional forms of Othering in their texts lends these novels to a more inclusive form of analysis: the web-like connections between different types of Othering are embodied in the word ecology.

My methodology, then, is chosen as a result of the discernable interests of the authors concerned: assessing the texts from the perspective of an ecological ethic allows me to trace not only the connections between the different types of Othering scrutinised by the authors, but also how these are expressed. In our world, perfect relationships of mutual understanding and respect for difference are, as yet, utopian; while they may be hoped for, they exist only in 'no place'. Speculative fiction, as a particular brand of science fiction which engages with utopian and dystopian discourses, is one way in which writers can imagine a world that actually functions without Othering. Similarly, they can use dystopian narratives to extrapolate from, and to critique, current society via envisaging a world characterised by even greater hierarchies of worth based on the exclusion and exploitation of people regarded as Other by those in power. It is the power of *imagination* which gives energy to the ideas of these authors; character and plot breathe life into the scenarios they depict and allow them not only to show what the world could look like tomorrow, but to question the very ideals on which their visions are based.

There are a number of science fiction authors whose texts could, to a greater or lesser extent, provide evidence of an adherence to an ecological ethic – Samuel Delany, Octavia Butler, Joan Slonczewski, Kim Stanley Robinson, Sheri Tepper and Karen Traviss, for example. I have, however, tried to choose authors who are both sufficiently similar to provide a useful point of comparison and different enough to provide contrast. Both Ursula Le Guin and Marge Piercy are American writers, whereas Margaret Atwood and Doris Lessing write from outside the borders of the United States: Atwood from Canada and Lessing from England. Both the latter, however, are writing out of a postcolonial position: Lessing is an African writer by virtue of the extensive influence of her years spent in the colonial state of Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. Le Guin, on the other hand, is the only writer known more for her science fiction than her other writing; the other three authors are better

known for their more ‘mainstream’ realist fiction. All four, however, are born in the twenty years between the two World Wars, and thus come roughly from the same generation. Perhaps more importantly, they all follow a similar pattern in their writing: their initial use of speculative fiction to address the problem of Othering has only been followed up in recent years and the gap, in each instance, divides their earlier optimistic search for a perfect society from a more pessimistic extrapolation of how current society could develop. The idea of what I am calling an ecological ethic is intrinsic to both their early and their late speculative novels, although their recent texts are more tentative and questioning of such an ethic than the earlier ones. It is this shift in thinking, discernable in all four authors’ speculative novels, which makes a comparison between them particularly illuminating and hints at the sense of a new *fin de siècle* centred on the millennium.

Ursula Kroeber Le Guin is one of the most well-known authors in science fiction circles. She was born in 1929 and began publishing SF in the 1960s. Her early science fiction was mostly set in her fictional Hainish universe, although she is as famous for her fantasy as her science fiction. She has also written novels set on the west coast of the United States and in a fictional central European country, Orsinia. Although Le Guin’s fiction includes other science fictional works, the full-length novels of the Ekumen, those set in the Hainish universe, were published between 1966 and 1974, leading many to assume that her interest in the Ekumen had waned. Although she did return to the Hainish universe in a number of short stories and in the four short novellas published as *Four Ways to Forgiveness* in 1995, she unexpectedly produced another full-length Hainish novel in 2000, *The Telling*. It is for this reason that I have not covered Le Guin’s other work in this thesis: environmental and feminist issues are clearly important in almost all her work,⁴ particularly *Always Coming Home*, but the specific mode of speculation in the novels centred on the Ekumen speaks to a certain kind of ecological thinking – one that seems to find a metaphorical expression of non-hierarchical interrelationships through interplanetary dynamics. Like the other authors I have chosen to study in this thesis, it also seemed particularly significant to me that this return to her very first kind of science fiction happened at the dawn of the new millennium: this time of anticipation and dread might have been what sparked Le Guin to revisit an earlier mode of writing.

Doris Lessing was awarded the 2007 Nobel Prize for Literature for her remarkable contribution to English letters. Although she is more famous for her realist work and

⁴ See, for example, Susan Palwick’s 2004 article on ecological awareness in Le Guin’s *Earthsea Trilogy*.

particularly *The Golden Notebook*, seen as a ground-breaking novel by the feminist movement, the influence of science fiction on her writing has been relatively widespread. Born in Persia (Iran) in 1919, Lessing was raised on a farm in Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia), and although she has resided in London since 1949, she has always maintained contact with her homeland in southern Africa. Her novels evolved from her solidly realist *The Grass is Singing* (1950), set in colonial Rhodesia, into an increasingly science fictional mode. Her *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971) and *Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974) have been seen as the first indications of this shift, yet her overtly science-fictional Canopus in Argos series, published between 1979 and 1983, still shocked her traditional readership. As a whole, the series is very uneven – it is turgid and polemical in many parts – but the second novel, *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five* (1980) is of particular interest for this thesis. This novel, which fits awkwardly into the over-arching structure of the series, speaks very clearly to the kind of feminist speculative fiction emerging in the decade prior to its publication, and is certainly the most interesting from the point of view of ecological philosophy. Lessing has continued to publish regularly since the 1980s, but it was only in 1999 that she revisited the realms of science fiction with the first of her two Ifrik novels, *Mara and Dann*. Followed by *The Story of General Dann and Mara's Daughter, Griot and the Snow Dog* in 2005, both novels mark a return to, and extension of, the ecological emphasis conceived in *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five*.

Like Lessing, Marge Piercy has been seen as an intensely political and feminist writer. Born in 1936, she has published since the 1960s and has made two forays into the science fictional mode with a break of fifteen years between the two periods. Although Piercy's *Dance the Eagle to Sleep* (1970) is speculative from the point of view of the political questions it asks, her *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) is one of the major novels of the feminist science fiction domain of the seventies. Science fiction did not feature strongly in any of Piercy's other works until her extraordinary 1991 novel, *He, She and It* (*Body of Glass* in the UK). Where *Woman on the Edge of Time* is clearly a part of the feminist utopian movement typical of science fiction in the 1970s, *He, She and It* is the first of the novels dealt with in this thesis to be influenced by the next stage in the evolution of science fiction: cyberpunk. The kind of ecological philosophies which underpin the earlier novel re-emerge against a much altered and highly technological backdrop in *He, She and It*.

The increasing prominence of technology can also be traced in Margaret Atwood's speculative fiction. Atwood was born in 1939, started publishing in the 1960s, and has

primarily been seen as a feminist and postcolonial writer. Her first science fiction novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, was published in 1985; it was almost twenty years before her second, *Oryx and Crake*, was published in 2003. Entering the science fiction field much later than the other authors examined here, Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* marks the end of the early period of speculative literature under analysis, and is notable for its pessimism compared to the utopian writing of feminist science fiction in the late 1960s and 1970s. Atwood's interest in environmental issues, apparent from her earliest novels and poetry, is given a new edge in *Oryx and Crake*, which returns to the ideas of her earlier speculative novel but uses information technology and biotechnology in order to question the viability of an ecological ethic in a world increasingly suffering from the effects of environmental degradation.

While it is clear that these four women provide much scope for comparison, like any written text, this thesis reflects the particular context of its author: I write as a South African woman, fascinated by responses to difference and otherness I have seen emerging in post-Apartheid society. I write, too, as a human living in an environment which, in its dramatic intensity, has a significant effect on my day-to-day life. Perhaps it is my urgent desire to avoid living in the kinds of futures envisaged by Piercy, Le Guin, Atwood and Lessing in their more recent speculations which has sparked off my enquiry into the lessons these women have to teach. Although I am thus aware that my background predisposes me to emphasise certain aspects of the texts under scrutiny, it is my hope that my reading of these novels through the concept of an ecological ethic can still in some way contribute to current ecological and literary debates.

The first part of this thesis, then, addresses both the theory and context of the research. In the first chapter, I outline the argument of the thesis as a whole, addressing how 'ecology' has been used both as a literary theory and a philosophical standpoint. My specific aim in this section is to produce a clear outline of what I mean by an 'ecological ethic' and illustrate how philosophers such as Val Plumwood provide a useful way in which to assess the ecological thinking present in the chosen novels. The second chapter places the novels in the context of extant research in the field of science fiction and delineates the shifts in speculative fiction between the 1960s and the present – the time period covered by the novels examined. This chapter introduces the second part of my argument, which proposes that the utopian impulse found in the early novels swings towards a more dystopian vision in their more recent works, all of which were published around the millennium.

The second part of the thesis covers the early work of the four authors under examination. In their earliest speculations, Atwood, Lessing, Le Guin and Piercy show a tendency to imagine a utopian world that conforms to an ecological ethic of mutual respect for the Other. Most often they try to create a world or society that conforms to the ideals of balance and harmony – usually between humans and the environment, but also between men and women, as well as between people of different races, cultures or classes. In most instances, their utopian desires are frustrated and their novels show an inclination towards dystopia. I am interested in tracing this movement from utopian desire to dystopian reality.

I begin in Chapter Three by using Le Guin as a case study, examining in detail the increasing pessimism towards the idea of utopia demonstrated between the publication of *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), *The Word for World is Forest* (1972) and *The Dispossessed* (1974). The fourth chapter suggests that the trajectory traceable in Le Guin's earlier Hainish novels is similar to the increasing sense of unease over blueprint ecological utopias displayed in the evolution of ideas from Piercy's *The Woman on the Edge of Time* (1979), to Lessing's *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five* (1980), and finally to Atwood's classical dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985).

The third part of the thesis assesses how the increasingly dystopian slant to their early novels turns, in their more recent work, to a greater questioning of the values and ideas behind ecological thinking. In their later novels, the authors are less interested in providing answers (blueprints for an ideal future based on principles of mutuality and respect), and more interested in asking what an ecological ethic can tell us about the way we currently live, and what this might mean for our future on this planet. Each chapter in this section concentrates on a detailed reading of the novels under examination, indicating the ways in which the authors' ecological philosophies mature as they begin to question the relationship between human nature and Othering. Chapter Five provides an analysis of Piercy's *He, She and It* (1991); Chapter Six of Le Guin's *The Telling* (2000); and Chapter Seven of Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003). The final chapter of the thesis examines Lessing's two Ifrik novels, *Mara and Dann* (1999) and *The Story of General Dann and Mara's Daughter, Griot and the Snow Dog* (2005). While all the later novels could be seen as critical dystopias, the utopian impulse contained within each dystopian society becomes increasingly compromised in the years beyond 2000, suggesting that the desire for an ideal society has become both more urgent and at the same time, a dream that is less likely to be fulfilled.

The thesis as a whole, then, attempts a complex and delicate interweaving of different novels, how they construct and deconstruct the idea of an ecological ethic, and how they thereby suggest the intricate relationship between utopia and dystopia.

Part One

Theory

and

Context

Chapter 1

Ecology, Literature and the Identification of an Ecological Ethic

Specifically, I am going to experiment with the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for a human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world we all live in of anything that I have studied in recent years.

– William Rueckert, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." (107)

In the introduction to this thesis I suggest that a number of speculative novels produced by Ursula Le Guin, Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood and Marge Piercy illustrate a particular concern with what I term 'an ecological ethic'. This phrase, however, demands elucidation: ecology itself is a word capable of multiple understandings which are only complicated further when used in conjunction with literary theories and ways of thinking about nature and culture. This chapter, therefore, is an attempt to examine how ecology has been used within a variety of philosophical standpoints and what the strengths and weaknesses of these are. More importantly, as this thesis argues that it is a specific type of value system based on ideas taken from ecology that informs the novels examined within its pages, this chapter outlines what is meant by an ecological ethic. I derive this mainly from arguments presented by ecological philosophers such as Val Plumwood and Carolyn Merchant, and its purpose is to incorporate ideas taken from ecology, ethics, literary theory and science into one concept.

Literature and Ecology

The notion of ecology has been increasingly integrated into literary studies over the last two decades. The term ecology was coined by Ernest Haeckel in 1866 and is defined as "the scientific study of the interactions between organisms and their environment" or the "'home life' of living organisms" (Begon, Harper and Townsend x), or as Eugene Odum puts it, the home lives of "the plants, animals, microbes, and people that live together as interdependent beings on Spaceship Earth" (23). Over time, however, ecology has become more than a scientific study; it has become part of everyday parlance, and is particularly associated with environmental activism's project to show how human activities can have a damaging impact upon the natural world.

The connections between literature and ecology were first made by Joseph Meeker and William Rueckert. Meeker's *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* was published in 1974 and is widely considered "the first book of explicitly ecological literary criticism" (Bate, *The Song* 180). Rueckert's 1978 essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" was the birthplace of the term ecocriticism: "I am going to experiment", he wrote, "with the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" (107). What this means in practice is often an individual matter and, as a result, definitions of ecocriticism are often quite generalised. Glotfelty argues that "ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii), and Bennett and Teague that it is "the study of the mutually constructing relationship between culture and environment" ("Urban Ecocriticism" 3). Love calls ecocriticism a "broadly based movement embracing literary-environmental interconnections" (1) and Garrard claims that ecocritics "generally tie their cultural analyses explicitly to a 'green' moral and political agenda" (3). Mazel is even more tentative, suggesting that no matter "how it is defined, ecocriticism seems less a singular approach or method than a constellation of approaches, having little more in common than a shared concern with the environment" (2). These definitions, however similar or different, assume that ecocriticism is a way to analyse literary texts from an ecological perspective in much the same way that feminist literary criticism, for instance, assesses literature through a feminist lens.

But what does it mean to analyse a text from an ecological perspective? Although many of the definitions make explicit a link between, on one hand, the human or cultural and, on the other, the non-human, natural or environmental, suggesting that ecocriticism is a way to explore the connections between the two, this has not necessarily been demonstrated in critical practice. Part of the problem is that ecocriticism is a relatively recent theoretical approach which has, to a large degree, grown out of an interest in nature writing from the USA. In its early years ecocriticism often became an elaborate label for a discussion of writing focusing on the natural world, although more recently there has been a move amongst ecocritics to reassess the scope of ecocriticism, broadening it to include more than just nature writing. This repositioning, which Lawrence Buell called second-wave ecocriticism in *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005), suggests that ecocriticism should also take into account "the interpenetration of metropolis and outback, of anthropocentric as well as biocentric concerns" (Buell 23).

What Buell recognised and labelled second-wave ecocriticism, was increasing attempts to redefine the range and significance of ecocriticism. In 2000, for example, Patrick D. Murphy suggested that a distinction needed to be made between ecocriticism, as “criticism that arises from and is oriented toward a concern with human and nonhuman interaction and interrelationship”, and nature-oriented literature (*Farther Afield* 1). Nature-oriented literature, he argued, is “limited to having either nonhuman nature itself as a subject, character, or major component of the setting, or to a text that says something about human-nonhuman interaction, human philosophies about nature, or the possibility of engaging nature by means of or in spite of human culture” (1). He continued by pointing out that ecocriticism does not have to focus on experiential nature-writing, or realist texts, but could include all literature, in any style or genre (28). Similarly, in their introduction to *Beyond Nature Writing* (2001), Kathleen Wallace and Karla Armbruster argued that

if ecocriticism limits itself to the study of one genre – the personal narratives of the Anglo-American nature writing tradition – or to one physical landscape – the ostensibly untrammelled American Wilderness – it risks seriously misrepresenting the significance of multiple natural and built environments to writers with other ethnic, national, or racial affiliations. If such limits are accepted, ecocritics risk ghettoizing ecocriticism within literary and culture studies generally. (7)

Wallace and Armbruster, in my view, still do not reach far enough in their vision of how ecocriticism can be used. While ecocriticism does and should concern itself with a variety of other issues, such as race, class and gender, its application to a variety of literary genres has the potential to increase the scope and relevance of ecocriticism as a literary method even further. To return to Murphy, therefore, I agree with his suggestion that one of the fields which could both benefit from ecocritical attention and amplify our understanding of ecocriticism itself, is eco-science fiction. Murphy has claimed that science fiction novels “are much like a thought experiment in that they place human beings in settings that foreground certain problems and dilemmas regarding human behaviour and awareness” (*Farther Afield* 38). This makes them in many ways ideally situated for a literary analysis that examines both inter-human and human/non-human interactions. I hope that this thesis begins to answer Murphy’s call for ecocritical practice to be applied to multiple modes of representation through its analysis of how selected speculative novels engage with the ecological philosophies outlined in this chapter.

Ecological Philosophies

The progression of ecocriticism from its first to its second wave suggests the extent to which ecocriticism has become a complex theoretical outlook – as does the growing interest in ecocriticism at academic institutions across the world.¹ Ironically, although all ecocritics have a vested interest in the same basic issues, the biotic and abiotic world, and specifically humanity's impact upon ecosystems, the ecological philosophies they follow are seriously divided. Deep ecology, social/Marxist ecology, environmental justice and ecofeminism provide a variety of analytical standpoints which have all influenced ecocriticism and propelled ecocriticism in different directions. It has become *de rigueur* for ecocritics to position themselves in one of these camps, using the basic tenets of their standpoint as a way into textual analysis. Each of these approaches to ecological philosophy has its individual merits, but at the same time, attempting to approach the novels examined here from any one standpoint is problematic: while any one of the philosophies associated with ecology goes some way toward explicating the novels, it is difficult to choose one particular stance without thus being forced to ignore other, equally important, aspects of the novels. My attempt to define an ecological ethic later in this chapter is a way to provide a balanced and relevant approach to the chosen texts, but first it will be useful to give a brief overview of these schools of ecological philosophy in order to clarify their individual strengths and weaknesses, and how they differ from one another.

Deep Ecology

Deep ecologists are generally seen as the most radical of environmentalists. The term 'deep ecology' was coined by Arne Naess in 1972 and is an expression of a desire to shift human thinking away from its anthropocentric bias towards an ecocentric vision, often based on notions taken from non-Western spiritual philosophies (Sessions, "Preface" xii-xxi). Naess's ideas were popularised in America mainly by George Sessions, and together Sessions and Naess described deep ecology's platform. This eight-point platform notes the intrinsic value of human and non-human life; the importance of diversity; the rejection of human exploitation of this richness and diversity; the need for a smaller human population; the rejection of human interference in the non-human world; the resultant need to change

¹ See the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment for further details (www.asle.umn.edu).

economic, technological and ideological policies; the need to appreciate quality of life over standard of living; and, finally, the obligation to try to implement the foregoing changes (Naess, “The Deep” 68). Although the Deep Ecology Platform appears prescriptive in its tone – particularly in the use of words like “must”, “will” and “obligation” – Naess follows this listing by asserting that individuals have the right to contribute their own ideas and by claiming that the eight points are not conclusive. While it does seem contradictory to create a set of ‘rules’ and then to claim that deep ecologists may have their own personal expression of their beliefs, Clark has pointed out that Naess himself had a deep “concern with minimizing antagonisms and engagement in open dialogue”, suggesting that it was the more closed conception of deep ecology developed by Sessions that advocated a more definitive understanding of the Eight Points (7).²

Nonetheless, as it has developed from Naess, deep ecology has become associated with a variety of ideas, most often encapsulated in the concept of ecocentrism. Fritjof Capra argues that a holistic attitude is fundamental to deep ecology, stating that an ecocentric approach “does not separate humans from the natural environment, nor does it separate anything else from it. It does not see the world as a collection of isolated objects but rather as a network of phenomena that are fundamentally interconnected and interdependent” (“Deep Ecology” 20). One way in which to ensure a more ecocentric society would be to decentralise and drastically reduce human populations. In an interview with Stephan Bodian, Naess claimed that “in more ecologically defensible societies, energy creation and energy sources would be decentralized and widely distributed, with small groups in local communities in control of their own resources” (Bodian 32). This would ensure that all parts of the ecosystem would have a greater chance of survival. Such decentralisation, however, would require a significant change in humanity’s perception of the natural world, which is why ecocentrism moves away from traditional mechanistic, progressive Western philosophy towards a more spiritual connection with the earth. This kind of spirituality entails, for the deep ecologist, a radical “change in human behaviour, attitudes, or institutions”, rather than the merely shallow or reformist approach to human activity characteristic of other environmental movements (Katz, Light and Rothenberg, “Introduction” ix). This shift in consciousness is often expressed as a quest for ‘Self-realisation’, where the self is recognised as part of the wider ecology of the planet – in

² Arran Gare has stated that Naess has “distanced himself from the more fervent views of Warwick Fox and George Sessions” (202).

other words, it necessitates an understanding of humanity's 'ecological selfhood' (Katz 25; Mathews 109). As Garrard points out, deep ecology opposes "almost the entirety of Western philosophy and religion" as it "identifies the dualistic separation of humans from nature promoted by Western philosophy and culture as the origin of environmental crisis, and demands a return to a monistic, primal identification of humans and the ecosphere" (21). Major influences on deep ecology have been Taoism, Buddhism, American Indian and other Shamanistic or indigenous religions,³ several of which are identifiable in the novels examined in this thesis. The idea of connecting in a sacred way with the environment is especially pertinent to the earlier works, and is written into novels like *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five*; Taoism is, of course, a central feature of Le Guin's work.⁴ Furthermore, the kinds of utopian communities described in most of the novels, as will become clear in later chapters, are very obviously based on ideas similar to deep ecology's proposition for small, self-sustaining communities.

The strong criticisms that have been levelled against deep ecology, however, highlight a side to the movement that is clearly at odds with the philosophies that underwrite the novels under investigation here. The appropriation of indigenous and Eastern religions by deep ecologists (and, as we shall see, by some ecofeminists) is, for example, inherently problematic: it is often done without a real understanding of the differences between various groups, and is simplistic and stereotypical (Garrard 125-126). As Bron Taylor points out, blanket statements suggesting indigenous people are "ecological saints" fail to recognise "religious and cultural pluralism" (279). John Richards, writing about the effect of colonialism on indigenous peoples across the world, worries that we tend to "over-romanticize" their relationship with the land without adequate knowledge or research (13).⁵ The appropriation of a particular spiritual philosophy into a different sphere is problematic in itself, but is even more so given the naïveté with which it is often done.

There are other disquieting factors related to deep ecology's philosophies. The call for ecocentrism, for example, has been seen as being misanthropic, although Fox argues that this is an invalid criticism as deep ecologists are not against humans, but against

³ See Garrard (22-23), Jacobsen, and Curtin for further comments on deep ecology and spiritualism.

⁴ See, for example, Bittner (*Approaches*), Bain, Porter, Hoyle and Reid.

⁵ John McNeill argues that although the Judeo-Christian religions have been seen to encourage environmental despoliation, other areas of the world have also seen similar environmental ruin despite the apparent friendliness of Buddhism, Taoism and Hinduism to nature – possibly because "religion did not notably constrain behaviour with respect to the natural world" (327).

human-centredness (279). However, statements like those made by Garrett Hardin, who “remarked that in view of their relative number he would, if forced to choose, support the existence of one redwood tree over one baby” (Nash 240), can be read as misanthropic rather than ecocentric. Also, even if it is clear that our planet can only sustain a limited human population, in practical terms deep ecology’s desire for decentralisation must “fail as a solution for more than a handful of people because there is not enough land to go around” (Nash 381). More importantly, who decides which people have access to this land and how is this to be achieved in a world so inextricably absorbed into late capitalism and globalisation?

A further problem is how to reduce human population numbers to make this decentralisation possible. Naess did state that it is possible to maintain a diversity of cultures while still decreasing the human population (Bodian 29), which could allay the fears of those concerned that calls to reduce the population are designed to take place at the expense of some racial groups over others. But still, deep ecologists’ insistence on a drastically reduced population is a reminder of Thomas Malthus, whose realisation that population grows geometrically and food production arithmetically, led him to call for “social engineering” (Bate, *The Song* 14). This is one reason why this aspect of deep ecology is looked upon with such suspicion, especially in the wake of Nazism,⁶ even though radical statements about population control have only been made by a minority (Garrard 22). Also, overpopulation should not be blamed alone: Silliman explicitly rejects blaming ecological problems on overpopulation, claiming:

These facile explanations pay little attention to the specifics of each situation: complicated histories of colonialism, corporate extraction, government policies and subsidies, economic inequalities, and growing fundamentalism worldwide ... are, in fact, more pertinent than overpopulation. (viii)

While deep ecologists do not universally believe that the only solution to environmental problems is reducing human population, even as one aspect of their programme for change it suffers from being impractical and often one-dimensional. Certainly, the authors examined here appear to be aware that small, decentralised communities may only be possible in the wake of some kind of apocalyptic disaster – the kind of catastrophe they are most often warning against in the first place.

⁶ Kate Soper reminds us, for example, that “[r]omantic conceptions of ‘nature’ as wholesome salvation from cultural decadence and racial degeneration were crucial to the construction of Nazi ideology, and an aesthetic of ‘nature’ as a source of purity and authentic self-identification has been a component of all forms of racism, tribalism and nationalism” (32).

Dominic Head, while considering himself a deep ecologist, admits that he is obliged “to question a perceived drive towards fundamentalism in deep ecology” (27), a statement which, taken alongside criticisms of over-simplification and unfeasibility, makes deep ecology an awkward method of analysis. Their novels show Atwood, Piercy, Le Guin and Lessing to have a strong aversion to fundamentalist or totalitarian philosophies, and they would certainly question any tendency towards this kind of narrow-mindedness. Furthermore, as even Warwick Fox points out, the lack of engagement amongst deep ecologists with the social and political causes of environmental degradation is a serious weakness (269): in contrast, these authors are all extremely conscious of socio-political elements in their writing. Thus, while as a whole, deep ecology clearly has much to recommend it as it calls for a dramatic change in our perceptions of our place as humans in the wider ecosystem, it can also be criticised from a number of perspectives which call into question its usefulness as a stand-alone means to assess the novels in this thesis.

Social Ecology and Marxist Ecology

The lack of political engagement among deep ecologists is criticised particularly by social ecologists (see Garrard 28), and the serious political engagement of the authors studied here suggests that social ecology could be a more appropriate analytical tool for their novels. Social ecologists, of whom Marxist ecologists form a substantial subcategory, believe that in order to understand the ecological crisis, we need to understand how human hierarchies of value have affected the environment. They, for example, reject deep ecology’s “insensitivity to intra-human politics” because they believe that relations between humans have a direct effect on how people treat the environment (Plumwood, “The Ecopolitics Debate” 72). Aggressive capitalism, globalisation and the self-seeking interests of multi-national corporations are seen by social ecologists as the major contributing factors to the abuse of the environment, and, certainly, the dramatic increase in pollution and environmental degradation experienced since the onset of industrialisation and late capitalism gives a measure of credence to their argument.

Some social ecologists see ecology as a way of substantiating their belief in human cooperation rather than competition. Anarchist Peter Kropotkin’s idea of ‘mutual aid’, for example, is the basis for much social ecology as, rather than “supporting a laissez-faire, competitive capitalist and unequal social order, social theory could find in nature a model of human society based on mutual aid, solidarity, equality and harmony” (Barry 64). Aside

from the problem that nature does not necessarily provide such a model for equality, and that evolution and survival are as often characterised by aggression and strength as by mutual aid and cooperation (see Bate, *The Song* 40), social ecology can also be accused of over-simplicity and generalisation. It is clear, as Fox argues, that “a socially egalitarian society does not necessarily imply an ecologically benign society” (276), and it is not true that “we need only concentrate on *interhuman* egalitarian concerns for all to become ecologically well with the world”, as social ecology sometimes implies (Fox 276, original italics). Deep ecologists, for their part, would see social ecologists as falling into the trap of anthropocentrism as a result of their concentration on socio-political causes of ecological problems. Furthermore, suggesting that Marxism is inextricably linked to ecology would be simplistic and untrue; as John Barry reminds us, Marxism and socialism are not pre-modern, pastoral or agrarian in their policies (66):

Marx’s problems with capitalism were not that he objected to the wealth-producing process, which was based on the exploitation of the nonhuman world; rather he argued that the fruits of this remarkable social order were not distributed equally because a few (the bourgeoisie or the owners of capital) enjoyed the gains while the many (the proletariat or workers) had to bear the costs and reaped few rewards. (Barry 69)

As Barry’s comments indicate, Marxism and ecology can be seen as uneasy bedfellows.

Social ecologists, therefore, while certainly correct in their criticism of deep ecology’s apparent inability to understand many of the very real and complex socio-political reasons behind humanity’s relationship with their environment, also elide several issues in their ecological philosophy. The novels covered in this thesis are also not entirely informed by social ecology – if at all. For example, while Le Guin may be influenced by the same notions of mutual aid that inform social ecology (particularly through the elements of Kropotkinism in *The Dispossessed* [see Urbanowicz 146]), she is also deeply spiritual and interested in ideas that are not related to social policy only. Lessing, on the other hand, seems to see nature as providing a model of competition rather than compassion, as can be seen through her presentation of ecological hardship’s negative effects in *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five*, and her later Ifrik novels. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, although the authors here have often been linked with socialist or Marxist politics in a variety of ways, their interests are more diverse than the emphasis on economics found in socialist politics. While social ecology does engage successfully with issues of class, it is also apparent that placing the blame for

environmental degradation on capitalism ignores other contributing factors, such as racism and sexism – elements that are clearly significant in many of the novels considered here.

Environmental Justice

The environmental justice movement is most explicitly linked to racial politics. It is an activist movement that works against environmental racism – usually seen as the targeting of minority communities as sites for toxic waste dumps and the exclusion of people of colour from leadership roles in environmental movements (Adamson 77). Joni Adamson argues that ecocritics often “assert the greater value of wilderness over lands inhabited by humans” and that this is problematic because “it leaves unexplored the connections between the marginalization and impoverishment of human communities and the exploitation and degradation of the environment” (16). What the environmental justice movement does is highlight how ecocritical practice often limits its discussion to wilderness or rural environments, without taking cognisance of the place of urban environments in the ecosystem and the problems unique to such environments, such as pollution in inner-city slums. As one of a growing number of urban ecocritics, Michael Bennett points out that “socioeconomic and political concerns – with regard to such inner-city problems as housing, health care, and workplace safety – have been added to the usual concerns of clean air and water and maintaining wildlands” (169). He points out that this has allowed the green movement to expand to include a more diverse demographic than the traditional “white, upper-middle to upper classes” (169).

The strength of environmental justice, Catherine Gardner argues, is that it highlights how “environmental problems do not affect us equally and that specific environmental concerns are not universal” (204). Usually the environmental justice movement has been associated with modern, urban environments, but Nancy Jacobs, following her study of the rural people of Kuruman in South Africa’s Northern Cape, argues that “environmental injustice – structured inequalities in the ways people related to the biophysical world – has existed in nonindustrial societies and in earlier times” (4). Control over land-use is, unfortunately, one of the foundations of human society, and whether this is an urban or a wilderness issue, it is significant in the majority of the texts in this thesis. Certainly the more recent novels examined here deal with specific problems relating to urban sprawl, particularly that of toxic pollutants, but even the novels focusing on rural idylls are aware of ownership issues.

Environmental justice is clearly useful for its ability to extend ecological issues into the urban arena, as well as for its assessment of race. It does not, according to Gardner, “explore fully the connections between oppressions” (206), although along with race, it is often associated with an attention to class and gender in its interest in the environmental problems of urban poor, giving it a wider application, perhaps, than either social ecology or pure ecofeminism. It can, perhaps, be accused of anthropocentrism and its focus on problems like pollution or lack of access to green spaces can limit its applicability. While the novels examined here, particularly later texts like *He, She and It* and *Oryx and Crake*, do focus to a degree on such issues, their attention is much broader, taking in aspects from other ecological philosophies, including ecofeminism.

Ecofeminism

Ecofeminist philosophies need to be examined in some detail if an ecological perspective on Atwood, Piercy, Le Guin and Lessing’s work is to be adopted: all are women writers who explicitly deal with gender issues in their work. Ecofeminism is perhaps the most complex, interesting and divided school of ecological philosophy. While ecofeminists take an explicitly feminist approach to ecological thinking, each ecofeminist has biases toward particular schools of feminism as well as toward the different aspects of ecological philosophy outlined above. For ecofeminists, the link between women and nature can have both positive and negative connotations: some ecofeminists validate the idea that women are seen as closer to nature than men, whereas others reject the naturalisation of women and feminisation of landscapes by men.⁷ Janis Birkeland claims that ecofeminism “explores the links between androcentrism and environmental destruction” (18), rejecting non-feminist green theories as being “manstream” as much as they are mainstream (24). Greta Gaard works from a slightly broader approach than Birkeland, stating that ecofeminism’s “basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature” (“Living” 1). Ecofeminists, for her, are particularly interested in examining the dualisms that have led to the devaluation of both women and nature, and of other groups dominated by masculine Western rationalism (5).

⁷ Annette Kolodny has paid close attention to the feminisation of landscape in literary texts. See *The Lay of the Land* (1975) for a discussion of how landscapes have been presented as feminine.

The divisions among ecofeminists are often deep-seated, following the general trends amongst ecological and feminist philosophies. For example, liberal ecofeminists, like liberal feminists, believe that equality within the parameters of already formed (and thus patriarchal) society can lead to necessary change (Guttman 40-41). For liberal ecofeminists, equal opportunities are particularly necessary within the areas traditionally used to control environmental issues in society. They believe that, as “scientists, natural resource managers, regulators, lawyers, and legislators, women, like men, can contribute to the improvement of the environment, the conservation of natural resources, and the higher quality of human life” (Merchant, *Earthcare* 9). Other ecofeminists often see this position as not being radical enough to effect sufficient change, and also as a failure to notice “the implicit masculinity of the conception of the individual subject in the public sphere” (Plumwood, *Feminism* 28).

Social ecofeminists, on the other hand, are strongly influenced by socio-political factors, seeing traditional Western capitalist structures as important exploiters of the environment and of women. Merchant points out that for some social ecofeminists, implementing Murray Bookchin’s decentralisation policies are important and necessary goals in their desire to create a more humane society (*Earthcare* 13). She adds that the relationships between production and reproduction emphasised in socialist feminism are as important as the relationship between production and ecology for social ecofeminists (15). Social ecofeminists argue, for example, that capitalism is an expression of male dominance and aggression, although, as Huey-li Li points out, “it is more likely that both men and women share a common desire for an affluent and comfortable material life, which may significantly contribute to the development of capitalism” (287). Nonetheless, social ecofeminists blame capitalism and patriarchy equally for the exploitation of both women and the environment.

The most radical of ecofeminists are cultural ecofeminists, who suggest that women are closer to nature and that they, as a result, have a natural ability to save the world from ecological crisis. For them, men, particularly white, Western men, are largely to blame for environmental problems. Working against science, technology and other forms of ‘masculine’ progress, cultural ecofeminists often espouse a return to goddess worship and celebrate woman’s particular spiritual connections to the natural world (Merchant, *Earthcare* 11). Mary Daly, for example, explicitly states that her book *Gyn/Ecology* is concerned with “all forms of pollution in phallo-technic society” but specifically with “the mind/spirit/body pollution inflicted through patriarchal myth and language” (9). Carol

Christ suggests that some kind of “mystical awakening in nature” can provide women “with images of [their] own power” (119) and promotes a “celebration of women’s bodies and their connections to nature and each other, and the drive for wholeness” (126). Susan Griffin’s famous *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* is an angry, though poetic, expression of how patriarchy has been responsible for associating women with nature in a negative way, while at the same time is celebratory of woman’s connection with nature. Other cultural ecofeminists, like Chaia Heller, proclaim an ecofeminist desire to live in an “erotic, anarchistic society” (240) and others state that a “female image of the earth simply seems to have resonance for many ecofeminists as a contrast to the patriarchal notion of a male sky god” (Kheel 251).

The debate over the usefulness of ecofeminist philosophy has often focused on this type of cultural ecofeminism, probably as a result of its more radical position. In some ways cultural ecofeminism comes across as misandrous rather than as a serious way to question the association between women and nature. The term ‘écoféminisme’ was coined by Françoise d’Eaubonne in 1974 (Merchant, *Earthcare* 5) and comments d’Eaubonne herself made, like “[u]rbanized, technological society, which is male-driven, has reduced the earth’s fertility, while overbreeding, also male-driven, has increased the population” (qtd. in Gates 17), suggest that the origin of ecofeminism is quite close to cultural ecofeminism’s ideas. Ecofeminism in general can also be fairly simplistic: the common suggestion that a change in attitudes towards women will automatically change ways of behaving towards nature, or vice versa, neglects the complexities of both inter-human relationships and the relationships between humans and their environment. Gardner admits that traditionally ecofeminism is “fundamentally connected to a position of white, middle-class privilege” and “may involve a problematic essentializing of nature and even of race” (192). As a Taiwanese woman, for example, Huey-li Li claims that the “association of women and nature ... is not a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon” (272), pointing to the vast differences between Chinese respect for nature and the “socially inferior position of women” in Chinese society (273). In her essay “A Cross-Cultural Critique of Ecofeminism” she argues succinctly that a “linear, cause-and-effect paradigm ... cannot elucidate the complexity of worldwide environmental problems” (273). From this perspective, cultural ecofeminism is unsound in its emphasis on Western masculinity as the cause of environmental problems.

Ecofeminism’s association with non-Western forms of spirituality, especially amongst cultural ecofeminists, can also be criticised (see Gaard, “Ecofeminism and Native

American”). Not only are non-Western cultures lauded for their supposedly more egalitarian attitude to nature, but the apparent bond between indigenous women and the natural world is often celebrated without taking into account that other cultures’ relationships with nature are equally constructed. Gardner points out that often third-world, ‘tribal’ or ‘indigenous’ women are seen as more ecofeminist in their principles or somehow closer to nature, but argues that this is racist and essentialist as it does not take into account the widely varying understandings of nature amongst different cultural groups – “Our concept of ‘nature’”, she notes, “is neither universal nor timeless” (202). Fatima Mahmoud would agree, making the further point that one of the problems of an ecofeminist identification of women and nature is that

one of its inappropriate practical implications is that women are considered the part of society most responsible for nature’s preservation and management. Such a definition does not serve women well and inevitably adds to their other responsibilities as bearers of cultural good and the well-being of the family. (46)

Not only does the emphasis on women’s special connection with the land suggest that women are responsible for maintaining the natural order, but also, linking this explicitly with Third World or indigenous peoples is a case of over-simplification. This kind of appropriation also raises questions of cultural imperialism (Roach 52).⁸ Moreover, some ecofeminists over-emphasise the connections between women and nature, which is dangerous in that there are differences both between women and nature, and between how different women of different racial and cultural backgrounds relate to nature (Armbruster “Buffalo Gals” 98). There is not, as this reminds us, necessarily a homogeneous experience of nature amongst women.

Ecofeminism, particularly when practised by cultural ecofeminists, can also become essentialist: as Garrard argues, constructing a positive feminine “essence” is as restrictive as patriarchy’s negative construction of femininity (24). He suggests that radical ecofeminism’s “irrationalism and essentialism are serious limitations” to its use as a critical philosophy (27). Symbols such as ‘Mother Nature’ are also problematic in that they “can portray a response towards nature that is ambiguous and uneasy”, making an ecofeminism espousing such a positive association actually more likely to “undermine its own activism”

⁸ While Roach uses the term ‘cultural imperialism’ in this context, it is perhaps worth noting – as John Tomlinson points out in his *Cultural Imperialism* – that this is a highly complex term, but one which often suggests the imposition of Western culture on other, non-Western cultures (3). In this case it is not the imposition of Western values which is being questioned, but the simplistic *appropriation* of beliefs and practices by Westerners.

(Roach 9). In addition, Roach argues that the better relationship between humans and nature in the pre-mechanistic eras may have little to do with any kind of positive association between nature and women, and mothers in particular. She declares: “If ecological integrity was better preserved in earlier times, I suspect it was due more to lower population pressures and lack of technological capabilities than to any clear-cut control exerted by notions of earth as nurturing mother” (Roach 71). Furthermore, certain ideas associated with ecofeminism are not, in fact, feminist because they “glorify the feminine uncritically and thereby suggest that embracing a feminine perspective will help humans solve the ecological crisis” (Davion 8-9): feminists, according to Davion, “must accept and address that there may be no unified experience of femininity (or Womanhood)” (19). Both Atwood and Lessing are careful to use differing experiences of femininity to question these same assumptions in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five*. This suggests that the authors under examination have a healthy awareness of the problems of over-generalisations and essentialism.

The realisation that there is no cohesive experience of femaleness or feminist politics is, therefore, a major problem with using ecofeminism in this thesis: its wide range of positions actually weakens its usefulness as the kind of theoretical tool needed in comparative research.⁹ Janet Biehl’s well-known and rigorous criticism of ecofeminism is justified in that she points out the serious nature of its self-contradictions, claiming that ecofeminists “tend to pride themselves on the contradictions in their works as a healthy sign of ‘diversity’ – presumably in contrast to ‘dogmatic,’ fairly consistent, and presumably ‘male’ or ‘masculine’ theories” (qtd in Gaard, “Living” 6).¹⁰ Although Biehl’s argument that ecofeminism had become “fraught with irrational, mythical, and self-contradictory meanings” (Merchant, *Earthcare* 14) is correct, Douglas Buege does note that by rejecting all ecofeminists, Biehl “fails to acknowledge potential allies in ecofeminists such as Warren, Plumwood and Cheney” (60). Ecofeminism in general, however, is difficult to pin down and the label itself has such contradictory associations that it is almost impossible to argue for an ecofeminist literary analysis without endless qualifications and restrictions on how it is used.

⁹ Comments like that of Vance illustrate this lack of cohesion, as she claims that ecofeminism is diverse “[b]ecause our experience as women *is* diverse” (125, original italics). She continues: “Ask a half-dozen self-proclaimed ecofeminists ‘what ecofeminism is,’ and you’ll get a half-dozen answers, each rooted in a particular intersection of race, class, geography, and conceptual orientation” (125-126).

¹⁰ I have been unable to access a copy of Janet Biehl’s 1991 *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics*.

Whether Atwood, Le Guin, Piercy and Lessing claim their feminist position or not, the emphasis in their writing on gender politics and feminist issues, such as reproduction, indicates very clearly that feminist thinking must play a role in analysing texts by these four authors. However, the charges of essentialism and over-simplicity in some ecofeminisms make me wary of labelling their work 'ecofeminist'. Furthermore, taking an ecofeminist position on their writing is difficult because the diversity of ecofeminisms, and particularly its association with cultural ecofeminism, make it an unwieldy method to use in this instance: these authors show a diversity of interests and concerns alongside their feminism and environmentalism in their speculative fiction, making ecofeminism alone too narrow a critical tool in this instance.¹¹

Each of the schools within ecological philosophy, therefore, has much to contribute to an examination of the speculative novels of Lessing, Piercy, Atwood and Le Guin. Deep ecology has a clear understanding of the need for significant changes in how humans identify with the non-human world; social ecologists bring ecological issues into the sphere of global economic systems; practitioners of environmental justice connect urbanisation and poverty to ecological problems; and ecofeminists make use of feminist theory to question deep-seated attitudes towards the environment. However, the weaknesses of each theory, plus the ways in which each of the chosen authors engage with multiple aspects of ecological philosophy makes taking an either/or approach to their novels unsuitable. A truly ecological approach conceives of integrated critical discourses rather than a hegemonic approach taken from a particular school of ecophilosophy. Several ecological philosophers have, however, attempted to use ideas from ecology to suggest an approach which takes into account the positive and negative features of these positions without becoming either amorphous or too general, and this is, I believe, the most effective methodology to use in analysing Atwood, Piercy, Le Guin and Lessing's speculative fiction.

¹¹ Kathryn Ross Wayne has produced a generally good ecofeminist analysis of Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest* and *Always Coming Home*, but does tend to emphasise the feminist values over the ecological. Despite this, Wayne finds, as I do, Val Plumwood's thinking a useful way to approach Le Guin's novels (30).

Ecology as Philosophy: Towards an Ecological Ethic

One of the difficulties with using ecology as a way into literary analysis is that unlike other theoretical approaches, such as Marxism and feminism, which are primarily socio-political terms and are thus closer to literary study in their basis in the humanities and social sciences, ecology is a scientific term. Often, as Garrard comments, “the terminology of ecological science is simply appropriated for political ends without any acknowledgement of change in use or qualification of meaning” (27) and, as Parham points out, the unscientific nature of ecocriticism can lead to “theoretical vagueness” (xii). This is a concern voiced on a more general level from within the field of interdisciplinary studies: Richard Levin, for example, notes the dangers of choosing merely that aspect of a theory which suits a particular political goal, rather than understanding it in its entirety or maintaining it as an empirical truth (24). It is thus essential to clarify what is meant by ecology in the context of this thesis.

The major problem with using ecology in an interdisciplinary way is that it can be understood on two different levels. As Glen Love remarks, there is a difference between ecology as a science and as “a buzz-word” (39): certainly in common parlance phrases like ‘ecology’ or ‘ecological concerns’ tend to be used where ‘natural environment’ or ‘environmentalism’ could perhaps more appropriately take their place. Mark Bush, as a scientist, opens his *Ecology of a Changing Planet* with the firm statement that “[e]cology is a science; environmentalism is a concern” (5). Ecology is about more than simply saving the whales or other environmental advocacies: it is an intricate science which takes years to master and, as Karl Kroeber points out, unless “we recognize the complexity of scientific ecology, we fall into cheap sentimentalism that may, in fact, be destructive of our natural environment” (27-28). Any attempt to work towards an ecological vision within the context of literary studies must, therefore, take note of scientific definitions of ecology before moving forward into using ecology within the framework of textual analysis.

Scientific ecologists Begon, Harper and Townsend state:

Unlike some other sciences, the subject matter of ecology is apparent to everybody; to the extent that most people have observed and pondered nature, most people are ecologists of sorts. But ecology is not an easy science, and it has particular subtlety and complexity. It must deal explicitly with three levels of the biological hierarchy – the organisms, the populations of organisms, and the communities of populations – and, as we shall see, it ignores at its peril the details of the biology of individuals, or the pervading influences of historical, evolutionary and geological events. (vii)

Ecology, therefore, is a multifaceted and demanding science. While as a non-scientist I am using ecology outside its original field, I am interested in emphasising the point that ecology is, as a science, concerned with individuals, with groups, and with the interaction between individuals and groups, and between varieties of groups. Indeed, part of scientific ecology is the study of the ecosystem, which is the “biological community together with its physical environment” (Begon, Harper and Townsend 679), and which is, as Brian Stableford has pointed out, a system of chains that are “elaborately intertwined” and “not merely the physical components of the environment but the other organisms whose lives overlap theirs” (127).

How, then, can I use ecology within the context of this thesis without entirely ignoring the emphasis of scientific ecology on systems and relationships? An ecological approach to literature should perhaps assess how a text elucidates the relationships between organisms and their environments. Just as scientific ecology includes human ecology, so this approach is inclusive of both human or non-human organisms, and works whether the environment concerned is pristine ‘wilderness’ or not. In other words, the examination of the texts in this thesis should encompass, as far as it is possible, an assessment of how the various interests of the author, *not simply the author’s interest in the non-human natural world*, work together to form a whole. Rueckert’s statement, in fact, was that this “need to see even the smallest, most remote part in relation to a very large whole is the central intellectual action required by ecology and of an ecological vision” (108). It is this ecological vision of wholes and parts working together that is the underlying force behind this thesis: its ecological philosophy tries to understand how the chosen authors deconstruct (and reconstruct) attitudes that have led to the abuse of the environment as well as to discrimination between people of different genders, races and classes. Just as scientific ecology analyses relationships between organisms, so this thesis argues that an ecological approach to these literary works must take cognisance of the interconnections between the different forms of Othering that have led to the inferiorisation of some groups of people or types of organisms. I derive the greater part of this ecological approach from the work done by Val Plumwood, supported by others such as Carolyn Merchant, Kate Soper, Donna Haraway and Freya Mathews. By drawing on their philosophies, I produce a theoretical framework that is more directly applicable than any of the narrower ecological schools to an analysis of Atwood, Lessing, Piercy and Le Guin’s speculative writing, as it demonstrates how these novels both value difference and refuse the dominance/submission culture that underlies Othering.

Dualism and the Nature/Culture Debate

Responses to the problem of dualism by recent ecological thinkers are, to my mind, the reason why ecological philosophy can provide such a useful theory both from which to assess our current socio-political and environmental problems, and from which to analyse how these issues are examined in certain fiction by Lessing, Atwood, Piercy and Le Guin. Val Plumwood begins her argument in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993),¹² by asserting that it is not simply ‘human nature’ that has led to environmentally damaging practices, but that “it is the development in certain cultures, especially and originally western culture, of a particular concept and practice of human identity and relationship to nature which is the problem, not the state of being humans as such” (12). Like many ecological thinkers, she argues that nature has consistently been presented as the opposite of culture or reason, and as a result nature (and all that is associated with it) is described in terms of exclusion (19-20). A dualistic approach to the differences between nature and culture, therefore, is the main culprit of not only the destruction of our environment, but also of the dominance/submission ethos that underlies all forms of Othering. This is not only destructive of those placed in subordinate positions, but also of those in the position of power. As Plumwood puts it,

dualism is a process in which power forms identity, one which distorts both sides of what it splits apart, the master *and* the slave, the coloniser *and* the colonised, the sadist *and* the masochist, the egoist *and* the self-abnegating altruist, the masculine *and* the feminine, human *and* nature. But if this is so, clearly we cannot resolve the problem by a simple strategy of reversal, affirming the slave’s character or culture, for this character as it stands is not an independently constituted nature, but equally represents a distortion. (32, original italics)

By critiquing dualistic thinking as the means of legitimating the subordination of class, race, gender and nature, Plumwood is correctly able to single out that the creation of a “master” identity (rather than of a simply “masculine” one) is the means that allows the creation of the inferior Other (42). The master narrative is based in dualistic thinking, and dualistic thinking is, for Plumwood, more than “a relation of dichotomy, difference, or non-identity, and more than a simple hierarchical relationship” (47) – it is the devaluation and

¹² I base the majority of my thinking on this particular book as it has more direct relevance to both my project in this thesis, and to the novels under examination. Her later *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (2002) is both more political and more practical. All unspecified references to Plumwood are to *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*.

inferiorisation of the Other.¹³ Plumwood is not alone in suggesting that a dualistic mode of thinking has been the cause of Othering: feminist and postcolonial theories, for example, commonly identify Othering as the root of inequalities in society.¹⁴ Ursula Le Guin has expressed the dualistic mindset in her typically poetic manner: “I am Self, I am Master, all the rest is Other – outside, below, underneath, subservient. I own, I use, I explore, I exploit, I control. What I do is what matters. What I want is what matter is for” (“Woman/Wilderness” 161). As Le Guin’s words indicate, by making the Other inferior, it is possible to justify its exploitation and abuse. In other words, socially constructed inferiorisations based on difference are at the root of dualistic behaviour.

Kate Soper’s thinking corresponds with Plumwood’s on this point. Soper has argued that it is not seeing difference between humanity and nature that is the problem with our relationship with our environment, but the *utilisation* of that duality to justify our actions regarding our instrumentalist use of nature. She adds that our separation from nature could equally be used to justify a more responsible attitude towards it, and conversely, that anti-dualism could be used to support our continuity with nature (and hence substantiate a desire to conserve it), as much as it could be used to support the argument that “human beings are no more able than any other of nature’s creatures to transcend their particular mode of doing things, however ecologically destructive this may have proven to be” (132). For Soper too, then, it is not so much the difference between nature and culture that is at fault in our current ecological crisis, as the way in which that difference has been used as a justification for our actions. This dualistic attitude is what Plumwood would call a *hierarchical* relationship of difference. Here hierarchical does not suggest size (after all there are natural hierarchies in the sense that atoms, for example, are smaller than molecules), but rather suggests a *value* judgement whereby the ‘I’ (whether that be male or female, human or non-human, white or black) sees itself as *superior* to the Other.

For many ecological philosophers, how this system of dualistic thinking developed is of paramount importance, and this is the case for Plumwood too. Most look specifically at the division between the human and the non-human, that is, between culture and nature – as Soper’s comments above indicate. Roderick Nash has taken the position that our

¹³ As a corollary to this, James Serpell has noted that challenges to the assumption of the Other as inferior coincide – arguing that the “British abolition of the slave trade in 1807” occurred at the same time as “the earliest Parliamentary debates on cruelty to animals” (228).

¹⁴ There are, for instance, clear links to be made between racism and the oppression of women and the environment in postcolonial scholarship, as Helen Tiffin (xv) and Susie O’Brien (194-195) have shown.

separation from nature (into culture) took place with the shift from hunter-gatherer societies to those practising agriculture and domesticating animals. This might seem an unusual place to mark the division between nature and culture, but he does make the point that until the creation of “fenced fields and walled cities ‘wilderness’ had no meaning” (xiii). Christopher Manes notes that there is often no language describing ‘nature’ or ‘culture’ amongst primal people (18), which may give credence to Nash’s argument. The majority of ecocritics, however, see the problem as lying not so much in the nature/culture divide, but in the shift in the hierarchy between the two; that is, when nature became seen as subordinate to culture. For most, the pivotal moment came with the development of Cartesian mechanism and thus instrumentalism, placing the cause of the dualistic understanding of nature and culture firmly in Western (or European) hands. Several commentators have argued that Descartes (1596-1650), with his severe division of the world into mind (*res cogitans*) and matter (*res extensa*), allowed humans to begin viewing the non-human natural world as soulless and spiritless, mere objects provided for the use of man.¹⁵ At the same time, the new investigative techniques of Francis Bacon (1561-1626) suggested that an understanding of the workings of science and nature could benefit humankind in the form of progress (Merchant, *The Death* 164-173). In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Plumwood disregards the claim that Cartesian nature/culture dualism came after an uncomplicated holistic world-view, going back to Plato’s derogation of women and nature as an example of earlier dualism (74-75). The tendency to blame the scientific revolution for dualistic attitudes towards nature is dangerous because it places the blame for human misuse of the environment on one moment in history. Furthermore, as Adamson points out, understandings of ‘nature’ or ‘environment’ are “historically dynamic and culturally specific” (74). While there is no doubt that Baconianism and Cartesianism did have a profound effect on the culture/nature or human/non-human separation, it is problematic to see the pre-Cartesian world as unaffectedly holistic and monist, since “mixed, perhaps conflicting attitudes have persisted throughout modern times” regarding how nature was viewed (Garrard 63).

Plumwood’s analysis shows that the nature/culture question is much more complicated than is, at first, apparent. Here Soper again contributes a valid point to the debate – one that will be especially significant to understanding texts like *He, She and It*, *Oryx and Crake* and Lessing’s Ifrik novels. Soper – correctly, I think – reminds us that

¹⁵ See for example Heisenberg (73), Capra (*The Tao* 27-28) and Merchant (*The Death* 194-195).

ecological philosophy needs to pay more attention to “the concept of ‘nature’ and to pay heed to some of the slidings of the signifier” (9). The authors under examination here, for example, often look at the conflation of ‘human’ and ‘natural’ and ask what exactly it means to speak of ‘human nature’. Defining ‘nature’ is vital to the ecological debate, especially if the nature/culture divide is blamed for dualistic hierarchies of worth. Nature is commonly “opposed to culture, to history, to convention, to what is artificially worked or produced, in short, to everything which is defining of the order of humanity” (Soper 15). Culture, Soper thus suggests, is that which is instigated or contrived by humanity, as opposed to that which is naturally given or dictated by nature (37). However, humans are also products of nature. This is what Soper calls the Human-Nature paradox: “Nature is that which Humanity finds itself within, and to which in some sense it belongs, but also that from which it also [*sic*] seems excluded in the very moment in which it reflects upon either its otherness or its belongingness” (49).¹⁶ Bate points out that the question of whether or not human consciousness is a part of nature is not new (*The Song* 148), but it is an important issue to raise within the context of ecology because of the detrimental effect human culture has had on the natural world.

While Soper’s arguments suggest that we are both a part of nature and apart from nature, it is still worthwhile to draw a distinction between culture and nature – that is, between the human and the non-human worlds. As was pointed out above, it is not difference that is the cause of dualism, but the hierarchisation of difference. The recognition of difference is undoubtedly one of the most important points Plumwood makes; the problem we face, if we do not recognise that there is diversity, is that of a formless holism. Some ecophilosophers do regard holism as the pinnacle of human/non-human relationships – deep ecologists particularly, as we saw above. For them, holism is seen as the positive counterpoint to atomism – atomism suggesting that each part of nature is entirely separate.¹⁷ Plumwood argues that mechanism was indeed problematic because it allowed for “the fantasy of complete mastery” (110), but although atomism has been seen as the “handmaiden of mechanism”, it is not negative in itself. She believes that it would be a mistake to negate atomism (in favour of holism) at the same time as negating

¹⁶ Terry Eagleton explains this paradox by arguing that “we are cusped between nature and culture” and unable to escape this position as the very helplessness of humans at birth has necessitated that we supplement nature with culture (99).

¹⁷ Capra sees twentieth-century science as a way to overcome Cartesian and mechanistic dualities because it “overcomes this fragmentation and leads back to the idea of unity expressed in the early Greek and Eastern philosophies” (*The Tao* 28), indicating clearly that for him that atomism is the negative counterpart of unity.

mechanism (126) because holism can only “be obtained by robbing particular things of their own measure of significance or agency” (128).¹⁸ What is needed, perhaps, is to tread a path between atomism and holism, recognising the individual elements that make up the world, but not seeing them only in isolation.

Plumwood’s insistence on difference rather than holism or dualism is usefully compared to Donna Haraway’s radical solution to the same problem: the cyborg.¹⁹ In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991), Haraway’s Cyborg Manifesto provides a new way of theorising both feminism and ecology. Basing her idea on the notion of the cyborg, “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism” (149), she argues for a “*pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* in their construction” (150, original italics). She contends that the cyborg, however it may seem initially, is not designed to be a construction of holism, but is instead a rejection of the “seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity” (150): according to Haraway, it is “committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity” (151). Haraway’s theory is perhaps most useful when placed in the context of dualism and the nature/culture debate. For her,

[h]igh-tech culture challenges these dualisms in intriguing ways. It is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine. It is not clear what is mind and what body in machines that resolve into coding practices.... There is no fundamental, ontological separation in our formal knowledge of machine and organism, of technical and organic. (177-178)

It also allows ecological philosophers to take “responsibility for the social relations of science and technology” (181) by suggesting the connections between the natural and constructed worlds in which we live. For Haraway, then, ecological thinking is about the blurring of boundaries between the human and the non-human, the organic and the technological.

The cyborg motif presented by Haraway is both revelled in and seriously critiqued by the authors examined here – particularly in novels like *He, She and It* and *Oryx and Crake*, which deal explicitly with cybernetics and genetic engineering. Philosophers like Chris Cuomo indirectly express why the cyborg figure is so useful to these authors, arguing that it highlights the obsolescence of arguments that separate nature and culture (and other

¹⁸ It is interesting, in the light of this, that Garrard wrongly expresses concern over Plumwood’s position because it can lead to “a somewhat pious recommendation of ‘holistic’ or ‘vitalist’ science based on its moral, rather than its methodological or pragmatic superiority over ‘reductive’ conventional science” (26).

¹⁹ Both the image of the cyborg and Haraway’s appropriation of it are given further attention in the context of science fiction and speculative fiction in the following chapter.

seeming opposites). This, for Cuomo, is a reason to be “hopeful” as it indicates there are “modes of being that do not depend on impossible either/or decisions between technology and life” (83). If it is part of ‘human nature’ to create and construct, Haraway’s approach allows us to see culture as a part of nature: as Frederick Turner argues, if we “distrust our technology, we distrust our own nature, and nature itself” (50). Gretchen Legler suggests, along with these other critics, that the cyborg is “an image that breaks down the boundaries between well-known dualisms such as culture/nature and organic/technological” (71).

While I would agree that this is positive in that, as Legler would claim, it subverts the myth of an organic whole apart from culture (72), I am concerned that it is merely the imposition of another specious type of whole, rather than the disintegration of holism. So, although Haraway’s insistence that there is no separate ‘nature’ apart from culture is exciting and useful, it seems to lack a method of showing respect for difference in its insistence on the blurring of the boundaries between Self and Other. Differences, after all, clearly exist: as Armbruster suggests, the problem of conflating women and nature, for example, can lead to an “erasure of difference” which simply “displaces difference elsewhere, where it often serves to reinforce dualism and hierarchy” (“Buffalo Gals” 103). Dualism, Plumwood argues, does not create difference, but rather capitalises on it (55). At the same time, she claims, it would be “misconceived” to choose a strategy of either denial or mergence in order to escape dualism (59).

What the nature/culture debate shows, then, is that it is problematic to see nature and culture as entirely separate or as the same. There is a complex relationship between the two, embodied in humanity itself. As Terry Eagleton indicates, nature “is not just the Other of culture. It is also a kind of inert weight within it, opening up an inner fracture which runs all the way through the human subject” (110). What this can tell us, then, is that the removal of difference in favour of holism would be mistaken. Equally, atomism neglects to show the complex interrelationships between different parts of greater wholes. A dualistic way of thinking uses these differences to instil hierarchies of worth that devalue the Other. What is needed, therefore, is a way to recognise difference without inferiorising it as a negative Other.

Dualism and Ecological Feminism

The anti-dualist stance taken by philosophers such as Plumwood is, for the reasons outlined above, in many ways an exemplary vision. In the light of this, it is significant that Plumwood positions herself within “critical ecological feminism” in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1). In doing so, she argues that attempts to undermine dualistic thinking may be particularly suited to women because of “their placement in the sphere of nature and exclusion from an oppositional culture” (36). Plumwood claims that, despite its association with cultural feminism, ecofeminism is able to engage “with all four forms of exploitation encompassed in race, class, gender and nature” (1). Ecofeminists do often assert that their position somehow allows a broad perspective that is naturally inclusive of other exploited groups, yet most assume that if they make the initial claim that there are links between gender discrimination, environmental degradation, racism and classism, then they do not need to make an actual assessment of other forms of domination, merely basing their argument on the links between feminism and ecology.

This assumption can be problematic. To presume that because people have been dominated according to their race or class, their experiences are exactly the same as those dominated as a result of their gender, elides the intricacies and complexities of their different situations. The experiences of women are diverse, often depending as much on racial or economic exclusion as that of gender. Both women and people of colour have been seen as closer to nature, yet it would be misguided to assume that dominance/submission patterns working against women are the same as those affecting people of different races. White women, for example, may not have had the same experience of gender domination as black women, as their experience of racial exclusion will differ from that of black women. Furthermore, dominance/submission relationships in which various women interact will also depend on a number of factors, including where they live in the world or their economic position within a community. As Lori Gruen says, “[b]oth feminists and animal liberationists would do well to reflect upon how their inclusion of certain ‘others’ is often accomplished at the expense of other ‘others’” (83). While ecological feminists claim to be equally concerned with other forms of oppression, by taking the label ‘feminist’ they do seem to accord gender discrimination a higher place in their list of concerns. Armbruster points out that “the categorical assertion that any form of oppression is the ground of all others does little to challenge the ideologies responsible for dominations of all sorts” and can “become a rigid code specifying which forms of

difference should take political priority over others” (“Buffalo Gals” 104). This kind of thinking can actually reinforce some types of dualism. Indeed, Plumwood’s contention that the “western mapping of a gender hierarchy on to the nature/culture distinction has been a major culprit in the destruction of the biosphere” (10), speaks to a bias toward feminist issues over those of race or class. In the light of this, it is extremely important to be aware of the equal oppression of those struggling against race and class discrimination when assessing Plumwood’s work. Being feminist, and avowedly so, is no problem in itself; claiming the right to speak for other oppressed groups from one’s position as a woman and as a feminist is more contentious.

Deborah Slicer suggests that to be truly feminist, ecofeminists must “incorporate analyses of other oppressed peoples into their analyses of oppressed nature” (“Wrongs” 39), and, as Patrick Murphy has pointed out, Alice Walker’s definition of Womanism is important in advancing feminism to include cultural and racial oppressions in its analyses (“The Women” 27-28). Cuomo also argues that “most feminists agree that to be feminist is to be against oppression in all of its forms” (32),²⁰ but surely if this was an obvious feminist platform, there would be no need for ecological feminists to make this point, so clearly and strongly, in their critical writing? It seems that feminism’s association with gender issues, first and foremost, makes such statements defensive at the very least. Clearly Plumwood does not see her position as a feminist “reductionist” – a criticism she lays at the door, for example, of Marxism, “which treats one form of domination as central and aims to reduce all others to subsidiary forms of it which will ‘wither away’ once the ‘fundamental’ form is overcome” (5). She does, however, question whether ecofeminism is “inevitably based on gynocentric essentialism” (8), worries about over-simplification (9), and makes clear that there are a variety of ecological feminisms (9). In using Plumwood’s theories, therefore, I feel it is important to highlight the potential for making gender issues the primary concern within ecological philosophies derived from her work. Certainly, in the context of this thesis, the emphasis of feminist issues to the exclusion of environmental, race and class agendas would be a mistake. Atwood, Lessing, Le Guin and Piercy have a definite interest in feminism, which is borne out in their speculative fiction, but their concern with Othering as a whole extends their texts into an argument for anti-dualist modes of thinking in the context of wider oppressions also.

²⁰ Chris Cuomo recognises the need to distance herself from the specific associations of cultural feminism with ecofeminism in her insistence on naming herself an “ecological feminist” rather than an ecofeminist (6), and presumably Plumwood’s initial claim to critical ecological feminism rather than ecofeminism is done with a similar motive.

Still, despite the occasional bias toward feminist questions, Plumwood's ecological philosophy is the most useful I have found in explaining not only the development of dominance/submission cultures, but also in providing a model allowing for both kinship *and* difference in relationships between Others – perhaps the most important point made in the novels dealt with in this thesis. Significantly, also, Plumwood's philosophy does not merely assert that dualism is the foundation of all forms of oppression, but attempts to propose a solution to this problem. All the authors dealt with in this thesis express an often utopian hope that an end to imbalances between races, classes, genders and between humans and non-humans can be found. Just as Plumwood argues that a dualist attitude inferiorises the Other, yet that holism does not allow for difference, so each of these authors use their speculative fiction to imagine ways to respect diversity and acknowledge the need for interrelationships between Others.

Relationships of Non-Hierarchical Difference and the Institution of an Ecological Ethic

The utopian desire for a world which refuses hierarchies of worth based on difference is the common dream written into many of the novels examined in this thesis; in others, it is the desperate fear of the damage dualistic thinking can do to the world that inspires dystopian nightmares. The problem of Othering for the authors studied here can only be resolved by creating a society which is able to change its mode of behaviour from that which denigrates to that which respects the Other. Similarly, Plumwood's suggestion that the problem of duality is to blame for the problems of racism, sexism, classism and the abuse of women and the environment can only be resolved, for her, through the implementation of an attitude which recognises difference while refusing to inferiorise it. For Plumwood denying difference is as problematic as using difference to justify a hierarchical relationship between Others. For her, therefore, it is one's *attitude* towards the Other that is most important. Modes of behaviour and attitudes are closely tied in with ethics, defined as a set of principles or rules of conduct;²¹ therefore, it is clear that the solutions to Othering posed by Lessing, Piercy, Le Guin and Atwood, which closely correspond with Plumwood's anti-dualist stance, are linked to the notion of an ethic. In this thesis, I argue

²¹ In this definition I follow that of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (1990), which cites ethic as "a set of moral principles" and ethics as "the science of morals in human conduct" and "rules of conduct".

that theirs is an expressly ecological ethic, as it is through ecological philosophy that their thinking, within the bounds of their fiction, can be explained.

On what, then, is an ecological ethic based? When Plumwood pinpoints one's attitude to difference, rather than difference itself, as the main issue in dualistic thinking, she is addressing the problem of instrumentalism. Rather than instrumentalism, she suggests that an intentionalist strategy should be adopted towards that which is different from the Self. Instrumentalism is the product of a "selfhood conceived as that of the individual who stands apart from an alien other and denies his own relation to and dependency on this other" (142), whereas intentionalism allows an ethical response encompassing respect for, and mutuality with, others (138). Intentionalism allows, as she has argued more recently, an openness to Others that sees them "as possible communicative, narrative and ethical subjects" (*Environmentalism* 177). Intentionalism, therefore, still acknowledges distinct differences, without subordinating them – clearly an important way in which the various authors examined here speculate on how to create balanced interrelationships. Indeed, their choice of speculative science fiction, with its utopian hopes and dystopian warnings (as will be shown in Chapter Two), suggests that these authors are aware of this need to change modes of conduct from instrumentalist ones to intentionalist ones. It is for this reason that I have called the dominant theme of their work an ecological *ethic*. Ecology is, as Bate has pointed out, both a "biological science and a politico-economic value system" ("Poetry" 54), and it is clearly as a part of this value system that Plumwood defines an ethic as "the domain of response to the other's needs, ends, directions, or meaning" (138). This response, or perhaps even responsibility, toward the Other is at question in this thesis.

By introducing the idea of an ethical response towards the Other, Plumwood provides a more useful means of reacting to the nature/culture dualism than do critics like Donna Haraway, and at the same time recalls two other prominent ecological thinkers: Freya Mathews and Carolyn Merchant. Plumwood specifically identifies Mathews's idea of the 'ecological self' as something which "can be viewed as a type of relational self, one which includes the goal of the flourishing of earth others and the earth community among its own primary ends, and hence respects or cares for these others for their own sake" (154). I am concerned, however, that Mathews, in *The Ecological Self* (1991), uses current physics to prove that we "are identical with the universe: it is into *its* substance that the pattern that is *our* signature is written" (91). While her point that we are all ultimately made up of the same substances is indeed true, comments which insist on us as being

“identical” with the universe can become dangerously monist if they do not take into account the different ways in which we are all, as diverse biotic and abiotic organisms, made up of this universal substance. However, although her expression of these ideas can be problematic if read as a way to subsume the part into the whole, it does not seem that Mathews is rejecting the notion of individuality. What is significant in terms of the idea of an ecological ethic is that she, like other deep ecologists, suggests a way of relating to nature which entails a shift in our perceptions of our standing as humans in our own ecology. Nonetheless, Carolyn Merchant’s partnership ethic is, for me, a more useful way of adding to Plumwood’s understanding of how an ethical or intentional relationship with both other humans and non-human nature becomes possible for the individual.

