ABSTRACT

Title of Document: READING UTOPIAN NARRATIVES IN DYSTOPIAN TIMES

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Directed By: Professor Jane L. Donawerth, Department of English

This dissertation is a feminist study of the reading process of contemporary utopian novels by women: Ursula K. Le Guin, Octavia Butler, and Toni Morrison. These novels are not utopias, in the sense of place, since they are set in dystopian times. Instead, this study explores the reading process as a part of a text's presentation of utopian desire.

The first chapter focuses on Le Guin's 1985 *Always Coming Home*, set in a future United States polluted by environmental toxins and divided between a patriarchal Condor nation, and a communal, matrilineal, and non-hierarchical Kesh culture. Le Guin uses a made-up language, constructed without hierarchies, concepts from Native American story-telling and Taoist philosophy, and multiple narrators to encourage a collaborative reading process where readers weave a utopian vision from the pieces of Kesh culture, balanced against the Condor. The second chapter examines Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1997). In this future, California has disintegrated into anarchy and violence, and Lauren Olamina survives

the razing of her walled community, creates Earthseed – a new philosophy-religion, and founds a utopian settlement that is destroyed by Christian fundamentalists. Butler parodies false utopias--gated communities, company towns, and the Christian Right--and presents Lauren's religion, Earthseed, built on the idea of “God is Change,” as a utopian alternative. Butler merges the genres of diary, scripture, jeremiad, and slave narrative to offer a collaborative reading experience. False utopian ideals of exclusivity, security, and institutionalized religion are resisted by meditating on Earthseed Scriptures. The third chapter considers Morrison's *Paradise* (1998), set in western United States, and recounts the story of an all-black town, Ruby, and its destruction of an all-women "convent" near the town. Because Morrison tells her story with non-chronological fragments and multiple viewpoints, the reader must become the point of view character, constructing a coherent narrative and image of paradise from conflicting accounts. Morrison explores spiritual connectedness and healing by drawing on the history of all-black townships and all-women communities.

The narrative strategies of these novels--defamiliarzation, polyvocalism, fragmented structure, and meditation--encourage readers to collaborate in exploring utopian desire.

READING UTOPIAN NARRATIVES IN A DYSTOPIAN TIME

By

Deborah Taylor

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Advisory Committee:
Professor Jane L. Donawerth, Chair
Professor Jeanne D. Fahnestock
Dr. Karen L. Nelson
Professor Judith P. Hallett
Assistant Professor Marta Chico

Dedication

For my Grandmother, Feebs, who thought I would never finish school.
For my partner, Victoria, who worked on and read the chapter on *Paradise* more times than I hope she ever admits to.
For my parents, Jack and Judy Taylor, and for the “creative muse” space they gave me in the final long haul.
For the hope and life found in nephews and nieces, sons and daughters, everywhere.
For my dissertation advisor Jane Donawerth without whom this project would have died many years ago.
And for my dog Max, who had the most delightful personality, hairy paws, and a most ridiculous tail.

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Introduction: Utopia in the Reading Process

"But isn't it perverse to describe novels quite so alienating as utopian?" Glenn, 2005.

My dissertation makes connections between contemporary feminist thought and feminist utopias by considering the novels of three twentieth-century authors: *Always Coming Home* (1984) by Ursula K. Le Guin, *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1997) by Octavia E. Butler, and *Paradise* (1998) by Toni Morrison. This study adds to the scholarship on utopias and dystopias an analysis of the feminist reading practices implied in late twentieth century feminist utopias. Each chapter covers the work of one author; I analyze how these novels speak to utopian and feminist theory and how their narrative structures imply a strategy of reading. Defining, exploring, and arguing about what is utopia and connecting it to the radical reading practices suggested by these novels is the purpose of this project. Each novel offers utopian desire and a new exercise of the imagination that requires the reader's activity as co-creator of worlds *in relation.*

Each of the three authors incorporates and yet subverts motifs of the utopian genre. The framing narrative for utopian literature retains the conventions of a narrator (or main character) who reaches a "better place" and views the opportunities the new place offers. The dissertation addresses generic elements, such as the traveler, the direction of travel, how the dialogue affects the reading process, and the character development. These foundational narrative structures continue to influence the fictional genre into the modern era.[1] Traditionally, utopias by men, such as Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) and Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888) use a plot where a protagonist leaves "his" world to

find utopia; the other important characters are generally male, and they help the protagonist travel to see the benefits of the new place, with the idea that the foreigner would return home and convert his community to utopian ways. Another common element in these traditional male utopias is the exchange between the character who guides and the other who visits or travels; the dialogues are primarily either philosophical or rhetorical tools to move the plot forward and to conceptualize utopia. However, this changes with the advent of the modern novel and the critical utopia. [2] Writers experiment with all of these conventional elements and open the dialogue in feminist utopias, I argue, to the reader's collaboration.

Much of my argument relies on the explicitly political nature of literary utopias.[3] In the context of literature, this open association with the political is somewhat unusual (Jameson xi). Because of these political associations, the utopian genre is consistently challenged for its literary value in terms of how it uses language; it is challenged by the readers of more mainstream novels not only for content (the model or practice) but also for its bastardized form. Utopias are a unique hybrid literature drawing from multiple genre forms, including realism, travel narratives, treatises, and tracts; they are also interdisciplinary, drawing on elements of ethnography, anthropology, political science, literature, and sociology. It is in the imagination where - as many theorists have pointed out – the unique function of utopian literature appears.[4]

In his most recent book, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (2005), Frederic Jameson argues that readers who focus on the utopian impulse need to tease out the intersections of utopian desire in content and form. Jameson shows how utopian texts do not work in isolation but instead argue and counter-

argue with one another. The need and effort to cross reference other works and debate is what Jameson finds unique to the utopian genre. An individual text is whole, but it also contains the utopian tradition; the texts modify and reconstruct each other to create what Jameson refers to as a literary "hyperorganism" (2). The texts connected to this "hyperorganism" show "complete systemic change, change in the totality of social relations, and not just an improvement in bourgeois culture."[5] In a recent interview with Joshua Glenn for *The Boston Globe*, Jameson explains that texts in this genre challenge "political paralysis" because only when "people come to realize that there is no alternative [do] they react against [their situation], at least in their imaginations, and try to think of alternatives" (Glenn).

Jameson argues that it is important to see two hereditary lines that follow Thomas More's *Utopia*. One descendent is intent on fulfilling a utopian program; the second is an "obscure yet omnipresent" tendency or impulse that surfaces "in a variety of covert expressions and practices" (3). The first appears to be systematic and provides radical political practices, creating new societies and new writings in the literary genre.[6] Most useful literary utopias express utopia in political and social theory that (paradoxically) aims at "realism," and tries to avoid "everything Utopian" (Jameson 3).

The dual quality of utopia, as project and impulse, makes up much of my analysis of the novels. Similar to Jameson, I argue that the second line, the utopian impulse is seen in this literary form but is also related to a hermeneutic or interpretive method. As hermeneutic, utopia is best explained using Ernst Bloc's "principle of hope," by which utopia is explored as "day dreams," followed by "anticipatory consciousness," which can generate an application of "utopian hermeneutics" usefully applied to daily life (Jameson

2). However, it is difficult to create an interpretive world-view that allows us to imagine or outline a utopian world-view. Bloch's method raises a hermeneutic problem because the utopian impulse it reveals is best revealed in places that we least expect. If utopian desire is stated overtly, then, does that lessen its revelation or opportunity? Which is stronger, the place of imagining "alternatives" or the place of "critique?" Although they rely more on critique than alternative structures, all four works by Butler, Le Guin, and Morrison are utopian.[7] This study also examines the hermeneutic or interpretative methods encouraged by the narrative structure of each of these feminist novels.[8]

Definitions and Discussions

A discussion of utopia and dystopia requires review of the foundational definitions by scholars of the academic circle who are part of the Utopian Studies Society, including Peter Fitting, Ruth Levitas, Tom Moylan, Lyman Tower Sargent, and Darko Suvin, among others.[9] Sargent's seminal article, "Utopia – The Problem of Definition" (1975), is frequently cited. In it, Sargent, a political scientist, succinctly describes a utopia as a "fairly detailed description of a social system that is nonexistent but located in time and space" (143). The definition refers to a "nonexistent" place that is (paradoxically) represented as a vision in a semi-recognizable time and space. From this description, we discern that utopia is a part of reality but also lives (only) at the level of the imaginary.

Sargent's definition also includes reference to the politician, scholar, and writer Thomas More, who is generally considered to be the first author of a political, social text about utopia; it was published in 1516. The play between what exists and what might exist appears in the shape of a realistic woodcut map on the cover of the 1518 edition.

Utopia and England spiraled around each other. The full title page of More's *Utopia* states: *The Best State of a Commonwealth and the New Island of Utopia: A Truly Golden Handbook, No Less Beneficial than Entertaining, by the Distinguished and Eloquent Author Thomas More Citizen and Sheriff of the Famous City of London.* Author More playfully compares "the best state" with this "new island"; he refers to his book as "golden"- "beneficial," but also as "entertaining" (Sargent 138-9).

Sargent discusses how these terms guide expectations of More's content and form – More's *Utopia* is meant not simply as a blueprint for a better society, since the narrative voice is truly ironical. More and Hythoday engage in a playful, yet rhetorical, conversation about utopia. Sargent emphasizes the etymological meanings of "utopia," which is formed by combining two different Greek words. He shows how More creates a two-sided definition where one meaning is *outopia* (no place) and a second is *eutopia* (good place). How good can a no-place be? Hence, the newly formed word is a neologism meaning both "no place" and "good place" at the same time. Sargent emphasizes how important it is to capture the contrast between the playful and serious references as shown by the etymology of the word. These playful paradoxes continue in the utopian tradition, altered by contemporary ideologies of postmodernism and feminism.

Much scholarship about the utopian genre analyzes the role of the reader, and the reading effect of utopian-science fiction criticism. Another long-standing critic is Darko Suvin, an English Professor Emeritus at McGill University in Canada; he has worked on multiple texts dedicated to the activity of reading utopian and science fiction texts. Most important is his foundational *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and*

History of a Literary Genre (1979). Suvin is interested in what readers presuppose about a text. He notes that any genre involves a communication between the reader and the writer; these communication conventions range from identification to opposition. Suvin assumes that a socio-historical context, as perceived by both the writer (sender) and the reader (receiver) is part of a genre's aesthetic. Audiences know that "our common world" affects the possible worlds in the literature.

Suvin adds to the definition of utopia by showing the intersections between utopia and science fiction and the cognitive process involved in reading (and writing) such novels. His much-repeated definition of utopia is:

> The verbal construction of a particular quasi-human community where sociopolitical institutions, norms and individual relationships are organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author's community, this construction being based on estrangement arising out of an alternative historical hypothesis (Suvin, Metamorphoses 49).

Suvin argues that literary utopias are words that construct a fictional representation of a place that contains social institutions that are "more perfect." A "more perfect" place implies a comparison, so there must be the possibility of other, different worlds. Suvin introduces cognitive estrangement and defamiliarization as elements of this verbal construct: social relations are defamiliarized so that the reader extrapolates about his or her own world and his or her point of view.[10] Suvin emphasizes that the reader's perspective on the relation between the fictional world and external reality requires the reader to imagine oppositional outcomes; this is where utopian desire appears. Suvin

calls this place the "novum," or the new horizon; it is the utopian impulse as imagined by the reader (“Metamorphosis” 65).[11]

The novum can also be a series of metaphors that exist in relation to one another to produce a dynamic understanding of space-time. Suvin argues that science fiction stories are stories modeled after our own world but altered enough that they appear different from our world. Science fiction focuses on world-building, emphasizing “metaphoric cognition," a concept similar to cognitive estrangement. The difference is that these stories create there own system of metaphors that build from a back-and-forth observation of what is normal here, and what is not normal. This metaphorical thinking implies a focus on how the new fictional worlds are built from old ones. Suvin discusses the principle of metaphoric cognition as one that opens up the possibility of a future that is optimistic rather than pessimistic (“Metaphoricity” 55).

Academic interest in women’s utopias is signaled by Carol Farley Kessler’s 1984 collection of early American utopian and feminist writing, *Daring to Dream: Utopian Stories by United States Women: 1836-1919*. Kessler introduces some tenets of early feminist utopian literature that still apply to theoretical discussions today. She argues that didactic fiction, such as the utopian genre, has much to teach us.[12] Similar to what Jameson notes about the hybridity of utopian fiction, Kessler argues that these novels contain “elements of assertive discourse” which include genres such as “sermon, manifesto, tract, fable or speech and marriage contract” (4). These works have characters and plots that put didactic and moral aspects into the foreground. These fictions teach.

Kessler lists characteristics of feminist utopias.[13] For example, these utopias provide evidence of “communitarian values” (17). Some feminist utopias depict common

property along with the awareness that each woman needs individual space. In most such texts, community members work together on food, medical care, education, and recreation choices. Efforts by community members include shared domestic work, and rotation of food preparation. In addition, child rearing is the responsibility of multiple members. The community assumes responsibility for the safety of all members. These aspects mean that individuals self-govern, and also take responsibility for the well-being of the group. The members remain egalitarian and strive for consensus.

Some of these writings show equality by containing separate or all-female societies. These societies exist in what Kessler calls the "wild zone" - a place that mainstream society does not go. The "wild zone" works similar to the term Gloria Anzuldua uses to describe the location of her identity: the borderland. It is useful to describe the attitude or the knowledge a sub-group has to have to live and survive within the dominant society's strictures. Some utopias with women-only spaces show a shared communication rather than isolation or separatism. The shared communication extends into a view of nature that is immediate, holistic, and organic. These nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century texts show utopias that search and demand "alternative ways of being" and often connect spirituality to utopian progress (19). These are stories of quests that contain journeys that are exterior but also interior. Self-renewal is for the reader a journey to the frontier of a new state of mind, "a Gedankenexperienment revealing new possibilities" (19). The reader's utopian renewal comes from the "vicarious" experience of engaging the text.

Tom Moylan's first book, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (1986), still informs utopian studies scholarship. Moylan begins by

describing the utopian genre historically and its role in cultural production. He distinguishes three stages in the evolution of the genre.[14] The first stage of "totalizing blueprints" of perfect societies; the second stage includes dystopias such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and Zamyatin's *We;* the third stage is made up of “critical utopias” which offered radical commentary on the genre and on the society of the late twentieth century.

Moylan divides the book into two sections. The first part is a theoretical discussion of the utopian imagination that builds on work by Foucault, Jameson, Mannheim, Bloch, and Marcuse and ties this discussion into the literary utopia and the “textual functions” of the genre. Moylan is especially interested in the intersections of science fiction and utopian fiction. In the second part, Moylan argues that four specific novels of the 1970s revived the dead genre: Joanna Russ’s *The Female Man*, Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*, Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and Samuel Delany’s *Triton.* These are "critical utopias" or texts that "keep the utopian impulse alive by challenging it and deconstructing it within its very pages" (46). Moylan addresses the utopian tradition by incorporating a feminist Marxist framing to argue for an “oppositional function” of these utopias. They use “self-critical utopian discourse itself as a process that can tear apart the dominant ideological web" (213). Moylan demands “the impossible” by showing individual consciousness in a dynamic relationship with society. The “critical utopia” raises consciousness, and advocates for actions that oppose the status quo; unlike traditional utopian literature, the critical utopia delineates the responsibility people have to reach a higher state of consciousness and addresses strategies for trouble-spots, or challenges.

Moylan argues that the 1970s literary utopias are new in form and function, and combine simultaneously with the feminist politics of the time. He suggests that these utopias were different from earlier forms because they embraced "a postmodern attitude of self-reflexivity"; the works saw the need for a "critical mass" to make change happen (10). Moylan points out how much the utopian genre was affected by feminism, environmentalism, and socialism, and argues that the fiction writers of the 1970s were responding to the politics of the time. Moylan explains: "By forging visions of better but open futures, these utopian writings developed a critique of dominant ideology and traced new vectors of opposition" (2). These texts pushed the reader into new territory. Social change comes out of a conflict between the origin society and the utopian society.

Although published the same year as Moylan's work, Peter Ruppert's 1986 book, *Reader in a Strange Land: The Activity of Reading Literary Utopias*, only recently became part of the common landscape in utopian studies scholarship. Interest in Ruppert has increased because theory has shifted toward an interest in the function of utopia where a reader's process is the focus. Indeed, Ruppert argues that the reader's activity is an essential part of creating utopia, which "grows out of the interplay between social fact and utopian dream" (6). Furthermore, the reader is the "site of productive activity, the point at which meaning is produced" (6). Ruppert's focus is on a dialectic at the heart of utopia where the "reader and text are welded together in mutual dependence" (55). He asserts that a utopian text will "mean different things to different readers" (x). Ruppert bases this argument on distinguishing between two types of utopian readers: one type views utopian literature for its sociopolitical functions and the other type for its imaginative qualities. He is most interested in the second group as the "ideal" readers.

These different approaches to utopian texts engage the reader's utopian horizon in separate but connected ways.

Ruppert's approach is attractive because it helps us rethink the categories of whether a work is utopian or not. His focus on the reader makes it possible for utopian texts to include utopias and dystopias, because both categories imply "a utopian alternative, the construction of which is left up to the reader" (116). For Ruppert, the "readerly" utopia is not a literary form per se, but rather a critical state of mind. This means that the audience gains some critical distance or perspective about the dystopian present, and past, and from this viewpoint imagines social relations anew. Like Suvin's theory of estrangement, this distance makes the reader aware "that our present situation is inextricably linked to our past and that the future depends on our choices and actions in the present" (Ruppert 163). The importance of the reader and a critical mindset continue to be important parts of utopian studies and I address these issues in each chapter and on each novel.

Historically, throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, the utopian genre grew in popularity, especially through the influences of feminism and science fiction. The debates surrounding the merits of utopian literature and theory increased. As attention to this fiction and criticism increased, people opposed to teaching feminist science fiction in academic institutions became more vocal. Still, while some literary scholars shrank from writing about science fiction because of its popular, non-academic associations, others dove in and criticized texts within more academically acceptable genre categories, such as utopia or dystopia. One such theorist was Frances Bartowski, whose *Feminist Utopias* (1989) surveyed an eclectic group of authors, including Marge Piercy, Joanna Russ, Monique Wittig, and Suzy McKee Charnas, but did not address these as science fiction.[15]

Bartowski argues that the utopian tradition is utopian and feminist in part because utopia is a universal force of feminism. Bartowski adds to the debate about the issues surrounding shifting from "utopia" as political impulse, to "utopia" as literary tradition. This distinction between the utopian imagination and the utopian place in relation to feminist discourse continues to be part of the discussions.

Ruth Levitas breaks down the utopian impulse into form, function, and content in her theoretical work, *The Concept of Utopia* (1990). Levitas uses Marx and Engels, Sorel and Mannheim, Bloch, and Morris to engage with the utopian Marxist positions that focus on the function of utopia. She proposes a working definition of utopia that informs my analysis, specifically concerning the function of utopia and the reader's role in creating utopian process. She argues that utopia expresses "desire" - the desire for a better living in the future. In her book, she emphasizes,

> Utopia is the expression of the desire for a better way of being. This includes the objective, institutional approach to utopia, and the subjective, experiential concern of disalienation. It allows for this desire to be realistic or unrealistic. It allows for the form, function, and content to change over time. And it reminds us that, whatever we think of particular utopias, we learn a lot about the experience of living under any set of conditions by reflecting upon the desires, which those conditions generate and yet leave unfulfilled. For that is the space which utopia occupies (Levitas 8).

Levitas considers that utopian desire can be found externally in institutions, and internally in spiritual or subjective responses although she believes that social formations are more important than those desires that are "merely in fantasy" (191). She reminds us

that, while most utopian literature includes what we would consider recognizable imagined institutions, it also expresses subjective and cultural fantasy.[16] Levitas concludes that fantasy, individual and collective, is necessary for utopian desire to occur.[17]

Levitas argues for a structural pluralism in which, according to the social constructions of desire in specific historical periods, the three components of form, content, and function can be endlessly combined in historically unique ways. She evaluates utopia according to whether it brings about utopian *desire* for a better way of being. Like her, the writers in my project do not view utopia as a "natural" impulse, but view utopia as a "socially constructed response to an equally constructed gap between the needs and wants generated by a particular society and the satisfactions available to and distributed by it" (182). Utopia shows that there is a gap between the needs and wants (189). It is "the education of desire" that points out something is missing and necessary to "inspire social transformation" (111). She differentiates between "desire" and "hope" and warns against confusing the two, stating that the "essential" part of utopia is "not hope, but desire" (191).[18] Finally, she links the "study of utopia with the quest for utopia" (199). Levitas's ideas about the impact of desire and hope on utopian constructions, as well as the impact that the purpose or quest produces, appear in each chapter of this dissertation.

Sargent, Suvin, Moylan, and Levitas continue to inspire current utopian scholarship. Others join them at the conferences and in the journals, including Peter Fitting, a Film and French literature professor at McGill University. In his 1990 essay, "The Turn from Utopia in Recent Feminist Fiction," Fitting suggests that feminist utopias are no longer

being written: a utopia must be a place where the reader would like to live and a place that challenges patriarchal gender roles, and capitalist principles, among others. Fitting argues that works such as Suzette Hayden Elgin's *Native Tongue*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, and Ursula K. Le Guin's *Always Coming Home* are not utopian because they do not show us how to get "there"; rather, he says, the "utopia" just appears out of nowhere. While Fitting believes that reading utopias allows the imagination to see utopia as a possibility, he also urges that

> Utopias do not exist simply for us to wander into and then live "happily ever after," the novel tells us; they must be built and renewed and constantly chosen again and again (Fitting "Turn" 152).

Fitting asks an important question about the outcome of reading a utopia. He wonders whether it is more important to warn the reader of a possible failed utopia or to scare the reader into action by using the estranged experiences that occur in these dystopian texts. Whatever way they go, he argues that both utopias and dystopias should function to "push the reader into action" (142).

Fitting describes early utopian works that constructed a reader through a clear "rational mode" whereby the reader is thought to be "an intelligent person," even a participant in the philosophical dialogue form (152). Contemporary narrative dynamics push the readers to be personally invested in the protagonist's point of view, which provides a way to measure attitudes and feelings. Fitting notes that the novel changed the utopian narrative in significant ways. He points out the shift in

> The positioning of the reader as the addressee in a philosophical dialogue who is persuaded through reasoned presentation, to a process of identification with a

> fictional character, in which the reader is implicated on emotional and experiential levels as well as on an intellectual one (153).

The reader identifies with the characters more completely than in the earlier utopias, where characters were flat, theoretical, rhetorical mouthpieces. However, he believes Ursula K. Le Guin's *Always Coming Home* to be beyond the reach of the contemporary reader – he doubts "they" will be *savvy* enough to be the utopian discoverer that Le Guin demands.[19] In the first chapter, I discuss some implications for looking at Le Guin's novel as a collaborative project, a polyvocal narrative resulting in a utopian outcome by means of a multi-layered reading practice.