In her *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* (1995), Merchant lays out her solution to ecological problems, claiming that:

Constructing nature as a partner allows for the possibility of a personal or intimate (but not necessarily spiritual) relationship with nature and for feelings of compassion for nonhumans as well as for people who are sexually, racially, or culturally different. It avoids gendering nature as a nurturing mother or goddess and avoids the ecocentric dilemma that humans are only one of many equal parts of an ecological web and therefore morally equal to a bacterium or a mosquito. (8)

Merchant, here, advocates a “partnership ethic” that, while it would “constrain traditional ethics based on rights, rules, and utilities”, is different from the “ethic of care” usually put forward by ecofeminists (8), and which ecofeminists claim “arises out of women’s culturally constructed experiences” (7).²² Her partnership ethic “treats humans (including male partners and female partners) as equals in personal, household, and political relations and humans as equal partners with (rather than controlled-by or dominant-over) nonhuman nature” (8). She sees a partnership ethic, then, as an expression of a “mutual relationship” which

draws on the principles and advantages of both the homocentric social-interest ethic and the ecocentric environmental ethic, while rejecting the egocentric ethic associated with capitalist exploitation of people and nature. The term partnership avoids gendering nature as a mother or a goddess (sex-typing the planet), avoids endowing either males or females with a special relationship to nature or to each other (essentialism), and admits the anthropogenic, or human-generated (but not anthropocentric, or human-centered) nature of environmental ethics and metaphor. (216-217)

²² Cuomo is also unhappy about the establishment of a “care ethic” amongst ecofeminists as she feels that it venerates so-called “feminine values” (126), and I would agree that this is a problematic position.

Merchant's delineation of a partnership ethic appears to find a path through the various different schools of ecocritical practice without falling into their various traps. However, her position as an ecofeminist makes the problematic assumption that it is primarily women who are associated with nature, and who have a special relationship with it. Her understanding of the root of ecology being 'oikos' or 'house', for example, leads her to say that the "connection between the Earth and house has historically been mediated by women" (139). This is much closer to her original position in *The Death of Nature* (1980), when she claimed that the "female earth was central to the organic cosmology that was undermined by the Scientific Revolution and the rise of a market-oriented culture in early modern Europe" (xvi). She also makes claims like "[w]omen challenge the ways in which mainstream society reproduces itself through socialization and politics by envisioning and enacting alternative gender roles, employment options, and political practices" (*Earthcare* 7). Yet this is surely a generalisation that assumes too much for women and too little for men, and suggests that she is closer to the care ethic of most ecofeminists than she would like to imagine.

Despite these problems with Merchant's general position, her partnership ethic corresponds closely with Plumwood's elucidation of ideal relationships between others. Plumwood agrees that "[c]oncepts of care, solidarity and friendship present alternatives to the instrumental mode" (154-155), which she calls an "ethics of virtue" (185) or, later, a "dialogical interspecies ethics", which entails "developing the stances of openness and attention that are preliminary to dialogical and communicative relationships of sensitivity, negotiation and mutual adaption" (*Environmental* 169-170).²³ The crux of her philosophy comes in her identification of five features of dualistic thinking, and her suggestion of ways to overcome them, in her creation of "An appropriate relationship of non-hierarchical difference":

- 1 *Backgrounding* (denial): a non-hierarchical concept of difference requires a move to systems of thought, accounting, perception, decision-making, which recognise the contribution of what has been backgrounded, and which acknowledge dependency.
- 2 *Radical exclusion*: a non-hierarchical concept of difference will affirm continuity, reconceive relata in more integrated ways, and break the false choice hyperseparation presents in reclaiming the denied area of overlap.

²³ Plumwood's use of ecological principles to suggest ways of relating in a non-hierarchical way is similar to what John Barry calls a dialectical relationship rather than a dualistic one – an idea he takes from Ted Benton's social theory, which seeks, like Plumwood's, to recognise both difference and connection or commonality between the social and the natural worlds (Barry 185).

- 3 *Incorporation* (relational definition): a non-hierarchical concept of difference must review the identities of both underside and upperside. It can aim to rediscover a language and story for the underside, reclaim positive independent sources of identity and affirm resistance.
- 4 *Instrumentalism*: a non-hierarchical concept of difference implies recognising the other as a centre of needs, value and striving on its own account, a being whose ends and needs are independent of the self and to be respected.
- 5 *Homogenisation*: a non-hierarchical concept of difference involves recognising the complexity and diversity of the ‘other nations’ which have been homogenised and marginalised in their constitution as excluded other, as ‘the rest’. (60, original italics)

What Plumwood is attempting to find in describing the potential for relationships of non-hierarchical difference is a third space or liminal zone (as postcolonial theory would phrase it), between the dualist and holist world-views. The problems of backgrounding, radical exclusion and instrumentalism are based on a duality which tries to deny that which is different or hyperseparate the Self from the Other; this distancing underlies, as we saw earlier, arguments that lead to the exploitation of the Other. When trying to reject these modes of behaviour, the opposite can occur through incorporation and homogenisation. In this case, Others are included into the Self without taking into account their distinctiveness and individuality. Ecofeminists who speak of nature *as* woman or who assume that women’s experiences of abuse are identical to those of other exploited groups often fall into this particular trap.

The Other, by means of Plumwood’s framework, is neither excluded totally from the Self in a denial of “relationship and continuity”, nor does it assume the Other is the same as the Self, denying difference: “two movements are therefore required to overcome dualistic constructions of self/other – recognising kinship and recognising difference” (155). This idea of mutuality (which Plumwood takes from Jessica Benjamin), therefore, forms a path between dualism and holism (156) through mutuality or relationalism. Elsewhere, Plumwood phrases this slightly more succinctly, arguing that it is crucial that we “must attain solidarity with the other *in their difference*” (“Deep Ecology” 63, original italics).

It is this mode of behaviour – the acceptance of, respect for, and mutuality with, the Other – that I am terming an ecological ethic in this thesis: it is a more neutral term than care ethic and more suggestive of multiple interrelationships than partnership ethic, allowing for a variety of connections between diverse individuals.

The recognition of both kinship and difference suggested by the term ‘ecological ethic’ is central to this thesis, in that the successful relationships and ideal communities described in these novels maintain relationships of non-hierarchical difference. Similarly, the dystopian societies portrayed by Lessing, Atwood, Piercy and Le Guin are characterised by hierarchies based on the separation from, and inferiorisation of, the Other. What this hints at, of course, is the ultimately utopian, or intangible, nature of Plumwood’s philosophy and of the ecological ethic underlying the novels’ discourses. At this time in the world’s history such relationships of non-hierarchical difference can only be dreamed of and worked toward. What Plumwood and other recent ecological philosophers yearn for in their theorising, these authors have for many years tried to put into practice by imagining how such mutual relationships might work in the future. As this thesis will show, the fact that this proves almost impossible, even in fiction, points to the ephemeral nature of such an idea. Nonetheless, it is the *striving* for such an ecological ethic that ties together the vision of Piercy, Lessing, Le Guin and Atwood in their speculative fiction.

Extending Ecological Ethics: Ecological Aesthetics and the Narrative Context

The ecological ethic these novels elucidate is described through ideas presented by ecophilosophers such as Val Plumwood and Carolyn Merchant. How the authors enact this ethic in their novels, however, is not by producing blueprint utopias. Rather, they pit utopian and dystopian narratives against each other, create open-ended texts which undermine and re-evaluate the supposed position of the work as a whole, and create ambiguities through both content and narration. It is here that postmodernist literary practices become relevant to this discussion.

One of the major problems of ecocriticism is that it has been seen as under-theorised. As mentioned earlier, there is a sense that ecocriticism is associated purely with the realist mode.²⁴ This disturbs Dana Phillips, who urges “that ‘ecocriticism’ of literature *not* be understood to hinge on whether literature represents the natural world realistically or not”, continuing that “[v]erbal representations of nature, honestly weighed in the scales of realism, seem clumsy at best” (165). The effect of concentrating on realist texts within the field of ecocriticism has been that ecology, when used as a theme in fiction, seems often to refer only to nature and often specifically to ideas about a kind of transcendent harmony

²⁴ See pages 3 and 4 above, and Patrick Murphy’s comments particularly (*Farther Afield* 28-42).

within nature. Karl Kroeber suggests that ecological thinking is that which “tries to understand and define systems of interdependency” (140). Ecocriticism, he argues, “instead of studying works of literature in self-defensively exclusivist terms – nationalistic, ethnic, or ideological – seeks to discover each work’s contribution to comprehensive possibilities of interactivity” (140). The point Kroeber makes here is quite clearly concomitant with the ecological ethic outlined above in its rejection of the exclusionary nature of the Master Narrative.

The idea of multiple and complex interpretive possibilities is, of course, a mainstay of postmodernist literary criticism. As Adamson describes it, postmodernism “posits that all knowledges are ‘situated’ in a heterogeneous world of difference and that all sorts of problems arise when privileged individuals or groups purport to speak for Others” (81). Like others (see, for example, Connor 279), Adamson thus makes the connection between postmodernism and ecology precisely because postmodernism is similar to ecological thinking: the postmodern condition itself, as Steven Connor has claimed, “manifests the multiplication of centres of power and activity and the dissolution of every kind of totalizing narrative” (8). Barry also agrees that postmodernism is useful to ecological thinking in that it challenges the idea of the “grand narrative” (166) and the apparent progressiveness of modernity (168). Several ecological philosophers, including Plumwood (see *Environmental* 167ff), have, like some postmodern literary critics, used Bakhtinian dialogism to theorise notions of plurality. Michael McDowell, for example, has seen dialogism as “the literary equivalent of ecology, the science of relationships” because it is “one in which multiple voices or points of view interact. Monological forms, in contrast, encourage the singular speaking subject to suppress whatever doesn’t fit his or her ideology” (372). Patrick Murphy also uses a Bakhtinian model to propose that it is both possible and desirable to forge a relationship with the Other, avoiding binary constructs. He claims that ecocriticism, by using Bakhtinian thinking, can suggest a movement “towards a rational model of ‘anotherness’”, rather than one of Otherness (“Anotherness” 40). Dominic Head links ecology to both postmodern and poststructuralist theories, particularly in the “rejection of metanarrative and grand theory” and the “decentring” of “traditional given hierarchies” (28) common to all. He points out that “prescriptions for the best action, from an ecological perspective, are necessarily provisional, continually refashioned as the scientific ideas on which they are based are contested and transformed” (28). SueEllen Campbell, too, has read connections between poststructuralism and ecology. Both, she argues, are polemical in their attempts to “overturn old hierarchies”

(127) as well as “question the concepts on which the old hierarchies are built” (128).

Armbruster reaches almost exactly the same place as Plumwood in her suggestion that poststructuralism

can complement and complicate the ideas most commonly associated with ecofeminism by providing an approach to identity that encourages neither the *erasure of difference* by representing women and nature as a homogeneous, continuous whole nor its overemphasis, which can lead to alienation and the dominations of humans and nature. (“Buffalo Gals” 115, my emphasis).

Significantly, Armbruster uses Ursula Le Guin, in the same article, to prove her assertion that authors can create “a conception of human subjectivity and reality that engages with both connection and difference” (106).

The above comments make clear that there are certain overlaps between ecological philosophy and those of postmodernism and poststructuralism. It would, however, be a mistake to assert too great a similarity between ecological thought and postmodernism. In the first place, there are a variety of kinds of postmodernism – what Patricia Waugh describes as a “bewilderingly diverse range of theoretical Postmodernisms” (5). Any blanket statement linking postmodern thinking with ecological must, therefore, take into account the fact that not all types or aspects of postmodernism meld neatly with ecology. The idea of fragmentation, for example, is inimical to the sense of connectivity elucidated in ecology’s interest in relationships. The kind of ecological thinking displayed by the authors chosen for this thesis is also, as I indicated earlier, inherently utopian. Even the dystopian aspects of their texts explore the lack of an ecological mode of thinking, creating a disjuncture with pessimistic and apocalyptic elements to some postmodern thought.²⁵ The rejection of ‘Science’ and of ‘Nature’ is also problematic: as Barry points out, the deconstructivist claim that nature does not exist (outside our perceptions of it) could be used as proof against the need to take responsibility for our relationship with the environment (172). Despite some similarities between postmodernism/poststructuralism and ecology, then, I am wary of suggesting they are entirely compatible. Science, in fact, is often better able to contribute to an understanding of ecological ideas within an explicitly literary context.

Current science, far from being concerned with a single, universal truth, is actually able to foreground the paradoxical nature of sameness and difference. Werner Heisenberg,

²⁵ Huffman does claim that eco-science fiction can focus “on a specific, politically charged perceived emergency” (66). The connections between postmodernism and science fiction will be explored further in Chapter Two.

famous for his Uncertainty Principle, claims that we learn from physics that the world “appears as a complicated tissue of events, in which connections of different kinds alternate or overlap or combine and thereby determine the texture of the whole” (96). Barbara Riebling, discussing the benefits of interdisciplinarity, suggests that literary critics should, learning from science, “abandon simplistic, reductive, and dated models and begin the search for ways of talking about power, truth, politics, and literature that are complex, contingent, and open” (197). For her, the new sciences of chaos theory, nonequilibrium dynamics and ecology all “reflect that fact that complex, living systems cannot exist in *perfect* balance or symmetry, and that their behaviour is inherently unpredictable” (180, original italics). In similar vein, N. Katherine Hayles argues that the study of complex dynamism – non-linear or chaos theory – had the effect of creating the intellectual shift in the humanities towards postmodernism as it led to “a break away from universalizing, totalizing perspectives” (2). While it does reject universalism, chaos theory is not an indication of disorder or randomness, but rather an indication of a hidden order beneath dynamic systems (Hayles 9). Nonlinear systems, Hayles argues, should be seen as “rich in information rather than poor in order” (6), illustrating the similarity to postmodernism’s understanding of multiple, and yet not definitive, perspectives. This works together with ecology in that the simple idea that ecology is about stability and balance has been found to be inherently problematic in the light of recent research; this has been pointed out by several ecocritics, such as Garrard (27), Phillips (viii, 42) and Turner (43). However, as Buell argues, chaos theory and the uncertainty principle do not mean disorder and confusion, and thus are not inherently threatening to ecological philosophy (48). Freya Mathews has also pointed to this, arguing that the “two deepest non-classical principles emerging from quantum physics are the principles firstly of the interconnectedness or non-localizability of particles, and secondly of their intrinsic dynamism” (51). It is both the idea of interconnection and that of dynamism that informs modern ecology, and which has much to offer conceptualisations of an ecological ethic in a literary context.

These concepts can be fed back into ecological thinking itself – ecology is a science, after all. Ecosystems are constantly changing and do not work according to a simple linear hierarchy; rather, they show complex, dynamic interrelationships and feedback systems, often with numerous ecosystems interlocking with each other. These relationships are often spoken of as food-webs within scientific ecology, and the image of the web seems particularly apt when taken back to the ecological philosophy uncoverable in the novels examined here. Plumwood herself, elsewhere to *Feminism and the Mastery*

of Nature, suggests that “one working model which enables such an escape from the one/many dilemma pictures oppression as forming a network or web. In a web there are both one and many, both distinct foci and strands with room for some independent movement of the parts” (“The Ecopolitics” 79). The web image is one which corresponds with the ideas of recent physics, which have taught us, through wave/particle research, to see the world as both/and rather than either/or. A web represents both individual parts and their connections to one another, symbolising the ecological ethic evident in speculative novels by Atwood, Piercy, Lessing and Le Guin.

This ecological ethic is evident in more than merely the ‘politics’ of these authors – it is also evident in the aesthetics of how they present their discourses. As pointed out earlier, the texts themselves often enact the idea of multiplicity through their structure. Some texts purport to be collections of anthropological reports; others switch between viewpoints; there are stories-within-stories and the sudden inclusion of material which undercuts the previous narrative perspectives; other works have multiple narrators and shifts in space and time. These narrative strategies insist that the reader interacts with the texts on a number of levels. At the same time, the variety of perspectives cannot be isolated from one another as there are constant links between points of view and correlations between cause and effect. The web image, therefore, comes to symbolise not only the ecological ethic embedded within the plots, but also the ways in which the reader experiences each work, both as an individual text and as part of a wider variety of literary works.

As a consequence of both the ecological ethic and its embodiment in the novels as an ecological aesthetic, an ‘ecological’ critical practice is also perhaps necessary. Applying ecological thinking to literary criticism could, as a result, take into account the principles suggested by Plumwood that allow for a middle path between respecting difference and acknowledging kinship, as well as recognise that no system of relationships is static. In the case of these novels, this will allow me to trace the connections between how the authors imagine ethical relationships across race, class, gender and species, while at the same time I recognise that these are novelistic visions, not simply philosophical statements. Indeed, the very genre within which they write, as the next chapter will show, allows for creativity as well as abstraction.

* * *

Heisenberg has said that “we have to remember that what we observe is not nature in itself but nature exposed to our method of questioning” (57). Perhaps then, as literary critics, we need to be aware that what we analyse is not literature in itself but literature exposed to our method of thinking. Obviously, as in any form of literary analysis, there are limitations to approaching a text from the perspective of ecological thinking. Just as feminist literary criticism, for example, would emphasise gender issues at the expense of others, an ecological approach would perhaps emphasise the interrelationships between disparate aspects of a text rather than take note of the complexities and subtleties of each strand of the web. Nonetheless, by applying ecological philosophies to literary criticism, we have the potential to trace how multiple viewpoints work within a text.

In this thesis, therefore, it is my intention to show how the four authors I have chosen explicitly demonstrate an ecological ethic in the selected novels. I seek to show how they demonstrate a desire to find a middle path between recognising difference and recognising kinship in their rejection of Othering, and the problems inherent in the process. Some novels are more successful than others in this undertaking, but generally I feel that Atwood, Le Guin, Lessing and Piercy all seek a similar route between dualism and holism in their speculative fiction. Most often this is expressed through the imagery of “a complex and delicate web” (Bate, *The Song* 23) of relationships between different human and non-human parts of the world as a way of moving beyond Othering. The next chapter takes the first step in placing the idea of an ecological ethic in the context of science fiction’s subcategory of speculative fiction; the remainder of the thesis then examines how the various authors demonstrate and question this ethic in their individual texts. Hopefully the result will show that it is possible, in the context of literary criticism, to highlight new ways of thinking about ourselves, our fellow humans and the non-human world in which we interact.

Chapter 2

An Ecological Ethic in the Context of Speculative Fiction

Like *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake* is a speculative fiction, not a science fiction proper. It contains no intergalactic space travel, no teleportation, no Martians. As with *The Handmaid's Tale*, it invents nothing we haven't already invented or started to invent. Every novel begins with a *what if*, and then sets forth its axioms. 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?*

– Margaret Atwood, "Writing *Oryx and Crake*." (322-323, original italics)

An ecological ethic, as outlined in the previous chapter, is a means of taking ideas from the science of ecology and using them in a cultural, social and political context – not merely an environmental one – to suggest ways to move beyond Othering and form what Val Plumwood calls relationships of non-hierarchical difference and Carolyn Merchant a partnership ethic. Clearly this desire for, and examination of, an ecological ethic can be traced in many different kinds of text, from realist to fantastic and from fiction to non-fiction. In this thesis, however, this ecological ethic is explored in the context of a very specific kind of science fiction with strong ties to utopian/dystopian fiction: speculative fiction.

Outlining the aims of speculative fiction and its evolution within the broader scope of science fiction, this chapter investigates why an ecological ethic is so easily explored within a mode that is not bound by the rules of realist texts. Indeed, Plumwood, Merchant and others who suggest the possibility for relationships of non-hierarchical difference and an ethics of care and respect are involved in a utopian project themselves, inasmuch as their desires for these kinds of relationships with others are written out of a present and a past which has *not* been able to demonstrate such relationships across race, gender, class and human/non-human classifications. This is significant for, as this chapter will show, speculative fiction is a particular type of textual practice that engages fruitfully with utopian possibilities through the medium of the futuristic imaginings of science fiction. More importantly, it is a kind of writing that has become associated with feminist and environmentalist issues, as well as those dealing with myths surrounding race and class. Furthermore, the speculative texts produced by Ursula Le Guin, Marge Piercy, Doris Lessing and Margaret Atwood clearly engage with the possibility for societies to produce the kind of mutual interrelationships suggested by the idea of an ecological ethic.

This chapter is therefore divided into three main sections. First, the emergence of speculative fiction within the broader field of science fiction is addressed, in order to show how speculative fiction is both writing out of traditional science fiction and against it. Secondly, the important contribution of the feminist utopia to speculative fiction is assessed, while at the same time the limitations of purely feminist readings of the chosen texts are outlined. In this case, the link between feminist utopias and ecological utopias is explored in order to demonstrate the importance of the wider understanding that an ecological ethic can give to an analysis of such novels. Finally, the shift (roughly around the millennium) into a more dystopian mode in speculative writing is assessed in the light of what speculative novels can contribute to the debates surrounding the possibilities for engaging in relationships of non-hierarchical difference.

Science Fiction and the Emergence of Speculative Fiction

The field of science fiction experienced a major shift in the second half of the twentieth century. The phenomenon which some have called the 'New Wave'¹ began a trend towards socially and politically conscious science fiction that, through the influence of utopian thinking, could profitably be called speculative fiction. It is often stylistically more mature, and in terms of content, less interested in technology and pure science, and more interested in issues brought to light by the 1960s counter-culture movements. Although it has been suggested that "the contribution of the Civil Rights movement, the New Left, the ecological movement, the anti-war protests of the early 1970s and the emerging gay and lesbian movements were all significant" (James 225), many critics emphasise that the development of speculative fiction, specifically in its utopian emphasis and form, stemmed from the growth of feminist thinking particularly. But what exactly is science fiction, and how did speculative fiction emerge out of it during the socio-political upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s?

Gary K. Wolfe has called attempts to find a definition for science fiction "something of a Grail quest" (*The Known* xiii), a description verified by the generally unsuccessful attempts of numerous critics to reach a consensus. In 2002, Brooks Landon suggested that it could simply be described as "the literature that considers the impact of

¹ See the later explanation of the complexities of the term 'New Wave' (pages 46-47 below).

science and technology on humanity” (31), echoing Mark Hillegas, who suggests that SF² is a means for “social criticism”, as well as literature “examining the whole relationship of human life to scientific and technological progress” (274). These, however, are fairly broad and generalised definitions: a more specific endeavour comes from the pre-eminent science fiction critic Darko Suvin. He disregards attempts to define SF thematically, but rather advocates that

it should be defined as a fictional tale determined by the hegemonic literary device of a *locus* and/or *dramatis personae* that (1) are *radically or at least significantly different from the empirical times, places, and characters* of ‘mimetic’ or ‘naturalist’ fiction, but (2) are nonetheless – to the extent that SF differs from other ‘fantastic’ genres, that is, ensembles of fictional tales without empirical validation – simultaneously perceived as *not-impossible* within the cognitive (cosmological and anthropological) norms of the author’s epoch. (viii, original italics)

Suvin’s attempt to define the term is fairly complex, but emphasises two main points: that science fiction should be “*significantly different*” from realist fiction, and that it should also be separated from other fantastic genres because it at least has the potential to be possible – unlike the magic, fairies or elves of fantasy, which belongs to the literature of the *impossible*.

This definition works well for most types of science fiction, but Suvin develops his theory further by suggesting that, as well as employing an overriding or hegemonic “novum” (70), his chosen term for the new or different factor mentioned above, science fiction is “the *literature of cognitive estrangement*” (4, original italics). This notion of estrangement (which Suvin takes from Shklovsky and Brecht) is important to an understanding of the mode because science fiction’s

specific modality of existence is a feedback oscillation that moves now from the author’s and implied reader’s norm of reality to the narratively actualized novum in order to understand the plot-events, and now back from these novelties to the author’s reality, in order to see it afresh from the new perspective gained. (Suvin 71)

The use of “cognition” in the definition signifies that this estrangement is that which allows for critical reflection on the world (10). However, the broad scope of science fiction does not always allow for this kind of complexity: Suvin’s definition suggests a literary intent on the part of all science fiction when, in reality, ninety percent of science fiction (like much

² As mentioned in the introduction, I use the abbreviation SF interchangeably with the term science fiction (but not speculative fiction). Some critics chose not to capitalise SF, and where this is the case I have left ‘sf’ as is when quoting.

fiction, in fact) is, as Theodore Sturgeon famously commented, “crud”.³ The bad science fiction to which Sturgeon points here is not necessarily interested in employing the concept of cognitive estrangement: Patrick Parrinder, for example, points out that “the use of specific defamiliarization devices in an SF novel by no means guarantees that the novel as a whole could be found subversive or even mildly critical of established norms” (“Characterization” 149-150). Furthermore, while estrangement must necessarily form part of a science fiction novel through the imposition of the novum, the cognitive or critical element will have a greater or lesser importance in individual novels and for individual readers (some readers, it must be acknowledged, may read purely to escape reality and may resist the writer’s attempts to prompt reflection and contemplation). Virginia Allen and Terri Paul agree with this in that they argue that science fiction is “inevitably a product of the society that produces it”, but specify that “good science fiction can compel cognitive dissonance and force a genuine shift in the reader’s perspective through exercising its mandate to challenge scientifically some accepted assumption about the known world” (170).

What science fiction does, then, depends very much on the kind of science fiction it is, and the evolution of science fiction demonstrates that the intent of SF as a whole has changed and grown over the years. Scholes, in his famous attempt to redefine ‘SF’ as ‘structural fabulation’, contends that modern science fiction derives from the romance tradition, “for this tradition insists upon a radical discontinuity between its world and the world of ordinary human experience” (28). That romance must have had some impact on the rise of SF is suggested too by Stableford, who notes that some critics place its origins firmly in the hands of Mary Shelley, arguing that the Gothic romance *Frankenstein* is a prototypical science fiction novel with its interest in the scientist’s role in creating new and original technologies (“Science Fiction Before” 19). Others see its beginnings in the scientific romances of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells (Slusser 27; Landon 3). In both cases, the importance of the novum is clearly evident in what science fiction was trying to achieve. However, still more critics place SF’s origins as a genre in 1926. This is the year in which Hugo Gernsback was supposed to have invented the term ‘science fiction’, although he actually only coined the short-lived tag “scientifiction” (Clareson,

³ Landon quotes “Sturgeon’s Law” as:
 Ninety percent of everything is crud.
 Corollary 1: The existence of immense quantities of trash in science fiction is admitted and it is regretted; but it is no more unnatural than the existence of trash anywhere.
 Corollary 2: The best science fiction is as good as the best fiction in any field. (3)

“Introduction” x). Science fiction was, in fact, first spoken of in 1851 by William Wilson,⁴ indicating that its origins lay many years before its widespread recognition. The uncertainty over the genesis of SF appears to have set in because Gernsback did much to spread the phrase ‘science fiction’, just as he – along with another pulp and magazine editor, John Campbell – did much to popularise the genre itself. Indeed, it is often suggested that the Campbell/Gernsback era is the second phase in the rise of science fiction (sometimes called the ‘Golden Age’), following from the less easily determined era of scientific romance (Landon 3).

This so-called Golden Age in the history of science fiction is responsible for many of the stereotypes associated with SF as genre writing. It was an era of mass-production and generally poor-quality writing that unfortunately reduced the potential of science fiction to its lowest possible level in many cases, leading to its widespread dismissal by the academic establishment. Indeed, Stanislaw Lem famously attacked the majority of twentieth-century American SF precisely for being so generic, claiming that science fiction

is reminiscent of neo-positivism’s aggressive reductionism in that it acts as if the miserable repertoire of the detective story and the adventure novel were sufficient for structuring any phenomenon in the whole spectrum of the infinite universe, regardless of its time, place, and degree of complexity, and all the situations in which human civilization may ever find itself. Thus science fiction designates its problems (contact with aliens, the spirit in the machine, the instrumentalization of values, etc.) but it does not embody them in narrative structures. (199)

Albert Wendland also sees an inherent conservatism in American SF that seems illogical considering that its intent was apparently “future shock”. He cites as part of this conformist era “assumptions that imperialism will continue, that economic incentives will always be important..., that a primarily Anglo-Saxon culture will predominate, and that ‘human nature’ will remain almost exactly the way it is now” (36). This is the science fiction of aggressive attacks on, and by, alien forces, the Cowboy-Western imposed on outer space, and much of it would not fall into Suvin’s definition of “the *literature of cognitive estrangement*”.

It seems that it was only after the Second World War that science fiction began to live up to its promise as a literature capable of critical force, and began to reflect back on the society out of which it was written. This third phase of science fiction writing by no means indicates a shift in the entire body of work (genre SF continues to this day), but there is consensus that from the late 1950s some science fiction writers began to use the

⁴ See, for example, Wolfe (*Critical Terms* 108) and Stableford (“Science Fiction Before” 19).

medium for a much more literary purpose. This is the stage out of which texts like *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *Woman on the Edge of Time* emerged. Problematically, however, critics argue about the terminology attached to this apparent revolution: it is sometimes called the New Wave, sometimes soft SF, social science fiction or speculative fiction.

The term 'New Wave' is probably the most contentious as it is debatable whether it can be used for only a few specific writers, such as J. G. Ballard or John Brunner, or for the change as a whole. Critics generally agree that the term was coined by Judith Merril, who put together annual compilations of what she considered to be the year's best science fiction, but it is also a term closely associated with the British editor Michael Moorcock who, in his *New Worlds*, tried to encourage a break with the conventional and badly written science fiction of the first half of the twentieth century (Latham 205). Broderick points out that the New Wave was "never quite formalized and often repudiated by its major exemplars", but was, as much as a change in style, "a reaction against genre exhaustion" (49).⁵ Certainly, whether or not 'New Wave' is used to describe the specific writers Merril and Moorcock nurtured or the general trend it sparked off, the term itself illustrates the major shift in focus from pulp to a more cerebral type of SF, indicated in both its more literary writing style and its shift away from themes prominent in 'Golden Age' SF.

The emergence of a new type of science fictional writing from the 1960s is generally supposed to represent a movement away from plot towards style. It has been described variously as "an attempt to find a language and a social perspective for science fiction that is as adventurous and progressive as its technological vision" (Scholes and Rabkin 88); as "a disruptive textuality seeking to enact its ideas in richly modernist symbol and vocabulary" (Broderick 55);⁶ and as "introducing new narrative strategies into science fiction, ... releasing the power of science fiction images as metaphor, and ... weakening the boundaries that had long separated science fiction from Mainstream fiction" (Wolfe, *Critical Terms* 82). The shift started by the New Wave is often called soft science fiction because the focus of these emergent texts was less on "scientific hardware" (Kumar,

⁵ As an indication of the confusion surrounding the term New Wave, Landon has included Harlan Ellison's *Again, Dangerous Visions* in the New Wave – a collection that included Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest*. On the other hand, despite arguments for the influence of New Wave writer Philip K. Dick on Le Guin's work, Scholes and Rabkin argue that unlike Dick (and Brunner), Le Guin is not a New Wave writer (71), suggesting that the difference between New Wave and Non-New Wave is one of attitude: "Dick focuses bitterly on alienation and dehumanization. Le Guin concentrates on integration and transcendence" (75-76). Latham, in a further complication, suggests that Le Guin is a prominent New Wave author from the United States, quoting *The Left Hand of Darkness* as a pivotal text in this regard (204, 210).

⁶ Butler suggests that New Wave SF can be linked to modernist discourse, and cyberpunk to postmodernism (144). See the final section of this chapter for a discussion of cyberpunk and postmodernism in relation to speculative fiction.

Utopia and Anti-utopia 404) than it was in the ‘soft’ or social sciences of psychology, sociology and anthropology (Landon 29). This so-called “rebellion” against the traditions of science fiction (Prince 26) was also in opposition to the type of writing which came to be known as ‘hard’ SF – the kind of science fiction based strongly on technology, and which Westfahl has called “a stimulating but frivolous ‘game,’ as writers enjoy the process of developing imaginary but scientifically valid concepts” (188).

The emphasis on the social sciences in the science fiction of this period is seen to have developed in response to the social and political upheavals of the 1960s and, as mentioned above, is often linked with the anti-Vietnam War Campaign, Women’s Liberation, and environmentalist and civil rights movements.⁷ The combination of these ingredients is a clear indication as to why an ecological ethic has so much relevance to this type of writing: an ecological ethic engages strongly with patterns of dominance and submission, and attempts to work beyond them to create new relationships and models of behaviour. All of these movements were specific attempts to overturn traditional power relationships in a system which had previously seen Caucasians, men and humans as part of a hierarchy under which a variety of Others were forced to submit. The medium of science fiction was therefore an ideal space for some authors engaging with these issues to speculate either on the possibility for societies in which these hierarchical patterns are disordered, or to examine the potential consequences for societies should these notions of Othering be taken to extremes.

It is for this reason that, when faced with the plethora of terminology relating to the third phase in the development of science fiction, I have chosen to use ‘speculative fiction’ for the novels with which I am concerned. ‘Soft’ science fiction stands against ‘hard’ or ‘pulp’ science fiction in a particular way, and by more traditional practitioners of the craft it can be a means to signal derogation rather than approbation. The word ‘soft’ also suggests a lack of rigour that is plainly not intended by the literature itself. ‘New Wave’, as we have seen, is a contested label, and I agree with Landon’s claim that the New Wave is more distinctive and closed than it seems (150). In addition, the inclusion of three authors who were not a part of the evolving science fiction scene of the 1960s makes me wary of using such a specific term to describe their inroads into the science fictional mode.⁸ ‘Social

⁷ See for example Latham (203), Broderick (49), Spark (153), and Wolmark (“Time and Identity” 157-158), as well as James (225), already quoted above.

⁸ Significantly, Landon notes Lessing, Atwood and Piercy as feminist writers who have, despite not coming from an SF background, “produced some of the most powerful works of SF writers in the 1980s and 1990s” (141).

science fiction' certainly emphasises the significance of anthropology and sociology on the kind of writing growing out of the 1960s, but suggests a much more limited subject matter than is actually the case. Wolfe, on the other hand, defines speculative fiction as "a particular subtype of science fiction in which 'established facts' are extrapolated to produce a new situation, *a new framework for human action*" (*Critical Terms* 122, my italics), while pointing out its close relationship to social science fiction and the New Wave. This definition seems to me to be the closest to what all four authors are attempting to do in the novels featured in this thesis.

Although the term 'speculative fiction' was originally Robert Heinlein's, Judith Merrill, of New Wave fame, is credited with popularising it as a rejection of the more technologically oriented 'science fiction'. While Latham has called it "a shifty moniker capable of endless amendment and fluid application" (203), Merrill herself did not see the term as more general than science fiction, but rather as more specific to a certain type of science fiction.

Speculative fiction: stories whose objective is to explore, to discover, to *learn*, by means of projection, extrapolation, analogue, hypothesis-and-paper-experimentation, something about the nature of the universe, of man, of 'reality.' Obviously, all fiction worth considering is 'speculative' in the sense that it endeavors to reach, or to expose, some aspect of Truth. But it is equally true – and irrelevant – to say that all fiction is imagination or all fiction is fantasy. I use the term 'speculative fiction' here specifically to describe the mode which makes use of the traditional 'scientific method' (observation, hypothesis, experimentation) to examine some postulated approximation of reality, by introducing a given set of changes – imaginary or inventive – into the common background of 'known facts,' creating an environment in which the responses and perceptions of the characters will reveal something about the inventions, the characters, or both. (Merril 60, original italics)

Speculative fiction, then, does two things: not only does it draw more on so-called soft sciences like sociology, anthropology and psychology, but also uses an identifiable medium, what Merrill calls "the traditional 'scientific method' (observation, hypothesis, experimentation)" (60). Merrill is alluding here to the idea of the thought experiment, which is vital to what Csicsery-Ronay called the "hypothetical novel" in science fiction ("SF/Criticism" 44) and which Wolfe has defined as "imaginary experiments under hypothetical ideal conditions in order to infer logically probable results" (*Critical Terms* 133). The term comes from Werner Heisenberg's phrase *gedankenexperimente*, and had its original use in the sciences as a way, as Arlen Hansen phrases it, for twentieth century

physicists to “cast their theories in open-ended fantasy-models” (54).⁹ The thought-experiments of speculative fiction writers take the form of novels dealing with “social and technological change” (Wolfe, *Critical Terms* 133) rather than the quantum mechanics of more traditional SF.¹⁰ This echoes the intent voiced by Atwood when she claims her speculative fiction asks “*What if we continue down the road we’re already on?*” (“Writing *Oryx and Crake*” 323, original italics.); Le Guin when she claims that her science fiction is not used to describe predictions of the future, “but to describe reality, the present world” (“Introduction to *Left Hand*” 131); and Lessing when she claims that space fiction has taken on the “thankless role of the despised illegitimate son who can afford to tell truths the respectable siblings either do not dare, or, more likely, do not notice because of their respectability” (“Some remarks” 9).

While these comments indicate that the authors themselves see their project in similar terms to how Suvin would define science fiction, Atwood speaks of “speculative fiction” and Lessing of “space fiction”, suggesting a reluctance to accept the label ‘science fiction’ for their texts. While this could partly be explained by the fact that Atwood, Piercy and Lessing have moved into the SF medium from other forms of fiction, mainly realism, it also points to the two different ways in which science fiction can be understood: it is important to distinguish between science fiction as genre and science fiction as mode. Farah Mendlesohn, for example, has argued that SF “is less a genre – a body of writing from which one can expect certain plot elements and specific tropes – than an ongoing discussion” (“Introduction” 1), reflecting the difficulties critics have faced in their search for a definition. Like others, she points out that many of the plot lines in science fictional novels could rather be identified with other, wide-ranging genres (3), an idea suggested also by Hillegas (275). Landon, too, rejects the notion of an SF genre, claiming that it is an “epistemological force” closer to modernism and postmodernism than to any other kind of genre writing (xii), returning us to Mendlesohn’s claim that a “reader’s expectations of sf are governed less by what happens than how that happening is described, and by the critical tools with which the reader is expected to approach the text” (1). What this suggests is that

⁹ Guthke has suggested that science fiction “is in fact a special form of philosophical literature that allows a writer grappling with the philosophical questioning thrown up by scientific advances to extrapolate more boldly and give freer rein to his imagination than those who write only as physicists are able to do” (22).

¹⁰ Even Suvin suggests that the main functions of science fiction are extrapolative and analogic modelling, using our own world as a starting point (27-29) – modelling that clearly cannot happen without the element of hypothesis in the thought experiment.

a novel can be seen as ‘science fiction’ more as a result of the way in which it is read, than through definite themes or plots. For instance, Atwood’s rejection of the term science fiction relies on her understanding of science fiction as a genre – in other words, as a type of fiction including “intergalactic space travel”, “teleportation”, or “Martians” (“Writing *Oryx and Crake*” 322-323), which are features of generic SF, rather than of texts written in the science fictional mode.

It is important, therefore, to ascertain that the novels examined here fall within the science fictional *mode*, rather than the science fiction *genre*. In fact, in many ways the movement of some science fiction authors into more speculative writing in the 1960s suggests is that this is the point which signals science fiction’s transition from genre to mode. Speculative fiction is not used here as a way to avoid using the term science fiction, or as an interchangeable label for science fiction or SF, but to illustrate that these novels by Atwood, Le Guin, Lessing and Piercy *are* science fiction, albeit the specific sub-category of speculative fiction. Moreover, the speculative novels examined in this thesis intersect with various other literary traditions, such as utopian/dystopian writing, women’s writing and writing about the environment. Indeed, the earlier novels of all four authors could be – and often have been – analysed as examples of a specific kind of speculative fiction: the critical feminist utopia. Consequently it is essential to understand how Le Guin’s early Hainish novels, Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Lessing’s *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five* and Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* can be read both as feminist utopias and – as the detailed analysis of them in the next part of this thesis will show – as texts which reach further than the conventional feminist utopia.

Feminist Utopias and the Emergence of an Ecological Ethic in Speculative Fiction

Phillip Wegner has argued that there is a utopian impulse in much science fiction (79), but stresses that its importance grew dramatically in the 1960s and 1970s (91) – a time which, as we have already seen, heralded the arrival of an experimental, speculative type of science fiction. Indeed, the influence of utopianism on science fiction is partially responsible for the development of speculative fiction: Krishan Kumar has linked modern utopian fiction explicitly with the New Wave, suggesting that in the years after World War Two, with the increased threat of nuclear catastrophe, utopian ideas began to gain prominence in the type of science fiction in which “states of consciousness became more important than intergalactic wars” (*Utopia and Anti-Utopia* 404). Utopian fiction’s interest

in critiquing current social order is akin to the thought experiment of speculative fiction, but what exactly is utopian fiction in its various incarnations, and how specifically does it relate to the feminist project, and furthermore, to the concept of an ecological ethic?

The word ‘utopia’ was invented by Thomas More (with the publication of his *Utopia* in 1516) and is what David Ketterer has called a “compromising pun on the Greek *ou topos* meaning ‘no place’ and the greek *eu topos* meaning ‘good place’” (*New Worlds* 97). In this sense, the dystopia – the negative utopia or ‘bad place’ – is reflected in the idea of utopia as it does not exist in the real world either, but is also an imaginative extrapolation of aspects of this world explored in fiction. Whether one speaks of utopia or dystopia, it is important to note the distinctions between utopian fiction and utopian politics: the latter concentrates more on the idea of a so-called ‘blueprint’ for social change. Like Kumar, who claims that many confuse utopianism in the literary sense with social philosophy (*Utopianism* 92), my main interest will not be in utopian politics (like Marxism or socialism, for example), but in the idea of utopia as “a work of imaginative fiction” (Kumar, *Utopianism* 27) – however much political ideals may inform such fiction.

The relationship between science fiction and utopianism is, and has always been, a significant one: Kumar even suggests that utopian fiction is, “using the term in its broadest sense, a species of ‘science fiction’” (*Utopianism* 20). Suvin has the same opinion, stating that utopia is “the *socio-political subgenre of science fiction*” – but he also points out that, “conversely, SF is at the same time wider than and at least collaterally descended from utopia” (61, original italics). Utopian fiction is, of course, a much older form of literature than science fiction (or even More’s *Utopia*), with its ideas originating in myths of Eden or the Golden Age,¹¹ and in ancient Classical philosophy, even if its terminology is more recent. In its classical form, utopia was an imaginary and perfect community, where, as Edward James claims, “[a]uthors offered ingenious ways to promote happiness and contentment ... by offering job satisfaction in various ways, and great freedom for the individual” (220). Science fiction is not occupied with depicting an ideal society, but it is – as we have seen – interested, in its better forms, with critiquing the present world. When Barbara Goodwin argues that utopias “are often written, like allegories, to influence people’s ways of thinking, and do not always demand the implementation of the utopian blueprint *in toto*” (69), it reminds us of the emphasis on the critical nature of SF in Suvin’s definition of it as the literature of *cognitive* estrangement.

¹¹ It is because of the connections between Eden and utopia that Rabkin argues that utopian writing is so often atavistic (4).

Significantly, the links between science fiction and utopian fiction developing out of the 1960s led to a particular kind of utopian writing: the critical utopia. Tom Moylan developed the idea of the critical utopia out of a recognition that the new kinds of utopian speculation in the 1970s were not classical utopias, but more critical and self-aware:

A central concern in the critical utopia is the awareness of the limitations of the utopian tradition, so that these texts reject utopia as blueprint while preserving it as dream. Furthermore, the novels dwell on the conflict between the ordinary world and the utopian society opposed to it so that the process of social change is more directly articulated. Finally, the novels focus on the continuing presence of difference and imperfection within utopian society itself and thus render more recognizable and dynamic alternatives. (Moylan, *Demand* 10-11)

Critical utopias, therefore, carry with them what Moylan terms a “utopian impulse” (*Demand* 26), while remaining open-ended in their expression of possibilities for social change “based generally upon principles of autonomy, mutual aid, and equality” (27) – principles, however, put forward in a revisionary rather than a totalising manner (31). Moylan himself notes the influence of both the feminist and the ecology movements on the rise of the critical utopia (27), and suggests that it was the changes within the science fiction of the 1960s (sparked off by such movements) that opened up a literary space which allowed for critical reflections on current society (42). It is immediately clear, therefore, that the idea of speculative fiction encapsulates within it both the utopian impulse and the critical reflexivity of the critical utopia.¹²

Feminism and Utopianism

The revival of utopianism in the form of the critical utopia has been associated with the feminist and ecology movements – as Moylan suggests above. His association of critical utopias specifically with writers such as Joanna Russ, Ursula Le Guin and Marge Piercy (*Demand* 10) suggests, however, that the connections are particularly clear in the field of feminist science fiction. Indeed, this is a common perception: Brian Attebury points out that before the explosion of feminist science fiction reintroduced the concept of utopian fiction, it was considered a dead genre (*Decoding* 107), and Veronica Hollinger goes further, claiming that “feminist authors virtually reinvented the genre of utopian fiction”

¹² The later emergence of the critical dystopia within speculative fiction is discussed in the final section of this chapter.

("Feminist" 128).¹³ It is certainly true that the major focus of research in speculative fiction has been on the feminist aspect of the utopian and critical utopian novels published from the late 1960s into the 1970s and 1980s: Marleen Barr's groundbreaking work in this regard has been followed by major studies by authors such as Natalie Rosinsky, Sarah Lefanu, Nan Bowman Albinski and Frances Bartkowski in the 1980s; Lucie Armitt, Robin Roberts, Jenny Wolmark and Joanna Russ in the 1990s; and, more recently, Brian Attebury and Justine Larbalestier. All these works, plus several other contributions, have concentrated on a spate of novels (including some of those covered in this thesis), examine how a feminist science fiction – mainly focused on explicitly feminist utopias – emerged in the 1970s. Of course, the suggestion made by many critics that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was the first science fiction text¹⁴ indicates that there has long been a connection between women's writing and science fiction: both, like gothic, supernatural and fantasy writing, share "their general exclusion from what is still frequently considered to be the 'canon' of Great Literature" (Armitt, "Introduction" 4), and perhaps it is this that led feminist authors in the late twentieth century to choose non-realist ways to express themselves. The emphasis on feminism in the extant criticism is partially an indication of academic trends, but also reveals the detailed analysis of gender issues found in novels such as *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Word for World is Forest*, *The Dispossessed*, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*.

These novels, published between 1969 and 1985, each make use of their position within science fiction to create what Jean Martens has called "a vehicle for oppositional thought": the science fictional mode, she argues, rejects "the rigidity and closure of 'utopia as blueprint'" and thus gives writers "the opportunity to exploit the genre, not to present cut-and-dried solutions to perceived problems, but as a vehicle for oppositional thought" (47). Martens, while obviously echoing Moylan's arguments to a degree, is correct in suggesting that it is the alliance between science fiction and utopian writing that gives writers of speculative fiction the unique ability to create a thought-provoking and

¹³ As Shaw points out, there were women writers of science fiction before the 1970s – the most obvious example is Charlotte Perkins Gilman, but she also includes authors like Katharine Burdekin, C. L. Moore and Margaret St Clair (see Shaw's *Women, Science and Fiction*).

¹⁴ Mark Rose points out that "we should understand that in labeling, say *Frankenstein* as science fiction we are retroactively recomposing that text under the influence of a generic idea that did not come into being until well after it was written" (5). I agree that *Frankenstein* was not written as science fiction or as specifically feminist science fiction, and thus caution should be maintained in making claims for it as the seminal text for either; however, it is clear that it has been extremely influential on both science fiction and feminist science fiction.

challenging text, but above all, a relevant text. As Rosemary Jackson, who includes science fiction and utopian allegories in her definition of fantasy, argues: “Fantasy re-combines and inverts the real, but it does not escape it: it exists in a parasitical or symbiotic relation to the real. The fantastic cannot exist independently of that ‘real’ world which it seems to find so frustratingly finite” (20). The infinite possibilities of science fiction can combine with the often lacklustre nature of utopian political theory, therefore, to create texts that are both instructive as well as entertaining. As Pamela J. Annas comments,

SF as a genre is more useful than ‘mainstream’ fiction for exploring possibilities for social change precisely because it allows idea to become flesh, abstraction to become concrete, imaginative extrapolation to become aesthetic reality. It allows the writer to create and the reader to experience and recreate a new or transformed world based on a set of assumptions different from those we usually accept. It allows the reader, for a while, to be reborn into a reborn world. (n.pag.)

It is for this reason that ideas about social change lend themselves so well to speculative writing: it is able to engage with specific issues through such “imaginative extrapolation”, and this perhaps is why so much of the existing scholarship on these novels has emerged from an area with a vested interest in changing social norms: feminist studies.

Lucie Armitt argues that women have chosen science fiction as a medium because it allows them a space “to *escape into* – that is, to depict – an alterative reality within which centrality is possible” (“Introduction” 9, original italics). The issue of “centrality” is extremely important in relation to these texts, as it highlights the position of women’s issues and women’s writing as marginal to the centre. Women’s speculative writing, therefore, is in the interesting position of being marginal to both so-called mainstream writing and to science fiction. Rather than making it merely doubly peripheral, however, this combination allows it the freedom to explore feminist issues in ways impossible in either mainstream fiction or traditional science fiction. It is, as Sarah Lefanu puts it, “not the ‘what if...?’ of typical science fiction but the impassioned ‘if only...’ of feminist science fiction” (*Feminism* 64), that gives it its strength.¹⁵ This passionate hope for a better world relates clearly to Anne Mellor’s argument that feminist theory is “inherently utopian”, as it “is grounded on the assumption of gender equality, a social equality between the sexes which has never existed in the historical past” (243). Both Donna Fancourt and

¹⁵ Landon argues that “the reciprocal relationship between SF and feminism has been doubly rewarding: just as SF has proved to be a ‘zone of possibility’ for feminist discourse, feminist concerns have created important ‘zones of possibility’ within the genre’s narratives, accounting for perhaps the most important single development in SF since the 1970s” (124). This suggests that speculative writing not only gains strength from its interrelations with science fiction, but that it has fed back energy into science fiction too.

Kim Trainor support this argument, suggesting that the position of women in society means that speculative fiction gives women writers a space to engage with “alternate possibilities” (Fancourt 109) and commit “to institutional change” (Trainor 30). But, while all these critics agree that feminism is an important driving force behind utopian speculations, particularly in the 1970s, what exactly is meant by feminism in this context?

Like definitions of ecology, as indicated in the previous chapter, definitions of feminism are fairly fluid. Rita Felski has argued that classifications of what constitutes a feminist text tend to vary from critic to critic, but that any text that reveals a “serious questioning of the existing basis of male-female relations or any sustained refusal of the values of a male dominated society” (14-15) can be considered feminist at heart. How this feminism is expressed in speculative fiction differs from author to author, but Jenny Wolmark points towards the Kristevan three-tiered model of feminist struggle as an initial entry point into the feminist politics of speculative writers:

The first stage of this model consists of a feminism which is centred on the liberal struggle for equal rights for women; the second stage is a separatist feminism of difference which asserts that women are of value in themselves as women, rather than in terms of a patriarchal order which excludes them; the third stage is one in which all binary oppositions are deconstructed. (Wolmark, *Aliens* 20)

The history of the feminist utopia indicates that Wolmark’s adaption of a Kristevan approach to feminist speculation is useful in that the last two categories specifically find expression in the evolution of the genre.¹⁶

Many of the first feminist utopias were all-female societies in which the authors found a space to express a utopian ideal of womanhood roughly aligned with so-called second-stage feminism. This is a trend located in even the earliest texts, like Mary E. Bradley Lane’s *Mizora: A Prophecy* (serialised 1880-1881) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* (1915). All-female societies were not, however limited to novels from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Joanna Russ’s *The Female Man* was published in 1975, Suzy McKee Charnas’s *Motherlines* in 1978, Sally Miller Gearhart’s *The Wanderground* in 1979. Each of these novels includes some form of all-female society which is explicitly designed as a feminist utopia. Robin Roberts initially calls such creations “radical” and “rigorous” (68), but she later acknowledges the essentialism of

¹⁶ Kristeva sees the first two stages as comprising women’s desire for “insertion into history” in the first case, and “the radical *refusal* of the subjective limitations” imposed by history, arguing that the third stage is a “mixture of [these] two attitudes” (20). The suggestion of the both/and nature of the third stage is similar to that of the ecological ethic outlined earlier.

many of the early feminist utopias by pointing out that they only function by excluding men and rely “on a simple reversal of values” (73). Mellor agrees that many such novels “give portraits of men that seem almost ludicrous in their reliance upon sex-role stereotypes” (250), but does see their contribution as positive in that they “project a felt need to return to and affirm a more direct and simple interaction between humanity, animals and vegetative life” (247) – an aspect of feminist utopias which, as will be seen later, is important in the development of an ecological ethic in the texts examined in this thesis. These separatist utopias are, as Martens shows, founded in the belief of “radical feminist gynocentrism [which] theorises that the differences are so essential to the genders that men and women are in fact socially incompatible” (32). In this, they clearly fall into Kristeva’s second stage of feminism in which women try to find value for themselves outside the patriarchal world of their every-day experiences, but, as a result, do suffer from a naïve and essentialist outlook. As Wolmark comments, women-only utopias “do not so much problematise gender relations as reproduce them, so that the communities themselves are based on relations of gender domination and inequality, with the balance tipped in favour of women not men” (*Aliens* 81-82), and as Toril Moi remarks, “an ‘undeconstructed’ form of ‘stage two’ feminism, unaware of the metaphysical nature of gender identities, runs the risk of becoming an inverted form of sexism” (13). Although these feminist utopias all make interesting and important contributions to the feminist debate, I am wary, as Wolmark and Moi are, of the potential for anti-male sentiment, believing that their positive value in creating a proudly female identity is undermined by their separatism. It is for this reason that I have excluded such texts from this thesis, as essentialism and exclusion are antithetical to the ecological ethic of partnership and respect.

Rosinsky has suggested that feminists envision utopia in two different ways, broadly seen as those who take an “essentialist position, with its gynocentric emphasis on women’s spirituality, physiology, and history” – the all-female utopias already discussed – and those who “advocate an androgynous vision of human nature, maintaining that sex roles and characteristics conventionally associated with gender identity are learned, rather than innate traits” (1). The androgynous feminist utopia can further be divided into those describing “a society of biological androgynes, and a genuinely egalitarian two-sex society” (Mellor 243). Whether biologically androgynous or androgynous merely in their arrangement of equality between men and women, Le Guin, Piercy, Lessing and Atwood all try to assess, in their early novels, the relationship between the two genders and project ways in their fictions to deconstruct gender roles rather than merely to invert them.

Although Le Guin does posit a biologically androgynous society in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the other texts can be seen as androgynous in the sense that “androgyny is a metaphor, more or less explicitly, which allows the writer to structure utopian visions that eliminate or transcend contradictions which she sees as crucial” and which are “analogous to a movement in thought from dualism to a dialectical synthesis” (Annas n.pag.). This rejection of dualism indicates clearly why much feminist SF can contribute to the kinds of ideas about multiple, respectful interrelationships posited by philosophers such as Plumwood and Merchant.

Women’s Speculative Fiction and Notions of Ecology

Women’s speculative fiction, as the above shows, is able to deconstruct traditional ideas about gender; as Wolmark has argued, feminist SF can “test the limits of the dominant ideology of gender by proposing alternative possibilities for social and sexual relations which conflict with the dominant representations” (*Aliens* 55). This is certainly the case in the novels examined in this thesis. Like most writers of feminist utopias, they often include a sexually permissive society as a means to escape the “violence and exploitation” of patriarchal relationships (Barr, “Permissive” 187) and to separate “sexuality from questions of ownership, reproduction, and social structure” (Teslenko 65). Reproduction, too, is a central concern and Shulamith Firestone’s concerns about “the oppression of women as inextricably related to their work as child-rearers as well as child-bearers” has an enormous impact on almost all speculative fiction written by women (Lefanu, *Feminism* 57),¹⁷ including theirs. But, as Roberts has claimed, the links between science fiction and utopian writing are also responsible for including issues of race and class into these apparently feminist texts (90-91); the androgynous vision of the authors studied here tends to include all aspects of society, including gender, race, class and environment. Marge Piercy has pointed out that feminist utopias of all kinds tend to have similar characteristics, such as freedom from fear of rape and domestic violence. All of them seek to eliminate domination of one person over another. People live in small groups, larger than nuclear families and less closed in but small enough for everyone to know everyone else, as in extended families. Society is decentralized. Order is kept far more by persuasion than by force. Nurturing is a strong value. Communal responsibility for a child begins at birth. (“Love” 137).

¹⁷ See Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970).

Furthermore, feminist utopias are often anarchistic, classless, and economically independent.¹⁸ As this indicates, gender relationships are merely one area of interest for authors like Le Guin, Piercy, Lessing and Atwood; they also include an understanding of unequal relationships between different races, classes and species. In this thesis, however, while their emergence out of the feminist tradition is important, what becomes a focus is how their novels encompass the ecological ethic outlined in the first chapter.

Ecological science fiction and science fiction that engages with an ecological ethic are not necessarily the same thing, although they are clearly related. The idea of relationships of non-hierarchical difference, which is the cornerstone of the ecological ethic of partnership, can appear within the broader parameters of eco-SF, and does in the case of these novels – in so much as they are ecological science fiction. Science fiction has often, and for a long time, used ideas associated with ecology: Brian Stableford, for example, notes its importance in the construction of alien biospheres, terraforming, evolutionary biology (on Earth and alien planets), notions of “quasisupernatural harmony”, ecotopian constructions and the ever-present ecocatastrophe, a stalwart plot device since SF emerged.¹⁹ Despite the prevalence of ecological issues in science fiction in general, a particular kind of ecological interest emerged out of science-fictional modes of writing from the 1960s and 1970s: the ecotopia. Although ecology and utopianism have naturally strong links through the importance of Arcadian thinking in the Western world (Reedy 172), the specific link between the two ideas was popularised in a more modern, environmentalist way with Ernest Callenbach’s 1975 novel, *Ecotopia*.

There are clear links between feminist utopias and ecotopias in that both are ways to imagine society from a particular position of activism. Kumar suggests that the development of ecotopian writing was a way “to steer a path between the euphoric excesses of the affluent 1960s and the pessimistic propensities of the leaner 1970s and 1980s”, and that its utopian vision comes with the “conviction that a society organized according to ecological principles not only was sustainable economically and socially, but also offered the best possible life for all its members” (*Utopia and Anti-Utopia* 405). Key to these narratives, as Lisa Garforth argues, is the ecological concept of sustainable development (“Ecotopian” 105). She points out that

¹⁸ These general characteristics are often listed in discussions on feminist utopias and feminist science fiction. See for example Khanna (9), Russ, (“Recent” 136-139), Goodwin (79) and Reedy (178).

¹⁹ See Stableford’s “Science Fiction and Ecology” (127-141) for a good overview of the links between ecology and science fiction.

[d]ecentralised, stable, rooted communities are crucial to ecologism's social and political vision, which prescribes economic limits – the 'no-growth' or 'stable-state' economy – and a dramatic reduction in material wants as the basis for ecological security and an expansion human [*sic*] well-being. (Garforth, "Green Utopias" 405)

Ecological philosophy has had, as Slonczewski and Levy argue, a widespread effect on science fiction writing since the 1980s (178, 183), and Garforth validly claims that ecological philosophy insists "not only that the earth can be saved but that the environmental crisis can prompt a reconceptualisation of the good life for human societies" ("Green Utopias" 393). Ecological utopias, therefore, are significant in suggesting that the good life is directly affected by relationships between humans and the non-human natural world of which they are a part.

Feminist utopias and ecological utopias therefore have a common goal in suggesting the possibility for new relationships between previously dominant and submissive parts of the world. Indeed, even though ecology and utopia have a connection outside the arena of feminist speculations, ecological ethics themselves are clearly a part of feminist writing in that, as many critics have argued, environmentalist principles are fundamental to the feminist ideas expressed in almost all forms of utopian writing by women in this period,²⁰ as are ideas about mutual relationships between races and classes. Piercy herself claims that within speculative fiction, "feminist visions tend to be ecologically conscious, assuming a partnership between nature and the social world" ("Love" 137). One of the reasons for the links between environmentalism and feminism in utopian speculations is that both movements attempt to envisage a world in which Othering, either of women or of non-human nature, is overcome. As Kumar argues, because patriarchy is often linked "to the exploitative and destructive uses of science and technology", "[f]eminism and ecology are therefore often to be found conjoined in the same utopian works for much the same reasons" (*Utopianism* 103). The kind of ecological ethic identified in the novels explored here takes these connections one step further, searching for relationships of non-hierarchical difference beyond gender and environment; the arenas of race and class have, through communism and socialism, and the civil rights, race relations and anti-Apartheid movements, contributed equally to the suggestion that difference need not lead to patterns of dominance and submission.

²⁰ For just a few examples, see Sarah Lefanu (*Feminism* 90), Joanna Russ ("Recent" 137) and Nan Bowman Albinski (166).

Not only feminism but all these elements, therefore, work together to create an ideal ecological ethic in speculative fiction emerging out of the 1960s and into the 1970s: Valérie Fournier has argued that it was a variety of grassroots movements (like anarchism, environmentalism and feminism) that led to an upsurge of utopian writing precisely because such movements dare “to imagine alternatives” and are movements “of hope” (191). The utopian impulse in much of this fiction is an expression of a desire for the kind of world in which difference could be respected, rather than used as a means to exert power over that which is perceived as Other. This, indeed, is the predominant trend in the early speculative works of Le Guin, Lessing, Piercy and Atwood. As a result they refuse the classical utopia’s totalising perspective and produce critical texts with a utopian impulse, working within a larger group of late twentieth-century writers who are aware of a “contemporary paradigm that acknowledges the dangers of positing an ideal”, while still critiquing current society and trying to find a way towards a better future (Curtis 148). Thus, novels like Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Word for World is Forest* and *The Dispossessed*, and Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Lessing’s *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five*, and Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, while being part of the tradition of the feminist utopia (or directly oppositional to it in the case of Atwood), are not merely feminist novels, but, as Chapters Three and Four will show, are novels which speculate on the hope for and possibility of living by the tenets of an ecological ethic.

Dystopia, Ecocatastrophe and New Hierarchies

John Clute has pointed out that many science fiction writers from the 1960s and 1970s “either wrote less than was expected of them, or shifted their main attention from sf altogether” during the 1980s (67). This is indeed the case for the women writers examined here; yet, almost twenty years after writing their first speculative novels, Atwood, Piercy, Lessing and Le Guin began to revisit their earlier concerns in a new generation of speculative fiction. Piercy returned to speculative fiction in 1991 with the publication of *He, She and It*, following a gap of fifteen years. After not attempting a full-length Hainish novel since 1974, Le Guin published her latest Hainish novel, *The Telling*, in 2000. Lessing’s return to science fiction was with the publications of her Ifrik novels, first *Mara and Dann* in 1999 and then *The Story of General Dann and Mara’s Daughter, Griot and the Snow Dog* in 2005, having left the mode after the last of the Canopus in Argos series

was published in 1983. Atwood's next speculative novel after *The Handmaid's Tale* was the 2003 *Oryx and Crake* – a full eighteen years later. Although Piercy was ahead of the other authors in returning to the arena of speculative fiction, it seems worth noting that these novels were all published either in the run-up to the millennium or immediately after it. Significantly, all these novels are less optimistic and become much closer to cautionary tales as they return, in a more dystopian mode, to contemplating the importance of an ecological ethic, but this time in a postmodern world.

If, as Debra Shaw suggests “sf offers potential futures whose most important function is to distance the reader from, and thus offer a critical perspective on, her present” (2), it is important to contextualise the shifts in science fiction from the 1980s onwards. Critics generally suggest that the changes emerging in science fiction during this era developed as a result of the socio-economic and political changes seen in the 1980s. Just as the rise of a new era of SF began with the radical politics of the 1960s, so the trends of the end of the twentieth century have been seen as surfacing in response to the neo-conservatism of the Reagan and Thatcher regimes and to globalisation – both “global capitalism”, as Levitas would have it (Levitas and Sargisson 16), and (through rapid changes in technology), global information networks.²¹ One of the most distinctive literary movements to come out of the new world order beginning in the 1980s was the male-dominated genre of cyberpunk. This has been linked to a general postmodernisation of SF and, more importantly for the texts examined here, to a resurgence of apocalyptic speculations specifically linked to late-twentieth century economics, technology and environmentalism. The increased cynicism of this era (Bassnett 60), as well as its anti-feminist backlash (Helford 125), would have contributed to why authors like Atwood, Piercy, Le Guin and Lessing began to address the idea of an ecological ethic through more urgent, and more dystopian, texts – and the use they have made of the traditionally masculine cyberpunk tropes in some instances may suggest an attempt to rewrite the technological elements of cyberpunk in a feminist voice.

Cyberpunk was a word coined by Bruce Bethke for the title of a short story published in 1983 (Bould 217), but became the label for the new, very specific type of ‘hard’ SF of the eighties, the seminal text of which was William Gibson's 1984 *Neuromancer*. Gibson was the first to articulate the concept of cyberspace (Taylor and Harris 153) as a three-dimensional world existing behind a two-dimensional computer

²¹ For further discussion of the impact of globalisation and right-wing politics on utopian and dystopian texts, see Baccolini and Moylan (“Introduction” 3) and Wegner (91).

screen (which he also called the matrix). The word ‘punk’ has generally been seen as symbolic of the ideas of subversion and anti-establishment politics of cyberpunk fiction; ‘cyber’ refers to the word cybernetic, coined by Norbert Wiener in 1948, “to describe a new science devoted to the study of communication and control systems in animals and machines” (Bould 218). As this suggests, cyberpunk was able to suggest more complicated boundaries between humans and machines, not only through the importance of the cyborg figure, but through information technologies in general. The rapid growth of the internet reflected this concern; as Clute has pointed out, SF thus “became fatally indistinguishable from the world it attempted to adumbrate, to signify: which is a way of saying, to *differ from*” (64, original italics). Reality, in other words, seemed to become even closer to science fiction’s imaginings at this time.

The emphasis on the human/machine interfaces in cyberpunk precipitated an anti-humanist (Hollinger, “Cybernetic” 447), or perhaps rather, in Fukuyama’s phrase, ‘posthuman’ sensibility in science fiction.²² The destabilisation of the centrality of the human, and of the grand narratives that this, in so many ways, signified, led – as many critics have pointed out – to the postmodernisation of science fiction.²³ In fact, as an illustration of the blurring of traditional boundaries, Brian McHale has defined cyberpunk as “*SF which derives certain of its elements from postmodernist mainstream fiction which itself has, in its turn, already been ‘science-fictionalized’ to some greater or lesser degree*” (*Constructing* 229, original italics). The impact of postmodernism has had two major influences on science fiction. First, it was a way to explore “the technological ramifications of experience within late-capitalist, post-industrial, media-saturated Western society” (Hollinger, “Cybernetic” 447), and secondly (as we saw in connection with ecology and literature in the previous chapter), it was a new way to address the binary power-relationships that had characterised previous thought.²⁴

Technology has a significant role to play in all forms of postmodern science fiction. Clute has claimed that science fiction has always been a way to figure the world as information, but that the onset of the millennium led to the realisation “that the new sf descriptions of the world-as-information may be genuine descriptions of the case; and that

²² See further: Jameson (*Archaeologies* 64), Hollinger (“Science Fiction” 236-237) and Foster (1).

²³ There are a number of discussions of the interrelationships between postmodernism, SF and cyberpunk. Wolmark (*Aliens* 110), Butler (144), Connor (134-137) and, perhaps most significantly, McHale (*Postmodernist* 66, 69), make the point that all three fed into each other.

²⁴ Peter Stockwell is wary of associating SF with postmodernism as it comes from a different tradition (71), but there is no reason why two different literary traditions cannot feed into one another, as McHale suggests.

the storylike utterances we make may have become instruction kits for manipulating the new world. Information is power” (Clute 68). The importance of knowledge in postmodern SF, which Clute identifies here, is evinced in the later speculative fiction of Atwood, Piercy, Lessing and Le Guin, positioning them firmly within the trend. This emphasis on information in their texts is significant because, as Wolmark has argued, “the destabilising impact of new technology on traditional social and cultural spaces” has been a way for recent science fiction to respond “to the complex conditions of postmodernity, particularly the collapse of traditional cultural and critical hierarchies, and the erosion of the distinction between experience and knowledge” (*Aliens* 110). However, as Clute’s comment above may suggest, underlying this apparent dissolution of hierarchies, there is a concern that information technology has simply led to new power formations rather than the abolition of them: those with access to the new kinds of information technology are rapidly replacing original hierarchies with new hierarchies of their own. Shaw points out, for example, that in cyberpunk’s “world dominated by the power structures of multinational corporate finance, information is the ultimate commodity, currency and defining infrastructure. Populations are stratified by levels of access to, and ability to manipulate, quantities of data” (165). This is certainly an explicit theme of Piercy’s cyberpunk-influenced *He, She and It*, a novel indicating that “the meaning of literacy may have changed to incorporate the reading and writing practices which characterise techno-proficiency but that, politically, the stakes are the same” (Shaw 176). Hierarchies and dualities thus exist in a different form in the postmodern world, but need deconstructing just the same.

The importance of technology, and of information systems in particular, to science fiction at the turn of the new millennium is particularly significant in terms of ecological philosophies. If an ecological ethic is a way to posit relationships of non-hierarchical difference, it is vital to assess the new kinds of hierarchies that access to knowledge may create in a postmodern world. Technology itself was often excluded from the earlier kinds of feminist utopias that were examined through the speculative fiction of the 1960s and 1970s, and the Arcadian influence on utopias often meant that these novels’ environmentalist stances were associated with anti-technological ones. Mellor, in fact, when discussing the “small, tribal societies” of early feminist utopian SF asks: “But can such organizational structures be transferred to more highly industrialized, technologically sophisticated, larger societies?” (251) – a topic which is clearly addressed in the more recent novels. Felski, too, has questioned the practicality of the nostalgic elements of early

speculative fiction written by women (76), and (writing in 1991) Lefanu already saw the possibilities of intermingling hard and soft SF in order to show that “it is possible to be feminist without being feminine” (“Sex” 180). Indeed, the kinds of references to technology in earlier works were often limited or elided, allowing for its containment “according to ecological principles” (Keinhorst 93), but not really dealing with its social effects. Even Piercy’s *Mattapoisett*, as Annette Keinhorst points out, kept technology to “clearly delineated areas (e.g. production of basic goods, gestation, aeroastronautics) and defined by authentic human needs” (93). Rosinsky has argued that this is because technology is seen to be “a patriarchal power and knowledge which man has utilised to entrench his social, economic and political power” (49). Certainly, the later novels examined in this thesis all make use of the idea of technology and information as power, and either treat information technology with caution, or as something which needs to be accessible to all if any kind of society based on mutual respect is to emerge in the future.

Technology, though often seen as negative in earlier kinds of speculative fiction, is therefore dealt with in a very different kind of way in more postmodern science fiction. This is partly to do with the appropriation of the image of the cyborg in Haraway’s attempts to postmodernise feminist theory. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Haraway’s ideas about hybridity and the confusion of traditional boundaries (149-150) have contributed to ecological philosophy in that her cyborg feminism has been hailed by some as a way to reject dualisms. Furthermore, Haraway’s cyborg is a way to challenge “traditionally corporeal or embodied definitions of humanity, which cannot engage successfully with the new ‘informatics of domination’” (Cranny-Francis 98). Judith Genova believes that Haraway’s postmodernism does not suggest the denaturing of the world but that “[n]ature’s voice needs to be liberated from the distortions of humanists as well as scientists” (6), and suggests that women science fiction writers “have begun experimenting with new concepts of nature and culture” (7) in order to do this. Certainly, the boundaries between nature and culture are a major area of investigation in the more recent speculative texts published by Piercy, Le Guin, Atwood and Lessing. Wolmark has suggested that “[c]yberpunk explores the interface between human and machines in order to focus on the general question of what it means to be human” (*Aliens* 110), but adds that “feminist science fiction has also explored that interface, but in order to challenge those universal and essentialist metaphors about ‘humanity’ which avoid confronting existing and unequal power relations” (*Aliens* 110-111). Similarly Hollinger points out that “science fiction’s original trope of technological anxiety” has been re-evaluated in

postmodern texts which have started “to ask new questions about the ways in which we and our technologies ‘interface’ to produce what has become a *mutual* evolution” (“Cybernetic” 460, original italics). There is no doubt that the postmodernisation of science fiction, as well as of feminist theory, has contributed to why the authors covered here begin to ask more questions about the boundaries between nature and technology and what it means to be human in the twenty-first century.

While these comments suggest that the rise of the new technologies of the late-twentieth century could have a positive impact on ecological philosophy in that, like postmodernism in general, they become a way to reject dualistic thinking, the negative side of this is that, as mentioned briefly above, a new kind of hierarchy emerges in which the technological becomes master over the natural (however blurred those boundaries may seem to be). Fredric Jameson points to the potential problems of this kind of discourse when he argues that, in the

effacing of boundaries at work in current ideas of the posthuman, the tug of war between organism and machine increasingly inclines to the preponderance of the latter, in genetic engineering and in the promotion of biology over physics as the prototypical science. The reincorporation of organic material in the imagery of the cyborg or of intelligent computers, however, tends to transform the organic into a machine far more than it organicizes machinery. Thus, postmodern or cybernetic technology becomes if anything more ‘unnatural’ than the older heavy-industrial kind. (*Archaeologies* 64)

Jameson’s concern is one which becomes increasingly apparent in speculative fiction the closer it gets to the millennium. Rather than a greater parity between different people and parts of the world, there is a sense of wider inequalities: while the relationships of difference between races and sexes may, in some instances, have become less hierarchical, the power of technology has increased as, concomitantly, has the power of those who control such technology. Sheryl Hamilton has argued that media representations of science, and biotechnology in particular have destabilised previous “categories of the self and the social that were fixed in Western philosophy” (278), but also points out that this is taking place in a society where “[k]nowledge is recognizably more incomplete, more speculative, more contingent” (270). This, she suggests, has led to “a permanent sense of anxiety, as people contemplate the potential failure of globalized technological, scientific, and economic systems” (267). Yet, is it not possible that people are more anxious about the growth and success of this globalisation, rather than its failure? The rapid changes in scientific knowledge can be unsettling, especially if this knowledge is kept for a certain

sector of the population alone. Science fiction has tracked this awareness of technology and its relationship to globalisation: as Slonczewski and Levy have pointed out, the “great adversary is no longer an alien superpower, but the enemies within – cancer, AIDS, and bio-weapons – as well as the accidental results of genetic manipulation, and our own lifestyle destroying our biosphere” (174). Indeed, they point out that this “leaves us fearful of biological warfare, and wondering how our moral traditions of the past millennia will survive the technological challenges of this one” (Slonczewski and Levy 185). Certainly this shift in science fiction has been picked up and played with in the speculative texts studied in this thesis, and the dystopian bias of the later works suggests that there is a concern about the uses to which new technologies are being put.

This concern has been seen in the increasing numbers of dystopian-style narratives of the turn of the millennium, which may, in years to come, be seen as the start of a new *fin de siècle* movement. Lambourne, Shallis and Shortland have claimed that “[a]pocalyptic thought has, arguably, been focused by the coming millenium [*sic*], a traditional time of foreboding,” and suggest that this is partly as a result of the “growing awareness of the devastation to the planet Earth through pollution, overpopulation and ecological damage” (149). Moylan perceives the dystopian turn as particularly focusing on how “the power of the authoritarian state gives way to the more pervasive tyranny of the corporation” (“The Moment” 135). However, Jason Cowley perhaps comes closer to the truth by noting the overwhelming number of contributing factors to the return of dystopianism in science fiction in recent years:

The events of 11 September 2001, the collapse of the so-called new economy, the catastrophic spread of Aids throughout much of Africa, China, Asia and European Russia, the emergence of new wind-borne viruses such as Sars, the devastating potential of science and technology, the opaque and oppressive power of multinational corporations, the dominance of the media, the fear of bioterrorism, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the instability of the Middle East, and the hard truth of American power have all contributed to a souring of mood and vision. (18)

Certainly, if Rafaella Baccolini is correct in suggesting that dystopia’s “function is to warn readers about the possible outcomes of our present world and entails an extrapolation of key features of contemporary society” (115), then Cowley’s pessimistic outline of current events would have an important impact on how speculative writers frame their imaginings.

Without detracting from the complexity of Cowley’s overview of current issues, the increased awareness of environmental issues has also been a clear influence on recent SF. Garforth has pointed out that the ecocatastrophe has become an increasingly common trope

in science fiction: “The figure of the large-scale eco-disaster signifies the urgency and gravity of the environmental crisis and the need for radical action in response. It suggests in the starkest terms what might happen ‘if this goes on’” (“Green Utopias” 398). However, as much as this science fiction is apocalyptic in that it expresses “our most subterranean fears and anxieties” (Cowley 20), Garforth points out that this kind of fiction “can also effect, metaphorically, a fresh start in terms of the imagination of future social possibilities” (“Green Utopias” 398). In fact, Ketterer suggests that the word ‘apocalypse’ “has both a negative and a positive charge”, arguing that “there is a necessary correlation between the destruction of the world and the establishment of the New Jerusalem” (Ketterer, *New Worlds* 7), and clearly this is what Garforth identifies in much speculative fiction. All the later speculative works by Piercy, Le Guin, Lessing and Atwood deal explicitly with the idea of a complete ecocatastrophe at the starting point of their narratives, but this does not necessarily lead to a total dystopia, however serious and pessimistic the novels are in general.

Perhaps it is this ability to suggest a metaphorical “fresh start” that has stopped the recent shifts towards dystopianism in fiction from creating a resurgence of the classic dystopia, as might be expected. Rather, recent dystopian-type, postmodern speculations contain a mix of utopian and dystopian elements (Helford 125) which avoid the “totalising tendencies” (Wolmark, *Aliens* 91) of both classical dystopias and classical utopias. Much as the earlier speculative texts discussed in this thesis are not classical utopias, but *critical* utopias, so these texts could be called – as Lyman Tower Sargent has suggested – critical dystopias (see Baccolini and Moylan, “Introduction” 3). Novels like Piercy’s *He, She and It* and Le Guin’s *The Telling* are demonstrative of the critical dystopia because the “ambiguous, open endings of these novels maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work, for characters and readers alike, whereas in classical dystopia, utopian hope is available only to the reader *outside* the story” (Baccolini 130, original italics). Indeed, Moylan has suggested that Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* “continues in a more classical mode with her portrayal of the religious fascist state of Gilead;” but at the same time “*anticipates* the emergence of a critical dystopia ... as it offers a social map that traces both the depredations of state power and possible vectors of hope within the ambit of that hegemonic force” (“The Moment” 137). Wegner claims that *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Gibson’s *Neuromancer* are the pivotal texts that show the movement away from utopia after the 1970s (91), but perhaps more importantly – as Moylan has argued – these two texts are among the first of the new dystopias to concentrate less on state power than on

“the extensive and intensive power of the economic-cultural system, and on the potential for resistance to it” (“The Moment” 137). One of the most marked differences between the early utopian-style novels and the later, more dystopian, texts discussed in this thesis is the greater concentration on the problems of an increasingly globalised system of powerful multinational corporations and the resultant problems of mass urbanisation – all important aspects of *He, She and It*, *The Telling* and *Oryx and Crake*.

What, though, does this movement towards a more critical and perhaps more postmodern dystopia suggest for the delineation of an ecological ethic in the novels examined in this thesis? Several critics have noted the shift towards a more postmodern SF, with its rejection of the either/or philosophies of classical utopias and dystopias, in texts written by women. These works have begun to include “a much broader consideration of the intersections of gendered concerns with postcolonial theory, ecological politics and radical critiques of (Western) science” (Merrick 251). Wolmark believes that the ability of contemporary SF to “articulate the experience of living in the spatio-temporal dislocations brought about by globalization and communications technology” is exploited by feminist SF, which contests notions of “exclusion and refusal of difference” in order to articulate “a social imaginary that is informed by the notion of plurality and inclusion” (“Time” 161). Similarly, Hollinger sees the “crises of authority which, in part, have defined the postmodern” as being inextricably linked with the feminist project’s “radical theoretical rethinking and deconstructive practice” (“Science Fiction” 242). Andrew Butler, too, has pointed to the ability of postmodernism to decentre subjectivities and thus break down “the hierarchies of male/female, white/black, heterosexual/homosexual, ruling class/working class” (146). Whether conceived through feminism or postmodernism, it is clear that Atwood, Piercy, Lessing and Le Guin do express the complex hierarchies of current society in their more recent texts, re-evaluating the ecological ethic evident in their earlier novels in a new context.

While Othering is a central concern of even the earlier novels, which – as this thesis hopes to show – reject a simple binary conception of gender, but *also* of class, race and species, the critical nature of the recent novels, and particularly their dystopian awarenesses, calls into question how the erasure of hierarchical relationships can take place in a post-millennium world. When Scholes and Rabkin suggest that a “truly ecological viewpoint takes into account much more than trees and streams. In studying human ecology ... one must consider man’s [*sic*] creations just as one must consider dams in beaver ecology” (145), they point to the need, in current ecological philosophy, to assess

how environmentalist practices can be brought into the cityscapes of our post-industrialised world. The influence of cyberpunk particularly, with its emphasis on the urban zones of modern life (see McHale, *Constructing* 250-252), has led these authors to consider the need for an ecological ethic within current society, rather than imagining it solely in a pastoral idyll. The apocalyptic scenes that often dominate these narratives suggest that the utopian dreaming of their earlier works has been replaced by a much greater urgency: ecological thinking is not seen as something to be hoped for, but as something for which we must strive and work – or the consequences may well be beyond our imagining.

* * *

“When we talk about the future,” states Marge Piercy, “when we project a set of expectations onto 1984 or 2001 or 2476 or 3000, we are really discussing what values we think underlie society and our own actions” (“Love” 142). The remainder of this thesis attempts to show how an ecological ethic of partnerships and respect for difference is articulated in individual novels written by Piercy, Lessing, Le Guin and Atwood. Whether their imagined futures are looming close, or far into the distant future, or are set on other worlds from ours, the novels examined here comment directly upon our own world. Helford has argued that “[u]topia and dystopia serve as central discourses in envisioning and enacting a more egalitarian future” (127), and the strong influence of both discourses on these texts are a way to speculate about how an ecological ethic could create such an egalitarian future. Part Two of this thesis, therefore, shows how the movement from utopia to dystopia can be traced in the early novels of the four women studied here, and Part Three examines the later, more complicated, combinations of utopia/dystopia. Most particularly, however, both parts show how an ecological ethic, as elucidated in the previous chapter, can be felt in these visions.

Part Two

The Early Novels

Chapter 3

Utopian Impulses: Ursula K. Le Guin's Early Hainish Novels

I don't think we're ever going to get to utopia again by going forward, but only roundabout or sideways; because we're in a rational dilemma, an either/or situation as perceived by the binary computer mentality, and neither the either nor the or is a place where people can live.

– Ursula K. Le Guin, “A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be.” (98)

My feminist anger is an element in, a part of, the rage and fear that possess me when I face what we are all doing to each other, to the earth, and to the hope of liberty and life.

– Ursula K. Le Guin, “Introduction to *Planet of Exile*.” (119)

Ursula K. Le Guin is seen as one of the founding voices of feminist science fiction. Her first science fiction novels were published in the mid-1960s and centred on her imagined Hainish universe. By 1974, two years before Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* was published, Le Guin had left the Hainish universe behind, only returning to it two decades later. The three novels dealt with in this chapter, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Word for World is Forest* and *The Dispossessed*, were all published before the early speculative novels of Piercy, Lessing and Atwood, and are a precursor to their works in that they present similar themes and foci to novels such as *Woman on the Edge of Time*, *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*. Furthermore, Le Guin's novels also encapsulate a movement from optimism to pessimism comparable to that seen in the shift from Piercy's utopianism, through Lessing's more ambiguous stance, to Atwood's dystopian vision. In this sense Le Guin's novels can be seen as a case study which demonstrates the decreasing optimism found in these speculative texts for the possibility for a society that lives by an ecological ethic.

Together, as an increasingly critical assessment of the possibility of creating such an ideal society, Le Guin's three major Hainish novels ask what it would mean to live in a community based on the principles of relationships of non-hierarchical difference. How would it be possible to envisage such a society? Even more importantly, what would impede the functioning of such a utopian world, and why does it seem impossible to live according to these principles? It is still, after all, a utopian dream to live in a world based entirely on the idea of what I call an ecological ethic, and Le Guin's novels, while striving to represent such a world, struggle to realise this hope even in a fictional context.

Tom Moylan, in his acclaimed study, *Demand the Impossible*, argues that Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* was one of the earliest critical utopias (41). By 'critical utopias', as pointed out in the previous chapter, he means a group of texts which have as their central

concern “the awareness of the limitations of the utopian tradition, so that these texts reject utopia as blueprint while preserving it as a dream” (10). Even before *The Dispossessed*, however, Le Guin’s work shows what Moylan has called a “utopian impulse” (*Demand* 31) in that her thought-experiments attempt to imagine societies that are based on an ideal ecological ethic (encompassing both kinship and difference), even though these communities often begin to reflect the opposite of this vision by rejecting the basic principles of ecological philosophy.

In this chapter, therefore, I begin by contextualising the utopian impulse in Le Guin’s novels of the Ekumen, her preferred term for what critics have called her Hainish novels. Thereafter I give a close reading of her early writing. First, I suggest that *The Left Hand of Darkness* enacts an ecological ethic in the most utopian and most unrealistic way of all three novels, maintaining a general optimism as a result. Secondly, I examine *The Word for World is Forest* as a novel which envisions, quite strongly and realistically, the kind of society that could emerge if an ecological ethic were to be applied to human behaviour, yet at the same time as a novel which ultimately warns against the fragility of such a society. Thirdly, and finally, I examine the ambiguities of *The Dispossessed*, arguing that the multiple ambiguities in the text produce the most critical assessment of the possibility for implementing the ideals of an ecological ethic within the real world.

Utopian Dreaming: The Hainish Novels and The Ekumen

An ecological ethic, which values both kinship and difference, is expressed throughout Le Guin’s fantasy and other science fictional works of the period, such as *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971). Indeed, it is an abiding concern of her whole oeuvre, and especially of her major ecological novel, *Always Coming Home* (1985), as her fiction either “questions the boundaries between polar opposites by transgressing or dissolving them, or it seeks to resolve the dichotomy in a dialectical fashion” (Byrne, “Woman’s” 352). Although I would be wary of suggesting that Le Guin’s Hainish novels are utopias in the true sense of the word, it is my contention here that the philosophy informing them is utopian: her aim is not to produce a blueprint for a better society, but to show, through open-ended narratives, possible paths towards a better society. Nadia Khouri’s statement that *The Dispossessed* does not display “an authentic utopian dimension, but only a utopian desire which is incapable of actualizing itself as such” (50) is, I believe, valid for all of Le Guin’s early

Hainish novels. Le Guin herself resists the word 'utopia' to describe her work because it is "too grand and too rigid" a concept, but does admit that, for her,

the important thing is not to offer any specific hope of betterment but, by offering an imagined but persuasive alternative reality, to dislodge my mind, and so the reader's mind, from the lazy, timorous habit of thinking that the way we live now is the only way people can live. It is that inertia that allows the institutions of injustice to continue unquestioned. ("A War" 218)

Jim Jose's proposal that Le Guin's work shows "a consistent vision of the contours (but note, not a detailed map) of what an inhabitable, ideal society might look like" (180), thus coincides neatly with what she believes to be present in her work. This vision of, and yearning toward, a better place, however unrealisable, is felt in both the individual texts that make up the Hainish cycle and in the over-arching notion of the Ekumen, which gains increasing prominence throughout the series.

Although *The Left Hand of Darkness* was the novel that thrust Le Guin into the limelight, her first forays into the Hainish world were in *Rocannon's World* (1966), *Planet of Exile* (1966) and *City of Illusions* (1967). None of these early novels displays a consistent interest in ecology as a philosophy, although power over the Other, usually the alien, features even in these early works. *Rocannon's World* deals with this through the imposition of the "Starlords" on the planet and the oppositional relationship between the various races, the Fiia and the Gdemiar, and the Angyar and the Olgyior. *Planet of Exile* shows subtle signs of Le Guin's interest in both feminism and ecology in that the Tevar are an exploration of patriarchy and the marauding Gaal are seen as a threat to the precarious ecological balance in a world which has only one full cycle of seasons in a human life-time. The novel, however, elides these issues in favour of a more typically science-fictional exploration of prejudice towards the alien. *City of Illusions* also focuses on the notion of the alien Other through the Shing's imperialistic control over Terra, but the characters in the novel are almost exclusively male. The two exceptions are Parth, Falk's rescuer, teacher and lover, and Estrel, his betrayer; but the women are a little too obviously good and evil, virgin/mother and whore, to deconstruct gender hierarchies effectively. The environmental message is stronger: in her introduction to *City of Illusions*, Le Guin wrote that the novel allowed her to create a sense of "the wilderness" (123-124), and parts of the novel reflect a simple and balanced life within nature. This is in marked contrast to the existence of the Shing, in the city of Es Toch, whose instrumentalist use of science and technology enable them to create and maintain power. As a whole, however, the novel

focuses more on the difficulty in distinguishing between appearance and reality than it does on ecological ideas.

Despite the problems and imbalances of *Rocannon's World*, *Planet of Exile* and *City of Illusions*, these novels begin to set up Le Guin's Hainish universe as the wider space within which her ecological vision finds expression. These early novels are overtly concerned with war and colonialism, but begin to hint at the idea of a League of Worlds within the Hainish universe. It is only in her next three novels that Le Guin begins to conceptualise the possibilities of the League, and develop it into the idea of the Ekumen. Ironically, this notion explodes, fully realised, into the earliest of the remaining Hainish novels, *The Left Hand of Darkness*.¹

Of all the 'political' bodies we see in Le Guin's Hainish novels, the Ekumen is possibly the most representative of the utopian ideals that inform Le Guin's desire for a better place. The Ekumen is not about power or control, but about trust and respect, co-ordination and communication. As Bittner points out, the etymology of Ekumen, described in *The Left Hand of Darkness* as meaning "Household" or "Hearth" (119), has the same stem as 'ecology', *oikos* (*Approaches* 110), encapsulating most strongly the values suggested by webs of interrelationships. Some of Le Guin's most beautiful writing in *The Left Hand of Darkness* describes the Ekumen as an alliance which works for: "Material profit. Increase of knowledge. The augmentation of the complexity and intensity of the field of intelligent life. The enrichment of harmony and the greater glory of God. Curiosity. Adventure. Delight" (35). The lyricism of these words perhaps demonstrates how much she invests in her creation. In the same novel, the protagonist Genly argues that the Ekumen is not a government, but "an attempt to reunify the mystical with the political", a "society", a "culture" and an "education" (119). Even the political aspect of the Ekumen "functions through co-ordination, not by rule. It does not enforce laws; decisions are reached by council and consent, not by consensus or command" (119). The Ekumen is thus envisaged as a space in which individual worlds can grow in an atmosphere of trust and respect, contributing to the greater good of the larger network of worlds. Harmony, equality, respect for difference and room for growth are therefore the principles behind all the Hainish novels from the moment Le Guin describes the Ekumen in *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

¹ Although *The Left Hand of Darkness* was published before *The Word for World is Forest* and *The Dispossessed*, the latter two novels actually describe an earlier time in the Hainish 'future history' than Genly's journey to Gethen. See Watson ("Le Guin's" 224, 230) for a timetable of events in the Hainish future history.

The Left Hand of Darkness and Optimistic Dynamism

The Left Hand of Darkness is the most optimistic of Le Guin's three major Hainish novels from her early period, mainly because the novel ends on a note of hope for the future of the planet Gethen and of positive change for its two major countries, Karhide and Orgoreyn. Within this wider utopian impulse, however, Le Guin uses the novel to ask two specific questions. What kind of society could be imagined which could enact an ecological ethic? And, what is the potential for this kind of society to fail? These questions are dealt with in the novel by Le Guin describing, through a variety of narrators, a society (in Karhide) which has been living according to ecological principles. Thereafter, she illustrates how these principles can become corrupted, and so, ironically, form a kind of dystopia based on the opposite of an ecological ethic (Orgoreyn). Part of what elucidates her thought-experiment across the whole novel, however, is the issue of androgyny, which I shall deal with before examining Le Guin's descriptions of Karhide and Orgoreyn in terms of an ecological ethic.

Androgyny and the Feminist Utopia in The Left Hand of Darkness

Critical attention has focused on *The Left Hand of Darkness* as a feminist novel, and it has been seen as a feminist utopia because the people of Gethen (known as the planet Winter to people of other worlds) are biologically androgynous,² fitting clearly into the second stage of feminist utopian thinking outlined in the previous chapter and the third stage in Kristeva's outline of feminism (see "Women's Time"). Feminist discussions of the novel therefore tend to focus on the presentation of the Gethenians as sexually latent – they have the ability, but not the choice, to be either male or female during the sexually active phase of the month, *kemmer*. During *kemmer*, we learn from the investigator Ong Tot Oppong, their "genitals engorge or shrink accordingly" (82), but following *kemmer*, they once more revert to an androgynous state.³ Only in the case of conception does the individual remain female outside the *kemmer* phase, and then only until lactation is completed: thus, "[n]o

² Attebury points out that the Gethenians are actually bisexual hermaphrodites rather than true androgynes (*Decoding* 133), but I believe that the use of 'androgynous' to describe them is not only simpler, but is also a clearer indication of Le Guin's intention.

³ Krishan Kumar points out that an early utopian text, Gabriel de Foigny's *A New Discovery of Terra Incognita Australis* (1676), created a society of "sexless hermaphrodites" (*Utopianism* 56-57), as did Theodore Sturgeon in *Venus plus X* (1960); however Le Guin claims she was unaware of any precedents when she conceived of the Gethenians (Walsh 204).

psychological habit is established, and the mother of several children may be the father of several more” (83). Oppong’s observations are almost universally cited in discussions of the novel, but bear brief repetition as they are pivotal to an understanding of why the novel has been seen as a feminist utopia. When explaining that “four-fifths of the time, these people are not sexually motivated at all” (84), Oppong inadvertently highlights the major problem facing writers trying to create a feminist utopia: that women are biologically disadvantaged in that they are “tied down to childbearing” (84) in a way that men are not. Gethen, then, has been seen as a feminist utopia because, as Oppong states, “[b]urden and privilege are shared out pretty equally; everybody has the same risk to run or choice to make. Therefore nobody here is quite so free as a free male anywhere else” (85). The subtext, of course, is that in Gethen nobody is quite so shackled as females everywhere else. Oppong continues by noting that there can be no rape or even division of humanity into dominant or submissive (85). The Gethenians’ androgyny, therefore, allows them to create a society where people are seen simply as people, not as male people or female people. This removes the problem of inequality based on sex or gender – as without sexual differentiation, there can be no gender problem.

Robin Roberts has followed other critics in arguing that a text can be “codedly feminine” when “an author forced by cultural, literary, or personal constraints explores a singularly feminine dilemma using a male character as a stand-in, or cover”, thus explaining “the appeal for feminist readers of an apparently womanless text” (16). Although she explicitly refers to novels like Shelley’s *Frankenstein* in this instance, Roberts later extends her thinking to include *The Left Hand of Darkness* as, like Shelley, “Le Guin brilliantly turns female absence into presence through science fiction tropes” (77). Similarly, Marleen Barr sees Gethenian society as being feminised because “young women and Gethenians both cannot escape biological cycles” and finds Genly’s masculinity pleasing because it takes “a man as the social exception for a change” (“Charles Bronson” 141). As Barr’s comment implies, it is well to remember that as much as the Gethenians are not women, neither are they men – as the introduction of a wholly male narrator and observer of Gethenian society in Genly emphasises. Furthermore, Margarete Keulen asserts that “the implications and consequences of the depicted hermaphroditic/ androgynous society constitute a critique of the situation of women in our culture” (31), and Kathy Rudy points out that the Gethenians are a reminder that “there are not – a priori – two different kinds of people who are inherently identifiable as ‘men’ and ‘women’ but rather many different kinds of people whom we actively and constantly

organize into two categories” (35). Certainly, the institution of androgyny in *The Left Hand of Darkness* is, from the perspective of the feminist utopia, an improvement on the all-female worlds that form a significant part of the genre: as Deirdre Byrne says, “Le Guin seems aware that gynocentric essentialism contains within it the potential for sexism, just as androcentric essentialism does. To this extent she appears to support an androgynous position” (“Selves” 24). Although Byrne is specifically referencing *Always Coming Home* at this point, I feel that Le Guin’s choice of androgyny in *The Left Hand of Darkness* is justified by a similar argument. Certainly it is borne out by Le Guin’s own statement to Byrne that “the way society constructs gender is unfair both to men and to women” (Byrne, “An Interview” 319).

While this may initially seem like the perfect feminist utopia, seen from another perspective there are several problems with how Le Guin employs the concept of androgyny in the novel. First of all, Gethen is not necessarily feminist as such. Brian Attebury argues that although *The Left Hand of Darkness* does have both feminist and utopian implications, “it does not portray a utopian state, nor are any female characters present” (*Decoding* 107-108). He also states that “androgyny as such is inimical to feminism” because it denies womanhood (*Decoding* 132), a comment reminiscent of Larbalestier’s argument that androgynous worlds “have been so frequently read as all-male worlds that the erasure of difference becomes instead the removal of women” (74). While androgyny has been seen as representing the third stage of feminism, the biological androgyny of the Gethenians can also be read as a way to *escape* gender issues.

A second problem is that the elision of gender can result in certain assumptions about sexuality and gender. Rosinsky, while seeing *The Left Hand of Darkness* as “a feminist work in its consciousness-raising inquiries” also points out that “it retains a significant number of androcentric or androcentrically essentialist elements” (31). One of these is the presumption of heterosexuality: Lamb and Veith question why it is that Le Guin does not allow the non-androgynous Genly and androgynous Estraven to consummate their relationship. On one hand they argue that Estraven would have to become consistently feminine in response to Genly’s masculine body, which would mean “he would relinquish his potential masculinity, not only during kemmer but, from the human perspectives of both Genly and the reader, for good. Estraven would permanently become wife to Genly and would cease to be simply a person” (226). There is, however, also a suggestion that their relationship would be seen as “socially and psychologically homosexual” (227), and thus somehow taboo. Le Guin is aware that there are several

problems with the text from a feminist perspective, recording herself as being unhappy that she made the Gethenians heterosexual in the novel, admitting that homosexuality would naturally have been possible, and that she was naïve in not clarifying this issue for both her readers and herself when writing the text (“Is Gender” 14). As part of debates surrounding gender and sexuality is the question of sexual preference, this would have been a perfect opportunity for Le Guin to normalise homosexuality.

A further androcentric element to the novel is Le Guin’s decision to use the masculine pronoun rather than create a gender neutral one; this, above all else, appears to undermine the specifically feminist agenda many critics have claimed for the novel. Like others, Helen Merrick has pointed out that by using the masculine pronoun, Le Guin “allows their society to be read as all-male” (247). Le Guin also acknowledges that she “left out the children”, omitting particularly to show Estraven in the home (qtd. in Mellor 253), which does make it easy for readers to forget that he was not a man doing his duties as prime minister, but a person doing their⁴ duty as prime minister. The use of the generic ‘he’ is “closely connected to the fact that the most frequent first-person narrator is Genly Ai”, argues Larbalestier, who suggests that by using the masculine pronoun, Genly, “keeps this world of Others in the realm of the Same” (103). Clearly the moments that shock the reader, like Genly calling his landlady “a voluble man” (46) and hearing that the “king was pregnant” (89), would not come as a surprise if the masculine pronoun was being read as the generic. As a result, the Gethenians do come across as overwhelmingly male, as Le Guin herself admits. She initially felt unable to “mangle English by inventing a pronoun for ‘he/she’”, but later agreed that using the masculine pronoun was a mistake because it “*does in fact exclude women from discourse*”, pointing out that the original generic singular pronoun was actually ‘*they/them/their*’ up until the sixteenth century” (“Is Gender” 15, original italics). Lefanu points out that Marge Piercy managed to create a workable gender neutral pronoun only a few years after *The Left Hand of Darkness* was published,

[w]hich is not to say that Ursula Le Guin *should* have, for it was perhaps those few years of explosive development in feminist consciousness that made it possible for Marge Piercy to conceive of such a linguistic revolution; however, the consequences, in terms of presenting a society of androgynes, are far-reaching. (*Feminism* 138, original italics)

⁴ In this same essay (see below), Le Guin points out that ‘their’ was originally the generic first person pronoun and I have used this where necessary in this thesis rather than the disruptive ‘his or her’ or ‘s/he’ etc.

Lefanu's comment serves to contextualise the debate, reminding us that Le Guin herself was not a committed feminist or familiar with the discourse when writing the novel; Le Guin admits that it was really only in 1977 that she discovered feminist literary theory (Reid 10; Rochelle 412). Nonetheless, the masculine pronoun does allow the reader to forget that the Gethenians are both men and women and thus undermines their androgyny.

One of the problems of taking a solely feminist reading of the novel is that the critic presumes that the author had the same aim in writing as they have in reading: Le Guin, we should perhaps note, claimed in a 1995 interview that she "didn't realize at the time that there was anything very radical about" *The Left Hand of Darkness* (Walsh 204). While I would agree with Byrne, who points out that "feminists who uncritically embrace the novel as a 'feminist utopia' do not take its conservative aspects into account" ("Selves" 116), I would not go as far as Rosinsky, who is critical of Le Guin for not placing feminist concerns at the centre of *The Left Hand of Darkness* (32). At the centre of the novel is, I would argue, the much wider issue of Othering and the potential to overcome this through what I have called an ecological ethic. This is symbolised by androgyny (or, perhaps more specifically by ambisexuality) in that androgyny is a rejection of an either/or ideology in favour of a both/and one. Thus, while *The Left Hand of Darkness* embraces wholeheartedly gender debates, it extends also into an analysis of all forms of Othering within dominance/submission cultures.

Karhide and Orgoreyn: Balance, Imbalance and Change

Androgyny has been "linked to the mythical Golden Age and the yearning for lost harmony" (Keulen 37), which gives it an instant connection to ecological writing's fascination both with the pastoral idyll and with ideas of balance. The androgyny of the Gethenians thus becomes more than a commentary on gender relationships: it becomes metaphorical of a world which has the potential to be governed by the principles of a certain kind of ecological thinking. This finds its clearest expression in Le Guin's depiction of Karhide – significantly the first experience of Gethenian life related by the primary narrator. Genly's greater period of time spent in Karhide and, eventually, closer relationships with Karhidish people, tends to foreground Karhide in the novel and the descriptions of Gethen are often actually descriptions of Karhide. Whether through Gethen in general or Karhide specifically, Le Guin uses Genly's descriptions of the planet to

outline an ecological ethic through her treatment of a variety of socio-political issues, including that of race.

Le Guin attempts to undermine racial Othering in the novel by asserting darker skin-tones over paler ones, rather than by eliminating race in the same way that she tried to eliminate gender. Not only is Genly himself “black” (37), but so are the Gethenians: Genly records that they are “yellow-brown or red-brown generally, but I had seen a good many as dark as myself” (37). Lisbeth Gant-Britton feels that the nonchalant descriptions of race in the novel underscore “the possibility that in some upcoming century ... darkness as a marker of inferiority may be outmoded” (36-37). She does, however, have some reservations in that she feels there is a conflation of darkness with the natural or animal – Estraven is described as “a stocky dark Karhider with sleek and heavy hair” (11) – which “heightens the image of the Karhide people, and specifically Estraven, as an enigmatic, exotic Other” (Gant-Britton 39). Byrne also feels “ambivalent” about Le Guin’s representation of these characters as dark-skinned, approving of their association with heroic behaviour, but wary of how black-skinned characters can “appear culturally disembodied” (“Selves” 242). Elisabeth Anne Leonard has pointed out that this tendency to “deal with racial issues by imagining a world where they are non-issues, where colour-blindness is the norm” can be seen positively on one level, but is problematic in that it “avoids wrestling with the difficult question of how a non-racist society comes in to being” (“Race” 254). Although Le Guin does not address the issues of race head-on (unlike her treatment of gender), on the whole, the relationship of darkness to lightness in *The Left Hand of Darkness* indicates her desire to reinscribe blackness with positive values. The novel is, after all, titled after Tormer’s Lay. Light, here, “*is the left hand of darkness/ and darkness the right hand of light*” (199, original italics). Neither darkness nor lightness are seen as superior in this reading, but both as necessary parts of a larger whole, thus enacting the ecological ethic of value in, and need for, difference.

Le Guin’s vision of an ideal society in the novel also appears to be found in the mentality of the Gethenians, as we are introduced to them in Karhide. Like the gentle forest people who take in Falk in *City of Illusions*, the Gethenians are profoundly Taoist. Time is an expression of living in the moment; as the envoy Genly tells us, it is “always the Year One” in Gethen (9). To live in the present is to balance the past against the future and to reject the notion of time as an endless forward movement, just as an ecological vision would reject progress at the expense of equilibrium. As Genly comments when he realises that although their vehicles could move faster, they are set to travel at a steady twenty-five

miles an hour: “Terrans tend to feel they’ve got to get ahead, make progress. The people of Winter, who always live in Year One, feel that progress is less important than presence” (48). This is not to say that the Gethenians are stagnant or primitive – they believe that change will happen, as Faxe the Weaver in *Otherhord* suggests, but should not be forced (64), just as evolution and adaptation must happen in the natural world.

Technology on Gethen, therefore, develops slowly, over millennia, and Genly notes that it happens “without any industrial revolution, without any revolution at all” (88). Le Guin suggests here that it is an obsession with progress at all costs, rather than a measured, considered progress over time, that creates imbalances such as those we have experienced through our own industrial revolution (now blamed for many negatives in our society, such as pollution, the poverty of the working classes, and imbalance of power in favour of the beneficiaries of capitalism). But, although there may not have been a similar revolution, Gethen is not backward, simply unhurried: as Genly relates, “[a]t any one point in their history a hasty observer would say that all technological progress and diffusion had ceased. Yet it never has. Compare the torrent and the glacier. Both get where they are going” (88-89). Genly’s words here are important as they highlight Le Guin’s notion of dynamic equilibrium. An ecological approach to life, as this makes clear, need not fall into the trap of suggesting that ecological harmony is an unchanging, static state, but – like evolutionary patterns traceable in the natural world – must accept the need for growth and development. In this context, therefore, Le Guin perhaps suggests a way for humans to find a space for technological development without having a catastrophic effect on the environment: by progressing slowly, thoughtfully, and carefully.

The idea of balance without stasis seems also to drive the Karhidish socially and politically. Power in Karhide is not centralised. Estraven uses the idiom “*Karhide is not a nation but a family quarrel*” (13, original italics) to show that while the king may nominally govern the lords of the Domains that make up the larger whole, within the Domains there is a fair degree of autonomy. Genly only fully understands Estraven’s point when he travels around Karhide, noting that the

seeming nation, unified for centuries, was a stew of un-coordinated principalities, towns, villages, ‘pseudo-feudal tribal economic units’, a sprawl and splatter of vigorous, competent, quarrelsome individualities over which a grid of authority was insecurely and lightly laid. (89-90)

The image of the grid here mimics that of the web, important in conceptualisations of an ecological ethic as a way to suggest mutual interrelationships. Rather than a hierarchical

structure, therefore, Karhide allows space for individual parts of its society to function without being dominated by a single centre of power. Furthermore, social groupings are the same as political groupings, allowing Karhide to demonstrate both stability and autonomy.⁵ This demonstrates even more clearly a kind of ecological ethic: it is as if the Clan-Hearths – Genly describes a Clan-Hearth as “a house-town-fort-farm” (88) – are individual species in a functioning ecosystem.

It is suggested that one of the reasons for Karhide’s slowly evolving balance is the difficulties imposed upon the Gethenians by their harsh planet, with its environment of ice and snow, but the development of Orgoreyn (as will become apparent) calls this into question. Rather, Karhide’s adherence to an ecological ethic seems to stem in large part from the major religion in Karhide: the Handdara. The Handdara religion – loosely based on Taoism – is “a religion without institution, without priests, without hierarchy, without vows, without creed” (52). This description seems to suggest a religion that is not interested in controlling or dominating others; as Faxel tells Genly, even the Indwellers of the Fastnesses “have no ranks or status” (65). There are no priests or hierarchy and yet there is a sense of order and harmony. Its main premise seems to be one of acceptance – the Fastnesses are not centres of power, but “retreats to which people may retire and spend the night or a lifetime” (52). Rather than cohering around a towering building, the Handdara seek a space away from places of political and social influence: Genly does not initially realise that he has reached the Fastness of Otherhord as the houses are “scattered about in the shadow” of the forest, made of wood and thatched with boughs from the trees themselves (53). Goss, the first ‘Indweller’ Genly encounters upon arriving at Otherhord, is described as moving amongst the trees gracefully and easily, suggesting that the Handdarata are so closely linked to their environment that they are completely part of it. If anything, the Otherhord fastness represents most clearly an ecological utopia, filled for Genly with “pleasant days”:

Time was unorganized except for the communal work, field labour, gardening, woodcutting, maintenance, for which transients such as myself were called on by whatever group most needed a hand.... In the evenings there might be a gathering in the hearth-room of one or another of the low, tree-surrounded houses; there was conversation and beer, and there might be music, the vigorous music of Karhide, melodically simple but rhythmically complex, always played extempore. (56)

⁵ If Le Guin had provided more detail about food production and trade in Genly’s description of Karhide, it would perhaps have been useful to examine Karhidish society from the perspective of sustainable development. Lisa Garforth, for example, in her article “Ecotopian Fiction and the Sustainable Society”, has made some thought-provoking comments about the relationship between sustainable development and ecotopian fiction, which would have been an excellent way to assess Karhide, given more information.

This kind of existence, in tune with the natural world, using but not abusing it, treating the Other – be it human or non-human – with respect, is a consistent picture of an ideal society in both Le Guin’s work and in ecotopian fiction in general, and suggests most clearly why the consideration of an ecological ethic is perhaps a more useful way into her texts than feminism alone.

The sense of harmony with nature and with other people is strong in *Otherworld*, and the ecological metaphor of the web-like group during the Foretelling emphasises this quite clearly in the narrative. During the Foretelling various members of the Fastness come together to answer a question, and I would argue that the demonstration of how it is answered is as important to the novel as Genly’s desire to know if Gethen will become part of the Ekumen. In order to find the answer to any question, the Indwellers, Zanies and the Pervert all sit in a circle, a symbol of harmony and equality (as there can be no head or leader in a circle) as well as a representation of diversity and acceptance (as the variety of different and even ‘perverse’ members of society are included). Genly sees them as “all connected, all of them, as if they were the suspension-points of a spiderweb” (60-61). Indeed, David Ketterer has pointed out the importance of this image, stating that “the weaving imagery, which permeates the book and may be related to the triangular netlike structure created by the relationship of unity to duality, finds its nucleus here” (“Ursula” 19). I would go further and suggest that it represents the idea of multiplicity as much as the intersection of unity and duality.⁶ Furthermore, while Faxel is the Weaver, needed to bring together all the elements of the Foretelling, it is clear that it cannot occur if even one of the elements is not there to play its part and balance the whole. Douglas Barbour (150) suggests that when Estraven tells Genly that the Handdarata are “less aware of the gap between men and beast, being more occupied with likenesses, the links, the whole of which living things are a part” (199), it indicates that they reject what Genly has just called “the ecology-breaking cultures of other worlds” (199). In this respect, then, the Handdarata are able to enact the principles of interrelationship suggested by Plumwood’s ecological philosophy.

⁶ Susan Wood points out that the image of the web is central to Le Guin’s work as a whole, citing a number of examples, including the Ekumen “as a ‘network’ for trade in goods and ideas” (185). Indeed, Le Guin is quoted as saying that “it’s perfectly obvious that I’m over on the side that thinks that all human endeavour is part of a larger web of life, and that ... if we don’t recognise this, we’re in deep shit” (Wayne 45).

Otherhord's strong sense of connection and balance is representative of the ancient Karhide, rural yet not primitive, connected yet autonomous, stable yet not stagnant; a balance of people within their environment. This is the Karhide we see through Genly's eyes as the novel opens; however, what is most fascinating in *The Left Hand of Darkness* is that this Karhide is rapidly dissolving. Le Guin's utopian vision, then, at the start of the novel is already becoming fragile, and there is an increasing erosion of the ecological ethic within Karhide as the novel progresses. I suggest that Le Guin shows this disintegration for a very specific reason: to demonstrate her awareness of how an apparently utopian society has its own conflicts and is also subject to forces of change if it functions – as it must – outside the usual unrealistic utopian blueprint. This is first apparent within Karhide as its political stability starts to shift over the Sinoth Valley Dispute; once Genly enters Orgoreyn, however, it becomes even clearer to the reader just how fine the balance is between a society based on ecological ideals and one in which those ethics are completely overturned.

Le Guin uses the Sinoth Valley Dispute to highlight the issue of patriotism, and through that to introduce the notion of Othering on a national scale. The conflict over whether the Sinoth Valley should belong to Karhide or Orgoreyn sparks off an increasing centralisation of power within Karhidish politics. Indeed, Genly begins to realise that the Karhide he had come to know – the one which can be read as an ecological utopia in many ways – is “already out of date” (90). Instead, Estraven's successor, Tibe, begins to use the Sinoth Valley Dispute as fuel for an increasingly nationalistic understanding of Karhide.

His speeches were long and loud: praises of Karhide, disparagements of Orgoreyn, vilifications of ‘disloyal factions’, discussions of the ‘integrity of the Kingdom’s borders’, lectures in history and ethics and economics, all in a ranting, canting, emotional tone that went shrill with vituperation or adulation. He talked much about pride of country and love of the parentland, but little about shifgrethor, personal pride or prestige. (91)

Tibe's speeches emphasise Estraven's earlier comment that patriotism is not about love, but about the “fear of the other. And its expressions are political, not poetical: hate, rivalry, aggression” (23). The fear of the Other, and the hatred of, rivalry with, and aggression towards that Other, is in direct opposition to the ideal of relationships of non-hierarchical difference.

The increasing trend toward hierarchy and centralisation that Genly begins to observe in Karhide is already established in Orgoreyn, which has become the antithesis of a community based on respect and mutual understanding. The reader's first experience of

Orgoreyn comes from the perspective of Estraven, whose flight across the border following his banishment creates a strong sense of anxiety in the text. The figure of the “Inspector” who lurks “[b]ehind every man in Orgoreyn” (73) and the immediate threat of being sent to the deceptively-named “Voluntary Farm, where there is a place for criminal riffraff, aliens, and unregistered persons” (73), both come together to suggest that Le Guin is writing out of the dystopian tradition in this instance (particularly in the Stalinist inferences of a police state and labour camp). This is emphasised as each person is described as a “digit” (73) because, as Estraven says later, “[n]ames won’t do, they must have labels, and say the kind before they can see the thing” (75). The labels, inspections and prison camps all suggest a rigidly hierarchical society based on fear and control rather than on individual freedom and mutual interrelationships.

This is also the experience of Genly, who eventually discovers that the “explosions, invasion, murder, and conflagration” (97) with which his first entrance to Orgoreyn is greeted, is closer to the truth of Orgoreyn than the comfort in which he soon finds himself living. He refuses to question the role of the Sarf (the secret police), ignoring his hunch that it is “sinister” (126), and only realising the extent of the power structures in Orgoreyn when he is eventually imprisoned on Pulefen Voluntary Farm. Obviously, through its contrast with Karhide, we see that Orgoreyn is a country out of balance: power is too centralised and the people are completely controlled and allowed no freedom or individuality. Ironically, it is the natural dispersal of authority still functioning in Karhide that is the basis for control in Orgoreyn:

The system of extended-family clans, of Hearths and Domains, though still vaguely discernable in the Commensal structure, was ‘nationalized’ several hundred years ago in Orgoreyn. No child over a year old lives with its parent or parents; all are brought up in the Commensal Hearths. There is no rank by descent. Private wills are not legal: a man dying leaves his fortune to the state. All start equal. (103)

Genly’s description of Orgoreyn could, at first glance, seem like a description of utopia – indeed, it has much in common with the utopian philosophies on which Communism was based. It seems to embody a country characterised by equality. Yet, even Genly notes that they may start out equal, but “obviously they don’t go on so” (103), as the luxury in which the Commensals live bears testimony. This apparent equality is used as a means to exert

control over the population⁷ as it allows for the institution of the paperwork and controls that take away the individuality of the Orgota. As Estraven realises,

In Karhide king and kyorremy have a good deal of control over what people do, but very little over what they hear, and none over what they say. Here, the government can check not only act but thought. Surely no men should have such power over others. (133)

This search for equality, then, is not enough for Le Guin's utopian vision. For her, it seems to be a matter of both power and individuality: if any person has enough power over another to create a pattern of dominance and submission, then the respect for the Other is totally lost and dystopia is formed, even if this happens on the pretext of equality. When Commensal Shusgis suggests that the opposite of patriotism is "self love" (127), we can perhaps wonder if the corollary is that Shusgis's type of patriotism has no love of individuality or respect for the Other.⁸

Of course, the novel is not a simplistic pitching of utopian Karhide against dystopian Orgoreyn. Le Guin, in her now famous essay "Is Gender Necessary? Redux", claims that

On Gethen, the two polarities we perceive through our cultural conditioning as male and female are neither, and are in balance: consensus with authority, decentralizing with centralizing, flexible with rigid, circular with linear, hierarchy with network. But it is not a motionless balance, there being no such thing in life, and at the moment of the novel, it is wobbling perilously. (12, original italics)

We see the disintegration of Karhide right from the moment when Estraven warns, early in the novel, that Tibe is using Orgoreyn as a model, and is using the Sinoth Valley dispute to "work a greater change in Karhide than the last thousand years have seen" (77). As I suggest above, the change occurs with frightening ease. Even the concept of 'shifgrethor', which seems to be the foundation of personal freedom in Karhide, is twisted in Orgoreyn to allow for the power-play and one-upmanship that underlies the underhand dealings of the Commensals and the Sarf. Shifgrethor, as originally introduced to us through Genly's bemused experience of it in Karhide, appears to be a way of showing respect by never giving advice: one never tells another person what to do nor tries to dominate them. This, on the surface, appears to be the ideal way to show respect for the Other. But Estraven

⁷ I find it significant that Ong Tot Oppong notes that only in Orgoreyn do they use "hormone derivatives to establish a preferred sexuality" during kemmer (82). Is Le Guin suggesting that once the natural harmony and equality of androgyny is tampered with, an imbalance occurs that can be seen throughout society?

⁸ Le Guin is obviously not alone in seeing patriotism as rooted in fear and selfishness. Benedict Anderson sees nationalism's roots "in fear and hatred of the Other" as well as in "self-sacrificing love" (129).

understands that shifgrethor can also be used as an excuse to renege on one's responsibility to the Other and to build prestige for the Self, when he says to Obsle and Yegey: "Every response you make to [Tibe's] provocations, every humiliation you inflict upon Karhide, every gain in your prestige, you will serve to make Karhide stronger, until it is your equal – controlled all from one centre as Orgoreyn is" (77-78).

If, as this suggests, the balance between utopia and dystopia, between balanced ecological ethics and the imbalance of hierarchical power relationships, is a fine one, is Le Guin's vision in *The Left Hand of Darkness* a pessimistic one? Is she suggesting that the dystopia of strength dominating weakness is inevitable, even on a world premised on harmony? This is certainly one reading. After all, Estraven, the main proponent of peace, unity and balance in the novel, is brutally and unnecessarily killed. His death does not, however, end the novel, and it seems that although the reader is left without certain knowledge of the events to come, the arrival of Genly's colleagues suggests a future for Gethen in the Ekumen; this, in fact, is what Estraven sacrifices himself for – to ensure that the ship is called down to Gethen and the way is made clear for a new beginning. Indeed, Estraven is visionary enough to see that Genly "brings the end of Kingdom and commensalities with him in his empty hands" (79): the influence of the ecological ethic embodied in the Ekumen, it is then suggested, will work toward bringing Gethen back to its state of harmony – but with the important difference that this equilibrium will be improved, in accordance with the principles of the Ekumen, to include not only balanced relationships between Karhide and Orgoreyn, but also within the borders of the countries themselves.

The last pages of the novel reinforce this reading as they document Genly's visit to Estraven's father and Estraven's son: the novel ends with both requesting to hear the tales of Genly and Estraven crossing the ice and of the Ekumen. The circularity of this – since the reader has just heard these stories – reminds us that no tale can be told in isolation. Indeed, the novel is not one narrative, but the interweaving of many strands which, together, enact the multiplicity of ecological thinking. The hint that these stories will be spun together again in the untold future of Gethen implies that the message of acceptance and interconnection for which Estraven died, will live on.

Keulen has contended that by "leaving the ending open, LeGuin [*sic*] does not propose a utopian ending for Gethen" (42), but the suggestion that the Gethenians join with the Ekumen – evidenced by the Ekumen's Embassy and the spread of Genly's colleagues over Gethen (250) – while not proposing a *utopian* ending perhaps, certainly proposes an *optimistic* one. More importantly, the open ending reminds us that Le Guin's project is not

to design a blueprint for a utopia – especially since this utopia would be predicated on the impossibility of physical androgyny. Rather, Le Guin asks what a world premised on what I call an ecological ethic *could* look like, and so investigates what principles would need to be maintained in order to achieve this. The inclusion of Orgoreyn and the shifting politics of Karhide illustrate the fragility of this hope in frighteningly recognisable terms, and allow readers to imagine the possibilities suggested by Le Guin’s creation in their own world. While an ecological ethic is therefore embodied in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, at the same time, the dystopian effects of Othering are used to highlight the need for relationships of respect within a dynamic yet balanced world.

The Word for World is Forest and the Imposition of Hierarchical Thinking

The Word for World is Forest, although written before its publication in Harlan Ellison’s New Wave anthology *Again, Dangerous Visions* in 1972, shows an increased pessimism in Le Guin’s writing.⁹ It is much less elegantly written than *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and Le Guin produces a stark contrast between a utopian-style world based on the premises of ecological thinking and a destructive, hierarchical future Earth (called Terra in the novel). Le Guin has said that *The Word for World is Forest* was written as a response to her involvement in the Peace and anti-Vietnam War movements (Le Guin, “Introduction to *WWF*” 126-127).¹⁰ This horror for war can be seen in the novel’s position in the mythical history she produces for her novels of the Ekumen at a point in time where war and colonisation are only just beginning to make way for the establishment of the League of All Worlds, and thence the Ekumen. The lack of mutual co-operation in this period in the Hainish ‘future history’ is illustrated through the marked violence that characterises the events that take place in the novel. The setting up of the ecologically ethical Athsheans as the opposite of the dystopian Terrans makes *The Word for World is Forest* a polemic against the imposition of the worst kinds of Othering.

⁹ Ian Watson quotes Le Guin as saying it was “written about three years earlier” than it was published (“Le Guin’s” 230), which suggests that it was written in about 1970, or shortly after the publication of *The Left Hand of Darkness* in 1969.

¹⁰ Bassnett has suggested that the most violent scenes are “clearly based on the Mai Lai massacre” (55). Indeed, Joe Haldeman’s descriptions of napalm attacks in Vietnam, when the “forest turns into an inferno”, and the need to escape “when it started to rain jellied gasoline” (99), are clearly written into the Terran’s attacks on the Athsheans in *The Word for World is Forest*.

Athshea as a Society Based on Ecological Ethics

Ecological philosophy is the overriding principle of *The Word for World is Forest*: Barbour has called it “a highly dense and specific creation of an ecology and culture inextricably entwined” (151), and Wayne claims that it is “an ecofeminist utopia of sorts, [which] starts its decline after contact with a male-dominated rationalist tradition, as represented by Terrans” (39). As much as *The Left Hand of Darkness* deals with relationships of non-hierarchical difference, it is *The Word for World is Forest* which elucidates most clearly, through Le Guin’s conception of Athshean society, how people can find their place both amongst other humans and within the wider network of non-human nature. Le Guin’s descriptions of Athshea, therefore, are a romanticised vision of a society which can live in a balanced and cooperative manner, and without hierarchies of dominance and submission.

The opening of the second chapter of the novel, the first from the perspective of the Athshean narrator, Selver, is pivotal in how we perceive Athshea, and thus its society:

All the colors of rust and sunset, brown-reds and pale greens, changed ceaselessly in the long leaves as the wind blew. The roots of the cooper willows, thick and ridged, were moss-green down by the running water, which like the wind moved slowly with many soft eddies and seeming pauses, held back by rocks, roots, hanging and fallen leaves. No way was clear, no light unbroken, in the forest. Into wind, water, sunlight, starlight, there always entered leaf and branch, bole and root, the shadowy, the complex. Little paths ran under the branches, around the boles, over the roots; they did not go straight, but yielded to every obstacle, devious as nerves. The ground was not dry and solid but damp and rather springy, product of the collaboration of living things with the long, elaborate death of leaves and trees; and from that rich graveyard grew ninety-foot trees, and tiny mushrooms that sprouted in circles half an inch across. The smell of the air was subtle, various, and sweet. The view was never long, unless looking up through the branches you caught sight of the stars. Nothing was pure, dry, arid, plain. Revelation was lacking. There was no seeing everything at once: no certainty. The colors of rust and sunset kept changing in the hanging leaves of the copper willows, and you could not say even whether the leaves of the willows were brownish-red, or reddish-green, or green. (25-26)

This passage, remarkable in its poetic quality, is not only important in creating the mood of the chapter (a dramatic contrast to the violence of the first chapter), but is perhaps the first real description of what Le Guin was later to call a yin utopia: “dark, wet, obscure, weak, yielding, passive, participatory, circular, cyclical, peaceful, nurturant, retreating, contracting, and cold” (“A Non-Euclidean View” 90). It is an accommodating and uncertain environment where curves and muted colours dominate. The shadows do not, however, signify death or fear, but rather gentleness and life: as we learn in *The Left Hand*

of *Darkness*, there is no light without darkness. Everything is interlinked – the light and the dark in the dappling of the leaves, the giant trees and tiniest mushrooms – and even the paths seem to be an integral part of the environment, suggesting that the human-made is within the natural world rather than imposed upon it. Barbour argues that this description of “the complex” (25) “is that fusion of light and darkness which represents wholeness” (Barbour 152), and this picture of the Athshean forest remains with us as readers throughout the novel so that we get a sense of the cyclical motion of life and death that informs Athshean society.

Forests are often used as representatives of the ecological web,¹¹ and the prominence of the forest in the title of the novel shows its importance to Le Guin’s thinking here. The forest as a growing, evolving dynamic equilibrium is the foundation of the philosophy of the Athsheans. As the anthropologist Lyubov explains, Athshe means

the Forest, and the World. So earth, terra, tellus meant both the soil and the planet, two meanings and one. But to the Athsheans soil, ground, earth was not that to which the dead return and by which the living live: the substance of their world was not earth, but forest. Terran man was clay, red dust. Athshean man was branch and root. They did not carve figures of themselves in stone, only in wood. (89)

The Athsheans identify themselves with the living forest, and thus with life itself in its endless permutations, cycles and interrelationships. Terrans, Lyubov implies, identify with the soil, seeing it as the starting point from whence life comes, but have no understanding of soil as merely one part of the ecosystem. This suggests that Terrans see life as a linear process from birth to death, whereas Athsheans see life as something inextricably linked with the circular process of life and death, and of the life that springs again from that death. Robert Pogue Harrison has pointed out that forest ecosystems have come to symbolise “environments where various species establish their ‘niche’ and exist in complex, integrated relationships to one another, each contributing its share to the network and each, in turn, depending on the delicate coherence of the network as a whole” (199). The Athsheans’ way of thinking ensures that they are always conscious of the effects of their living, rather than seeing it as a finite movement: in many ways this is the foundation of ecological ethics as it ensures a deep and humble understanding of one’s place in the entire ecosystem. Similarly, by only carving statues of themselves out of wood, the Athsheans

¹¹ Watson has compared *The Word for World is Forest* to Le Guin’s story, “Vaster than Empires and More Slow”, pointing out how the forest represents “connectedness” (263). Brian Stableford suggests that this same story uses the notion of a completely integrated ecosphere (“Science Fiction Before” 132), again making a connection between forests and ecological thinking.

seem to recognise the pointlessness of trying to leave something solid and everlasting behind: they are not troubled by the thought of themselves or their images disintegrating into the mulch which keeps the forest alive, seeing no need to dominate the landscape either literally or metaphorically.

This philosophy is demonstrated in how the Athsheans live. It is almost impossible to see their towns because they literally live within the ground in houses “like badgers’ setts” (40). The town of Cadast centres around a birch grove surrounded by paths which initially seem the only sign of habitation, until a closer look shows that “among the live-oaks and other trees you would find houseroofs sticking up a couple of feet above ground, between a hundred and two hundred of them, it was very hard to count” (39). The houses themselves are not only built into their environment; they are literally made from the forest with “thatch of small branches, pinestraw, reeds, earthmold” (40), making the houses “insulating, waterproof, almost invisible” (40). The people seem as much a part of the environment as their dwellings: “the voices calling here and there and the babble of women bathing or children playing down by the stream, were not so loud as the morning birdsong and insect-drone and under-noise of the living forest of which the town was one element” (40). They even have an efficient and natural way to dispose of their garbage – the grey kites which circle the town (42).

As this description of Cadast indicates, the Athsheans have such intimate ties with their environment that they do not seem to dominate it in any way, making their community perhaps the ideal example of sustainable living. Le Guin describes them as hunting with bow and arrow, weaving baskets, making fishing nets, and keeping orchards in a peaceful, rural existence. The planet is sparsely populated (70) and the Athsheans live in towns small enough not to make too significant an impact on their natural surroundings; Cadast has between one and two hundred dwellings (39). They are primitive in that they have no technology, but they have a highly sophisticated social structure. Of particular interest is that women are seen as rational and practical with the ability to “talk sense” (29), while men are dreamers and visionaries, each of whom takes the name of his wife after marriage just as, in a reciprocal gesture of respect, each woman takes her husband’s name (29-30).

In this novel, then, Le Guin posits a society that does not need the imposition of an unrealistic androgyny to suggest ways of living according to an ecological ethic; it is living in ecological balance that allows individuals to appreciate the value in the Other. The women, for example, run the towns: the headwoman Ebor takes charge when her town is

threatened, putting everyone “on alert, making sure that each family was ready to move out, with some food packed, and litters ready for the old and ill. She sent young women scouting south and east for news of the yumens. She kept one armed hunting-group always around town” (35). While this may simply suggest that gender roles are reversed on Athshea, the relationship between the men and women is one of mutual importance: as Ebor puts it, the men are the Dreamers and as such make judgements based on their visions, but the responsibility of the women “was then to take that judgement and act upon it. He saw what must be done; she saw that it was done” (35). What is important about this is not that the women run the society in a forthright and practical manner, but that the society acknowledges the equality of the sexes and their ability to take different but necessary roles: Le Guin forces the reader to acknowledge this by switching the traditionally Terran gender roles. As Lyubov describes it, the “Athsheans are governed, in so far as they have government, by old women. Intellect to the men, politics to the women, and *ethics to the interaction of both*” (98, my italics). As this implies, the success of Athshea lies in the interdependence of the two sexes, rather than on the imposition of hierarchies.

This depiction of a society characterised by mutual respect is augmented by its non-violence. Lyubov learns that the Athsheans have a complicated system of “aggression-halting gestures and positions” (60), which may be innate but are socially learned and developed. Most important are ritualised singing matches between males, which “are not only aggression-releases, but an art-form. The better artist wins” (61). Even more importantly, although they are a society that hunts for meat and thus have the tools to take life, violence is so minimal that “[r]ape, violent assault, and murder virtually don’t exist among them” (61). Another reason for their lack of violence seems to be the importance the Athsheans place on touch as a form of communication. Touch is customised and highly varied, “patterned, codified, yet infinitely modifiable” (95). Lyubov compares this to Terran touch behaviour which “is always likely to imply threat, aggression, and so for them there is often nothing between the formal handshake and the sexual caress” (94). Communication and interaction on both a symbolic and a physical level, then, is the norm for Athsheans.

The picture Le Guin draws of Athshean society is a remarkable elucidation of how living by ecological principles might create an ideal society. Lyubov says that they are “[p]erfectly integrated, and wholly unprogressive. You might say that like the forest they live in, they’ve attained a climax state” (62). But, like in any utopia, this can be a

problematic state as it implies stasis and not just stability. Indeed, the metaphor of the forest carries a hidden message; like the forest, the Athsheans have a fragile ecological balance. This is immediately clear when the influence of the Terrans on the planet is taken into account. Their logging activities do almost irreparable damage to the areas they inhabit. The Terran ecologist, Gosse, points out to the League's representatives that

[i]f more than a certain percentage of the forest is cut over a certain area, then the fibreweed doesn't reseed, you see, gentlemen, and the fibreweed root-system is the main soil-binder on clear land; without it the soil goes dusty and drifts off very fast under wind-erosion and the heavy rainfall. (71)

The total destruction of the forest as a result of over-logging is a symbol of the potential for the total destruction of the Athshean society. Gosse's environmental message thus becomes a warning: because Athshean society is integrated into the entire ecology of their planet, it is as vulnerable to devastation as its ecosystem.

The Terran Dominance/Submission Culture as Oppositional to an Ecological Ethic

Unlike the more muted and mutable differences seen between Karhide and Orgoren in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin shows up the Athshean society's beauty and harmony by pitting it in starkly against the ugly imbalances of Terran society in *The Word for World is Forest*, interspersing descriptions of the Athshean culture with the scenes of violence, rape, assault and murder that characterise the Terrans who colonise Athshea. Terra's norms are shown through the eyes of Captain Davidson, one of the most repugnant, if baldly and crudely drawn, characters in Le Guin's oeuvre,¹² and the chapters she devotes to his perspective show clearly his inability to respect or love anything that shows the slightest difference from himself; his thoughts and deeds are driven by his extreme sexism, racism and speciesism.

Davidson's sexism is apparent from the opening pages of the novel as he speaks of women as if they are a commodity: a "shipload of women" is useful as it provides "breeding females" (1). Davidson, here, shows how he sees women in animalistic terms¹³ as well as sexual objects. He later consoles himself with the "fact" that "the only time a

¹² In her introduction to the novel, Le Guin admits that Davidson "is purely evil – and I don't, consciously, believe purely evil people exist" (127).

¹³ He later talks of the females who arrive at the start of the novel as "collies" (79), which initially sounds like he is referring to a group of dogs before it becomes apparent that it is short for "colonists" – a clever play on words that emphasises how often he perceives the human Other as animal.

man is really and entirely a man is when he's just had a woman or just killed another man" (81). His objectification of women is extended to his treatment of female Athsheans: he shows no remorse for raping Selver's wife Thele and thus causing her death. This objectification of women is such a central part of his character that he cannot even imagine that the Athsheans could think of, or treat, Terran women any differently to the way he does, certainly displaying no awareness the role of Athshean women as respected individuals and leaders. The greatest irony is that when the Athsheans finally revolt against their treatment by the Terrans, he worries about the Terran women being captured, not because he believes they have any intrinsic value, but because he cannot bear the thought of the Athsheans raping 'his' women:

God knows how many of the women were still alive in the creechie warrens, tied down underground in one of those stinking holes, being touched and felt and crawled over and defiled by the filthy, hairy little monkeymen. It was unthinkable. (140)

Of course, the incongruity here is that Davidson sees the capture and rape of women as "unthinkable" when it is something being done to Terran women, whereas he is guilty of raping Athshean women. Furthermore, he is oblivious to the Athsheans' respect for women, which forms a contrast to his own abusive behaviour towards the Terran women arriving on Athshea.

Davidson's objectification of the other is extended into how he thinks racially – he comments: "Don't look for good sense from women or creechies" (11). He not only subordinates women, but is racist towards other members of Terran society, as well as towards the alien Athsheans, whom he calls creechies (a word stemming from 'creatures') as a way to enforce their Otherness. Terra, our Earth, as Le Guin depicts it in this novel, is some time in our future, and there has clearly been some kind of cultural change, as the racial groups Davidson describes are mostly conglomerations of our current racial groups. He talks, for example, of being lucky in his parentage compared to other men, seeing himself as part of a chosen race.

Some men, especially the asiatforms and hindi types, are actually born traitors, not all, but some certain other men are born saviors. It just happened to be the way they were made, like being of euraf descent, or like having a good physique; it wasn't anything he claimed credit for. (78-79)

Typically, his nickname for Major Muhamed, one of the so-called asiatforms, is Old Moo, its cow-like overtones designed to accentuate his disrespect for the old man's conservative approach to the Athsheans. On the other hand, the atrocities committed by Davidson's men

after the Athshean attack are seen as loyal actions by Davidson, and he instinctively attributes this ‘dependability’ to their racial background:

Here in Java the fifty-five loyal men remaining after the reorganization were mostly eurafts like himself, some afros and afrasians, not one pure asio. Blood tells, after all. You couldn’t be fully human without some blood in your veins from the Cradle of Man. (142)

Of course, part of why this passage works so well is that African people have traditionally been on the receiving end of racist colonial policy, and so by highlighting Davidson’s violent racism against people *without* African descent, the reader (particularly the white, Western reader) is forced into a position of self-analysis, assessing their own response to racial Othering and the historical norms of racism in the real world.

Davidson’s fear of the Other is extended to other non-Terran humans, both those who arrive on Athshea as part of the League of All Worlds responsible for investigating Terran colonial interests, and the Athsheans themselves. Lyubov (who is actually the saviour figure in the novel despite, as Davidson would see it, his “asio” blood) describes the two representatives of the League, Or and Lepennon, as “a Hairy Cetian, dark grey, stocky, and dour” and as “tall, white, and comely: a Hainishman” (53). Lyubov’s fairly factual, but positive, response to them is contrasted with that of Davidson, who sees Or and Lepennon as the “little grey ape and the big white fairy” (76). Again, this shows Davidson’s tendency to describe anyone other than himself in animalistic terms, and there is implicit homophobia in his reaction to Lepennon’s elegant frame. Despite our knowledge, garnered from *The Left Hand of Darkness*, that the League’s motives are noble, Davidson can only expect of others the type of behaviour he would demonstrate. He suspects the League of the kind of greedy and violent colonialism for which he stands:

What the long-term objective of the aliens was, was hard to guess from here; it probably involved weakening the Terran Government by tying it up in this ‘league of worlds’ business until the aliens were strong enough to make an armed takeover. (78)

His fear of the Other is defensive as well as aggressive, as this shows.

Davidson is also remarkably violent in the antipathy he displays towards the Athsheans. He sees the Athsheans as animals and not as humans, as is indicated by his use of the pejorative ‘creechie’ instead of Athshean. As in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin makes the Athsheans significantly different from what we are used to seeing as humanoid: in this case they are not hermaphrodites but are, as Davidson describes them, “a

meter tall and covered with green fur. As ETs they were about standard, but as men they were a bust” (8). What is difficult for us as readers is that Davison’s description is our initial introduction to the Athsheans, and as a result, our first impression of them is more animal than human, too – although his disgust for them is not justified by this. He claims he “knew how to handle them; he could tame any of them” (3); points out the difference between “wild creechies” or “tame creechies” (17); and when he argues with one of the other Terrans who feels that the work-camps are slavery, Davidson contends that it “isn’t slavery.... Slaves are humans. When you raise cows, you call that slavery? No” (10). The colonists do not only speak of the Athsheans as if they were animals, as we see here, but treat them like animals too. When Davidson is forced to release the captured and caged Athsheans he is disgusted because they “had no loyalty. A dog, a chimp would have hung around. These things weren’t even that highly developed, they were just about like snakes or rats, just smart enough to turn around and bite you as soon as you let ’em out of the cage” (80). The social Darwinism implicit in this is echoed by his inability to imagine that they could have their own language – he describes Athshean voices as a “gabble-gobble” (17) – and his mouthing of the familiar words of coloniser over colonised: “the creechies are lazy, they’re dumb, they’re treacherous, and they don’t feel pain” (11). Davidson sees the Athsheans simply as animals to be used and abused, making no effort to understand their highly complex sleeping patterns and social order. To him they are one amorphous Other, despite their own varieties of language, dialect, and even physical types with what the narrator describes as “infinite ramifications of manners, morals, customs, crafts” (36). He utterly dehumanises the Athsheans, and it is this ability to see them only as Other that forms his justification for treating them as objects.