Jean Pfaelzer addresses Fitting's conclusions in a short piece in the same anthology, *Feminism, Utopia, and Narrative.* In her essay, "Response: What Happened to History," she argues that the late twentieth century has brought about a shift so that "readers identify with a series of collective subjects who, at a time of intense historical crisis, find themselves part of the creation of a new society" (Pfaelzer 197). This creative practice occurs from the level of the sentence up to the worlds we construct in the reading praxis. Pfaelzer suggests that "Utopia tempts us as an evocation of political desire" (199), even when the form doesn't point to an exact path. Pfaelzer informs my argument that Le Guin's utopia evokes *desire* in the reader, and this desire for a better way of living stands out, rather than the remorse or apathy that Fitting seems to suggest.

Another critical part of the discussion occurs in a special 1990 issue focusing on women of the journal *Science Fiction Studies* (SFS). Veronica Hollinger's essay, "Introduction: Women in Science Fiction and Other Hopeful Monsters," covers many debates and ideas in academic circles. By the 1990s, science fiction by women was a

pluralistic enterprise. Therefore, the essays contain multiple ideologies and voices and look at the many ways the imagination sees a utopian "lived reality" anew. Hollinger suggests that this journal's focus on women and science fiction shows the way that women speak the unspeakable and put it into printed form. In the introduction, Hollinger surveys what readers have gained from these revisions in utopian and science fiction for women.

The 1990 journal emphasizes the intersection between social and political theories about science fiction by and about women. Hollinger briefly summarizes each essay and discusses how feminist scholarship continues to become more rigorous. Various interests, such as the utopian/dystopian debate are visible. She notes that, while Hoda Zaki's article, "Utopia, Dystopia, and Ideology in the Science Fiction of Octavia Butler" is the only one to overtly focus on the relationship between utopia and dystopia, other essays focus on other intersecting ideologies. Yet other essays focus on personal desire for utopia, such as that which is found in Joanna Russ' work, and yet others focus on creating new societies, such as those in Le Guin's *Always Coming Home*. From this range, we see that the essays address feminism as a utopian enterprise on personal and communal levels. Hollinger describes the important role deconstructive theory has played in feminist scholarship; she discusses its importance in breaking down hierarchies, and in lessening black and white (or binary) thinking. It is deconstructive theory that helps readers and writers to subvert and denaturalize assumptions about power and offers new approaches to utopian designs. This is one reason that works that had been labeled dystopias became interestingly theorized as utopias because deconstruction allowed

critics space to look in the gap between utopia and dystopia rather than at the two in opposition.

Jane L. Donawerth and Carol A. Kolmerton in their 1994 anthology, *Utopian and Science Fiction by Women: Worlds of Difference*, argue feminist utopias and science fiction are on a continuum. Women's utopias form a "continuous literary tradition" but a changing tradition.[20] The anthology is made up of essays that focus on literary texts extending from the sixteenth century until today. The editors point out the differences between these texts and male-authored utopian texts. Donawerth and Kolmerton argue that what is unique about feminist writers is that these works contain "multiple worlds in relation rather than in opposition" (14). One can conclude, then, that this utopian writing is an epistemological shift from the Western Cartesian notion of a rigid definition of the subject and object paradigm; feminist utopias tend to deconstruct the subject - object binary and instead view the subject as formed at a point of intersecting with other subjects. In the introduction, Donawerth and Kolmerton point out the threads of ideas and traits that make up feminist utopias across several centuries. I describe a select number of the essays that give a sense of the utopian debate and inform my interpretations later.

One example is Rae Rosenthal's essay, "Gaskell's Feminist Utopia," which draws attention to several characteristics of utopian writing by women, including its "emphasis on feminine values and issues, commitment to communalism, and an ability to overcome male intruders through either expulsion or conversion" (74). We see evidence of this usage of models in my analysis of *Paradise*. Donawerth contributes "Science Fiction by Women in the Early Pulps, 1926-1930," and reminds us that it is at the start of the

twentieth century that the utopian tradition overlaps and connects to works of science fiction. This essay's argument for a utopian-science fiction continuum supports my choice of texts as they cross from realist utopian fiction, to "other-worldly" science fiction. Other useful essays in the anthology include some that discuss the generic qualities of feminist utopian texts. For instance, Jean Pfaelzer's "Subjectivity as Feminist Utopia" interprets Louisa May Alcott's "Transcendental Wild Oats" (1872) and Rebecca Harding Davis's "The Harmonists" (1866) to show how American women writing in the utopian tradition broke away from the male-authored tradition. Pfaelzer notes that some women's narrative strategies included gender reversal or gender ambiguity (176). Pfaelzer looks at narrative strategies in relation to female subjectivity and this connection is central to all chapters.

Carol Farley Kessler's essay, "Consider Her Ways: The Cultural Work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Pragmatopian Stories, 1908-1913," also influences my cultural approach to the novels in this study. Kessler interprets Gilman's stories by focusing on how the utopian genre intersects with issues surrounding gender. Gilman felt that utopian texts had "cultural work" to do and that this work was in part their ability to redefine acceptable social ordering (126). Kessler interprets Gilman's fiction by bringing in some of Gilman's own non-fiction work about economics, gender, and the utopian genre. In the chapters that follow about each author, I also bring in author interviews and essays to take into consideration each author's perspective about her work. Similar to Kessler, I do not think it probable (or good) that all readers interpret Gilman's stories as she intended. However, Gilman's ideas about the "social function of literature" help to position her important contribution to reading books in the utopian genre.[21] Kessler points out the

changing quality of the genre: earlier texts were not considered “utopias” because of their realism and concern with the present. Some critics might argue against the appearance of Toni Morrison in my study because *Paradise* is clearly not straightforward “utopian” or science fiction. However, like Gilman who believed that in order to “change minds” you need to “change behavior,” I think one purpose of literature results from this desire for change and that appears in the reader’s collaborative process.

In chronological order, the next works that inform my interpretative method of utopian and science fiction are Jane Donawerth’s book, *Frankenstein’s Daughters: Women Writing Science Fiction* (1997), and an article, “The Feminist Dystopia of the 1990s: Record of Failure, Midwife of Hope.” In *Frankenstein’s Daughters*, Donawerth describes science fiction and *Frankenstein* as a paradigm. On the one hand, she argues that *Frankenstein* shows Shelly’s freedom and desire to explore gender, science, and fiction outside of the social norms; on the other hand, Donawerth argues that *Frankenstein* shows Shelley’s confinement by patriarchy and the male gendered role of science fiction. In later science fiction, the social context of the genre shows women “constructed as aliens” and men who “retained the license to speak and control the stories" (xxvi). Donawerth also adds a postmodern feminist intervention by calling attention to the "cross-dressing" strategies of women who "speak through" male narrators. One tactic women authors have used to construct resistant narratives has been such cross-dressing. Donawerth’s approach calls attention to narrative strategies which she argues are not "innately female, but instead [are] narrative strategies that work as resistance because they are also similar to the conventions of ‘realistic’ science fiction narrative" (135). Donawerth’s focus on multiple narrators and the narrator’s theoretical

purpose informs my later discussions about narrative strategies, women authors, and utopian thinking.[22]

Donawerth describes a series of shifts in the last thirty years in the science fiction and utopian genre in her article, "The Feminist Dystopia of the 1990s." She discusses the genre in relation to the political and social climate of the previous three decades, pointing out what she calls a "trajectory" of feminist utopian fiction that peaks during the "critical utopias" of the 1970s. The 1980s then offer "replies" or critiques of the earlier works; and last, the utopian fiction of the 1990s dives into a series of pessimistic dystopias (Donawerth 94-100). Donawerth further describes some commonalities in the 1990s dystopias, such as "dysfunctional families" and fragmentary narrators' voices.[23] Since then, scholars have debated about whether these 1990s texts resemble earlier dystopias, just after World War II, or are something new. An important consideration is whether these works implied hope or hopelessness in terms of our future.

Tom Moylan adds to the debate about the 1990s conventions of the science fiction and utopian genre. Moylan echoes Donawerth's ideas about the shifts in the genre content and form during the 1970s that continues into the twenty-first century. Such dystopian elements included fragmented identities, and multiple narrators that seemed to generate a satiric critique of society and express hopelessness. However, during the 1990s, more discussions about the function of these dystopian texts took place, rekindling our theoretical interest in what happens when we read literary dystopias as utopias. Instead of despair, oftentimes the works subvert heroic, patriarchal ideals, with a "new" hero who may be fragmented or multiple but who may embody a "collective," and powerfully gendered discourse.

Moylan's recent book, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (2000), a continuation of his earlier study of utopias, deals with this new form of dystopia. The book is divided into two main parts. The first section summarizes the past thirty years of utopian scholarship, synthesizing the range of theories in utopian studies and science fiction and using them to create a framework for understanding the dystopias of the 1990s. Moylan pulls together all of the major theorists and the concepts deployed in the study of science fiction from Suvin's "cognitive estrangement," to Angenot's "absent paradigm," and Jameson's "cognitive mapping." In addition, he reviews Bloch's principle of "utopian hope," Lyman Tower Sargent's "social dreaming," and Ruth Levitas's the "education of desire." Like previous critics, Moylan is concerned as much with the reading process as the texts of utopias.

The remaining chapters of Moylan's study discuss a selection of literary texts that show the characteristics of the new "critical dystopias." Moylan theorizes that "the distinction can be made between the limit case of an open (epical) dystopia that retains a utopian commitment at the core of its formally pessimistic presentation and a closed (mythic) one that abandons the textual ambiguity of dystopian narrative for the absolutism of an anti-utopian stance" (156). However, few texts are so strikingly oppositional since individual texts generally "negotiate a more strategically ambiguous position somewhere along the … continuum" (147). This theoretical section is followed by some very closely read texts, two of which I cover in my dissertation: Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998). The other works he analyzes are Kim Stanley Robinson's *Orange County Triology* (1984-90), and Marge Piercy's *He, She, and It.* I agree with much of Moylan's argument about Butler's two

novels; however, I also address, in my chapter on Butler, the limitations of a primarily social, economic interpretation that Moylan uses to support his arguments. These are not works of non-fiction, after all.

Moylan describes the role of the reader as a participant who responds to a philosophical treatise. Moylan argues that science fiction and utopian literature is "a fictive mode that not only mirrors but actively interrogates and intervenes in the processes of history…" The reading of utopia is pleasurable but offers more. He asserts that:

> When the book is closed and the reader looks out at the world, the even more satisfying experience (now both delightful and didactic) of investigative reading so privileged by sf (sic) lingers as one more skill, one more intellectual habit, by which to make sense of social reality itself. In this way, the popular cultural form of sf makes an empowering critical practice available to its readers (27).

Moylan describes science fiction as producing pleasure and delight as well as a means to a "distanced" interrogation of the social world. Aesthetics are less valuable than the social-critical reading. A science fiction text by definition should explore counter-hegemonic possibilities. This transformative engagement can so radically energize a reader that "she or he might …, especially in concert with friends or comrades and allies, do something to … make the world a more just and congenial place for all who live in it" (5). At a minimum, the works will at least unsettle the reader; at a maximum, the dream is a critique that energizes the reader to "do something." Science fiction and utopian literature create a "distanced space that can draw willing readers away from the society that produces and envelops them" (30). A utopian or dystopian text thus succeeds or fails

based on the actions of the reader. A text that excludes the possibility of utopian hope for the reader is negative; ideally, a utopian text presents a horizon that leads to either "political awareness or effort" (163). While useful as a starting point, Moylan's theory makes reading a text almost a mathematical exchange.

Moylan argues that a dystopia fails when it reinforces an "anti-utopian pessimism" or inaction that lulls the reader into settling for the "status quo" (181). When the hope for social change is "shattered," then the negative, non-critical dystopian text has survived. For Moylan, the recent critical dystopia confronts staid politics and is "sensitive to diversity and more engaged with direct, collective challenges to the system" (198). This encouragement of collective responses to oppressive situations is a utopian cognitive practice. Only by moving away from what lulls us can we become revolutionized by utopian desire.

Much of what Moylan discusses about the function of the critical dystopia I find helpful for analyzing the three novels in my project. Kenneth M. Roemer focuses more closely on the reader complicating the way we view the intersection of form, function, and content.[24] *Utopian Audiences: How Readers Locate Nowhere* (2003) furthers the role and function of the utopian text by emphasizing readers as "co-creators" who transform the "utopian message" (67). Roemer points to the significant theoretical shift in the last few decades of the twentieth century from "what it is" to "what it does" orientation. The question "*what* it does" then raises the question of "to whom" – obviously ending with the reader. Roemer describes how utopian texts "invite" changes in perception and behavior because readers imagine the non-existent and can then "transform no place into their own someplace" (60). The real drama, he claims, is not

whether or not readers "will accept the given-gospel of the text, but how they will respond to and use the potentially unhinging experience of reading a utopia".[25]

Roemer constructs a theoretical matrix from disparate texts, including More's *Utopia* (1516), Le Guin's *Always Coming Home* (1985), and John G. Neihardt and Nicolas Black Elk's *Black Elk Speaks* (1961). He uses each of these books to give an overview of how the subject and writer of different utopian texts show us something about the culture and history, the author as writer and first reader, the impulse as first hand. The first chapter develops the theoretical origins and assumptions that he uses to teach Edward Bellamy's 1888 novel, *Looking Backward*. The next chapters are grouped around three pools of readers and how they might (or have) approached the novel. It is a unique book in the utopian scholarly field because it combines reception and real reader-responses (his students among others), with cultural studies to analyze Bellamy's book, cultural production and reception.[26]

Roemer's work on utopian audiences began in 1983 when he decided to incorporate reader-response criticism into his classes reading Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888). The purpose was to give students an approach to a genre that many had never read. His approach was not to "pretend to explain how readers locate nowhere." Rather he hopes

> it will help us to understand some of the likely reasons why and how Americans readers transformed a book by a relatively unknown author into an agent of national and even international change, how these reasons might relate to reading utopian literature in general, and why the study of the literature of nowhere is such a fertile exploration site for studying the frustratingly inaccessible but perpetually fascinating process of reading (xii-xiii).

Roemer uses early book reviews by the famous and unknown writers of Bellamy's era to explore the transition from an unknown to a well-known book and popular author.

Roemer methodically considers multiple layers of audiences – the first reader is the author (once the book is in print); the next group includes professional reviewers (book reviewers, illustrators, critics, and scholars); the last group consists of the seven hundred plus student readers in his classes. He incorporates how non-professionals read the novel; in addition, he provides a context for the expectations initial readers would likely have brought to the text. Roemer avoids the pitfalls of simply close reading the text by including a cultural study perspective on how the readers are "socially constructed." He describes possible cultural reasons for Bellamy's utopia to become so visible for "thousands of Americans." Roemer discusses the reader as subject, producer, and receiver of the book to consider its production from multiple perspectives (72), and calls attention to the book's focus on the problems of the late nineteenth century and its focus on "orderly resolutions to contemporary problems" (74).

The multidimensional hybrid quality of the utopian genre is not entirely new; Roemer looks at the context of utopian fiction in relation to popular genres of Bellamy's period, such as domestic or sentimental fiction. Roemer explores one outcome of the romance theme or "Domestication of Utopia." Early American reading was easier when a new form, such as the utopia, was combined with a more established form, such as the romance novel. The utopian responses would be varied; they could be seen "in acts as private as helping orphans or warning young women about untrustworthy men, or as public as joining temperance or abolitionist groups" (97). Roemer points out that estrangement combined with familiarity allowed readers to connect with the text's

utopian qualities. He proposes a three dimensional method of analysis.[27] In a tongue-in-cheek titled chapter, "Getting Nowhere Beyond Stasis," (with wordplay on u-topia, no place), Roemer argues for an approach to reading utopias that allows for the contradictions between the revolutionary and the static parts of imagining alternative societies (118).

Roemer models the necessity of each dimension for an understanding of the text. The content analysis is associated with the proposed models and can be about politics, economics, cultural, or religious issues. The second tactic deemphasizes content and emphasizes possibilities suggested by "reading conventions, styles, and structures that can invite readers to imagine degrees of stasis and dynamism" (120) The third tactic looks at evidence that has to do with "how and why actual readers have accepted or rejected the socioeconomic and stylistic invitations of utopian texts" (120). The results of this three dimensional model are complicated. No element, content, implied or ideal reader response, or extra-textual constructions (biographical or historical) dominates. This means that the results are not easy to categorize. Roemer points out that the content and model the readers extract will depend on how "content" is defined (120). Evaluating a utopian text solely based on the content model is limiting and reductive.

A textual analysis that uses "reader-response theory" is open to elements beyond the level of the model.[28] It allows the text to be perceived "in terms of a network of invitations (some disruptive, some reassuring) that imply a reader who can interpret (or decode) invitations […] that might not be discovered in typical attempts to discover fixed utopian models" (124).[29] Roemer's point is that before these readers can create a positive future, they need to "deconstruct their notions of the past and present," which is what this

altered narrative perspective does (126). This deconstruction of the past and present is performed in each novel of my dissertation.

Roemer uses a complex body of audience members to show what a distributed readership analysis looks like. Meaning comes from a distributed reading base; this situates the text's meanings.[30] Using Bellamy's own words about literature and reading to support his argument that a fictional text can become a pretext for social action, Roemer shows how multiple interpretative communities might arrive at the same conclusions about the text's values (135). Many critics argue that utopian literature has "the power to 'move' readers" (230). However, the direction of movement changes from era to era, from public activism or private reflection. For Roemer, "readers transform utopias and other forms of literature" (231). Although it is impossible to ask each reader's response to these texts, I highlight the important parts of each novel to show how reading reception offers access to a utopian reading practice.

Questions about the role of the reader continue to be discussed in a recent anthology, *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* edited by raffaella baccolini and Tom Moylan. The anthology overtly confronts the hopelessness and hopefulness in utopias and dystopias in refreshing new ways. The collection includes many utopian scholars: Jane Donawerth, Peter Fitting, Naomi Jacobs, Ruth Levitas, Lucy Sargisson, Darko Suvin, Lyman Sargent Tower, as well as some newer scholars such as Ildney Cavalcanti and Maria Varsam. *Dark Horizons* incorporates many of the critical discussions in the field of utopian studies today. The anthology's articles seek and find utopia even within the most dystopian landscapes.[31] This inverted view of dystopia comes from the idea that "To speak of Utopia is to engage in an ongoing dialogue about

locating hope and positive prospects amidst the (dark) horizons of contemporary sociopolitical discourse," according to the editors (1). The articulation of utopia can be anywhere, even in the "dark" horizons.

baccolini and Moylan frame the anthology with their "Introduction: Dystopia and Histories" in which they discuss the trends in the literature and the scholarship. In particular, "critics began to track this dystopian turn, noting its innovations in formal flexibility and political maneuvering" particularly at a roundtable led by Lyman Sargent Tower at the Utopian Studies Society conference in 1993 where he called these works "critical dystopias." The dystopian text opens up directly in a terrible new world and yet with "textual estrangement" because the focus is usually on "a character who questions the dystopian society" (5). Dystopias are like other science fiction texts where the "protagonist (and the reader) is already in the world in question, unreflectively immersed in the society" (5). The text develops a counter-narrative as the point-of-view citizen of the dystopia discovers his or her alienation and resistance (5). The dystopian text presents a new kind of relationship to the reader in its formal narrative strategies. For instance, one of the main conflicts in the dystopia turns around language and at least one character's control over meaning. A protagonist, such as Butler's Lauren Olamina, authors a radical verbal expression, the poetry of Earthseed that provides her with a way to teach a new philosophy under the guise of teaching English.[32] Recent critical dystopias continue to put forth a utopian impulse; the readers and protagonists continue to hope by "resisting closure: the ambiguous, open endings of the novels maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work." [33] The individual isn't subjugated in these dystopias; but he or she becomes part of the collective voice that goes against the hegemony.

A few articles specifically discuss the critical dystopian form and the process of reading. Ildney Cavalcanti, Assistant Professor of English, writes in her essay, "The Writing of Utopia and the Feminist Critical Dystopia," about the difficulty of the reader's role in evaluating whether a fictional society is better or worse than our own and notes this as an almost impossible task. Generally, she argues that feminist dystopias imagine places that readers would consider bad or negative because female desire is suppressed and female characteristics are oppressed (48-49). Cavalcanti puts a feminist spin on Ruth Levitas's definition of utopia as "the desire for a better way of being" by putting "women's expression of desire" in the foreground (50, 198). In order to look carefully at the reader's role, she distinguishes the "dystopia as narrative" from utopia as the "critical expression of desire, which serves an anticipatory function…." (50-51).[34] Desire is materialized through an education that promotes political hope and through development of "female feminist subjectivities" (62-63). Cavalcanti argues that a utopian hermeneutics depends on a "deliberate mental twist" so the reader can see the text and gather its meaning. She is quick to point out that many individual acts of reading do this but notes that dystopias make reading a "public affair" with "a shared political stance" and a "utopian statement in itself" (65). The end result is the emphasis on the process of feminist dystopian journeys that, if studied, make us see a picture of "utopia forming" (65). Similarly, she separates out the utopian genre from utopian desire or impulse. This allows for a critical look at the value of a feminist utopian hermeneutics.

The next in depth look at the relationship between the reading process and dystopia occurs in the article by Maria Varsam, "Concrete Dystopia: Slavery and Its Others," which explores how slavery is connected in three novels: Margaret Atwood's *The*

Handmaid's Tale (1985), Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Varsam elaborates on how the first person narrator, among a "multiplicity of voices," is constructed to produce a reliable narrative point of view for the reader (205). She theorizes that dystopias are on a continuum where both fact and fiction are linked in a "non-representational mode"; she uses these different kinds of novels to reframe "the historical novel of Afro-American slavery experience in terms of the utopian impulse, a process of hope and resistance to oppression" (204). Varsam uses Suvin's defamiliarization to show the importance of a reader who identifies with a narrator or protagonist in order to condemn "those aspects of society that constitute the narrator's oppression" (206). The main strategy of this genre is that the reader is drawn into the world and identifies with the narrator's critique of the present and heeds the warnings of a future, stoppable catastrophe. The reader is located in "reality" and is asked to interpret the world, given this warning. Dystopian fiction can inspire the reader into creating a dialectical relationship between history and the future.

Like Varsam I argue for a "text-based definition" of dystopia, which "the reader takes an active part in generating, since it is the reader's understanding of the narrator's message that will establish the distinction between what constitutes a 'good' or 'bad' future world" (205). If it is a "bad" world, then characters resist by rebelling against the status quo and challenging the oppressive society. If a reader acknowledges the text as a warning, and as an education of desire, then he or she will see which kinds of power and institutions need resisting (213). This shows, according to Varsam, whether or not the reader has space to critique the "dystopian" text, and whether or not it enables utopian consciousness.