Although Davidson’s mentality may seem extreme, it is not singular within the novel, and it sets up an image of Terra as a society with an embedded dominance/submission culture. It is not just Davidson who enacts the master/slave dynamic; it becomes clear that this is a common perspective amongst Terrans when we learn about how they have treated their own world. The ecology specialist, Kees Van Sten, calls Terra a “desert of cement” (5), and even Davidson recalls that “[b]ack on Earth they were using robodeer even in the High Rockies and Himalaya Parks now, the real ones were about gone” (6). There are no more gorillas in Africa (12), gibbons are extinct (89), and Alaska has been destroyed (by a similar development policy used in Athshe), to the extent that there are no surviving Sitka spruce, snowy owls, wolves, or Eskimos (72): rats, as Davidson himself admits, are “about the only wild animals left on Mother Earth” (85). The

sole purpose of the Terran colonisation of Athshe is to set up a logging industry because wood is “more prized on Earth than gold. Literally, because gold could be got from seawater and from under the Antarctic ice, but wood could not; wood came only from trees. And it was a really necessary luxury on Earth” (7). Yet, despite the clear picture of an ecologically devastated Earth that even he recalls, Davidson still cannot see how his actions will potentially destroy Athshe, thinking that “[c]leaned up and cleaned out, the dark forests cut down for open fields of grain, the primeval murk and savagery and ignorance wiped out, it would be a paradise, a real Eden. A better world than worn-out Earth” (3).¹⁴ He is blinded by his own inability to respect and honour difference.

What is most frightening about Le Guin’s portrayal of Terra as a dystopian world, ecologically ravaged and controlled along race and gender lines, is that the novel does not simply contrast the two societies merely to highlight the pleasantness of Athshea and the horrors of Terra: the tension in the novel is created by the imposition of dystopian values of hierarchy and exploitation onto utopian ones of mutuality and respect. Selver’s position in the novel is central in this respect. The reader naturally identifies with Selver, not only because his actions are presented as reasonable, but because Le Guin’s portrayal of the Terrans through Davidson is so unsympathetic. When Selver kills the Terrans while rescuing the people of Penle city, brutally enslaved by Davidson, he rebels against the Athshean culture of non-violence, indicating the impact the Terrans have had on Athshea’s idyllic society. As Lyubov points out to the members of the League,

‘For four years they’ve behaved to us as they do to one another. Despite the physical differences, they recognized us as members of their species, as men. However, we have not responded as members of their species should respond. We have ignored the responses, the rights and obligations of non-violence. We have killed, raped, dispersed, and enslaved the native humans, destroyed their communities, and cut down their forests. It wouldn’t be surprising if they’d decided that we are not human.’

‘And therefore can be killed, like animals, yes, yes,’ said the Cetian.... (62)

This is indeed the only way in which the Athsheans can explain the behaviour of the Terrans: they see the Terrans as insects, as nothing else can explain to the Athsheans how they could kill one another, especially how they can kill large groups at once without sparing “one who asks life” (33). Their decision to attack the Terrans comes from their

¹⁴ Byrne argues that Davidson’s attitude here is Le Guin’s way of exposing “the acquisitive imperialism of a mechanistic view of nature, sanctioned by Christianity” (“Women’s” 355), and certainly humanity’s desire to clear away forests is evident here. See Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilisation*, for a detailed analysis of this mind-set in Christian and other cultures.

realisation that the Terrans are stronger, and are starting to settle and breed. They have weapons and technology that could quickly subdue the Athsheans, and so Selver reasons that the Terrans “must be burned out of the Lands, as nests of stinging-ants must be burned out of the groves of cities. If we wait, it is we that will be smoked out and burned” (45). Selver is seen by the Athsheans as a god who brings murder and war to their people, shattering their society’s characteristic balance and culture of non-violence.

At the end of the novel, the League promises to leave Athsheans alone and remove all the Terrans from their world. Does this mean that there is hope that, like the forest, they will return to their Edenic state? It seems not: as Selver explains to Lepennon, when a ‘god’ brings a new way of doing things, “it is done. You cannot take things that exist in the world and try to drive them back into the dream, to hold them inside the dream with walls and pretenses. That is insanity. What is, is. There is no use pretending, now, that we do not know how to kill one another” (168). Selver’s statement is crucial in that it is realistic. We do have a sense that the Athshean culture has been irrevocably changed by the presence of the Terrans – a presence which inextricably links our own world to Le Guin’s imaginary one. Huntington has pointed out that Le Guin’s early novels “envision a primitive economy as the main salvation from the modern, technological, imperialist state”, but that at the same time that the unity provided by this primitivism is “vulnerable to outside threats” (271). Why, then, does Le Guin go to the trouble of creating a society of such beauty and harmony, only to leave the novel on such a note?

First, the contrast between Athshe and Terra shows most clearly a possible future for us on Earth – one based on the supremacy of particular races, where women are objects used for breeding, and the environment is completely destroyed. This is not outside the bounds of possibility (it is a similar vision to those described in other novels examined here), and by positioning the crudity of the Terrans alongside the equilibrium of the Athsheans, Le Guin suggests that our earth is out of balance because of humanity’s inability to think and act in an ecological way. Secondly, by not allowing the Athsheans to go back to their utopian state, Le Guin refuses to allow the reader the conventional happy ending. Only if we are dissatisfied and horrified will her polemic work – and there is no doubt that this novel is pure polemic: Le Guin even admits in her introduction to the novel that she “succumbed, in part, to the lure of the pulpit” (126). Byrne suggests that Le Guin’s portrayal of “the self-justifying male appetite for power and violence, coupled with cruelty towards natural phenomena” in Davidson is “unequalled anywhere in her work” (“Selves” 66), and this is certainly true. I do, though, agree with Reid when she argues that

this novel is more simplistic than Le Guin's others because "it polarizes good and evil so definitively" (59). The strongly dystopian element to her writing in this novel – and by that I mean not only the descriptions of Terra, but also the sense of loss and destruction with which Athshea is left – indicates a more pessimistic turn in Le Guin's writing.

The Word for World is Forest is situated at an earlier point in the history of Le Guin's Hainish cycle and shows the beginnings of the Ekumen. Still a League of Worlds, the association of planets is still at the stage where it is trying to work out a balance and find its true role as the unthreatening co-ordinator of many worlds, allowing each world its independence and acknowledging unique cultural differences. If the Ekumen is really Le Guin's only true utopia in her Hainish cycle, then this novel shows, with dramatic effect, the importance of the Ekumen's philosophy of dynamic equilibrium by showing the failure of balance following the clash between Terra and Athshe. Søren Baggesen argues that it is the Athsheans'

peaceableness, emergent from the outset as the submissiveness into which the greedy aggression of their oppressors has perverted it, that makes them so easy for the Terran conquerors to enslave. This carries with it a further pessimistic implication: peace may be a hope, but it is an impossible hope, because it cannot sustain itself against conquest. (36)

The World for World is Forest shows, then, that an ideal world, based on an ecological ethic, is fragile. It is utopian not only in its 'eutopian' dream of the good life, but also, by the end of the novel, as More's original pun intended, that it is 'no place'.

The Dispossessed and the Ambiguities of the Real and the Imagined

The utopian impulses of both *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Word for World is Forest* come of age in Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974). Fredric Jameson points to this movement when he suggests that *The Left Hand of Darkness* "served as something like a proving ground for techniques that are not consciously employed in the construction of a utopia" until *The Dispossessed* ("World Reduction" 258). Certainly, in *The Dispossessed*, originally subtitled "An Ambiguous Utopia", Le Guin's portrayal of ecological ethics becomes much more complex. As the subtitle suggests, the novel is more open-ended than her earlier ones, and perhaps most importantly for this project, more questioning of the practicalities of living by an ecological ethic. In this instance the lack of the markedly Other in the form of aliens who are androgynous or covered in green fur makes the

estrangement in *The Dispossessed* less obvious, and at the same time the characters and situations more familiar. This similarity to our earth is perhaps why Le Guin is less able to produce a society that enacts an ecological ethic in the way that she does in Karhide and Athshea. Utopia, in *The Dispossessed* is made ambiguous in two ways: first, Anarres initially seems to be portrayed as a utopia, but this is then undermined during the course of the narrative. Secondly, as the idea of Anarres as utopia is weakened, so the apparent dystopianism of Urras is also questioned. What this does is begin to cast doubt on the ability of an ecological ethic to flourish in a real-world situation.

Utopian Anarres/Dystopian Urras: Ecological Ethics versus Hierarchies of Worth

Like the utopia-styled societies of Karhide and Athshea, Anarres is premised upon the idea of relationships of non-hierarchical difference, and this is shown specifically in Anarresti society's attitude to the relationship between men and women. Not only are Anarresti names genderless, but no form of labour is seen as either women's work or men's work – they believe that while men may be physically stronger, “women work longer” (22). Women are not tied down by their biology any further than pregnancy and child-bearing warrant, as child-rearing is done communally in nurseries, allowing women to return to their work. In the case of the protagonist Shevek, for example, his mother is a valued engineer and leaves him behind when she goes to work at the Central Institute of Engineering, while his father chooses to take on a more nurturing role (29). For these reasons, many feminist critics see Anarres as a good example of a feminist utopia, and, moreover, one which actually seems realistic enough to be possible (see Mellor 260). Rochelle, for example, argues that the novel is a feminist utopia because “Anarresti society is based on full equality and mutual solidarity and cooperation, with its philosophy developed by Odo, a woman” (415). Russ, however, suggests that *The Dispossessed* is not so much a “feminist utopia” as “feminist and utopian” (“Recent” 134). Russ is certainly correct from the standpoint that feminism does not appear to spark the utopian energy of the novel; rather, Anarresti society displays a stronger congruence with the idea of ecological thinking.¹⁵

¹⁵ Sarah Lefanu is confused by Le Guin's strong feminist following as she argues that Le Guin actually features very few women in her work, claiming that those she does feature “are restricted by biology – Rolery as childbearer in *Planet of Exile* – or by stereotype – Takver as prop and support in *The Dispossessed*” (*Feminism* 132). It is true that Takver's role is fairly minor and that Shevek, the central character of the novel, is a man. This is definitely one of the novel's failings if read from a feminist point of view (see also

One of the primary ways in which Anarres corresponds to an ecological ethic is through the kind of anarchism that the Anarresti practice. Their anarchism, as pointed out above, is based on the philosophy of a woman, Odo. Odonianism is premised on what Le Guin calls in the novel “the ideal of complex organicism” (86): it uses technology and communication to allow for the exchange of goods “in an intricate process of balance: that balance of diversity which is the characteristic of life, of natural and social ecology” (86). In many ways Le Guin’s own description of Odonianism is a comment on the ecological ethic found in her novels: she highlights both the need for a “process of balance”, suggesting dynamic equilibrium, and the importance of “diversity”, which rejects the submission of the part into the whole. Even its symbol is the green circle of life representing both ecological balance and cycles of growth and change. Bittner suggests that the “two-hundred-year-old symbol of the Odonian Movement, a circle not quite closed, is an abstract version of the ouroboros, the snake with its tail in its mouth, a synthesis of linearity and circularity” (“Chronosophy” 255). The idea of the linear and the circular working together is an apt description of the dynamic equilibrium that is so important to the establishment of an ecological ethic.¹⁶

Reedy’s suggestion that anarchism is actually a realistic way to describe a decentralised and self-regulating state (178), illustrates the importance of Odonianism to the ecological philosophy of the novel.¹⁷ It appears to be the most plausible vision of a society run on the premises of an ecological ethic: a state that is not controlled from the top down, but in a way that allows for individuality, tolerance and respect. Odonianism has been linked to Kropotkinism (Urbanowicz 146)¹⁸ and to Taoism: Hoyle points out that ‘Odo’ means ‘the way’ in Greek, and argues that it is this influence which allows each Anarresti to be “seen as an integral part of the functioning of the individual and of society” (77). This immediately connects the Taoist elements of Karhide in *The Left Hand of*

Cummins, “The Land-lady’s” 157). However, Heldreth argues that “Le Guin uses the freedom of Odonian society to create in Takver’s and Shevek’s relationship a portrait of what an association between man and woman might be like if all questions of ownership and subservience were left out of it” (219), and it is certainly clear that their relationship is suggested in terms of the ideal. Nonetheless, Lefanu’s comments substantially undermine the idea that *The Dispossessed* depicts a pure feminist utopia.

¹⁶ Kumar has suggested that *The Dispossessed* “is not just a feminist utopia; it is, perhaps even more, an ecotopia” because “[m]ale domination is often linked in these utopias to the exploitative and destructive uses of science and technology” (*Utopianism* 103). Although Kumar is generally correct, Le Guin does not shun science and technology in *The Dispossessed* so much as reject its abuse by those with more power than others. The ecotopian aspects of the novel are rather more suggested by Odo’s rejection of hierarchical systems of power and abuse.

¹⁷ Anarchism is not, in other words, the same as anarchy, the latter suggesting chaos and violence.

¹⁸ Kropotkin, in his essay “Mutual Aid” argues that “mutual aid and support” are “inherent parts of human nature”, basing his anarchism on these ideas (170). These are similar ideals to those found in Odonianism (and some forms of ecological philosophy).

Darkness to the anarchism of Anarres in *The Dispossessed*; Anarres, however, is more modern and sophisticated than the quasi-Medieval Karhide and thus appears to be a more relevant, or at least less removed, kind of ecological utopia for the modern reader.

Odonian anarchism also seems recognisable because it is more firmly based on real-world socio-economic and political systems. Most noticeable perhaps is the communal element of Anarresti society, which like most feminist and ecological utopias is based both on what we would today call principles of sustainable development, and on a rejection of the hierarchical systems associated with capitalism. Anarresti do not own property or have a money economy. As in many feminist utopias and societies based on sustainable development, work on Anarres is not done for private, material gain: “There is no other reward, on Anarres; no other law. One’s own pleasure, and the respect of one’s fellows” (129). Individual drive and competition for personal economic gain, the main force behind a functioning capitalist society, is rejected in this utopia, as it allows those with economic power to dominate others, creating hierarchical relationships and imbalances in society. Anarresti society is premised, rather, on each individual finding a place within a working economy, with no hierarchy or submission of some beneath others. Heldreth argues that it is the elimination of property which is partially responsible for this equality, because the Anarresti language has eliminated the possessives ‘my’ and ‘mine’, eliminating the ability to claim anything for oneself (217). There are no guns, no prisons, and hardly any need for people to work for the Defence syndicate. Unlike capitalist Urras, therefore, it certainly seems a utopian world, as none experience the commonplaces of a poor Urrasti’s life, like “a rat, or an army barracks, or an insane asylum, or a poorhouse, or a pawnshop, or an execution, or a thief, or a tenement, or a rent-collector, or a man who wanted work and could not find work to do, or a dead baby in a ditch” (236). Each person in Anarres is seen to make a valid contribution to society and, as a result, all are guaranteed basic needs.

This contrast between Anarresti Odonianism and Urrasti capitalism suggests that Urras is a dystopia, especially as it is seen through the eyes of Shevek when he travels there to complete his Theory of Simultaneity. The Urrasti are completely hierarchical – the Captain on the spaceship *Mindful* is “used to looking on foreigners as inferior, as less than fully human” (19) – and even the room Shevek is given at the university makes him feel “detached from the ground, dominant, uninvolved” (60). His servant, Efor, quite clearly cannot behave as a brother to Shevek, as Shevek would like, but bows to him as if he thought Shevek “was about to hit him in the face” (62). Women have no place in society that is not purely submissive: the Urrasti think that they are biologically incapable of

original research because “what women call thinking is done with the uterus” (67). The only power women seem to have is in their sexuality and how they can use their sexuality to manipulate men, as Vea’s flirtatious behaviour shows, despite her empty protestations that women only *seem* inferior but really “run the men” (181). Le Guin is clever enough not to overdo her depiction of patriarchy though, choosing not to make Urras “the kind of violent, misogynous society common in feminist dystopian fiction; rather it is presented as a somewhat Victorian society in which both women and men are straitjacketed by rigid gender roles and sexual mores” (Benfield 130). Urrasti society is thus much more believable than the radically patriarchal societies which often appear as the counterpart to feminist utopias. Each individual, however, is fiercely defensive about their little piece of power, whether it is theirs personally or their country’s power, or, indeed, their world’s: the scientist Atro is threatened by the opening up of new worlds through the Ekumen, stating that “nowadays ‘mankind’ is a bit over-inclusive. What defines brotherhood but non-brotherhood” (123). Urras can thus be seen as a dystopia because it is a total rejection of ecological ethics: it is a culture completely based on exclusiveness and power rather than on inclusiveness and respect.

Making Utopia and Dystopia Ambiguous: The Practicalities of Ecological Thinking

What makes *The Dispossessed* Le Guin’s most mature work of this period of Hainish novels is that neither society is totally utopian nor totally dystopian, complicating her vision in this novel so that it becomes much more thought-provoking than her earlier contrasts between Karhide and Orgoreyn, or Athshea and Terra. Shevek, after all, leaves Anarres because the utopian ideals on which it was founded have gradually been eroded over the seven generations since it was founded. By complicating her depiction of Anarres, as well as Urras, Le Guin thus forces the reader to ask what the most important element of any society really is, and the novel becomes a means of examining the effects of stasis and stagnation on an ecological ethic.

Anarres does not have laws governing freedom of thought and deed, but these have become ruled by convention. For example, the PDC (a supposedly purely administrative fixture, not a government) has slowly become more centralised, even though this is totally antithetical to the principals of Odonian anarchism. Reedy has argued that the “ideal anarchist community is a dynamic one, where groups and individuals can extend the realm of freedom to include the determination of needs and desires within consensual social

relations” (182), and this is precisely what Odo’s philosophy intended. However, as Ken MacLeod points out, there can be “no politics in Utopia; as in its neighbour Dystopia, the government of people has been replaced by the administration of things” (230). MacLeod continues his argument by pointing out that this in itself can become “oppressive”, using the example of *The Dispossessed*:

When the hero Shevek finds himself in conflict with aspects of his society he has no forum in which to express it, no way to find like-minded individuals with whom he might find common ground; instead his conflicts become conflicts with *other individuals*. He is as isolated as any dissident in a totalitarian state. (230, original italics)

The problem of basing a society on the principles of ecological ethics, therefore, seems to be that it can only work if its networks of interrelationships do not become rigid, but rather allow for change and growth: equilibrium must, in other words, remain dynamic.

The stagnation of Anarres has its basis in a very practical consideration: one of the reasons for the increasing power of the administrative system on Anarres is the physical environment. Kumar has argued that *The Dispossessed* is an ecotopia because it “presents a detailed picture of a decentralized, egalitarian society forced by its circumstances to accommodate to a harsh environment, and discovering in the process new ethical and social principles” (*Utopianism* 105). While Kumar is correct in suggesting that Anarresti society is ecotopian in principle, he is incorrect in suggesting that it is the ecology of Anarres that leads to their egalitarianism. Odonianism is created on Urras, a country clearly lacking the harsh environment of Anarres, and Anarres is settled with Odonian principles already intact: ironically, it is the scarcity of the planet’s resources that start to erode Anarresti ideals of egalitarianism and anarchism.¹⁹ This is first made apparent when Shevek finds out that personal needs are not always taken into account by work postings. He is sent to work in the desert areas of ‘The Dust’, and envies his friends because their “central function wasn’t being wasted. They were working: doing what they wanted to do. He was not working. He was being worked” (48). Later, the famine allows for greater controls, because “every emergency, every labour draft even, tends to leave behind it an increment of bureaucratic machinery within the PDC, and a kind of rigidity: this is the way it was done, this is the way it is done, this the way it *has* to be done” (272, original italics). It is for this reason that I disagree with John Fekete’s statement that “[o]ddly, Le Guin sees the

¹⁹ This is also the case in Lessing’s portrayal of a futuristic Africa in her Ifrik novels (see Chapter Eight).

function of environmental adversity only as providing the possibility of fulfilment and purpose to the worker and the possibility of solidarity to the community. She does not connect the material and cultural poverty on Anarres” (Fekete n.pag.). Rather, Shevek’s comments indicate that Le Guin does not see a sparse environment as a prerequisite for the establishment of ecological principles,²⁰ an argument that is perhaps only relevant to the slow evolution on Gethen. One of the prerequisites for utopia, according to Bartkowski, is that it is “founded on a premise of abundance” while dystopia is “tied to the rhetoric and economy of scarcity, lack, hopelessness” (151). Certainly, Shevek believes that it is the poverty of Anarres that frustrates individual creativity because their planet “wasn’t meant to support civilization” (143). It is significant, therefore, that Le Guin chooses to found Anarres on such an economy of scarcity, and ironic that it turns out to be the very thing that aids the bureaucratic invasion of utopia.

The increasing bureaucracy of Anarres during the drought leads to the very opposite of what Odo intended to achieve: hierarchy. As his teacher Mitis warns him, Shevek learns that “[p]ower inheres in a centre” (55): the supposed egalitarianism of the Anarresti has collapsed in Abbenay, the main city. While no possessions and privileges should be allowed, Shevek is given his own room, books, a blanket, and he discovers dessert is served nightly, whereas nowhere else in Anarres is it served more than twice a decad (their ten-day week) because of the limited resources. These little details make Shevek aware that the total equality preached by Odonianism is slowly slipping away. In fact, as Benfield points out, this realisation “literally sickens Shevek. He becomes ill for the first time in his life and has to be hospitalized” (132). Ruth Levitas suggests that Anarres “is a utopia in which not all needs are met; the benefits and costs of the prescribed values are stated, but nevertheless some needs are accorded greater legitimacy than others” (28), a situation that becomes increasingly clear to Shevek as he grows up. In fact, Kathryn Hume makes the valid point that, during the drought and subsequent famine, “the flexibility of the society’s voluntary co-operation hardens into a demanding system, a denial of individual needs, and a requirement of service” (106). Anarres, however, has been moving toward a bureaucracy even before this. This is illustrated by Shevek (like many others) always feeling obliged to accept his work postings, even though these often split up relationships and leave individuals unhappy and unfulfilled. He comes to the slow realisation that the Anarresti “don’t cooperate – we *obey*. We fear being outcast, being called lazy, dysfunctional,

²⁰ As Mathisen notes, novels such as *The Dispossessed* can even alert us to the danger that ecotopian thinking can merge into a “totalitarian green culture” (69).

egoizing. We fear our neighbour's opinion more than we respect our own freedom of choice.... We've made laws, laws of conventional behaviour" (273, original italics). As Mathisen has pointed out, Anarresti society "has becomes too rigid and intolerant" to accept disagreement (64). While there may not be written laws, society has entrenched certain codes and norms which restrict individuality. Anarresti society, which initially seemed to conform to an ecological ethic, can thus no longer be seen as purely utopian: the individual has been suppressed in favour of the whole.

This is seen through Shevek, who has constantly been taught to negate individuality; even as a small child his genuine attempt to explain Zeno's paradox is crushed with the rebuke "stop egoizing" (32). Anything the Anarresti do not understand, is rejected, as Tirin finds out when the response to his satirical play about Urras is to ensure that, although he is trained to teach, he is sent away on endless drudge labour postings until he eventually ends up in an Asylum (146, 270-272). Shevek too faces the wall of public opinion when his intellect outstrips that of his teacher, who ensures that the Press Syndicate vetoes Shevek's publications (102), that the Physics Federative will not allow him to introduce a new course or send his letters to physicists on Urras (137), and that the Central Institute refuses to allow Shevek to teach his theories to any students (212).²¹ Bedap believes that public opinion is the "unadmitted, inadmissible government that rules the Odonian society by stifling the individual mind" (142). Even Vea, despite her own powerlessness in Urras, points out that the Odonians may have destroyed hierarchy, but have kept tyranny inside their consciences, which makes it so much more difficult to rebel against (185). Benfield's comment that "Le Guin shows us how easily the pursuit of equality can turn into the suppression of difference" (128) illustrates the main dystopian influence on the novel: the erasure of difference in the face of public opinion. Relationships of non-hierarchical difference are the foundation of the ecological ethic identifiable in this novel, and as Shevek's experience of Anarres makes clear, difference and diversity are its corner-stone: the Other, on Anarres, is just as feared as it is on Urras, but instead of excluding the Other, the Anarresti simply erase it.

The Anarresti's fear of the Other is shown through the defensiveness with which they approach any new ideas, as well as any old ones that might be linked to Urras. Shevek, as he matures, starts to question more seriously what the Anarresti have lost by

²¹ Shevek and Tirin are not alone in their isolation: the musician Salas, for example, is also not allowed to record his music because it is new and unusual (150).

refusing to allow anything new into their world and by insisting that Urras is evil. He realises that to

deny is not to achieve. The Odonians who left Urras had been wrong, wrong in their desperate courage to deny their history, to forego the possibility of return. The explorer who will not come back or send back his ships to tell his tale is not an explorer, only an adventurer; and his sons are born in exile. (80)

As Urbanowicz argues, part of the reason for Anarresti stagnancy is that its “prolonged isolation has made it xenophobic towards Urras, quite against anarchist ideals of human cooperation and solidarity across political boundaries” (147). Of course, the main image in the novel, as many critics have pointed out, is that of the wall. Bernard Selinger, for example, claims that the wall described in the opening line of the novel “is a real boundary but it is really an idea, something concrete made abstract and vice-versa. This idea of separation has existed since the birth of that planet for the Odononians. It is important; it is necessary. But one is not sure whether it is a positive thing or not” (108). I think it is clear that the wall is not meant to be positive: Shevek is haunted by it and it is only the removal of the wall he constantly sees in his mind that literally allows the breakthrough he needs in order to complete his life’s work.²² As Bittner points out, the double-sided nature of the wall shows it is not only the Urrasti who hope to keep revolutionary change out of their own world (and ironically thus ensuring its return): “the Anarresti, hoping to eliminate authoritarian power by walling out the profiteers on Urras, cut themselves off from the past and ensure the slow growth of authority” (“Chronosophy” 250). Like the Berlin Wall in our own history, then, the wall both imprisons those within it and ‘protects’ them from outside influences.

The isolation, fear and stagnation of Anarres therefore works in opposition to the ideas of diversity, interrelationships and dynamic equilibrium that are supposed to found Odonianism. Shevek points out that the “Odonian society was conceived as a permanent revolution, and revolution begins in the thinking mind” (276). The Anarresti are no longer allowed to think or act for themselves, only for their community, and as much as Le Guin stresses the importance of one’s responsibility to other members of a community, she does not approve of this if it leads to the destruction of the individual. “There is a very real ambiguity in calling a place where genius cannot flourish an utopia [*sic*]”, says Judah Bierman, adding that this “is an ambiguity that utopists have kept hidden till now. Utopias

²² Marius de Geus has commented that one of the problems of green utopias is their isolation and fear that “disruptive ideas or behaviour patterns introduced from outside could directly endanger the extremely delicate balance of their ideal societies” (qtd. in Mathisen 76).

make good citizens, good soldiers, but when have they shown us flourishing geniuses other than founders?" (280). Le Guin actively fights against stagnation in her conception of an ecologically-minded utopia, as Odonianism's constant revolution makes clear, suggesting that dynamism is as important as balance in an ideal world, however difficult that is to achieve on a practical level.

The need for growth and change in society is emphasised through the depiction of Urras as more complicated than a dystopia. The complexity of Anarres – mirrored in Urras through the juxtapositioning of chapters set on Urras with those set on Anarres – undermines Anarresti society's utopianism further (Jose 189). Urras, in fact, has several positive aspects: Shevek's joy at the "cool, damp, many-scented, mild" air of Urras makes it feel like "home" to him (24). He feels awe at the thought of enough trees to make a forest (25) and at the looming face of a donkey (26). He has never had the pleasure of hearing a bird sing (61) and thinks that Anarresti farmlands are "like a crude sketch in yellow chalk, compared to this fulfilled magnificence of life, rich in the sense of history and seasons to come, inexhaustible" (61). In fact, the poignancy of Shevek's response to Urras shatters the foundations of our belief that Urras is completely dystopian, as he thinks that

he did feel at home. He could not help it. The whole world, the softness of the air, the fall of sunlight across the hills, the very pull of the heavier gravity on his body, asserted to him that this was home indeed, his race's world; and all its beauty was his birthright. (70)

He is saddened by the fact that his "ancestors for seven generations had never touched an animal's warm fur, or seen the flash of wings in the shade of trees" (131) and have such a limited ecology (159). Pointing to this sense of ease Shevek feels upon his arrival, Kumar agrees that Urras is "not all anti-utopia" (*Utopia and Anti-Utopia* 413) and Raymond Williams sees this as a way for Le Guin to suggest an "uneasy consciousness that the superficialities of Utopia, affluence and abundance, can be achieved at least for many, by non-utopian and even anti-utopian means" (64). Excess, then, is not always excrement, as Odo would have it.

Furthermore, Shevek finds intellectual freedom in A-Io, a place where academics can discuss their ideas and "new worlds were born of their talking. It is of the nature of idea to be communicated: written, spoken, done. The idea is like grass. It craves light, likes crowds, thrives on crossbreeding, grows better for being stepped on" (66). Shevek's words, here, are the heart of the novel. Not only is Shevek's heightened emotion here a

key to the importance of this idea, but the very expression of its opposite in Anarres leads to his journey in the first place. I would agree with Bain, therefore, when she argues that the Urrasti can give Shevek the one thing that he cannot get from Annares: “knowledge of the foreign, of the alien, of the other side of the circle” (222). Isolation and stagnation are always to be rejected in Le Guin’s philosophy: this is effectively an ecological ethic, as it is not on the removal of difference, but on the acceptance of it, that harmony and growth can come about. Urras gives Shevek the chance to communicate with other physicists and, through his exposure to their work, as well as their support for his need for privacy, Shevek is able to elucidate his Theory of Simultaneity.

Annas suggests that Shevek’s theory is important to the novel since it is “analogous to androgyny because it denies separation and duality. It denies the separation between here and there; it comprehends the universe holistically rather than partially” (n.pag.). While I think Annas is correct in her reading up to a point, I would add that although the word ‘simultaneity’ suggests the then and the now, it also suggests the here and the there: it is not about subsuming different parts into one whole so much as it is about connecting different parts within the whole. This is illustrated clearly through its practical application in creating a device which allows for communication on a universal level. In Le Guin’s chronology, the concept of simultaneity precedes the creation of the ansible, which gives instant communication across the universe, without the wait for radio signals to travel at lightspeed from world to world that hinder any attempts at mutual exchange. In *The Word for World is Forest*, for example, the lengthy time between transmissions allows the colonists to make decisions that ultimately cause the destruction of the Athsheans and the imposition of imperialistic domination. It is the arrival of the ansible that brings news and instructions from their home planet which shows that, at home at least, the Terrans are trying to view their colonies with more respect. Communication, then, is one of the keys to creating a better world and a better universe. Indeed, Benfield points out that when Shevek gives the theory to Keng, Keng even claims “that communication between the various human societies can lead to progress” (131). Similarly, when Shevek presents his theory to the Terrans on the understanding that it is shared, he says he gives it away so that “one of you cannot use it, as A-Io wants to do, to get power over the others, to get richer or to win more wars. So that you cannot use the truth for your private profit, but only for the common good” (285). Here we are reminded of the ideals of the Ekumen as elucidated by Genly in *The Left Hand of Darkness*: as Donald Theall points out, “the Ekumen is an ‘ideal’ model with implicit criticisms of contemporary intercommunication between

nations” (286). The Ekumen is not about controlling its member planets, but about fostering exchanges and understanding.

Despite the fact that Shevek’s journey ends with the possibility of instant communication, the novel does not necessarily close on an optimistic note. It is true that Shevek returns to Anarres, but it is not clear what his reception will be – Benfield argues for the possibility of violence (134), whereas Keinhorst claims that Shevek is “granted a chance to reintegrate himself after his initial visit to the hostile mother planet (Urras) has positive consequences for his home planet (Anarres)” (94). Williams, too, argues that Anarres is “an open Utopia: forced open, after the congealing of ideals, the degeneration of mutuality into conservatism; shifted, deliberately, from its achieved harmonious condition, the stasis in which the classical utopian mode culminates, to restless, open, risk-taking experiment” (65). Yet we never actually see this in the novel. We are not to know the result of Shevek’s visit to Urras, and cannot conjecture whether it will have a positive affect on Anarresti society or if it will lead to the ultimate destruction of Shevek the individual. As Byrne points out, the novel is actually “a-topian, since it is not located in any temporal world at all, but outside both Anarres and Urras, in Odo’s writings and the dream of a better world that inspired them” (“Selves” 118). This utopia, then, like an ecological ethic, is really only to be found in theory.

In the final analysis, then, *The Dispossessed* raises several questions about the practicalities of using the idea of an ecological ethic to build an ideal society. Is it possible to achieve a society based on principles of relationships of non-hierarchical difference without falling into the trap of stagnation? How do diversity and dynamism, individuality and growth fit into the need for a balanced society? Moylan, in his attempt to fit *The Dispossessed* into his conception of the critical utopia, criticises Le Guin for failing to “break down the wall” (*Demand* 120) and condemns her ending for reconfirming the “nostalgic ambiguity which persists throughout the novel” (118). But is it not possible that the open ending of the novel is Le Guin’s warning to the reader not to seek answers, but rather to continue asking questions? For, in *The Dispossessed*, utopia is something to seek, but not necessarily to find in any closed form: the ambiguities in the novel reinforce the suggestion that constant revolution is necessary for true harmony, as stagnation leads to suppression. If we are to seek an ecological ethic in our world, we learn from this novel the dangers of prescriptiveness, and are reminded that an essential part of ecological thinking is diversity and respect for Others in their difference from the Self.

The early novels of Le Guin's Hainish cycle work together to suggest her growing interest in what makes an ideal society. This is quite clearly revealed as the embodiment of an ecological ethic: all individuals have the right to grow within a greater network of relationships. Isolation leads to stagnation, and communication leads to growth. Lefanu has accused Le Guin of not being radical enough in her expression of feminism, suggesting that "[s]exuality is, in her work, too integral a part of a philosophy of binary systems that leads, ineluctably, to stasis" (*Feminism* 145-146). But gender equality is just one expression of her desire to move away from a world ruled by ideas of dominance and submission: Le Guin herself claims that she would like to see a tendency towards authoritarianism "replaced by a little human idealism, and some serious consideration of such deeply radical, futuristic concepts as Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity" ("American SF" 240). These concepts are embodied in her ideas about gender, but also (and perhaps even more strongly) in her ideas about every kind of Other – from the individual to the species. Gérard Klein, for example, claims that in Le Guin's work "the possibility of hope, the idea of change itself, resides in the experience, the subjectivity of the other" (87). I would support this statement over Carol McGuirk's contention that Le Guin's SF has "an optimism that too easily tames the universe by denying its perilous otherness" and that her universe "achieves its balance and coherence through a diminished emphasis on the unknowable, the alien" (247). Rather, by allowing the Other their own individuality – whether that other is male or female, black or white, human or environment, ruler or slave – Le Guin asserts the need for difference and for its implications of growth in her universe.

It is this idea that is ultimately preached by the Ekumen. As Aldiss sums up:

Le Guin's Ekumen, unlike so many other future historical backdrops, serves not to cement her stories into a chronological sequence, but to provide a philosophical context. One might view all of Le Guin's work as utopianist in nature, her alien Hain, those tall, elegant and intelligent humanoids who drift in and out of the background of these tales, as an evolutionary stage of *Homo sapiens*; Ethical Humanity, we might call it. (348)

Similarly, Selinger points out that "Le Guin's movement away from the centrality of man himself [*sic*] and her celebration of creative individuals (those who speak alterity) are her recognition of our increasing distance from Nature" (156). Even if she does not provide a final utopian answer to the possibilities of changing this forever, by seeking balance she suggests, as Griffiths claims, "that it is still worth trying" (106).

My definition of an ecological ethic as encompassing diversity is one which fits closely with this idea of a utopian vision, and with what other critics have identified as the major theme of Le Guin's work. Her novels are seen as elucidating a concept of balance, but

she also takes the concept of ambivalence very seriously, stressing history as perpetually upsetting the balance and creating new tensions. Le Guin sees balance as a dynamic principle mediating between oppositions. Hence her preoccupation with the paradox of communication: in order to communicate, it is necessary to recognize differences and to move toward an understanding of these differences. (Theall 294)

Stasis, therefore, has no place in her world, however much harmony does, and the erasure of difference is rejected in favour of plurality. As the first epigraph to this chapter makes explicit, she specifically rejects an either/or philosophy in favour of a 'both/and' ideal ("A Non-Euclidean" 98). Her imagery in her early Hainish novels has been specifically identified by Barbour as showing "wholeness and duality, together and separate at once" (149). He adds that "Le Guin's artistic vision is multiplex, dualistic, and holistic" (149). The seemingly contradictory note Barbour strikes here shows the complexity of Le Guin's utopian beliefs and illustrates, for me, the need to approach her work from the point of view of ecological philosophy. If the ecosystem is figured as a web of individuals, each important as individuals, but ultimately also responsive and responsible to other individuals in the web, it is clear that ecological thinking becomes metaphorical of Le Guin's concern with harmony without uniformity.

Deirdre Byrne has commented:

I have a very strong sense that Le Guin is part of a literary movement that is constituted by subversion of established norms, both in literature and society. I think that the next stage in 'Le Guin Studies' is to abandon the single-author study and look at the ways in which she participates, and even founds, that movement. ("Selves" 316)

In the chapter that follows, I hope to demonstrate that the kind of ecological ethic characteristic of Le Guin's writing in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Word for World is Forest*, and *The Dispossessed* underlies the earlier speculative novels of Marge Piercy, Doris Lessing and Margaret Atwood. Furthermore, like Le Guin's own realisation of the complexity of human behaviour, Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Lessing's *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five*, and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* show an increasing rejection of utopian/dystopian polarities.

Chapter 4

The Shift from Utopia to Dystopia:

Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Doris Lessing's *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five*, and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

To live with the struggles of the present, we project possible futures that promise endpoints to our oppression. We use utopias as ideological playthings: intangible seeds to sow stolen moments of escape, imagined counterarguments to challenge lived polemics, mental blueprints to dismantle and rebuild the world anew.

– Elyce Rae Helford, “The Future of Political Community.” (124)

At the moment when Ursula Le Guin was leaving her Hainish novels behind, three other women, who were better known for their realist writing, were beginning to prepare a space for themselves in speculative fiction. First Marge Piercy, and then Doris Lessing, and finally Margaret Atwood produced novels that approached the problem of Othering from the perspective that I have termed an ecological ethic. Significantly, the way Piercy, Lessing and Atwood dealt with this problem was not only by exploring the notions of kinship and difference; their individual novels, taken together, show a similar development to Le Guin's three main Hainish novels. These novels demonstrate an increasing sense of unease over the lines drawn between utopia and dystopia, and a subsequent recognition of the complexities that face what Byrne has called the “subversion of established norms, both in literature and society” (“Selves” 316).

This chapter, therefore, has two main objectives. On one hand it provides a detailed analysis of how the novels demonstrate each author's engagement with ecological thinking; on the other, it illustrates a progression from each novel to the next in terms of how complicated this vision is. The first section shows how, in *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Piercy sets up an apparently unambiguous dichotomy between a sexist, racist, capitalist America and a futuristic one based on the ecological ethic outlined in Chapter One, with only the closing section of the novel beginning to question this opposition. In the second section, I argue that in *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five*, Lessing shows a more complex understanding of how societies can balance notions of ideal behaviour with the need for difference, and the growth difference allows within communities. In the third section I suggest that the reversal of ecological thinking in Atwood's *The Handmaid's*

Tale becomes a way to question if and how it is possible to create relationships of mutual respect with the Other.

Marge Piercy's Quest for a Working Utopia in *Woman on the Edge of Time*

Krishan Kumar has attempted to forge a link between Le Guin's 1974 *The Dispossessed* and Marge Piercy's 1976 *Woman on the Edge of Time* by suggesting that for both "urban America is the nightmare of joyless materialism and brutal exploitation that serves as the anti-utopian contrast to their egalitarian ecotopian utopias" (*Utopianism* 83-84). However, this comment gives too much agency to these two novels alone. In fact, all the novels in this thesis speak out of the same nightmare Kumar so elegantly describes, and furthermore, *Woman on the Edge of Time* has less in common with the ambiguous utopian politics of *The Dispossessed* than it does with the more hopeful elucidation of an ideal world found in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Like *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *Woman on the Edge of Time* has been analysed as a feminist utopia. However, I would like to suggest that, as important as the feminist vision is in Piercy's novel, it is not exclusively feminist but rather a remarkably practical application of an ecological ethic. Both Piercy's utopian descriptions of a future America, embodied in Mattapoissett, and her dystopian depictions of the novel's present and of Gildina's America, work together to analyse the potential for relationships of non-hierarchical difference. The problems of the novel, however, illustrate the vital need for dynamism and growth in any society, however balanced, as well as the difficulties of finding utopia, even in the format of fiction.

Mattapoissett as Feminist and Ecological Utopia

Tom Moylan has shown that Piercy's activism, beginning with her participation in "the New Left and the woman's movement which came from it" ("History" 133), was an important factor in developing her utopian society in *Woman on the Edge of Time*. Certainly, there is a strong feminist presence in *Woman on the Edge of Time*, which has in fact been inspirational in the development of other feminist utopias from the same era (see, for example, Teslenko 65). Yet, there is an equally strong ecological drive in the novel which has led Lisa Garforth to suggest that although it is a feminist utopia, its "commitment to an emancipatory ecological philosophy makes it more properly ecofeminist" ("Ecotopian" 101). Although I am wary of the term ecofeminist because of

its often essentialist connotations and more specifically because of a concern that it elides issues of race and class,¹ Garforth's comment suggests the need to understand *Woman on the Edge of Time*'s utopian impulse from the perspective of ecological philosophy. Like *The Left Hand of Darkness*, however, the novel's ideas of balance and harmony can perhaps initially be examined through the idea of androgyny.

Natalie Rosinsky has argued that *Woman on the Edge of Time*'s utopia, Mattapoisett, is a feminist utopia which advocates androgyny rather than gynocentric essentialism (66).² However, unlike Le Guin, who creates a world of biologically androgynous people in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Piercy's androgyny is purely social: there is absolute equality between the sexes in every area of their lives, including the bearing and raising of children. This androgyny is symbolised through her characterisation of Luciente: Martens, in fact, has claimed that Luciente is an embodiment of the idea of androgyny in Mattapoisett (41).³ Although Luciente at first seems masculine to the protagonist, Connie, this is because of Connie's own mindset, rather than any suggestion that Luciente is inherently masculine or unfeminine. As Connie herself thinks,

Luciente spoke, she moved with that air of brisk unselfconscious authority Connie associated with men. Luciente sat down, taking up more space than women ever did. She squatted, she sprawled, she strolled, never thinking about how her body was displayed. (67)

As this quote indicates, Connie had originally thought Luciente was a man (if rather an effeminate one) precisely because her life experiences have told her that only a man could behave with such naturalness.⁴ Consequently, Connie's association of free behaviour with manly behaviour makes the reader question how naturally women are able to act in Connie's own time, and thus in our own time. This is reiterated once Connie becomes

¹ See Chapter One.

² Natalie Rosinsky contradicts herself later, arguing that "[e]mphasizing mystic communion with nature, this aspect of Mattapoisett's culture is reminiscent of the nature feminism of such gynocentric visionary works as *The Wanderground* and *The Kin of Ata*" (97). I think Rosinsky is correct in her initial analysis of Mattapoisett as androgynous and that this comment stems from a misunderstanding that ecologically friendly societies are somehow feminine – surely an essentialist position? Rosinsky returns to her original position by qualifying her statement to say that their concern for the environment "is fostered, however, by a society that is actually closer to the androgynous end of the spectrum of feminist ideologies" (101).

³ Later in her thesis Martens uses a more interesting phrase to describe such feminist utopias: "gynandrous" rather than androgynous which "semantically and morphologically, gives primacy to the male" (48). I have stuck with androgynous because it is so common in the criticism of these novels, but feel that Martens does make a valid point.

⁴ Frances Bartkowski makes the point that Luciente's arrival in Connie's life signifies the arrival of 'light' (Luciente) (62). This enlightenment begins with Connie's realisation that women do not have to behave in a certain way.

more familiar with Luciente as a woman: she sees her as “female”, but “too confident, too unselfconscious, too aggressive and sure and graceful” to be “feminine” (99). Annas argues that “[w]e only gradually discover that Luciente is a woman, since Piercy has managed to give Luciente behavior-patterns which are both and neither male or female” (n.pag.); but this is, of course, partially because Connie sees Luciente as male as much as it is because Piercy presents her as male. Nonetheless, it is an effective tool for making us question what kinds of gendered behaviour we instinctively recognise, thus subtly reinforcing the idea of equality. Luciente, although female, is also a leading scientist, which Mellor has suggested is in marked contrast to the norms of our own world – as is the fact that the leading artist is a man rather than a woman (255). Luciente, then, becomes a symbol of Mattapoisett’s androgynous mind-set, which is important for our initial judgement of the community.

One of the main problems with androgyny, however, is that it can suggest a holism that, in eradicating both masculinity and femininity through its attempt to merge the Other into the Self, does not allow a space for difference. It is thus vital that Piercy does not choose to describe all her characters from Mattapoisett in androgynous terms, but only uses Luciente as a representative of this state. Her introduction of other characters, such as Barbarossa with his red beard or the intensely masculine Bee, or spiritual Erzulia and sexual Diana, both powerful women, ensures that Piercy does not subsume difference beneath the banner of androgyny. It also means that our discovery of the most androgynous aspect of their society, child-rearing (including breast-feeding by both men and women), shocks us almost as much as it shocks Connie. Women do not bear children in Piercy’s ideal future, but embryos are created out of diverse genetic material and grown in ‘brooders’ for between nine and ten months. Once they are born, the final barrier in the way of total equality between men and women is removed – as Luciente explains:

It was part of women’s long revolution. When we were breaking all the old hierarchies. Finally there was that one thing we had to give up too, the only power we ever had, in return for no more power for anyone. The original production: the power to give birth. Cause as long as we were biologically enchained, we’d never be equal. And males never would be humanized to be loving and tender. So we all became mothers. Every child has three. To break the nuclear bonding. (105)

Although Piercy could perhaps have had Luciente speak about parenting rather than mothering, which is a word with certain explicitly feminine connotations, she makes the same point Le Guin does in *The Left Hand of Darkness*: true equality can never happen if women alone must bear and raise children. At the same time, Luciente (and presumably

Piercy) sees human reproduction as “power” too, and thus argues against the gynocentric attitude of many all-female feminist utopias. Connie’s initial rejection of the idea of multiple parents, both male and female, is reinforced when she first sees a man, Barbarossa, breast-feeding a baby. Connie, who is so immersed in her own role as a woman, is unable to accept that men breast-feed because she too feels this is a traditionally feminine power. She is horrified that women “had abandoned to men the last refuge of women.... They had given it all up, they had let men steal from them the last remnants of ancient power, those sealed in blood and in milk” (134).

By making Connie respond with violent emotion to the very masculine Barbarossa breast-feeding his genetically-engineered baby, Piercy tries to pre-empt potential criticism by some feminists who are fiercely against technological and biotechnological solutions to the problem of female biology in the creation of a gender-equal society. In this she has not been entirely successful. Alice Adams, for example, rejects the notion of exogenesis as a feminist tool in the novel, claiming that “Piercy’s use of artificial wombs becomes a gesture of patriarchal affirmation, approving men’s inability to accept women’s bodies and their reproductive capabilities, and placing the burden on women to validate men as ‘mothers’” (278). She argues that Piercy makes a vital mistake in remedying Connie’s “disenfranchisement” with a technological solution:

Long before Luciente appears to her, Connie already has ample experience of those who, claiming to know what is best for Connie, her child, and society, seize control of her reproductive body. Physicians and social workers coerce her into sterilization and give her daughter to a white couple who – according to the dominant ideology – can provide Angelina with love, security, and a chance for a better life. (Adams 278)

The difference, which Adams does not recognise, is one of agency. Connie has no choice in whether she should give up her reproductive capacity or her child; in Mattapoissett the choice was made available to women and taken by them – not to give up childbirth and motherhood, but to share it.

The issue of motherhood in *Woman on the Edge of Time* has been the focus of much critical attention. Lefanu notes that it was Shulamith Firestone who initially suggested that pregnancy itself is oppressive and that equality could only result from women being freed from pregnancy and childbirth through technological interventions (*Feminism* 59);⁵ Lefanu continues, however, by pointing out that while Firestone

⁵ Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex* ends with a series of demands for an “Ultimate Revolution”, including: “The *freeing* of women from the tyranny of their reproductive biology by every means available,

“continues to be sniped at for her apparent desire to eliminate all difference, Piercy is praised for exploring precisely that in *Woman on the Edge of Time*” (*Feminism* 59). Indeed, critics like Barr have praised Piercy’s alternative arrangements for reproduction and breast-feeding, preferring to see them not in the light of a loss of femininity, but as the “end of masculinity”, and therefore as a positive step towards a gender equal society (*Lost* 71). Similarly, Fancourt points out that Piercy “renounces cultural feminism’s notion of celebrating women’s experiences and women’s bodies” and chooses rather to “break down the boundaries of gender through material and social change” (107). As a female bioethicist, Kathy Rudy points out that while reproductive technology can be used to extend “male power and control of women” (22), Piercy’s novel makes it clear that “the reorganization of reproduction must be accompanied by the elimination of capitalism and the consumer economy and by the radical restructuring of communities and infrastructures” (31). This is an important point in that it highlights Piercy’s androgynous approach to gender inequalities: it is not an attempt to *erase* difference – as Bartkowski points out, Mattapoissett is a world “of two sexes and no gender” (68) – but is a way of making gender equality part of a wider change in society. Indeed, Piercy’s search for equilibrium extends into more than just a rejection of gynocentrism or of patriarchy; the androgynous nature of gender in Mattapoissett is accompanied by a total shift in mindset across all aspects of society, making it more ‘ecological’ than feminist only.

Racial and cultural issues are less often explored in relation to the question of using technology in the reproductive process. Being able to create children through a mixing of DNA allows them to breed people that are racially mixed, although there is a “high proportion of darker-skinned people” (103) in Mattapoissett, presumably in order to redress past imbalances. Children, therefore, have none of the genetic characteristics associated with their parents, including racial ones, emphasising the need for equality in all aspects of society.⁶ By refusing to associate race with particular families, or groups of parents and children, Piercy’s Mattapoissettans therefore make a small but vital step in eliminating Othering. Difference is maintained, but is not allowed to coalesce in family groupings – or the wider community. Each village in the future of *Woman on the Edge of Time* is associated with a particular cultural heritage that has nothing to do with any kind of racial

and the diffusion of the childbearing and childrearing role into the society as a whole, men as well as women” (233, original italics).

⁶ Although, as Curtis points out, this is a form of eugenics and could be criticised as such (157), its motives are the increase of diversity, rather than the removal of difference, which is surely positive.

composition (103-104). A diversity of belief systems and cultures is thus maintained, but not at the expense of any particular individual. Moreover, individuals cannot be identified as belonging to a particular group purely on the basis of a physical difference such as skin colour.

The importance of the individual is indicated in various ways, but one of the most interesting is through the medium of language. The issue of language in *Woman on the Edge of Time* is possibly as commonly explored a theme in the criticism as is the issue of reproduction, and, like reproduction, the language of Mattapoisett gives less credence to physical characteristics than is common in our own present. The people of Mattapoisett speak in a carefully reconstructed English that has been purged of gender distinctions, using the generic ‘per’ for person instead of ‘he’ or ‘she’. Piercy’s easy manipulation of the language – for it is a surprisingly easy transition for the reader to make – is often favourably compared to Le Guin’s refusal to manipulate English in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, which (as discussed in Chapter Three) is a clear indication of how important language is in our perception of difference. Martens points out that ‘per’ does more than simply emphasise the androgyny of Mattapoisett, but “also undercuts the assumption of contemporary Western society that the masculine ‘he’ is the norm against which women are defined as deviant” (110). There is no norm, masculine or otherwise, in Mattapoisett; individuals are recognised for their achievements as people (or perhaps ‘persons’) within the wider network of other people. Also, as “neutral terms, ‘person’ and ‘per’ tend not to carry with them a whole set of assumptions and expectations, based on sex, about what is possible for a given character” (Annas n.pag.). This means that as readers we are more readily able to accept the actions of each character in Mattapoisett, whether they conform to our notions of what is possible or not.

The idea behind equal, balanced relationships permeates more than simply the issue of gender, race or language in Mattapoisett: it is the defining philosophy of Piercy’s whole utopian future. As in the case of Le Guin, I argue that Piercy bases her conception of an ideal society on an ecological ethic formed by networks of respectful interrelationships. The importance of ecology, as philosophy and as practical application, is seen in the intense environmental consciousness evidenced in the Mattapoisettans’ relationship with their natural surroundings. Keinhorst, for example, while arguing that Mattapoisett is specifically a “women’s critical utopia”, points out that this is “revealed through Indian tribal structures, an ecological, spiritual and holistic philosophy” (92). The ecological aspect of Mattapoisett is seen most clearly through its sustainable relationships with its

surrounds. It is a village of about six hundred people, limiting its impact on the environment, and seems old-fashioned and rural to Connie with its small buildings “randomly scattered among trees and shrubbery and gardens, put together of scavenged old wood, old bricks and stones and cement blocks” (69). Windmills and solar panels provide electricity, the houses have their own rainwater holding-tanks, and most people walk or cycle. Luciente tells Connie that they raise a variety of birds and other animals, but that their major protein source is vegetable, pointing out that each “region tries to be ownfed” (70) in this future America. They are, in fact, the ideal sustainable community, and as such Mattapoisett is as much an ecotopia as a feminist utopia in its embodiment of deep ecological philosophy’s desire for “scaled-down, decentralized, largely self-reliant forms of community” (Garforth, “Ecotopian” 104).⁷

Piercy is not only trying to create the perfect example of sustainable environmental relationships in her novel. She also uses the idea of ecology to produce a society that is characterised by both equilibrium and mutuality. The governing of Mattapoisett, and the other sixteen villages with which it is linked, is achieved through co-operative planning because they have “limited resources” (125), and must maintain a balance between needs and production. Village, town and grand councils take the form of bodies which co-ordinate, rather than government structures. No one person serves in their council position for more than a year, and once they have been in a position of control, coordinating some aspect of their communal lives, they do a humble job like shepherding so that they cannot identify themselves too closely with their position, and power cannot coalesce around one person (251-252). Cooperation and the rejection of power hierarchies are fundamental to the idea of an ecological ethic, and Piercy’s novel is remarkable in how practically it envisages this aspect of ecological ethics on all levels of society – even work is not part of a hierarchical system. Job co-ordinators, rather than managers or directors, are chosen by lot and only have that position for six months, so that in any work environment no one person is able to control the others. Also, every permanent member of a particular work base has to “share the exciting jobs and the dull jobs” (123). Members of the community are encouraged to take part in as much necessary work as possible, although there is plenty of room for people to use their particular talents: as Luciente says, “[p]erson must not do what person cannot do ... but likewise, person must do what person has to do” (136). Most

⁷ Garforth’s “Ecotopian Fiction and the Sustainable Society” is a clear elucidation of how the discourse of sustainability is expanded by an investigation into ecotopian models found in texts such as Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* or Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Pacific Edge* (1990).

of the horrible, drudge work is fully automated so that no one has to work inside a factory (129), indicating a neat partnership between technology and sustainability.⁸ Other than that, work in Mattapoisett is not an all-consuming pastime:

How many hours does it take to grow food and make useful objects? Beyond that we care for our brooder, cook in our fooder, care for animals, do basic routines like cleaning, politic and meet. That leaves hours to talk, to study, to play, to love, to enjoy the river. (128)

The balance the Mattapoisettans maintain between needs and wants, community engagement and personal growth, seems therefore to be the ideal way to allow for relationships of non-hierarchical difference.

My insistence on calling the co-operative qualities of Mattapoisett ecological in form, rather than feminist or political, may be supported by the consistent imagery of the ecosystem employed in the novel. The ecosystem is, in fact, used so often when describing Mattapoisett, that it becomes an almost mantra-like quality in Luciente's speech. She is constantly telling Connie that "ideas make us see ourselves as partners with water, air, birds, fish, trees" (125). When Sappho dies,⁹ Luciente tells Connie that it is an opportunity to celebrate life and that Sappho is buried simply in the ground, without undertakers and coffins, because it would be wrong to "pretend we are not made of elements ancient as the earth, that we do not owe those elements back to the web of all living" (162). She even points out that although their science is advanced enough to prolong life beyond its natural limits, they decided not to do so because the old need to make way for the young, as this is "part of the web of nature" (278). The idea of webs and connections permeates every aspect of Piercy's ideal society: the Mattapoisettans are always "[t]ouching and caressing" (76); the Cree Indians are valued for their ability to teach "discipline, a sense of wholeness" (273); and even the games they play at their festivals entail weaving people together with ropes until a web is formed (175), symbolising the common links between individuals.

We are also told more explicitly that their society is based on their understanding of how fragile the ecosystem is. Mattapoisett's history – the reader's present – shows clearly how dangerous it is to exploit the environment. For example, Luciente tells Connie that in the 1990s people tried to control the weather:

⁸ Shulamith Firestone also called for the utilization of technology to change the lives of working-class people, arguing that mechanisation "could act as the perfect equalizer, obliterating the class system based on exploitation of labor" (227).

⁹ The name 'Sappho' obviously refers back to the poetess of Lesbos and reinforces the lack of sexual discrimination in Mattapoisett through its lesbian associations.

But the results were the usual disasters. It rained for forty days on the Gulf Coast till most of it floated out to sea. Let's see, the jet stream was forced south from Canada. They close to brought on an ice age. There was five years' drought in Australia. Plagues of insects.... (97, original ellipsis)

The almost biblical nature of Luciente's prose is suggestive of the deep importance they place on the need to maintain the ecosystem as best as possible. Indeed, in one of the central moments of the novel, Connie sees a type of film, called a holi, created by Jackrabbit and Bolivar. It shows the extinction of a variety of endangered species, like whooping cranes, the California condor and passenger pigeons, as well as of the original inhabitants of Tasmania and the Californian Yaqui people (180-181). The images are filled with horror and yearning, but from the bones and corpses of extinction, two androgynous people grow, and become linked with the earth, air, plants, birds, insects and animals. In the final moment, a poem appears in which lines appear that indicate clearly their philosophy: "We are joined with all living/ in one singing web of energy" (181). The holi suggests, perhaps more clearly than any of Luciente's lectures to Connie (which are the most contrived, and the most typically utopian, aspect of the novel), that although the world was nearly destroyed, a time of respect and balance is possible between humankind and the rest of the natural world.

Opposing Ecological Ethics: The Dystopian Narratives in Woman on the Edge of Time

The emphasis on power in the dystopian aspects of *Woman on the Edge of Time* once again highlights the ecological ethics implicit in the utopian parts. Magdalena, who specialises in the care of children, says that the Mattapoissettans' "notions of evil center around power and greed – taking from other people their food, their liberty, their health, their land, their customs, their pride" (139). What she is really saying, here, is that evil can be defined as the opposite of an ecological ethic. A bad society, for the Mattapoissettans, is one of imbalance and hierarchy rather than harmony and equality. The utopian – and yet relatively practical – conception of what I call ecological ethics through Piercy's descriptions of Mattapoissett is accentuated by the dystopian, hierarchical and power-hungry side of life shown in the novel. This is not only shown through Connie's present world, which is dystopic in many ways (certainly for her personally), but also through the alternative future Connie visits, which shows how far this dystopian thinking can be taken.

The narrative present of the novel positions Connie in particularly vulnerable circumstances: she is a woman, part of a racial minority, and incarcerated in an asylum for what the doctors see as her insatiably violent tendencies. Because we read the novel from her perspective, we see how Connie's supposed violence is merely her reaction to her circumstances: when her lover dies in prison as a result of a drug trial gone wrong, she succumbs to a fit of manic depression and hits out at her daughter. Similarly, when she tries to protect her niece Dolly from a pimp, Geraldo, he ensures that Connie is committed for attacking him; the doctors refuse to believe Connie's version of events. Geraldo and the doctors are depicted as men with neither empathy nor respect for women. Gardiner has noted that one problem with Piercy's depiction of Connie's world is that all the men are "evil, nasty dominators", indicating a "troubling bimodal psychology" (75) that is not realistic.¹⁰ I agree that Piercy allows her polemic to create a situation that is far too polarised, but it cannot be denied that she makes her point about patriarchy's culture of dominance and submission.

Once in the system, Connie experiences more than just the hierarchy of patriarchy: she finds out that once labelled as insane, she is powerless in every aspect of her life. She is sent to a psychiatric hospital and is given brain surgery against her will as part of an experiment on behaviour modification.¹¹ Of course, the irony of this is that Connie's behaviour is not actually modified in the way the doctors expect: instead of controlling her apparent violence, they actually make her into a violent murderer, as murder is the only option she is left with in order to exert some control over her circumstances. Lefanu argues that the novel is particularly powerful because it portrays both Mattapoissett and "the real world with the same wealth of realistic detail. The two worlds reflect on each other to highlight their differences; the comparison illumines the horrors of the present day as well as the liberating potentialities of the future" (*Feminism* 60). Although Lefanu neglects to mention the lack of complexity in Piercy's portrayal of men in Connie's present, the movement between present and future does set up the necessary contrast to ensure that Mattapoissett is seen in a positive light. From this summary of events, it is clear that the world Connie inhabits is a dystopia for her because she is completely powerless and placeless, at the mercy of the men in her life, social workers, psychiatrists and surgeons.

¹⁰ The one male figure whom we do see in Connie's present (Claud is dead before the action of the novel begins) is Skip, but he is depicted as 'feminised' through his homosexuality, and is thus excluded from the normal patriarchy of the novel's present.

¹¹ Seabury, in her interesting essay comparing *Woman on the Edge of Time* to Shelley's *Frankenstein*, points out that Connie's brain surgery becomes a metaphor for her construction as monster – her gender, class and ethnicity also label her 'monstrous' in her society (133-134).

None of them can see Connie as an individual equal to them, and all wield power over her because she represents for them the Other.

The future Connie sees during her visits to Mattapoissett is not the only possible future: the alternative to Mattapoissett is the society in which Gildina lives. Connie's position in her society stands in parallel to that of Gildina, whose dystopian existence emphasises the potential for Connie's world to become even more hierarchical. Gildina is completely powerless in ways even Connie cannot imagine. She is, as her name suggests, gilded into a

cartoon of femininity, with a tiny waist, enormous sharp breasts that stuck out like the brassieres Connie herself had worn in the fifties – but the woman was not wearing a brassiere. Her stomach was flat but her hips and buttocks were oversized and audaciously curved. She looked as if she could hardly walk for the extravagance of her breasts and buttocks, her thighs that collided as she shuffled a few steps. (288)

Gildina's Barbie-doll figure quite literally shackles her so that she has no freedom of movement, symbolising the complete lack of freedom in every other aspect of her life. In Gildina's world some women are mere sex-objects, kept on contract to provide sexual services, while others are solely used for reproductive purposes; as Susan Kress points out, Gildina thus seems to be the "descendant of Connie's niece, Dolly, who is drugged, smoothed, sleeked and starved – for sexual service" (119). From an environmentalist viewpoint also, Gildina's existence is a horror story: she has never seen sunlight, there is too much pollution to live longer than about forty years below the smog line, and food is not natural but produced "from coal and algae and wood by-products" (296). Furthermore, Gildina is given a variety of drugs, kept in isolation, and entertained by a variety of sense-all pornographic holographs.

Booker calls Piercy's presentation of Gildina's dystopian world "a striking vision that ranks in power with the classic dystopias of Zamyatin, Huxley, and Orwell" (n.pag.), and it is certainly the case that Gildina is imprisoned by every aspect of her society. Gildina's 'owner', Cash (surely his name is a nod to materialism) is genetically enhanced to the point that he is almost a cyborg. From his perspective within the hierarchy, he can describe himself and his world as "[p]ure, functional, reliable. We embody the ideal" (299). Cash's comment is telling in that it suggests that the quest for the "ideal" can in itself lead to dystopia, rather than utopia. Ironically, Gildina's future is a heteronormative utopia from the perspective of the powerful men in control of society: a world in which women are slaves to men's needs and desires, and men are enhanced to become almost

perfect specimens of strength, speed, intelligence and longevity, would be perfect for such men. By showing us Cash's mindset, Piercy warns us that individual ideas about utopia must be carefully judged, in case such utopias are founded on the suppression of one part of society or nature.

Imperfections in a Perfect Future

Booker, while calling Gildina's world dystopian, also argues that "[m]any of the practices of the society of Mattapoissett are rather extreme, and some readers may not find conditions there ideal at all. Indeed, Mattapoissett shares many characteristics with classic *dystopias*" (n.pag., original italics). While I would hesitate to suggest that Mattapoissett is dystopian, the point that utopia and dystopia are closely aligned is an important one. Mattapoissett is clearly utopian compared to Connie's present and Gildina's world, but Piercy's vision of Mattapoissett is not totally perfect, and the way she structures the novel casts doubt on the realisability of Mattapoissett. Two details are of particular concern: the Shapers debate and the need to serve in the 'Defense'.

Our first introduction to the Shapers debate is the notice near the Mattapoissett meetinghouse which declaims: "Do you value yourself lower than zucchini? Vote the SHAPERS!" (226). This is one of the few indications that hierarchical thinking has not entirely been wiped out in Mattapoissett, particularly between humans and the natural world. The debate, as Bee explains, is over the Shapers' desire "to intervene genetically" (226) in human reproduction by breeding specific traits into their foetuses (much like the plant geneticists breed selective traits into vegetables). The implementation of a type of eugenics is a concern in any utopian society (and is one of the reasons deep ecology, for example, has come under criticism). The emergence of this tendency in Mattapoissett suggests that the longing for an ideal society can become a desire for a society without difference, or for a society that values some forms of difference over others. It is important that Piercy introduces this element, not only because it reminds the reader of the bioengineering Connie sees when she visits Gildina, but also because it shows that Mattapoissett does have socio-political debates even in its perfection. Significantly, Bee and Luciente dismiss the Shapers as being part of "a power surge" (226), and effectively close any discussion with Connie on the topic. Judith Kegan Gardiner dismisses these conflicts as "occasional temperamental incompatibilities", concluding that, "[i]n short, there is no evil in this future society or in its people" (75). Yet, it would have made a much

more powerful point if the debate between the Shapers and the Mixers was given more prominence in the novel. As it is, it appears as if Piercy herself did not know how to deal with the idea of eugenics, and it is given such a tiny portion of the text that the reader can skip over its implications too easily. This is the one case where I agree with DuPlessis in her analysis of the novel, as she argues that the conflict between Shapers and Mixers is not dramatised, despite being “ideologically important, involving both the allocation of resources and human values”, and as a result, “while Piercy does try to assert that dynamic controversy is part of the lives of this future world, in treating political questions the work slides in the direction of pastoral utopia” (4). In practical terms, such a debate is significant to the workings of utopia, and in refusing to emphasise this, Piercy misses the opportunity to show how diversity can be maintained, even in difficult situations. Perhaps it is the impossibility of this that makes Mattapoissett utopian and reminds us of the intangibility of an ecological ethic in our own world.

The issue of ‘Defense’, the Mattapoissettans’ duty to protect their community, is also not adequately explored in Piercy’s conception of her utopia. Again, Luciente’s explanations are perhaps just a little too glib, as she explains: “Everybody takes turns. We can all use arms, we’re all trained in fighting hand to hand, we can all manage facets of more complicated operations. I can shoot a jizer” (100). When Connie points out that fighting a war means killing people, Luciente agrees that it worries her, but then gives the excuse that they are mostly fighting “robots or cybernauts” (101). The reader is never given a clear explanation of how they organise their fighting or any details on the war or the enemy. Furthermore, the war, in one instance described as important and necessary, hardly features in their idyllic life in Mattapoissett. Is it that the war and need for defence was an afterthought on Piercy’s part? The intermittent, casual references to the war suggest that this is a distinct possibility, or else that Piercy was unable to find a way to meld her activism with her ideals of peaceful cooperation. When the council discusses whether to repair a beautiful three-hundred-year-old wrought iron bridge or use the iron for weapons (152), Piercy again does not allow space for the debate in the novel, as Luciente and Connie have to leave the meeting. The reader thus never finds out if war is given a higher priority than aesthetics. Similarly, the implications of Jackrabbit’s death are never fully explored. He dies during Defense having never been a mother because he felt under obligation to serve Mattapoissett’s needs before his own. Even his Defense comrade claims that the fighting is getting worse and everyone will have to pull their weight, but at the same time says that Jackrabbit “would have been happier staying at home” (314).

There is thus a curious acceptance of war and killing that seems out of place in the peaceful, life-enforcing space of Mattapoisett. For the reader, because there is no real, detailed explanation of why the war is being fought or what the history has been which leads up to this moment, Jackrabbit's death seems pointless. Piercy's message certainly falls short if she was intending us to believe that Jackrabbit's death was a necessary evil in order to preserve the utopian life of Mattapoisett, as the threat is not insistent enough throughout the course of the novel. Curtis argues that "people who choose not to do defensive work or to parent are supported in these decisions" (156), but it is clear that societal pressure sends Jackrabbit to war. Is this freedom, and if it is not freedom, then can it be utopia? Le Guin's treatment of Anarres suggests that conformity has no place in utopia, but Piercy does not emphasise this enough in Mattapoisett.

The novel also falls short of presenting a clear utopia in that we are never certain that this future will happen. Luciente says that Mattapoisett is "only one possible future" (177), that "[p]robabilities clash and possibilities wink out forever" (177), and that Mattapoisett can only exist if certain things happen in Connie's time to ensure that it is "the future that happens" (198). Rosinsky argues that it is precisely because it is uncertain which future will prevail, the reader's involvement with the text is increased (94), yet Luciente does not ever fully elucidate on what Connie must do, and so we cannot be sure that her actions at the end of the novel do indeed work towards creating the utopian future. The tenuousness of even the Mattapoisett that we know is also evinced in that Connie's experiences of Mattapoisett can differ quite wildly: although Connie joins Luciente and the others in a battle on one trip into the future (326), when she next returns to Mattapoisett, Luciente claims she was not fighting (367). Is Piercy trying merely to suggest the fragility of Mattapoisett, or that Connie's physical state (when trying to fight the dialytrode inserted in her brain) creates a different future?

This obviously begs the question: is Connie really visiting the future or is it simply the figment of her imagination? Fancourt suggests that the "implications of the doctors' electrodes are horrifying because they represent an end to dreaming and fantasy – thus they figure an end to utopian dreaming and possibility" (106), which seems true if one considers that Connie cannot reach Mattapoisett once the electrode is inserted. Billie Maciunas claims that Connie's similar inability to reach Mattapoisett following her murder of the doctors suggests that Piercy concludes "that the possibility of the world that she imagines is closed off by violence" – the kind of violence expected in a world dominated by white male culture (257). But why, then, is the violence of the Mattapoisettans themselves

condoned in their apparently utopian future? Similarly, DuPlessis claims that “Connie leaves no evidence that this is a planned act, a chosen act, a political act. Naturally, it will be interpreted as mad, only confirming the diagnosis of Connie Ramos as hopelessly violent” (4). In opposition, Barr argues that by becoming a murderer, Connie “enters a new space away from the margins of patriarchal space” and as a result “causes readers to share her antinormative point of view” (*Alien* 56). I am not sure that all readers would respond in this way, even though Moylan reminds us that Luciente encourages Connie’s actions by claiming that power “cannot be destroyed peacefully” (“History” 139). I have to question, instead, how far this works towards the vision of a peaceful and balanced utopia presented throughout the rest of the novel.

The close of the novel adds to this uncertainty for the reader. Rather than ending with a suggestion that Connie’s murder of the psychiatrists has a direct effect on the future, and leads to the utopian world in which Mattapoisett can exist, the novel ends with the formal documentation of Connie’s case history. We learn that she is diagnosed with “Paranoid Schizophrenia” (379). Critics have taken a variety of positions on the inclusion of her case report. Roberts argues that Piercy includes the scientific reports in order to “shock and alienate the reader from hard science” (85), and Rosinsky believes that “this flawed ‘translation’ of Connie’s aptitude and experience may further involve us in her predicament and in the construction of textual meaning” (95). She continues by suggesting that

we must take the questions and emotions this faulty translation of her life raises and direct them elsewhere – towards the issues rather than the characters of this novel. Piercy thus succeeds in her attempt ‘to write beyond the ending’ of her text. Despite the defeat of her protagonist, the possibility of the collective success of her vision of Mattapoisett remains. The author’s depiction of the future as disparate possibilities rather than as an inevitability is thus as much reassuring as threatening. (95)

Rosinsky’s argument here may be too strong when one considers the negative implications of the report. Jameson and Kress, for example, argue that her diagnosis may suggest that Mattapoisett does not exist, with Jameson asking, “who is to say that her visitors from the future are not hallucinations and the wish-fulfilments of a troubled and well-nigh terminal case?” (*Archaeologies* 233).¹² Murphy, too, speculates that while Connie’s medical records may emphasise the horrors of her present, if “the reader’s inspiration to act in the present is in any way dependent on a belief in the existence of both Connie and Luciente ...

¹² Kress does, however, wonder if a woman like Connie would “have the means to imagine such a world, and detail so coherently so many practices that, at least initially, shock and dismay her” (120).

then Piercy's frame may undercut the reader's resolution to struggle" ("Reducing" 31). The very last sentence of the novel informs us that Connie is sent back to Rockover State Hospital with over "one hundred thirteen more pages" (381) of diagnosis, suggesting quite strongly that Connie finds herself right back where she started. If Connie has indeed achieved nothing, and if we are asked to question her visions of Mattapoisett, then Piercy's vision of utopia is severely undermined and destabilised. On one hand, this may be positive in that this enables Piercy to withdraw from a blueprint utopia, which would be at odds with the multiple viewpoints implicit in both an ecological ethic and in much of what we learn about Mattapoisett's goals. On the other hand, a clear reading of the novel's intentions could be obstructed by the openness of its ending. As in the case of the Shapers debate and Defense, the sudden juxtapositioning of the medical report with Connie's apparent experiences may be too little, too late.

To call the novel a failure would, nonetheless, be a mistake. Khouri believes that the novel's achievement is in suggesting that utopia can actually be realised (56) – and I would argue, as I suggested earlier, that Mattapoisett is perhaps as close as it is possible to be to a working utopia based on an ecological ethic. Lefanu feels that the novel is convincing precisely because of Connie's role in the novel:

objections that the reader might have to the society portrayed – that it is too good to be true, for example – are raised by Connie herself and answered by the people there. This device makes possible the gradual revelation of this complex new society, and it also offers a means of charting Connie's development. (*Feminism* 61)

Indeed, as Kress submits, it is "a world where most of the inequalities of the present have been rectified, and most of the repressive institutions and practices have been reformed or abolished" (117). While Piercy's utopia is not, after all, perfect, in the final analysis *Woman on the Edge of Time* is able to go further in imagining a world that lives according to an ecological ethic than any of the other novels examined here. Piercy's optimism is certainly not felt as strongly in Lessing's utopian fable, published four years later, and is completely negated in Atwood's 1985 dystopia.

Doris Lessing's *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five* and Dynamic Interrelationships

Doris Lessing's first true science fiction was her Canopus in Argos series, published between 1979 and 1983. The Canopus series, for the most part, takes the form of huge and unwieldy polemics rather than character- and plot-driven novels. Katherine Fishburn, for example, suggests that "it is in her science fiction that Lessing sets out most clearly to critique modern social and political structures", adding that the message is more important than the story in these novels (3). I would argue that the entire series has a utopian element running through it – as does Khanna (9) – although this utopian impulse is largely found in the mystical and impractical philosophy of the Canopeans. Roberts has specifically argued that "Canopus presents the possibility of a feminist utopia" (121), but its ideals are not explicitly feminist, nor are they elucidated clearly and consistently in the series as a whole. According to Bazin, Lessing's utopian vision is of "oneness" (160), which, alongside the colonial and paternal aims of the Canopeans for their empire, is particularly worrying from the point of view of ecological philosophy. Although Lessing most likely intended the Canopeans to be read into the voice of the 'Providers', the distance of the second novel in the series, *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five* (1980), from the universe of the other novels allows Lessing space from the over-arching politics of the colonising forces of Canopus, Sirius and Shammat. It is for this reason, as well as for its close alliances with other feminist and utopian science fiction of the period, that *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five* alone is dealt with in this thesis rather than the other Canopus novels.

The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five, through the way it engages with the genre of the feminist utopia and its particular expression of ecological thinking, is a contrast to *Woman on the Edge of Time* in many ways. Lessing's novel lacks the practicality and detail of Piercy's, but also manages to express the need for diversity and change within an ecological ethic more successfully than Piercy, who – as we have seen – tends to elide her exploration of stasis behind the more positive aspects of life in Mattapoissett. I begin by suggesting that *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five* does contrast the idea of the feminist (or feminine) utopia with that of a patriarchal dystopia. Yet, Lessing ensures that there is ultimately a rejection of these kinds of polarities in the novel, making it the more complex type of critical utopia discussed in Chapter Two. Secondly, therefore, I assess how Lessing introduces ambiguities into her

portrayal of the apparently utopian Zone Three and apparently dystopian Zone Four. Finally, the introduction of Zone Five into the plot of the novel is examined as an added complication, but one which reiterates the constant need for dynamism and interrelationships in any system, and particularly one reflecting an ecological ethic.

Feminist Utopia and Patriarchal Dystopia: Initial Readings of Zones Three and Four

In *Shikasta*, the first novel in Lessing's series, Zone Six is seen as a kind of purgatory in which humans wait out the time between incarnations on earth, suggesting that the zones form some kind of spiritual landscape. In *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five*, the various zones are represented as actual countries, bordering one another in an increasingly mountainous topography, with Zone Two – the blue-tinged, most 'spiritual' and difficult-to-reach zone – at the top of a snowy mountain pass. The plot is narrated through the eyes of the Chroniclers of Zone Three as a legendary, and even cautionary, tale of the marriage of the queen of Zone Three, Al·Ith, to the king of Zone Four, Ben Ata, and later the marriage of Ben Ata to Vashi, the queen of Zone Five. The marriages of Al·Ith to Ben Ata, and of Ben Ata to Vashi, are not their choices, but a condition imposed upon them by the mystical 'Providers' who watch over the Zones. Armitt points out that, "in line with the allegorical form both Al·Ith and Ben Ata are personifications of the abiding characteristics of their own respective zones" ("Your Word" 126) – as is, I would add, Vashi representative of Zone Five. As such, their marriages are not simply marriages between individuals, but, as the title suggests, between the zones themselves. This allegorical mode is a clear indication of Lessing's didactic intent, as is the imposition of a command from above which the characters initially do not understand but must obey in order to learn a lesson. Although it is undermined slowly during the course of the novel, initially this lesson seems to be that Zone Three is an ideal society. Not only is the novel narrated from the perspective of Zone Three, but its idyllic lifestyle is presented in such stark contrast to Zone Four that it seems even more utopian by comparison.

Zone Three has been called a "magical matriarchy, sophisticated, sensual and intuitive" (Sage 80), and it is a typical feminist utopia for many reasons. Like other feminist utopias, a great deal of emphasis is placed on the care of children, and monogamy is rejected in favour of the kind of group parenting reminiscent of that found in Piercy's *Mattapoisett*. Each child has "Mind-Fathers" and "Gene-Fathers", and they form a group who, with "the Gene-Mother, and the women who cared for the child, considered

themselves joint-parents, forever available to her, or him, any time they were needed, collectively and individually” (72). Men can only be Gene-Fathers once every five years (73), and so the population is stable, yet without the possessiveness of the nuclear family. Both men and women take part of all aspects of society: instead of making war, they

bake, and farm, and herd, grow, and trade and mine and smelt and make artefacts and everything there is to do with the different ways of feeding children, mentally and emotionally, and the keeping of archives and maintaining Memory and making songs and tales.... (125)

As much as these are typical characteristics of feminist utopias, however, they also resemble those of many ecotopias. The inhabitants of Zone Three are particularly conscious of the non-human world and of their relationship with it, thinking of animals as their friends, communicating by looking into their eyes and listening to the sounds they make (31). They even send messages by tree (197), suggesting that they perceive the environment as sentient in a way that is not usually the case in our own world. Like Piercy’s *Mattapoisett*, Zone Three seems an idyllic place where sustainable development and harmony between people and the environment create a utopia – indeed Christina Jiménez asserts that it is a “model utopia” (12). But it is not simply ecological in its relationships between humans and the non-human aspects of their world: it is also ecological in the way these relationships create webs of kinship and difference. Although Al·Ith is the queen and thus ruler of Zone Three, the zone is characterised as being non-hierarchical – Al·Ith has never been called by anything other than her own name, certainly not ‘queen’ or any other hierarchical term (31). The zone is presented as a loose federation of towns and villages (reminiscent, in a way, of Le Guin’s *Karhide*), with everyone being seen as an individual, with their own needs and desires adequately accommodated. The narrator tells us that the inhabitants of Zone Three do not know jealousy (82) and that as “individuals we do not expect – it is not expected of us – to weep, wail, suffer” (13-14). Al·Ith’s realm is characterised by “an easy friendly light-heartedness” (66), where her time, like that of all her people, is spent “with the children, her friends, her lovers, the amiable peace of this realm setting the rhythms of the body and the mind into good humour, kindness” (70). It is a peaceful land without soldiers or armies (22), and the dark hours of the night are not a time of fear, but valued for “visiting, feasts, and all kinds of enjoyments” (67). It is thus presented as an idyll based on mutual respect and cooperation.

Much of our understanding of the desirability of Zone Three is created through its comparison with the hierarchical Zone Four. Ben Ata’s rule of Zone Four is a military

reign with an “economy entirely geared to war” (111). He is not only King, but the leader of all the armies – armies populated by every able-bodied man in the zone. We learn that Ben Ata cannot “play without self-consciousness” (65) because he has not had a real childhood: all boys are taken away from their mothers at seven years old to start training for the army, thus learning only domination and violence. Lessing constantly reiterates this aspect of Zone Four, with the narrator telling us that its nature was “conflict and battle and warring. In everything. A tension and a fighting in its very substance: so that every feeling, every thought held in it its own opposite” (144). Even the landscape is forbidding, “a uniform dull flat, cut by canals and tamed by streams that were marked by lines of straight pollarded trees, and dotted regularly by the ordered camps of the military way of life” (35), indicating that the people of Zone Four try to control nature by imposing upon it geometric patterns. Al·Ith questions the point of Zone Four having “large, and efficient armies” (93) but not even being able to tell who their enemies are. Hierarchy, violence and control, as symbolised by their militarism, seems to be part of Zone Four simply for the sake of hierarchy, violence and control.

Zone Four’s militarism is paralleled by its patriarchy, which stems largely from the masculine and rank-driven order of the army. Time and again the men of Zone Four are shown to be caricatures of masculine aggression, such as when Al·Ith is seen “ringed by brutal laughing men” (21), who “could not help feeling in themselves the triumph that barbarian natures show *when faced with weakness*; and the need to cringe and crowd together *when facing strength*” (20, my italics). The dominance/submission pattern is entrenched in their behaviour, as is shown when Jarnti is described with irony as needing to shout at a small boy who approaches Al·Ith because “the sight of her, small, unarmed, standing rather below them near the defenceless and frightened boy, had roused in him a need to show strength, dominance” (38).

Al·Ith’s first view of Ben Ata is archetypally masculine: he stands before her as an “arms folded, legs apart, bearded soldier” (40) and, soon after their first meeting, he rapes her, putting “his hand across her mouth in the approved way” (47). Rape is itself symptomatic of a need for power and dominance and, in that it is socially acceptable behaviour in Zone Four, it illustrates the prevailing social structure. Thus Lessing shows how the women of Zone Four are inferiorised, and systematically used and abused. Indeed, the only woman of Zone Four that Lessing portrays in detail is Dabeeb, who, despite being a strong woman, has a name which means “something that has been made soft by beating” (81). What is significant in Lessing’s evocation of Zone Four is that although it appears to

be masculine mainly because Ben Ata becomes a representative of the Zone, the hierarchical character and attitude of the Zone extends in part to the women of Zone Four too: we do not see them displaying compassion towards either animals or the environment, and Al·Ith's soft and giving behaviour seems as alien to the women of Zone Four as it does to the men.

On the surface, the marriage between Al·Ith and Ben Ata seems to be Lessing's way of showing the influence of the feminine on the masculine. Al·Ith's role is to bring to Zone Four a previously unknown respect and empathy for the Other, be it women or animals. Al·Ith's special rapport with animals is particularly important in shattering the norms of Zone Four. The first of several stylised descriptions emphasises the opposition between Al·Ith and the men of Zone Four. The pictures show:

the angry commander, his face distorted, and the jeering soldiers. The bitter wind is indicated by flying tinted clouds, and the grasses of the plain lie almost flat under it.

All kinds of little animals have crept into this picture. Birds hover around [Al·Ith's] head. A small deer, a great favourite with our children, has stepped on to the dust of the road, and is holding up its nose to the drooping nose of Al·Ith's horse, to comfort it, or to give it messages from other animals. Often these pictures are titled 'Al·Ith's Animals.' Some tales tell how the soldiers try to catch the birds and the deer, and are rebuked by Al·Ith. (19)

The initial contrast between the zones is thus immediately set up as that between feminine compassion and masculine brutality, and perhaps more significantly, through how this is figured through their interrelationships with the non-human natural world.

Al·Ith's compassion for animals, particularly her horse Yori, who she talks to and can even mentally summon, is totally aberrant behaviour in Zone Four, whose people see animals merely as objects to be used. Ben Ata accuses Al·Ith of witchcraft because he can neither understand the possibility for closeness between human and animal nor even see the subjecthood of non-human nature. In fact, during one of their first conversations he says to her, "I see that in your country you have horses the way we have dogs" (53), showing his incapacity to imagine a relationship not predicated on ownership and control. As Lessing presents it, therefore, Ben Ata's anthropocentrism mirrors his androcentrism – and Al·Ith thus becomes the enlightened teacher, showing Ben Ata the possibility for acceptance of and kindness to the Other represented by women and animals. Indeed, Ben Ata's unthinking mistreatment of animals begins to change from this point, as does his treatment of Al·Ith, suggesting that she teaches him the possibility of approaching other beings with the kind of intentionalism suggested by an ecological ethic.

The relationship between Ben Ata and Al·Ith does begin badly, as signified by the rape of Al·Ith during their first meeting. Ben Ata is confused and threatened by her behaviour towards him as she insists on acting “like a man” (65), and talking to men as if they were equals. Slowly, however, they begin to form some kind of friendship, which grows as their love-making becomes less brutal. It is not a smooth process, however, and it is interesting that Lessing chooses to show Ben Ata responding to Al·Ith’s ideas almost before he responds to her sexually, although their sexual relationship does become a metaphor for the possibility for non-hierarchical interrelationships between men and women, and subsequently between human and animal. Al·Ith constantly questions his militaristic reign, and Ben Ata starts to realise that there is no need for his army’s endless campaigning. His confusion is apparent in his response to his horse:

‘What am I going to do?’ he kept muttering, as he alternately switched his horse to make it go faster, and then checked it, and patted it briefly ... the horse’s mouth was lathered, the bit was uncomfortable there ... Ben Ata thought that Al·Ith, and everyone in her country rode without bridles, without saddles, without beatings, without everything that here, with them, was found necessary. He lessened the grip of the bit on his horse’s mouth, and even muttered a few words of pity for the beast – but as he did so, felt himself to be a traitor.... (155)

Slowly, he starts to make some kind of subconscious connection between his zone’s militarism, the way his people treat animals and the violence of how they treat women – seen as little better than animals, to assault and capture as spoils of war. This causes a crisis which marks the beginning of his ability to change his zone for the better as he surveys the landscape around the borders on Zone Five in preparation for yet another campaign.

He sat on his horse, caressing its neck without knowing that he did, and thinking of the poor creature’s torn mouth, and remembering the feel of the captured girls, the gritty acridness of their bodies as he held them, their tears and their anger.

Ben Ata wept. (155)

Ben Ata’s tears (which I read as significantly feminine) prepare him to perceive – finally, and only after one last act of domination – the crux of the matter. When he insists on displaying Al·Ith to his army, dressed in gold and riding her horse, Yori, similarly dressed with “indignity and discomfort” (181) in saddle and bridle, her distress makes Ben Ata finally aware of the similarities between human and animal, and his attempts to possess both:

At the fort, he helped her take the bridle and saddle from poor Yori, before untrapping his own horse. Both were set free for the night, having been told by Al·Ith that they were to be waiting here in the morning. The beasts raced off in the dust, tossing their manes and neighing in relief at their freedom, and then rolled in the soft grass, while the two watched.

‘All right, Al·Ith, don’t say it,’ said he.

‘There is no need,’ she said, soft and fierce, ‘no *need* for it. Why make slaves of creatures who will do what you want for love?’

At which he clasped her, with a sort of groaning apology, and pulled down her hair so that he could sink his face in it. (185, original italics)

The transition in Ben Ata from rapist on their wedding night to compassionate lover in the remainder of this scene emphasises the extent of Al·Ith’s influence on him, and is suggestive of his new openness to mutuality rather than hierarchy.

Ambiguities in Zones Three and Four and the Rejection of Stasis

It is clear that on one level Zone Three is presented as an idyll in contrast to Zone Four, and that it is the influence of Zone Three that allows Al·Ith and Ben Ata eventually to see one another as “[e]quals. A balance” (227). This is symbolised by the birth of their son, who represents the union between the two zones – as is indicated through the choice of the Persian word for both ‘marriage’ and ‘wedding’ as his name, ‘Arusi’ (Afman 4). If this was the entire point of the novel, Lessing would be producing the same kind of feminist utopia versus patriarchal dystopia that many women writers were producing in the 1970s. Lessing, however, refuses merely to show a binary opposition between the two zones. Unlike Piercy, who does not question her vision of utopia (although she may be uncertain how to reach it), Lessing makes it clear that seeing Zone Three as a utopia would be a misreading of the text, because while Zone Three’s inhabitants do insist on relationships of non-hierarchical difference, they are unable to see the dangers of stasis.

Right from the start of the novel the narrator, Lusik, despite being from Zone Three, questions both Al·Ith’s behaviour and the attitude of the entire zone:

We asked ourselves if we had grown into the habit of seeing ourselves falsely. But how could it be wrong to approve our own harmonies, the wealths and pleasantness of our land? We believed our Zone to be equal at least of any other for prosperity and absence of discord. Had it then been a fault to be proud of it? (14)

Clearly the story is being narrated in the past tense, but Lessing could have told it from the perspective of Zone Three as an idyllic place if she did not want to undercut the very

picture of Zone Three that, at least on the surface, seems to be presented. Lusik's words, coming merely a few pages into the novel, remain a subtle question as to whether Zone Three is indeed the utopia it seems to be, and become a useful distancing device for the reader. This is maintained throughout the novel as Lusik corrects himself, but more importantly through how he shows contrasting views of the same events. This is often done through the additional distance gained by describing the pictorial representations of these events as offered by artists and weavers of both zones. This ensures, as an ecological ethic would encourage, that the reader is aware of the complex interweaving of viewpoints that make up the tale. Lusik's awareness that utopia is not simply harmony and equality between every section of nature and society – and the emphasis of this through the inclusion of multiple narratives – forces the reader to ask what is missing from this apparent Eden. Moreover, as Fishburn argues, by “subordinating her characters to the voice of her narrator, Lessing implies that it is time for her to address us more directly – before it is too late” (3)

The utopianism of Zone Three is also undermined when it becomes clear to both Al·Ith and the reader that she has neglected her duty as queen: she has not attended to the news that the animals have stopped conceiving, “are disturbed in their minds”, “are sorrowful” and “have lost the zest for living” (27-29). It is clear from Al·Ith's horrified reaction when she realises that she is out of touch with the people and animals of her kingdom, that the apparent perfection of Zone Three is fragile. Once she arrives in Zone Four, she finds that Ben Ata also realises that there is “something very wrong” (55) with his realm, suggesting that the two zones have more in common than originally seems to be the case. Al·Ith finally realises that there is, within both zones, a dying out amongst “all the animals. All. And the birds. And as we know, that means the plant kingdom too, or if not now, soon” (56). Al·Ith's understanding of the importance of the relationship between human and animal within an entire ecosystem is thus expressed early in the novel, even though she remains uncertain of how to correct the stagnation she perceives amongst both animals and plants. She is further horrified by the realisation that this stagnation can also be translated into the social structure of her own zone. Her return to Zone Three following her marriage to Ben Ata is singularly lacking in the kind of sisterhood characteristic of feminist utopias, as she is shunned by her sister and her people and left “hungry, cold, quite alone” (150). She is forced to understand that the peace and prosperity of Zone Three could, from another perspective seem “fat and mindless” (235), making her wonder “how it could be that these people here, *her* people could live all their lives through without ever wanting

anything more” (235, original italics). The “stagnation” that the Chronicler identifies within Zone Three (175) is the reason why the people of Zone Three fear the different perspective Al·Ith brings back after her sojourn in Zone Four. There is no room for change and growth in Zone Three: as she says to Ben Ata of her own realm, “[w]e are too prosperous, too happy, everything is so comfortable and pleasant with us” (95). Ingersoll argues that the reaction of Zone Three to Al·Ith’s return and her change is “Lessing’s subtle satire on the culture of Zone Three” (“Pursuing” 26) and Lessing herself has said that she wishes that women could be “independent, neither the slaves of men nor Amazons” (Von Schwarzkopf 103), which suggests that she is wary of the kind of simplistic feminist utopia that has often been described by women writers. It is this realisation that indicates the importance of ecological thinking in *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five*.

Al·Ith’s gradual realisation that her land is not the utopia she imagined it was, helps her question what she is supposed to learn from her marriage to Ben Ata: it becomes increasingly obvious that their marriage is not only designed to teach the ways of ease and plenty of Zone Three to the barbaric, poor and hostile people of Zone Four. Ironically, it is the very people it initially seems would be least likely to contribute to the lessons of the novel that teach Al·Ith how to avoid stagnation in her own zone: the neglected and exploited women of Zone Four. During their secret festivals of song and dance, they actively defy their zone’s punishment for looking up towards the mountains of Zone Three, and through the words to their songs, constantly question their lot in life and strive towards something better as they gaze longingly up at the heights of Zone Three and beyond. Lucie Armitt argues that it is because of their position on the margins of Zone Four that these women can see the need to perform such a subversive action, and that it is significant that they do this through the medium of

song and story, an association which counteracts the traditional patrilinear linguistic/philosophical position which privileges writing over speech as the proper medium of the rational (considered more ‘logical’ because less immediate and emotive), and hence the ‘natural’ vehicle for knowledge and learning. (“Your Word” 128)

Significantly Al·Ith and the rest of her zone cannot remember the words to their songs. Is Lessing suggesting that when the marginal is simply made central – as in the more ‘womanly’ Zone Three – the desire for growth is lost? Certainly the deepest desire for change is felt by the women of Zone Four, those with the least amount of power in any of the zones.

Fishburn suggests that the conflict between the two zones is important in order to

rejuvenate worn-out societies that are suffering from a lack of fresh ideas and a reluctance to change. In her utopian vision, therefore, the very dialectic that at the beginning threatens to destroy Zones Three and Four becomes the same process that they need to experience in order to grow, to change. It is the same dialectic that helps us to a new vision of wholeness, as the recognition we experience in reading about their conflict leads us to a re-cognition in which we assimilate both poles of the argument. (88)

I would argue that, while Fishburn is right in suggesting that the dialectic Lessing creates between Zones Three and Four in her novel does emphasise the need for growth, it is not a dialectic that insists on oneness. The action of the women of Zone Four indicates quite clearly that there is a need to strive for growth and change, not necessarily just through the symbolic union with Zone Three, but also that with the mysterious Zone Two, and with Zone Five. It is respect for, and acceptance of, multiple Others that keep the zones balanced yet dynamic.

Zone Five and the Extension of Ambiguity

Dynamic equilibrium becomes even more significant to the novel when Lessing further complicates the binary opposition between Zones Three and Four by introducing Zone Five into the equation: as Zones Three and Four must marry, so must Zones Four and Five. Ursula Le Guin calls the marriage with Zone Five “a second marriage, a tertium quid, startling and inevitable” (“Review: *Marriages*” 260), suggesting that she too recognises in Lessing’s novel the need to reject simple binaries and create webs of interrelationships. Virginia Tiger also asserts that the novel is “simultaneously critical of both phallogentric and feminist culture, dystopian and utopian strategy”, and that it “dissolves the dualisms implicit in both feminist utopia and androcentric dystopia while critiquing sexual dualities and the binary oppositions that surround the gender system” (“The Words” n.pag.). The introduction of a third zone therefore pushes the concept of an ecological ethic in the novel further, dissolving the idea of dualistic opposition by refusing categorisation as either feminine utopia or masculine dystopia, as well as that of false holism.

The people of Zone Five are introduced to us through Ben Ata’s eyes as “barbarians” who fight, men and women together, without accoutrements of battle such as tents and supply wagons (249). Like Zone Three, then, Zone Five appears to be less

ordered and controlled than Zone Four, but, unlike Zone Three's peaceableness, it is as violent as Zone Four was before the marriage of Al·Ith and Ben Ata.

Ben Ata's first meeting with the queen of Zone Five, Vashi, is an ironic counterfoil to his first meeting with Al·Ith: the latter expected to be treated like a queen and was raped; Vashi expects to be raped and is welcomed and treated as a queen. Vashi does not, however, behave towards Ben Ata as a subjugated woman, as might be surmised from her expectations of rape. Rather, her behaviour seems almost masculine in its refusal to project submissiveness:

She sat sprawling, and lounging, raising her arms to yawn and stretch, moving and swinging her legs as if the chair she sat on was a stone on a hillside, or perhaps a horse – at any rate, she was quite magnificently unable to subdue her wildness to this strictly sober military tent. She laughed continually, and with the utmost good-nature, at *him*, his ways of speaking, of thinking – but this became her. (256, original italics)

Vashi's wildness and savagery¹³ has led her to vanquish Zone Five and appropriate the wealth of the land for herself. Far from being hardened and poor, Ben Ata realises that she is becoming accustomed to the luxury furs and golden jewellery she has stolen as spoils of war. The order and control of Zone Four, then, is seen as a positive influence on Zone Five's chaotic and unprincipled movement towards a degenerate hierarchy led by Vashi. Ben Ata decides to encourage Vashi to return to Zone Five's traditional way of life. This, as he understands it, is

an ordered anarchy. Each tribe, or even group of aligned tribes, owed to the members of it a fanatical and fantastic loyalty, even to death. A man claiming protection from a fellow tribesman might ask for that man's life, if necessary, and was bound for always to return the same if asked. There was an absolute honour, trust, giving, between members of these tribes and groups – but between groups, tribes, no limits to deception, treachery, guile, dishonour. (263-264)

Eventually there comes a point when Vashi sees that Ben Ata is right in seeing “a slackness and a loosening” among her people and realises that if he returns to Zone Four, she will “miss his counsels. He was stolid. He was slow. But he was not stupid. They were a balance for each other” (265). Zone Five appears to represent a different type of the feminine than Zone Three. Vashi's wildness links her quite explicitly with wilderness – an essentialist view of woman as natural, anarchic and uncontrolled. Ellen Peel suggests that Vashi and her people “combine male and female traits” (13). While this is correct to a

¹³ These words, used to describe Vashi in the text itself (256, 258), are significant as ‘vashi’ means ‘wild’ or ‘savage’ in Persian (Afman 4).

certain degree – men and women certainly seem more equal in Zone Five’s tribes – Vashi displays none of the ‘masculine’ rationality that Ben Ata does, needing this influence to create greater harmony within her own zone, which has become too uncontrolled and unbalanced.

The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five ends with Al-Ith’s final journey, this time up the pass into Zone Two. This, combined with the new interrelationships between Zones Three and Four, and Zones Four and Five, becomes symbolic of a need to strive continuously for growth as well as balance. At the climax of the plot the narrator claims that there was

a continuous movement now, from Zone Five to Zone Four. And from Zone Four to Zone Three – and from us, up the pass. There was a lightness, a freshness, and an enquiry and a remaking and an inspiration where there had been only stagnation. And closed frontiers. (298)

Ingersoll is pessimistic about Lessing’s choice to end the novel this way, saying that “Zone Three shows few signs of abandoning its complacency about its patent superiority to Zones Four and Five, and seems no more keen on journeys ‘down’ or ‘back’ to either of those inferior Zones” (“Pursuing” 27). Ingersoll forgets that it is precisely the so-called inferior zones which teach those higher up in the topography how to relinquish their complacency, without which there could be no movement in any direction. What is perhaps more important is the openness of the novel’s ending – which is possibly what leads to Ingersoll’s dissatisfaction with Zone Three in particular. The fact that this open-endedness is tied up with Lessing’s mystical and spiritual tone in the Canopus series as a whole, may be the novel’s flaw. Although Lefanu is perhaps too stringent in her critique of these novels, Lessing’s prose does become overly didactic even in this, the least polemical of the series. The stories, Lefanu claims,

unfold against a background of imperialistic domination that is nowhere challenged while they treat with some of the more mystical aspects of the ‘woman’s viewpoint’, extra-intuitive horses and perfect complementary marriages being just two examples. Lessing somehow manages to come over as an authoritarian sentimentalist, which is perhaps explained by the religious instruction which is the barely concealed sub-text of the quintet. (*Feminism* 92)

Lefanu fails to recognise that Lessing does question the essentialist feminism of Zone Three, but it is also true that the novel seems unfinished: the trek into Zone Two is certainly not explained and the result is that, as much as the remainder of the novel tries to

question the imposition of 'masculine' and 'feminine' values, the conclusion lacks weight, tying it in more closely with the platitudinous quality of the rest of the series.

An ideal world, then, is much more complicated for Lessing than many other writers of feminist utopias. Although she starts out by creating in Zone Three the kind of realm so familiar to the genre, she pushes the boundaries of utopia towards something less certain, but also closer to the ideals of ecological thinking. Indeed, for her, utopia is a balance between various entities, but a balance which opposes stasis and encourages communication and growth. In doing this, "the novel breaks down the duality of self and other" and encourages us to "seek difference" (Peel 11). It is stagnation, which Tiger calls a "dubious state of achieved immobility" ("The Words" n.pag.), which seems to make a dystopia of even the most perfect society. Lessing appears to propose that we need reason and emotional empathy, order and freedom, human and animal, male and female, in order to strive towards a fulfilled and balanced world, illustrating the kinds of boundaries that can be crossed to create a dialogue between different parts of the same ecosystem. As Fishburn posits, the novel attempts to find "a oneness based not on the *dissolution* of differences but on their *affirmation* and integration" (93, my italics), however ephemeral that attempt is. Perhaps the acceptance of growth in Lessing's mystical novel and the real attention to detail in Piercy's practical novel work together to create an ideal understanding of the way ecological thinking can work – an ideal that becomes more urgent when Atwood's dystopian *The Handmaid's Tale* is explored.

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: Reversing the Idea of an Ecological Ethic

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, published in 1985, we see the increasingly ambiguous and open-ended utopian presentation of an ecological ethic, observed in *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five*, translate into a novel of terrifying dystopia. Significantly, *The Handmaid's Tale*, a futuristic Canterbury Tale, is based on the same principles as *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five*, but these principles have been reversed in order to show a society which is built on power and hierarchy over the Other. Atwood has stated that the readers of a dystopia "are supposed to deduce what a good society is by seeing, in detail,

what it isn't" ("Writing Utopia" 86).¹⁴ This is what both Lefanu (*Feminism* 75) and Schäfer (n.pag.) note when they argue that there is a hidden or implicit utopia in dystopian novels. The question that Atwood asks, then, is not "What would happen if we tried to create an ideal world?", as it is perhaps for Le Guin, Piercy and Lessing, but rather, "What will happen if we do *not* try to create an ideal world?" Atwood has been compared to Piercy because both are "feminists, often concerned with environmental and social issues" (Van Spanckeren xx), clearly a description that has equal relevance to Le Guin and to Lessing. For Atwood, the question of balance across both the human and the non-human worlds, and the way in which they relate to one another is seen in how she imagines a future society, called Gilead, which is the epitome of discord and imbalance.¹⁵

It is often suggested that Atwood reaches beyond the feminist utopias of the 1970s in response to the "social and political forces, including the growth of moral conservatism, in the USA in the 1980s" (Lefanu, *Feminism* 73), and follows other feminists in writing "barely concealed allegories of feminism's complacency and failure" (Nixon n.pag.). More than this, as I indicated above, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a novel that recognises the pitfalls of traditional attempts to create a moral society. Atwood stated, in an interview with Danita Dodson, that part of the inspiration for the novel was the colonisation of America:

It was evident to me, as it was evident to anybody who has ever studied it, that the fairy tale version that kids used to get in school – the Puritans came to America to establish a democracy – was quite wrong. They were not interested in democracy. In fact, it wasn't even a notion at that time. They were interested in a theocracy, their rules. And among the things they did, in addition to participating in witchcraft persecutions, they persecuted basically anybody who didn't agree with them religiously. ("An Interview" 97)

The utopian dream of the Gileadean patriarchy, like the utopian dream of the Puritans, is a picture of the ideal life gone wrong. Like the other authors under scrutiny here, Atwood begins her assessment of society with a utopian dream, and asks what it is that destroys that dream, making her novel move beyond the critical utopias of Le Guin and Lessing particularly. Erika Gottlieb argues that dystopian novels make "us ponder how an originally utopian promise was abused, betrayed, or, ironically, fulfilled so as to create

¹⁴ She makes a similar comment in an interview with Dodson, stating that "[a]lthough one is depicting ideal society and the other is depicting its opposite, their areas of interest are still very similar" (Dodson, "An Interview" 99)

¹⁵ Atwood takes the name 'Gilead' from Jeremiad 8:22 – "Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there? Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?" This verse hints at the issue of disease and sorrow prevalent in the novel.

tragic consequences for humanity” (8).¹⁶ Alexander and Gill question whether this is an inevitable movement, or if it could “merely indicate weaknesses in particular versions of utopia” (“Introduction” xi). Scholes and Rabkin go even further, claiming that “most utopias have something repellent about them, since they involve the imposition of order on society at the expense of liberty” (27) – reminding us of Anarres and Shevek’s quest for intellectual freedom in *The Dispossessed*. Thus, if we are interested in assessing where utopia breaks down (see, for example, Morrison 140), the question of the ideal life for the individual versus that of the collective must be examined. Indeed, Gottlieb places *The Handmaid’s Tale* in the tradition of Huxley’s *Brave New World*, Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* and Vonnegut’s *Player Piano*, stating that along with Atwood’s novel, “[a]ll these works are political satires, projections of the fear that their writers’ own society in the West ... could be moving towards a type of totalitarian dictatorship already experienced as historical reality in the USSR and in Eastern and Central Europe” (7).

Bearing in mind the clear links between utopian dreaming and dystopian realities, therefore, Atwood asks a very important question in *The Handmaid’s Tale*: is utopia the same for everyone? In her exploration of Gilead, she suggests that what makes it a dystopian society is the problem of imbalance. This is first figured in the novel’s exploration of environmental imbalance in the future she imagines, which then becomes a way to emphasise the social and political dystopia of Gilead: it is a place of hierarchies and Othering, fear and disharmony. This is further illustrated through Atwood’s depiction of the role of women in Gilead. Finally, Atwood does not merely describe the dystopia in order to suggest the implicit utopia, however; she also looks closely at the role of knowledge, and of power over knowledge, in creating dystopias. This is seen both in the Handmaid’s tale of life in Gilead itself, and in the Historical Notes attached to the end of the tale.

¹⁶ It is important to note that the movement from utopian ideal into dystopian regime is not simply a theory: Kumar points out that in reality utopias often fail, at their worst creating “the opposite of utopia, and anti-utopia of authoritarian regimentation. This has been the experience of all so-called utopian communities and utopian societies, from the American communities of the nineteenth century to the socialist societies of the twentieth” (*Utopianism* 95).

Socio-Political Dystopia as a Reflection of Ecological Dystopia

Marge Piercy has pointed out that an identifiable theme in Atwood's writing is "her insistence on nature as a living whole of which we are all interdependent parts" ("Margaret Atwood" 66), indicating that the idea of ecology is a central one in Atwood's work. This is figured prominently in Atwood's description of the environmental degradation that has become a fact of life for the people of Gilead early in the twenty-first century, but is further echoed in interhuman relationships, which are also, it must be remembered, part of the wider ecosystem.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, we are plunged into the middle of a confusing dystopian nightmare, but it is nonetheless clear that Offred's world is out of balance. Throughout the novel the narrator, Offred, recalls a time of greater harmony in nature, connecting her own sparse lifestyle with ecological scarcity. This is most often felt through the yearning for foodstuffs which are almost impossible to obtain in the face of shortages and environmental disasters. Fish, for example, can now only be obtained from fish farms because of over-fishing. Offred questions the news, which "says the coastal areas are being 'rested.' Sole, I remember, and haddock, swordfish, scallops, tuna; lobsters, stuffed and baked, salmon, pink and fat, grilled in steaks. Could they all be extinct, like the whales?" (173). On Offred's shopping trips she struggles to find things we would consider normal commodities, like oranges or steak (57), queuing to buy with tokens whatever is available. The world is an apocalyptic vision of the after-effects of pollution:

Women took medicines, pills, men sprayed trees, cows ate grass, all that souped-up piss flowed into the rivers. Not to mention the exploding atomic power plants, along the San Andreas fault, nobody's fault, during the earthquakes, and the mutant strain of syphilis no mould could touch. (122)

Atwood clearly suggests the link between human behaviour and the destruction of the environment through Offred's thoughts here, but it is not just the picture of a world with serious food-supply problems that is important. It is the effect of this pollution on the everyday lives of humans that becomes the focus of Atwood's novel, showing that interrelationships work in both directions, creating a circularity of cause and effect. Atwood points out that dictatorships rise up during bad times because they promise better times, and asserts that the bad times that lead to the rise of Gilead are due to a shrinking economy, but more so to "widespread environmental catastrophe" ("Writing Utopia" 92).

The effects of this are not, however, limited to a lack of certain foodstuffs: environmental degradation has a widespread effect on all areas of human society.

In the time leading up to the foundation of Gilead, the birth rate has dropped dramatically – a situation which has a direct effect on Gileadean policies regarding women and fertility. Although this is partly due to birth control and abortion, it is also related – as Professor Pieixoto suggests in the Historical Notes attached to Offred’s story – to the R-strain syphilis and AIDS epidemics causing the elimination of “many young sexually active people from the reproductive pool” (316). He continues:

Still-births, miscarriages, and genetic deformities were widespread and on the increase, and this trend has been linked to the various nuclear-plant accidents, shutdowns, and incidents of sabotage that characterized the period, as well as to leakages from chemical and biological warfare stockpiles and toxic-waste disposal sites, of which there were many thousands, both legal and illegal – in some instances these materials were simply dumped into the sewage system – and to the uncontrolled use of chemical insecticides, herbicides, and other sprays. (317)

Not only does pollution lead to a declining birth rate; if babies are conceived and carried to full term, they are often born with defects. Abortion is no longer an option in Gilead, however likely the chances are of a deformed baby, and Roberta Rubenstein argues that this “demonstrates the way in which the profound and irreconcilable split between ‘pro-life’ and ‘pro-choice’ ideologies of reproduction in contemporary social experience corroborate female ambivalence about childbearing in patriarchy” (“Nature” 102). Certainly Offred’s own desire for a child is tempered by her understanding of the potential for deformities:

The chances are one in four, we learned that at the Centre. The air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules, all of that takes years to clean up, and meanwhile they creep into your body, camp out in your fatty cells. Who knows, your very flesh may be polluted, dirty as an oily beach, sure death to shore birds and unborn babies. (122)

An “Unbaby”, or “Shredder” as they are called colloquially, can be born “with a pinhead or a snout like a dog’s, or two bodies, or a hole in its heart or no arms, or webbed hands and feet” (122). Atwood’s use of horror here illustrates in shocking detail the realities of how humans too are part of the chains of cause and effect in the wider ecology of the world, and that the consequences of our actions are dire for ourselves as well as for our environment.¹⁷

¹⁷ Atwood herself highlights several trends as being important influences on the novel in an unpublished manuscript: “the rise of right-wing fundamentalism as a political force, the decline in the Caucasian birth rate in North America and northern Europe, and the rise in infertility and birth-defect rates,

This dystopia of the natural world encloses the dystopia of the social and political world. Because of the poor birth rate, women have become the ultimate commodity in Gilead. They have been reduced to their most functional roles: those who can bear children become mothers – the others are wives, daughters, servants according to their ‘class’ in the military order instituted by the Commanders. Those commanding Gilead are able to use reproduction as the basis for their authoritarian rule: women capable of bearing children must be imposed upon to do so in order to ensure the survival of the human population. This is done in a bizarre ritualised threesome, whereby the handmaid lies between the legs of the wife as the commander tries to impregnate her. Offred, as a handmaid, is required to bear children for the barren wives of those commanding Gilead, and thus becomes a “two-legged womb” (146).¹⁸ Even her identity is stripped from her as she becomes only the handmaid ‘of Fred’ and his wife. Rubenstein points out that “procreation and maternity are simultaneously idealized and dehumanized in Gilead” (“Nature” 102), which makes Offred’s position horrifyingly ironic. “I avoid looking down at my body,” says Offred, “not so much because it’s shameful or immodest but because I don’t want to see it. I don’t want to look at something that determines me so completely” (72-73). A religious justification is given for this law, set out in the epigraph to the novel: the story of Genesis 30:1-3, where Rachel is made barren and, desperate to give Jacob a son, prevails upon her maid Bilhah to bear children for her. This “establishes the idea that long ago religio-political pressure to procreate set society on a collision course with personal autonomy” (Friebert 282). This adds another layer to the text, whereby it becomes a warning to the reader that an imbalance in the environment can lead to an imbalance in the socio-political and even spiritual spheres, as religion becomes a mechanism to try and control this imbalance.

The irony in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is that attempts to control these imbalances come from the implementation of further hierarchies rather than of equalities. Indeed, the Commanders are able to implement their power-structures simply by making use of already extant systems of control: the pre-Gilead American economy is run electronically and it is the work of an instant to refuse access to funds to anyone with an F for female on their bank account. In merely a few lines, Offred describes the events leading to this fiscal

due, some say, to increased chemical-pollutant and radiation levels, as well as to sexually transmitted diseases” (qtd. in Howells, *Margaret Atwood* 96).

¹⁸ Wagnor-Lawlor points out that the “performance of sex” during the ritual is something Offred disassembles at in order to stay alive, but which “provokes a deep sense of self-alienation” (“The Play” 121). This sense of alienation from the self is figured also, I believe, in this phrase “two-legged womb”, which makes Offred the subject into Offred the object.

control: “they shot the President and machine-gunned the Congress and the army declared a state of emergency. They blamed it on the Islamic fanatics, at the time” (182-183). The brevity of the description, plus its almost nonchalant tone, shows how easy it is to reach a point where a state of emergency is declared, and even more importantly, accepted. Once declared, it becomes the justification for anything, including the closure of women’s compubank accounts, creating roadblocks and Identipasses, and refusing to allow women to work (183-188). Nobody who has lived within the confines of apartheid South Africa – even if only as a child – could underestimate the power of a state of emergency declaration as a very real and powerful way to take control of a country.¹⁹ Furthermore, when Gilead blames Islamic extremists for the chaos that they have in actual fact inflicted themselves, it might seem like part of an unbelievable conspiracy theory were it not for the reality of post-9/11 America in our own times. Dystopia, we are warned, can happen all too easily, especially when we read novels such as this in the light of our own history. Indeed, Murphy has pointed out that one of the reasons why *The Handmaid’s Tale* is so successful is because the “dystopian distance between tenor and vehicle” has been reduced, making the links between “the dystopian features of the present and the possible horrors of the future” more apparent (“Reducing” 25). It is this recognition that allows science-fictional texts to use cognitive estrangement to such – ironically – realistic effect.

The Justification of Othering: Women and Gilead

The positioning of Atwood’s imaginary Gilead within a recognisably realistic America has particular relevance to how relationships between men and women, as well as between different types of women, are figured in the novel. The State of Emergency, for instance, is justified as a necessary action in order to protect the people from terrorism. Similarly, one of the justifications Commander Fred gives to Offred for the laws relating to women in Gilead is that they have been created to protect women.²⁰ For example, if the state regulates all relationships between women and men, he argues, it actually makes life better for women:

¹⁹ Interestingly enough, Atwood has admitted that apartheid, along with the institution of slavery in the American South, was inspirational for her creation of Gilead (Dodson, “An Interview” 102).

²⁰ Atwood points out that Gilead is “named for the mountain where Jacob promised to his father-in-law Laban that he would protect his two daughters” (“Writing Utopia” 93), which underscores the Commander’s ideology of protection of women.

This way they all get a man, nobody's left out. And then if they did marry, they could be left with a kid, two kids, the husband might just get fed up and take off, disappear, they'd have to go on welfare. Or else he'd stay around and beat them up. Or if they had a job, the children in daycare or left with some brutal ignorant woman, and they'd have to pay for that themselves, out of their wretched little paycheques. Money was the only measure of worth, for everyone, they got no respect as mothers. No wonder they were giving up on the whole business. This way they're protected, they can fulfil their biological destinies in peace. With full support and encouragement. (231)

The Commander thus suggests that the dystopian world of the past, where women were alone, abandoned and abused, has made way for a utopian society which gives women the freedom to "fulfil their biological destinies".

This conflict between protecting women and imprisoning them is evinced through Offred's own reaction to the imposition of the state of emergency and curtailment of her personal freedoms. Although she recalls her days drinking and smoking with Moira with evident pleasure, she does admit that the "Pornomarts were shut, though, and there were no longer any Feels on Wheels vans and Bun-Dle Buggies circling the Square. I wasn't sad to see them go. We all knew what a nuisance they'd been" (183). The woman behind the counter at the corner store agrees with Offred, congratulating the government for taking action. Their vehement reaction against sexual freedoms, here, indicates how quickly people's perceptions can change – as Offred herself realises when she and Ofglen encounter Japanese tourists in their short skirts, high heels and made-up faces, and feel "fascinated" and "repelled", admitting that it "has taken so little time to change our minds, about things like this" (38). Offred's deep distress at the infringements on her own rights is thus complicated by her appreciation for some aspects of Gilead's legislation, and her powerlessness to do anything about those aspects she cannot change.

Her powerlessness is complicated further by the fact that she is not simply made into a commodity by men in the new patriarchal system: some women, too, believe that Gilead is a better society than twentieth-century America.²¹ Aunt Lydia claims that the handmaids should not see their position as "a prison but a privilege" (18). She – co-opted by the religious philosophising of Gilead – attempts to brainwash the young women sent to the Rachel and Leah Re-education Centre (the "Red" Centre) into believing that their life before was characterised by constant sexual threat and disrespect. She shows the women at the Centre a variety of brutally graphic pornographic films as a way to force them to

²¹ Howells argues that Offred's experiences are set in about 2005, which we know because she is born in the 1970s, and is thirty-three when she becomes a Handmaid ("Margaret Atwood's Dystopian" 163).

“consider the alternatives” to their lives as handmaids (128), attempting to argue that their pre-Gilead lives were the same as the perverted images they now see. Offred does acknowledge that, under the controls imposed by Gilead, they can

walk along the same street, in red pairs, and no man shouts obscenities at us, speaks to us, touches us. No one whistles.

There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it. (34)

As Karen Stein points out, the irony is that “the women of Gilead are *not* free from rape or violence. Rather, rape has been institutionalized” (277, original italics). Atwood seems to be suggesting here that patriarchy, disguised in an apparently modern, free society or as part of the political establishment, is a kind of rape, and makes us question the validity of the arguments used by the Commander and Aunt Lydia. Yet, at the same time, Aunt Lydia’s arguments make the text even more frightening because Atwood uses such ordinary women as part of the power structures, thus showing how it is possible, even easy to “domesticate totalitarianism” (Stimpson 765). The collusion of women in patriarchy is an important aspect of the novel, and one which calls into question exactly how Othering comes about. Aunt Lydia is portrayed as constant in her beliefs, probably because she, like the other Aunts, really does feel that the morality of Gilead has created a better world. Atwood points out that she intentionally used women to control other women in Gilead: “you should look at how the British took control of India. They raised the power of control amongst the Indians themselves. In Gilead control comes amongst the women themselves. That’s my model of control” (Dodson, “An Interview” 104).²² This suggests to me that the Aunts could also be motivated by the desire for power: it is fairly easy to preach morality when you are not in the same position as the young women forced to become Handmaids.

A similar aspiration is portrayed in the character Serena Joy, the Commander’s wife. Here the collusion Serena Joy shows with the establishment of Gilead is initially seen to be a desire for power and recognition. Serena Joy, a has-been gospel singer, was once, as Offred recalls, a high-profile proponent of the kind of ideology practised by Gilead, making “speeches about the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home. Serena Joy didn’t do this herself, she made speeches instead, but she presented this failure of hers as a sacrifice she was making for the good of all” (55). Offred can see that her preaching back-fired once Gilead came about because Serena can no longer make

²² The Salvagings are also an indication of how the women of Gilead acquiesce in their own nightmare situation: their daily consent to the oppression of Gilead is appalling, but “the festival fever of these public events intensifies the horror of women’s complicity in their subjugation” (Friebert 284).

speeches: “She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn’t seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she’s been taken at her word” (56). Serena Joy’s characterisation is actually quite complex, and it is apparent that although she has indeed obtained the kind of life she wanted, she is bitter about the realities of that life for all women – but most of all, herself. This suggests even more strongly the possibility of utopia turning into dystopia. But what is perhaps even more interesting is that it is through seeking power that Serena Joy ironically loses all her power. Any kind of hierarchy, therefore, seems to result in dystopia in the end.

Characters like Aunt Lydia and Serena Joy are set in opposition to Offred’s mother and Moira because the latter are both fierce proponents of women’s liberation and are therefore apparently the opposite of the co-opted women of the regime. In pre-Gilead America, Offred’s mother, for instance, had tried to explain what women’s liberation meant to her generation, but realised that Offred did not understand her arguments (131). It is not entirely clear, here, whether Offred simply takes her freedoms for granted or if she rejects the vehemence with which such ideas are put across.²³ Similarly, when Moira tries to argue with Offred that sex between men and women is an unequal transaction, Offred replies that “if Moira thought she could create Utopia by shutting herself up in a women-only enclave she was sadly mistaken” (181). On the one hand, the suggestion during this exchange is that Offred, so in love with Luke, is herself sticking her head in the sand and wilfully misinterpreting Moira’s point that men do have more power than women and, as a result, accepting that there must be an inequality in any kind of sexual exchange. On the other hand, as we have seen, even women can objectify and seek power over other women. Certainly, the separation of women from men in much of Gilead allows Offred to display a rueful irony when she says, “Mother, I think. Wherever you may be. Can you hear me? You wanted a women’s culture. Well, now there is one. It isn’t what you meant, but it exists” (137). Howells points out that the phrase “a women’s culture” is a feminist slogan from the late 1970s, and argues that Atwood uses it because, as “a feminist with a deep distrust of ideological hardlines, she refuses to simplify the gender debate or to swallow slogans whole, for slogans always run the risk of being taken over as instruments of oppression” (*Margaret Atwood* 97). Fiona Tolan, too, makes the convincing argument that “Atwood focuses on the history of second wave feminism, addressing the limiting and

²³ Lefanu sees the depiction of Offred’s relationship with her mother in a more positive light than I do, claiming that “Offred’s portrait of her own lost mother, a feminist of the 1970s and 1980s, is ironic, exasperated and affectionate. It is partly through that search that Offred manages to construct a subjecthood for herself” (*Feminism* 73).

prescriptive nature of its utopian beginnings” (18). She notes that many of the ideals of communal living and women-only environments are to be found in Gilead’s creation of the Red Centre and of households populated by multiple women (23) and, as we have seen, the idea of many women raising children communally is one of the hallmarks of the feminist utopias of the 1970s. Atwood perhaps suggests here that this kind of feminism is as dangerous as patriarchy, for it, too, is a form of Othering. Instead of accepting individuals’ needs and valuing difference, it tries to create a sense of sameness amongst women, removing the element of choice either by rejecting a female biological imperative entirely or by essentialising it. An ecological ethic would reject both points of view as too narrow and lacking the space for dialogue.

One of the most interesting aspects of *The Handmaid’s Tale* is, in fact, how Atwood ties the feminist movement in with the repressive regime of Gilead. Offred recollects a group of activists burning pornography at a bonfire in the park when she was a little girl. The smugness of the women’s comment, “[g]ood riddance to bad rubbish” (48) is eerily echoed in Offred’s first reaction to the closing of the Pornomarts during the state of emergency, allowing Lois Feuer to suggest that “Atwood looks explicitly at the thesis that we are our own enemies” (89). When newspapers are censored and closed down (183), therefore, Atwood suggests, ironically, that the self-satisfied and moralistic response of the feminists burning pornography is the same kind of mentality that tolerates the wholesale censorship that in turn allows Gilead to come into being. It is a short step from the feminists burning pornographic magazines in Offred’s childhood to the scene from the early days of Gilead:

In New York it was called the Manhattan Cleanup. There were bonfires in Times Square, crowds chanting around them, women throwing their arms up thankfully into the air when they felt the cameras on them, clean-cut stony-faced young men tossing things onto the flames, armfuls of silk and nylon and fake fur, lime-green, red, violet; black satin, gold lame, glittering silver; bikini underpants, see-through brassieres with pink satin hearts sewn on to cover the nipples. And the manufacturers and importers and salesmen down on their knees, repenting in public, conical paper hats like dunce hats on their heads, SHAME printed on them in red. (242)

I agree with Feuer when she argues that it is “[p]recisely this eradication of irreducibly individual women in favor of Woman [which] lies at the meeting-point of essentialist feminism and the fundamentalist right” (89). Again it seems that Atwood is warning us that a quest for utopia can so easily lead to a dystopia. Indeed, even the patriarchal utopia envisioned by the rulers of Gilead is not necessarily utopia for the young men serving the

regime as guards. They are not allowed to marry until deemed worthy: “They have no outlets now except themselves, and that’s a sacrilege. There are no more magazines, no more films, no more substitutes” (32). The Commander even has to admit that “[b]etter never means better for everyone.... It always means worse, for some” (222). An ecological ethic, while inherently idealistic (as we have seen), suggests that any kind of world – whether labelled utopia or dystopia – is not the ‘good place’ if it creates a better world at the expense of some.

These features of Offred’s story complicate our understanding of dystopia and therefore of hierarchies of Othering. Rather than it simply being an ‘Us versus Them’ situation, with the narrator as entirely helpless in the face of a totalitarian regime, Atwood hints that the narrator herself is in some way complicit in the founding of the dystopia in which she finds herself trapped. In many ways this makes Atwood’s novel that much more successful: if we read it carefully, we cannot assume that we would not allow a Gilead to establish itself in our own times. While Martens argues that Offred is not a strong female hero because of her submissiveness (94), Offred’s passive acceptance of much of what occurs in the lead up to Gilead is, in actual fact, as believable as Moira’s feminism. So often in utopian writing, character is entirely lost in favour of polemic, and I would argue that Offred’s character flaws, rather than being a weakness in the novel, make Atwood’s point that much more genuine. Offred’s obsession with Nick, for example, blinds her to the needs of Ofglen and the Mayday movement. Offred tosses Ofglen aside, thinking that the “things she whispers seem to me unreal. What use are they, for me, now?” (282). Even when she hears that Ofglen has hanged herself before she is arrested, her only thought is “[s]o she’s dead, and I am safe, after all” (298). Offred’s insularity and her selfishness are not uncommon character traits, and suggest that it is all too easy for individuals to ignore warnings they do not want to hear. The opposite of utopia, Atwood suggests, is not so much dystopia as the complacency that allows dystopia to come into being. Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor, however, argues that

Even if one faults Offred for her inaction during the ‘real time’ of the narrative, she achieves a kind of modern, muted heroism through the act of telling her story, which records not the sentimental education of past heroes and heroines but the ironic education of our present. Although her narrative ends at possibly her first moment of true autonomy in Gilead, the fact that she tells her story moves her from the private and into the public. (“From Irony” 91)

The act of telling, of narrating, therefore appears to be the one way to fight against complacency and the acceptance of imbalances and hierarchies.

Knowledge and Ecological Ethics

The reason why critics such as Wagner-Lawlor emphasise that Offred's narrative is a means to her heroism, is because it suggests that complacency, and the dystopian society that results from it, can be fought through knowledge. It is our ability to know our potential and to understand our restrictions that can save us from living in the kind of hierarchical world Offred experiences. Knowledge of the Other rejects both the possibility of dominance and the likelihood of submission, because on one hand ignorance leads to the fear of the Other, and on the other because it teaches us our commonality.

It is significant that, in the light of the importance of knowledge, Atwood chooses to emphasise books and words so often in this novel. One of the ways in which the regime is able to maintain itself is precisely through restricting access to knowledge through strict censorship laws. In the Commander's house, as all over Gilead, the "Bible is kept locked up, the way people once kept tea locked up, so the servants wouldn't steal it. It is an incendiary device: who knows what we'd make of it, if we ever got our hands on it? We can be read to from it, by him, but we cannot read" (98). Even the passages read from the Bible, both in the Commander's house and the Red Centre, are heavily censored – only certain stories are read and even then, Offred is convinced some of the details are changed (which, the reader recognises, is indeed the case). No one can question these readings, however, as only the Commanders are allowed access to any books, including the Bible. Offred is only left to think desperately, "I knew it was wrong, and they left things out too, but there was no way of checking" (100). Her desire for words is, of course, evoked through the eroticising of words in her illicit scrabble games with the Commander in the forbidden territory of his study. Here she also reads books and magazines, which she wants "with a force that made the ends of my fingers ache" (164). Of course the incongruity is that one of the reasons that access to books can be restricted so easily is because books have become obsolete: Offred herself "worked transferring books to computer discs, to cut down on storage space and replacement costs" (182). Her job, therefore, has indirectly allowed Gilead the space to grow as it is so easy for the Commanders to restrict access to knowledge once it is all electronic.

Diana Brydon argues that it is Atwood's postcolonial stance that recognises "the power of the word: to communicate, to share, to transform, to concert, to separate, to shake and topple tyrannies, to save lives, and to end them" (54). Stein agrees, suggesting that marginal people "often find they are denied access to the discourses that confer power and

status” (269). This certainly ties in with the idea of an ecological ethic, which extends marginality from the discourse of post-colonialism into a more universal understanding of hierarchies of power. Furthermore, by insisting on web-like relationships of mutuality, the institution of an ecological ethic works against the kind of binaries that can lead to an exchange of power from one group to another, placing the previously marginal into a position of power. It is not just Offred’s narrative to which we should pay attention, therefore, but also to those it includes – Moira’s or Serena Joy’s, for example – and, indeed, how Offred’s own narrative is employed in the novel.

The importance of Offred’s tale is re-emphasised in the “Historical Notes” at the end of the novel in a very oblique, yet significant, way. Much has been written about how the Historical Notes insist on a rereading of the narrative, and I would agree that they shake the foundations of the novel. However, I would suggest that rather than undercutting what has come before, they actually reiterate Atwood’s point that complacency and lack of knowledge is the enemy of ecological ethics. Part of the confusion surrounding the Historical Notes comes from our recognition that much of the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies seems to accord with our ideas of utopia and with ecotopia in particular. The names of the professors, Maryann Crescent Moon, James Darcy Pieixoto and Johnny Running Dog, as well as the fact that there is a Department of Caucasian Anthropology in the year 2195, suggest that Native American cultures now dominate over European ones,²⁴ and a fishing expedition and a nature walk are part of the conference proceedings. But, as many critics have pointed out, Pieixoto’s lecture is filled with sexist puns and sexual innuendos. He suggests that it would be possible to “enjoy” the female chairperson of the symposium (312) and adds that the title “The Handmaid’s Tale”

was appended to it by Professor Wade, partly in homage to the great Geoffrey Chaucer; but those of you who know Professor Wade informally, as I do, will understand when I say that I am sure all puns were intentional, particularly that having to do with the archaic vulgar signification of the word *tail*. (313, original italics)

Pieixoto’s comment, plus the laughter and applause with which it is greeted, suggests that the new academia is closer to the biases of the pre-Gilead America (and perhaps of Gilead itself) than initially signified.

²⁴ David Ketterer points to the Indian Déné Nation and Greenland’s Nunavik as possible inferences for the place Denay Nunavut where the symposium is held (“Margaret Atwood’s” 212)

Pieixoto's obsession with the authenticity of the document and the identity of the Commander also speak to an implicit chauvinism. It seems remarkable that Offred's tale is so little valued by Pieixoto for its insight into how everyday life functioned in Gilead that he actually exclaims: "What would we not give, now, for even twenty pages or so of printout from Waterford's private computer!" (322). Hundreds of pages of transcription of Offred's voice would, apparently, be valueless in the face of a mere twenty pages from the Commander. Pieixoto is more intent on finding the supposed facts behind the narrative, than he is in the implications of the narrative itself – and in fact, his desire for a closed text and "a metaphysics of truth is equivalent to Gilead's dogmatism and its illusions of stale, given meaning" (Staels 465). The hope, then, that Gilead has been destroyed is tarnished by what Davidson sees as an "ominous" desire on Pieixoto's part to "have the last word" (114). An ecological ethic shows that true knowledge comes from an attempt to understand as many different perspectives as possible, and not simply the one valued by the dominant voices of the time.

Pieixoto's notes, therefore, remind us that "history, in written form, has most frequently censored the experience of the Other for the purposes of the One" (Dodson, "We Lived" 83): certainly the intimacy of Offred's tale and of her experiences are merely used as a means to explore the ways and means Gilead's Commanders used to gain power for the historians led by Pieixoto. Feuer agrees, stating that the Historical Notes not only nod to Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but also become a "satire on the academic rhetorical habit of 'distancing' (and thus 'objectifying') its subject" (85), so invalidating Offred's personal experience.²⁵ This experience is invalidated even more by the fact that the tale is not the present-tense narration we read it as at the outset, but recreated after the fact, rendering her version of events suspect on some level (Stein 274). Even worse, just as Offred's body was appropriated by Gilead, there is the consideration that, as Hogsette has suggested (see also Davidson 115), Offred's text has "been appropriated by a male":

It appears that Pieixoto reinscribes her text, thus trapping her within his textual authority, his sense of history, and his vision of how her life should be pieced together and presented. A man grants her the chance to speak and orders the way in which her words will be received. Offred becomes Ofjames" (Hogsette 272).

Yet, this also emphasises the fact that it is not enough that Offred tells her tale; her readers must also "learn how to read those reinscribed voices and properly interpret their subjective

²⁵ Davidson points out that Pieixoto's analysis is "essentially, a pre-Foucault, pre-de Beauvoir form of historical criticism", suggesting that Pieixoto is unaware "that context is itself a construct" (118).

meanings” (Hogsette 265). Not only should we not objectify the Other, we should also respect its subjectivity in its very difference from our own.

The critical obsession with the place of the Historical Notes in the novel suggests that Atwood’s inclusion of them is vital to her message. There has, however, been some confusion surrounding what they mean in the context of the novel. Ketterer calls *The Handmaid’s Tale* a contextual dystopia, suggesting that the Historical Notes allow us to read Gilead in the context of “a cyclical history” (“Margaret Atwood’s *HMT*” 214):

Unlike the traditional dystopia, Atwood is concerned not just with the preceding context, the historical development – continuous or discontinuous – that led to the establishment of dystopia, but *also* with a succeeding *discontinuous* context, and historical development – unanticipated by Offred’s dystopian discourse but implied without being described in the “Notes” – that led, over time or abruptly, away from dystopia. (213, original italics).

Murphy criticises Ketterer’s comments, pointing out that “Ketterer reveals his resistance to the feminist perspective that recognizes the *continuity* rather than the alleged *discontinuity* of Gilead and Nunavit, two dystopias of vastly incongruous features but congruent ideologies” (“Reducing” 32, original italics). These differing readings perhaps indicate a flaw in Atwood’s presentation – possibly her irony is too subtle for some readers, and if this is indeed the case, the Historical Notes may not fulfil their required function for all readers. As Gottlieb points out “probably one of the most typical ‘messages’ of dystopian fiction is that access to the records of the past is vital to the mental health of any society” (12). It must be made clear, therefore, that the people of the post-Gilead world are to be criticised for their misunderstanding of the message that Offred’s tale leaves behind: their world is imbued with the same patriarchal ideology as the pre-Gilead world, indicating the seriousness of their inability to learn from Offred’s story. As has been noted many times (see for example Staels 463), the very place name “Denay, Nunavit” suggests Atwood’s message is that we deny none of it – deny none of the warnings explicit in Offred’s tale *and* implicit in Pieixoto’s discourse. It is not enough that we have Offred’s tale, therefore: true knowledge comes from heeding the tale’s warnings.

Although Atwood’s novel is dystopian, it is able, ironically, to emphasise the importance of an ecological ethic through the reversal of this in both Gilead and Nunavit. These dystopias reiterate the importance of relationships of non-hierarchical difference through the very act of denying them. The series of tales within tales – of Offred, Serena Joy, Moira and Pieixoto – also deconstruct the monological point of view represented by these two societies and indicate quite clearly that it is only through acknowledging multiple

perspectives that we are able to resist hierarchies. *The Handmaid's Tale* thus warns us of the dangers we face in our world if we do not resist the kind of behaviour that leads to such dystopias, and seek, instead, to live by an ecological ethic.

* * *

The Handmaid's Tale is, in many ways, the most analytical novel covered in this section. Atwood claims that “[u]topia is only safe when it remains true to its name and stays nowhere” (“Writing Utopia” 89), suggesting that the search for a practicable utopia will always lead to dystopia. As Friebert points out, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, “Atwood blames no one group, but indicts, by sheer exposure, those who espouse simplistic solutions that deny the rights and welfare of others” (284). Any attempt to find a simplistic solution to inequalities in our society seems to lead, inevitably, to unforeseen complications. Piercy’s admittedly utopian Mattapoissett is the closest to finding a solution to the oppression still evident in modern society, but it is telling that the conclusion to her novel nonetheless leaves the reader questioning the reality of Mattapoissett, making the novel perhaps too open-ended. Similarly, Lessing’s *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five* leaves the reader without, I believe, adequate closure. She suggests that the zones have found both balance and growth through their renewed association with one another, but figures this in a confusing, unrealistic spirituality, that may make her message about dynamic equilibrium clear, but does not pose a practical solution to the problems of Othering indicated through ecological philosophy.

However the problems in their quest for utopia are demonstrated, Piercy, Lessing and Atwood nevertheless make it explicit that an ideal world would be one where balance and harmony is accompanied by progress and expansion. In this they display a remarkably similar set of beliefs to those evident in Le Guin’s early science fiction. An ecological ethic, figured as dynamic interrelationships of non-hierarchical difference, is therefore the clear basis for the early speculative fiction of all four women, and the foundational philosophy for their subsequent ventures into speculative fiction, dealt with in Part Three of this thesis.

Part Three

The Later Novels

Chapter 5

Piercy's *He, She and It*:

Searching for an Ecological Ethic in a Technological Dystopia

We do not live in the seemingly stable modern world our grandparents did. Their belief in inevitable, comfortable progress has been supplanted by our realization that scientific and technological innovation are relentless and quite ambiguous. Our ancestors' acceptance of the natural limitations of space-time and life and death have been replaced by the fear and hope we feel about space travel, apocalyptic war, immortality, global pandemics, virtual community, ecological collapse, scientific utopias, and cyborgization.

– Chris Hables Gray, *Cyborg Citizen: Politics in the Posthuman Age*. (13)

Tom Moylan has argued that *The Handmaid's Tale* “anticipates the emergence of a critical dystopia” while still following a “more classical dystopian mode” (“The Moment” 137, original italics). On the other hand, he suggests that Piercy's *He, She and It* (1991)¹ is one of the earliest critical dystopias (138). The critical dystopia, with its ability to “negotiate the necessary pessimism of the generic dystopia with a militant or utopian stance that not only breaks through the hegemonic enclosure of the text's alternative world but also self-reflexively refuses the anti-utopian temptation that lingers in every dystopian account” (Baccolini and Moylan, “Introduction” 7), provides a versatile space in which to discuss the implications of the ecological ethic that is the focus of this thesis. Rather than attempting to elucidate *what* relationships of non-hierarchical difference entail, either by describing ideal worlds based on mutual interrelationships or hierarchical dystopias premised on the master narrative (as we saw in the earlier novels), *He, She and It* is the first of the novels examined here to question not only how it could be possible to live by an ecological ethic but also why this is so urgent in the face of current environmental, technological and societal trends.