Chapter Breakdown

This dissertation concerns the function of the reading process as part of a text's presentation of utopian desire. Each chapter of this dissertation also touches on the form utopian desire takes. All three authors examined in this study argue in interviews and essays that they do not "believe" in utopia. In what follows, I discuss some of their conceptions of utopia. Their thoughts outside the fiction may not coincide exactly with how we interpret their works, but the interviews and essays provide a place to start. I discuss narrative theory and some possible consequences of certain narrative points of view in terms of the expression of utopian desire. I refer back to Levitas' breakdown of analysis of utopia into form, function, and content. Race, class, gender, and sexuality are explored in terms of their impact on our interpretation.

The first chapter, "Reading Utopia: Tapestry," focuses on Ursula K. Le Guin's 1985 novel *Always Coming Home*, a feminist utopia. Le Guin calls this her most hopeful book. Set in the western United States in a mysterious future that hints at pollution, radiation, infant deaths and deformities, and decreased population, the novel's future exists in a dialectical relationship with our reality, and our contemporary, military-industrial society is loosely represented by the patriarchal culture of the Condors. Juxtaposed to that culture, however, is the Kesh culture, a utopian society that is communal, matriarchal, and non-hierarchical.

Experimental in form, *Always Coming Home* threads the one hundred eighty page story of Stone Telling through a six hundred page novel that foregrounds the anthropological and ethnographic materials that generally constitute the backdrop of utopian and science fiction. The story of Stone Telling follows her on a journey from her

Kesh mother's culture to her Condor father's world and back (she is "always coming home"), as she creates a new, hybrid identity for herself. The novel is a collage of stories, poems, songs, dances, recipes, descriptions of social practices and arrangements, maps, and a new fictionalized language explained throughout the novel and complete with a glossary. As a consequence, the reader has to co-create the Kesh vision out of cultural artifacts, including songs, recipes, rituals, maps, folk tales, and Kesh literature. Our patriarchal culture becomes estranged because we look at it from the now normalized Kesh point of view.

The narrative of *Always Coming Home* obfuscates any order or linear sequence although it does give a rich picture of Kesh life. Given this, Le Guin implies that she wants the individual reader to have control over the way the text is put together, rather than imposing one view or vision of utopia – to the extent that she expects some readers to read only parts of her novel, or in an order quite different from her textual order. In Chapter 1, I show how Le Guin's narrative thus implies a utopian reading process. Le Guin's hermeneutics suggests that "neither the 'either' nor the 'or' is a place where people can live" (Dancing 98), and so the novel deconstructs our usual binaries. According to the Kesh, people cannot live at extremes, but must live in balance, on what the Kesh refer to as the "hinge," referring to their major cultural symbol, the "heya-if," a visual icon similar to an unrolled yin/yang symbol. Thus, as theorist Peter Ruppert suggests, the reader of Le Guin's "ambiguous utopias" is engaged in "a process of interrogation and experimentation," out of which our perception of "possibilities" may extend to the here and now (147).

In Chapter 1, I focus on the patterns of interconnectedness of *Always Coming Home* that help to generate this utopian reading process. The utopian reading process is found in the multi-faceted language that comes from the inclusion of Native American culture and Taoist philosophy, and encouraged by her use of multiple narrators; Le Guin invites the reader to weave together a utopian fabric from the pieces of Kesh culture. I analyze the multiple discourses, texts, and languages that allow for a polyvocal account of culture and the fragmented nature of the texts that require the reader to enter a utopian collaboration in building the culture. The language that Le Guin creates for the Kesh signifies the interconnections and mindfulness necessary for utopian process; it frees the Kesh people from oppression. Stone Telling enters a different world when she enters the Condor language, a world built on hierarchies and resulting in repression. Le Guin furthers this effect of polyvocal language by borrowing elements from the Native American cultures that her parents studied, and by adopting a philosophy of life using Taoism. Many of the Kesh stories reflect Native American story-telling practices – communal and collective, incorporating audience response. Also, *Always Coming Home* contains an extended metaphor of a Taoist form of utopia that emphasizes Taoist ideals of spontaneity, naturalness, calmness, non-action, and strength that comes (paradoxically) from softness. Finally, Le Guin uses multiple framing narrators to encourage a utopian reading process: Pandora, the author, Stone Telling, and the Editor. Having multiple narrators undoes the genre characteristics of story-telling because the question of the correct viewpoint is central to the novel. This makes readers consider their responsibility about constructing utopia as a collaborative process whereby readers can choose from the narrators. The narrators provide multiple ways to enter the text and multiple points of

view; these provide the reader with different ways to create a vision of utopia out of the seemingly unrelated cultural fragments of the Kesh and the allusions to Native American and Taoist practices.

Chapter Two, "Parody and Resistance," explores the utopian impulse in its dystopian attire in two novels set in near-future California in a series by Octavia Butler: *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1997). Lyman Tower Sargent and Tom Moylan define "critical dystopias" as those that depict at least one enclave that resists, making a hopeful impression on the reader at the novel's ending. This chapter explores the effect of Butler's use of parody and subversion in her near-future dystopias on utopian reading practice. In *Parable of the Sower*, Butler parodies different kinds of "ideal" community structures, including gated or walled-in communities, and company towns. In *Parable of the Talents*, Butler also subverts and parodies religious communities as utopias through looking critically at fundamentalism and the Christian Right.

When asked about her feelings about ideal societies in a 1991 interview before the *Parable* Series novels were published, Butler overtly rejected utopia because, she says, people will never be perfect. "I find utopias ridiculous," she asserts, and explains,

> We're not going to have a perfect society until we get a few perfect humans, and that seems unlikely. Besides, any true utopia would almost certainly be incredibly boring, and it would probably be so overspecialized that any change we might introduce would probably destroy the whole system. As bad as we humans are sometimes, I have a feeling that we'll never have that problem with the current system (Interview McCaffery and McMenamin).

In *Parable of the Sower*, the protagonist, Lauren Olamina, creates a philosophy called "Earthseed" that counteracts the dystopian reality around her. Gathering converts at the end of the novel she founds a utopia called "Acorn," based on collaborative work and her new religion; the second novel begins after the destruction of Acorn, by the Christian American government, but Lauren's diary entries talk about the four positive years the community had. The Christian American government takes the country down a path diametrically opposite this view of utopia.

Butler's first novel in this series parodies gated communities and company towns, and so satirizes the American dream for the middle class by exposing its violent and repressive consequences. The gated communities result from a desire for security and a fear of others, but the negative effects include excluding others and leaving the public welfare system behind. Thus, this parody exposes as false utopian ideals of exclusivity and of security. The company towns parody American capitalist culture, and expose the brutal policies of capitalism without government controls: debt slavery and lack of worker and environmental protection. Butler's second novel parodies Christian fundamentalism through exaggerating it into a state religion – the Christian Crusaders – those who enslave others who refuse to believe. Butler's parody in this novel exposes the false utopian ideal of institutionalized religious belief as central to government. These novels feed utopian desire through parody that resists oppressive cultural norms. Parody unsettles and invites readers to relocate the utopian impulse elsewhere.

The genres Butler combines range from utopia and dystopia, to diary, biblical scripture, the jeremiad, and the slave narrative; she concentrates on rhetorical strategies that provide space for readers to resist dominant thinking and co-create a better world.

The biblical parables alluded to in the titles are juxtaposed in her novels against the Earthseed scriptures modeled on the fragmented proverbs of Taoism and Buddhism. The jeremiad offers social critique and spiritual renewal. The diaries disrupt the narrative (in the second novel) of Vere, Olamina's daughter, and present multiple perspectives: those of Olamina, Bankole (Olamina's husband), and Marc Duran (Olamina's brother, who raises Vere). The neo-slave form, following Olamina in her escape first from the urban violence of her first community, and then from enslavement by the Christian Crusaders, calls on the strategies of resistance of the African-American past as hope for the future. Butler makes us see that not only the Christian crusader's collars, but also the walls of the gated communities and the debts of the company towns are forms of slavery. In this future, as in the past, learning to read and write signifies freedom, enabling the characters to show the way to dream a better future.

It is difficult and taxing to locate the "desire for a better way of being" in Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1998), the subject of the last chapter of this dissertation. In part, this difficulty results from Morrison's belief that utopia or "paradise" can never exist because it is based on exclusivity and, by definition, utopia cannot exclude. In an interview, she reflects that:

> isolation, the separateness, is always a part of any utopia. And it was my meditation, if you will, and interrogation of the whole idea of paradise, the safe place, the place full of bounty, where no one can harm you. But, in addition to that, it's based on the notion of exclusivity (Verdelle).

Interestingly enough, and quite paradoxically, Morrison admits that *Paradise* is an experiment in how to make utopia less exclusive. How can paradise be less exclusive?

Who is she trying to include? One answer is that Morrison is addressing her readers to help us see the causes and the problems of exclusivity. She presents details that account for peoples' fear and hate of others.

To explain such a response, Morrison envisions two related communities: the all-black town of Ruby and the all-women community of the Convent. Ruby is a settlement – a spin off the earlier settlement of Haven, a "haven" for ex-slaves. Ruby, like Haven, was formed as an all-black township because Blacks were excluded from white society – exclusion thus becomes the basis for their exclusivity – neither Ruby nor Haven welcome outsiders. The insider families of Ruby are called the "eight-rock" and are known for their coal-black color and proud independence from other communities. Their sense of superiority isolates the town and demonstrates how exclusivity can lead to discomfort and inequality. The women's community is born out of exile, as well, but they embrace all women, forming an eclectic, non-cohesive, and non-hierarchical community. Morrison's exploration of exclusivity thus begins and ends with considering what caused the deterioration of the idealistic all-black town and why the men of Ruby killed an isolated, peaceful group of women who live communally at a former convent miles away.

This final chapter, "Imagining Subjectivity as Utopian Practice," examines the reading practices encouraged by Morrison's *Paradise*, an insistently non-chronological narrative that lacks a central point of view character and frequently fails to give the reader full information about a scene being recounted. As a consequence, the reader must become the point of view character, constructing a coherent narrative and pulling together conflicting accounts into his or her own imagination of paradise. In *Paradise*, Morrison rewrites historical accounts of black settlements to prepare us for how unsettled the past

really is and to destabilize constructions of race. Moreover, she adapts historical utopian experiments in all-women communities – the Shakers and the consciousness-raising groups and communes of the 1970s feminism – to explore ideas of spiritual connectedness and to examine ways to empower former victims.

In *Paradise,* Morrison foregrounds interpretative practices by urging the reader to become the point of view character that the novel lacks, through an intersubjective interaction with the characters of the novel, through multiple perspectives that encourage the reader's empathy, and through the erotic charge of several scenes. Morrison models intersubjectivity as an interpretive practice in the "stepping in" that Connie practices, seeing others' suffering and helping them to heal, as well as in "loud dreaming," the women's practice of telling each other their life stories in order to erase the damage that has been inflicted on them. *Paradise* challenges its readers to imagine a better world through the differing views of Ruby's Christmas pageant, one commemorating the founding families for the good of the community, the other critiquing the town for its rigid exclusivity. In the final pages, *Paradise* further asks its readers to interpret the return of the women: were they not really killed? Are these visions? What does their return signify? In these ways, Morrison offers her readers participation in the shaping of the narrative, but also in the construction of paradise.

In each of these novels, social relationships appear in the narratives and in counter-narratives; the narratives show collective and individual struggles and resistance. Not one of these novels is a classic utopia, although they have all been discussed as utopias previously. However, they do contain utopian hope, and operate by utopian hermeneutics. They show that there are ways to desire and work for a better world. In

Always Coming Home, hopeful resistance appears in the new language that expresses a critical understanding of place and a feminist subversion of the utopian form. The *Parable* series inspires a critique of social relations and enclaves and webs of resistance that inspire utopian transformation. The narrative process in *Paradise* forces readers to incorporate the voices of communities in relation to one another – communities for which hatred and fear underlie all communication. What is utopian here is what the reader has to do to cross into the "other's" shoes. This forced consciousness produces a critical awareness of our responsibility for seeing worlds in relation and not in opposition through the desire for a better way of living.

ENDNOTES

[1] Chris Ferns xi.

[2] Ferns 23.

[3] Ferns, in *Narrating Utopia: Ideology, Gender, Form in Utopian Literature,* argues that utopian fiction has a specific tradition where writers engage in debates and talk with narrative examples of earlier writers. If narrative forms contain "ideological implications," what does the utopian form tell us? He is quick to point out that we can over simplify this relationship by arguing that a fragmented, open-ended narrative is subversive and a closed narrative, a formal, coherent narrative, conventional.

[4] Frederic Jameson's 1982 essay, "Progress Versus Utopia, or Can We Imagine the Future?" is expanded and published in the first section, "The Desire Called Utopia," in *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions.* He explores how science fiction can be "future histories," or a way to see one's place in relation to history. Jameson implies that science fiction, like the historical novel of old, is not so much about the future, or the past, as a way to defamiliarize the present. "Progress" is a symptom or an orientation toward history and the future. Each genre, historical novel or science fiction, denounces our inability to visualize the future. Jameson focuses on our inability to envision a reality that is different from our own concrete world view. Utopia lives where such imagination exists.

[5] Jameson's sarcasm appears when he notes, "If we want a [bourgeois idyll], we can go to Celebration, Florida" (Glenn).

[6] The first also includes "intentional communities," as well as innovative ways to use space to create a new aesthetic.

[7] A few scholars have made connections between Butler's work and literature classified as realism. Claire Curtis presented, "Engage or Withdraw? Toni Morrison's *Paradise* and Octavia Butler's *Parable* Series" and discussed Butler and Morrison as utopias with two different constructions: integrated and/or the pocket utopia. Curtis states that the *Parable* novels show the death of two pocket communities (Acorn and Robledo) and yet the survival of the integrated utopia whose principles are based on Earthseed. On the other hand, Curtis argues that Toni Morrison's *Paradise* indicts the pocket utopia but that the novel is also "deeply anti-utopian." The communities in *Paradise*, including Haven, Ruby, and the Convent fail, Curtis argues. She further notes that Morrison doesn't guide or give any place of hope or utopian possibility, but Butler's novel offer a possibility of radical change. She believes that Morrison provides escapism or fantasy that promotes despair and sticking with the status quo. I argue that Morrison's novel is utopian because it pushes readers to *hermeneutically* seek utopia and attain a consciousness that looks for hope, the desire for a better way of living.

[8] Accordingly, Jameson points out the need to reconfigure the interpretive method behind the utopian impulse as related to body, time, and collectivity. He foregrounds "body, time, and collectivity" because these three make up "contemporary allegory" (6). The novels I chose recontextualize utopian thinking within an allegory of contemporary feminism.

[9] This list of definitions is arranged chronologically according to the original idea or date of publication; of course, someone like Lyman Sargent Tower continues to influence the scholarship. His definition of utopia influenced all subsequent ones. However, his most

recent work on dystopias came later so I revisit his scholarship to show the scholarship in its historical progression.

[10] Darko Suvin describes a meticulous method for the reading process of science fiction and utopian novels. It is a literary genre, where there is an "interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment" (Suvin, *Metamorphoses* 7-8.)

[11] Darko Suvin's "novum" is discussed as a theme throughout most of his work including "Novum is as Novum Does."

[12] Kessler borrows from Rachel Blau DuPlessis, who revived the idea that the label "apologue" can be applied to utopian literature (4). See DuPlessis, "The Feminist Apologues of Lessing, Piercy, and Russ."

[13] These feminist utopias contain some of the following attributes: they "critique women's status, offer alternative ways of being female, recommend reforms benefiting women, place women centrally in the plot, show either sex atypically" (Kessler 21).

[14] He recently added to the debate yet again with two texts: *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*, and the edited anthology, *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*.

[15] Similar to Bartowski's study, I bring to the table a study that compares one mainstream author, Toni Morrison, with two works more peripheral to the academy because they are science fiction texts.

[16] A number of critics have written about the relationship between utopias and the contemporary novel. Some believe that social anxiety produces dystopias while feelings of possibility or security increase the number of published utopias.

Examples include the social revolutions of the turn of the century, the industrial revolution of the 1890s, and the political hope and unrest of the 1970s when rebirths of speculative fiction occurred. Interestingly enough, although many critics show a positive correlation between social environment and the mood of the resulting utopian texts, others, such as James Simmons, believe the contrary. In his article, "Utopian Cycles" Simmons provides graphs that show the overall social mood alongside the output of texts. Simmons argues that he sees little correlation between the historical and economic moment and the type of utopia produced.

[17] She continues to theorize about utopia today, and her further ideas about what the value is of utopia as oppositional versus alternatives structures is discussed later in this introduction (*Dark Horizons* 19).

[18] In the discussion of the novels that follow, Levitas's breakdown and analysis of utopian desire is a major resource. Interestingly enough, Levitas plays down those articulations of cultural formations suggesting that counterculture is desire that is "merely in fantasy."

[19] What kind of savvy reader do these authors and critics rely on? Chris Fern's book, *Narrating Utopia: Ideology, Gender, Form, in Utopian Literature*, deals with this sticky question. Ferns interprets More's utopia as a "modern" reader in order to demonstrate the positive value in a variety of reader responses. For instance, the description by More's narrator Hythloday includes the narrator's caveat that "a few of the customs and laws he had described as existing among the Utopians were quite absurd" (91). Modern readers may miss the joke, Fern argues, and gives the example of a reader who believed More describes the Incas; "But such spectacular misinterpretations only serve to underlie the

extent to which the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction become blurred in utopian narrative" (Ferns 37). Ferns further explains that More wrote in Latin to a small select audience of friends who would know and understand the humor, and freedom of speculation for what they were - not practical programs but speculations which, Ferns argues, were not meant to go as far or influence as much as "the author could have intended - or indeed, desired" (38)

[20] Chris Ferns similarly argues that the utopian genre is "particularly strongly influenced by a sense of its own specific tradition - by the writer's consciousness of what has gone before" (Ferns 16-17).

[21] For example, Gilman makes the argument that if fiction were believed to be “true,” then we would learn about and act in our lives more wisely and with fewer disappointments (Kessler 127). Similar to many contemporary utopian thinkers, Gilman thought that this genre of literature creates the space for consciousness to be raised because it is didactic.

[22] For example, Donawerth discusses novels in which a communal narration is sequential, where there is a “series of narrators,” and other novels where a narrative strategy uses simultaneous voices to create a “we” or a “they” voice in order to represent a communal point of view (148).

[23] The novels Donawerth primarily theorize about include Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Four Ways to Forgiveness* and Melissa Scott’s, *Dreaming Metal*. However, many others are used as examples for different aspects of dystopias, such as Rebecca Ore’s *Gai’s Toys* (1995), Marge Piercy’s *He, She, It* (1991), Judith Moffestt’s *The Ragged World* (1991), Nicola Griffith’s *Slow River* (1995), and Octavia Butler’s novels. I am in no way saying

these works are NOT dystopian – rather I want to focus on what the function of the novels may be and how this function captures the reader's imagination in radically utopian ways.

[24] Roemer's diverse interests include Native American literature, which he interprets using utopian scholarship. Similarly, he employs his knowledge of early indigenous literature to inform his theories about utopia, the reading process, and utopian audience members.

[25] Roemer admirers Le Guin's work, especially *Always Coming Home*, which he uses to theorize the function and reading of utopias, borrowing from her the term "hinge" to describe the reading process of a utopian impulse (63).

[26] Other scholars of this area include Peter Rupper. In addition, Roemer considers the theories about the process of "utopian reading" by scholars such as Darko Suvin, Fredric Jameson, Marc Angenot, Kathleen Spencer, Peter Fitting, Lee Cullen Khanna, Phillip Wegner, and Tom Moylan. Roemer's study is a descriptive analysis of how readers respond to utopias, rather than a study of how utopias SHOULD be read, as Ruppert demands. Ruppert's study is "normative" rather than "descriptive" which reveals that this "reader response theory is merely a rhetorical device for relaying his own views: the 'ideal reader' here is quite clearly the writing" (229).

[27] Roemer focuses on a few theoretical problems in the utopian studies field. The first is belief that spontaneity and dynamism are more important to utopian reading than stability and security. Another theorizes what an ideal reader should be – one that reads for the literary value but who also sees the "true" utopian ideas in the text. He points out the interesting fact that when a reader reads for content only, then the utopia becomes

reduced to its content – this does produce "stasis." However, reading just for structure limits the scholarship to idealizing dynamic texts alone.

[28] Roemer points out that the direct address that begins *Looking Backward* reverses the returning visitor-reader convention found in More's *Utopia*. Roemer further explains that More's narrator, Hythloday, tries to persuade his narrator that utopia exists (125). In contrast, Bellamy's narrative voice tries to persuade his audience that the nineteenth century exists. This reverses the kind of responses Bellamy's audience members feel throughout the novel. The narrator's questions are first distanced, then disturbing, and then the reader becomes aware of the narrator's perspective about the selfishness of those who live off the work of others. Roemer argues that these narrative inversions cannot help but make the reader tumble into "the muck of insecurity" (126). He also suggests that today's readers would approach the narrative in radically different ways.

[29] Here Roemer points to a number of scholars who've dealt with the implied reader for *Looking Backward*. These include Lee Cullen Khanna ("Reader"), Jean Pfaelzer (*Utopian Novel*), Peter Ruppert, and others (125).

[30] The first "real" reader, of *Looking Backward* Roemer argues, is the author himself, Edward Bellamy. He wrote, reread, received reviews, rewrote the forward, wrote the afterward, and his essay about how and why he wrote the book. Roemer points out that Bellamy's position on the text changes as he reads, discusses, and responds to published and unpublished reviews.

[31] One humorous reviewer, Graham Murphy, pointed out that the anthology was trying to "kick at the dystopian darkness until it bleeds the daylight of Utopia."

[32] The other way these critical dystopias open up for the reader is because they rely on an intense form of genre blurring; the texts quite self-reflectively borrow from multiple genres, which allows them to creatively challenge a critical expression. Butler's *Parable* novels combine "survivalist science fiction with the diary and the slave narrative" (8).

[33] Baccolini and Moylan, "Introduction" 7. Traditionally, the form contained little hope within the story; dystopias "maintain utopian hope *outside* their pages, if at all; for it is only if we consider dystopia a warning that we as readers can hope to escape its pessimistic future" (7).

[34] Much of her theory is beyond the boundaries of this dissertation, but I touch on some of the qualities of a utopian hermeneutic in my reading of Morrison's novel as well as of Butler's works. She formulates this theory from Bloch's theories of "anticipatory consciousness" with semiotics of the "desire to articulate" such as that found in Barthe's ideas about "otherness" in language (51). For Cavalcanti there is a utopian element "encoded as a textual enigma, or a non-place, that functions as a motivational element of narrative and relates … to a catachrestic mode" (51).