The increasingly apocalyptic science fiction emerging towards the end of the twentieth century was, as indicated in Chapter Two, partly a response to the failure of the left-wing idealism of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as a more pessimistic view of a future gripped by war, global warming and diseases such as AIDS and SARS. Piercy herself has claimed that *He, She and It* is her way of warning against what could happen “if this continues” as opposed to *Woman on the Edge of Time*, which is mostly her way of imagining the world “if only” things were different (“Love” 136). This shift away from the

¹ *He, She and It* was published in the United Kingdom under the title *Body of Glass* – a title which I believe is far more evocative of the novel than the rather bland American title.

utopian dreaming of her earlier speculative novel is not merely towards descriptive dystopia, but towards a more complicated engagement with the kinds of ethical issues addressed already in *Woman on the Edge of Time*: in *He, She and It*, Piercy begins to ask questions about how similar ideas of balance, equality and respect can be translated into a world dominated by information technology.

Piercy is the only author examined here to have been directly influenced by the information-technology-dominated cyberpunk movement beginning in the 1980s.² *He, She and It* is clearly inspired in part by the seminal cyberpunk text, William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) – which Piercy acknowledges at the end of her novel (431). Gibson was the first to articulate the concept of cyberspace, which he also called the matrix (*Neuromancer* 8), and this idea of a three-dimensional virtual world existing behind a two-dimensional computer screen became the dominant image of cyberpunk. The importance of both direct, physical interaction with computer networks and the biological-meets-mechanical cyborg technology in *He, She and It* suggests the influence of cyberpunk on Piercy's novel. Mark Bould has argued that it is “a more obviously feminist, if rather conservative revision of cyberpunk's central tropes” (226), but I believe *He, She and It* is actually more complex than Bould suggests: it is an interesting combination of cyberpunk and what could be termed eco-SF. John Clute has suggested that cyberpunk's Bruce Sterling was incorrect in attempting to create “an internecine conflict” between Gibson-style cyberpunk and the kind of speculative humanist novels describing an “ecologically-aware small-scale set of utopian communities” (73). Clute's suggestion that this was a false dichotomy may indeed be true if one looks at *He, She and It*, which finds a neat balance between the two types of SF and, as a result, is perhaps able to go further than either in the questions it asks.

In *He, She and It*, Piercy uses the technology of the internet, still innovative at the time of writing, as well as cybernetics and robotics, in order to question how the idea of an ecological ethic can be pursued in a world which becomes more reliant on technology as our ability to survive deteriorates in the face of radical climate change. This chapter explores four main ways in which Piercy addresses this issue in the novel.³ First, she describes the kind of dystopia in which relationships of non-hierarchical difference have become impossible and where power over the Other is of paramount importance. This

² It is interesting to note that the only woman to write true cyberpunk, Pat Cadigan, published her *Synners* in the same year as *He, She and It*.

³ This chapter concentrates mainly on the parts of the novel set in the future, although the sub-story, set in Prague in 1599, echoes certain ideas, as will be indicated later in the chapter.

dystopian horror creates a sense of urgency which is in no way diminished by the introduction of a variety of utopian possibilities within the novel. These utopian spaces, examined in the second section of this chapter, suggest a variety of ways in which mutual interrelationships could exist in a world dominated by technology. Technology itself, however, becomes an ambiguous expression of utopia. Piercy deals with technology as a product to be used in order to engage with Otherness through the idea of the Net (the third section) and through the intermingling of the artificial and the natural in the cyborg figure, Yod (the fourth section). By asking where the boundaries lie between human and machine, Piercy points out the importance of freedom and respect in relationships, rejecting a hierarchical structure of dominance and submission through her portrait of Yod's relationships with the human characters in the story. The freedom to live one's own life, without being enslaved by corporations, limited knowledge or other individuals becomes, then, the focus of *He, She and It*.

Environmental Apocalypse and a Dystopian Future

He, She and It opens in a post-apocalyptic world. The future Piercy imagines is premised on whole-sale environmental destruction, but rather than simply describing the devastated planet (although she does this in frightening detail), Piercy uses this backdrop to suggest the dystopian ramifications of global climate change. As in the case of the other novels examined here, not only ecosystems, but also social and political systems are affected in this vision of the future. The outcome of our present actions will be, Piercy suggests, a world without the kind of ecological ethic which posits mutual, respectful relationships: it will become a world of hierarchies based on who has the power to remain alive on a practically barren and unsustaining Earth.

In the future Piercy envisages the world is a mere shadow of what it is today: UV radiation and global warming have destroyed ecosystems, making it almost impossible to survive without artificial assistance. Piercy describes on at least three separate occasions in the novel how the world in which the main character, Shira, lives has been devastated by a Great Famine which resulted from massive climate change. The rising oceans have drowned the major rice paddies and breadbaskets of the world (37, 41, 301) and the rest of the food-producing regions are turned to "scrubland or desert" once the "rising temperatures had shifted the ocean and air currents" (37), drying up the Great Plains, spreading the African deserts, making temperate zones arid and desertifying the Amazon

basin (41, 301). Furthermore, the “end of abundant oil” has the effect of stopping much “agribusiness on land” (37). The Great Famine is sparked off by the resultant inability to produce food naturally, leaving most people surviving on “vat food, made of algae and yeasts” (41). Even those lucky enough to be able to afford real food do not have access to everything, so that cheese and apples have become “far more costly than caviar” (325-326).

Global warming and the resultant rise in sea levels after the ice caps have melted have not just affected crop production: the sky is no longer blue “because of the greenhouse effect” (89) and most animals, unable to survive the increased radiation and life in the ‘Raw’, have become extinct. The only animals left are vultures, pests and insects, which “moved in waves over the land, eating the hills to desert” (34). All the birds have died out (34, 122), making bats a protected species, as they alone eat the insects over-running the world. Water has become “radioactive and highly polluted with toxic chemicals, including petroc carbons, acetic acid, choloroform” (101). Human populations have been affected as areas like Massachusetts Bay have been flooded out and destroyed by hurricanes (35, 100), leaving the “wreckage of buildings, vehicles, machinery under water” (100). Moreover, “the leftover radiation from power plant residues and the stockpiles of toxic chemicals long since part of the water table had left most people infertile without heroic measures to conceive (and the credit and/or position to command these measures)” (116).⁴ Population declines caused by the Great Famine and increased infertility are exacerbated by the problem of uncontrollable viruses, like the kisrami virus, “responsible for 8,472,338 deaths in what was then still the United States” (299) and the “so-called parrot plagues that occurred in the third year of the famine” (299). War, too, has taken its toll on the world, most notably the Two Week War of 2017, which “a terrorist had launched with a nuclear device that had burned Jerusalem off the map, a conflagration of biological, chemical and nuclear weapons that had set the oilfields aflame and destroyed the entire region” (3), leaving a barren, irradiated Black Zone on the world map.

The novel begins, then, by extrapolating a world in which all our worst fears have become a reality: war, famine, environmental degradation, bioterrorism, genocide and mass extinction. What becomes important in the novel is how this apocalyptic world, and particularly the devastation of the environment, has had an enormous effect on every aspect of life – not only in terms of the practical issues of food production or conception, but also in its political and social effects. The eco-police, for example, have considerable power

⁴ This, of course, is also the premise upon which Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* is based.

and are able to punish by death non-organic farming practices, the use of pesticides and “poisons or allowing them in contact with the soil or the water table” (319). More significantly, artificial environments have had to be created by building domes⁵ and wraps over cities and towns to protect them from the radiation and severe weather conditions. Shira’s grandmother, Malkah, born in 1987, makes the poignant statement that “[n]o one born now will experience the world of gentle air we could walk through on impulse, without protection, winds and rain that caressed our skin, deep thick woods, grass like green hair growing thick from the moist earth” (132). The novel, though, does not simply demonstrate a nostalgic yearning for a long-past natural world: it is those with the ability to build protection from the environment that have power in Shira’s world. The cost of building and maintaining domes is high, and the world has been divided up amongst “twenty-three great multis” (3), or multinational corporations, which have “wielded power and enforced the corporate peace” (3) since the breakdown of traditional power structures following the Two Week War – mainly because they have the money and technology to build the artificial environments that ensure the sustainability of the human race.

The ecological background to the novel, therefore, is not merely for show. Although it is one of the common roles of ecological science fiction to describe the possible results of non-green practices in our own world, Piercy goes further than simply pointing out that global warming will cause the sea level to rise: she makes us aware that this would cause mass starvation and hence world-wide political instability. *He, She and It* suggests that ecological collapse leads in turn to dystopia. Democracy is a concept that belongs to the past and the power over technological knowledge has given control to the multis, like Cybernaut, Uni-Par, Olivacon and Aramco-Ford, who own domes around the planet as well as space platforms. They in turn have a measure of control over the majority of the population who live in the Glop (the Megalopolis that surrounds the domes) from which the low-level workers are drawn. The only alternative existence besides the privileged and powerful life of a multi ‘grud’ or the day-worker from the Glop is – at least at the start of the novel – to live in a free town. As Shira thinks, aside from the eco-police, who are solely concerned with land-use in the tiny areas not inhabited by humans, “the multis ruled their enclaves, the free towns defended themselves as best they could, and the Glop rotted under the poisonous sky, ruled by feuding gangs and overlords” (33). The

⁵ The dome idea is familiar to cyberpunk – see Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (84) – as well as ecological science fiction.

political and geographical boundaries we know today have made way for a global dystopia of hierarchies, ultimately controlled by the multis.

The multis themselves are dystopian in *He, She and It*. In traditional cyberpunk fashion, they are based on the idea of multinational corporations becoming increasingly powerful and able to dominate much of the world through their economic muscle and access to technology. The influence of Japanese culture is often important in cyberpunk, and this is seen in *He, She and It* in the case of the multi for which Shira works, Yakamura-Stichen (Y-S)⁶ – a name which also perhaps hints at a Germanic influence. The Y-S religion is born-again Shintoism, and Shira is dismissed and despised for being a practising Jew. The society has an extremely rigid hierarchy in which “[p]eople of the same rank greeted each other with ritual gestures, a bob of the head. Those farther down the hierarchy they usually ignored. Passing those above them, they awaited recognition and bowed deeply” (5). Conformity is also vital in Y-S: the Y-S colours – black, white and blue – dominate the architecture and even the clothes, and “[a]lmost every exec, male or female, had been under the knife to resemble the Y-S ideal” (5). In fact, Piercy reiterates several times in the novel the predominance of the “surgically created Y-S faces – blond hair, blue eyes with epicanthic folds, painted brows like Hokusai brush strokes, aquiline nose, dark golden complexion” (1-2): a strange mix of Japanese and Aryan features (the latter suggesting Nazism). Although cosmetic surgery is common in cyberpunk – Gibson too uses cosmetically created “epicanthic folds” (*Neuromancer* 57) – Piercy uses it specifically to create the idea of homogeneity, rather than as part of the drug-scene and quest for youth traditional in the genre. In fact it is the most important aspect of Y-S culture to be “prepped” for a specific occasion, looking appropriate, “image tight, surface impervious, alert to the smallest changes in corporate will” (213). The corporation is all-powerful in the Y-S enclaves, and success in the work-place is as dependent on creating the correct image as it is on one’s technical skills, making it a singularly colourless and uniform society, which illustrates clearly how far Y-S is from the ecological ethic of respect for difference.⁷

The Y-S corporate culture is not the only form of homogeneity within the multi-walls: race and gender discrimination are rife too. Y-S is a patriarchy, and Shira loses

⁶ Even Norika, the geographical region in which Shira lives, has a Japanese sound to it although it is actually an amalgamation of ‘North America’.

⁷ Nixon points out that cyberpunk often pits “Japanese pragmatism and mass production versus American innovation and ingenuity” – the latter represented by the console cowboy image in fiction like that of Gibson (n.pag). Similarly, the Y-S enclave is reminiscent of Gibson’s Asian “Ninsei enclave” (*Neuromancer* 15) and the Tessier-Ashpool company (*Neuromancer* 71).

custody of her son because boys are “regarded as property of the father’s gene line” and Josh, Shira’s husband, “has a higher tech rating” than she does (10), which gives him more status in Y-S law. Shira’s secretary, Rosario, is banished to the Glop because “[w]omen over forty who were not techies or supervisors or professionals or execs were let go if they were not the temporary property of a male grud” (6), although Rosario’s Latin blood is clearly as much of a problem as her gender in the blonde world of Y-S. Shira experiences similar discrimination, for although she is a corporate grud, and thus has some privileges, she feels “too physical..., too loud, too female, too Jewish, too dark, too exuberant, too emotional” (5) for Y-S’s sense of propriety. Helford implies that the flattening of “cultural identity” into “corporate identity” at Y-S is a weakness of the novel – she calls Piercy’s descriptions of ethnicity “surprisingly limited” (130) – but this is surely Piercy’s point: the corporate culture is a controlled mix of Japanese and Caucasian with little room for deviation. This is one of the clear indications that Y-S is dystopian, especially if it is levelled against an ecological ethic.

Although working for a multi gives status and wealth to those with the appropriate technical know-how, it is clear from Shira’s experiences at Y-S that there is a high price to be paid for these: that of personal freedom. Everything expressive of Shira’s individuality (including her religion, her gender, her looks and her feelings), is suppressed by Y-S, which forces her to live a life of restriction and regimentation. By the end of the novel, this lack of individuality and personal freedom is seen to be further compromised when it becomes evident that the Y-S hierarchy has been targeting Shira specifically, watching her and manipulating her. This clearly dystopian feature, reminiscent of Orwell’s Big Brother as much as it is of the genre in general, has the effect of emphasising the extent to which Y-S society is a reversal of the ecological ethic outlined earlier: Y-S is hierarchical, homogeneous and instrumentalist.

In short, the world in which the novel opens outlines the worst fears of current ecological, social and political forecasters. The enormous and irreversible damage done to the environment has led to plant and animal extinctions, and the reduction in human population has come too late to fulfil the deep ecologists’ ideal of small, biocentric, sustainable communities: those humans left are totally dependent for their survival on the corporate strategies of the multis. Yet, as Moylan points out, *He, She and It* is a *critical* dystopia and thus moves forward from the classical dystopias, as “beyond the privileged

corporate localities ... and the weak regional entities, there are other spaces of hope to be found in Piercy's dystopian world" ("The Moment" 139).⁸

Holding out Hope for an Ecological Ethic

Moylan identifies three main areas in which the utopian impulse is maintained within *He, She and It*: the Glop, Tikva and Safed ("The Moment" 139). Significantly, all three regions are illustrative of different ways in which the idea of an ecological ethic can be envisaged. The Glop is the least obviously utopian in atmosphere, and Tikva, because of its prominent role, is the most reliably utopian space within the dystopian constraints of the novel. Safed, while the most intriguing and utopian community of all, is also beset by the problems of narrowness. Nonetheless, all three areas suggest alternatives to the hierarchical structures embodied in the multis.

Stretching "fourteen hundred kilometers to the south and two hundred to the west" (298), the Boston-Atlanta megalopolis, the Glop,⁹ is initially described in terms that seem dystopian. It is in the Glop that the faceless masses of the working classes live, commuting to the multis to perform drudge labour. The Glop is first seen through the eyes of Shira as she has to cross it in order to reach her home town, Tikva, which lies on the Bay of Massachusetts. Her journey is nightmarish as she is forced to dodge rival gangs; she fears for her life, not just because of the violence, but because the Glop is full of diseases, including "new types of typhoid and hepatitis" (32). Shira's main worry is to "stay alive and intact" (31) and so she wears a thin black cover-up which is designed to hide "age, class, sex, and made all look roughly the same size" (31) and wears "metal woven gloves to cover her hands, though she was perfectly aware that although they might discourage a casual slasher with only a sticker, any real hand-hacker could lazer right through the protective mesh" to use her hand-print to access her credit (31). Although there are some areas in the Glop covered by domes, "the system had not been completed before government stopped functioning" (33) and so she cannot survive without "[g]oggles, mask, cover-up, cooler" and, as an extra precaution,

⁸ Peter Fitting, in opposition, argues that *He, She and It* is not a critical dystopia, but an eutopia as the "focus in Piercy's novel is on a utopian struggle within a larger dystopian context" (155). But since this struggle is predicated on the wide-reaching dystopian future Piercy postulates, I would argue that Moylan is correct in calling it a critical dystopia.

⁹ Piercy's Glop is another clear reference to Gibson: Case calls home "BAMA, the Sprawl, the Boston-Atlanta Metropolitan Axis" (*Neuromancer* 43).

an edge of amphetamine.... It honed her paranoia enough to help her navigate the station where hundreds camped and slept in the filthy decaying passages that mumbled day and night of distant voices, muffled screams, drumming, zak music, running sewage, the hiss of leaking coolant. (31-32)

Our introduction to the Glop, then, suggests a world of fear and noise, disease and death.

The description of the Glop in terms denoting disorder and chaos, with “the only laws that held ... turf laws of the gangs who controlled a piece of the Glop” (33), may suggest dystopia, but the Glop is depicted as the opposite of the multis in that it is unregimented, colourful and vibrant. Helford is fairly negative about the Glop, arguing that the cover-up is a way to repress individual identity, and that “[w]e never meet black characters in the novel, even in minor roles” (131). Helford fails to note that although the cover-up is worn in public, the Glop is generally “mixed race”, with most of the people “black- or brown-skinned, but almost every combination was represented: red hair, brown eyes and black skin; light skin, black hair, blue eyes; and other permutations” (301-302). The populace speaks a variety of languages, “at least English, Spanish and something else – Vietnamese, Russian, Chinese” (360) indicating a multicultural as well as multiracial society. It is this type of representation that has led Jameson to argue that “cyberpunk revels in the demonic energies of the ‘sprawl’ and of metropolitan excess in ways that are certainly celebratory and often proto-Utopian” (*Archaeologies* 161).¹⁰ Certainly, the vibrancy and multiculturalism suggests a type of utopia in which difference is acceptable.

Although the Glop is run by powerful and hierarchical gangs at the start of the novel, the emergent ‘New Gangs’ like the Coyotes¹¹ are demonstrative of a new type of power infiltrating the Glop. During the course of the narrative, they begin to react against the control exerted by the multis by decreasing their reliance on the multis for credit, food and protection. The Coyotes’ ‘den’ is warm and safe and they make their own food and educate their children in a bid to remain as independent of the multis as possible (307). The leader of the Coyotes is named Lazarus, suggesting a rising from the dead, or new life. He wants to unionise the Glop labour so they cannot be exploited by the multis (309), and points out that they can work together with the free towns to stop the multis taking total

¹⁰ Philip E. Baruth has also commented that “cyberpunk is a narrative form essentially tied to thematic questions of social integration, these questions explored paradoxically in a ‘punk’ atmosphere of chaos and seeming fragmentation” – making it ultimately “utopian fiction” (111).

¹¹ I think it is significant that Piercy chooses to call the representative of the New Gangs the Coyotes. Suggestive of the trickster figure of the Coyote, the gang is attempting to undermine the power of the corporate ‘gods’. Helford suggests this possibility too, adding that the name is also “suggestive of Native American heritage” (131), which, if true, would add another dimension to the multiculturalism and multiracialism mentioned above.

control. "See, we're all as good at that game as the multis", he points out to the previously rather insular Tikvans, "[w]e got assassins badder, faster and just as maxed. We got troops, we got assassins, but we hungry for the techie lore. We can maybe trade" (310). The ferment of the Glop, its freshness and its initiative form a contrast with Y-S and suggests that the Glop is not as dystopian as it first appears. Furthermore, the novel closes on a note which implies that the Glop is ready to mobilise and work with the free towns to support a more democratic and free society.

Although there are a number of free towns in the future Piercy imagines, only the Jewish free town of Tikva is described in detail. Tikva, meaning "hope" in Hebrew (Helford 128) and founded in response to the anti-Semitism that followed the Two Week War (342), is a haven for Jews, but is characterised by a classless and genderless society. People of all ages are encouraged to mix with one another, unlike in some corporate enclaves where "rigid age segregation was considered normal" (248). Helford finds Piercy's depiction of Tikva as a utopia problematic because she claims there is "more racial and ethnic uniformity in Tikva than even in multis like Y-S" (136). Although Helford is correct to a degree, Piercy is clearly making the point that a minority group is forced to find sanctuary outside the multis in order to have the freedom to practise their religion. Moreover, later in the novel, Piercy also explicitly mentions black-skinned Jews from Africa (420), which suggests that the religious bias of Tikva is not exclusive of racial difference. While Tikva is not described in remotely the same detail as Massapoissett, it has the same ambience as the utopia from Piercy's earlier novel in its mix of technology and nature, and in the democratic processes whereby every decision is discussed in detail and voted on at Council meetings. Although certain members of society do command respect, such as Shira's grandmother, Malkah, this respect is earned and does not lead to any special privileges. In terms of its structure, therefore, Tikva appears to be a remarkably realistic formulation of a society in which relationships of non-hierarchical difference do work and which is organised around ideas of mutuality.

Significantly, also, Tikva represents the idea of individuality and freedom of expression even more clearly than the Glop. When Shira returns to Tikva after years of living within the strictures of Y-S, she is shaken by the lack of uniformity of the architecture and is provoked "into a state of ecstasy" by "the colors, the textures, the sounds and smells" (36). She is surprised by the open windows, which let out sounds of music, the casual attire of "open-throated shirts, pants, a full skirt, shorts" (36), the flowers and vegetables growing everywhere, and the dogs, rabbits and chickens in people's yards:

“Everything felt ... unregulated. How unstimulated her senses had been all those Y-S years. How cold and inert that corporate Shira seemed as she felt herself loosening” (36). Clearly an ecological ethic can only survive where individuality can thrive, as it relies on respect for difference. It is therefore in its contrast to Y-S that Tikva is presented as a utopian alternative. Shira realises that most of the people who live in the various free towns around the world could have chosen to work directly for the multis, “but elected to stay outside the enclaves because of some personal choice: a minority religion, a sexual preference not condoned by a particular multi, perhaps simply an archaic desire for freedom” (31). Once one begins to work for a multi, freedom and self-expression are simply not tolerated.

The dystopian presence of Y-S is exacerbated, therefore, when it becomes clear that the utopian hope of Tikva is under threat. It becomes increasingly clear that Y-S does not want Tikva “to endure free any longer” (173) and that the Y-S ideal is “[o]ne world, one corp” (199). Once it is clear that Y-S is prepared to do anything to get the skills and technology Tikva has, the Tikvans’ main objective is “to remain ourselves. We want our independence. Our freedom” (283). However, because they live in such a highly advanced information-based society, Tikva can be attacked through their computer systems. Their “Base” – their virtual town, through which their physical town is maintained, and through which they all work and all interface with each other and with other parts of the world – is therefore vulnerable: “People know that staying free depends on the integrity of the Base. No Base, no work, no credit, no town” (209). Only by selling their skills to the multis can the free towns remain independent, and the Tikvans’ fight to protect their Base is a fight for their very existence.

In this sense, Tikva is not just similar to Mattapoisett in its utopianist society; like Mattapoisett, Tikva is only able to remain utopian if it is able to defend itself against the powerful dystopias that threaten it. This situation has the effect of undermining the utopianism of both places in that it shows how fragile the ideal society actually is, while at the same time perhaps presenting a more realistic picture of the difficulties of remaining utopian in the face of a greater power. It is ironic, then, that Tikva is “intimately connected to what it opposes by the technology that ensures its survival” (Shaw 174). Economic integrity is the foundation of the only freedom Tikva can realistically have in a world run by multinational corporations, and by creating a world where this is the case, Piercy seems to be questioning how much freedom it is possible to have in a capitalist, materialist society, and particularly in one so dependent on sophisticated information technology.

The final utopian space present in the novel is also vulnerable in the face of the corporate control of information systems. The Black Zone's Safed community, while not described in detail in the novel, is still significant in terms of the utopian vision evident in *He, She and It*. It is, in many ways, a regression towards the naïve feminist utopias of the early 1970s, and the most surprising community in the future Piercy imagines, not least because the Black Zone is understood to be completely decimated by radiation and plague following the attack that led to the Two Week War. The community of Safed survives despite this and is described by Nili as

a joint community of the descendants of Israeli and Palestinian women who survived. We each keep our religion, observe each other's holidays and fast days. We have no men. We clone and engineer genes. After birth we undergo additional alteration. We have created ourselves to endure, to survive, to hold our land. Soon we will begin rebuilding Yerushalaim. (198)

In the context of current political issues, the concept of a new Jerusalem as peaceful home to both Israelis and Palestinians is perhaps the ultimate utopian expression. The only significant problem with this (as in the case of other all-female utopias), is the rejection of men – in terms of an ecological ethic, all forms of difference are to be encouraged and accepted, including gender.

Despite this, the little we see of Safed provides some clues as to how a more utopian world could emerge from the dystopian scenario which provides the backdrop to the novel. Malkah describes Safed in glowing terms when she travels there towards the end of the novel. Although it is a city of caves, life “is not bleak” but luxurious and warm: “There are animals and computers everywhere, sheep, cats, goats, camels, and more children than I have seen in a long time” (420). The association of animals and computers indicates the potential for nature and technology to come together in a positive way, and the focus on children is highly suggestive of regeneration. The increasing rain-fall and the arrival of butterflies at previously barren oases in the Black Zone (420), may also point to the ability of the planet to recover, eventually, from almost total environmental annihilation. The people of Safed have “adapted themselves and their animals to the high UV” (420) and their superior medical technology gives them additional strength to survive the harshness of their environment – indeed, Malkah's only hope of recovering her sight is the advanced medical care available in Safed.

By ending the novel with Malkah's trip to Safed, Piercy argues for a new kind of society for the future facing Shira and her son Ari. By combining the knowledge and

adaptations of the peaceful, feminine Safed, the anarchic Glop and the more traditionally independent Tikva, she suggests that a complex freedom is the true utopia sought by the characters in the novel. Utopia is not a place, but a way of living within an ecological ethic: living, that is, in freedom, safety and diversity, without enslavement to the rigid codes of one group of people. Furthermore, this utopian impulse is explicitly tied to the ability of these societies to survive in a radically altered world. Unlike the pastoral idyll of Mattapoissett in her earlier *The Woman on the Edge of Time*, Piercy clearly articulates the ways in which utopian ideas can be formulated within a post-modern world where freedom is found not only in the physical world, but in access to the knowledge and power of information technology.

Networks of Knowledge

The Net is an all-important feature of *He, She and It* and the most significant cyberpunk element of the novel. Piercy uses the Net for two main purposes. First, the Net is employed as a means for suggesting political or societal freedom. It stands for access to information, and the plot suggests the magnitude of power given by the Net and its associated technologies in an information age such as Piercy presents. How the Net is used and who is able to access it thus become important questions in the novel. Secondly, the ability to access the Net directly, without any limits or margins, becomes an important way through which Piercy expresses an idea of personal freedom. The limitations of the physical body are totally eradicated in full projection into the Net, including the limits of our own synapses, logic and imagination.

The Net, in Shira's world, is not the purely computer-based internet of our own age, but a highly interactive tool, sophisticated and complex beyond our current knowledge and technology. While obviously based on a similar idea to the internet or world wide web, access is not only through interfacing with a screen, but full immersion in the virtual world of the Net is possible via an actual physical connection: each computer terminal is fitted with a male coupler which fits into a socket in the temple of the user – or in the case of those needing to interface with “large AIs”, wrist jacks are inserted in the body in addition to those in the temple (187).¹² The characters are able to access the Net directly because, as

¹² There is a temptation when dealing with this kind of literature to dismiss concepts like temple sockets and Artificial Intelligence as mere fantasy, or at the very least, symbol. Chris Habes Gray, however, documents a visit to MIT in 1995 during which he met “grad students working on wearable computers and

Shira explains, “[o]ne of the components in the plug embedded in her real body was a decoder that made her able to access machine language, translate it instantly into numbers and words” (272-273). Just as the console cowboy Case is “jacked into a custom cyberspace deck that projected his disembodied consciousness into the consensual hallucination that was the matrix” (*Neuromancer* 9), so the characters in *He, She and It* are able to cast their consciousnesses into the Net. The human brain and the computer processor therefore become one tool, communicating through binary code and allowing human subjects to project their consciousnesses into the virtual world of the Net wholly, and without the boundary of the computer screen.

Once plugged in, the user experiences a Net similar to our internet in many respects, although more vast and complex, because each mind can be plugged-in to it directly:

The Net was a public utility to which communities, multis, towns, even individuals subscribed. It contained the mutual information of the world, living languages and many dead ones. It indexed available libraries and offered either the complete text or précis of books and articles. It was the standard way people communicated, accepting visuals, code or voice. It was also a playing field, a maze of games and nodes of special interest, a great clubhouse with thousands of rooms, a place where people met without ever seeing one another unless they chose to present a visible image – which might or might not be how they actually looked. (55-56)¹³

The common experience of many (although by no means all) people in the world today, of googling, accessing chat-rooms or facebook, and using skype, is very similar, while more superficial, than the experiences of the users of the Net in Piercy’s novel. In an invention perhaps analogous to the Blog or Web Log, people can only access the Net through their own personal Base, which is like a home-page linked to one’s brain and personality. In addition, the multis and free towns have their own Bases. Each one is much like an advanced intranet-cum-server, a vast store-house of information accessible only by authorised users, functioning as an archive, used to regulate the artificial environment, and as the virtual office of almost every working person. In many ways, then, the Net becomes a space in which diverse (though virtual) interrelationships can exist.

sophisticated human-machine interfaces who happily labelled themselves cyborgs” (9). One has a “small lazer that painted a computer screen onto one of his retinas” (9) and exists “in cyberspace and Massachusetts at the same time, his senses simultaneously accessing both worlds” (10). Perhaps plugging in to the internet is not as far removed from reality as it seems?

¹³ It must be remembered that Piercy’s novel was published in 1991 and her description of the Net, barring the actual physical connection via brain sockets, is remarkably prescient.

The major problem of the Net, however, is that with everything held virtually in one's personal or corporate Base, free towns like Tikva can only maintain their independence from the multis by protecting the information and technology they design from raids by corporations and information pirates who steal and sell "data and systems" (45). Although Malkah deals "with misinformation, pseudoprogramming, falsified data, the creation of the structures that protected Bases by misdirection and were called as a class chimera", and although Avram uses artificial intelligence to build "defence systems to defeat penetration into a multi or town base" (45), Y-S is able to penetrate and attack Tikva through the Net. This exposes the Tikvans both individually and as a group. Their freedom to live as they choose is totally dependent on their ability to design systems they can sell to the multis and their capacity to keep their data secret from multis and information pirates. Knowledge, therefore, has become a commodity in Shira's world. Tikva's quasi-utopian lifestyle is not, then, a true freedom: their independence is reliant on the integrity of their access to the Net and control over their skills and knowledge.

The precarious autonomy of Tikva in relation to the Net and its technologies is illustrative of the position of each group that falls outside the all-powerful Multis. Shira's mother Riva becomes an information pirate because of her anxiety about the power wielded by those with access to, and control over, the Net. Riva, as a kind of futuristic Robin Hood, claims that she does not steal information, but liberates it, arguing that "[i]nformation shouldn't be a commodity" (193). While Riva sells some information, she also gives away necessary science, like medical knowledge, to the "places where the multis cut down the rain forest, deep and strip mined, drove the peasants off the land and raised cash crops till the soil gave out" (194). This perhaps suggests that information and technology is one way to redress ecological, social and political imbalances: for Riva, knowledge is "political" (29) and even as a little girl she would claim, "[i]t's what we don't know that makes us stupid.... We should all know everything" (81). Knowledge for Piercy, then, should not be withheld by those in power, or become their instrument to wield. Nili, as a representative of the isolated Safed community, also believes that the "ability to access information is power", and points out that this was the case even before the Net:

The ability to read and write belonged to the Church except for heretics and Jews. We are people of the book. We have always considered getting knowledge part of being human. With the invention of the printing press, literacy spread. With mass literacy, any person no matter how poor could learn how the society operated, could share visions of how things might be different. (194)

As utopian as the various communities are in their isolation, the only way to break down the dystopian control of the world by the multis is by liberating the Net from their control. In this future, technology and society have evolved to a degree where access to the Net is the only real means of gaining knowledge and thus the information that can keep such communities independent.

In the novel, this idea is pursued through the growing insurgence of the Glop and through what characters like Shira, Yod and Nili learn from their visit there. Nili's innocent questions about the Net – which she has never accessed as the devastated Black Zone is excluded from the technology – force the others to realise that the Net is not actually accessible to all, as they would like to believe. This realisation is re-enforced when Shira realises that that “a poor child might grow up in the Glop, work for a gang or sell labor to a multi, die of one of the viral plagues that swept the Glop every year, and never once plug in to access the Net” (252). One of the major hierarchies attacked in the novel is that of privilege – in this case the privilege of access to information. The solution Riva proposes is to create a new Net using technology from information pirates and the contacts of the New Gangs like the Coyotes. Shira's confusion suggests that her position of privilege has blinkered her to the realities of life outside the multis and free towns:

“We're building our own Net,” Riva said calmly. “Outside theirs, alongside theirs.”

“But the Net is public,” Shira said.

“So is ours,” Lazarus said. “Different publics.” (308)

Lazarus's wry comment explodes Shira's notions of the Net as both freely accessible and a normal prerogative. The novel ends with Tikva, the Glop and Safed all poised to work together to create an alternative Net, not run by the multis, and able to provide knowledge and information to all, not simply those with the credit or power to access it. This alternative Net is therefore the first step away from the dystopian control of the multis, and is representative of the kinds of mutual interrelationships suggested by an ecological ethic, as it is community-run rather than controlled from above.

The second way in which the Net undermines the master narratives of this dystopian world is perhaps more complex and less obviously positive than the idea of access to knowledge. The Net's configuration as an information highway that is accessed through the direct, physical connection between human brain and computer system, is also significant: not only is it important that everyone has access to the knowledge held on the Net; it is also important how that information is processed. Malkah, who has been able to watch the development of the interactive Net, recalls that it was a revolutionary experience:

“We didn’t understand what we were doing, or we would not have dared. But the freedom! To imagine algorithmically, logically and fully, to think forward, clear, loud thoughts permitting no distractions, no misgivings, a discipline of the inner life” (160-161). In this passage, Piercy suggests that the gift plugging-in gives to the characters is to make them almost super-human in their ability to think and imagine. If the “spatial dimensions of the Net [are] all metaphorical, mental conveniences” (267), creativity is no longer linked to physical dexterity, but is limitless.

Some of the most magnificent scenes in the novel are set inside the Net, such as when Yod expresses his love for Shira by thinking “a rose around them, huge, so that they were standing inside an enormous flower the size of a bed, thick with petals” (166), or when Yod, Shira and Malkah become shape-shifters in order to raid the Y-S Base, becoming invisible (268), spreading themselves “flatter than a skate” (270), being able to fly (270), turning into a mining machine capable of burrowing through rock (272), and lastly becoming fire (274). In each of these instances, the characters feel as if they are the objects they only virtually become, their brains tricking them into experiencing emotions like elation when ‘flying’, for example. Clute has argued that cyberpunk neither challenged nor explicated the corporate world in any meaningful way, but merely created “a *noir* megalopolis of inner space” (67). While Clute may be right about the majority of cyberpunk, it is clear that Piercy, while utilising the conventions of the genre, has used the human/Net interface to expand traditional conceptions of inner space in *He, She and It*. Personal autonomy can thus be found in the unusual space of virtual reality (VR) – perhaps the only space in the novel in which difference is truly experienced and accepted, and in which exterior, physical labels such as race and gender can be transcended. As Gray points out, “race and gender distinctions are hard to enforce if you cannot tell with whom you are interfacing” (134).

Despite the very positive aspects of being able to plug-in to the Net, it is still problematic on several levels. First, the Net is only experienced by those lucky enough to have access to it. Notions of class and privilege must therefore be taken into account when assessing whether networking systems such as these are in fact demonstrative of an ecological ethic: as the movement in the novel to create a public Net suggests, access to VR would have to be available to all. This kind of interfacing also questions the boundaries between the natural and the artificial. “The Net is real”, Riva claims, “We are all in the Net” (193). Malkah, too, suggests that the Net is an inexorable part of human evolution:

Nobody can think anymore without AI. It's like asking someone to walk to California or cross the Atlantic on a raft. Everything is on a system. Just as nobody could do arithmetic anymore without a calculator after they were introduced, who can think with just their own brain? (251)

Whether Malkah and Riva are right or not, in the context of the novel, comments such as theirs force us to assess what is meant by 'real' in a virtual world. Is the virtual space accessed by the characters when plugging-in to the Net any less real for them than the 'natural' or physical world? Foster, in his attempt to examine post-humanism from the perspective of such technologies, claims that being able to plug into a computer physically means "that we tend to become more self-conscious about what is 'automatic' or 'natural' in our own thought processes" (9). While this may be true, what does this awareness of 'natural' as against artificial suggest for the ability of an ecological ethic to flourish in a technological world? As free as the virtual world makes the individual accessing it, and as much as it allows for both the expression of difference and the eradication of boundaries enforced by labels like race or gender, there is the potential for the virtual world to assert its primacy over the natural world. This is particularly problematic in a world in which so-called nature is almost non-existent in any recognisable sense: even the relatively natural world of Tikva can only exist under cover of an artificial 'wrap', and the majority of life on earth – almost totally human – lives in tunnels or caves underground, and eats artificial food grown in vats. Information technology such as Piercy describes, therefore, has a double effect. It can both increase the potential for relationships of non-hierarchical difference – by providing access to knowledge and the freedom to escape discrimination – and it can exacerbate instrumentalist approaches to the environment by becoming a way to avoid the problems facing the natural world, and by providing a final space in which to exist without any kind of mutual relationship with nature.

Piercy is clearly influenced by Haraway in her suggestion that the dissolution of boundaries between natural and artificial can allow for greater freedoms, as Piercy's acknowledgement of the suggestiveness of Haraway's "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" outlines (431).¹⁴ Humans can become super-humans when they are plugged-in to the Net: the defining line between subject and object becomes blurred; the Other becomes the Self. However, as much as the union between humans and information technologies suggests freedom, this connection must still be managed or regulated in a responsible fashion, both

¹⁴ Haraway's theory possibly has more relevance to critical dystopias, such as *He, She and It*, because, as Csicsery-Ronay points out, "Haraway's work is in many ways more intimately connected than that of the critical utopians with the technoscientific languages that pervade postmodern culture" ("Marxist" 123).

because of what this may mean for the further destruction of the natural world and, as the image of the cyborg suggests, because of what it means to be human in a post-human world.

Cyborgs: Complicating Hierarchies between Natural and Artificial

The figure of the cyborg in SF has usually been explored as a “potent threat to much of Western philosophy’s reliance upon Cartesian-inspired dualisms (mind/body), or the binary dichotomies that underpin dominant patriarchal society – self (white male)/Other (female, nonwhite male, etc.)” (Cornea 275). It is clear that this thinking is the inspiration behind Piercy’s cyborg character, Yod. The blurring of gender and race categories through cyborg symbolism is further enhanced by the complication of “accompanying distinctions as nature/culture, civilised/primitive, public/private, normal/abberant” (Shaw 160), but Piercy does not simply use the idea of the cyborg to suggest a “near future world in which the natural and the authentic have somehow become meaningless categories” – as Bould has argued of Gibson (220). Rather, Piercy concentrates on how the idea of the ultimate union between natural and artificial can inspire further questions about issues surrounding dominance and submission. She does this in three main ways: through the story Malkah tells of Joseph the golem, the detailed examination of Yod’s complicated position as a non-human man, and the suggestion that Nili, as an enhanced human being, is the only truly free combination of human and non-human. In her exploration of these three characters Piercy uses what I have called an ecological ethic to question the validity of blurring the abovementioned boundaries without careful thought.

Although the sub-story of the novel, set in the Jewish Ghetto of Prague at the turn of the sixteenth century, is not the main focus of this chapter, it is important to note that Malkah’s story mirrors the main plot in many ways: the Jewish town under siege from the dominant culture of the day; the old, powerful man making an artificial man in order to protect the town; the coming to consciousness and growth of human emotion within that artificial man; the compassionate young woman as love-interest; and finally the destruction of the artificial man. For the purpose of this thesis, it is the story of the golem, Joseph, which is most interesting in the questions it raises about the formation of cyborgs, continuing those elicited in a different format in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.

In the story Piercy takes from Jewish legend, Joseph is made by Judah, the Maharal, in order to protect the Prague ghetto from a Christian attack at Easter, 1600. Although

Joseph is literally formed from clay and given life through Kabbalistic power (64-66), Itzak, one of the men who aids Judah in creating Joseph, realises that despite Joseph's "massive, inert, prehistoric" qualities, he "is alive, he is a living man" (66). This is, of course, the conflict Joseph faces: he is alive and conscious, but is also an object – golem means "matter, lump" (81) – created for one purpose only: to protect the ghetto. Although he refers to Judah as "father" (81), he realises that he is "a slave" (202), only able to do Judah's bidding, and totally under his control. Once the ghetto has survived the Easter attack, and Judah realises that his time on earth is nearly over, he therefore makes the decision to return Joseph to clay. Yakov, who was also part of the ceremony which brought Joseph to life, protests that Joseph "thinks, he feels" (397), and believes that Joseph should be rewarded for saving the ghetto by being allowed to continue to live. The other two men, however, assume that Joseph needs to be controlled, placing little faith in his ability to control himself and keep from doing violence to the very people he was created to save. The conflict between Yakov and the other two men ensures that the reader must weigh Joseph's right to control his own destiny against Judah's responsibility to ensure that the golem's supernatural strength can never be exploited by others. In a poignant and terrible scene Judah begins to unmake Joseph, who, once he realises what is happening, cries out: "No! I want to live. I want to be a man!" (400). Joseph's haunting cry encapsulates the problem the novel highlights: what happens when an artificial person is endowed with human characteristics and desires, and yet has to suffer the fate to be used as an object, without the dignities and rights of a human?¹⁵

An ecological ethic would suggest that any Other deserves the same rights and respect as the Self – be this Other a different gender, race or species. Piercy complicates this notion through the creation and characterisation of the cyborg Yod. The human-Net interface is taken to an extreme in the formation of an artificial human, but the delight in the "confusion of boundaries" (Haraway 150), so evident in the descriptions of projection into the Net, become subverted in the case of Yod: the cyborg does not choose to experience freedom through virtual reality; he is neither human nor unconscious machine. Although the creation of cyborgs is illegal in Shira's world, it is clear that society has been moving inexorably towards such technology. Robots, once they become sufficiently complex, are banned from being made to look humanoid from the 2040s because people

¹⁵ Gray, while not referencing Piercy or *He, She and It* at all in his *Cyborg Citizen*, also refers to the golem of legend, suggesting (after a visit to Prague) that "cyborgs as simple and loyal as the golem will probably not be the rule. Cyborg identity is definitely more complicated than the golem's literal view of the world, and it will only get more so" (193).

found them disturbing and threatening (48), but artificial intelligence (AI) has clearly progressed to the point where computers are able to have something approximating a personality. Malkah's house computer seems almost human to Shira, with its "female voice" and "warm effect" and because "it knew so much about her and it freely uttered opinions and judgements" (40). On several occasions the house computer responds to Shira's actions with disapproval (180), even making "a rude noise" (363) when its opinions are challenged. However, the complication in Yod is that while he is also an example of AI, he is embodied – unlike the house computer or a robot.

Rather than being a robot, a pure machine programmed for certain tasks and unable to change its own programming, Yod's maker Avram explains that Yod is "a mix of biological and machine components" (70). Not only that, but Yod's programming is much like that of our human brains, "self-correcting, growing, dependent on feedback as we are" (376). Avram's efforts to make a cyborg prior to Yod, his tenth attempt,¹⁶ were unsuccessful precisely because the earlier programming was not self-correcting – an innovation introduced by Malkah after Chet, the cyborg created prior to Yod, proves to be an unsuccessful model. Chet is "fast, aggressive in the pursuit of his given objectives", "undeviating, relentless" (179). However, his attempts at human interaction end in disaster as he attacks and kills Avram's laboratory assistant because he perceives him to be an "obstacle" to be "removed" (180) during a role-play game designed to teach Chet to seem human. Malkah's coding, therefore "was to prevent Avram's cyborgs – who were programmed to protect, to be capable of efficient violence in the pursuit of goals they were given – from applying that violence to every obstacle" (351). It is Malkah's programming that changes Yod from machine to man, albeit a cybernetic organism.¹⁷ Malkah claims he is not just a "simple man-made cyborg" but a "woman-made" cyborg, too, as she is responsible for extending his "pleasure and pain centers" as well as his "capacity to imagine" (114). As this capacity to imagine suggests, Yod's needs are surprisingly human. He admits that he needs "to be touched" (182), he can see colour (89) and experiences boredom (117) and loneliness (121). Even more surprisingly, he shows a remarkable capacity for subtle disobedience, hiding aspects of his personality from Avram, lying to him and breaking out of the laboratory to visit Shira (197).

¹⁶ Yod is the tenth letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

¹⁷ The term cyborg was coined by Drs Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline in 1960s by combining cybernetic (a word describing information processors) with organism. See Cornea (276), Gray (11) and Foster (14) for further comments on the terminology surrounding cyborgs.

It is through Yod's relationship with Shira that the reader comes to realise the depth and breadth of his character, especially as Shira's initial scepticism regarding Yod's 'human' characteristics potentially mirrors that of the reader. The first time Shira sees Yod, she thinks he is human, but despite this, once she realises Yod is a cyborg, she instantly assumes that he is a machine without any emotions. When she touches him without his permission, his reaction makes "her feel as if she were being rude, but that was absurd. You did not ask permission of a computer to log on; computers did not flinch when you touched them" (69). She also initially rejects Avram's use of the pronoun 'he' to refer to Yod, suggesting that Avram is "anthropomorphizing" Yod, and is surprised when Yod, unbidden, leaps to his own defence, by claiming that he is a man (70-71). Malkah warns Shira not to think of Yod as a machine, arguing that he is "Not a human person, but a person" nonetheless (76). She points out that personality is not limited to humans: "The great whales – we had just about killed off the last of them before we began to translate their epic and lyric poetry. Were they people? Were the apes who learned to communicate in sign language intelligent beings?" (77).

Malkah's questions force both Shira and the reader to reassess their understanding of what it means to be human. While Yod is not human, but a human-seeming machine, he has the same characteristics that are perceived to be uniquely human: Yod himself tells Shira,

I'm conscious of my existence. I think, I plan, I feel, I react. I consume nutrients and extract energy from them. I grow mentally, if not physically, but does the inability to become obese make me less alive? I feel the desire for companionship. If I can't reproduce, neither can many humans. (93)

Like humans, Yod shows that it is his ability to form bonds which makes him more than a mere robot (352). In this, Yod is similar to Frankenstein's monster, who feels deeply and yearns for human contact – only becoming a violent and abhorrent creature when rejected by those with whom he shares consciousness. Even their moments of coming into being are similar. In Shelley's novel, the monster explains to Frankenstein that a "strange multiplicity of sensations seized me, and I saw, felt, heard and smelt, at the same time; and it was, indeed, a long time before I learned to distinguish between the operations of my various senses" (*Frankenstein* 80). Similarly, Yod tells Shira: "The moment I came to consciousness, in the lab, everything began rushing in. I felt a sharp pain, terrible, searing. I cried out in terror" (119). Yod tells Shira this pain was fear, suggesting a greater emotional response compared to the monster's rather more physical reaction, but both Yod

and the monster know that they are alive. It is their separation from other living beings that causes them pain, and their relationships with others that teach them compassion.¹⁸

The rewriting of the Frankenstein story in *He, She and It* is overt in the many textual references to the original tale, such as when Avram's son, Gadi, calls himself the son of Frankenstein (148) and when Yod's chosen image of himself when they project into Base is of the monster from Boris Karloff's film production of *Frankenstein* (165). Wolmark suggests that "Yod's cyborg masculinity means that he occupies the unexpected narrative position of alien and outsider, and is therefore denied access to structures of power" (*Aliens* 132). Shaw would accord with this description, seeing both Frankenstein's monster and Yod as "ambiguously gendered and transgressive" (163). Yet, Piercy does more than simply suggest that Yod, like Shelley's monster, is symbolic of a hierarchical gender structure: she uses Yod's reading of Frankenstein to alert the reader to the basic problem of the novel – that of how we can maintain hierarchical divisions between the natural and the artificial in a world in which cyborgs exist. When Yod reads *Frankenstein*, he wants to "die" (149) because he can see the similarities between Frankenstein and Avram and is upset to think that he is "just such a monster. Something unnatural" (150).¹⁹ Shira responds:

'Yod, we're all unnatural now. I have retinal implants. I have a plug set in my skull to interface with a computer. I read time by a corneal implant. Malkah has a subcutaneous unit that monitors and corrects blood pressure, and half her teeth are regrown. Her eyes have been rebuilt twice. Avram has an artificial heart and Gadi a kidney.' She perched on the edge of the table, trying to get him to face her. 'I couldn't begin to survive without my personal base: I wouldn't know who I was. We can't go unaided into what we haven't yet destroyed of 'nature.' Without a wrap, without sec skins and filters, we'd perish. We're all cyborgs, Yod. You're just a purer form of what we're all tending toward.' (150)²⁰

Shira's response to Yod is, I believe, the crux of the novel. In the future Piercy imagines, the boundary between natural and artificial, human and machine, has become so blurred that it is very difficult to say that a cyborg is not a person any more than it is possible to say

¹⁸ Yod's relationships with first Malkah and then his deeper connection with Shira both give him the bonds that he so desperately needs in order to become more 'human'. Frankenstein's monster, however, while learning compassion from the De Lacy family, is ultimately rejected by them. The monster is self-aware enough to plead with Frankenstein to show him kindness (*Frankenstein* 78) in a desperate bid to become more humanised, which makes Frankenstein's rejection of him all the more distressing.

¹⁹ Significantly we never see Yod's response to the final segment of the story of Joseph and the Maharal: his own destruction mirrors that of Joseph and occurs before he is able to comment on Malkah's story.

²⁰ Shira's corneal implant is a direct copy of Molly's implant in her optical nerve (Gibson, *Neuromancer* 35).

that humans are still part of nature. Jameson suggests that the “reincorporation of organic material in the imagery of the cyborg or intelligent computers ... tends to transform the organic into a machine far more than it organicizes machinery” (*Archaeologies* 64). If this is the case, where does the human become the machine, and the machine the human? And more importantly, what are the rights and roles available to cyborgs within society? Although the Tikva council do not finalise their discussion about Yod’s position as he is destroyed before they reconvene, Piercy’s method of exploring the issue raises some important points and suggests that the blurring of boundaries that the cyborg symbolises is dangerous if it merely creates a new category of being to be dominated or exploited.

Piercy is careful to emphasise, for example, that the differences between Yod and the human characters are more a matter of degree than they are of kind. Shira’s relationship with Yod is vital in this regard as her slow-growing love of Yod becomes a complete romantic relationship whereby she can think of Yod as able to take the place of Josh in the role of father to Ari (323) and can have a happy and fulfilled emotional and sexual relationship with Yod as a person, albeit not a human person (196). Although she wonders whether having intercourse with Yod is somehow disgusting because he is artificially created, she reasons that “her own interior was hardly aesthetically pleasing. Were biochips more offputting than intestines? She no more thought in bed about what was inside the skin of a human male than she really cared what was inside Yod” (180). She also points out to him that although he is not a mammal like her,

[w]e are all made of the same molecules, the same set of compounds, the same elements. You’re using for a time some of earth’s elements and substances cooked from them. I’m using others. The same copper and iron and cobalt and hydrogen go round and round and round through many bodies and many objects. (185)

Here Shira’s words suggest the ultimate connection between everything, organic and non-organic, natural and artificial. It is this idea of connection that ecophilosophers such as Freya Mathews and Val Plumwood use as the basis for their rejection of dominance/submission cultures, and which has led Haraway to argue that in the cyborg “[n]ature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other. The relationships for forming wholes from parts, including those of polarity and hierarchical domination are at issue in the cyborg world” (151). Shira’s acceptance of Yod’s otherness, and refusal to impose a hierarchical structure on their relationship, becomes symbolic of the ideal relationship of non-hierarchical difference.

The elimination of hierarchical interaction demonstrated through Shira's relationship with Yod leads into the second question that Piercy asks: should a conscious being be treated as a mere tool? Over and over again the subject of Yod's freedom comes up in discussion with those who can respect him as an individual pitted against those who see him as an instrument. Gadi points out that Avram treats Yod as "slave labor" (212), reminding us of when Joseph the golem realises how Judah sees him. Yod admits that he calls Avram father because he is afraid that Avram will destroy him, like he "destroyed every one of my brothers", making him decide "to establish a bond that may preserve me. How do I know he won't decide to scrap me?" (93). At the same time, Yod points out to Shira that he does not really consider Avram as a father:

My relationship with him is one of unequal power, which is like a father-son relationship in minority, as I understand it, but not nearly as complicated or compelling. He manufactured me. He chose to make me exist – but not me as an individual, not who I am, only some of what I can do. I can never dare reveal myself to him. He's more my judge than my father. (120)

Yod's perception of his situation is true, and becomes even more so when he tells Shira that "Avram controls a self-destruct mechanism" in his body, which Avram can signal at any time, no matter where Yod is (327). His statement, "I can't run away, though I want to" (327), is a poignant recognition of his helplessness in the face of Avram's cold instrumentalism. Because Yod's characterisation is so much stronger than Avram's, the reader's sympathy is much more likely to lie with Yod, just as Shira and Malkah's sympathy does.

At the same time, the novel is careful not to argue simplistically that because Yod is conscious he is therefore human. Although Malkah tries to reason with Avram, saying that while Yod is artificial, "he possesses his own motivations, his own goals. He's not a cleaning robot, who works because you turn him on" (284), Avram persists in seeing Yod as a tool to protect Tikva, as this is what he envisaged when creating Yod. The novel is complicated by Yod's own realisation of this, which leads him to explain to Shira the dichotomy of his existence: "I don't want to be a weapon. A weapon that's conscious is a contradiction, because it develops attachments, ethics, desires. It doesn't want to be a tool of destruction. I judge myself for killing, yet my programming takes over in danger" (410). Yod might feel like a person, he might desire to live his own life, but he has been created as Avram's instrument and thus is a slave to Avram's programming, not his own wishes. For this reason, Yod takes the only action he is free to take, that of rigging an explosive in

Avram's lab that is triggered when Avram issues the command that terminates Yod in a giant blast arranged to kill the main power-group in Y-S (415).²¹ Yod does not only kill his creator by taking this action, but destroys Avram's labs and records so that another cyborg cannot be created to think and feel, yet remain a tool. Although Shira attempts to convince herself that she can find love again if she rebuilds Yod, she finally understands that even if she rebuilt a cyborg using her copies of Avram's records, the cyborg would never be Yod: just like a human, Yod's personality was rooted in his circumstances. His relationship with her was as much "the product of tensions between Avram and Malkah" (428) as the result of his initial hard-wiring. The same programming might create a similar cyborg, but it would have a different character. But more importantly, another cyborg would, like Yod, be unable to live the life it chose, remaining a mere tool designed to mend her broken heart.

Neil Spiller points out that *Frankenstein* "was arguably the beginning of cyberpunk" as it "explored human hubris and the consequences of humanity taking life into its own hands" ("Introduction" 12). Although Spiller's argument may not hold for all of cyberpunk, the cyberpunk-inspired *He, She and It* certainly raises the issue of what it means to create conscious life in an artificial being. The tragedy of the novel is that Yod becomes so evidently a person that his destruction becomes a death for Shira and many other characters in the novel. This suggests that Malkah is right in asking Yod if she is "guilty of great folly and overweening ambition" for her role in his programming (18) and for worrying whether "the programming I gave him to balance his violent propensities wasn't a tragic error, if I did not do him an injustice in giving him needs he may not be able to fulfil" (340). While her programming is what makes Yod possible, it also means that he yearns to be "free to live as I want and choose" (283). The denial of that opportunity in the novel means that the reader has to ask whether indeed Yod should have been created. Yod even states "I'm not a proselytizer for my kind. I'm not persuaded I'm a good idea, frankly" (222), believing that Nili, as a modified human, is a better option for the intermingling of human and machine.

Nili herself states that she "is the future" (222). Nili is "born from a woman" and thus is considered human (191), but is so enhanced with technology that she and Yod are ironically a similar mix of biological and mechanical parts (196). As a product of the Safed

²¹ As Shaw points out, "[p]art of the tension in the novels is derived from the efforts of Yakamura-Stichen to acquire the cyborg for their own unscrupulous purposes – purposes which are understood in terms of dominance, conformity and the maintenance of a hierarchical order" (164). The irony is, then, that the destruction of Yod puts an end to the possibility of Y-S using him to enforce their hierarchical position, but at the same time, Yod has no choice in this self-destruction, as his needs and desires are placed on a lower level than those of Avram.

technologies and situation in the irradiated Black Zone, Nili is able to “walk in the raw without protection” (198) and is so improved that she “can bend metal with her hands. She can jump eight feet straight up” (355). Nili is a warrior, which is significant in terms of Cranny-Francis’s critique of cyborgs as reinforcing gender stereotypes. She argues that “female cyborgs always tend to be ‘pleasure models’ ... whereas male cyborgs are either ‘combat models’ ... or unskilled manual labourers” (15). Piercy turns this on its head by creating Yod as the romantic lover and Nili as combative and uninterested in relationships. Furthermore, the irony is that “[s]ide by side with Yod, Nili actually looked more artificial. Her hair, her eyes were unnaturally vivid, her musculature was far more pronounced” (222). Despite her appearance, though, she is still considered human and thus is granted the rights of a human, leading Malkah to realise that Nili’s situation is much more tenable than Yod’s: “It’s better to make people into partial machines than to create machines that feel and yet are still controlled like cleaning robots. The creation of a conscious being as any kind of tool – supposed to exist only to fill our needs – is a disaster” (413). The disaster, for Piercy, is in Yod’s enslavement, but what does the suggestion that Nili is the (post)human future mean for the expression of an ecological ethic in the novel?

Wolmark has pointed out that the “capacity for transformation represented by Nili provides a key metaphor for the kinds of positive changes that cybernetic systems have the potential to produce, particularly for women, once the binary divide between nature and culture has been challenged” (*Aliens* 133-134). Similarly, Piercy uses Yod’s “developing consciousness to question the ways in which social and sexual relations are shaped by conventions and definitions that are thought of as fixed and natural” (132). Ultimately, Wolmark finds the use of a literal cyborg in Yod not only limiting, but actually damaging to what Haraway was intending through the use of the cyborg metaphor (134). Wolmark’s emphasis on gender, however, perhaps distracts from what I feel is the real issue in the novel: it is not just an exploration of how hierarchies between different genders can develop, but an examination of the possibility for engaging in mutual interrelationships with the Other. The juxtapositioning of Yod against Nili therefore forces us to consider how Othering takes place in a variety of ways, not simply in the space of gender or race, for example. The novel insists that the categories of natural and artificial are reassessed in the light of where they fit into notions of power. The ‘natural’ world (the environment or world of non-human nature) has long been approached instrumentally and has been seen as less than the human because it lacks an apparently higher consciousness. By imagining a world where there is no longer any real nature left, in which the artificial has become

commonplace, Piercy's novel shows the emergence of a similar instrumentalism towards the artificial. Is it therefore 'human nature' to relate to the Other in an instrumentalist way? If this is the case, the dystopian warning in the novel becomes more than just the warning against environmental degradation and hierarchical power structures symbolised by the multis: it becomes a warning against allowing the perpetuation of hierarchies and power relationships in whatever kind of future faces us. It is no longer enough, Piercy argues, to reassess responses to difference in gender, race, class or species; the increasing intermingling of natural and artificial calls into question value-judgements about these categories too.

* * *

Feminist science fiction, as Martens has pointed out, "overwhelmingly tends to represent an Edenic future" with minimal or absent technology (49). By flying in the face of this norm – a norm she herself explored in *Woman on the Edge of Time* – Piercy is the first of the novelists examined in this thesis to engage fully with the idea of a technological and artificial world, and what this means for our understanding of hierarchies. Unlike *The Handmaid's Tale*, which cleverly depicts a dystopia by reversing the tenets of feminist utopias, Piercy's *He, She and It* is a radical take on the realistic problems facing a society challenged by an increasing separation from the natural world into a synthetic and virtual one. By exploring an information age, Piercy contests the early divisions between utopia and dystopia, moving beyond mere description into a type of novel that attacks the root of both extremes: utopia is not so much a physical place as it is an ability to live in freedom. Much like Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Telling* (explored in the following chapter), *He, She and It* suggests that freedom is self-expression, access to knowledge, diversity and mutuality – as idealistic as this is. The novel ends on a note of hope, with Shira's realisation that any cyborg faces enslavement to their human creator, with Malkah's journey to the burgeoning Safed, and with the joining together of various groups to provide a freely accessible Net. It is these utopian impulses which undermine and critique the dystopian vision of the novel, but at the same time, the openness of the ending suggests that this affirmation is still to come, and is still to appear on a ravaged and destroyed planet.

Chapter 6

Le Guin's *The Telling*:

The Intangibility of Hope in Dystopian Worlds

What distinguishes contemporary science fiction from nineteenth-century science fiction is that, rather than offering utopian scenarios, it reflects our sense of estrangement regarding the rapidity of current change. Science fiction, in other words, defamiliarizes the present, not dreams of possible futures. It both reflects and provokes unease. Science fiction, therefore, becomes a vehicle for reflecting upon our limitations regarding cultural, ideological, and technical closures.

– Rosi Braidotti, “Cyberteratologies.” (151)

Ursula K. Le Guin's novel, *The Telling*, was published in the year 2000 and, I believe significantly, was the first full-length novel to return to the universe of the Ekumen since her 1976 *The Dispossessed*. Although Le Guin did use the Ekumen as the setting for a number of short stories, and for the four short novellas published between 1994 and 1995 that make up the collection *Four Ways to Forgiveness*, there is an element of nostalgia in *The Telling* for the Hainish universe and its ability to provide a space to reflect upon the limitations of current society. In *The Telling*, Le Guin's thought-experiment focuses on how fundamentalism, be it political or religious, is inimical to the ideals of multiplicity and difference that form part of the ecological ethic proposed by Plumwood and Merchant.

Moylan has argued that *The Telling* “intertextually extends the vision of *The Dispossessed*” but, like *He, She and It*, “revisits utopian politics and poetics in a dystopian mode” (“The Moment” 149). Marge Piercy's reaction to the onset of the last decade of the twentieth century was to explore ideas about what it might one day mean to be human in an almost totally artificial environment, and how this highlights the problem of instrumentality in particular. Le Guin, in *The Telling*, is also interested in technology, but characteristically uses two opposing societies – one which encourages technological progress, and one which rejects it – to highlight the importance of diversity in a well-functioning society. Le Guin's philosophy on the ideal society has always demonstrated what I term an ecological ethic: as suggested in Chapter Three, this is often illustrated in Le Guin's work through societies that refuse to exclude other people on the basis of race, gender or species. What makes *The Telling* a little different is that, although an ecological ethic is still evident in the novel, Le Guin places it in the context of two different ways of thinking – one wholly concerned with the past, and the other wholly concerned with the future. Furthermore, the action of this novel, unusually for those of the Ekumen, is

intimately concerned with our own earth, called Terra by the Hainish. Although Le Guin has included Terran characters in her other novels of the Ekumen, and mentioned Terra's history of imbalance and even violence, no other novel has included as much detail on Terra's specific ills.

The focus on Terra in *The Telling* suggests a new sense of urgency in Le Guin's writing. Although it is clear that her previous thought-experiment novels are as much a commentary on our own earth as they are about imaginary worlds, it may be that the onset of a new millennium, with its *fin de siècle* atmosphere, caused Le Guin to focus more overtly on our own problems in this novel. On one level, the thought-experiment here involves the question of religious fundamentalism. If Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* asks 'What if America was taken over by a fundamentalist religious group?'; *The Telling* asks 'What if the whole world was taken over by a fundamentalist religion?' The parts of the novel that deal with Terra, therefore, create an imaginary situation on earth which offers an answer to the question of how and why the rise of religious fundamentalism could take place on earth.

The novel does not, however, take the form of an anti-religious treatise. Raffaella Baccolini compares *The Telling* to *The Word for World is Forest*, and is correct to do so in that, as she argues, there are strong connections with real events in both novels (114).¹ However, *The Telling* does not have the same simplistic good versus evil, Athshea versus Terra dichotomy as *The Word for World is Forest*. Le Guin complicates *The Telling* by expanding her thought-experiment on religious fundamentalism to include secular fundamentalism. She claims that it was her horror at Mao Tse-tung's destruction of Taoism, "a tradition two thousand years old", that led her to write a novel "about the extinction of a religion as a deliberate political act ... counterpointed by the suppression of political freedom by a theocracy" ("The Questions" 279). The issue Le Guin deals with in the novel becomes that of fanaticism or single-mindedness rather than either religion or economic growth – the latter being the impetus behind the secular fanaticism of the planet Aka. Over-rapid technological growth in a booming secular economy thus becomes as important as blinkered religious zeal in *The Telling*. In this way, Le Guin is again suggesting that, on the eve of a new century and a new millennium, the greatest difficulty facing earth is our inability to accept the Other. The solution to this difficulty is suggested

¹ The Vietnam War is the spark behind *The Word for World is Forest* and the Chinese cultural revolution and its impact on Tibet in the case of *The Telling* (Baccolini 114). See also Moylan ("The Moment" 149) and Le Guin ("The Questions" 279).

through the life-philosophy of ‘the Telling’, outlawed on Aka by the secular Corporation State. The novel implies that the kind of thinking practised by those who adhere to the general principles of the Telling is that which could provide an alternative to the violence and oppression resulting from both religious and secular fanaticism. In this case, therefore, Le Guin provides a further thought-experiment in her novel: ‘what would the world be like if we all lived in harmony with and respect for both others and our environment?’

In her elegant and cogent essay on memory and history in *The Telling*, Baccolini observes that, like *Four Ways to Forgiveness*, it is a novel “concerned with history and with the portrayal of a dystopian world” (113) and that it “presents a quest for identity for its protagonist” (114). I agree with Baccolini’s argument that the novel is a critical dystopia, and that the idea of reconciliation is important to the novel, especially in that it “opens a utopian horizon within the critical dystopia” (122). However, this chapter intends to build on Baccolini’s argument by focussing on how utopia and dystopia work together to point towards an ecological ethic in *The Telling* by dealing with the novel in three ways. First, the dystopian element of the novel is addressed and the problems of the lack of respect for, and the repression of, difference in both Terran and Akan society are compared to each other. The utopian influence of the Ekumen, and especially of the Telling, is the focus of the second part of the chapter, which outlines how the ethics of the Telling correspond closely to the ecological ethic outlined in Chapter One. Thereafter, two individual characters, the Terran Sutti and the Akan Yara, are examined as exemplars of how fundamentalist practices affect individuals, until the teachings of the Telling shift their behaviour towards mutual understanding and respect for one another.

Hierarchies and the Suppression of Difference: Dystopia on Terra and Aka

The ecological ethic outlined in Chapter One is founded on what Plumwood calls relationships of non-hierarchical difference. This entails a rejection of concepts such as homogenisation, incorporation and exclusion, and encourages mutual relationships between, and respect for, the Other. In *The Telling*, the two societies that are described maintain control by enforcing a homogenous belief system which excludes any kind of dissent or alternative practice. Both Terra’s religious fundamentalism and Aka’s secular fundamentalism work together to suggest that it is neither religious nor economic/technological progress which creates a dystopian society, but rather *any* kind of narrow, single-minded viewpoint.

Our knowledge of Terra in *The Telling* is achieved through the recollections of Suttu, the novel's protagonist.² Although this would normally create a distancing effect, the increased attention given to Terra in comparison to Le Guin's other Hainish novels creates an immediacy not found in the earlier works. Unusually, Le Guin mentions specific places identifiable to the reader as the real earth – such as Vancouver and India – which root the imaginary elements of Terra in historical fact. This brings *The Telling* closer to the novels of Atwood, Piercy and Lessing than any of Le Guin's earlier Hainish novels, and ensures that the extrapolations from current events which Le Guin includes in the novel are more marked than in her early writing.

Suttu's life on Terra is initially one of peace and happiness, spent living with her great-aunt and great-uncle in India. As is usual in Le Guin's fiction, societies characterised by harmony are described in lyrical terms, and Suttu's recollections of her childhood are of "all the colors of sunlight in the day": "Yellow of brass, yellow of turmeric paste and of rice cooked with saffron, orange of marigolds, dull orange haze of sunset dust above the fields, henna red, passionflower red, dried-blood red, mud red" (1). This description of Suttu's idyllic childhood (which opens the novel), forms the contrast with the slowly growing dystopia created by the Unist Fathers. The Unists' inexorable take-over of Terra is accompanied by the slogan "*One God, one Truth, one Earth*" (213, original italics), and all unbelievers are forced to take refuge in the so-called Pales, or to live under Unist rule.³ The first sign of interference in Suttu's life with her aunt and uncle is when the Unists take over the government in India and begin "having what they called cleansings in the river" (218). Significantly, the idea of the river-cleansing in the context of Suttu's life in India recalls the Hindu practice of washing in the Ganges. This makes the cleansings that much more horrifying, as the sacred practices of the Indian people are appropriated by the Unist Fathers. The cleansing extends to more than simply a personal purging of religious 'ignorance' and 'sin' in favour of the Unists' religious beliefs: Suttu also recalls that the villagers were so afraid of the Unists that they had begged her aunt and uncle to "hide our

² In 1990, Elizabeth Cummins criticised Le Guin because the Hainish universe is "male-dominated, and its main characters are heroes who 'save' the world with their knowledge of technology and their positions of power" ("The Landlady's" 157). Although Le Guin has experimented with female protagonists in her short stories and novellas, Suttu is the first female protagonist in her full-length Hainish novels. Significantly, her name recalls the Hindu practice of 'suttee', in which a woman immolates herself on her husband's funeral pyre. Suttu's refusal to sacrifice her life following the death of her lover is perhaps Le Guin's attempt at a feminist reinscription of the name.