Chapter One: Reading Utopia: Tapestry
Ursula K. Le Guin's Always Coming Home

When asked what one utopian aspect she would like to see in the world, Ursula K. Le Guin answered,

> I can't pick one because I don't think that way. It's all a network. You know the butterfly theory--if you kill a butterfly in North Carolina, it may result in a typhoon in China. Small causes have very large results.[1]

Le Guin consistently has stated that one part of a women's utopia that never wavers for her is the interconnectedness of things. "It's all network" is the substance of her writing. Interconnectivity directs her to certain narrative structures; it supplies her writing with a core of hope that is at the center of dissatisfaction with the status quo. The dozens of stories that make up Le Guin's 1985 feminist utopia, *Always Coming Home*, the novel that is the subject of this chapter, are interconnected not in terms of plots and subplots, but rather as stories that are bound together by place, culture, and people.

The stories are only one part of the culture presented; poems, plays, treatises of living and dying are included as cultural artifacts that create a picture of an imagined, future people - the Kesh. In this chapter, I focus on the patterns and interconnectedness of *Always Coming Home* that help to generate a utopian reading process. By creating a text that emphasizes the polyvocal quality of language and worldviews borrowed from Native American and Taoist culture, a text communicated through multiple narrators, Le Guin offers the reader the opportunity to construct a utopian vision of culture from an abundance of Kesh cultural fragments.

Le Guin creates a culture and a text that encourages the reader to perform activities that can evoke a utopian reading process. Lee Cullen Khanna, a feminist literary scholar, suggests, "The journey to Le Guin's utopia is, of course, endless and cannot be made without the questing reader, for women's utopias are not places or even times, but states of mind" (136). This dissertation asks where the utopian state of mind originates. One way to view feminist reading is to see our reality as permeated by the utopian dream in *Always Coming Home*, and this future utopia as haunted by our horrors. Le Guin directs the reader toward this interconnection of the future and our current reality by synthesizing a medley of philosophies, interwoven storylines, multiple narrators, and diverse genres.

LeGuin constructs this feminist utopia with and for her readers by drawing upon a number of methods that I identify in the chapter. LeGuin uses techniques from anthropology and requires readers to become anthropologists. This means that readers must piece together the cultures she creates from the artifacts she provides and create narratives for themselves about these cultures. By connecting the stories of *Always Coming Home* to storytelling traditions of Native American cultures, she asks readers to involve themselves in the narrative construction much as audience members in oral traditions become part of the story. Perhaps most importantly, Le Guin's societies are informed by Taoist principles. The poetic verses in the novel are very similar to Lao Tzu's verses which create an opportunity for the readers to connect meditatively to the material, thus practicing, a utopian state of mind.

The reading process is utopian because it comes out of the principle of the interconnection of all things that underlies Le Guin's novel. For instance, the novel

privileges communal values over hierarchical ones. Le Guin acknowledges that this lack of hierarchy is a key principle of the Kesh culture and this concept foundational to the societies "of the pre-white Californian nations" (57). We see this principle in the polyvocal and communal language of the Kesh. Examples from Stone Telling's life help to show the importance of a polyvocal understanding of language. Another interconnection is the belief in the importance of nature, rather than an alienation from it. Le Guin creates a language with no oppositional categories, and shows how the Kesh see they are an organic part of the environment. Le Guin inspires readers to make intellectual connections that support the communal over the individual by creating a people and language that resemble the non-hierarchal thinking found in Native American and Taoist traditions. In addition, Le Guin's use of multiple narrators provides disparate perspectives that further highlight the collaboration that is part of the reading process.

Le Guin puts *Always Coming Home* into a conditional future that seems very remote from today: "The people in this book might be going to have lived a long, long, time from now in Northern California" (ix). The semi-familiar place, California, soon loses any relationship to our conceptions of today's state. In addition, hand drawn maps illustrate an organic relationship between the towns and the environment. The Kesh live near the Ocean beneath which San Francisco is buried. Our present is remembered through stories of a mythical nature. Even more striking is that "time" is not even a thinkable concept for the Kesh. Instead, they recognize "spatial" relationships, shown in the diagrams and maps throughout the book, in place of temporal.

In this chapter I elaborate on Khanna's concept of "utopia as a state of mind" but add focus on different strategies, such as the polyvocal narrative, adaptations of Native

American and Taoist philosophies – all offering the reader utopian collaboration. Consequently, this chapter is divided into the following sections: summary of the story, review of criticism on *Always Coming Home*, and reading practices. Le Guin's novel is a collaborative project, a polyvocal narrative resulting in a utopian outcome by means of a multi-layered reading practice.

I. Summary

Always Coming Home is an unusual science fiction novel because it is not organized mainly by plot. Many science fictions include a background of ethnographic materials, but Le Guin moves these to the foreground, as demonstrated in her complicated, elaborate table of contents. Le Guin's interest in ethnography is understandable given that her father, A. L. Kroeber, was an anthropologist, and her mother, Theodora Kroeber, collected Native American stories. The table of contents is broken into two main sections; the front of the book is four hundred pages long and includes sections on stories told aloud, poems, romantic tales, histories, dramatic works, life stories, and cultural concepts. Interwoven in three parts is the connecting narrative of Stone Telling, the protagonist. Interspersed among these larger sections are smaller sections introducing different narrators, footnoting cultural practices, and commenting on the different values of the cultures. The "Back of the Book," which is about one-hundred and twenty-five pages, contains twenty-three sections describing cultural practices, three poems by Pandora, and one by an anonymous poet. The topics of this section range from Kesh musical instruments, to maps, to the use of technology, and to the nature of language and literature.

There is one central story that weaves in and out of Le Guin's approximately five hundred and twenty pages: the life story of a woman character named Stone Telling. Stone Telling grows up a Kesh living in the Na Valley, a place that resembles the Napa Valley of today; she reflects on her life retrospectively, looking back over roughly forty years. Stone Telling speaks to us about her bi-cultural identity and her time with a different people, the Condors, who are outside the Valley. She was asked to write her life story "as an offering because nobody else in the Valley had lived with the Condor and come back, and so my story is a history" (192).

Stone Telling, who begins with the name "North Owl," because an owl visits her mother, Willow, when she is carrying her daughter, explains how this bifurcated identity, where she is not quite Kesh, and not quite Condor, affects her self-perception. One result of this split identity is that she feels compelled to leave the Kesh utopian society, to travel to the Condor's dystopian world, though eventually she returns home. We see the effects of these contrasting cultures inside her when she lives with her father's family, the Condors, and tries to become similar to them. Her journey allows her to eventually embrace a new hybrid identity, for she realizes she is always in process and, as the title of the novel argues, she is always coming home. Stone Telling's narrative allows the reader access to her perspective but, most importantly, from a unique view inside and outside each culture. As becomes clear, the Kesh and Condors have very little in common, which is why it is so interesting to look at Stone Telling's own identity. Le Guin intends for the reader to weigh the two cultures in relation to each other; it is here, in this space – the interpretive space of the reading process - that utopia – that the desire for a better way of being - exists.

On first glance, the remaining four hundred odd pages are difficult to place. Le Guin emphasizes the non-fictional attitude of the novel with an elaborate table of contents that breaks down the sections into small subsections of works according to genre as well as content. “A First Note” introduces the use of ethnography so that “voices” of the people speak for themselves in stories, plays, poems, and songs. One narrator addresses the reader, telling him or her to bear with some "unfamiliar terms” because they will become clear by the end. This narrator directs the reader to the book’s organization and the “Back of the Book.” This section contains details about Kesh life that are carefully explained for the reading audience. It is acknowledged that readers will read the text differently. Some readers will want explanations first, while others may want a narrative, and to avoid the glossary; still others may find the glossary “useful or amusing” (v). The evidence is everywhere - the Kesh existed and they will exist - in *this* present time and space - in the desire and imagination of the reader. Using so many genres cannot help but produce different emotional and intellectual experiences for each reader, and it is paradoxically in accruing and assembling these Kesh fragments that we are invited to create a utopian process.

The novel occurs in a future, fragmented United States. It occurs after an unnamed and catastrophic event that has caused environmental devastation and a drastic reduction in the population. It describes a people, the Kesh, who are not materialistic, but are communal, matriarchal, and non-hierarchical. One icon that embodies the Kesh characteristics is called the “heyiya-if,” which loosely translates as the “hinge.” The “heyiya-if” presents the sacred interconnectedness in relationships and articles such as their art, architecture, and writing. The “heyiya-if” shows the importance of intersecting,

rather than fragmentation, isolation, or independence. The Kesh practice yearly ritualized dances that show the "heyiya-if" relationships between the seasons. The Kesh are organized into "Houses" and "Lodges" that exist in relation to a craft, an animal type, color, and a working community. The "heyiya-if" is also part of the reason the Kesh choose to be mainly agrarian and not technological. The path they follow is relational rather than hierarchical.

Le Guin wrote the novel during the 1980s when the political situation in the U.S. was still dominated by a bifurcated global fear that appeared as "the Cold War." The Cold War meant massive technological advancements, such as Star Wars program, and much money spent on the arms race. Nuclear war seemed a possibility, and the U.S.S.R. (Soviet Union) was the "evil empire" against which the United States needed a vast arsenal of weapons. There was much fear and posturing on *both* sides. Other technological advances of the period include the home computer, video cassette recorders, microwave ovens, and cordless phones. However, *Always Coming Home* is different from other much more pessimistic utopian fiction of the early 1980s, such as Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue* (1984) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Perhaps it is Le Guin's creation of a new language; or perhaps it is due to the fear of what might come next if attitudes remain the same toward other countries. Le Guin ends up offering, paradoxically, a way out of a simplistic binary of an *us* and *them* mentality. Le Guin describes a people, the Kesh, who reject both war and technology and who continue to live in a place that has residual toxic waste and radioactive material around them. However, this book presents a positive experience because it can potentially open up the reader, to create, as Ken Roemer explains, using Le Guin's

heyiya-if icon, an “unhinging experience that leads to new perceptions and possibly changed behavior” (Roemer 67).

II. Critical Reception

Always Coming Home is a unique text that has generated literary criticism from a variety of disciplines, including women's studies, political science, psychoanalysis, literature, Marxism, and others. In this section of the chapter, I survey descriptions of the reading process asked of the readers in *Always Coming Home* as foundation for my own analysis. While *Always Coming Home* has attracted a number of feminist readings, and several critics have analyzed a utopian reading practice, none has worked out in detail that use of polyvocal language, the adaptation of Native American and Taoist philosophy, and the effect of multiple narrators on the reading process that my study provides.

Lee Cullen Khanna writes in “Women’s Utopias: New Worlds, New Texts” (1990) that *Always Coming Home* creates a utopian process for the reader because of its fragmented structure and the many narrators who frame the novel.[2] Le Guin’s “Pandora” narrator has “invited, cajoled, teased, ‘gently’ addressed, assaulted” the audience as well as left us hanging, and made us pick up the pieces. She uses many kinds of narrative strategies to address the reader. We are directly addressed as “you” in various sections; this tactic resembles the narrative directive in Margaret Atwood's, *The Handmaid's Tale*. Khanna suggests that Le Guin wants us to read as “participants” (137).

Through Pandora, one of the narrators, Le Guin offers two metaphors; one the scrub oak and the other the broken clay pot. Khanna suggests that the scrub oak becomes “a metaphor for the messiness, the untameability” of nature and yet, Pandora insists that a

“Way into the Valley is ‘Through’ the Scrub Oak” (Le Guin, *Always* 239-241). The good of the scrub oak comes from the way the “mind can imagine that shadow of a few leaves falling in the wilderness; the mind is a wonderful thing. But what about all the shadows on all the other scrub oaks on all the other ridges of all the wilderness? If you could imagine those even for a moment, what good would it do? Infinite good” (Le Guin, *Always* 241). This moment is a good example of the mindfulness that the book encourages and supports the idea that the process of looking carefully is part of the reader’s job in constructing a utopian impulse. Khanna discusses a second metaphor for the reader’s utopian process by looking at the “broken clay pot images” that work like the text, “deliberately imperfect, incomplete – created to give us the feel of a utopia that is not a dead thing, a static system to be emulated, but rather a living, changing relation to us as readers" (Khanna 139). The reader has the opportunity to piece together “a vibrant quilt of utopian thought” (Khanna 138).

Naomi Jacobs writes a compelling essay, "Beyond Stasis and Symmetry: Lessing, Le Guin, and the Remodeling of Utopia" (1988), in which she argues that feminist utopias are “inside out” from traditional utopias; here “a utopian insider reluctantly leaves utopia, not to spread the utopian gospel – although that desire may surface when the traveler is confronted with the extrapolation reality – but to fulfill some lack in utopia itself” (38). Traditionally, journeys originated in a bad place and moved to a good place; here the journey starts in a good place, moves to a bad place, but then takes us back home again. This brings up the question that, if the place is "lacking," how can it be utopian? Jacobs spells out one of the most important aspects of this radical utopian novel. She says: “The ‘grail’ is to be found not in the other reality, as the truth was once found by

the visitor to utopia, but rather in the act of traveling, the act of seeking, the act of renewing a stagnating self, or society through contact with an inimical reality" (38). The grail isn't an object to be found, but a journey through hostile territory where reading is utopian renewal. To Jacobs, utopia is a process: not in stasis, but a body in motion, constantly renewed.

Peter Fitting suggests in his 1990 essay, "The Turn from Utopia in Recent Feminist Fiction," that *Always Coming Home* is something of a "kit" – in which are provided songs, poems, plays, stories, rituals, and other bits of ethnographic data that the reader must put together to create this culture. Fitting also discusses the role of the reader in maintaining utopia. In his view, "Utopias do not exist simply for us to wander into and then live happily ever after; the novel tells us they must be built and renewed constantly and chosen again and again" ("Turn" 152). Fitting finds *Always Coming Home* difficult to classify as a feminist utopia because it does not show the process of getting *there*. He emphasizes the function of reading a literary utopia as key to the novel's accomplishment and finds fault with those novels that fall short of a direct path.

Jane Donawerth (1997) discusses how Le Guin employs "postmodern techniques of multivocal sequential communal narration to suggest not fragmentation, but collaboration as social and narrative practice" (*Frankenstein's* 150). Le Guin's use of multiple perspectives and genres, Donawerth reports, opens "the readers' options" (150). The many narrators deconstruct the hierarchy found in many science fiction stories narrated and written by men. Le Guin's "ethnography" provides a sense of cultural diversity (151). Donawerth's point is that no one narrative perspective maintains the upper hand and that allows the reader room to read.

Chris Fern's *Narrating Utopia* (1999) adds insights into how Le Guin's novel constitutes an alternative reality that offers readers "another way of seeing" (214). *Always Coming Home* suggests, "utopia and reality aren't exclusive of one another" (215). The society Le Guin presents isn't perfect or secure; however, it is a society that has underlying "balance and harmony that is able to *contain* disruptive forces" (Fern 215). By reading Le Guin's novel, our reality is permeated by utopia, and the dream of a new future; moreover, for the Kesh, the future is ironically haunted by the corrupt, environmental degradation resulting from the reader's present.

Mike McAllister's article, "Green Thoughts Asleep and the Fury of Dreams: Native Shading in the Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin" was written to "celebrate" the republication of the novel. Reflecting on the paradox of the literary critic in terms of interpreting and publishing on Le Guin's novels, he refers to the direct irony of writing about the novel when the narrator Le Guin has said, in the "Back of the Book" in a section "Spoken and Written Literature" that "the text itself mediates" between the "writer and reader" (502). McAllister sees reading Le Guin's utopia as transformative: "We cannot be the Kesh, but having met them we cannot, ever, walk the old path again: passing through the Na Valley, our home is renewed" (online).

Lisa Garforth's 2005 article, "Green Utopias: Beyond Apocalypse, Progress, and Pastoral," discusses *Always Coming Home* in the context of apocalypse, the environment, and the reader. She presents a nuanced understanding of utopianism that clarifies utopia's work as a cultural construction in literatures that represent the desire for an environmentally "green" elsewhere. Garforth suggests that new interstitial and embedded heterotopian possibilities occur with the Kesh description of "Time in the

Valley" (163).[3] The Kesh do not distinguish between inside and outside and this subverts the linear notion of progress. Garforth also points out the relevance of the gyre for understanding the Kesh view of energy and the cosmic life force. *Always Coming Home* embodies a close-up and experiential utopian mode, signifying through "bits, chunks and fragments" the irreducibility of ordinary life and its partial, local, and ecological temporalities (Garforth 410).

As pointed out in the introduction, Kenneth M. Roemer studies reading literary utopias in *Utopian Audiences: How Readers Locate Nowhere* (2003). This work builds less on Le Guin criticism per se, but adds to the criticism of the function of reading utopia and the reader's process. As noted in the introduction, this unique book contains hundreds of responses and analyses by readers of utopian novels. Roemer's research is intimate yet detailed, and he shows how *Always Coming Home* has many connections to the anthropological writings of both Le Guin's father and mother, as discussed in more detail later.

Keith Roemer's work suggests why there is such an unmistakable similarity between Le Guin's Kesh maps and the maps that her father, A.L. Kroeber, drew for his anthropological study, *The Handbook of the Indians of California* (1925).[4] Roemer reviews Le Guin's role as a reader of her father's writing in order to see how she, as a reader, locates "nowhere." She read many studies about California and Native Americans from the Northwestern U.S. Roemer believes that Le Guin's writing in response to her father and mother's work shows a reading process that includes "dependence and transcendence" (55). Le Guin explains that the primary influence she received from her father's work was the possibility of "there being no hierarchy and no center" (57) in a

culture. The irony, of course, is that both father and daughter want to "give voice," to show visually and verbally cultures outside of "mainstream" U.S. culture. But, in order to do this, they participate in the "centuries old drama of speaking for the Other'" (57). They both draw maps of Indian country that the indigenous people that Kroeber worked with would not have drawn for themselves.[5] However, Roemer believes that *Always Coming Home* is utopian and a sign of the revitalization of the form. Interestingly, Roemer's language is similar to the Kesh construction of the reading process; he suggests the novel offers the "potential for an opening-up, unhinging experience that leads to new perceptions and possibly changed behavior" (67).

It helps to consider Roemer's definition of a "literary utopia" (65). He argues it is a detailed narrative that is based on an imaginary place – the fiction "invites readers to experience vicariously an alternative reality that critiques theirs by opening cognitive and affective spaces that encourage readers to perceive the realities and potentialities of their culture in new ways" (65). In his definition, Roemer builds off of earlier writers, such as Sargent, Suvin, Khanna, and Moylan, among others, about the "vicarious" experiences that open the reader up to new world views. Moreover, this new culture must be perceived by the author and the reader as better than the "present" moment. If it is viewed more positively, it is a *eutopia* or utopia, if negatively, it is a dystopia (65). Roemer further addresses how the reader is "highlighted in the definitions of utopian literature," which allows him to focus on the contexts of the text and the reader.

Thus, Le Guin's *Always Coming Home* has an already rich scholarship that discusses the demands made on the reader. To this discussion, I add discussion of the theoretical importance of Le Guin's polyvocal quality of language, philosophies borrowed from

Californian Native American culture and Taoist practices, and the interconnectivity modeled by a number of contrasting narrators. Each of these aspects offers the reader many chances to create utopian visions out of the cultural fragments of the Kesh culture. Le Guin creates the opportunity for readers to immerse themselves in the archive and imagine that utopian vision that satisfies their own needs for a utopian world.

III. Polyvocal Language

In *Always Coming Home*, multiple discourses, texts, and languages allow for a polyvocal account of culture. These texts are art-forms that access different parts of the reader's emotions. For instance, the music allows the reader to hear the language and tones of Kesh life in a way quite different from the written word. In addition, there are drawings that stimulate visual responses different from those that result from the written word. Moreover, the maps Le Guin draws allow us to "see" the landscape and pieces of the Kesh homes in relation to the Valley as a whole. The fragmented nature of the texts also provides Le Guin with a means to require the reader to build a utopian process out of pieces of the culture during his or her reading. The readers are offered participatory utopian collaboration.

Le Guin's "hope and potential for change" appears in her experimental use of language, including the invention of two languages that contain opposing cultures. The language differences show how two cultures develop and speak different values from one another. These two cultures, the Kesh and the Condor, are diametrically opposed in terms of property and ownership, one valuing owning property and the other evaluating property as negative. This split shows Le Guin's reference to More's own communal

living situation which is what so many readers have found problematic. Le Guin creates the Kesh language in order to analyze the possible outcomes of a liberating verbal system. She can then also show the reciprocity between concepts of language and reality. Le Guin emphasizes how something as elementary as a verb form or a noun can show, create, and sustain utopian consciousness. Le Guin infers that a language that is oriented toward interconnection and mindfulness is essential to create utopian process. Moreover, Le Guin implies that it may be language itself that compels utopia to appear in our consciousness as a hopeful possibility.[6] Later, we look at how Kesh grammar may allow for language to represent utopian relationships. Reading the Kesh language may provide us with glimmers of utopian possibility.

In *Always Coming Home* Le Guin's conception and use of language seems influenced by the work of Edward Sapir. Sapir was interested in the way that language constructs our understanding of reality. In his study, he explains,

> It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group.[7]

Stone Telling's story about her life with first the Kesh and then the Condors reflects this theory about the importance of language to one's understanding of "reality." Sapir argues that humans do not create the world but are at the "mercy" of the language of society. In the novel, we witness the results of such influence when Stone Telling describes her journey from the Kesh to the Condor worldview and what the experience embodied. At

one point, Stone Telling's thinking process is contained in the Kesh communal language. At another point, Stone Telling rebels against the Kesh culture and travels with her father to the Condors where she takes a new name bestowed by her father: Terter Ayatyu - which means "woman born above others" or “well-born woman” (186). Thus, the daughter now “Terter Ayatyu” journeys into a different, hierarchical language with a resulting oppressed identity; paradoxically, this focus makes us aware of language as important to collaboration and utopian process. When we read about the culture with the hierarchical language, we have the opportunity to perceive the negative characteristics and arbitrariness of social hierarchy.

The father gives his daughter a name that contains a hierarchical meaning – that she is a woman “above” others. He takes his understanding of language and hierarchy and applies it to North Owl. Within Condor culture, people relate to one another within the hierarchical structure. The head Dayoa man is called “the One” and he is supreme. Those under him are made in his image but they are valued less. Below these men are men of even lower class, followed by women, outsiders, and animals. North Owl’s father names her the only way he knows how, which is to position her in a hierarchical category. Even with this name, most of the Condor women still treat her as an animal because she is an outsider.

The Dayao or Condor language reveals and constructs the hierarchical nature of their culture. For example, there are many different classes of people – from those who most closely resemble the One true Condor, all the way down to Ayatyu, the foreigner, who is considered a lowly being, even an uncivilized animal. The Dayao believe "man" is separate from nature - something outside of it - above it. The Kesh, on the other hand,

believe everything is interrelated - there is no difference between nature and culture, and neither is more or less important. These differences make it impossible for Ayatyu to understand Condor power dynamics. One story Stone Telling tells about her childhood is about living with the Condors and how she resented having to go to her father's family house, the "Terter House," without him; he tells her she must stay with the women and not with him because that's where his women's family belong (197). The idea of belonging to another human confuses and puzzles her. She describes how she wrestles with this idea but eventually is back in her proper place. The Condors believe women and foreigners are animals, and lower in status than men. Because the reader is privy to Stone Telling's thinking, we sympathize and connect intimately with her puzzlement. For many of us, the idea of family name and ownership is quite familiar; for Stone Telling the power dynamics of such a relationship are strange. Our own "reality," then, is affected by both our own hierarchical society and by how estranged we may feel through Stone Telling's perspective.

Estrangement is also apparent between Stone Telling's mother, Willow, and her father, Abhao, as they try to communicate, while knowing very little of each other's language. For example, Abhao inadvertently shows his estrangement from Kesh culture by saying that his wife and child "belonged to" him. He says alienating things like, "she belongs to me, the child belongs to me" (42). When he says this, a Kesh woman starts making fun of him as she '"began to do the Blood Clown turkey-gobble around him, shouting 'The hammer menstruates to me! They pleat the courage to her'" (42). The people in the town are dumbfounded by Abhao's behavior. Actually, Abhao's behavior and language are very much like our own understanding of familial relations and the

sense of ownership that goes along with “having” a child. The narrator describes the problem with translating such language as "reversal words." Becoming estranged from our perspective and the function of ownership in language helps us to see that there are other possibilities. For example, North Owl describes the limitation of her father’s language by saying that he spoke like a trader she knew who tries to pour water into a broken pot. She thinks that he means well as he gropes after "the pieces of language" (28). She admits that he sounded funny to her, but eventually she sees him as a "human person, however strange he was" (28). By extension, we are “human” people with a language as strange as the Condors.

The difference between these two languages also shows the characters’ inability to cross over into a different way of being. Examples of dominance appear in the Condor language. In one instance, North Owl learns a word of Dayao, "pyez," that her father teaches her to say to the Condor men who are working on building a bridge across the river near her home. She explains how the men behave as though everything her father said to them was an order that needed to be obeyed. She describes the physical response of the men to her father's words. She tells how the workers slap their hands over their foreheads and run to do Terter Abhao's bidding. North Owl says, "I heard my high, thin voice and saw ten strong men obey it, over and over" (32). This is a wonder to her, and she "felt the great energy of the power that originates in imbalance, whether the imbalance of weighted pulley or a society. Being the driver not the pile, I thought it was fine" (32). North Owl's experience demonstrates the power of a single word and the sense of power she felt over these men simply by reciting one word that they had to obey. The spoken word sheds light on the oppressive quality of the Condor language.

However, North Owl's reflection on her dual identity, and cross-cultural journey shows that she is able to translate herself across these cultures. Le Guin represents how painful it is to cross this language barrier; translating foreign concepts from one language to the other is contradictory.

The readers' understanding of the individual in relation to community comes out through the exchanges about the Condor's construction project in the Valley. Abhao, commander of the Condor Army, sees himself outside of the Kesh community, responsible for the Condors' rule, and above the Kesh community and its practices. He thinks he can tell the Kesh to behave a certain way and that they will do as he commands. He claims that the Kesh now live "under the shadow of His wings" (35). The Valley people do not understand or accept this dominion and resist the Condors' efforts to build a bridge across the river. Abhao, a name that aptly translated into "Kills" in Kesh, shouts, "But I serve the Condor. He has given his orders. The decision is not mine or yours to make or change. You must understand that"! (35). Kills has no understanding of the Kesh; his inability to have a conversation, rather than shout directives, demonstrates this lack. Kesh language does not have any provisions "for a relation of ownership between living beings" (42). Nobody owns another person or animal. One of the most recited lines from the novel concerns the verb "to have." The Kesh language doesn't have a verb form of "to have" that allows anyone to actually possess something. Their equivalent is an intransitive verb, and "'to be rich' is the same word as 'to give' [which] is likely to turn its foreign speakers, and translator, into a clown all too often" (42). A reader from a contemporary capitalist economy will find this use of words inverted. For instance, I am rich, if I own many things, not if I give it all away. But, the Kesh communal values

become the norm and “my” capitalist values become “strange” which reinforces the importance of the communal for the reader.

For the reader, an outcome of this exploration of language is seeing the reciprocity between reality and language and the possibility of utopian process found in a liberating language. Stone Telling discovers language that helps her to explain her reasons for trying to leave the Kesh. She notes that when she was young, her "mind was held inside the Valley"; she learns the importance of "holding the Valley inside it" (193). The difference between the two is one of intention. "Holding the Valley inside it" exhibits a state of mind that is mindful and aware. This mindfulness is an essential part of utopian process that comes out of the reading process itself. We witness a society that does not oppress "others" in language, thought, or deeds. The Kesh language frees men and women from oppression. As Suzanne Reid explains, *Always Coming Home* is “narrative art [that] is to be valued not only for its content, lesson, or entertainment but also for its ability to replicate the communal experience.”[8]

IV. Native American Storytelling Practices and Chinese Taoism as Utopian Process

In this section of the chapter, I review the cultural influences on Le Guin’s *Always Coming Home* that affect the implied construction of the reader in the novel: Native American Oral storytelling practices and Chinese Taoist philosophy. For instance, Le Guin adapts beliefs in Native American thinking to create a reading activity that resembles utopian process. Le Guin’s understanding of native culture stems from the history and anthropology that both her parents studied. Similar to her parents, Le Guin

seeks to intertwine pieces of oral into written discourse. She legitimizes oral literature and points out how the Euro-western bias "conveniently illegitimizes all oral traditions and most indigenous people right from the start. If you don't have a written language, you aren't part of history" (White). By legitimizing through its simulated records of oral events, *Always Coming Home* suggests to readers that they participate in the creation and distribution of stories not usually available. Although not based on one particular tribe, Le Guin references oral and written indigenous literature similar to that which her parents collected. At one point, she jokingly admits that she makes up worlds, while her father describes "real" worlds.

Le Guin's parents, Alfred Kroeber and Theodora Kroeber, provided the basis for Le Guin's many academic interests and writings. Her father, Alfred Kroeber, was a well-known anthropologist, and her mother, Theodora Kroeber, was the author of a book, *Ishi in Two Worlds*, about the destruction of a Northern California Indian tribe called the Yahis.[9] Seeking specificity in order to avoid "othering" Native American ideas, Le Guin uses oral records, her father's handbook, and her mother's writing to inform her work: "I certainly didn't want to put a bunch of made up Indians into a Napa Valley of the future. That was not what I was trying to do. What I got from reading California oral literature was a sense of a distant and different quality of life. You can't hear the voices but you can pick up the feeling" (White).

Le Guin believes we can learn much from these oral storytelling practices. In *Always Coming Home*, she includes the principles behind the oral traditions found in the Native American storytelling she worked with in the Napa Valley area. She suggests that it makes you "relearn how to read and there's nothing in them to draw you in. There's no

sweetening of the pill. Maybe there's a coyote, but there's no description. We're used to a lot of fleshing out, and we're used to being courted and drawn into a story" (White). "Some Stories Told Aloud, One Evening in the Dry Season at a Summer Place Above Sinshan" is a set of interactive stories about war between the bears and humans. The story explains the actions, rather than the emotions or motivations of the animals. The words are streamlined with little character development or attention to dialogue. For example,

> Well, Coyote was going along inside the world, you know, and she met old man Bear.
>
> I'll come with you, Coyote said.
>
> Bear said, "No, please don't come with me I don't want you. I'm going to get all the bears together and make a war on the human beings. I don't want you along."
>
> Coyote said, "oh, that's terrible, a terrible thing to do. You'll all destroy each other. You'll be killed, they'll be killed. Don't make war, please don't make war!" (54).

The story contains general adjectives such as "old" and "terrible." The language is direct and repetitive – even redundant - such as the phrase "don't make war," "don't make war." Yet, the skeletal stories allow the community to collaborate.

Le Guin employs storytelling tactics to create a reading process that resembles the communal, collective quality of oral stories. A number of sections are presented as "live" recordings of different communities in dialogue with one or two storytellers. For instance, in the section "About a Meeting Concerning the Warriors" by Stone Telling, italics set off some tellers such as the "Exchange with Bear Man," in conversation with

“What Steady of the Serpentine” said. We get pieces of stories, interruptions followed by digressions, which show the different elements of these cultures together. Instead, a story's point may be the "telling," and the audience’s response in the performance. The audience co-creates the story with laughs, gestures, and interjections.

The Kesh overtly use stories as a way to pass on all elements of culture including humor. The stories about the wars between coyote, bear, and humans are good examples. The interactivity between the audience and storyteller make the story happen. It opens with the Coyote talking how she worked with the bears only to trick them, with the result that they give her their testicles. Then the Coyote teases the humans and makes them so angry that they kill many bears. The coyote, who has caused all of this misery and death for the bears, pretends later to work to “save” the bears from extinction by going against the humans. There is a “translator’s note” at the end, that explains how the original story about “the war with the bears” was known to many of the adults. The translator, in what could only be comments addressed to the readers, says that the audience laughed, murmured, and spoke quietly at points in response to the “neat turns of phrase” (57). The translator reveals that “Whether the story told after the young children had gone to bed was a variation on a familiar theme, or entirely improvised, or something in between, I do not know; my impression was that the listeners did not know what was coming next, but collaborated in the invention and performance by their responses and laughter” (57). Le Guin highlights the collaboration modeled in this collective story-telling. She endorses collaborative projects within the story's fabric and then connects collaboration to utopian process. She implies that the oral quality of the stories is necessary to simulate collective process and may even be the cause of community forming around laughter.

Assuming a different point of view is one key way that the reader responds more deeply, through the act of experiencing things other and outside him or herself. One way to assume different points of view is in this telling and listening to stories. Le Guin seems to be acknowledging the idea that language, and telling is where learning occurs and this knowledge is linked to utopian hope and change. Stories are where we begin to create *a sense of self and other*. raffaella baccolini, discussing a later Le Guin novel, *The Telling*, that is also a critical dystopia, refers to "history, memory, and the telling of tales" as the root of the subversive ("Memory"126). baccolini points out that it isn't that we need to have one single vision of history, but rather that knowing and telling the past is "a way to attain freedom" (127). It is baccolini's contention that "memory" or recollection is an individual and community encounter with history that also provides place to see the utopian sources in many of Le Guin's novels. Storytelling becomes an instrument of resistance (baccolini 127).

Some of Le Guin's specific narrative techniques are borrowed from Native American culture. She transports techniques from storytelling, such as the call-and-response audience involvement, in order to reproduce in her novel the act of making a story as a collaborative process. In addition, she thinks that the storyteller can function to strengthen people politically and culturally. In an interview, she praises the "tribal storyteller," a tradition she believes continues today in the novels of Paule Marshall, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison. She describes this kind of writer as someone who is "providing spiritual access as well as moral guidance" (White). Le Guin says that these women are "fulfilling the ancient role of tribal storytellers because they're trying to lead us into different spiritual and moral realms" (White). She thinks that art adds to our

utopian cultural imagination and makes life more than a list of obstacles or things to do. In a comic aside in the novel, the section “Pandora Worrying About What She Is Doing: She Addresses the Reader with Agitation,” Pandora engages in playfulness that makes life more than a “list of obstacles.” The ending paragraphs contain ordinary bits of life but put in such a way together that they create a jumbled silly result. First, there is the phrase, “Take your time, now.” This is followed by some clichéd phrases and activities. “Well, now, where’s the fire? Officer my wife is having a baby in the back seat! Now, now, none of that now. No hurry. Take your time. Here. Take it please. I give it to you, it’s yours” (148). By making fun of our seriousness and shortsightedness, this list of the cacophony of life’s events shows us what we lose out on if we consider life a series of “obstacles” by making fun of our seriousness and shortsightedness. After all, artistically, we want “A big room, that holds animals, birds, fish, cubs, trees, rocks, clouds, wind, thunder. A living room” (148). This shows that space is necessary for a collaborative society to exist. The stories are about our “living” area so we should note how different this kind of living is. Stone Telling’s narrative brings out the oral nature of history, and the need to keep telling stories in order for us to understand the origins of the pasts as related to both the Kesh and the Condors.

Stone Telling explains in "Why I have written this," the different stories between the Condor and Warriors and how little has been written about the violent warrior behavior. Stone Telling comments that she's "come to think that the sickness of Man [violence] is like the mutating viruses and toxins: there will always be some form of it" (Le Guin, *Always*, 386). Predicting that humans will always suffer this illness, Stone Telling suggests a cause: it is a "sickness of our being human, a fearful one" (386). "It would be

unwise," she says, "to forget the Warriors and the words spoken on the Cottonwood Flats, lest it need all be done and said again" (386). As though to remind us of our own past, Stone Telling's warns about the troubles that may result if we "forget the Warriors."

However, Le Guin seems to argue that we can't "forget" the warrior nature because it isn't in one group or part of society, rather it is part of all of us. However, we can strive for balance - what Le Guin shows with the Kesh resemblance of the Taoist practices. Taoist practices minimize friction or conflict; to do this, one has to be individually mindful and think about how one's actions affect others. Situation after situation, and fragment after fragment, demonstrates mindfulness as though to simulate the internal utopian process for the reader. The Kesh imitate Taoist balance in a negotiation process with another group of people, the Cotton or Usudegd people. The Kesh have "trouble with the people who send us cotton from the South in trade for our wines" (136). The Cotton, or Usudegd people, spread across many nearby islands. The Cotton people short-change the Kesh; this eventually results in the Kesh shipping less wine than the two promised. In the end, both people are angry and unwilling to trade. Instead of a war, the Kesh send an envoy down the peninsula to resolve the situation. The four Kesh, including a negotiator called Patience, sit in meetings for days until the Cotton-peoples' troubles finally surface (144). The Cotton people lay bare their souls and talk about bad frosts and "told everything" (145). The Kesh and Cotton people renegotiate and resolve to be clear and open about problems that may happen with stocking and shipping the trade items. What could have become a violent or physical conflict was avoided because of Patience and the negotiating team of the Kesh. The character of Patience shows the sage qualities essential for a Taoist leader who must lead without leading. A

contemporary Taoist thinker, Frederic Bender, discusses how we should think about the Taoist sage today. He notes that the Taoist "sage comprehends the metaphysical nullity of worldly goods such as the prestige and power over which people so often quarrel. Unlike those who seem powerful because they impose their views on others, truly powerful individuals never show their strength, yet others listen to them because they radiate knowledge. They understand that power flows not from them, but through them" (Bender 131). In the story in *Always Coming Home*, the character Patience is a good example of a Taoist sage because his journey is peaceful, process oriented, and in the present. Here, avoiding guns or knives is not seen as weakness, but as strength.

Taoist practices and philosophy come out of one fragmented collection of verses attributed to one man, Lao Tzu. The meandering, paradoxical format of the novel demonstrates Taoist principles. In addition, the Kesh practice a philosophy like Le Guin's Taoism, which turns out to be a useful tool in modeling a utopian reading. *Always Coming Home* may even be read as an argumentative treatise for a utopian form of Taoism that also argues for a Taoist form of utopia. The reader engages in Taoist practices, such as mindfulness. Reading *Always Coming Home* is a utopian process because of the Taoist philosophy and textual conventions that Le Guin relies on.[10] The poetry verses in *Always Coming Home* function similarly to Lao Tzu's text thereby creating the opportunity for meditative and spiritual connectedness as a utopian state of mind.[11]

General principles associated with Taoism that appear in the Kesh society concern humans as perceived to be microcosms of the universe; this allows the body to be both a way to understand simultaneously the self and the universe. The "uncarved block" is the

Taoist metaphor that stresses living receptively and perceiving without judgment. The uncarved nature is one that is kind, simple, and modest. Early Taoism rejected some rigid, Confucian social structure, and instead embraced nature, spontaneity, and perception. Taoists were skeptical of conventional structure and replaced it with anarchy, showing mistrust of social structure and particularly governments.

There are three aspects on which I base my view of Taoist process in the text and for the reader. First, I rely on Le Guin's writings, interviews, and essays. Second, I use Le Guin's published version (she insists it is not a translation) of the *Tao Te Ching* (1998). Third, I point to textual references, writing patterns, and symbols (such as the heyiya-if), as well as the intertwined animals drawn in the margins of the pages (see illustration). These illustrations resemble the circular, S shape now familiar to so many as a representation of the intertwined elements of the balanced universe in the yin and yang symbol.[12] From this evidence, I suggest that the Kesh and *Always Coming Home* looks and acts like a Taoist utopia.[13]

Le Guin admits that Taoism has been an under layer of her work for years. She says that

> [Taoism] begins talking about what we can't talk about – an old mysticism that intertwines with Buddhism and is practical and not theistic. Before and beyond God. There's a humorous and easygoing aspect to it that I like temperamentally and that fits in with anarchism.[14]

Le Guin's Taoist influences are apparent in the desire for balance that is part of the content and form of *Always Coming Home*. The Kesh celebrate a oneness with nature

that exemplifies Taoist practices. Also, Buddhist practices appear as part of the mindfulness and the collective responsibility for attaining enlightenment.

Le Guin's interest in Taoism and the book, the *Tao Te Ching* began, like the Native American history, with her parents' own interests. She describes her introduction to a very old copy of an English / Chinese version of the book that her father had, and that she discovered when she was fourteen years old. Le Guin reflects that, "The undeserved good thing that happened was that a true and genuine scholar of ancient Chinese and of Lao Tzu, Dr. J.P. Seaton of the University of North Carolina, saw some of my versions of bits of the Tao Te Ching (scurvily quoted without attribution by myself)" and asked me to collaborate on an "interpretation" with him (107). The lens of Taoism applies to utopian process and changes how we see what is considered a utopian frame of mind.

In an interview, Le Guin describes how "All of my writing has been deeply influenced by the *Tao Te Ching*. And in *Always Coming Home* I did imagine a Taoist society in the Kesh people of a distant future, whose culture flourishes on the Pacific Coast." [15] In the novel, in "A First Note," the narrator explains the contextual meaning of a book, such as the Tao Te Ching, in terms of history-- it was written two thousand years ago-- and memory. The narrator explains the difficulty – indeed the impossibility - of translating a future language that has not existed. To clarify, Le Guin offers an analogy between what she does as a writer and what Lao Tzu has done in writing the *Tao Te Ching*.[16] She explains that the *Tao Te Ching* was written during a specific period in Chinese history called the Warring States Period, and for over 2,500 years since it was first written, it has been translated and retranslated. Le Guin concludes, "no translation can give us the book that Lao Tze" is said to have written. She thus suggests that meaning in a text is

relational – a part of the reader and the cultural contexts of both the writer and reader. Le Guin admits that we only have “here” and “now" (*Always* xi), but the readers’ construction and view of historical memory assumes crucial importance in the role of individual purpose and collectively building utopia.

Le Guin is not immune to the fact that the origin of Taoism also came out of a conflict between the yang or strong, and the yin or weak. In brief, it descended from a conflicted relationship between two Chinese philosophies, the Han and the Legalists. Previously, under Confucianism, there was a structure that not surprisingly supported the rule of an emperor’s mandate. Confucianism contains a complicated, hierarchical system of social, political, philosophical, and religious rules and thinking. The Condors’ view of the universe is also based on the necessity of hierarchy to create social order and is most obviously opposed to the Kesh, as well as Taoist belief systems. Le Guin admits that she meant the Kesh to represent a "Taoist" society, a society that seeks balance. But, even beyond the content, Le Guin implies that the reading process should function like a Taoist text – present, mindful, process oriented, and open to negotiation.

Philosophically, Taoism embraces naturalness, vitality, peace, “non-action” emptiness, detachment, and the strength of softness, such as that found in flexibility, as well as receptiveness, and spontaneity. The central concept of “wu wei” is translated as “without action,” and paradoxically expressed: “wei wu wei means something like action without action, or effortless doing. The goal is “not doing” because that aligns one with the “Tao” thereby paying attention to the “soft” or “invisible” power of all things. The Tao is the invisible potential, or the yin-action of the Way. Water is often associated with “wu wei” because it yields and shapes simultaneously. It is soft, but carves stones and

moves earth. Taoism shares the attitude that the universe strives for harmony. However, human “will” at certain times works against the Tao and that disrupts harmony. To create harmony, humans have to act according to “Te” with right attitude, morality, and lifestyle. “Te” is the expression of the “Tao” and is found in integrity. Tao is the “way,” and “Te” the living, or cultivation of that “way.”

One example of this “wei wu wei” and the Te principle can be seen in North Owl's journey at the age of eight when she goes on her first pilgrimage into the hills surrounding Sinshan. North Owl decides to go "up in the tracks of the lion" (18). The process is tough. She's afraid. She wants to find a place to hide. She cries because she thinks about how the Sinshan children call her a "half-person" (19). She ends up feeling "outside the Valley" because she is half Kesh and half Condor, known as a person with no-home. But in choosing to walk around the mountain named, “She Watches,” she collects the mountain’s ability to be persistent. She says, “I kept going all that day as I had the day before, walking slowly and stopping, but my mind was changed. It was not thinking, yet it was clear. All I said to myself was, ‘Try to be on a way that goes around this mountain “She Watches” without going down or up much, and so come back to this bald place on this hill.’ There was a good feeling on that hill where the wild oats were bright yellow in the sunlight” (20). What North Owl describes is a state of present mindfulness. She also describes the importance of speaking to all beings, giving trees and water respectful “heya” greetings. Her description shows attention to everything, including the coyote who sang. She reflects where her “hand and the rock touched each other I knew that I had not gone wrong, even if I had come to nothing” (22). North Owl,

who is eight at the time, shows a profound awareness of her interconnectedness with inanimate and animate beings, a mindfulness known as the Tao.

Le Guin's influences of Native American ideals and Taoist imagery are quite clear in *Always Coming Home*. She embraces the often referred to "weaker" Taoist process rather than the strong, destructive male utopias. Accordingly, Le Guin argues that male utopias tend to be "made by the reaction of will and reason against, away from, the here-and-now, and it is, as More said in naming it, nowhere" (*Dancing* 81). She thinks that utopias have failed because they are too goal oriented, the frontier where "you boldly go where no one has gone before, pushing forward, like a storm front, like a battlefront. Nothing before you is real. It is empty space" ("Which" 27). She uses yin and yang to discuss types of utopias in her 1982 essay, "A Non-Euclidian View of California as a Cold Place to Be." Le Guin describes male utopias as "yang," embracing "structure without content; pure model; goal. That is its virtue. Utopia is uninhabitable. As soon as we reach it, it ceases to be utopia" (*Dancing* 81). Based on the summary and the indigenous influences in the novel, Le Guin strongly suggests the Condors are a "yang" utopia. In contrast, and not surprisingly, the Kesh are "yin" utopia – one that strives for balance with nature. The Condors live out of balance and rely on a system of dominance. They are out of balance and too yang. However, a "positive" outcome of Le Guin's interpretation of Taoism is a sense of harmony with the Tao. Thus, Le Guin's novel balances the forces of the Kesh and Condor, yin and yang, and achieves a harmony that is not stated, but is constructed in the reader's interpretative process.