³ Le Guin is never explicit about whose God the Unists worship. It could quite easily be that of the Muslims, Jews or any other monotheistic religion, but the importance of the West in their power-base, and the reference to Father John (231), suggests that the Unists may be Christian. Whatever real or imaginary religion is intended, however, the point is the narrow-mindedness of the Unists and their lust for power.

books or throw them in the river” (218). Ultimately both the books and their way of life are destroyed as, following Uncle Hurree’s death, Suttu and her aunt must join Suttu’s parents in Canada.

The warm colours of Suttu’s childhood are dissolved by the “Vancouver rain” (2) as quickly as her innocence is lost in the face of the realities of Unist rule. Moreover, soon after Suttu’s arrival in the Vancouver Pale, the Unist Fathers

declared that the Treaty of Beijing contravened the Doctrine of Unique Destiny and must be abrogated. The Pales were to be opened, said the Fathers, their populations allowed to receive the Holy Light, their schools cleansed of unbelief, purified of alien error and deviance. Those who clung to sin would have to be re-educated. (4)

Although the reader is never told what the Treaty of Beijing stipulates, the language of the Unist Fathers is that of religious fanaticism and, as the word “re-educated” alerts us, that of totalitarianism. The Cleansing, the first action of the Unist Fathers in their missionary zeal, is predicated on what they call “educational action” (4). Their policy is to allow only “one Word, only one Book. All other words, all other books were darkness, error. They were dirt” (4). Significantly, the Unists blame technological progress for the problems of the earth: in a subtle reminder of the fall in the Garden of Eden, which came with the eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, the Unist Fathers claim that “what they called evil knowledge had brought all this misery” (213) and argue that “[u]nholy knowledge should be destroyed to make room for holy belief. They opposed science, all learning, everything except what was in their own books” (213). The parallels to Atwood’s Gilead are clear: dissent is seen to be lodged in access to knowledge and education outside that sanctioned by the ruling theocracy.

The Unist belief is founded on the fear of the Other, as one has come to expect in Le Guin’s fiction. In this case, the Other includes not just those people who have a different religious belief from the Unists, but those texts which suggest there are alternative ways of seeing the world. Even when the Unist Fathers begin to listen to the more moderate Dalzul, the Terran-born envoy from the Ekumen, the years of preaching narrow-minded Unism leads to even further terrors for the people of Terra. Because they have been taught to fear anything that is different from their own narrow path, the Unists divide, with many of the more militant adherents forming an anti-Dalzul faction. Although the Unist Fathers had proclaimed Dalzul an angel, and with Dalzul’s help, Unism was beginning to “fall to pieces, crumble into fragments” (219), the single-mindedness taught by the Unists for so many years leads many Unist followers to believe that Dalzul was the

“opposite of God, entirely wicked” (219). Their fear of the opening-out of society and the increased acceptance of new, varied truths brought by Dalzul leads the anti-Dalzul faction to attack the District of Washington. Suttty remembers how they “bombed the Library there, plane after plane, four hours of bombing that turned centuries of history and millions of books into dirt” (4). Written and published by 2000, *The Telling* becomes almost predictive in foreseeing the acts of terrorism begun by the attacks on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001. Both the pro-Dalzul and anti-Dalzul Unist factions “were always planting bombs, trying suicide raids”: “They’d always used violence, because their belief justified it. It told them that God rewards those who destroy unbelief and the unbeliever” (220). The blinkered thinking and extremist position that the Unists preached is turned on them by the anti-Dalzulites, suggesting that it is inflexible, dogmatic vision which ultimately leads war and terrorism, the quintessence of separatism and dominance/submission behaviour caused by the fear of the Other.

The narrow, blinkered point of view of the Terran Unists’ religious fundamentalism is paralleled on Aka by the fervour of the Corporation State. Tom Moylan has pointed out that “in the dystopian turn of the closing decades of the twentieth century, the power of the authoritarian state gives way to the more pervasive tyranny of the corporation” (“The Moment” 135), and Le Guin’s analysis of dystopia recognises this trend in both real life and in fiction – seen already in the multis of Piercy’s *He, She and It*. Unlike the Unists’ fear of science, knowledge and progress, the Akan slogans are the opposite of the Terran ones: “REACTIONARY THOUGHT IS THE DEFEATED ENEMY”, “FORWARD TO THE FUTURE. PRODUCER-CONSUMERS OF AKA MARCH TO THE STARS”, “PURE SCIENCE DESTROYS CORRUPTION. UPWARD ONWARD FORWARD” (7-8, original capitals). Everything in Aka is directed towards the improvement of society through technology and the whole world becomes one giant corporation with every person expected to work towards the goal of modernising Aka. This creates a remarkably single-minded society “sustained by rigid discipline universally enforced and self-enforced” (31), and in which “[e]very hour was scheduled” (32) and “[c]onversation went by program” (33). People are no longer citizens, but “the producer-consumers of the Corporation State” who all wear “canvas StarMarch shoes” (29) and the “ubiquitous” uniforms which identify each person’s role in the March to the Stars (37). The inflexible codes by which the Akans live, and the description of them as a people with “[a]mazing unity of discipline” (18), reminds us – especially through the word ‘unity’ – of the Unist theocracy on Terra, thus setting up the comparison between two totally dissimilar governments which are,

nevertheless, both too afraid of losing power to allow a healthy diversity of practices and beliefs.

The Akan Sociocultural Bureau, with its propagandist-sounding Ministry of Information is, like the cleansings and re-education programmes of the Unists, one of the indications that Aka fails to live according to an ecological ethic – which, as we have seen in her earlier Hainish novels, is always an indication of dystopia for Le Guin. In this instance, what makes Aka dystopian is the Akan Corporation State's absolute control over information. On the one hand, it has outlawed all information pertaining to their traditional way of life, and on the other, it has come to revere all knowledge pertaining to technological progress. Suttty, as a historian for the Ekumen, finds it exasperating to witness how the Akans reject their past in their eagerness to fast-forward their technological progress, and finds her work hampered by the apparent total eradication of any literature remaining from before the Corporation State.

The government of this world, to gain technological power and intellectual freedom, had outlawed the past.... To this government who had declared they would be free of tradition, custom, and history, all old habits, ways, modes, manners, ideas, pieties were sources of pestilence, rotten corpses to be burned or buried. The writing that had preserved them was to be erased.

If the educational tapes and historical neareal dramas she had studied in the capital were factual, as she thought they were at least in part, within the lifetime of people now living, men and women had been crushed under the walls of temples, burned alive with books they tried to save, imprisoned for life for teaching anachronistic sedition and reactionary ideology. The tapes and dramas glorified this war against the past, relating the bombings, burnings, bulldozings in sternly heroic terms. (57)

The bombing of temples and burning of books by the Akan Corporation State's Sociocultural Bureau obviously parallels Suttty's memory of the destruction of the Washington District Library. However, what is even more terrifying for Suttty is the closure of the Office of Book Location in Dovza City because there are "no more pulpables in Dovza": it has finally been "Cleansed" (20) in the same way that the Unists were attempting to cleanse the Pales. Although Aka is bent on replacing religion with technological know-how, and Terra is bent on replacing all secular knowledge with religious belief, it is clear that both are afraid of being weakened by exposure to alternative ideas. For both the Unists and the Corporation State there is only one path: the kind of monologism that is antithetical to an ecological ethic.

The Implementation of a Totalitarian Society

What is often difficult to understand about any totalitarian culture is why its people allow themselves to be led along this highly restricted path. In *The Handmaid's Tale* the dystopia of Gilead is reached through technology: books are systematically destroyed and the totally computerised society makes it easy to take away the freedoms of certain sections of the population until the military can affect a complete take-over. In *He, She and It*, the dystopianism of the multis is more insidious: power belongs to those who control the technology. Yet, in *He, She and It*, the means of overturning the hierarchies and of empowering those suffering under the dystopian rule of the multis, is also technological – the creation of the parallel Net which is free to all.

In *The Telling* the Unists' ability to convert and then control so many people is clearly linked to their ability to use "neareals and holos and 2Ds" (5) to disseminate their information through the internet, a medium which is totally under their command. Le Guin suggests that virtual reality technology makes propaganda much easier to believe, especially when it allows the user to participate directly in the programme. Sutti is able to watch the antics of the Unists on the net "without having to partiss in it, [her] Father having disconnected the vr-proprios" (5) because he, as a neurologist, believes that "[l]ying to the body is worse than torturing it" (76). The suggestion here is that Sutti is much less susceptible to the Unists' proselytising because she is careful in how she interfaces with technology. In the face of the Unists' power over information technology, the bombing of the District of Washington Library becomes more than the loss of the books; it becomes a symbol of the inability to choose what information to seek, rather than have to rely on that which technology thrusts in one's face or embeds in one's body. Although books can be censored, the wave of information sent through the varieties of visual and aural media in a technological era are easier to access and control, and thus become much more powerful than the written word.

In Aka, too, the Corporation State manipulates the masses by making judicious use of technology. Following its campaign to destroy every book and all the calligraphy pertaining to the pre-technology era on Aka, the Corporation State constantly reinforces its ideals through all forms of the media. For instance, as Sutti travels by robocab across Aka's main city, Dovzan City, she is forced to listen to constant propaganda as the cab's radio automatically becomes "loud for one of the Corporation announcements that overrode low settings. There was no off button" (9). Even though studying to be an Observer for

the Ekumen has taught her to remain neutral, Suttu finds it difficult to remove herself from the constant stream of information, and is frustrated that “there was no way to back off from it” (9). She feels inundated by “[e]ither the hyperstimulation of the neareals she had to study, or the clamor of the streets; nowhere to get away from the endless aggression of propaganda, except alone in her apartment, shutting out the world she’d come to observe” (9). As is the case with Terran technology, the Akan neareals trick the mind and body into believing that what is merely seen has actually been experienced. The unceasing, persistent nature of the remaining propaganda ensures that there is no space to express difference.

Part of the reason why the Unists have been able to gain control of the government and institute their propaganda machine is because of the kinds of problems that are familiar to readers from current media as well as eco-science fiction. Each time Suttu recalls the rise of the Unists, or tries to explain it to the Akans, she mentions that it was related to the problems caused by environmental damage on Terra. She explains to the Akan government official, Yara, that “all of us on Earth, had done a lot of damage to our world, fought over it, used it up, wasted it. There’d been plagues, famines, misery for so long. People wanted comfort and help” (213). Unism “was a panic response to the great famines and epidemics, a spasm of global guilt and hysterical expiation” (76), suggesting that the widespread devastation of the natural world, and the knock-on effects thereof, were directly responsible for the growth of the Unists. People, Suttu claims, “wanted to believe they were doing something right. I guess if they joined the Unists, they could believe everything they did was right” (213). Like in Atwood’s *Gilead*, religion becomes, on one hand, a panacea for those afraid of the world they have created, and on the other hand, a way for religious groups to use the imbalance in the world as a reason for their militant control. The instrumentalism towards, and thus abuse of, the natural world not only destroys the environment, but also directly affects social and political structures, as the environmental crisis allows the greater institution of greater controls.⁴

On Aka the total control of the state is not triggered by the same environmental disruption as on Terra, but by the disruption of their naturally evolving society by a different kind of external force: the interference, ironically, of the Terrans. At first, Suttu and her superior, the Ekumen’s envoy Tong Ov, are confused by the success of the Corporation State. Tong believes that the “mechanisms of control are so pervasive and

⁴ This is not an uncommon correlation in Le Guin’s work. As Murphy has pointed out, the picture of Terra at the end of *The Dispossessed* suggests that “[d]evastating the planet will lead ... not only to human self-destruction but also to the loss of human freedom” (“The Non-Alibi” 265). See also similar extrapolations in *He, She and It*, *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*.

effective, they must have been set up in response to something powerful” (18), and that if the “resistance to the Corporate State centred in a religion – a well-established, widespread religion – that would explain the Corporation’s suppression of religious practices. And the attempt to set up national theism as a replacement. God as Reason, the Hammer of Pure Science” (18-19). They initially cannot understand why the Akan word for religion is derived from Hainish and not from their own official language, Dovzan (17), until Sutti discovers that the Akans have no concept of religion in the Terran sense of the word: what the Corporation State has done in Aka is no less than destroy everything pertaining to their history, literature, art, spirituality and life philosophy as it is collected under the umbrella of the ‘Telling’. This amorphous system of telling stories and relating histories is both written and – especially in the rural areas where literacy is uncommon – oral. The Akan Corporation State has made the Telling illegal, replacing its stories with Corporation State propaganda, but Sutti and Tong cannot initially understand why this has happened.

Significantly, the Unists turn out to be one of the reasons for the dramatic shift in Akan society. The arrival of the first Terrans on Aka, part of a mission sponsored by the Ekumen, coincided with the rise to prominence of a new type of maz or learned person in the Dovza region of Aka. These ‘boss maz’ had “the power to rule and punish”, leading to the Dovza region becoming a hierarchy ruled by rich and brutal maz (167). When, soon after the first Terrans had visited, the Unists sent a ship to Aka, they were welcomed as those from the Ekumen had been. The Unists gave the Akans all the knowledge they needed to fast-track a technological society, but insisted in return that they become believers in the Unists’ God (231). The response of the boss maz was to reject any threat to their hierarchy – both that of the interfering Unist Terrans and (subsequently) their own philosophy of the Telling. The Unists’ attempt to barter technical knowledge for religious control, then, ironically leads the Dovzan maz to fear any knowledge other than the scientific and secular. The autocratic power of the Dovzan boss maz thus becomes strengthened through their opposition to the Unists, as they learn to behave with the same single-minded zeal as the Terrans. They, however, reject religion rather than deny secular knowledge. Both the Akan Corporation State and the Terran Unists, therefore, become dystopian for Le Guin, not because of their secular or religious belief systems, but because of their repression of alternative ways of thinking within the parameters of their government.

The dystopianism evident on Terra and Aka, then, is not only linked to their repressiveness: it is linked to their fear of Otherness. The Unists’ refuse not only other

religious expression, but also any knowledge which threatens their own teachings. The Akan Corporation State rejects this kind of narrow-mindedness in favour of its own desire to grow economically and technologically – thus seeing religious or philosophical knowledge as a threat. In this way, the hierarchies of power on both Aka and Terra are founded on both exclusion and homogeneity. What alternatives, then, does Le Guin posit as a means of counteracting fundamentalism?

Alternatives to Dystopia

An ecological ethic suggests that multiplicity and diversity create positive, balanced societies that have room for growth based on mutual interaction between varieties of groups and individuals. Within Le Guin's Hainish novels the Ekumen is usually the exemplar of this ecological ethic. Their policy of non-interference is designed to protect cultures from being forced into an unnatural homogeneity with other worlds, and the connections forged between the worlds that make up the Ekumen are designed to augment their societies, without any of these societies suffering the loss of their own unique characteristics. While this ideal is still maintained in *The Telling*, the practicalities of the Ekumen's philosophy are presented more ambiguously than in her earlier novels, with the Telling itself appearing to supersede the Ekumen in describing an ecological ethic.

In *The Telling*, the Ekumen's greatest influence on Terra is seen through the envoy Dalzul, who arrives on Terra at the height of the Unists' power. He is seen as a figure of hope by those opposing the Unists, especially when the Unist Fathers admit him into "the Sanctum" (5) and began to listen to him. He is certainly a figure of inspiration for many, and his work in trying to dismantle the totalitarian rule of the Unists gives Suttty the idea to "try to qualify for the Ekumenical college" (6). Furthermore, after Dalzul's arrival it seems that Terra is going to be saved from the narrow-minded dogmatism of the Unists: "Most of the old regions or states were going back to democratic governments, choosing their leaders by election, and restoring the Terran Commonwealth, and welcoming people from the other worlds of the Ekumen" (219). However, the influence of the Ekumen is ambiguous in this novel. Despite Dalzul's initial welcome, many Unists suspect the Ekumen's motives. Suttty tells Yara, for example, that the "Unists hated the Ekumen and wanted to keep all the extraterrestrials off Earth, but they were afraid to try to do it directly. So they encouraged terrorism against the Pales and the ansible installations and anything else the alien demons were responsible for" (218). Although Dalzul's arrival does seem to

change the Unists' perception of the Ekumen, the Ekumen is clearly not successful in spreading their message of acceptance to all: Dalzul is not seen as another human arguing for peace and diversity, but as an angel from God by those Unists who believe him, and as a demon by those who do not. All the Unists do, therefore, is transfer their blinkered thinking to either the pro- or the anti-Dalzul cause, sparking off the "Holy Wars" (22). The Ekumen's influence on Terra seems, in this case, to cause less acceptance of difference and more fear and hatred – a much more pessimistic reading of the viability of the Ekumen's values than is found in Le Guin's earlier Hainish novels.

We never discover the outcome of the Holy Wars. Is this because Le Guin wrote herself into a corner and was unable to find a way for the Ekumen's influence on Terra to become wholly positive, or because Le Guin has lost faith in the Ekumen as a concept? The latter is perhaps the more likely scenario, as the influence of the Ekumen on Aka seems to have very little effect on the Akan Corporation State. Although it is clear that the Akan government is afraid of antagonising the Ekumen – allowing Suttu to stay in Okzat-Ozkat without monitoring her when she complains (84) – it is also apparent that the presence of the Ekumen has not been able to stop the widespread punishment and incarceration of those practising the Telling. Suttu's conversation with Tong at the close of the novel is also an implicit critique of the Ekumen's policy of non-interference in Akan politics. As Suttu points out, just by their presence in Aka "for seventy years" (244) they have been interfering with the Akan world, reminding us of Tong's own statement about the Ekumen's presence on other worlds: "The margin between collusion and respect can be narrow" (20-21). By allowing the Corporation State to continue criminalising the Telling, the Ekumen has become complicit in its narrow-minded vision. Suttu's insistence on the Ekumen bargaining to save the Telling at the end of the novel therefore suggests that the Ekumen has been weak in its refusal to see its own complicity. While the Ekumen does have enough power to insist that the Telling manuscripts secreted in the Silong caves are saved, its power comes from the Akan's culture of commodity exchange and not from its ability to convince the Akan Corporation State of the merit of the Telling in itself. Moylan has argued that the Hainish ethic of responsibility allows Suttu finally to intervene in Akan politics on behalf of the Ekumen ("The Moment" 149), but while it seems that Suttu might be able to save the Silong library, there is very little indication that the Corporation State perceives the value of Akan history and philosophy. This suggests a new-found pessimism in Le Guin's work that may reflect the sense that very little of the optimism of the 1960s and 1970s remains in the twenty-first century.

The weakness of the Ekumen as an alternative to the dystopias of both Terra and Aka is, however, counteracted in the novel by the emphasis on the Telling itself as an alternative way of being, suggesting that change can only come from within – from an understanding of our own past rather than from direct intervention from outside. Part of the power of the Telling is that Suttty is naturally antipathetic towards any kind of religious philosophy and has to work hard not to let her prejudice of the Unists affect her attempts to find the meaning behind the Telling. For her it entails a complete change of perspective: she realises that she “was a child of violence, as Tong Ov had said”, which makes it hard “and bitterly ironical, that here it was all the reverse of what she had known, the negative: that here the believers weren’t the persecutors but the persecuted” (58). Nevertheless, she soon finds out that the Telling’s ethic is more balanced than that of the Unists and “chiefly prescribed respect for your own and everybody else’s body and chiefly proscribed usury” (109). The Telling, then, teaches respect for Self and Other and rejects instrumentalism.

Unlike the singularity of purpose displayed by the Unists and the Corporation State, the Akan system of the Telling is based on balance and diversity. It is

a way of thinking and living developed and elaborated over thousands of years by the vast majority of human beings on this world, an enormous interlocking system of symbols, metaphors, correspondences, theories, cosmology, cooking, calisthenics, physics, metaphysics, metallurgy, medicine, physiology, psychology, alchemy, chemistry, calligraphy, numerology, herbalism, diet, legend, parable, poetry, history, and story. (91)

The Telling is therefore an all-encompassing way of living, but at the same time, it does not follow a single, didactic line of thinking. Rather, many different parts constitute the whole of the Telling, making it analogous to an ecosystem with its “interlocking system” (91) of various diverse features. This connection to ecology is confirmed through Suttty’s attempts to describe it as she rejects concepts like “religion” and “*philosophy*” as being inadequate, instead calling it “the Great System” and then later “the Forest, because she learned that in ancient times it had been called the way through the forest” and even “the Mountain” (96, original italics). Part of the Telling includes a tradition of “yearlong and lifelong cycles and patterns of feasts, fasts, indulgences, abstinences, passages, festivals” (93), reflecting patterns of scarcity and abundance found in natural ecosystems, which, however balanced they are, are not without fluctuations. Suttty sees the Telling as subtle, natural and “subterranean” (93), rather than imposed, ordered or overt, and as a way to rejoice “in the complexity and specificity, the wealth and beauty of the world” (125). In fact, Suttty connects the Telling explicitly to religions “of process” like Buddhism and Taoism (94-95),

suggesting that harmony and balance must be accompanied by dynamism and growth – as has been suggested through other novels examined here.

The ecological imagery used to describe the philosophy of the Telling is also used within the actual texts that make up the Telling. A central text is called *The Arbor*, and is a collection of “mystical meditations on the Making and the Made, the beautiful, difficult, metaphysical poems concerning the One that is Two, the Two that are One, all interconnected, illuminated, and complicated by the commentaries and marginalia of all the centuries since” (103). But at the same time, Suttty also discovers that there is no correct, standardised version of *The Arbor*, “but many, many arbors” (104). The tree is also a particularly important image of the Telling, being as it is a mini-ecosystem. The body is likened to a tree (55) with a root, or place of centring and spirituality, that is unseen but necessary to the survival of the tree (89), and, to add to this, the major symbolic representation of the ideas behind the Telling is called the Tree. The Tree is described as

a marvellously painted map or mandala of the One that is Two giving rise to the Three, to the Five, to the Myriad, and the Myriad again to the Five, the Three, the Two, the One.... A Tree, a Body, a Mountain, inscribed within the circle that was everything and nothing. Delicate little figurines, animals, people, plants, rocks, rivers, lively as flickering flames, made up each of the greater forms, which divided, rejoined, transformed each into the others and into the whole, the unity made up of infinite variety, the mystery plain as day. (121, original ellipsis)

Although *The Arbor* is a central text, the Telling is made up of many stories, which indicates to the reader of the novel that there is no single, correct path to a single, correct truth. The Akan people have no word for God and that there is no “native theism or deism” (95); there is “[n]o creator, only creation. No eternal father to reward and punish, justify injustice, ordain cruelty, offer salvation. No binary Dark/Light, Evil/Good, or Body/Soul. No afterlife, no rebirth, no immortal disembodied or reincarnated soul. No heavens, no hells” (95). The way of life the Telling evokes is one where ethics and right-action are acted out not in the hopes of an other-worldly reward, but are a reward in themselves; where eternity is “not an endpoint but a continuity” (95). More importantly, perhaps, Suttty discovers that there is a “[p]rimal division of being into material and spiritual only as two-as-one, or one in two aspects” (95). This is a direct rejection of the Cartesian division of the human into body and soul as two distinct parts. The Telling, therefore, suggests that there is a way to conceive of the human as both/and rather than either/or. It is this that makes the Telling the most detailed philosophical expression of an ecological ethic in Le Guin’s Hainish novels.

The Telling is not only a utopian dream, however, but a practical way of life. The plot of the novel is careful to emphasise the benefits of living according to the Telling, as the people in Okzat-Ozkat do, rather than according to the rules of the Corporation State, as is the case in Dovza City. Dovza City is a place of extreme regulation and control, and conforms totally to the economic and technological aspirations of the Corporation State. As Sutti travels up the Ereha River away from Dovza she feels a sense of freedom: not just because she literally travels further away from the bureaucracy of the state, but because she feels less isolated within her carefully defined bureaucratic niche. She is able to speak to people without the constant monitoring of subject matter and experiences a thrill at hearing their small, every-day stories, revelling in the fact that “[e]verything she had missed in Dovza City, everything the official literature, the heroic propaganda left out, they told. If she had to choose between heroes and hernias, it was no contest” (35). Her sense of ease and release is intensified the further behind she leaves Dovza City, until she is finally able to realise that what she is feeling is “happiness” (37), something unfelt for so many years that she feels the “word itself destroyed it” (37).

Sutti’s contentment is increased once she arrives in Okzat-Ozkat and begins to experience life away from the centre of power. People still follow the ancient ways of living, eating “the fresh food and drink that was appropriate to the day, the time of day, the season and the weather” (94), rather than the “high-protein, sweet-salt packaged stuff” available in the city (62). They still use greetings and gestures which are banned under the Corporation State because “[h]onorifics and meaningless ritual phrases of greeting, leave-taking, permission-asking, and false gratitude, please, thank you, you’re welcome, goodbye, fossil relics of primitive hypocrisy – all were stumbling blocks to truthfulness between producer-consumers” (44). Significantly, also, they still make use of the forbidden pronoun, which is gender unspecific as well as both singular and plural (207), suggesting the balance urged by the Telling is even found in their language. They also practise the meditative exercises which remind Sutti of “yoga and tai chi” in their incorporation of both physical and mental discipline (124), and still gather (if clandestinely) to hear the maz recite the Telling. Nonetheless, they are not so prejudiced against the progress brought by the state that they refuse to accept useful technology. When winter arrives, for example, each of the people of Okzat-Ozkat insist on wearing an old-fashioned “leather coat lined with its own silky fleece” (116), but the new type of boots

“made of artificial materials, for mountain sports and hiking” (116) because they can see that some new products “worked better than the old ones” (117).⁵

The lifestyle enjoyed by the residents of Okzat-Ozkat who still live according to the principles of the Telling forms a stark contrast to that of those in Dovza City. The repression and narrow-mindedness of the Corporation State is figured in the stifling atmosphere of Dovza, and the practical application of mutual respect, balance and acceptance of difference is epitomised by the lifestyle enjoyed by Sutti in Okzat-Ozkat. Nonetheless, the true success of the Telling as a life-philosophy is not found in generalised descriptions of socio-political entities; it is found in how the Telling is able to promote an ecological ethic within the individual, as can be seen through how Le Guin characterises both Sutti and Yara.

Utopia and Dystopia Within

The fear of the Other present in both the Akan and Terran dystopias is clearly translated into the lives of those who live under their rule. Both Sutti and Yara, the Sociocultural Bureau Monitor, show how living in the atmosphere of fear and suspicion engendered by a totalitarian state can affect individuals. Yara is the most obviously influenced in his zeal to protect the Corporation State from what he perceives to be the sedition of those still practising the Telling. Although Sutti is the protagonist, and the reader has a natural sympathy with her, she too is clearly a product of her past. Her fear of the Unists has left her with both a fear of religion and of fundamentalism. Her awareness of this does not, nevertheless, allow her to approach Yara with balance and sympathy until the very end of the novel, when she finally comes to understand the meaning of the Telling.

From the moment Sutti encounters Yara on the boat journey up the river Ereha, he is described as a typically narrow-minded bureaucrat. He is “silent and aloof” (38) amongst his fellow travellers, and when he first approaches Sutti, she is surprised by the “cold keenness of his look” (39). He has a “tight pseudo-smile” (39) and treats her with “suspicion, distrust” and “xenophobia” (40). His mission is to warn her of “pockets of cultural fossilisation and recalcitrant reactionary activities” in the Okzat-Ozkat area (40) and to tell her that “the natives are brutal and dangerous” (41). In his desperation to do his

⁵ Writing in 1975, John Huntington claimed that Le Guin tends “to envision a primitive economy as the main salvation from the modern, technological, imperialist state’ (271). Although there is this element of acceptance should technology prove to provide a better product than the traditional ways, there is still the same emphasis on the ‘primitive’ as salvation in the Telling.

duty for the Corporation State, he asks her to report any illegal activities to him and then, once they land in Okzat-Ozkat, he watches Sutti's every move so that when she stops to talk to the locals, she notes that he "loomed" up beside her with a face "like plastic" (50); a mask of disapproval. Later, when she complains of his surveillance, his blinkered vision leads him to warn her, with an "intense" voice,

there are people here who intend to use you for their own ends. These people are not picturesque relics of a time gone by. They are not harmless. They are vicious. They are the dregs of a deadly poison – the drug that stupefied my people for ten thousand years. They seek to drag us back into that paralysis, that mindless barbarism. They may treat you kindly, but I tell you they are ruthless. You are a prize to them. They'll flatter you, teach you lies, promise you miracles. They are the enemies of truth, of science. Their so-called knowledge is rant, superstition, poetry. Their practices are illegal, their books and rites are banned, and you know that. Do not put my people into the position of finding a scientist of the Ekumen in possession of illegal materials – participating in unlawful rites. (86)

Sutti's response to Yara's warning is "incredulous scorn" (86), as is her response to the entire Corporation State. Yet, her contempt is as blinkered, in its own way, as their secular fundamentalism. She arrives on Aka still suffering from the grief following the death of her lover Pao, killed as a result of the anti-Dalzul uprisings on Terra. Her attempts to drown her feelings in her work as a historian are thwarted by the Akan regime's total destruction of their history and past literature, and her bitterness at the religious fanaticism that caused Pao's death, is intensified by the "sensory assault of the neareals she had to partiss in" (2) on her arrival in Dovzan City. Although she tries not to judge the Akans for their rejection of their past and their focus on technology and progress, it is clear that she is rubbed raw by the similarities between Aka and Terra and at having to "go back to circumspection, caution, self-suppression. And danger" (59). She is horrified to discover that Aka is going through a similar period to that in which she grew up in on Terra, and that although the Akan government explicitly rejects religion "they were all true believers, both sides. Secular terrorists or holy terrorists, what difference?" (58). Thus Sutti sets out to search Okzat-Ozkat for banned literature, already suffering from a prejudice not only against religion, but against the Corporation State.

Yara becomes, as the representative of the greater body, the focus of Sutti's frustration with the Corporation State; she even calls him "Monitor", thus keeping him firmly in his role, without bothering to find out his name as an individual. From the moment of their first meeting on the boat trip to Okzat-Ozkat, Sutti clashes with him and blames him for his blinkeredness. But what she does not understand – or try to understand

– is that she is as blinkered as he is in her own way. By simply maintaining her anger against the Corporation State and its Monitors, she does not take the time to understand why Yara believes what he does and to investigate why the Corporation State has such stringent rules against the Telling, even though Tong has emphasised that it must be a reaction to some event of great importance. She does struggle against her instinctive dislike of the Monitor, thinking that he “was insufferable, but that did not excuse her” (51); still, she finds it almost impossible to be impartial towards him. Later, she tries to see him “not as the object of bureaucratic control looks at the bureaucrat, but humanly” (85), but when he calls the Okzat-Ozkat people “vicious” (85) and “mindless” (86), she again feels “a wave of hatred for him that frightened her” (87). Although she is concerned by her response, it is very clear that Suttu has not really understood that part of her dislike for Yara is an expression of her hatred for his way of thinking, and furthermore, that she is succumbing to a similar kind of thinking by treating him with such scorn. Even when his helicopter crashes, leaving him gravely injured, she only feels “cold” (178) and “bitter” (187) towards him. Similarly, although she does try to speak to Yara after his accident, her own anger leads her to pour out her frustration at him:

You’re my enemy. The true believer. The righteous man with the righteous mission. The one that jails people for reading and burns the books. That persecutes people who do exercises the wrong way. That dumps out the medicine and pisses on it. That pushes the button that sends the drones to drop the bombs. And hides behind a bunker and doesn’t get hurt. Shielded by God. Or the state. Or whatever life he uses to hide his envy and self-interest and cowardice. (192)

While Suttu begins by attacking Yara and the Corporation State during her outpouring of resentment, she soon turns from describing Aka to describing Terra, indicating that much of her antagonism towards him is actually antagonism towards her own world.

Yara, too, cannot initially see Suttu’s perspective, arguing that the Telling had to be destroyed in order for Aka to grow:

the people who wanted to accept that world were stopped, prevented, by the old ways. The old ways of doing everything. The maz mumbling forever about things that happened ten thousand years ago, claiming they knew everything about everything, refusing to learn anything new, keeping people poor, holding us back. They were wrong. They were selfish. Usurers of knowledge. They had to be pushed aside, to make way for the future. (215)

Yara’s zeal is frightening, and although Le Guin does not condone his actions and perceptions, it is equally obvious that Suttu’s are not condoned either. Despite Suttu’s training at the Ekumenical School, which has taught her that it is “[w]rong to let frustration

cloud her thinking and perceptions” (9), she persists in seeing Yara as the Monitor and not as a fellow human being. Indeed, it is only their exposure to the Telling that provides both characters with a way to move beyond their initial prejudices.

The crucial change in Suttu begins with her pilgrimage to the lost library (or ‘umyazu’) in the caves of Silong, where she not only finds the manuscripts of the Telling, but also learns finally to apply the principles of telling and listening to her own life. Suttu’s enormous respect for the maz Odiedin has not, despite her best efforts, been able to bridge the gap between her understanding of the Telling and his, a gap which is “so wide light would need years to cross it” (169). It is Odiedin who suggests Suttu should talk with Yara, as he believes that it is important for her to “hear what he has to tell” (188). Out of trust and love for the maz Odiedin, Suttu decides at least to try to do what he asks of her. Although initially only able to voice their frustrations at each other’s views, Suttu and Yara start to understand themselves and each other better once they have experienced their own version of the Telling. Both tell the stories of their lives, and in so doing, both expurgate some of the emotions they have been holding on to, and which have been fuelling their anger and zeal. In addition, because they listen to one another, they also have greater understanding of the other’s position. This has led Lawson to suggest that Yara and Suttu become, briefly, an exemplar of the “two-in-oneness” embedded in the Telling’s philosophy (R20).

Suttu begins to understand the complex emotions that have driven Yara’s extreme conformity to the rules of the Corporation State once she hears him tell of how he witnessed his grandparents being beaten to death for practising the Telling. Yara’s memory of “[s]mashed faces, splintered skulls, blood-clotted grey hair in a heap in the middle of a square” (217) is thus paralleled with the “[f]ragments of bone, tooth fillings, a dust of exploded flesh” (217) that are all that remain for her of Pao after the attack on the Washington District Library. Yara’s story also reminds him that when he was living with his grandparents he was happy. This memory can finally “jar him out of the quietness from which he had been speaking” (208) and allow him to experience an emotion other than zeal. The catharsis he experiences in telling his story, plus his slow recognition of Suttu’s own pain, enables him to recall the principles of the Telling. Certainly, their interaction reaches the point where Suttu realises that Yara “had to become what he was.... But I think all that really makes sense to him is the Telling” (236-237). It is thus that Suttu finally comes to understand the Telling as a way to accepting, understanding and loving the Other. As Baccolini claims, Suttu and Yara “engage in a utopian process of memory and

telling that leads to awareness and an acceptance of individual moral responsibility and possible individual and collective action” (128).

Sutty’s realisation of the importance of each individual’s story in creating society emphasises Le Guin’s ecological thinking: at the very base of her utopian drive is the idea of many different parts working together to form the greater whole. On one level, Sutty’s memories, the narration of her experiences, and the stories told by the Akans she befriends (and by Yara in particular), enact this ideal in *The Telling*. The text as a whole, though, shows that any kind of hierarchical thinking causes imbalance and disharmony, whether on the largest planetary scale of Unist or Corporation State policies, or on the smallest individual scale. Le Guin demonstrates this when Sutty realises that the greatest tragedy of Aka is that from

a great consensual social pattern within which each individual sought physical and spiritual satisfaction, they had made it a great hierarchy in which each individual served the indefinite growth of the society’s material wealth and complexity. From an active homeostatic balance they had turned it to an active forward-thrusting imbalance. (111)

The opposition of balance and imbalance that she sees in Aka is felt also on Terra, except that the imbalance is not forward-thrusting, but backward-looking, as the Unists refuse technological progress in favour of their own monotheism.

* * *

Baccolini calls *The Telling* a narrative which “counters dystopian pessimism with hope and responsibility” (124), arguing that “the bargaining meeting amongst representatives of the Ekumen, the Telling, and the Corporation opens a possible door toward utopia” (124). Similarly, Moylan suggests that “what we get in Le Guin’s millennial fable ... is a critical dystopia with a strong utopian presence, one found not only in the actions of yet another opposition alliance but also (again, as in *Piercy*) in the power of a successful utopian post-state formation” (“The Moment” 150). The reader does not, however, see the results of their attempt to bargain for the manuscripts of the Telling, leaving this hope elusive. Within the confines of the novel, then, the only real utopia is encapsulated in the Telling. While this philosophy outlines an ecological ethic of mutuality, respect and acceptance, it is not described in terms of the usual categories of race, class and gender as in Le Guin’s earliest novels; it is described in terms of free access to knowledge, whether this be

scientific or spiritual. Multiple viewpoints, a variety of information, and recognising that it is our responsibility to value that which is different, are our only hope, this novel suggests, of living by an ecological ethic. The very intangibility of this notion, however, suggests even more strongly than before in Le Guin's oeuvre that this ideal is – as in any true utopia – as much a 'no place' as it is a 'good place'. This makes *The Telling*, despite its best attempts, the least optimistic of Le Guin's Hainish novels and, as is the case with Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, a commentary on the increasing pessimism felt at the turn of the millennium.

Chapter 7

Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*: Utopia is Dystopia

Risk theorists argue that the traditionally privileged position of science and technology as knowledge systems has come under scrutiny as their limits have become apparent. Contrary to Enlightenment expectations, the more complex, contradictory, and indeterminate it has become. The constant revision of knowledge, the disagreement among its practitioners, and the evident failures of science over the course of the twentieth century have tended to undermine utopian promises of progress; certain knowledge and rational control over nature have given way to a permanent sense of anxiety, as people contemplate the potential failure of globalized technological, scientific, and economic systems.

– Sheryl N. Hamilton, “Traces of the Future.” (267)

Margaret Atwood's second speculative novel, *Oryx and Crake*, was published in 2003, eighteen years after *The Handmaid's Tale*. This gap is significant in that the intervening years saw a marked shift in the concerns of speculative fiction, with the millennium instilling a sense of urgency in many writers, as we have already seen in the previous two chapters. *The Handmaid's Tale* is perhaps the most complex of the novels dealt with in Chapter Four as Atwood is more insistent on the implicit relationship between utopia and dystopia in her novel than Piercy and Lessing are in theirs. Despite this, *The Handmaid's Tale* is relatively straightforward in its presentation of a classic dystopian world, warning us about what awaits if we allow the balance of power to shift totally into the hands of extremists. *Oryx and Crake*, like *He, She and It* and *The Telling*, takes the idea of the relationship between utopia and dystopia a step further, not just showing us what a dystopian world could be, but asking both how we find ourselves in a dystopian world and where in fact the boundaries lie between utopia and dystopia. Atwood is still interested in issues linked to what I have called an ecological ethic, and especially the problem of how unequal access to power results in the imbalances that lead to dystopian worlds. She is, however, more ironic and more uneasy about the idea of utopia in the modern world, questioning – like so many ecological philosophers – the place of ‘human nature’ in our current environmental, social and political crises.

Like Piercy in *He, She and It* and Le Guin in *The Telling*, Atwood's choice of setting in *Oryx and Crake* is carefully designed to emphasise certain trends in our current world, showing how they could evolve in the future, and therefore examining our current choices and activities. Again like *He, She and It*, *Oryx and Crake* interrogates our understanding of the natural and the artificial, and like *The Telling*, it is interested in the

relationship between technology and philosophy. On the surface, *Oryx and Crake* appears to be a typical science-fiction novel about bad science and an evil scientist, in the same tradition as *Frankenstein*. Nevertheless, it is clear from the complexities of the novel as a whole that Atwood's task is not to illustrate some malevolence inherent to science, but to illustrate how science can be used for dishonourable purposes. As Atwood herself has claimed:

Science is a way of knowing, and a tool. Like all ways of knowing and tools, it can be turned to bad uses. And it can be bought and sold, and it often is. But it is not in itself bad. Like electricity, it's neutral.

The driving force in the world today is the human heart – that is, human emotions. (Yeats, Blake – every poet, come to think of it – has always told us that.) Our tools have become very powerful. Hate, not bombs, destroys cities. Desire, not bricks, rebuilds them. (“An Interview” n.pag.)

This, in turn, becomes part of a greater issue in the novel: Atwood focuses on the relationship between science and art in order to question commonly-held perceptions about humanity's place in nature.

Boundaries and opposites are thus constantly under scrutiny throughout the novel. Atwood uses *Oryx and Crake* to explore what it means to be human (and therefore what it means to be ‘civilised’ or part of culture rather than nature), and how this translates into a deeper understanding of the place of an ecological ethic in our society. Atwood is known for her “patterns of doubling and repetition” (Howells, “Margaret Atwood's Dystopian” 171), and Howells claims that, in *Oryx and Crake*, this occurs in “not only the title and the epigraphs but also the narrative structure” (171-172), as well as in the relationship between Jimmy and Crake (176-177). What I wish to explore in this chapter is, first, how the doubling is not merely used for repetition, but how each half of the double undermines the other as Atwood constantly shifts our perceptions between that which appears utopian and that which seems dystopian in the novel's setting. This requires us to analyse the fragile nature of an ecological ethic in the kind of post-modern world Atwood envisages. Secondly, by calling into question Crake's utopian dreaming in the novel, Atwood engages with two significant areas in the ecocritical debate – instrumentalism and the opposition of ‘human culture’ with ‘nature’, thus challenging us to re-evaluate our understanding of how, and if, it is possible to create an ecologically ethical society without either becoming instrumentalist or destroying that which makes us human.

Utopia/Dystopia: The Problem with Paradise

The idea of apocalypse is central to *Oryx and Crake*, as is perhaps to be expected in what is a millenarian novel. Dystopian science fiction, especially of the eco-SF variety, often uses the idea of apocalypse to illustrate either the impending doom of the human race or humanity's resilience in the face of catastrophe (as we shall see in Lessing's Ifrik novels in the next chapter). In *Oryx and Crake*, the narrative shifts between the events leading up to the disaster and its aftermath: the cataclysmic moment when the scientist Crake releases the virus that kills almost the entire human population – the pivot between the two narratives – is only described towards the end of the novel. This ensures that cause and effect are constantly juxtaposed throughout the text, so interweaving and balancing multiple perspectives. The events which lead up to the act of bioterrorism which remakes the world suggest a society already in crisis, and are important because the way in which Atwood describes the protagonist's early life ensures that the reader reacts with ambivalence to the actions taken by Crake as he tries to 'solve' the predicament facing this imagined future.

As is common in speculative novels that deal with ecological issues, Atwood extrapolates from our current ecological concerns, creating a world that has succumbed to the kind of environmental devastation currently predicted. Atwood herself has claimed that the novel "is based on certain axioms" such as global warming (Case and McDonald 42), pointing out, on more than one occasion, that part of the novel was written on a ship in the Arctic where she saw first-hand the melting of the glaciers (Case and McDonald 42; Atwood, "Writing *Oryx and Crake*" 322). She is forthright about placing the novel in the context of environmental issues, which are becoming increasingly pressing:

I postulate that unless North America does something about its environmental laws, the aquifers will be depleted, groundwater will seep in and they'll become contaminated. And if you over-irrigate, you salinate the land – that's happening in California now. That's why everybody in this book is eating soya. We don't even know whether it's real soya.

People may think that these developments are not going to affect them but we saw the collapse of the cod fishery within the past 20 years. Bang. Gone. The model before that was the passenger pigeon. Everyone thought that they were so numerous, they would never run out. You can't think that about anything anymore, except possibly viruses.

(Case and McDonald 42)

The particularly valuable aspect of speculative fiction is that it is able to take information such as this and present it imaginatively, using plot and character to speculate on the potential effects of scientific fact.

Atwood is careful to build up a dystopian picture of an environmentally devastated world slowly through the novel. This is done via almost casual references to the changes seen in the course of the narrator Jimmy's lifetime, and through his memories as his alter-ego 'Snowman', a name which signifies the "Abominable Snowman – existing and not existing ... known only through rumours and through its backward-pointing footprints" (8). Snowman's backward-looking reflections on his life as Jimmy, describe a world after "the coastal aquifers turned salty and the northern permafrost melted and the vast tundra bubbled with methane, and the drought in the midcontinental plains regions went on and on, and the Asian steppes turned to sand dunes" (27). The sea level has risen, drowning most of the cities on the eastern seaboard of North America (71) and Jimmy can only just remember that "the leaves still turned colour" in October when he was a small child (17). Wider climate change is demonstrated by his grandfather's Florida grapefruit orchard drying up "like a giant raisin when the rains had stopped coming, the same year lake Okeechobee had shrunk to a reeking mud puddle" (72), and by Texas drying up and blowing away in the dust (287). Jimmy, Crake and their classmates graduate in February because it is too rainy to hold the ceremony in June, but even in February it is so warm and humid they miss "a twister by only one day" (203). The daily thunderstorms Snowman has to contend with in the novel's present suggest that the United States now has a tropical climate, and the effects of UV radiation have become so severe that he cannot risk being in the sun during the middle of the day. Oryx, the love-interest of both Jimmy and Crake, is sold into sex-slavery as a small child because her village is unable to support itself once the weather becomes too unpredictable and crops fail (136), illustrating how climate change affects not just food production but social issues too. These and other references to the environmental situation in the novel show the steady transformation from the world of today to the world of the future by referring to places and events with which the reader would be familiar. As a result, the scientific predictions of environmental change, which are becoming increasingly prevalent following the droughts and floods covered by recent media, become more immediate through Atwood's extrapolations.

What is significant about the environmental degradation experienced by Jimmy in his lifetime is that it not only forms part of the background of the novel or stands as a grim warning of a possible future, but also presents his life as a descent into the kind of dystopia

represented by a rejection of an ecological ethic. The dystopian world of the novel is not only illustrated through the references to the natural environment, but as a system of socio-political hierarchies. Most people live in the urban sprawl known as the 'pleeblands'. Atwood clearly uses current living conditions in many parts of the world as her inspiration for these areas, although Jimmy's first view of the pleeblands on leaving the confines of his father's company, HelthWyzer, seems exotic to him:

Rows of dingy houses; apartment buildings with tiny balconies, laundry strung on the railings; factories with smoke coming out of the chimneys; gravel pits. A huge pile of garbage, next to what he supposed was a high-heat incinerator. A shopping mall like the ones at HelthWyzer, only there were cars in the parking lots instead of electric golf carts. A neon strip, with bars and girlie joints and what looked like an archaeological-grade movie theatre. (231)

By exoticising (and thus estranging) what seems normal to the reader, Atwood invites us to reassess our lives in relation to concepts of utopia and dystopia. Jimmy, for example, also sees "[v]acant warehouses, burnt-out tenements, empty parking lots" and ramshackle huts "inhabited no doubt by squatters" (217), recalling the slum-lands of cities in places like South America and Africa, their appearance in North America indicating a definite decrease in the general standard of living in Atwood's future. Compounding this vision of our possible future is also the realisation that the news Jimmy grows up with – "more plagues, more famines, more floods, more insect or microbe or small-mammal outbreaks, more droughts, more chickenshit boy-soldier wars in distant countries" (298) – is a reality for increasing numbers of people in today's world, as diseases like SARS, AIDS and Ebola, and wars such as those seen in Rwanda and the Sudan, indicate.

In contrast to the dystopian-seeming pleeblands, Jimmy grows up in the highly protected and secure compounds attached to the major scientific corporations. The compounds are seen as little utopias:

Inside they were the way it used to be when Jimmy's father was a kid, before things got so serious, or that's what Jimmy's father said. Jimmy's mother said it was artificial, it was just a theme park and you could never bring the old ways back, but Jimmy's father said why knock it? You could walk around without fear, couldn't you? Go for a bike ride, sit at a sidewalk café, buy an ice-cream cone? (31-32)

The compounds not only resemble a 1950s advertisement for suburban bliss; they also appear to be exemplars of the ecological ethics of care, mutuality and diversity. The Watson-Crick compound, for example, seems Edenic. Students only drive electric golf carts, thus minimising carbon dioxide pollution, and the grounds are lush with newly-

engineered plants – “drought-and-flood-resistant tropical blends” (234). Even more amazingly, the exquisite gardens are dotted with fake rocks made from recycled plastics that absorb water during humid periods and release it during droughts (234-235). The RejoovenEsense compound is described as “spectacular” (343): “sparkling clean, landscaped, ecologically pristine” with “solar whirlpool purifying towers” to clean the air and even a “self-energizing gym where running on the treadmill kept the light bulbs going” (343-344). Moreover, the ecological balance of compound life is complemented by a multiracial and genderless social structure: the school in the HelthWyzer compound has a “bright and cheerful school cafeteria with balanced meals, ethnic choices – perogies, falafels – and a kosher option, and soy products for the vegetarians” (61), and in every case there seem to be as many female scientists as male.

Life inside the compounds might be strongly reminiscent of ecotopias like Piercy’s Mattapoissett, but the balance between utopia and dystopia has always been a fine one for Atwood: as we saw in her pastiche of a women’s culture in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, utopian dreaming can so often become a dystopian reality. The compounds may seem ideal in many ways, but it becomes increasingly clear that they do not really fulfil the requirements of an ecological ethic, being built not for altruistic reasons, but because “security in the pleeblands was leaky” (31). Jimmy’s father’s fears about spies and biological attacks on OrganInc become justifications for compounds like that of OrganInc to seal themselves off from the outside world (21) – not to protect the people so much as to protect the company’s products. We soon begin to wonder if the compounds are not really simply giant prisons: Jimmy’s mother believes “their phones and e-mail were bugged, and the sturdy, laconic HelthWyzer house-cleaners that came twice a week – always in pairs – were spies” (61). Jimmy’s mother’s rejection of everything for which Jimmy’s father and his employers stand eventually sparks her desire to leave the compound life, but the reaction of the HelthWyzer officials makes it clear that this is not simply a decision to leave her marriage; it is a treasonable offence. Her note for Jimmy indicates that she is aware that a “search will be conducted” (69), and her destruction of the home computers (70) indicates her fear of discovery after her escape, as much as it does her disapproval of the work being done on them. Her careful planning, which outwits the CorpSeCorps security guards, enrages them and causes them to question Jimmy and to track his contacts for years after her disappearance. The ‘Big Brother’ of CorpSeCorps – what Somacarrera has called “one step further in the Foucauldian police state” (55) – is obviously watching every resident of every compound, suggesting, as Howells has argued, “the dark side of this utopian illusion”

(Margaret Atwood 175). Atwood's insistence on undercutting the apparent utopia of compound life through the events surrounding the escape of Jimmy's mother, ensures that we do not take any examples of utopian dreaming in the novel for granted: we realise that "the supposed security of Jimmy's family is achieved at a high cost by means of implementing a policy of authoritarian monitoring and control" (Rao 108-109).

In contrast to the sense of imprisonment experienced within the walls of the compounds, the pleeblands appear less dystopian. Initially, Jimmy's sense that "[o]utside the OrganInc walls and gates and searchlights, things were unpredictable" (31) suggests fear and unease. However, once Jimmy is older, he regards the pleeblands as "mysterious and exciting" (231): "so boundless, so porous, so penetrable, so wide-open. So subject to chance" (231). Even his mother's recollections of life before compounds suggest freedom:

Remember when you could drive anywhere? Remember when everyone lived in the pleeblands? Remember when you could fly anywhere in the world, without fear? Remember hamburger chains, always real beef, remember hot-dog stands? Remember before New York was New New York? Remember when voting mattered? (72, original italics)

Freedom of choice, movement and expression thus become the antithesis of compound life, despite its supposed virtues. As a result, readers of *Oryx and Crake* are forced to ask what the cost of the apparently utopian compound life has been. Although they may seem to be ideal societies on the surface, the compounds have none of the freedom of the pleeblands, thus becoming dangerously homogeneous and afraid of difference.

The setting of the novel, then, highlights the darker side of utopia and the ambiguous nature of dystopia. The environmental disasters that have made the world ecologically unrecognisable, and the wide gaps between privileged scientists and urban poor, construct a space in the novel to assess the nature of utopia. Is utopia to be found in the freedom of the pleeblands, despite their destroyed environment, or in the luxury and surface diversity of the compounds? *Oryx and Crake* calls both into question and, by doing so, creates the backdrop out of which Crake justifies playing God and uses Jimmy in his plans to recreate humanity and thus the world.

Crake/Crakers: The Problem with Paradise

Both the descriptions of life prior to this act of bioterrorism and the outline of its effect on Jimmy call into question the notion of 'human nature' and how it can be both the agency of

human destruction and the saviour of humanity. The rationale behind Crake's Paradise Project initially seems valid: his plan in designing the Crakers is to isolate what he believes are the main causes of our damaged and broken world, and thereafter to devise a human race that is incapable of replicating humanity's so-called progress, which he sees as being responsible for damaging the planet. He modifies the Crakers' brains to remove what he calls "destructive features, the features responsible for the world's current illness" (358) – such as racism, hierarchy, love, sexuality, or "harmful symbolisms such as kingdoms, icons, gods, or money" (359). His hypothesis is that, once destroyed, current civilisation cannot be rebuilt because the surface of the earth has already been mined out. Without minerals and metals, Crake argues, there would be "no iron age, no bronze age, no age of steel, and all the rest of it. There's metals farther down, but the advanced technology we need for extracting those would have been obliterated" (261). Crake's logic seems valid: if humans are responsible for destroying the world, then it makes sense to alter humans radically in order to ensure this destruction can no longer continue.

The Paradise Project is thus set up to create a type of human that conforms with Crake's idea of a perfect world and his "aesthetic" (8). These genetically engineered 'humans', called Crakers after their creator, initially do seem to be a practical path to a utopian world based on an ecological ethic. In fashioning the Crakers, Crake removes racial stereotyping, making each person a different colour, "chocolate, rose, tea, butter, cream, honey" (8), but all with Crake's own bright green eyes. The Crakers are programmed not to kill, as Crake wanted "no more human predation" (116), and are able to protect themselves from predators by marking their territory: the men's urine is chemically enhanced to resemble that of the larger predators so that dangerous animals are frightened away (182). They are also able to heal themselves by purring over wounds at "the same frequency as the ultrasound used on bone fractures and skin lesions" (184). The Crakers eat only vegetable matter and, like rabbits, produce caecotrophs which they then re-eat in order to ensure the maximum digestion of nutrients (187-188). They grow so rapidly that they reach adolescence after a mere four years (187), eliminating the long period necessary for child-rearing. Population itself is strictly controlled, as women come into heat only infrequently. When a woman is in oestrus, her buttocks and abdomen turn blue and, after a courtship ritual, she chooses four mates with matching blue penises.¹ Crake thus takes a

¹ Marita Dvorak, commenting on Crake's BlyssPluss Bill, has pointed out how Atwood uses hyperbolic description in order to produce "structural irony – often employed for satirical purposes" (117). A similar effect is produced in this list of the Crakers' apparent advantages over humanity.

variety of features from the animal kingdom and designs a human that appears closer to nature, yet is ironically the product of a laboratory experiment.

While Crake's method of making the world a better place may seem unusual, it has particular relevance to ecological philosophy, as many theorists have outlined desires for an eco-friendly future for Earth based on similar ideas to that of Crake. As we have seen, deep ecologists like Arne Naess and George Sessions have argued, for example, that the "flourishing of non-human life *requires* a smaller human population" (Naess 68, original italics). The Crakers, with their restricted reproductive capacities, certainly appear to pose an ideal solution to the problems associated with overpopulation, and the lack of pair-bonding amongst them ensures that it "no longer matters who the father of the inevitable child may be, since there's no more property to inherit, no father-son loyalty required for war" (195). The infrequent oestrus means there is "[n]o more prostitution, no sexual abuse of children, no haggling over the price, no pimps, no sex slaves. No more rape" (194). Taken from a purely ecological perspective, the Crakers therefore form an ideal community: they are peace-loving vegetarians, designed to live in harmony with both each other and their environment. There is no rape or sexual abuse, no racial disharmony or dominance/submission culture. In short, the Crakers appear to fulfil the requirements of an ideal community based on an ecological ethic of diversity and mutuality.

But is Crake's solution to the over-burdened, ecologically ravaged Earth's problems really utopian? While the Crakers appear to be perfect representations of an ecological ethic, a closer analysis of their creation highlights two problems with seeing the Crakers as the first step towards an ecotopian world. First, there is the problem of how to replace humans with Crakers, and secondly, that of what would be lost in the event that this becomes possible. These can be dealt with by first looking at the idea of instrumentalism in *Oryx and Crake*, and then by analysing notions of civilisation in relation to what Atwood seems to be suggesting about human nature in the novel.

Instrumentalism

Oryx and Crake engages with one of the most important aspects of ecological philosophy: the debate over the divide between nature and culture and its effect on our relationship, as humans, with our environment. Much scholarship in ecological philosophy has centred on why it is that humans have mistreated their environment in such a manner that has led to

our current environmental crisis.² Science, particularly post-Cartesian science, has often been blamed for instigating an instrumentalist approach to nature. Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* has been a leading text in this regard: she argues that the development of our abuse of nature began during the Renaissance with "the formation of a world view and a science that, by reconceptualizing reality as a machine rather than a living organism, sanctioned the domination of both nature and women" (xvii). The division between human and non-human nature has also been seen as a result of Copernican and Newtonian science (see Suzuki 13-18). Whether this dualism is pre- or post-Cartesian however, "man's presumption of his own apartness from nature" (Bate, *The Song* 36) has been blamed for the objectification of nature in opposition to the subjecthood of humanity (Soper 43). In short, humans have come to use that difference or separation from nature to justify a dualistic or hierarchical relationship of difference to nature.

It is this hyperseparation from the Other, both from nature and from people in general, that informs Crake's behaviour in the novel. In order to remake the world into his utopian vision and provide a space for the Crakers, he must eliminate humanity as it is. To do this, Crake's Paradise Project creates and markets the BlyssPluss Pill. As Crake explains it, the BlyssPluss Pill:

- a) would protect the user against all known sexually transmitted diseases, fatal, inconvenient, or merely unsightly;
- b) would provide an unlimited supply of libido and sexual prowess, coupled with a generalized sense of energy and well-being, thus reducing the frustration and blocked testosterone that led to jealousy and violence, and eliminating feelings of low self-worth;
- c) would prolong youth. (346)

The hidden factor, Crake admits to Jimmy, is that BlyssPluss will also "act as a sure-fire one-time-does-it-all birth-control pill, for male and female alike, thus automatically lowering the population level" (347). Crake's use of the BlyssPluss Pill thus becomes illustrative of his extreme instrumentalism: other humans, not just nature, become mere objects to Crake, as only the objectification of humans could allow him to rationalise removing their ability to conceive without their knowledge. Even more distressing is the further hidden aspect of BlyssPluss: the pills are also seeded with "a rogue hemorrhagic" leading to "high fever, bleeding from the eyes and skin, convulsions, then breakdown of the inner organs, followed by death" (380). The virus, after its release in the pills, is able to travel through the air, and possibly water, making even island populations susceptible to it.

² See Chapter One.

Crake's means to achieve his utopian world is therefore a supreme act of bioterrorism which is to result in the destruction of the entire human race, leaving earth free for the immune Crakers.

Crake's presumption that he has the right to eradicate humanity stems from his past – a past which has allowed and encouraged his instrumentalist behaviour. Instrumentalism towards humans is not so different, Atwood suggests, than the instrumentalism towards the non-human environment that characterises the world in which Crake and Jimmy have grown up. For instance, nature, for the OrganInc scientists, is there to be used for recreation: after-hours they splice together racoons and skunks to make a placid rakunk without the negatives of either species (57), create luminous green rabbits for fun (109-110), as well as dangerous splices – “a cane toad with a prehensile tail” capable of blinding one (57); the snat, “an unfortunate blend of snake and rat” (57); and cute but deadly bobkittens (193) and wolvogs (241). Less obviously instrumentalist is the genetic engineering ostensibly done in the interests of benefiting society. The spoat/gider “done in Montreal at the turn of the century, goat crossed with spider” (234) is used in the novel for the “high-tensile spider silk filaments in the milk” which can produce bullet-proof vests (234) – and is based on actual “transgenic goat technology” innovated “in January 2002 by Nexia Biotechnologies” (Squier 1154).³ The spoat/gider is perhaps less obviously altruistic than the “[k]anga-lamb, a new Australian splice that combined the placid character and high-protein yield of the sheep with the kangaroo's resistance to disease and absence of methane-producing, ozone-destroying flatulence” (344), or the ChickieNobs (237) that produce everlasting ‘chicken’ meat. Atwood herself has argued that there is nothing intrinsically bad about such genetic engineering (Case and McDonald 42), but however constructive such creations seem, when science is sold to the highest bidder the questionable morals behind genetic engineering become more obvious.

Once again Atwood uses Jimmy's parents to encapsulate the philosophical argument surrounding science and technology. Their argument is centred on their responses to the pigoon, “*sus multiorganifer*” (25), which is also based on research Atwood did on “multiple-organ pigs” that have already been genetically engineered (Case and McDonald 42). Initially the pigoons seem like, and perhaps did start out as, a philanthropic project – pigs capable of growing human-tissue organs “that would transplant smoothly and

³ Hamilton points out that “the *Calgary Herald* in 1999 suggested that ‘crossing goat [and] spider produces biosteel’” (272). It is possible that this article is the source for Atwood's idea here, but it is significant in that the lines between reality and science fiction are blurred – making Snowman's dystopian world seem that much more believable.

avoid rejection, but would also be able to fend off attacks by opportunistic microbes and viruses” (25). But, tellingly, Jimmy’s father explains to him that a “great deal of investment money had gone in OrganInc Farms” (26) and that pigoon organs are “cheaper than getting yourself cloned for spare-parts ... or keeping a for-harvest child or two stashed away in some illegal baby orchard” (27). It becomes even more apparent that the profit-motive is more important than the desire to help people desperate for transplants when Jimmy’s mother reacts with horror when she learns that OrganInc has managed to grow human neocortex in pigoons. Jimmy’s father initially blusters that she should “[t]hink of the possibilities, for stroke victims” (63), but she feels that he should be “[m]aking life better for people – not just people with money”, rather than “interfering with the building blocks of life” (64). It is, she argues, “immoral” and “sacrilegious” (64) while Jimmy’s father responds that there is “nothing sacred about cells and tissue” (65).

It is, however, precisely the inability to see nature’s cells and tissues as sacred which leads to scientific instrumentalism. The development of the pigoons into rather frightening creatures, who seem to see Snowman with human eyes and who “might have plans for him later” (30), make us wonder if human neocortex is ‘merely’ DNA. When the pigoons show that they are “clever enough to fake a retreat, then lurk around the next corner” (276), work together when Snowman is trapped in the gatehouse (314), and bait him with his own lost bag of loot (319), we have the horrifying sense that the pigoons have human consciousness, not just human DNA. Although the monstrous consequences of instrumentalist approaches to science have been a trope of science fiction since *Frankenstein*, Atwood places these in the context of current debates about how biotechnology can be used positively in the medical field to enhance the lives of many. This is off-set by the realisation that such benefits can be manipulated in a society that values privilege and position over ethics – as is the case in Jimmy’s world.

Danette DiMarco argues that Crake is “a member of an elite class that values instrumental production only as it is linked with personal gain” (171), suggesting that Crake is similar to Jimmy’s father in using profit as a motive for his scientific research. She makes the compelling argument that *Oryx and Crake* “critiques modernity’s commitments to *homo faber* [sic] – he who labours to use every instrument as a means to achieve a particular end in building a world, even when the fabrication of that world necessarily demands a repeated violation of its materiality, including its people” (170). However, I would argue that Crake’s instrumentalism runs deeper than the profit-motivated instrumentalism derived from hyperseparation; it is an instrumentalism based also,

ironically, on incorporation.⁴ This is seen during Jimmy's visit to Crake at the Watson-Crick university campus.⁵ While walking around, he sees gorgeous butterflies "with wings the size of pancakes" (235) and asks Crake if they are "recent" (235). Crake responds: "You mean, did they occur in nature or were they created by the hand of man? In other words, are they real or fake?" (235). Crake then argues that it does not matter how the butterflies were created – once they have been engineered, then they are real. "If you could tell they were fake," Crake contends, "it was a bad job. These butterflies fly, they mate, they lay eggs, caterpillars come out" (236). As we have seen before, Haraway has evoked the image of the cyborg to argue for "*pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries" between the natural and the artificial (150, original italics), but Crake, like the other scientists in the novel, has worked so long with an instrumentalist approach towards nature that he is able to convince himself that animals and insects created in a laboratory are as real as those which naturally occur, suggesting that the confusion of boundaries can have negative results.

Snowman's memories of himself as Jimmy, growing up with Crake, suggest that the question of nature's relationship with reality is a fundamental one. Crake seems to be sceptical about reality being based in anything concrete, preferring to believe that reality is merely a matter of perception. This is evinced early on in his relationship with Jimmy, as Snowman's recollections of their after-school activities suggest. After a brief encounter in the real world, playing tennis "on the clay court behind Crake's place" (88), they – at Crake's instigation – immerse themselves in the virtual world of computers. Their interaction is, in itself, significant: they sit back to back in Crake's bedroom playing computer games against one another rather than relating to one another face to face. When Jimmy finds their behaviour "weird" (88) and questions why they do not rather use a real chess set rather than playing on screen, Crake responds that computer chess is as real as the kind played with "plastic men" because the "real set is in your head" (88). Already Crake is able to justify his choices in life by suggesting that reality is something that we create, rather than something tangible. Even the violent computer games they play suggest the blurring of real and virtual: Three-Dimensional Waco and Kwiktime Osama (45) are obviously based on real events and people (Osama Bin Laden and the cult suicide at Waco,

⁴ See Chapter One and Plumwood (*Feminism* 60).

⁵ The novel was published "on the fiftieth anniversary of Crick and Watson's discovery of the structure of DNA" (Howells, "Margaret Atwood's *Dystopian*" 163), and the name of the campus becomes an ironic warning of how scientific knowledge can be abused, as the Watson-Crick Institute is solely concerned with transforming and reshaping the building blocks of life.

Texas). Aside from playing computer games, the boys also spend a large amount of time surfing the internet, and are exposed to webcam sites where they can watch open-heart surgery, animal snuff sites, live execution sites, assisted-suicide sites, and internet pornography, including child-pornography (93-105). Crake shows himself to have a remarkable ability to distance himself from the reality behind these sites, and is curiously unmoved, either positively or negatively, by the scenes they watch. He explains away much of what they witness with the suggestion that what they see is fake. He claims that “digital genalteration” (94) means that it is impossible to tell whether the political leaders featured on the sites actually exist, and the Asian corporal punishment and execution scenes “were probably taking place on a back lot somewhere in California, with a bunch of extras rounded up off the streets” (94). He even believes that the men capering and fighting on the electrocution sites were

paid to do it, or their families were. The sponsors required them to put on a good show because otherwise people would get bored and turn off. The viewer wanted to see the executions, yes, but after a while these could get monotonous, so one last fighting chance had to be added in, or else an element of surprise. Two to one it was all rehearsed. (95)

Crake’s lack of empathy and respect for the Other is exacerbated by his justification for this lack of feeling, based on the premise that everything they see is false.

Jimmy’s reaction to their increasingly virtual relationship with the outside world,⁶ compounded by the sensory over-load of pornography and marijuana, initially makes him feel odd and dislocated (99). His attempts to mimic Crake and subdue his instincts and emotions are unsuccessful, and when he and Crake enter the HottTotts sex-site Jimmy feels guilt and sympathy. The little girl that becomes Oryx looks straight at Jimmy through the camera, and “for the first time he’d felt that what they’d been doing was wrong. Before, it had always been entertainment, or else far beyond his control, but now he felt culpable” (104). Crake, on the other hand, saves the picture of Oryx and uses it as the gateway into the Extinctathon game on which he bases his life’s work, just as he later uses Oryx as the gateway through which he pulls Jimmy into his Paradise project. Jimmy vacillates between the real and the artificial world throughout the novel, but Crake’s inability to interact with the real, ‘natural’ world becomes the clue to his inability to see the moral problem behind the Paradise Project. Indeed, his complete instrumentalism is

⁶ As Howells has pointed out, although “Atwood does not venture into the cyberspace territory mapped by William Gibson in his novel *Neuromancer*, she does explore the psychological effects of living in a high-tech world of artificially constructed reality” (“Margaret Atwood’s Dystopian” 175).

unmistakable when it becomes apparent that he is most likely responsible for his mother's death at the hands of a "transgenetic staph ... mixed with a clever gene from the slime-mould family" (207) and that he kills Uncle Pete – even Crake admits that he was at Uncle Pete's death in "*a manner of speaking*" (297, original italics).⁷ Clearly it is Crake's ability to distance himself emotionally and objectify any kind of Other – often by incorporating the fake into the real – that allows him to create and seed the BlyssPluss Pills with the JUVE virus and thus destroy the human race without any apparent qualms.

What, then, is the point Atwood is making here? Like many ecological philosophers, she seems to be identifying instrumentalism as a potential problem in scientific practice. For her, however, instrumentalism appears to have become even more sinister in the modern world: not only do we now have to contend with dualistic thinking which sees non-human nature as fundamentally different from humanity, but we are also faced with a world which is able to disassociate itself entirely from reality. If nature does not exist – Crake himself says that he does not believe in nature "with a capital N" (242) – it is possible to use nature as a plaything. Our increasingly virtual take on the world, therefore, becomes questioned through the development of Crake in the novel, and his utopian desires for the world must be read against the instrumentalism his rejection of reality allows him to develop.

Civilisation and Human Nature

If we must question Crake's utopian dream because its achievement is only possible through the extreme objectification of other humans, his hyperseparation from nature and integration of opposites such as real and false, we must also do so in relation to what Atwood appears to be suggesting about human nature in *Oryx and Crake*. Indeed, she has said that she is interested in asking "How far can we go in the alteration department and still have a human being?" (qtd. in Hengen 74). The opening section of *Oryx and Crake* is extremely important in foregrounding the question of what it means to be civilised, as the reader is plunged, *in medias res*, into a confusing assortment of scenes experienced by Jimmy as he becomes 'Snowman' in the days after the JUVE virus has eradicated humanity.