Other textual evidence of the "sources" of Kesh culture in Taoism can be seen in the representation of Stone Telling's friend and former Condor servant, Shadow, who leaves

her home and joins Stone Telling's Kesh family. Her name among the Kesh, “Shadow,” suggests her feelings about her paradoxical presence and absence in the Valley, and her journey to the Kesh balances North Owl’s to the Condor. Shadow asks questions that show her (and consequently our) alienation from many Kesh practices. She wonders, “Why are there children in the trees tying wooden flowers to them? Why do people in white clothes come to the windows to frighten Ekwerkwe at night? Why don’t you eat beefsteak? How can Jay and Stag Alone be married if they’re both men? I will never understand anything here” (366). For the reader, through Shadow's narrator, what is normal becomes unfamiliar, and what is unfamiliar becomes normal. Le Guin uses the outsider point of view to have us look at all of the "common" (but strange) Kesh ways. Shadow’s words express our own anxiety; they show her distrust in a culture that is foreign - her fearfulness may reflect our own. Shadow learns to see differently; she learns to come home with Stone Telling. Eventually, she sees that there is much to be gained from living softly, in the Valley. Shadow notes “Animals live softly. They don’t make it hard to live. Here people are animals. Here everybody belongs to everybody” (366). In contrast, a Condor man believes he is alone and outside of nature. As we saw in the last section, Kesh language shows relationships that are not hierarchical. Shadow is finally convinced that the Condors' living outside the world is wrong. Stone Telling sympathizes with Shadow’s struggle because her father, Kills, had lived “outside the world, killing it, to show the glory of One” (201). In contrast, living inside the world is living like the Kesh - in a balanced state with other beings, human and nonhuman.

Balance between the human and nonhuman worlds is found in Taoism as well as in many Native American beliefs that Le Guin refers to and that inspire the Kesh makeup.

Le Guin points out interconnections on multiple levels, including in the process of reading, and the collaboration that occurs between the readers and the text. Taoist philosophy and practices strengthen Le Guin's invitation to reading as utopian process. A Taoist utopia comes out of the Kesh people's stories and allows readers to search for and find a state of mind that seeks utopian balance. Le Guin incorporates Taoism much the same way that she does with the philosophies and practices of Native Americans from the Napa Valley area. Her usage shows her desire to emphasize the reader's participation and the multiplicity of interpretations (the open-ended text) as the basis for the reader's utopian process.[17]

V. Multiple Narrators and a Utopian Reading Process

Besides drawing on philosophical principles from Native and Taoist systems of belief, Le Guin uses a plethora of framing narrators to create the opportunity for utopian reading practice. As noted in the introduction, dialogue is central to the conventional utopian plot: one character lives in utopia, the other in dystopia; the dystopian character journeys to utopia to talk to the inhabitants to learn about the place and never leaves. The purpose of the exchange is not to converse, but to convert the dystopian character and the reader to belief in the values of this utopia. *Always Coming Home* differs in how it uses these tropes. For example, one-sided convincing arguments about the nature of utopia are replaced by conversations between an informant, the Archivist, and Pandora, the visitor who attempts to put the text together. Pandora's narrative voice consistently doubts the reliability of her own ethnography and provides a meta-commentary on the text, the Kesh, and the readers. In addition, the Archivist, if following the prototype, would more

typically assure the visitor (including the reader) of the validity of this new utopian place. But this Archivist cannot act as the guide because (as she says) “I have no answers and this place isn’t utopia, aunt!” (316). Shortly thereafter, the Archivist tells Pandora that “This is a mere dream dreamed in a bad time, an Up Yours to the people who ride snowmobiles, make nuclear weapons” (316). These words show the Archivist is not calling or persuading Pandora that this is utopia; rather she is more honestly declaring the characteristics.

The narrators construct the Kesh culture before our eyes and challenge the reader to integrate their disparate views. First, there is the meta-narrator, Pandora; second, there is a nameless narrator referred to as "Editor"; third, Le Guin's voice as persona “author” pokes in; fourth, Stone Telling offers a first-person account. Other narrative moments are indicated, often by setting off a character's introduction in italics. The use of multiple narrators destabilizes the conventions of story telling by calling into question who is appropriate for creating and then telling stories in a culture. This destablization allows the readers the possibility of collaboration, picking and choosing the various “in roads” supplied by the different narrators. There are multiple reasons that Le Guin uses this plethora of narrators. The reader witnesses varied ways to put culture together and learn about how stories inform culture. This plurality creates a knowing reader who puts different elements of the community together as a utopia. The narrators are also used as mediators and guides; the reader sees through their eyes. What readers do with this information involves them in the utopian process. These four narrators gather and present the data of the cultures differently. They provide different ways of

conceptualizing the relationship between the individual and community in terms of utopia. They offer the reader a polyvocal quality of the self in community.

The multiple narrative voices in the community become internalized so that the reader contains a medley of narrative positions. For example, Pandora demonstrates that self-reflexivity is a part of the social practice of ethnography. That is, Pandora employs a communal reading practice and that implies we can (or should?) do the same. For example, such a process appears when she directly addresses her desire for collaboration from the reader, valuing interconnected thinking. The reader is told to work with Pandora as she "Finds a Way into the Valley through the Scrub Oak" (239). The reader is told to "look how messy this wilderness is" but to continue. Pandora asks the reader to "imagine that shadow of a few leaves falling in the wilderness" (241). But, Pandora wonders whether any good would come out of it if we imagined "all the shadows of all the other leaves on all the other branches on all the other scrub oaks on all the other ridges of all the wilderness" (241). The narrator responds to her question that imagining these things will do "infinite" good, showing the importance of imagining, seeing, and connecting shadows, leaves, and scrub oaks in a meditative practice.

Four different narrative voices exist, and each has a different view of the Kesh and a different relationship to Kesh culture. These narrators serve as frames that allow the reader to decide how near or far he or she is positioned in relation to the utopian text; a different frame can create a different book. The narrators provide the reader with narrative windows that "can invite rather straightforward relationships between authorial voice and reader or introduce ambiguous, even contradictory, relations." (Roemer 28). The narrators provide meta-commentaries on the utopian genre, as well as on how the

fiction or non-fiction is put together. One narrator, referred to as "Editor," directs our focus and our interpretation. We recognize this nameless Editor because she enters the text through italics; she shows and sometimes prescribes a way to decipher the artifacts, the dialogues, or the new texts. For example, she notes, “The second part of Stone Telling’s story begins on page 173” (41). Or, before the poem “Puma Dance,” she notes that “this song is taught in Sinshan to people preparing to go up alone on the hills on a journey of the soul” (403).

Pandora offers us a feminist, ethnographic approach to the text. She demonstrates the self-reflexivity necessary for a feminist social practice of ethnography. Pandora shows "we are part of the social world we study […] We act in the social world and yet are able to reflect upon ourselves and our actions as objects in the world" (Hammersley 25). Pandora narrates with a self-reflectivity basic to feminist practice because it allows a collaborative rather than hierarchical relationship to the world she observes. Her voice shows her uneasiness in the section, "Pandora Worries About What She Is Doing: The Pattern” (53). Here, Pandora recognizes that she doesn’t want to see the “entire Valley” through the “big end of the telescope” where “Everything [is] Under Control” (53). She “rushes from the observatory eyes shut and hands outward” and she feels “Bits, chunks, fragments. Shards. Pieces of the Valley, lifesize” (56). Pandora gathers bits of the culture in this chaotic, passionate manner. Traditionally, archeologists use measured, precise means to logically gather the physical evidence from the ground; afterwards, the objects are labeled and put together as artifacts in a museum. In contrast, Pandora works randomly, explains to the reader that her methods are messy, and then worries what the

reader will do with this information. Pandora thus also offers a feminist critique of the assumption of objectivity by the archaeologist or ethnographer.

Pandora's narrative voice is complicated. Her voice shows how difficult it is to imagine new, utopian places. Named for the "originator, first woman, goddess, troublemaker," Pandora is, according to Khanna, the “scatterer of utopian/dystopian fragments, the inclusive 'all' encompassing multiple narrative voices" (134). Rather than the conversion narrative of the utopian literary tradition, Pandora achieves a narrative that deconstructs itself. Khanna notes that the Kesh valley is said to exist in the “First Note,” only to be negated in the last song of the book, “Stammersong.” These paradoxes show tension between the practical and the promise of utopia. She notes that More’s text deconstructed paradoxes as well, such as the capital, “Amaurotum, meaning ‘mirage’ or ‘ghost city’; its river Anydrus, ‘without water’; and its ruler Ademus, ‘without people.’” Pandora’s narrative takes these impossibilities and makes them sit uneasily in our minds.

Le Guin emphasizes her multiple identities to show her reader the necessity of embracing a polyvocal or collective identity. What we may have suspected from the title page, that Pandora and Le Guin shared a narrative voice appears true. In “A First Note” the narrator explains, she was “coming at my work as a novelist, I thought it best to put many of the explanatory, descriptive pieces into a section called The Back of The Book, where those who want narrative can ignore them and those who enjoy explanations can find them” (“A First Note”).[18] In the last section, “Pandora No Longer Worrying,” the idea that Le Guin plays Pandora and the Editor off each other is mentioned again. Behind Pandora is the authorial voice of Le Guin. Le Guin **is** Pandora, a writer, an archeologist, an ethnographer, an Editor, and a Gatherer. In “Pandora No Longer

Worrying," Le Guin reminds us of the multiplicity of roles she plays; she does this in a self-reflexive manner, and explains how this multiplicity, where choices have to be made, suggests the integral nature of the readers' choices for creating utopian process.

This collective authoring of the text is an important part of the text's utopian characters. Le Guin's "real" narrative voice remarks that "Here as the ceremony begins to end and the heyiya-if opens out, Pandora takes hands and dances with her friends" (506). This is followed by a long list of people, people "with beautiful feet and dancing" who helped, including a musician-friend, an artist, a painter, librarians, family members, publishers, and many others. Thus, the book claims to be authored by multiple versions of Le Guin and also many actual collaborators. Pandora's narrative role speaks to the collaboration of the many people necessary to create not only the novel, but also the utopian possibility in the Kesh. Le Guin seems to be using the alias, "Pandora" as a persona throughout, but she eventually drops it to acknowledge the people in her life who helped her write this text. In the section, "Pandora No Longer Worrying," Le Guin foregrounds her work with the other people who authored parts of the utopian culture in *Always Coming Home*. She thanks Bart Jones, who "heard the first songs, the quail and the creek and sang them to me so that I could hear my people" (506). She thanks Judd Boynton, who helped her learn to do some practical things, including the practicalities of recycling and washing. She uses humor to thank "Jean Nordhaus of the Folger Poetry Series, who enabled me to hoot and croak in the Folger Shakespeare Library" (506). She attributes songs to several people and includes strange references, such as thanking the "Three Who Cared for the Cow" (507). Le Guin is thanking people in her everyday life, who exist outside the book's binding. These people supported and allowed her to

collectively tap into this place and time of utopian process in California. By this point, it is clear that she couldn't, and by extension, her readers can't, create utopia if they see themselves in one role or through one perspective. A fluid identity allows for utopian process, and by default, makes us engage across identities.

Stone Telling's narrative examines the Condor war and dominance strategies from the inside; her narrative voice is balanced so we tend to trust what she sees about the Condors and their war-like ways. As Stone Telling grows up, the reader is given the opportunity to see the Kesh as "the norm" and the Condors as the extreme. When we are introduced to the Condors, the narrative works to create a sense of surprise as the Condors' attitudes and beliefs are shown to be closer to contemporary U.S. militarism, than to the Kesh point of view. The Valley point of view, Stone Telling, is where we see the Condors first and shows the two cultures to be alien to one another. Le Guin uses Stone Telling's narrative voice to show the evils of a society that is both militaristic and materialistic. The way the narrative unfolds, we see the Condors while still disoriented, similar to Stone Telling's own cultural positioning. For example, when her mother sees him for the first time, Stone Telling describes her first impression. She says, "beaked and winged" the Condor men were looking "down on her. My legs went weak and then I wanted to piss. I saw black vultures stooping on my mother, stretching out their red necks, their pointed beaks, staring with eyes ringed with white. They pulled things out of her mouth and belly" (16). This narrative approach is "powerful and jolting" causing the distance Le Guin wants readers to have from a society like the readers' own, so that the principles, values, and attitudes of that society can be more dispassionately evaluated.

Stone Telling's narrative is also important because in it she describes her process of coming into womanhood. Her second installment talks about her love for her father's return, and a young Kesh warrior, an event similar to her mother's love of the Condor man. Stone Tellings says, "I thought I did not love my mother at all. I thought continually of how my father would come back to me on his big horse … and find me waiting for him" (173). Stone Telling's third and final narrative shows her coming full circle and arriving back home. She collapses, finally realizing that she has to leave the Condors because of her concerns for her daughter and her own mental instability. Her narrative allows us to witness her journey, where she becomes "Woman Coming Home," finally knowing she is a being in process. By extension, the readers are invited to come home, as well, and to see the journey "home" as full circle, with the dangers, rewards, and risks of belonging to a human community. In the reading, Le Guin suggests that this goal can only be achieved by first leaving and finding one's identity, then returning, coming home.

Pandora, as her name implies, narrates on a mythological level, where she opens up the box of culture and shows all the fragments. She explores what it means to reconstruct; she uses self-deprecation and humor to discuss her creation. She talks directly to her readers, showing her likeness to values associated with Western, capitalist ideas of identity and place. Her narrative voice is a comfort to most readers because her point of view resembles our own. What is striking is how different this narrator is from Stone Telling's voice. Stone Telling's narrative shows an individual in process. She demonstrates a journey of coming home; she is bi-cultural, Kesh and Condor, and travels between these identities but with difficulties. Her narrative voice demonstrates that

identity is relational, not independent from others. The Editor and the authorial voice of Le Guin provide two entry points into this mammoth work. The editor is a practical narrator who is keenly aware of the nuts and bolts of the details about the culture and what the reader won't know but may want to know; for example, she directs, in "here a reader who is interested in narrative may want to go to page X." Le Guin's voice shows how identity comes from multiple pieces similar to her reliance on community to collaborate and create a text that offers many ways to read.

These narrators act in collaboration and demonstrate nuanced approaches to observing, collecting, and constructing culture. These narrators provide multiple persons who witness and discuss the process of putting the culture together to arrive at a utopian, or balanced state of mind. The text does not simplify by simply showing binary opposition but provides "multiple voices" and "multiple worlds in relation rather than in opposition" producing a radical entry point into utopia.[19]

VI. Reading Fragments and Utopian Practice

Interconnection and balance are the basis of Kesh society. "This Stone," by the Kesh poet Wordriver shows an interconnection between inanimate and animate things by talking about and through "stones." Wordriver looked for a road that didn't go to "death," and found it, walked for awhile until he stopped, "having turned to stone" (120). He is frozen into "stone" but still narrating the poem because, symbolically, the road that doesn't lead to death doesn't lead anywhere. He is captured, in the moment, embodying all of time and a moment. Stones fall from "his eyes" and the rainbow people, "long-

legged" and "light-stepping," pass by and pick up "his tears." The speaker says the stone was "given me on the mountain/ by one who died before my birth, / this stone, this stone" (120). Thus, the poem reminds us that a stone is part of utopia and contains utopia as much as utopia contains the stone.[20] This short tale, a fragment of Le Guin's novel, is an allegory for the worldview that the novel is presenting to the reader. A stone is a part but it is only a part of a whole. The reader can only perceive the whole through these parts.

Another old man recognizes that while rocks don't live according to our pace, if you look carefully, touching, holding, and listening, talking and singing to them, "you can enter into the rock's soul to some extent and the rock can enter into yours, if it's disposed to" (309). In this reciprocity, there is still difference, but also an exchange happens. The old man talks about rocks in a way that differs substantially from our current culture's assumptions. For the Kesh, humans can converse with a rock, and a rock's soul can enter into our own soul; rocks have soul. In contrast, our culture tends to think of rocks as soulless, not alive, or able to be in a relationship with a living being. The names "Stone Telling" and "Stone Listening" indicate this sense of interconnection with the world. The reader is asked to put all these disparate references about rocks and stones together to help construct the utopian vision of the Kesh.

Le Guin reinforces that the people of the Valley exist here and now by ending with Kesh words. A simple line drawing of a bird in flight tries to make real the evidence of the culture. The words and images reinforce the continuation of the Kesh beyond the end of the novel. These fictional words show the level of concreteness that Le Guin believes is necessary to create utopian process. The words also reinforce Le Guin's principle that since language reflects reality, we need a language that reflects the interconnection of all

beings in order to make people act with caring and community in mind. Utopia exists in the language because it reflects different relationships. The words that end this section are “Heya Heggaia, han es im! Amoud gewakwasur, yeshou gewakwasur” (507). Roughly, this translates to give homage to "heya," the "world, visible and invisible, on this side and on the other side of death" (94). The Heyiya-if represents a world view made up of the fragments that are somehow the “source” or “spring” and that appear in multiple cultural forms: architecture, dancing, and of course, storytelling.

Living and dreaming, the characters of *Always Coming Home* invite the reader to feel a utopian process. Even analyzing the naming process, such as when Stone Listening finds his name in relation to Stone Telling's name, is evidence of interconnection and utopian process. Stone Telling's own name and actions model reciprocity and her solid connection to the physical world, reminding us of her circular travel from the Na Valley back to her self. Her beginning is her ending: a (Taoist) paradox that aims to create a utopian process. In this process, she says, "I have a story to tell of where I went when I was young; but now I go nowhere, sitting like a stone in this place, in this ground, in this Valley. I have come where I was going” (7). She explains: “I have lived in this place until I have become Stone Telling, and my husband Stone Listening, and my quail has become Shining; and in this house Acorn and Phoebe have made me the grandmother weaving at the loom” (376). Stone Telling explains her identity in *relation* to those around her; there is a balance between self and other, and her identity depends on interrelations with those around her. Le Guin is not so glib as to say that utopia is a "state of mind," but she successfully adapts principles from Native American culture and Lao Tzu's, *Tao Te Ching*, multiple discourses, and a polyvocal, communal narrative to create

a reading process that complements utopian practice as a kind of imagery and practiced transformation.

In this chapter, I have analyzed the utopian process the novel urges by looking at Le Guin's use of polyvocal langue, the philosophies generated by Native Americans and Taoists, as well as the use of multiple narrators to provide different reading strategies and identities. Each of these elements provides the reader with options to create utopian visions out of the pieces of culture.

According to Le Guin, reading a novel is an archeology of perception; meaning comes from the pieces, the cultural artifacts found at the site: "a piece of madrone wood, a piece of obsidian" as well as "a piece of blue clay." The "Pieces of the Valley" are important because they are hard evidence that such a society exists. The narrator says that "Even if the bowl is broken (and the bowl is broken), from the clay and the making and firing of the pattern, even if the pattern is incomplete (and the pattern is incomplete), let the mind draw its energy. *Let the heart complete the pattern*" (emphasis added 53). The heart, not the intellect or reason alone, is the way to "complete" the pattern. But, the hinge, or gyre is a pattern that cannot be broken or incomplete. And in that completion, that balance, lies utopia.

ENDNOTES

[1] Walsh, Interview.

[2] An earlier critic who dealt with these aspects of *Always Coming Home* is Bernard Selinger in the book, *Le Guin and Identity in Contemporary Fiction*, which appeared in 1988. Selinger uses psychoanalytic theory to interpret Le Guin's most significant novels. *Always Coming Home* is discussed in two chapters: the first chapter, "The Art of Living" and a summary chapter, called "The Personal Is the Political." Selinger argues that *Always Coming Home* concerns separation and symbiosis. For example, when Stone Telling takes her final name, her husband then becomes Stone Listening. They are distinct from one another, yet in relationship; Selinger focuses on the Derridean way that Le Guin uses presence and absence, wholeness and fragmentation. According to Selinger, the Kesh rely on harmony, supportiveness, ecological interdependence, and the erasure of discrimination. Le Guin's narrative style generates a conversation about identity that, internalized, can capture a snapshot of the world and worldview she wants us to consider. Selinger is worried that Le Guin's readers won't become "as imaginative, as fierce, and as gentle as what they are reading" (156). These ideas support my argument but are too psychoanalytic for my discussion.

[3] The narrator wants to understand the Kesh concept of time and keeps asking questions, finally concluding, "It's hopeless. He doesn't perceive time as a direction, let alone a progress, but as a landscape in which one may go any number of directions, or nowhere. He spatialises (sic) time; it is not an arrow, nor a river, but a house, the house he lives in" (Le Guin, *Always* 149 – 153).

[4] Le Guin refers to A.L. Kroeber as "the author" (rather than her father) when she discusses the importance of his work as background for *Always Coming Home* in her

essay that explains many of her ideas about utopia, "A Non-Euclidian View of California as a Cold Place to Be" (Roemer 57).

[5] In contrast, utopia is mapped out in most Euro-American literary utopias. Roemer suggests that Le Guin blends facts and maps, polyvocality of nonexistent peoples, speaking indirectly "about but not for Native Americans" (59). Le Guin's use of irony, ambiguity, and visions of community "transcended many of the contradictions and ironies of mapping the utopian ideals of the Other" (60).

[6] Chris Fern argues that utopia appears as a dream in “many aboriginal cultures: not so much wish fulfillment, or an exploration of possibility, [rather] as an alternate way of perceiving reality” (214). Theoretically, then, our reading process, our reality, is permeated by utopia. The Kesh world is haunted by our current time as shown by the damages to the earth. We can infer that our own thinking has led to this destruction and destructiveness. However, these suppositions are contained within the reader. The result is that “Utopia and reality aren’t exclusive of one another” (Fern 214). A dialectics plays out the distinction between reality and dream.

[7] Sapir 1958 [1929], 69

[8] Suzanne Elizabeth Reid, *Presenting Ursula K. Le Guin*, 86.

[9] The tribal social structure found in the Yahis is seen in Le Guin’s own writing. The destruction and continuation of a tribe such as the “Yahis,” who were recorded to have as many as 15,000 citizens at one point, appears heavily in the background of *Always Coming Home*.

[10] Change in the universe was explained by the principles of the Tao or “The Way.” This principle is divided into yin and yang, opposite forces of change that complement and

cyclically “give rise” to one another and they are operated through the physical mechanism of "the five material agents.” These five agents are wood-fire-earth-metal-water grouped to show how they produce or conquer each other. The agents were said to explain the progression of change in everything, the stars, the body, “the nature of foods, the qualities of music, the ethical qualities of humans, the progress of time, the operations of government, and even the nature of historical change” (Hooker).

[11] Taoist process involves generating and forming energy on a personal and community level. The Kesh describe three kinds of energy: cosmic, social, and personal, a set that resembles the main principles of the Taoist philosophy. The Kesh have a word, "rruwey," that resembles the Taoist word for energy, "chi."

[12] The invented Kesh language includes specific words that reflect Taoist thinking; this include the term "dao," meaning “moving, motion, action, activity” or process, which resembles the “Tao” meaning the “process” of becoming. Other Kesh words include “iya” which means energy or “chi”; “toudo” meaning the motion of water, related to the “yin” principle; and “heyiya” meaning sacred or hinge, similar to the Taoist principle of the wheel. Further explanations are in a section of *Always Coming Home titled*, "Some Generative Metaphors," since direct translations don't quite give the meaning (483).

[13] Warren Rochelle’s work, *Communities of the Heart*, (2001) focuses on cultural fragments that are part of the ethnographic data. Rochelle touches on Le Guin’s "Native American (in particular California Indians) religious beliefs and social practices” and how these add to “American cultural myths" (81). Rochelle also considers Le Guin's use of "feminism as transformative for utopian myth" (78). Similarly, I apply concepts from

her essays, such as “A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to be" and her thinking about yin and yang appear when applied to utopia.

[14] Gevers, Interview.

[15] Brenda Peterson, interview “The Feminine and the Tao.”

[16] Tao Te Ching appears in many different spellings including “Dao de Ching,” and “Tao te Ching” as well as others.

[17] Bruce Woodcock analyzes how Le Guin uses Taoism in "Radical Taoism." Woodcock discusses whether Le Guin "appropriates" Taoism as other critics have said (202).

[18] The “First Note” continues supporting this with “The difficulty of translation from a language that doesn’t yet exist is considerable but there is no need to exaggerate it.”

[19] Donawerth and Kolmerton 14.

[20] A section contains "some remarks made by an old man of the Serpentine of Kastoha-na, Walnut Bridge End House in conversation with the Editor, and recorded with his permission" (308). The subject of rocks includes where the old man gives a tongue in cheek judgment that “not all rocks are equally sensitive” (309). He uses figurative language, including personification, to describe how the “basalt doesn’t pay attention” because it may be thinking about “the fire in the dark” (309). Or, Serpentine “listens, and speaks,” but Flint “stays locked up” (309). Sandstone isn’t from the Valley, but it is brought in by the members of the Finders Lodge who look for "strange things." Sandstone is “mortal and intellectual – it is a rock made of lives” (309). Some hard rocks, such as Limestone, can be shaped by the softest substance: water.

Chapter Two: Octavia Butler: Parody and Resistance

Despite the dystopic near-future in which Octavia Butler's two novels, *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, are set, they reflect a utopian impulse. However, Butler explores this utopian impulse through parody and subversion. Thus Butler's novels fall into the category of contemporary postmodern feminist fiction that deploys parody and subversion in order to resist patriarchy, to challenge the value of individualism, and to question rationalism as the only way to obtain knowledge.[1]

In *Parable of the Sower*, Butler parodies different kinds of "ideal" community structures, such as gated or walled-in communities, towns created and owned by companies, and communal pastoral retreats. In *Parable of the Talents*, Butler also subverts and parodies religious communities through looking quite critically at fundamentalism and its effects on creating community --the Christian Right reappears in the dystopic future of "Christian America." Both novels offer forms of community that are parodied. As Linda Hutcheon observes of postmodern parody in general, Butler's novels work to "de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life" (Hutcheon 1-2), exaggerating injustices that in lesser forms pervade our patriarchal society as a whole. The *Parable* novels provoke readers to ask the following questions: Is it possible to examine the origins of our ideas, and rethink what we consider "natural"? Is it possible for the characters and by extension the readers, to interact rather than strive for dominance? Butler creates a dystopian backdrop against which humans must decide whether to succumb to their desire for hierarchy and power, or to use their intelligence and admit the need for interdependence.

Butler's novels, however, are not dystopias, I argue. Rather, Butler writes utopian novels out of dystopian premises. Ironically, it is Butler's parody of the utopian impulse that allows her novels to resist hopelessness and challenge cultural norms. For example, Butler's exaggerated vision of the modern gated community parodies the utopian impulse toward isolation and exclusivity in order to achieve ideal community. But the failure of this form of utopia is freeing for Lauren because she knows that this exclusivity does not help to change the social injustices. Lauren and her followers seek new ways to organize society. The failure of Robledo is Lauren's father's attempt to create utopia behind walls; however, the failure allows the journey toward Acorn, the utopian home that Lauren and Earthseed followers build which, however short lived, offers hope of a better world. Thus, by using parody, Butler unsettles her readers and invites them into the process of relocating the utopian impulse.

In order to use utopia in this postmodern way, Butler recontextualizes the history, story lines, conventional characters, time, and place of utopia as a genre by creating a hybrid form from the components of utopia, dystopia, diary, scripture, jeremiad, and slave narrative. These new narrative elements offer a broader range of rhetorical strategies to demonstrate and invoke in her readers resistance of oppression.[2] For example, in both *Parable* novels, Lauren Olamina, the protagonist, suffers from hyper-empathy syndrome, the illusion of sharing others' pains. Psychic powers are a convention of the modern feminist science fiction/utopian novel, but Butler revises this generic convention to complicate the utopian vision. Rather than the ability to read others' minds, Lauren's disease offers the illusion of sharing others' pains to the degree that it debilitates her--but also evokes in her the purpose to establish a

community that alleviates such pains. As a narrative strategy, hyper-empathy syndrome deconstructs the binary of self and other but is not imagined as a superhuman power: it is a metaphor for redefining social relations. Similarly, Lauren's self-published poetry book, *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*, merges elements from scripture, diary, utopia, and the dream of literacy in the slave narrative. The *Earthseed* poems thus give material reality to words as resistance, and so provide hope in Lauren's dystopic future.

Through parody, multiple narratives, hybrid form, and the neo-slave narrative, Butler generates a utopian reading process. Through the humor of parody and satire, Butler shows awareness of slippage between the grim circumstances of this imagined future and her hopeful vision of a different future The multiple narratives create a diversity of voices, a Bakhtinian "heteroglossia" that requires readers to sort their visions of utopia out of diverse claims on the ideal future. The neo-slave narrative brings generic means to both expose historical atrocities and offer hope of escape from that history. In the remainder of this chapter, I first review the *Parable* novels and surrounding criticism, then analyze Butler's parodies of gated communities, company towns, and religious institutions as utopia, and finally discuss narrative forms, especially the neo-slave narrative, as offering a resistant reading process.

I. Summary

Parable of the Sower takes place from the year 2024, when Lauren Olamina is a teenager, to the founding of the small utopian community called Acorn in 2027. It is set in a dystopian future; the protagonist, Lauren Olamina is a young, ethnically mixed female with the medical condition known as hyper-empathy syndrome. This illness gives

her the ability to feel the pain (and pleasures) of those around her. Lauren is a girl coming of age at a time when the world around her is coming apart. In this future United States, the government is fragmented, urban violence has increased, and there is fierce competition for scarce resources like water. Lauren lives in a gated community, made up of middle-class families trying to survive in a suburb of Los Angeles. They live in their neighborhood as virtual prisoners; people only leave when armed, and scavengers desperately break in and steal. Lauren's father won't give up on Robledo or his college job; he still teaches and preaches outside the walls. Unlike the step-mother who wants to go to Olivar, he believes that "Freedom is dangerous . . . but it's precious too. You can't just throw it away or let it slip away. You can't sell it for bread and pottage."[3] Lauren's father rejects going to a company town and insists on continuing their life with their community, in Robledo. Lauren loses much of her family when the town is attacked by pyromaniacs who burn it for the pleasure of the fire.

While yet in Robledo, Lauren had begun to develop a philosophical religion, Earthseed, to help her survive – a religion – like Buddhism or Taoism – without a deity but based on poetic scriptures that inspire individual and collective enlightenment. Lauren is writing her own set of instructions for practices that she thinks will make her world better. As she journeys along Highway 101, she gains followers and she establishes her thinking about how best to live in a violent, unpredictable world where the idea of community seems to have completely disappeared. At an early age, she decides that her father's all-knowing God is not her God. Lauren's God is very simply change.

Lauren first travels up the coast with two survivors from the Robledo fire: Harry, a young white man, and Zahra, a woman sold into slavery by her own mother. There are

other people who join and appear throughout *Sower*. A couple, Gloria and Travis, and their baby become the first community members. Travis is a fast learner of Earthseed ideas and Lauren considers him her first convert. Bankole joins the group as they move northward; he is a fifty-seven year old African-American doctor, who lost everything during a raid on his community outside San Diego. He takes to the road to get away from the violence and to walk up the coast where other family members reside. Although there is a large age difference between them, Bankole and Lauren become lovers, marry, and have a daughter. A number of others join during the last months on the highway. The last to join are a father and daughter, Grayson Mora, Latino, and Doe Mora. It comes out later that these two share the hyper-empathy syndrome.

The group finally arrives at Bankole's land only to find the house destroyed, and its inhabitants dead. This remote location in Northern California becomes the place Lauren establishes Acorn, a community made up of nine adults and four children. They ceremonially bury Bankole's family, and they perform rituals of remembrance for their own families. Lauren notes that "Afterward, we sat together and talked and ate a meal and decided to call this place Acorn" (Sower 295). *Parable of the Sower* ends shortly after they arrive in this remote corner of California. The community builds homes, shares craft expertise, and sets up education. They live there for five long and good years due to their tenacity, and the help of the medical doctor, Bankole.

Parable of the Talents opens in 2032, five years after the ending of *Parable of the Sower*. It contains a diary entry from Lauren in 2090, although most of the novel occurs during the mid-twenty-first century. The novel continues the story, but the daughter replaces the mother as the principle narrator. The chaos is replaced with a totalitarian

regime that is connected to a right-wing religious organization, called the Church of Christian America; the group uses Gestapo tactics to grind down anything it considers heretical. They attack and stamp out Earthseed, imprison the Acorn members, bring more "heretics" to the camp for religious re-education, and take away all of the children, including Lauren's daughter. Bankole dies of electrocution from the slave collar the Christians use to control people. Re-education consists of some old and some new oppressive tactics: the prisoners are chained; writing and reading are not allowed; they demand endless work, and give little food or rest. The "new" slavery includes the use of chains with electric collars that control the amount of pleasure or pain each feels. Finally, the prison of Camp Christian implodes, Lauren escapes, and starts her life as an itinerant, one who preaches and teaches, using Earthseed stanzas to teach reading and writing. Slowly, the totalitarian regime fades and Lauren gains followers, becoming a religious leader, and she assumes the title of "Shaper."

Unknown to Lauren for years, her younger brother survives the Robledo attack and also becomes a preacher. After Camp Christian ends, Lauren sees him by chance in his role as a respected preacher of the Church of Christian America. Marcus and Lauren become "rival" preachers of diametrically opposed religions. He is conservative and traditional, retaining ideas such as the unchanging nature of God, the opposite of Lauren's "God is Change." Lauren doesn't know that for years Marcus has kept the daughter's life a secret. Finally, Vere sees a television show and recognizes pieces of her own childhood in the story of Lauren Olamina. Vere comes to the Earthseed center, and a quick DNA test proves she is related to Lauren. They hardly meet again after that because Lauren is so angry at her brother, which turns Vere away from her mother, and

closer to the only family she has ever known, her Uncle Marc. At the center, we learn that Earthseed is an international movement, and that some original members still work with Lauren, now greeted as "the Shaper."

Many of the diary entries that the narrator, Vere, chooses are about Earthseed and its dissemination on the World Wide Web. The phrases repeated are "Shape chaos. Shape God," and the command, "Act." Earthseed lines sprinkled throughout are about living and expanding to "take root among the stars," to live and thrive on new earths, to explore the "vastness of heaven . . . to explore the vastness of ourselves." Butler closes *Parable of the Talents* with Lauren's death; she is rich and famous, and her dream of "The Destiny" is blasting off into space, a rocket carrying seeds to other worlds.

II. Scholarship on Butler's *Parable* Novels

Since the late 1990s, criticism has focused on the utopian aspects of Butler's oeuvre, oftentimes drawing attention to the reading process. Some theorists believe that Butler's work is positive and inspires a utopian reading practice; others argue that many of her works produce less optimistic and more dystopian reading practices. The central question is whether these works function to raise critical consciousness or whether these works close down readers into accepting society without working for change. I review a selection of criticism related to reading process, and the utopian or dystopian function. The critics range in their attitudes about the politics of the reading process; what I discern is that Butler's works inspire hopefulness, or at least evoke the ability to resist negative alienation. Butler's books have been the subject of scholarship in a range of disciplines--Utopian Studies, African-American Studies, Women's Studies--because her novels allow

for studies of language and power as they intersect with categories of gender, class, race, and sexual identity.

An early essay by feminist theorist, Hoda Zaki, focuses on the topic of "Utopia, Dystopia, and Ideology in the Science Fiction of Octavia Butler" (1990) and on Butler's subversion of norms surrounding race, gender, and sexuality. Zaki claims that Butler refutes the category of woman as “trans-historical.” Zaki points out that Butler resists "liberal feminist ideology: its claim to speak for all women, regardless of class or color." Butler's works show her belief that “human nature is fundamentally violent and therefore flawed" (241). As demonstrated by creating situations where characters and readers have to confront matters of “dominance and submission,” Butler’s audience is politically aware and concerned about the relationship between those who rule and those who are ruled (242). Zaki implies that Butler’s texts propose readers who are aware of the critique of liberal feminist thinking and ready to embrace alternative ways of thinking about difference.

Michelle Erica Green’s essay, "'There Goes the Neighborhood': Octavia Butler's Demand for Diversity in Utopias" (1994), discusses the possible dystopian aspects of the reading process. She explains how Butler insists on her audience confronting problems that have occurred so often in human communities that they seem an almost unavoidable part of human nature. Green points out that Butler doesn't create utopias where problems go away, but shows that utopian thinking is intertwined with dystopian reality. Green does not treat the *Parable* novels, but she does provide an early analysis of the reading effects of utopian hope displayed in diverse but dystopian futures.

Jim Miller discusses evidence of Marxist perspectives in Butler's texts in his essay, "Post-Apocalyptic Hoping: Octavia Butler's Dystopian/Utopian Vision" (1998). He discusses *Parable of the Sower* as a "critical dystopia" which envisions a reading audience who are invited to construct a utopian practice. Miller rests his argument on his view that the novels' construction of a "new" alternative philosophy and practice found in Earthseed provides the readers with a "utopian political myth that prizes diversity, but avoids a fragmented identity politics" and that also "serves as a good model" for community (Miller 349). Miller notes that *Parable of the Sower* contains post-utopian hoping and invites readers to "a Gramscian exercise in overcoming the pessimism of the intellect with an optimism of the will" (Miller 357).[4] He reviews how the readers' responses are guided by Butler's choice of narrators, and how in *Parable of the Sower*, the narrator produces a sense of optimism rather than pessimism.

In the discussion of Butler's *Parable* series, scholars have revisited the characteristics of the genres of utopia and dystopia, including terms and definitions and historical sub-genres, and have frequently analyzed the process of reading as a generic function. In his book, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (2000), Tom Moylan describes the paradoxical effect on the reader of Butler's novels in his exploration of four late twentieth-century dystopias that includes Butler's *Parable* novels as a new kind of dystopia. Moylan writes that both *Parable* novels show a "new" utopian form he calls the "critical dystopia"; Butler's novels provide a dialectical synthesis, "a deepening of the dystopian form which includes utopian episodes or opens out into their margins" (195). Moylan suggests that critical dystopias retain utopian commitment and are open-ended.[5] Moylan revisits Suvin's theory of cognitive estrangement to suggest that utopian

process appears when the reader experiences estrangement from his or her own present time and place. He argues that critical dystopias function by estranging the reader through the use of a parody of self-consciousness whereby the future includes evidence of vital utopian communities glimpsed in the dystopian landscape. These futures are extrapolations from today and focus on societal control. However, Moylan further points out that the properties of capitalism are such that counter-communities, such as the gathering of Acorn, can intrude and resist dystopia.

Moylan values "open-ended" stories because they have a utopian horizon which “might provoke political awareness or effort" (163). He believes that dystopias are ineffectual when they embrace “an anti-utopian pessimism” and cause “authors, and willing readers, to reinforce their settled preference for the status quo or to help produce their capitulation to it as all hope for change is shattered" (181). Arguing that the *Parable* novels educate, change consciousness, and even cause the readers to act differently in the world, Moylan implies that readers who partake in dystopian fiction are provoked to expand intellectually and to become open to radically new perspectives. However, Moylan expects people to read dystopias *only* to have their political beliefs challenged. Because of the value he places on the political activity of the reader, Moylan finds *Talents* more pessimistic than *Sower* because it "sets aside questions of immediate political opposition in favor of the abstract alternative of a stellar journey" (238). Thus Moylan implies that *Talents* is not a “critical dystopia” because it uses an “apocalyptic leap, not *through* the present but *out* of the present, out of this world" (243). A utopian impulse appears when the impossible is imagined in a way that is both open-ended and possible (ie. not apocalyptic). Utopia needs to come out of here and now as opposed to

the “other” world approach, which he considers to be close-ended. The close-ended novels are seen as limiting utopian desire because the reader is left with few places out there to imagine. Thus Moylan's argument conflates aesthetics with politics. The novels treated in my dissertation, however, demonstrate that, while aesthetics and politics are connected, they are still distinct aspects of Butler’s novels.

In "Octavia Butler's Chiastic Cannibalistics," Peter Sands studies Butler’s use of cannibalism to show the horrors of “individualism” and capitalism (3). Sands argues that Butler employs cannibalistic metaphors in many of her novels to review the importance that the body plays - “especially women’s body’s” – in her fiction (3). Sands discusses how the narrative point of view invites readers to see from the colonized point of view, rather than the colonizer. This shifts the readers’ perspective from the aggressor to the oppressed. Inverting allows readers to consider the narrative voices of those usually unheard. Sands’ thinks that cannibalism appears in many of Butler’s texts and that it encourages readers to see the “permeability of the skin boundary and the mutability of the self” (11). If we see ourselves as permeable, then we understand the intersection between utopian hopefulness and dystopian despair.

Another critic, Peter Stillman, analyzes the hope and possibility for changing community formations in his essay, "Dystopian Critiques, Utopian Possibilities, and Human Purposes in Octavia Butler's *Parables*" (2003). He focuses on how individualism and self-reliance in isolated communities fails in Butler’s violent and frightening future; these failures make places that develop into dystopias. However, Stillman argues that because the *Parable* novels model collective process and recognize the importance of interdependence for constructing solid community, the readers are encouraged to respond

by engaging in utopian thinking. Butler proposes the need to create shared identities and trust, as well as active engagement with change for characters and readers alike. If this collaboration doesn't happen, the United States, Stillman warns, will become a fragmented dystopia. Similar to other critics, Stillman's utopian promise for the readers comes out of the "hope" and possibility in the fictionalized philosophy of Earthseed. He describes Earthseed as a "post-secular" religion, where no god or divine plan will make this all happen, but where "post-humanist" thinking provides a way to utopian practice. Similar to Stillman, I argue that Earthseed undermines boundaries and dichotomies so that human dominance is rejected in favor of communal language and actions.

Thus, the critical discussion of Butler's *Parable* series centers on the question of whether Butler's novels end with hope or despair and further suggests that the answer is tied to the reading process. I enter this discussion with an argument that Butler's use of parody establishes hope in her dystopian landscapes by offering the reader resistance to false utopian ideals. To accomplish this, I start with Lyman Tower Sargents' definition of "critical dystopia" and Elizabeth Wessling's explanation and use of parody in dystopias. Lyman Tower Sargent's approach, although he does not discuss Butler's novels, informs my discussion of the *Parable* novels as "critical dystopias" which are works that point to dystopias but that still have enclaves of hope. In his essay, "Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited" (1994), Sargent emphasizes the importance of "social dreaming" in dystopias as one face of utopianism (3). A critical dystopia, Sargent argues, allows characters and readers ways to criticize social injustices around them.[6] The critical dystopia is

> A non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as worse than contemporary society but that normally includes at least one *eutopian* enclave or holds out hope that the dystopia can be overcome and replaced with a *eutopia* ("Three Faces" 15-16).

Sargent analyzes dystopias in which a "*eutopia*," a positive or good society, exists as an enclave inside the text, creating a space for the desire for a better way of living. In critical dystopias, the utopian impulse is presented in such a way that characters and some "contemporaneous" readers hope that dystopia *will* end, to be replaced with a utopian alternative. Witnessing the practice of hope invites more social dreaming - the possibility of seeing a way out of the present dystopian society.

Butler's novels creatively adjust time and space, looking forward in time as well as looking backward. Through this rhetorical use of history, the readers come to see history as malleable. Both *Parable* novels depict conflicting political and social communities juxtaposed to one another. In Butler's series, *no community* is an island unto itself. Butler strategically places communities to imply that it is the reader's task to evaluate them and trace the relationship between them.

Sargent's definition offers a partial explanation of the hopefulness in Butler's works, but hope also derives from the novels' parody of the utopian impulse. For my definition of parody, I merge and adapt M. H. Abrams' traditional definition with Linda Hutcheon's postmodern study of the function of parody. Adapting Abrams' definition, which is restricted to the parody of literary genres, I define parody as "an incongruous imitation" that "imitates the … characteristic features of" a cultural institution, and by

"exaggerating," so "deflates the original" (27). According to Linda Hutcheon, parody is "doubly coded in political terms: it both legitimizes and subverts what which it parodies. This kind of authorized transgression is what makes it a ready vehicle for the political contradictions of postmodernism at large" (Hutcheon 101). Butler uses parody to push her readers into recognition of contradictions within the political and religious arena in the United States. She also uses parody to point to some problems associated with utopia as an idea and as a genre. She uses parody so she can reject the useless parts of the structures of the utopian and dystopian genres.

In her book, *Writing History as a Prophet: Postmodernist Innovations of the Historical Novel*, critic Elizabeth Wessling sheds light on the way parody functions. Wessling points out that in parody, writers have a way to tackle the issues of time and whether previous errors are repeated. Wessling claims that

> Utopian counterfactual parodies rewrite history from the perspective of groups that have been excluded from the making and writing of history. The ideological principle which informs their alternate histories is the sympathetic identification with those who have suffered history. The political commitment of the novels to be discussed emerges in their fantasies about alternate distributions of the roles of winner and loser (Wesseling 162)

Wessling suggests that parody functions to guide the reading audience toward "sympathetic" identification with the losing side or the oppressed.

Butler's own prophetic dystopian narrative form shows her desire for defiance and the survival mechanisms necessary to overcome historical oppression. Butler, like Wessling, sees that narratives that look backward (paradoxically) look forward to offer powerful

rhetorical resistance. These narratives may appear to be dystopian; but because the disenfranchised speak more than in the "historical record," those oppressed voices bring to the surface "opportunities for gaining victory over the *vis inertiae* into the past" (163). The way the novels reject "canonized history" is profoundly radical, inspired by the idea that "Western" capitalist civilization is about to end. By applying Wessling's ideas to Butler's *Parable* novels, we can recognize that Butler disrupts historical narratives to show the possibility of dismantling the current unjust system. Butler's parody encourages her readers to judge the usefulness of various utopian visions of community and to resist false utopian ideals, such as the gated community, or the corporate or company town, or religious institutional enclaves. Now, let us turn to an analysis of the kinds of utopian communities that Butler parodies.