⁷ Later, Jimmy wonders if "Uncle Pete, and possibly even Crake's own mother, had been trial runs" for the JUVE virus (400).

In the first few pages of *Oryx and Crake*, every description is designed to estrange the reader, as is typical of the science-fictional mode, so that we take nothing for granted. We discover that the reefs over which the waves crash are “ersatz” (3), made not of coral but of the tower-blocks of a previous existence, of “rusted car parts and jumbled bricks and assorted rubble” (3). Decay and devastation thus form the first images of the novel. The blank face of Snowman’s watch, showing “zero hour”, is the “absence of official time. Nobody nowhere knows what time it is” (3). The reference to time, and its loss, coming immediately after such images of desolation, suggests the end of civilisation, just as the description of Snowman, scratching his “bug bites” (3), living in a tree and afraid of “scales and tales” (4), suggests that humankind is left, like a monkey, to climb “[l]eft hand, right foot, right hand, left foot” (4) in the trees. The association of Snowman with pre-civilised man, living amongst scenes of apocalyptic devastation, suggests that he has been reduced to what we would see as a travesty of civilisation. Although he wears a baseball cap and a pair of sunglasses, symbols of late twentieth and early twenty-first century life in the developed world, the sunglasses are missing one lens and he is dressed only in a toga-like “dirty bedsheet” (4). But, by constantly using familiar objects that symbolise our notions of civilisation in a manner that undermines or even mocks them, Atwood invites us to consider whether the trappings of civilisation are really representative of civilisation, or if there is more to civilisation than baseball caps, sunglasses and digital watches.

Atwood returns to this question throughout the novel, but one particular way in which she concentrates the reader’s attention on what it means to be civilised, is through the computer games that Jimmy and Crake play as boys. In *Barbarian Stomp*, “[o]ne side had the cities and the riches and the other side had the hordes” (88), and the purpose of the game is to pit the cities and riches of civilisation against the brutality of the barbarians. Almost as an aside, Jimmy mentions that a “cute one” is the Aztecs versus the Spaniards, as “it was the Aztecs who represented civilization, while the Spaniards were the barbarian hordes” (89). This works against our usual preconceptions about civilisation and culture, ensuring that we ask ourselves what it is that makes a nation civilised. Similarly, *Blood and Roses* measures human atrocities – “[m]assacres, genocides, that sort of thing” – against “[a]rtworks, scientific breakthroughs, stellar works of architecture, helpful inventions” (90):

You rolled the virtual dice and either a Rose or a Blood item would pop up. If it was a Blood item, the Rose player had a chance to stop the atrocity from happening, but he had to put up a Rose item in exchange. The atrocity would then vanish from history, or at least the history recorded on the screen. The Blood player could acquire

a Rose item, but only by handing over an atrocity, thus leaving himself with less ammunition and the Rose player with more. ... The player who managed to retain the most human achievements by Time's Up was the winner. With points off, naturally, for achievements destroyed through his own error and folly and cretinous play. (90)

Jimmy calls it "a wicked game" (91), and while in context the word "wicked" can be read as slang for 'cool', it becomes a horrifying pun meant to be taken at face value: what human achievements are lost when Crake commits the ultimate genocide, eradicating almost the entire human population?

In order to create his ecologically ideal Crakers, as we saw earlier, Crake tried to make sure that he eliminated everything he blamed for the world's ills: the Crakers are specifically designed without features like emotion, love, imagination or creativity. He believes that imagination is the main downfall of humanity, as it is our ability to imagine our own deaths that is responsible for overpopulation. In the face of environmental crisis, animals "put their energy into staying alive themselves until times get better", Crake tells Jimmy, but "human beings hope they can stick their souls into someone else, some new version of themselves, and live on forever" (139). Furthermore, as Snowman, Jimmy recalls that Crake rejected artistic expression:

Watch out for art, Crake used to say. As soon as they start doing art, we're in trouble. Symbolic thinking of any kind would signal downfall in Crake's view. Next they'd be inventing idols, and funerals, and grave goods, and the afterlife, and sin, and Linear B, and kings, and then slavery and war. (419-420)

Although they may not necessarily be positive attributes, idols and funerals, kings and slavery, are an intrinsic part of human nature – they are what separate us from animals. As Kate Soper has pointed out, it is our ability to reflect upon the characteristics of nature and of humanity which separates us from non-human nature (49): at the crux of much ecological thinking is the problem that humans are both a part of nature and apart from nature. Crake's rejection of 'culture' therefore is a rejection of part of what makes us human.

Crake is not alone in dismissing 'culture'. In the world in which Jimmy and Crake grow up, science and reason are lauded above all else: 'numbers people' rule the world and 'word people' are relegated to the outskirts of society.⁸ Jimmy's own life illustrates this as

⁸ Howells has argued that Crake's emphasis on "male mastery through reason and science" is contradicted by Jimmy's "alternative 'feminine' allegiance to the life of emotion and imagination" – noting

it becomes apparent to him that his lack of numeracy makes him invisible to his parents because he does not “measure up” to their ideals (56). His experiences at university are also seen as completely peripheral to society as “a lot of what went on at Martha Graham was like studying Latin, or book-binding: pleasant to contemplate in its way, but no longer central to anything” (219). Martha Graham is so far behind the times, in fact, that unlike “[b]etter libraries, at institutions with more money”, the librarians at Martha Graham have not “burned their actual books and kept everything on CD-ROM” (229)⁹ – suggesting clearly how the newer technology has become the norm against which Martha Graham is measured. Once Jimmy leaves university, he feels that his life is doomed to be spent “decorating the cold, hard, numerical world in flossy 2-D verbiage” (221). The world in which Jimmy finds himself, in other words, is the world of science and technology, and one where he can find a place as mere decoration, if that.

The utopian world Crake desires is similarly lacking in concepts like art or imagination. While he claims that “*God is a cluster of neurons*” (186, original italics), and refuses to believe in either God or ‘Nature’ (242), even Crake is forced to acknowledge that “take out too much in that area and you got a zombie or a psychopath” (186). But, despite Crake’s attempts, the Crakers are neither zombies nor psychopaths (186), and neither can Crake rid them of their ability to dream or to sing (411). Despite his best efforts, then, Crake is unable to remove human creativity and self-expression. In fact, Crake demonstrates himself incapable of understanding such concepts, and laughs at Jimmy when he tries to suggest that it is art which makes humans civilised. “When any civilization is dust and ashes,” Jimmy argues, “art is all that’s left over. Images, words, music. Imaginative structures. Meaning – human meaning that is – is defined by them. You have to admit that” (197). For Crake, however, there is no such thing as human meaning – his only response is to reduce even art to a mere biological imperative, a “stab at getting laid” (198). Because Jimmy/Snowman narrates the story, we as readers empathise with him and thus question Crake’s detachment.

Moreover, Crake’s desire to eradicate art and imagination is ironically overturned in the novel by his decision to make Jimmy immune to the JUVE virus, thus leaving Jimmy to watch over the Crakers. Words, when Jimmy becomes Snowman, are “a salvation, a way to remind him that he is still human and alive” (Rao 111) and, left with only Jimmy’s

that Atwood’s choice of two male protagonists here “complicates stereotypes of gender” (*Margaret Atwood* 177).

⁹ The downfall of society into a dystopian nightmare has already been figured, for Atwood, by the replacement of paper books with electronic resources in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (182).

abilities as a 'word person', Snowman finds himself unable to answer the Crakers' questions without resorting to story. "*Crake*", he tells them

made the Children of Crake out of the coral on the beach, and then he made their flesh out of a mango. But the Children of Oryx hatched out of an egg, a giant egg laid by Oryx herself. Actually she laid two eggs: one full of animals and birds and fish, and the other one full of words. But the egg full of words hatched first, and the Children of Crake had already been created by then, and they'd eaten up all the words because they were hungry, and so there were no words left over when the second egg hatched out. And that is why the animals can't talk. (110, original italics)

In this passage, it is clear how Snowman develops a mythology for the Crakers as he goes along, using objects already familiar to the Crakers, but suggesting cause and effect, creator and created, and so giving the Crakers a means to symbolic thinking. Even more significantly, as Howells has argued, "the Crakers love his stories, which makes us wonder if the primitive human brain is hard-wired not just for dreaming and singing as Crake had discovered, but for narrative as well" ("Margaret Atwood's Dystopian" 171). Even Snowman realises the irony in making Crake into their creator, thinking that "Crake was against the notion of God, or of gods of any kind, and would surely be disgusted by the spectacle of his own gradual deification" (119-120).¹⁰ Snowman is, however, attracted by the thought that the Crakers "were like blank pages, he could write whatever he wanted on them" (407). Whether he intends to or not, Snowman certainly triggers the creative neurons in the Crakers who, by the end of the novel, have evolved so far as to create an effigy of Snowman and circle round it, chanting and singing his name in the hope that he will return to them. It is hinted that this is merely their first step to forming religion, as Snowman thinks that their chanting "*Ohhhh*" followed by "*Mun*" is "*Amen*", although it is actually "*Snowman*" (418-419, original italics). It has been argued that the novel is a rewriting of the Christian mythology with science constituting "the postmodern version of a transcendent metanarrative" (Howells, *Margaret Atwood* 182), which would make the Crakers' emergent religiosity an ironic counterpoint to the worship of technology preceding the JUVE outbreak.

Jimmy's role as myth-maker is symbolised in the name he chooses to signify the end of his pre-catastrophe life as Jimmy and the start of a new life in a post-apocalyptic

¹⁰ Howells notes the "suggestions of trickery" coded into the spelling of 'Paradice' (*Margaret Atwood* 178), but for me the pun becomes ironic with Snowman's narration of Crake into supreme creator-figure. When Jimmy says that Crake is "in Paradise" (421), we instantly recognise our own notions of God residing in paradise.

world. By calling himself the “Abominable Snowman” (8), he rejects Crake’s rule at Paradise “that no name could be chosen for which a physical equivalent – even stuffed, even skeletal – could not be demonstrated. No unicorns, no griffins, no manticores or basilisks” (8). For Jimmy, fantasy and reality become one as he chooses a name to suggest “existing and not existing, flickering at the edges of blizzards, apelike man or manlike ape” (8). Jimmy thus rebels against Crake’s attempts to create a human race without acknowledging that to be fully human is to have both reason *and* imagination. Ironically therefore, by leaving Jimmy as the Crakers’ caretaker, Crake actually leaves a door open into the past and into a world of symbolic thinking: the Abominable Snowman’s backward-facing footprints join the pre-apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic worlds inexorably, not through the medium of biology, but through that of culture.

The ending of the novel is sufficiently open to allow the reader to wonder if Crake’s project has failed or succeeded. There are suggestions that Crake may have succeeded in his attempts to eradicate human culture and civilisation: Snowman constantly worries that the Crakers “can’t read” (46), experiences a “dissolution of meaning” (43), and feels that “[l]anguage itself had lost its solidity” (305). But at the same time, it becomes clear that the Crakers are evolving in a similar direction to their human ancestors. Snowman notes, for example, that the Craker called Empress Josephine “looks worried: a small frown has appeared between her eyes. Unusual to see such an expression on one of their perfect wrinkle-free faces” (424-425). Without imagination, without the ability to see into the future, it is impossible to worry. Similarly, the Craker called Abraham Lincoln is “getting to be a leader”, which makes Snowman remember: “*Watch out for the leaders*, Crake used to say. *First the leaders and then the led, then the tyrants and the slaves, then the massacres*” (184). Crake’s attempts to stop human progress, in all its guises, both good and bad, appear therefore to have been foiled.

Even more importantly, the close of the novel also indicates that there are other human survivors of JUVE. We have no idea why Crake’s supposedly infallible way to remove humans from earth fails, but the presence of first the voice on the radio, which Snowman hears on his trip to Paradise (321), and then the two men and one woman who walk past the Crakers down the beach, make it clear that it did. If there are at least four or five human survivors, then there could be more. Although Snowman is afraid that civilisation can be destroyed – a fear he has when he realises that weeds, vines and plants are already overgrowing the buildings of the compound when he revisits Paradise (263-264) – Atwood possibly suggests that human civilisation is more resilient than Crake could

have foreseen. As Howells has suggested, the “zero hour” (433) displayed on Snowman’s watch could not only symbolise an end, but a beginning, “with the narrative poised on the edge of a future where history may be about to repeat itself” (*Margaret Atwood* 171). Elsewhere, Howells has argued that Snowman’s question, “What do you want me to do?” (432),¹¹ is a window “for optimism in an open-ended situation” (“*Margaret Atwood’s Dystopian*” 169). On the whole, I think Howells is right, despite Wilson’s opposing suggestion that the end of the novel illustrates that humanity will not survive and “even the created humanoid species, the Crakers, seems likely to become extinct” (177). If nothing else, the novel has shown that human culture and civilisation are not as easily destroyed as Crake imagines.

But what does this mean in terms of how we view Crake’s original utopian project? His logic was that humans, as we have evolved and progressed and become civilised, have become responsible for the destruction of the planet, and therefore to save the planet, humans must be destroyed and replaced. Nonetheless, Crake himself displays two particularly human characteristics in his own life’s work: the instrumentalism which has played such a major role in the destruction of nature, and the human creativity to imagine a more utopian world. As Howells has pointed out, “creative imagination is not confined to artists but is shared by scientists, for it is one of the qualities that distinguish [*sic*] human beings” (“*Margaret Atwood’s Dystopian*” 170). Crake’s failures, therefore, ironically have the hallmarks of his own status as a human being. Furthermore, it seems that his attempt to create a perfect world, based on relationships of non-hierarchical difference, diversity and mutuality, is somehow doomed to failure because it is impossible to impose an ecological ethic through unethical means: Crake’s instrumentalism undermines his desire for utopia.

* * *

Crake endeavours to remake the world, so Oryx believes, because he “wants to make the world a better place” (377). By constantly balancing utopian against dystopian thinking in how she presents both the novel and Crake’s dream, Atwood creates a tension between the two ideas that questions both. Can we survive in an environmental dystopia; if not, should we use any means to reach an ecological utopia? If so, which ones, and under whose

¹¹ Snowman cannot decide whether to approach the newcomers in peace or to kill them “before they see him” (432), and this question is not resolved by Atwood in the novel, leaving the reader to wonder which course of action he will take.

control? Ultimately, Crake takes into his own hands the future of the earth, removing choice from any other human being through his act of bioterrorism. He imposes his ideals without questioning the rights of other humans to choose for themselves the kind of world in which they want to live. Shannon Hengen has argued that in Atwood's Kesterton Lecture, "Scientific Romancing", given in 2004, Atwood made it clear that being human "implies acceptance of the whole range of our physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual state. To deny or splice out any of that state is to amputate the self as it has been known so far, and so to stress nature perilously" (Hengen 74). What makes us humans is our free will, and in removing humanity's free will by hiding the JUVE virus in the BlyssPluss Pills, Crake is irrevocably changing that which is part of nature, albeit human nature. As Hengen has pointed out, environmentalism in Atwood's works "becomes a concern with the urgent preservation of a human place in a natural world in which the term 'human' does not imply 'superior,' or 'alone,' and in which what is fabricated or artificial is less satisfying than what has originally occurred" (74).

Novels like *Oryx and Crake*, through their speculative character, are able to alert those who dream of an ecological utopia to become more self-reflexive about the realities of living according to an ecological ethic. Not only must we ask how practical the rhetoric of reducing the world's population or stopping technological progress or the growth of capitalism actually is, but we must also ask whether the loss of free will is too high a price to pay for 'perfection' – a perfection that can never, in fact, be reached. At the same time, the novel instils an urgent desire for the implementation of an ecological ethic in our behaviour: if we do not learn to engage in respectful, mutual interrelationships with the Other, then we may indeed face the kind of future into which Jimmy is born. Speculative fiction such as this, therefore, is able to alert us to the tensions revealed when reality is balanced against idealism, and utopia against dystopia, and thus underscores the complexities of what it means to be human – complexities questioned also in Doris Lessing's pessimistic take on what humans become in their most primitive guise in her recent Ifrik novels.

Chapter 8

Lessing's Ifrik Novels: The Erasure of an Ecological Ethic

We have all read about global warming; we know that by the end of the first quarter of the next century worldwide water shortages will be endemic, that the oil will run out very soon, that the Sahara is encroaching on the Sahel, as is the Karoo on the Eastern Cape; but who among us can make statistics about climate changes and desertification into a significant reality in our daily lives? It takes an imagination such as Lessing's to bring the worst before us.

– M. J. Daymond, "Imagining the Worst." (87)

Lessing's Ifrik novels mark a return to the kind of speculative fiction not seen in her oeuvre since the Canopus in Argos series. The Ifrik novels have the same fable-like qualities as *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five*, but are set on a future Earth millennia from the present, as the planet heats up again following an ice age. *Mara and Dann*, the first of the Ifrik novels, was published on the eve of the millennium in 1999, and the sequel – *The Story of General Dann and Mara's Daughter, Griot and the Snow Dog* (henceforth *General Dann*) – in 2005. Both novels, like the more recent speculations published by Piercy, Le Guin and Atwood, show a marked awareness of global climate change and deal specifically with issues of massive drought, desertification, and the melting of glacial fields. Like the other authors already considered in this thesis, Lessing is not only interested in the physical effects of climate change, but uses these to ask questions about human nature.

Human nature, in Lessing's Ifrik novels, is placed in the context of a world that has returned to the dark ages of barbarism: in the face of a devastated environment and endless wars, survival has become more important than the kinds of knowledge and notions of civilisation that are common today. In fact, both novels suggest a return to the primitive in a much more alarming vision of environmental apocalypse than those others examined here. Piercy's *He, She and It* imagines a much more highly technological future following the collapse of the world's ecosystems, as does *Oryx and Crake* – at least before Crake tries to return humanity to a primitive state. Even the future Terra and planet Aka of Le Guin's *The Telling*, while perhaps not as technologically abundant as those in *He, She and It* and *Oryx and Crake*, are not entirely without advanced technology. In Lessing's novels, the Northern Hemisphere is covered by ice, South America – called South Imrik – is completely out of contact, and Africa is devastated by drought and war. With the total destruction of the world as we know it, Lessing's millennial novels involve a bleakness that

suggests everything we understand about civilisation becomes questionable in the face of violent global climate change, and that even the kinds of technological solutions envisaged by these other authors will not be able to save us from the effects of complete ecological collapse.

The first section of this chapter, therefore, deals with how both *Mara and Dann* and *General Dann* examine the different consequences of environmental disaster. The second section uses ideas of environmental change to explore what these novels seem to be saying about human nature, particularly in its opposition to notions of culture. This leads, in turn, to an investigation of how civilisation appears to be linked to knowledge and access to knowledge. Finally, then, I question the effectiveness of the novels as cautionary tales, which, through their pessimism, can be read as highlighting the importance of living by the premises of an ecological ethic.

Environmental Apocalypse and Global Warming

Environmental apocalypse has become an increasingly popular form of disaster narrative as the problem of global warming has gained increasing currency in the world media. The usual forms of disaster narrative found in science fiction – such as nuclear holocaust or meteor strike – are often used as a way to showcase human ingenuity: either through the human hero averting potential disaster at the last minute, or by re-establishing the human race on a battered earth following some kind of catastrophe. Most often, therefore, the focus is on humanity rather than nature. This is the case in all three of the novels discussed so far in this section of the thesis: massive environmental destruction, precipitated by human behaviour, causes the conditions in *He, She and It*, *The Telling* and *Oryx and Crake* in that their enclaves, their heightened emphasis on technological solutions, and their dystopian governments are attempts to deal with the ecological crisis. Consequently, the novels warn against environmental abuse by showing how this can create hierarchies, thus questioning the notion of an ecological ethic as a realistic foundation for a future world. Lessing's Ifrik novels take a slightly different approach in that they focus on the environment constantly, and in great detail, rather than using ecological change as a catalyst for other change.

Mara and Dann contains image after image emphasising the extreme problems of climate change, and indeed one of the difficulties of the novel is that it emphasises the drought affecting Southern Ifrik to the extent that it almost becomes tedious: Virginia Tiger

calls the novel “damagingly repetitious” (“A Slog” 1) and Michael Upchurch comments that it is “inflated, repetitious and strangely devoid of surprise” (10). The positive side of this is that the reader simply cannot escape the importance of the climate change in both local and global contexts, unlike in the novels of Piercy, Atwood and Le Guin. *General Dann* is less obsessed with the global environment, and is more interested in how climate change has had a specific effect on a particular place, but the importance of climate is still a major factor in the novel.

Drought and Devastation in Mara and Dann

Mara and Dann opens with scene after scene describing the drought-ravaged southern part of Ifrik.¹ The frightening events that begin the adventures of Mara and Dann occur as a result of the tension between two parts of their family. The family quarrel, in turn, is sparked off because “everything” is “getting worse” as a result of the increasingly dry climate (5). What is most striking about *Mara and Dann* is that Lessing does not merely describe the weather, but shows its effects in minute detail, such as when Mara, as a little girl, is tortured by her captor Garth “pouring water into a cup, and then back again, making the water splash, so that her whole dry body yearned for it” (4). Similarly when she is rescued by Lord Gorda, she can hardly hear him and cannot talk because she is so thirsty that “there was only a thick gum in her mouth”; she realises that Gorda, too, has “a greying scum on his lips. That was why it was hard for him to talk. He was thirsty, like her” (5). Lessing insists on the very physical effects of extreme thirst affecting the little girl in every way – from her ability to understand what is happening to her, to the larger events that lead to the dissolution of her family, and to the fights between the Mahondi people to which she belongs. There is also no slow build-up to the significance of the environment; the immediate emphasis on the drying landscape and the extreme thirst of the characters plunges the reader instantly into the ecological themes of the novel.

The opening to *Mara and Dann* contains perhaps the most exciting and revealing descriptions of the novel in their dogged assertion of the minute-by-minute dangers of living in a world where water is almost entirely nonexistent. Lessing’s narration of Mara and Dann’s journey north from their home in Rustam to the safety of the Rock Village is

¹ The Africa of the future is called Ifrik “because of how often we may hear the how the short *a* becomes a short *i*” (Lessing, “Author’s Note” vii) and Lessing has clearly stated that the scenes of drought in the novel are based on her experiences witnessing terrible drought in Zimbabwe (Naoti 6).

key in suggesting the hardships of living in a land devastated by drought. Readers unfamiliar with what it means to be truly thirsty, to the point where one can smell the tiny amount of water in a mud hole filled with dying animals, can only begin to imagine the position of the travellers. The situation once they arrive at the Rock Village is hardly better: Mara and Dann are taken in by Daima, and with her they live a life of undisguised hardship, measuring out water by the sip and existing on dried-up roots and the occasional bag of flour. Mara's only lasting association with the Rock Village is of dust:

the smell of dust, the feel of dust on everything: soft pads of dust underfoot, dust piling up in the grooves the door slid along in, dust on the rocks of the floor, which had to be swept out every day into the dust outside. Films of dust settled on the food even while they ate it, and often winds whirled dust and grass up into the air and the sunlight became spotty and dirty-looking. (51)

There is quite literally not enough water to wash in, so Mara has to rub herself in sand in order to try and feel cleaner, although she cannot do anything about the "greasy lumps of her hair" because "the sand only stuck there" (71). Rustam, only a few years after they flee it, is "dried up and dead" and "sand storms had blown over it, filling the houses and burying the gardens" (63) and soon the Rock Village experiences the same fate, forcing Mara and Dann's long journey north in search of water.

Zimbabwean reviewer Govazvimwe Patsanza highlights the importance in African folklore of the movement from north to south, and from south to north, in relation to *Mara and Dann* (6), and Lessing utilises this feature of African legends in order to explore encroaching environmental degradation, as well as animal and human reactions to climate change. It is clear that the drought has caused a decrease in the ability of many animal species to survive and Lessing uses natural human fears to suggest how climate change could have a horrifying effect on the animal kingdom as ecosystems alter irrevocably. Even as a small child, Mara learns that the caches of huge bones where the land has been eroded are from "the last time there was a very bad drought. It lasted for so long all the animals died. The big ones. Twice as big as our animals" (18). The reader is able to connect with these specific images because current wildlife conservation and environmental movements often use similar ideas, based on the extinction of the larger mammals, as a foundation for their awareness campaigns. But even more crucial to Lessing's warnings about climate change is the suggestion of what it may mean for evolution. Soon after Mara's arrival in the Rock Village, she discovers a water stinger, "very big, as big as the largest of the Rock People, and it had pincers in front that could

easily crush Dann, and a long sting like a whip for a tail” (42); these scorpions become so large that they are eventually able to “take a hand off, or a big piece of flesh out of a leg” (67). As they journey north, Mara and Dann also see large colonies of ants, whose queen is “the size of Mara’s hand, white and fat” (92), and spiders are so huge that one “the size of a big dog, leaped on a smaller one and began crunching it up” (110). What this does is instil a sense of fear and repulsion in the reader, thus emphasising the dramatic effects that are possible if global warming takes place.

Mara and Dann, then, focuses on the environment to the degree that it becomes a prominent aspect of the novel. The intense detail in the descriptions of dust, thirst and dryness contribute to the atmosphere of the novel which, as a result of the attention given to the physical and even evolutionary effects of a hotter climate, is frightening in its insistence on how climate change could affect both individuals and groups, humans and animals.

The Melting of the Ice in General Dann

In contrast to *Mara and Dann*, which is a quest for water, *General Dann* describes a world overwhelmed by water. The ecological premise upon which the latter novel is based is also global warming, but rather than causing massive drought, it causes the melting of the glaciers and frozen tundra lands, ultimately resulting in floods. Also in opposition to *Mara and Dann*, which begins with the drought-ravished country and slowly describes a moving away from this towards life-giving water, the plot of *General Dann* moves towards environmental disaster as the saturated landscape becomes more threatening during the course of the novel.

The rising water levels of *General Dann* are hinted at towards the end of *Mara and Dann* when the travellers witness the rapidity of water seepage in the marsh-lands. Not only do they see entire towns beneath the surface of the water over which their boat travels, they also see “a solid town, as fine as the ones lying under the water. Some of the houses in the lower streets stood in water, but the higher parts of the town were dry and in good condition” (*M&D* 364). The opening pages of *General Dann* are much more dramatic, describing Dann’s experience of the “mists and spray that whirled and shifted, hypnotising him with movement: a cliff of thundering white” (5). Over and again, Lessing emphasises the “booming” (6) sound of water and the drenching foam and spray as a result of ice “melting into the ocean, and falling down the sides of the Middle Sea” (7). The novel’s gripping opening is, however, soon replaced by a much slower pace – again in contrast to

the urgency of *Mara and Dann*. Part of this is because of Dann's melancholia, but it also reflects the insidious creeping water slowly taking over the buildings of the Centre in which Dann's army is housed.

Dann's assistant Griot is the most aware of the dangers of flooding – not just as a threat to human life, but also (as we shall see later) to the records of the past kept in the Centre. Dann's gradual emergence from his depression is paralleled in the novel by Griot's increasing warnings to Dann about the rising damp and flooding foundations. It is Griot who keeps urging Dann to leave (194), and who realises the reality of the Centre flooding.

On a tall white wall in the very heart of the Centre Griot had seen a blanket of black mould creeping up from its foot, that was apparently set firm in a stone foundation. It must be standing in water. Griot took Dann to see the black furry film on the wall.

'Very well, Griot, I see. We have to hurry.'

'Yes, sir, we do.'

'I will – but first...' (200, original ellipsis)

Despite his awareness of the urgency that faces them, Dann keeps postponing their move away from the Centre, because he is afraid of losing all the books and artefacts contained within its walls. But again it is Griot who points out that beneath the precious underground chamber of books is water. "The walls everywhere are mouldy with damp" (248) and the water does indeed eventually rise until there comes a point when "[w]ater was trickling in from the sides of the room" (249) and then "rushing in" (249) until the room is finally inundated by "a jet of water" (250) shooting through the foundations. The rising of water levels in *General Dann* is thus perhaps more frightening, when it finally happens, than the dryness of *Mara and Dann*, although the length of the earlier novel and more constant repetition of the characters' thirst and anxiety about whether they will survive is a more insidious terror.

As this shows, then, both *Mara and Dann* and *General Dann* use the idea of global climate change to suggest the very physical effects this could have on individuals and communities. The extensive references to the climate ensure that the novels' plots are driven by an environmental awareness. Consequently, Lessing's interest in notions of what it means to be 'civilised' or 'cultured' and 'educated' or 'knowledgeable' become inextricably linked to the shifting climate described in the novels.

Human Culture/Human Nature

The desire for truly ethical behaviour, outlined by ecological philosophers such as Plumwood, is expressed in terms of relationships of care and respect with the Other that are mutual rather than hierarchical. Lessing's presentation of this kind of ethic in the more optimistic *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five* is completely overturned in the Ifrik novels. In these novels, societies are hierarchical, and characterised by violence and slavery. Here, humankind is returned to a primitive state, residing in a world where all of the knowledge and technology associated with human culture today has been destroyed, first by a planet-wide ice-age, and then – during the course of the novels – global warming. This leaves the bare vestiges of 'human nature' open to analysis.

In the Ifrik novels, the entire concept of civilisation is rewritten in relation to the changes wrought on human society by the climate. The covering-over of the Northern Hemisphere with ice appears to have destroyed the technology, engineering, architecture, art and literature associated with the Western world. While attempts were made to preserve knowledge, books, artefacts and even buildings (as the museum and library hidden in the Centre bears testament), much of which we would associate with civilisation today no longer exists. Life on Ifrik, isolated from the other continents, is relatively primitive. Most people cannot read and barely scrape together an existence through pastoral or agricultural means. Technology is seriously limited: some artefacts are based on designs copied from our own age, but they are not really understood in this future world. War and violence is endemic to life on the continent, and clearly the struggle for survival has been of a higher priority than the creation of technology and art.

This situation has clearly been exacerbated by the climate changes experienced by Mara and Dann in their lifetime. The first quarter of *Mara and Dann* is centred on how Mara and Daima (and initially Dann) eke out their existence: each description of Mara's everyday life reiterates the painstaking steps they must take simply to survive for one more day. But Lessing does not merely describe the dried-up environment and the subsequently harsh living-conditions it induces; she uses it to comment on what this kind of life means for the personalities of those who have to live it. For example, there is always antagonism over the rights to the milk beasts and the Rock People constantly fight amongst themselves, which leads Daima to explain to Mara that the "harder things are the more people fight. You'd think it was the other way about" (47). Daymond claims that "Lessing's point is that human conflict is obviously foolish in the face of the natural threat and could be

avoided” (86), but there is also the implication that because people become more violent when times are bad, human nature is naturally aggressive. In this, humans appear to be quite similar to animals, which are also shown in *Mara and Dann* to exhibit more aggression the more desperate they become to survive. At one point, for example, Mara discovers that a

water dragon, almost dead with hunger, had been attacked by a water stinger half its size; and when the villagers went down together to the waterholes they saw half a dozen stingers fighting over the half-dead beast. And just outside the village a couple of the big black birds that normally ate only seeds and berries attacked in full daylight a wild pig too weak to run away, tearing from its shoulders and neck big beakfuls of flesh, while the pig squealed. (60)

The hand-to-mouth existence of humans leaves them like animals: all their energy is devoted to mere survival, leaving nothing for the cultural pursuits which supposedly divide humans from the non-human natural world. Roberta Rubenstein has claimed that *Mara and Dann* “gives little cause for optimism” as “civilized relations have largely been replaced by one form or another of the law of the jungle” (“Mar(th)a” 1), and the imagery of both novels seems to reinforce this idea, however problematic a notion it may be.

But is this aggression really as a result of humanity being forced into an ‘animalistic’ phase as a result of environmental change, or is it something intrinsic to human nature? The novels explore the question of our baser human nature through the legends told of our current time. Daima, for example, tells Mara right at the start of *Mara and Dann*:

Once, long ago, there was a civilisation – a kind of way of living – that invented all kinds of new things. They had science – that means, ways of thinking that try to find out how everything works – and they kept making new machines, and metals.... There was once a time, but it was a long, long time ago, when there were machines so clever they could do everything – anything you could think of, they could do it – but I’m not talking about then. No one knows why all that came to an end. They say there were so many wars because of those machines that everyone all over the world decided to smash them. (37)

Daima’s uncertainty as to why our civilisation failed appears to be answered by the end of the novel, when Mara’s visits to the museum in the Centre leave her with the understanding that our period in history had a “crescendo of inventiveness”, but that “the end of the story in every building was war, and the ways of war became crueller and more terrible” (381). The implication is that, ironically, all those features of ‘culture’ or ‘civilisation’ actually led, in the end, to the destruction of the world as we know it today.

Is Lessing then suggesting that the trappings of civilisation merely cover up human nature's baser instincts toward survival and violence, and that civilisations inevitably self-destruct? This seems to be the opinion of Dann when he discusses the destruction of the civilisations of Yerrup in *General Dann*. He says cynically to Griot and Ali: "Never mind about the Ice, we don't even need that. We can destroy everything without that. Again and again" (192). Furthermore, the endless wars between the Agre and the Hennes described in *Mara and Dann* achieve nothing, and continue despite leaving the populations of both groups uneducated and subdued, as every person must join the army whether they wish to or not (249). General Shabis states that, in his "experience easy talk about wars and invasions means weakness, not strength" (111), and adds that "[n]othing was achieved except the usual tale of refugees and deaths". Yet, despite his antipathy towards invasion and war, his own authority comes from commanding the Agre army. There are also other suggestions that armies can fulfil a positive role. Dann's army, with its red blanket insignia, is seen as a way to control the savagery of humanity and to give people both order and hope – the narrator claims that without Dann's army, the people "would be a rabble" (*GD* 125). This notion of order or control over others is, in fact, a dominant feature of the Ifrik novels. Both novels suggest that humans somehow need hierarchies and assert difference as Other. This is not necessarily the authorial position, but the predominance of power relationships in each novel tends to undercut any real sense that it is possible, or even desirable, for an ecological ethic to survive in a barren and 'primitive' world.

Hierarchy is not only linked to military power in the novels, but even more closely attached to race: Mara and Dann are described as being somehow superior to the other characters that populate the novels because of both their Mahondi blood and their status as members of the Mahondi royal family. In *Mara and Dann* the Mahondi people are constantly described as aesthetically pleasing, and the narrator insists on the beauty of the "glossy, long, black hair" (23), the fact that they are "tall and thin with long, slippery, shiny, black hair" (28-29), and have "[b]lack, straight, shining hair.... Long-fingered hands. Long, quick feet. And the deep, dark Mahondi eyes" (243). Lessing has claimed that she "didn't want their colour to be an issue" (Naoti 18), but here again, as Moira Monreith has claimed about the Canopus novels, Lessing "never completely gets rid of the language of colonialism and alienation" (68). Significantly, the Mahondi are referred to as "the People" in opposition to others, to the point where Mara recognises that Daima is "a Person" (23). The capital letters and the suggestion that other humans, like the Rock

People for example, are thus somehow not people at all, has a worrying implication of racism.

This emphasis on race is exacerbated by the way in which Lessing chooses to depict the other types of people in Ifrik. Mara is disgusted by the Rock People's "dull greyish skin and their pale eyes, like sick eyes, and their pale frizzy hair, which stood out around their heads like grass or like bushes" (39), and when she leaves the Rock Village, she is astonished to see people "with great bushes of black hair and almost black skin" (99). The Hadrons have "billows and pillows of yellow flesh" (144) and the Hennes have features with no distinct markings: "The large, flattish, yellowish face – it had a greasy look; the pale eyes; the large mat or bush of hair that looked greasy too" (266). Whether or not Lessing consciously used African and Asian features to describe those people for whom we are meant to have little or no respect, the antipathy of the main characters for "frizzy hair", "black skin" and "flattish, yellowish faces" is concerning to say the least. Also, Leta is described initially as "so pale she was almost green, with straight, pale hair and green eyes. Mara had never seen anything like her, and was repulsed" (318), but, by the end of *Mara and Dann*, she is the only non-Mahondi character accepted as part of the group that lives on the Farm, giving her virtual Mahondi status. Also, she is a trusted and valued friend of Mara and Dann in both the novels and by the end of *General Dann* is given almost magical significance because of her white skin, blonde hair and special healing powers. Susan Watkins has noted that reviews of *Mara and Dann* have displayed discomfort with Lessing's "tribal" characteristics (7), although Daymond suggests that the Mahondis' "too easy contempt for those that they and natural disaster cast as 'other' is a matter that the reader and not the characters must register" (86). Daymond's comment indicates that the authorial intention is to highlight the racism of the Mahondis, thus causing the reader to question and reject this racism. While a distinction should be made between author's, narrator's and characters' viewpoints, the story is mainly told from the perspectives of Mara in *Mara and Dann* and Dann in *General Dann*, which tends to emphasise the Mahondi point of view.

The accent on the pale brown skin, straight hair and refined features of the Mahondi is accompanied, moreover, by Lessing's insistence on associating the physical features of the Mahondi with their special status as rulers over Ifrik and with notions of civilisation. The Rustam Mahondi obviously live a luxurious life, with plentiful, tasty food, slaves to do their bidding and pleasant surroundings, like the "tall, light room open all around with windows" (*M&D* 29) that Mara remembers from her home. In Chelops, although the

Mahondis “had ‘always’ been the Hadrons’ slaves” (*M&D* 137), the Mahondi Kin hold themselves apart from the other slaves and live indulgent and pampered lives. In fact, Mara soon realises that the “Mahondis here are slaves of the Hadrons, but they decide everything and the Hadrons do not know it because they are lazy and stupid and take too much poppy” (145). Thus, although they might appear less ‘civilised’ than the Hadrons because they are slaves, the Mahondi are actually described as clever, powerful and much more capable than the Hadrons. In addition, Shabis of the Agre army and Daulis, one of the Councillors of Bilma, are Mahondi men and are seen to have physical strength as well as moral steadfastness, reiterating the higher status of the Mahondi compared to the other inhabitants of Ifrik.

While the Mahondi in general are held up as ideals, Mara and Dann particularly are singled out as being of a special status. From the start of *Mara and Dann* the two children are protected, and as soon as they make their way to Chelops, the Mahondi Kin recognise who they are, as do Shabis and Daulis. When they arrive at the Centre, the people in the surrounding areas immediately look to them for leadership, even though Mara and Dann refuse to generate a new Mahondi royal house through the incestuous relationship that Felix and Felissa expect of them. Indeed, the idea of Dann’s special status as a Prince is that which gives him his power and charisma as a general in *General Dann*. While this in itself is not necessarily problematic – the two novels are after all designed as a fable, allowing for the almost magical status of the two main characters – when looked at in conjunction with the racial stereotyping of the novel, the automatic assumption of special leadership is more difficult to accept.

If we take the above into consideration, Lessing’s observations about human nature appear to be twofold. First, she seems to suggest that the divisions between humans and other animals are not as wide as we perhaps believe. Whether living in the primitive conditions of the future she imagines or in our own violent and war-torn present, humans are bent on survival – even if that survival entails the destruction of others, be they other humans or not. As a result, Lessing makes a second point through the behaviour of the characters in the novels (and the Mahondis particularly): humans tend to form hierarchies in order to enable their survival, or at least the survival of one group over another, and race inevitably structures these groups. *General Dann*, for instance, is premised upon Dann’s power and charisma, which has nothing to do with his practical leadership abilities (or else Griot would have leadership over the ‘Red Blankets’), and everything to do with his mythical status as the last Mahondi prince. In terms of an ecological ethic, then, this

reading of the two novels is a deeply pessimistic one: relationships of non-hierarchical difference are not even a hope for the future; they are an impossibility.

Knowledge and Civilisation

The one way in which Lessing attempts to undercut the pessimistic vision of the future elucidated in the Ifrik novels is by highlighting the role of knowledge in human culture. From the beginning of *Mara and Dann*, when Mara plays the “What did you see?” game, we understand that the idea of learning is extremely important to the Mahondi and the game is the way they teach their children about the world. However we may react to Lessing’s creation of the Mahondi as a more ‘civilised’ type of people, their predominance, and that of Mara and Dann particularly, has the effect of ensuring the significance of knowledge in the novels. Indeed, “their quest for knowledge (not just survival) is ultimately what drives [Lessing’s] protagonists in *Mara and Dann*” (Daymond 87), as well as in *General Dann*.

Mara is initially marked out as different from the other characters in *Mara and Dann* not because of her Mahondi royal status, but because of her earnest desire to learn. From her earliest childhood in Rustam and the Rock Village, she wants to understand nature and society, and no matter how difficult her life is in the Rock Village and during her journey north, she constantly questions others and uses her powers of observation to increase her knowledge. Almost the first thing she says when the Kin take her in is, “I wish I could go to school” – a request she makes “passionately” (146). She also tries to learn as much as she can, becoming what the Kin call a ‘Memory’: a “person who has to keep in her mind everything the family knows” (145). Similarly, as soon as she is captured by the Agre army and is interviewed by Shabis, she is “breathless” with eagerness to learn “[e]verything” (241). Even when she reaches the Centre, Mara is not seduced by Felix and Fidessa’s offer of power, but merely by the Museum’s ability to “satisfy every hunger she had for knowledge, for information, to find out – learn” (384). The constant reiteration of Mara’s thirst for knowledge ensures that throughout *Mara and Dann* the importance of education becomes as central to the text as the environment.

Mara’s desire for education is highlighted throughout *Mara and Dann* by the remarkable limits to knowledge amongst the various people of Ifrik. Few people are literate and even fewer have any understanding of Ifrik as a continent or its place on a world map. Even basic human biology is hardly understood, and the nature of conception

and contraception becomes indispensable knowledge that Mara is able to impart wherever she goes in Ifrik. While the Kin know that there “is a lot we have forgotten – a lot we’ve lost” (146), they are still amazed at what Mara can tell them about women’s fertility cycles. Their astonishment is not only because they have lost that knowledge, but because it is such a vital piece of information to lose: all over Ifrik the issue of fertility has become extremely important as birth rates have dropped with the continuing droughts, and Mara is captured several times in the hopes that she will be able to produce a child for the various different groups around Ifrik.² Her fear of pregnancy, on the other hand, is linked to her understanding that a child will hamper her ability to travel in the harsh conditions in which she finds herself; she cannot help but remember the children that she has seen dying of malnutrition on the road, and when she aborts her first pregnancy she thinks: “No baby could survive a boat journey in this heat. That was no choice” (226). When Shabis tells her about contraception as we know it today, she therefore says that it would mean “women then didn’t have to be afraid of men” (260): “I cannot even begin to imagine what it could be like, being at ease when you meet a man. And then, when it suits you, at the time you want it, you have a baby. ... They were free. We could never be free, in that way” (261). While this knowledge and this power is taken for granted by many today, the enormous impact of Mara’s knowledge of fertility and Shabis’s stories of contraception on the characters in *Mara and Dann* indicate not only the levels of ignorance in Lessing’s Ifrik, but also what this ignorance means for women in particular.

A similar moment occurs when Mara and Dann are exposed to the collections held in the Centre. Initially when they reach the Centre, they are confused by the Museum Tour, with its crumbling and decaying artefacts of ancient history: the descriptions which we easily recognise make them feel “angry, because of the futility of it all” (379). The irony is that much of that which they do not understand describes our own age, thus ensuring the defamiliarisation which is designed to make us as readers assess our own understanding of our present. Virginia Tiger has noted this in relation to *General Dann* (“Our Chroniclers” 25), although it is clearly also relevant to the end of *Mara and Dann*. Once they have recovered from their shock at seeing the vast history behind them and the enormous

² Rubenstein has pointed out that the fact that “women of child-bearing age are valued principally for their breeding potential” in the Ifrik novels is reminiscent of the conditions shaping Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (“Mar(th)a” 11), although infertility is a problem in *He, She and It* and *Oryx and Crake*, too. This suggests that the effects of pollution and environmental degradation could have a very specific impact upon gender issues, making women vulnerable to becoming mere vessels for procreation. Avoiding global climate change, in this reading, would thus be of extreme importance to women in particular.

amounts of knowledge preserved in the Museums, it becomes easier to assimilate the information. Mara's thirst for knowledge is finally quenched:

Some of the buildings were as good as hours of talking with Shabis. Even a wall, with a few lines of fading words, could tell her at a glance about things she had puzzled over all her life. She felt her brain was expanding. She was soaking up new thoughts with every breath she took. (*M&D* 384)

Earlier, when Dann had found Mara at the Rock Village and realised that she knew nothing outside her experience of living there, he was shocked at her ignorance and said to her: "We think the Rock People are just – rabbits. But those people, the ones that lived long ago – compared to them we are beetles" (89). Mara's experience at the Centre confirms Dann's description. Is Lessing perhaps suggesting, then, that the Mahondi are more civilised because they have superior knowledge and education? Mara clearly feels that they have lived a much more primitive life than in earlier eras, and this is based on her understanding of civilisation as being a society or world where education is almost taken for granted, unlike in Ifrik, where survival is of more importance than inventiveness or even art.

The relationship between knowledge and power is even more evident in *General Dann* than it is in *Mara and Dann*, as there is a greater emphasis on the written records of the Sand libraries rather than the technology that Mara and Dann see in the Museum on their first visit to the Centre. Just as Mara's thirst for knowledge drives the plot of *Mara and Dann*, so Dann's fear of ignorance leads to much of the action in *General Dann*. When he stays among the Island people, for example, he is frustrated by their lack of interest in anything they have "never needed to know" (*GD* 69) and as a result, the "bitterness of his ignorance grew in him. He could not bear it, the immensity of what he didn't know. The pain was linked deep in him with something hidden from him" (69-70). Dann's return to the Centre becomes, in many ways, an attempt to find that which is hidden from him and hence he immediately recognises the importance of the sand libraries contained in the maze in the very heart of the Centre. In Chelops, Candace had told Mara that "[a]bout five thousand years ago there was a terrible storm in a desert that everyone thought had always been a desert, just piles of sand, and the storm shifted the sand and exposed a city. It was very big. The city had been made to keep chronicles – records – books" (*M&D* 168). Candace suggests that the Mahondi are descendents of the old Memories from the north who were involved in preserving the library (169), and although Lessing does take a rather clumsy route to get there, finally it seems that the real reason for

Mara and Dann trekking north to the Centre is not to found the royal dynasty as it appears at the end of *Mara and Dann*, but to find the sand libraries, as happens in *General Dann*.

Certainly, Ali tells Dann that

he believed the need to preserve these records of the past – and remember that these were the only records of that past – built the Centre: probably that was the main reason for building the Centre. For not only books and papers were found in the sandpits but every kind of artefact and machine. All these were put in the Centre, which then spread much further than it did today, before all its northern and western peripheries had gone under the marshes. (*GD* 174)

This suggests that the importance of the Centre is the knowledge it preserves, and possibly it is because they are supposed to be keepers of this library that gives Mara and Dann, and then Dann alone, their mythic quality.

If this is indeed the case, then this would explain the unwavering desire for knowledge that they demonstrate throughout the two novels, and also the importance Dann attaches to saving as much of the sand libraries as he can when it is clear that the Centre is flooding. One of the most poignant scenes of *General Dann* occurs when Dann, Ali, Griot and their helpers try to do just this. Once the moment comes where they have to break into the plexiglass chamber to rescue the books, they all try to work quickly to save as much as possible, but “water was rushing in to the centre of the shattered not-glass” (249-250). The blast of air and water into the chamber begins the destruction of the books and parchments that have been preserved for millennia and their best efforts to save them seem almost pointless:

Dann set down his final armful of books. The scribes were trying to sort the books into languages they knew, but the frail old things were falling apart. As each was opened, it began to crumble. Dann, desperate, grief-stricken, grabbed up book after book and saw it disintegrate in his hands. Fragments of paper bronzed and darkened as the air took it.

‘And there goes the wisdom of a hundred civilisations,’ said Dann. ‘Look, there it goes. Going, going, gone.’

Dann was moving from table to table, hoping perhaps that at this one or that the books were still whole. He gently opened one after another, and watched it die, while odd words or lines of words sprang up clear and strong, like lines of writing being consumed by fire. (250)

Dann’s terrible grief at the loss of so much knowledge, described in terms of the books falling “into dust” in the hands of the scribes (250), recalls the endless descriptions of the dust that denotes the barrenness of the physical landscape in the earlier novel. In this sense the lack of water in southern Ifrik becomes symbolic of both a lack of civilisation and a

lack of knowledge. The power of natural forces in destroying knowledge, both in *Mara and Dann* and when the Centre floods as the Tundra melts in *General Dann*, again suggests how much humans are at the mercy of their environment.

What is most interesting in the light of this, is that while everything in *General Dann* seems to lead towards the preservation of the artefacts and books held in the Centre, two incidents highlight the opposing value Lessing's novels place on this information. First, when Dann is weeping over the manuscripts and books they are unable to preserve, Griot tells him "what has been made can be made again" (251), which suggests that the loss of knowledge is not really tragic, but that another cycle of gaining information and of education will begin. It is this idea of the rebirth of knowledge that informs the end of *General Dann*. Once they have left the Centre and set up a new city, Dann acts on his previous realisation that "[e]verywhere there are people who know things but they don't know their knowledge is precious. If we could put together all the things that different people know, it might add up to – it would be something enormous" (179). He sets up a "College of Learning" run by the "scribes and savants who had studied at the tables along the Great Hall in the Centre" (272), leaving it to Mara's daughter Tamar to run when she becomes an adult. At the entrance to the College is a large white wall inscribed with a message:

This great white expanse represents the area of knowledge of the Ancient World. The small black square in the lower right-hand corner represents the amount of knowledge we have. All visitors are asked to reflect for a few moments, asking themselves if they perhaps have information or learning which is not general, and which could be added to our common store. There was once, long ago, a shared culture covering the whole world: remember, we have only fragments of it. (272)

This image, which appears towards the end of *General Dann*, suggests that the cycle of knowledge has begun again, despite the flooding of the Centre and the loss of much that was previously conserved. It is also, then, perhaps a way towards an ecological ethic in the Ifrik novels – the "common store" and "shared knowledge" hinting at the first steps towards mutuality instead of war and separation.

A less optimistic reading of the significance of knowledge is suggested by the second incident. When Dann thinks about the ignorance of his time, he complains that "[t]hose people, those old people, they knew so much. They were so clever", but Ali replies: "If they were so clever, then where are they?" (179). This implies that, despite the apparent superiority of the earlier civilisations (who had all the knowledge the Centre protects), their knowledge was not enough to save them and their societies. Once again this

returns us to the earlier point Lessing's novels seem to be making: human culture is not enough to save humans from their baser nature or instinct towards self-destruction. Thus, despite knowledge being held up as the one way in which to challenge the human tendency towards violence, as the ending of *General Dann* seems to emphasise, there is an undertone of irony which rejects the hope of knowledge ultimately being able to 'civilise' humanity. This, then, seems to be a rejection of mutuality and respect for difference, and undercuts any sense that Lessing perceives a future in which an ecological ethic could emerge triumphantly over an intrinsically selfish and violent human nature.

The Ifrik Novels as Cautionary Tales

Despite the attempt to see knowledge as a way for humanity to overcome their hierarchical and destructive natures, the Ifrik novels can, then, be read as a pessimistic view of humankind. This cynical tone is maintained through Lessing's depiction of both our response to the kind of climate change described in the novels and, even more, through the suggestion that climate change is inevitable – even if we were to try to act in ways to prevent it. The response of humans to environmental transformation is illustrated through Mara's experience with the Kin in Chelops, which parallels Dann's experience with the island people. Both encounters advocate that it is somehow in the nature of humans to ignore the signs of ecological change, suggesting that Lessing intends the novels to warn us to take heed of climatic shifts in our own time. The actual warming of the globe during the course of the novels is, however, presented as a natural occurrence in itself, which calls into question whether *Mara and Dann* and *General Dann* can indeed be read as cautionary tales.

When Mara arrives in Chelops and is welcomed by the Mahondi Kin, she is constantly awed at the variety of food which they eat, their pretty clothes and their lazy lifestyles, especially as she has experienced so much hardship during her own short lifespan. Even though she is painfully thin when she arrives in Chelops, when she tells the story of the advancing desertification experienced across southern Ifrik, the Kin assume she is fabricating the stories.

They asked her questions but did not understand what she told them. They had grown up in Chelops, and had never known hardship. When she said, 'Sometimes we had only one cup of water to last for days,' they did not believe her, thought she was making it up. When she said, 'For years we ate roots and flour made into paste with water and cooked on the stones,' they exchanged pretty glances and little

grimaces of disbelief. She said, 'We didn't wash at all, we couldn't, there wasn't any water,' and they raised their eyebrows and shook their heads, and smiled at each other. They were being kind to her, as if she were a foolish child or a pet animal. (147)

The Kin's refusal, or perhaps even inability, to believe in Mara's story becomes one of the litanies of the Ifrik novels: Lessing suggests that one of the problems of global warming and environmental degradation is that humans have a unique capacity to ignore what is happening around them, almost as if they can will themselves into believing that their environment has no affect on them. Perhaps Lessing's message is that part of our inability to see the damage we are currently causing to our world is because of a similar incapacity to recognise the inevitable changes our environment can have on our own lives (which is maybe why speculative fiction is so often dismissed as mere fantasy).³

This is certainly the case in *Chelops*. After Mara and Dann have been there for a while, Mara begins to notice that "[e]very dry season dust blew across the plain and the dry, dead bushes bounced and whirled about the air with the dust devils; but this season was worse than anybody remembered" (162). She can see that the plants are changing, the animals are suffering and water – previously abundant – is rationed (170). Yet, despite these tangible signs, and in spite of Mara's previous experience of encroaching desertification, the Kin do not believe Mara when she says that "Chelops is coming to an end" (145). Certainly, neither the Mahondis nor the Hadrons are capable of seeing that one of the signs of the drought is their decreasing fertility as their bodies react to the changes in the environment: either they cannot conceive or their babies die almost immediately after birth, because they suffer from poor nutrition and dehydration. Even our bodies, Lessing suggests, can sense the changes in our circumstances before our minds can accept them.

The fear of the encroaching desert drives Mara and Dann to leave *Chelops*, and when they finally do, their insistence that the environment is deteriorating is vindicated. As they look back, "it was easy to see that *Chelops* was dying. Over in the east were little dots in the fields and streets that meant people were about, but the central areas seemed deserted. The reservoirs were low and did not shine, because there was dust on the water" (205). Soon after leaving *Chelops*, Mara and Dann arrive at the River Towns that line the tributaries to the Cong River⁴ and "so Mara and Dann, who had known in their lives only

³ Lessing's short story, "Report on the Threatened City", makes the same point: a group of aliens struggles in vain to warn humans living along the San Andreas fault line of the imminent danger to their lives.

⁴ This is one of the few times when Lessing makes a direct reference to today's Africa, as the Cong River is clearly meant to be the Congo River. Later, she mentions the Sahar robes (332) worn the by people

drought and dust, thirst and anxiety over water, were floating on a river that seemed to them enormous” (212). Lessing does not leave the reader to assume that they are now safe, however, as Mara and Dann, unlike the majority of other characters, soon notice that the river “had been wider, they could see, for the water had, though not recently, filled the banks to the brim” (212). Furthermore, as they journey further north, they can see that on both sides of the river “the country was dry and yellowish, and all dry grasses fringed the banks. This was the country that had once been the green part of Ifrik, long, long ago, with great forests, and innumerable feeder streams” (213). Because they are so aware of climate changes, Mara and Dann’s observations reinforce the message that drought can easily turn into desertification.

Global warming has a different effect on the northern areas of Ifrik because as the continent heats up, so the ice of the tundra starts to melt and the marshes increase in size. The ice-melt begins to pour into the Middle Sea,⁵ which is surrounded by cliffs and the glaciers of Yerrup. When visiting the island people of the Middle Sea, Dann soon realises that they “had no conception that their way of life would soon change, and on some islands, the lower ones, end” (48). Just as the people of Chelops “can’t see their situation because they’ve lived too comfortably for too long” (*M&D* 243), so the island people “did not want to know” (*GD* 48) that their situation was changing. Dann alone, it seems, is able to see that the “water was rising fast. Not far along the coast houses stood in water, some submerged” (48). Even his palpable excitement at seeing the lush vegetation on the islands is not enough to convince his friend Durk that his stories of drought and desert are true:

He had not seen ever in his life whole forests of healthy trees, but only trees standing in dust, trees dying of dryness, trees that seemed whole and well until you saw a limpness in their leaves and knew that drought was attacking their roots.... Dann told Durk of what he had experienced in the drought-struck lands of southern Ifrik, and saw that he was not being believed. (50-51)

of north Africa which are clearly names derived from the Sahara Desert, even though the same region is well-watered and even forested in many places in Lessing’s Ifrik. By my calculations, taken from the map of Ifrik at the beginning of *Mara and Dann* (v), Ifrik corresponds roughly with Africa as follows: Rustam and the Rock Village with modern Zimbabwe – when Mara and Dann leave they cross an old waterfall “that had been half a mile wide” (93), which is probably Victoria Falls; Chelops somewhere near Lake Tanganyika; the River Towns in the Democratic Republic of Congo; Charad in the Chad area; the Tundra in the old Sahara desert; the Centre in Algeria; and the Farm in Morocco. I would argue that the Centre is too far west on the given map for it to be Egypt, as Crater claims (19), especially as the Nilus River is indicated much further to the East of the Centre. These changes in place names have the effect of suggesting the long period of time between today’s world and that of Mara and Dann, increasing our estrangement and inviting us to think about our preconceptions regarding the apparent consistency of our world.

⁵ The Mediterranean Sea.

No matter where he and Durk travel amongst the island people, he finds people will listen to what he has to say about his experiences on his trek up through Ifrik, but they assume that he is merely telling fantastic tales. When he tries to warn them of the dangers of the melting ice for their island lifestyle, and they reject what he has to say as another tall story, he is reminded that “it was not the first time, after all, that he observed this phenomenon: people whose existence was threatened and did not know it. Would not. They could not bear it” (48). What makes Lessing’s point even more significant is that even Dann can see the advantages of living in ignorance and is tempted to stay with the island people, asking himself if he is “*mad to leave ‘down there’ – with its delightful airs, its balmy winds, its peaceful sunny islands?*” (80, original italics).

Although Dann is tempted to ignore the warning signs so evident to him, if not to the island people, his return to the Centre and its subsequent flooding reiterate that the effects of global warming cannot be discounted. The result of Lessing’s constant references to humanity’s inability to see the very real (and often very rapid) effects of global warming would, if taken alone, suggest that *Mara and Dann* and *General Dann* are intended as cautionary tales. On one level, they do warn us that to ignore the effects of global warming in our own time is dangerous and suggest an urgent need to implement an ecological ethic – at least in our behaviour towards the non-human natural world – in the hopes of arresting the damage we are already doing to our environment. However, on another level, Lessing’s references to the natural causes of climate change undermine any sense that humans are culpable for their instrumentalist attitude towards the planet.

It is clear throughout both novels that the populations of Ifrik have no idea how or why the climate is changing, and certainly do not have the technology to affect their climate in the same way that we do. Mara even explains the changes in climate to the women in the Bilma brothel as if climate change is purely natural:

‘From where we are to the Middle Sea was once only sand.... Only sand. Imagine that a white streak of sand you see on the road grows and becomes everything you see – everything is sand everywhere you look.... Yet under this sand were once forests and fields where people grew corn. Forests and fields that fed people, and then for some reason the sand covered it all over. And then after many, many years’ – she did not dare say hundreds, let alone thousands – ‘over the sand blew earth, and then seeds, and then again instead of sands were forests, deep forests. But people came to live in the forests, and they began to cut down the trees, and what you see now is that stage, people making towns among the forests and cutting trees and – everything always is a stage, one way of being changes into another.’ (322)

Mara's words here suggest that human agency is impotent in the face of the power of nature, which contradicts the plaque Mara sees on the wall of the museum at the Centre. The plaque makes explicit reference to our own age, and the abuse which leads to a changing global climate:

‘There was a recklessness about the ways they used their soil and their water. These were peoples who had no interest in the results of their actions. They killed out the animals. They poisoned the fish in the sea. They cut down forests, so that country after country, once forested, became desert or arid. They spoiled everything they touched. There was probably something wrong with their brains. There are many historians who believe that these ancients richly deserved the punishment of the Ice. (381)

If Lessing means to suggest that the high levels of pollution of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries were responsible for exacerbating natural swings between cold and warm eras, it needs to be clearer in the novels. As it stands, however, comments like Felix's – “All the history of Ifrik has been that – swings of climate” (374) – have a fatalism to them that seems to undercut any sense that the museum's summary of our own age should stand as a warning to us. Similarly, Daulis says quite casually that it “seems fairly clear that we are having another change of climate. They are saying up North that the Ice is retreating again” (336). Climate change, here again, seems to be a matter of natural shifts between warm and cool eras, over which humans have no control.

As cautionary tales, then, Lessing's Ifrik novels both succeed in their insistence on the importance of climate change as well as failing in their rejection of human responsibility for global warming – or at least for the speeding-up of it. The effect of this is to undermine any sense that ecological ethics are valuable on a global level. Modifying our behaviour to respect the Other – be it the environment around us or other humans – would, it seems, have little effect on the kind of future facing planet earth.

* * *

Norah Vincent has suggested that *Mara and Dann* is a “portrait of a world in which everything and nothing about nature and culture has changed radically” (n.pag.). Perhaps, in this, Vincent is vacillating between Watkins's position that *Mara and Dann*'s final emphasis is “on process rather than conclusions” (9), and Daymond's argument that Lessing

places human agency above evolutionary issues: although her narrative describes in great detail the effects of drought on the land, the vegetation, the animals and the people, and although her time-scale is geological rather than historical, Lessing's real interest lies in what people will do rather than in the natural forces themselves. (85-86)

Although Lessing does hint that knowledge can finally lead to a more ideal world, focused on the mutual benefits of education and understanding, and does – albeit weakly – suggest that the behaviour of our current society was responsible for triggering the ice age out of which Ifrik is emerging, the overwhelming tone of the novels is pessimistic. Any ideas that Lessing may have articulated in her earlier *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five* that it is possible to create a society founded on relationships of non-hierarchical difference, are overturned in the Ifrik novels by the emphasis on the violence and self-involvement of human nature. Even the suggestion that the College of Learning may be the path towards some kind of ecological ethic in the future, is damaged by the implication in the final pages of the novel that Mara's daughter Tamar will end up clashing with Dann's daughter Rhea in the future – Rhea is driven by a desire for power and not by mutual respect. Whether or not Lessing writes a third Ifrik novel which deals with this conflict, both *Mara and Dann* and *General Dann* leave the reader without any real optimism. The dystopian trend of the later works of Piercy, Le Guin and Atwood is, at least to some degree, alleviated by their open endings or by the suggestion that there is space, no matter how bad the future, for an ecological ethic to flourish; Lessing's Ifrik novels hold out much less hope for a world that is recognisable to us, and even less for one that reaches toward utopia.

Conclusion:

Speculating on the Future

Sci-fi is sometimes just an excuse for dressed-up swashbuckling and kinky sex, but it can also provide a kit for examining the paradoxes and torments of what was once fondly referred to as the human condition: What is our true nature, where did we come from, where are we going, what are we doing to ourselves, of what extremes might we be capable? Within the frequently messy sandbox of sci-fi fantasy, some of the most accomplished and suggestive intellectual play of the last century has taken place.

– Margaret Atwood, “The Queen of Quinkdom.” (300)

Doris Lessing’s Ifrik novels form a fitting, if depressing, climax to the dystopian trend of the more recent speculative novels of Lessing, Atwood, Le Guin and Piercy. *Mara and Dann* and *General Dann* suggest a bleak future – one in which the utopian impulses towards a world nurtured by an ecological ethic are virtually impossible. This pessimism, perhaps more than anything else, illustrates the considerable shift in perspective these four authors demonstrate in their speculative novels. Since the publication of *The Left Hand of Darkness* in 1969, there has been a gradual erosion of the optimism that expressed itself in utopian dreams in the earliest novels examined in this thesis. These early utopias, whether described or merely sought, have made way for novels which see less and less hope for such dreams to become reality.

But why dream, why seek utopia in the first place? Patrick Murphy has pointed out that “extrapolation emphasises that the present and the future are interconnected – what we do now will be reflected in the future, and, therefore, we have no alibi for avoiding addressing the results of our actions today” (“The Non-Alibi” 263). Each of the authors considered here demonstrates through her novels a profound sense of unease about the human tendency towards Othering. To use, abuse, dismiss and disregard that which is different is, they suggest, one of the major problems facing society. The ideal world is one in which others can be seen as equal and as worthy of respect in their difference. Ecological philosophy provides a useful way of adumbrating this ideal: Steven Connor has written that a “postmodern ecology” requires “the paradoxical feat of inventing the modes of our inherence in the world, determining the nature of our determination by the natural, bringing about the condition of our givenness” (284). Through the rejection of backgrounding, radical exclusion, incorporation, instrumentalism, and homogenisation, Val Plumwood has perhaps attempted to do just this by positing an exemplary type of conduct, which she calls relationships of non-hierarchical difference (*Feminism* 60). Alongside

other ecological philosophers, such as Carolyn Merchant, Donna Haraway, Kate Soper and Freya Mathews, Plumwood's desire for mutual respect between humans and their non-human environments, between different races, classes and genders, is a rejection of master/slave ideologies and an acceptance of webs of interrelationships: it is this which I have termed an ecological ethic.

What this thesis has demonstrated is that this ecological ethic is expressive of the ideals of human behaviour found in the speculative novels published by Margaret Atwood, Ursula Le Guin, Marge Piercy and Doris Lessing within the last forty years. It has elucidated not only the background to the ecological philosophy underpinning the analysis of the chosen texts, but has also contextualised these novels within the greater compass of science fiction, showing how these particular works are written out of a long tradition of extrapolative fiction, particularly that linked to utopian and dystopian discourses. Thereafter, this thesis has argued that the early novels envisage an ecological ethic in two main ways. On one hand they attempt to describe utopian societies which function according to the principles of mutuality and respect for difference, and on the other they depict dystopias characterised by hierarchical power structures. Most often, these conflicting ways of life are balanced against each other, as in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Word for World is Forest*, *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five*. By *The Dispossessed* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, however, the utopia-versus-dystopia opposition has become ambiguous, so that it is less clear which society displays the values concomitant with an ecological ethic and which does not. This feeling of unease over the practicalities of living by an ecological ethic and the increasing sense of urgency regarding issues of dominance and control, whether environmental or societal, led, it has been argued, to these authors revisiting their earlier themes through the medium of the critical dystopia. The later novels, all written around the turn of the millennium, begin to question more rigorously the nature of human behaviour. They ask what it is that separates culture from nature, and whether the desire for mutual interrelationships between Others is achievable in the face of the kinds of futures that are likely for our planet.

What can one take from this reading of these novels? Within the context of ecological philosophy, such novels can realise, through the form of fiction, the ideals and fears of theorists engaging with the questions surrounding not only environmental abuse, but any form of Othering. The practicalities of creating a utopia based on an ecological ethic can be assessed through thought-experiment; the uneasiness about what may happen

to our planet, should we continue to Other those people, animals and non-human environments under threat, can be imagined through extrapolation. The earlier novels, with their optimism for the future, may inspire us to change, and the later novels grip us with a sense of urgency to revolutionise the way humans interact with other humans and with the world around them. Indeed, the latest report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (released in November 2007), makes it clear that global warming is now an “unequivocal” fact (Bernstein, Bosch *et al* 2), which suggests that the anxiety evident in the later novels is not unfounded.

The main shortcoming of such an analysis is its emphasis on the didactic qualities of the chosen novels. As argued in Chapter Two, speculative fiction lends itself to instruction precisely because it is used to speculate: it experiments by imagining societies, worlds, and universes that work according to principles different from those experienced by the author – sometimes very dissimilar, sometimes more alike. As fundamental as ethics are in such fiction, it is the aesthetic quality of the texts that make them live and thrive as literary works. By viewing novels through particular lenses, such as feminism, ecological philosophy, post-structuralism, or whatever the literary student may choose, it is possible to forget what draws us to novels such as these in the first instance. This could perhaps be summed up best through Le Guin’s own words, used to describe the Ekumen: as much as we read to be enlightened, for “Increase of knowledge”, we also read for “Curiosity. Adventure. Delight” (*The Left Hand of Darkness* 35). The message of each novel studied here would be lost without the poetry of the language in which it is embedded.

The originality of my approach to the chosen texts has been in using ecological philosophy to understand the problem of Othering, a common theme in the speculative fiction of Atwood, Piercy, Le Guin and Lessing. It is hoped that this could spark off further research in a number of different ways. It would be interesting to assess the usefulness of such ecological theorising in relation to other speculative fiction. Is an ecological ethic apparent in other feminist speculations of the 1970s and 1980s? A cursory reading suggests that it would be a useful tool in which to reassess texts held up as exemplars of feminism, despite their essentialist or separatist thinking. There are also male authors – Samuel Delany and Kim Stanley Robinson, for example – whose novels clearly work towards some of the same goals as those studied here. The rise of the critical dystopia in post-millennium writing would certainly speak to the kinds of ecological theories used in this thesis, and the avowedly ecological or environmentalist science fiction of authors like Joan Slonczewski, Karen Traviss and Sheri Tepper would obviously provide

further scope for research in how mutual interrelationships can be expressed in fiction. Furthermore, the entire oeuvres of Atwood, Le Guin, Lessing and Piercy could be examined in the light of the thinking begun here. Le Guin's fantasy, including her recent revisitation of the Earthsea world, could profitably be read through ecological philosophies such as those expressed in this thesis. The overtly feminist re-imagining of classical mythologies, as evinced by Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) and Lessing's *The Cleft* (2007), and fictionalising of history in Piercy's *Sex Wars* (2005), may also shed a different light on arguments begun here. The more realist fiction of these authors would in many instances also benefit from a re-examination which takes into account what I have called an ecological ethic.

Ultimately, the dialogue between authors, between texts and between those of us who are interested in the literary expression of these discussions, is founded in the shadowy space between reality and imagination: the solidity of the book held in our hands is a representation of the world surrounding us. What an ecological ethic can perhaps do is see the text and what it signifies as a part of the space in which we all interact, enabling us, in the words of Jonathan Bate, to live "with thoughtfulness and with an attentiveness, an attunement to both words and the world, and so to acknowledge that, although we make sense of things by way of words, we do not live apart from the world. For culture and environment are held together in a complex and delicate web" (*The Song* 23).

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