III. Parody as Evidence of Utopia

A. Gated Communities as Utopia

Butler is writing out of the late twentieth century, which saw an increase in gated communities. During this period of time, gated communities began to be advertised to middle class suburbanites afraid of urban violence. In Butler's first novel, *Parable of the Sower*, Robledo parodies these communities and this American dream for the middle class. These communities are particularly common in California, where some even became incorporated as gated cities where city halls and municipal facilities are public, and private corporations own the buildings, parks, and all facilities within the gates. Gates, guards, fences, barbed wire make up these fortresses. In some communities, the number of private security guards is larger than the number of public police forces. In

addition, these places have tended, on the whole, to be made up of white and middle class individuals who turn away from the state and invest in private roads, private schools, and private police. The gated communities make us ask, Why bother to support the state if you can "buy" everything? Who cares about public health or public transportation? One problematic outcome occurs when the state authority becomes lessened, and the gated community regulations outweigh the municipal laws. This autonomy also leads to the legal problems that arise if gated communities are left to decide who to let in, and who to keep out. These are the problems that Butler addresses in her parody[7]

Butler recognizes that "gated" communities come out of the social dreaming associated with America as utopia, as well as the "distrust" many have of the government ("America's"). One scholar contends that Americans have tended to imagine their utopias elsewhere, rather than, like Europeans, to change society around them. In part, this has to do with the feeling of excess space, the frontier, because the United States is made up of a lot of land, especially out west. But parody also points to the problems associated with the effects of isolating and leaving the public state outside of the utopian process. The gated communities come out of a desire for security and a fear of others; however, Butler shows readers the negative effects of excluding others and leaving behind the public welfare system and rights associated with public education, community health care, and public transportation.

Early in *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren speaks about the gated communities during her father's childhood. Only here, Butler also refers to these early communities as "walled-in." In disbelief, Lauren reflects that "According to Dad, [Los Angeles was] once a rich, green, unwalled little city that he had been eager to abandon when he was a young man.

He lived there for 21 years. Then in 2010, his parents were murdered and he inherited their house. Whoever killed them had robbed the house and smashed up the furniture, but they didn't torch anything. There was no neighborhood wall back then" (9). Lauren is unable to believe her father's story; to have no walls was unfamiliar. Butler develops this parody of the gated community to show the problem of exclusivity is associated with both walls and gates on communities. Lauren's surrounding communities are so violent and frightening that gates or walls have become commonplace. [8]

The walled-in communities are shown to be commonplace in Lauren's childhood. The existence of the "wall-less" communities that her father talks about show that even without "walls" inequity and violence was stewing; Butler describes the walls as life-like in their ability to exclude others. Lauren describes seeing a wall as "a massive, looming presence nearby. I see it as a crouching animal, perhaps about to spring, more threatening than protective" (5). This image of the wall as an animal about to spring shows the potential violence that Butler suggests is behind the walls and communities that exclude. Butler also parodies the need to protect these areas with guns. The narrator suggests that "All the adults were armed. That's the rule. Go out in a bunch, and go armed" (7). Butler is parodying the "right to bear" arms, the constitutional right, to show the probable outcome of such a policy - that guns feed violence. Butler also parodies the outcome of extreme fear or hatred of those who are different – race, class, or religion. One character, Mrs. Sims, lives alone. She is described as "poor" and "sanctimonious" (19) because she felt so "frightened" of people different from her in "some deep, hard, ugly way" (19). She is described as hating a neighbor family, the Hsu's, because they are Chinese and Hispanic, as well as Buddhist – "Idolaters" she calls them. Her literal belief

in the Bible is parodied when she shoots herself. Mrs. Sims is a parody of people in our current society who are afraid and hateful of others (21).

Butler parodies these communities by making readers consider the "illusions of security" felt behind the walls (118). For example, "None of us goes out to school any more. Adults get nervous about kids going outside" (6). Each group retreats as best they can, in the safety not of friendship, but of physical walls that keep others out. All parts of their lives have been retreating behind walls. Robledo is a parody, born out of fear and hatred, which readers have to acknowledge. These are "non-communities" that occur because people aren't drawn together out of cohesion or caring, but are pushed together out of fear and hostility. Lauren acknowledges that a woman, Mrs. Sims, shot herself because "different people frightened her in some deep, hard, ugly way. She didn't like the Hsu family because they were Chinese and Hispanic, and the older Chinese generation is still Buddhist"; as far as she was concerned "they were still from Saturn" (19). Butler shows readers that exclusivity is not part of a utopian process of community. Indeed, the parody of gated communities functions to help readers reject the false utopian ideal of exclusivity. These gates and walls are also a target for where utopia appears or disappears in the chapter on Toni Morrison's novel, *Paradise*.

B. Corporate Towns as Utopia

In an interview, Butler notes that, outside her novels, "Sometimes the only thing more dangerous than frightened, confused, desperate people looking for solutions is frightened, confused, desperate people finding and settling for truly bad solutions."[9] One "truly" bad solution she refers to in the novel is the company-owned town. Butler's company town,

Olivar, also allows her to create a parody of the entire capitalist culture, no small undertaking. The following section discusses what Butler parodies and how this invites a utopian reading practice.

Historically, at the turn of the century, several industries in the United States created towns at the site where the industry was being built. Many factories were not near towns but were located near the raw materials or the energy source. In a discussion about corporate towns like Olivar, Lauren refers back to this United States history. She says that "there are still people in Olivar who are uncomfortable with the change. They know about early American company towns in which the companies cheated and abused people" (106). Lauren refers to the company towns that were a part of the economic landscape into the early 1900s.

Butler pushes her readers to reject a utopia that allows the brutal policies of capitalism without government controls. Butler taps into a reality associated with the often times laissez-faire approach to capitalist ventures adopted by the United States government. In history, there are examples of workers being conned or not paid where they had little or no recourse. Butler parodies this economic oppression by showing workers paid in company vouchers rather than with cash. Lauren explains, "Wages were paid, but in company scrip, not in cash… and of course they could only spend their company notes at the company store. Wages – surprise! – were never quite enough to pay the bills" (259). Lauren's sarcasm shows she is *not* surprised, because the purpose of the town is not to represent rights but to make money. This oppression is caused by giving laissez-fair capitalism and industries full control. In nineteenth-century America, "Sometimes mine owners prevented peddlers or deliveries from independent stores from entering the towns.

A practice that seemed to be more common early on was requiring workers to purchase supplies at the company store" (Boyd). This laissez-faire approach is critiqued because it does not have the workers' interests in mind. Butler's parody of the company town forces her readers to question the necessity of big business monopolies controlling large segments of the country.

In the novel, companies approach and purchase towns that are floundering. The towns may be failing because they do not have enough work for people, or are stressed because of environmental problems, such as limited access to clean drinking water. Butler parodies the ill-advised idea of a free-running capitalist economy. It is as though Butler is pointing out the risks associated with trusting capitalist ventures, similar to the way that Pepsi or Coca-Cola "purchase" schools to provide funding for education; the money helps, but the price to the students is high.

Butler also parodies what she considers the excessive rights companies have in terms of United States law. Over the years, companies have gained more rights and are becoming able to represent themselves as individuals rather than companies. Historically, workers were protected from companies, but now, many companies have gained almost as many rights as the individual, which makes it easy for them to lobby and harder for the individual's voice to be heard. Butler parodies this imbalance of power by having people throwing themselves at the gates of Olivar to be paid poorly but to live safely. This desire to trust capitalism to protect us and to answer our problems is shown as misguided in Butler's dystopian future.

Historically, people have misconstrued the idea that capitalism and democracy are the same systems in the United States. *Parable of the Sower* includes a parody of capital

without regulation, which Lauren points out would lead to "debt slavery."[10] Butler presents this future possibility when the recently elected President describes his desire to suspend laws associated with "minimum wage, environmental, and worker protection laws" (*Sower* 24). The difference, though, is that these people aren't uneducated, but, instead, they are afraid of taking a stand against the chaos. During a radio show that Lauren, her father, and step-mother listen to, they hear people "made a public spectacle of selling themselves to KSF" (the company that bought Olivar).

For Butler, then, capitalism and authoritarianism are problematically related. In an interview, Butler points out that, "I got the impression that for the extreme right during the Reagan administration, capitalism was definitely a religion. So if you said anything against capitalism, it's as if you were cursing God or a preacher or something" (Miller 353). Butler's perception is that being "anti-capitalist" is perceived as betraying the American dream of democracy. Butler constructs an exaggerated perspective so we can plainly see that capitalism is not the same as democracy. She suggests that if capitalism is allowed to run freely, it is distinctly possible that democratic rights will be short-changed. Without laws to protect people, "room and board" may be all a company has to pay (107).

In *Parable of the Sower*, Butler critiques mercantile capitalism by showing the readers multiple levels of responses to Olivar. Further, she condemns the multi-national companies who say one thing, that they will provide jobs, and do something else, not pay people enough to live independently from the company. Oliver is based on a system of labor exploitation that Lauren refers to as "half antebellum revival," the return to the economics of the early slavery years in the United States, and "half science fiction,"

symbolically, beyond our beliefs (109).[11] Lauren's father does not consider Olivar an option for the family because he sees it as taking away his freedom. He says, "Freedom is dangerous … but it's precious, too. You can't just throw it away or let it slip away" (109). The pay, safety, labor laws, and workers' rights have clearly been set aside for people in the corporations.[12] Company towns are not an option for Butler or her characters because they rely on the fantasy of security. Butler parodies company towns, the security they say they provide, the money and support they say they will bring, by showing how Olivar has no interest in the workers' physical or economic well-being and how dangerous it is to give up rights.

Butler parodies the representation of the "company" in science fiction as shown by comments Lauren makes about the company town "subgenre" where typically a hero outsmarts and escapes. But, here, "the hero fought like hell to get taken in and underpaid by the company. In real life, that's the way it will be. That's the way it is" (110). Lauren points to the irony of the "hero" fighting to be taken into custody for a twisted reason. The effect of the parody is that the readers should realize the danger of exchanging security – a false utopian ideal - for freedom. Olivar warns us that laissez-faire is not as benign as it seems, and if readers aren't careful, history will be repeated.

C. Religion as Utopia: A Parody of Christian Fundamentalism

Butler parodies the Christian Fundamentalism of the 1980s and early 1990s prevalent in the United States in both novels. In *Parable of the Sower,* it is at a local level, but in *Parable of the Talents,* it becomes a parody of a National Christian Right movement. A parody of the Christian Right reminds readers of the conservative trends of this period.

This reminds readers of the presumptuousness of the Moral Majority, who tried to dictate social roles (pushing for traditional gender roles), and elitist economic policies (such as trickle down).[13] Butler takes religious views from the past and projects them into the future to see what would happen if they were to come into fruition. Her answer is complicated, but by using parody, the readers are invited to see the values of the Christian right are not as "utopian" as they claim to be.

Briefly, then, I review some historical events and issues that Butler calls to the readers' minds which, through parody, she pushes her readers to reject. Butler suggests that Christianity cannot contain seeds for a utopian future in part because historically it can and has often been used to dictate morality that can oppress. Butler's parody points out a relationship between a surge of religious fundamentalism and the Christian Right's desire to keep women in traditional roles in the home. Like Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Butler undoes the fundamentalist presence by marking it with an extreme parody of possible outcomes if these ideas are followed. Butler seems to be recalling, and playing out the ideas prevalent during Pat Buchanan's bid for the Presidential election in 1992; he said, "America is locked in a cultural war for the soul of our country. A battle between the values for which America has always fought – family, faith, freedom and country – and the gospel of the New Age relativism which rages in our schools, our courts, and our popular culture."[14] Butler uses the past to allow readers to see what *might* happen. Because these are possibilities from history, readers know the result of the political power of the Moral Majority.[15]

Butler parodies Christian Conservative government leadership. Some beliefs she highlights through parody are the idea of a righteous, Puritan, or "Christian

Commonwealth," as well as the resulting concept of Manifest Destiny; these foundations Butler parodies to show how they violated the lives of people with limited access to power or control over their lives. Butler uses history and religion to show the reality that prayer and faith are not necessarily the easiest or most positive way to move those impoverished out of this status. Instead, Butler offers Earthseed, where characters hold out the possibility that science and education are ways to move society ahead. Earthseed promotes education by offering scholarships and other support to help students improve technology. Butler suggests that religion is not the only way to educate, or plan for tomorrow and suggests readers consider the opposite: how science can be both a practical and spiritual way to think about tomorrow (Gates 104).

Butler uses parody to show how the Christian Right placed blame on "people like us [who] went whoring after foreign relations and refused to do our duty as citizens. We women lost all modesty and offered ourselves in the streets, and the men who should have controlled us became our pimps" (*Talents* 212). Butler's "Christian Crusaders" are a parody of the "real" Christian Coalition of America, still in existence, a political organization made up of "pro-family" Americans who organize around "the purpose of guaranteeing that government acts in ways that strengthen, rather than threaten, families," working "with Christians of all denominations, as well as with other Americans who agree with our mission and with our ideals."[16] Butler's parody exposes the dangerous conflation of social ideology and religious belief of such organizations.

The takeover of Acorn shows the hypocrisy of the Christian movement because the patrollers separate the Acorn family members, confine, and torture the inmates during the "re-education" process, and require they work for free in exchange for "redemption."

Inmates are raped, and some are killed by the electric collars that can cause them extreme pleasure or pain, depending on the slavers' desire. These Crusaders believe that non-Christians are heathens. Heathens deserve only to have collars, Bibles, bedding, plastic bowls, and cups - the only items allotted. The prisoners have hushed conversations about their feelings of powerlessness that resulted from the collars. Lauren still writes on scraps of paper with broken pencils and hides her writing under the floorboards, reminiscent of the way slaves had to hide literacy. Lauren writes everything she can, which is what her daughter uses to narrate the *Parable of the Talents*. She writes about the events, such as the landslide that frees them, and the kinds of punishment they received. At one point, she acknowledges that the slave camp is worse than Robledo because it "snatched away" bits of her mind, too (206). Butler portrays the fundamentalism of the Christian Americans as physically *and* mentally obliterating.

Thus, Butler projects communities into a future that is tantalizingly close to what we have today in order to make this extension of reality seem familiar. The same social problems exist – homelessness and poverty – for example, and no real solutions have been found. On the contrary, these problems seem worse with negative anarchy the outcome. These kinds of communities model the results of hate, fear, and security. Seeing these communities through the lens of parody invites readers to find Butler's complicated purpose, akin to Bakhtin's "hidden polemic." This is when "the author's discourse is oriented toward its referential object, as is any discourse, but at the same time each assertion about that object is constructed in such a way that, besides the referential meaning, the author's discourse brings a polemical attack to bear against another speech act, another assertion, on the same topic."[17] These parodies create a

critical distance between our current or recent past perceptions and the question of solution - whether gated communities, company-owned towns, or institutions founded on Christianity could be part of utopian transformation or not. Butler's use of parody allows her to direct readers to see the limitations of these communities, using this "double-voiced relationship" (Gates 111).

Butler employs parody because it is the *only* way she can address utopia at all. Butler admits that:

> I find utopias ridiculous. We're not going to have a perfect society until we get a few perfect humans, and that seems unlikely. Besides, any true utopia would almost certainly be incredibly boring, and it would probably be so overspecialized that any change we might introduce would probably destroy the whole system. As bad as we humans are sometimes, I have a feeling that we'll never have that problem with the current system (McCaffery and McMenamin 69).

Certainly, Butler's novels are not traditionally "utopian" in the way Butler interprets it – as a complete system. But they are utopian in that they ask us to revise our understanding of what is utopian and offer us possibilities for changing what seems unchangeable (such as institutionalized religion).

IV. Narrative Forms and Utopian Reading Process

Butler's novels adapt a variety of narrative forms – scripture, diary, jeremiad, and slave narrative – to guide the readers' reading experience in her novels; clearly, she expects her readers to bring their experiences of generic conventions from these older forms to this new hybrid form. To begin with, Butler's novels use Biblical parables to

signify Christian discourse and then to draw a distinction between Christianity and her subversive, hybrid narrative. She calls attention to this narrative form through providing the Earthseed poems as a kind of psalm or scripture that offers contrast between the two in order to invite new narrative standpoints. Butler also frames her novels with the Biblical parables to critique this traditionally Christian method of a "teaching" story and to offer a new discourse. Like scriptures, Butler's religious verses develop heavily significant metaphors, such as seeds, only to draw an ironical distinction between her verse and traditional scripture. In addition, this section examines a diary form Butler employs to underline the importance of the individual's voice speaking against the status quo. Butler also uses "diary" elements to frame her hybrid dystopian tale in a way that evokes utopian hope. Each diary is a different typeface, distinguishing many different authors (and different levels of importance). This complex construction gives a polyvocal understanding of the imagined historical moment; readers can see "history" and therefore revise their own views of the past. Readers are invited to reconsider their roles in constructing stories about "history."

Butler also alludes to the narrative form of the "Jeremiad," adopted from the Biblical tradition into United States literature and used to connect a promise of an ideal community into a transformation of society. The Jeremiad offers a social critique while also implying spiritual renewal. It is a sharing of "public and private identity," with an attention to the shifting metaphors, themes, and symbols that offer a vision of the future ("Witnessing"). There are three elements that surround these tales of lamentation. One is the scriptural precedent that "sets out communal norms"; the second condemns the flaws

of the actual state; the third is a vision that "unveils the promises, announces good things to come, [and] explains away the gap between the fact and ideal" (Bercovitch 16)

In addition, Butler uses the slave narrative to point out the similarities and differences between slavery in the United States in the past, into our present, and the possibility of slavery in the future. Butler uses a "neo-slave" narrative approach that distances readers and characters from slavery but that also makes us consider definitions of slavery with discussions ranging from economic bondage, to physical restraint, as well as psychological manipulation. Revising the slave narrative draws attention to the role of "whiteness" in the United States system of slavery where Christianity was a tool of of the morally corrupt and used to oppress. Butler's "Earthseed" as religion plays a very different role from Christianity by pointing to practical actions that go against the slave "masters" on all levels – religious, political, and social.

As noted earlier, this section on the narrative form of the *Parable* novels suggests how the hybrid critical dystopia functions for readers. The novels cross genres to interrupt the categories of storytelling. Because Butler uses so many forms, she creates recognizable strategies that readers may feel affinity toward, but that interrupts them by combining characteristics of one genre with another. The reader's job is to calculate the relationship between these discourses and to draw a synthesis from the different representations of utopian narration.

A. The Narrative of Scripture: Earthseed and Psalms.

Butler uses Biblical language in order to dismantle it from the inside – hence the effect of parody is a doubling back on itself: Butler's use of Christian ideology in order to undo

it. This challenges readers to rethink religious premises, such as stasis or process. Biblical discourse is opposed to the Earthseed "religious" verses; this alternation breaks up the reading pattern from prose to poetry and back again.

One example of scripture in *Parable of the Sower* calls attention to the seed as a metaphor for utopian process.

> Earthseed
>
> Cast on new ground
>
> Must First Perceive
>
> That it knows nothing.
>
> *Earthseed: The Books of the Living* (160)

This stanza of Lauren's religious verse contrasts this concept of seed with the seeds in "the parable of the sower," the Biblical text that closes the novel. The Christian parable at the end of the novel tells how seeds are sewn here and there: some land on good land and grow; some land on rocky ground and die. In Lauren's verse above, the seeds of Earthseed are seeds that are cast and that need to be *self-aware*; if the seeds represent us, then we must begin our enlightened lives, knowing, paradoxically, that we don't know anything. This perception that one must "know nothing" to move ahead is a means whereby the novel opens-up the readers to a self-aware, utopian process.

Contrasting Marc's and Lauren's spiritual leadership roles invites readers to see the function of Christianity as religion from a mainstream angle set against the peripheral Earthseed "religion." Marcus argues that, "Belief must be based on faith as much as on proofs" (139). Because of his past, Marc feels that he needs to believe in a God that is a rock-solid entity, external and all knowing.[18] But readers see that Lauren witnesses the

same men guarding at Acorn as were at the Christian shelter, and this exposes Christianity as cruel and hypocritical. When confronted, Marc hits Lauren, tells her she is wrong, and walks away (284). Marc's character captures and satirizes the weakness associated with Christianity as liberator and oppressor. Readers are pushed to think about the role of Christianity in leading to a state of intolerance and oppression.

Lauren argues that not only is religion a human construction, but that God is, too. She notes that "Every time any god is accepted by a new group of people, that god changes" (139). If "god" is depicted as a social construction, does Butler's fictionalized religion undermine belief, faith, and truth, by embracing change, including Shaping God and oneself rather than praying for something to happen? Lauren says repeatedly that her "God" promotes nothing (139). The scriptures that Lauren writes are set in her present, our current, time. Butler makes the time accessible to readers in order to incite some desire for action or change. Readers are asked to compare and evaluate what is utopian in each philosophy. If the Earthseed "God" is within each person, by extension, Butler's readers are invited to consider this possibility. The invitation is to share the attitude of "change" and to see what may happen if God to accepted as "Change."

The concept of entropy found in many of the Earthseed poems makes for a strange but interesting relationship between scientific "change" and religious belief.[19] For example,

> There is nothing alien
> About nature.
> Nature
> is all that exists.
> It's God,

Never at Rest.

It's you,

Me,

Us,

Them,

Struggling upstream

Or drifting down (343).

If change is "nature," which continually evolves and adapts, then Earthseed practices show how to engage with change rather than remaining stuck in stasis. If religion promotes a status quo, it doesn't permit change or agency to people who desire to challenge power or hierarchies. In Earthseed, change becomes the way to include difference within the community; change is the potential for moving beyond the dystopian environment brought about by the fear of change and the desire for a fabricated status quo. Change is "you," "me," "us," and "them" who struggle or drift up and down the stream of life. This idea of change on multiple levels is an example of embracing entropy, which is the idea that the universe naturally becomes chaotic, or has a tendency to disorder. If readers can imagine this embracing of entropy, then it becomes easier to imagine change, and our place in an ever changing universe. Butler's use of science, like entropy, underlines her characters' willingness to live by adapting.

The religious verses also provide a philosophy that crosses into remnants of spirituality as well as drawing on science (such as the attention to entropy and Darwin). The crisp brevity of the verses is reminiscent of eastern philosophy. Lauren underscores this idea in her discussions about Earthseed elements like Taoism or Buddhism (*Sower*

111, 234). Earthseed verses are didactic and practical. Earthseed poems point to the ability humans have to Shape God, to the presence of God within each of us, and to our duty to Shape God to therefore Shape ourselves. This "shaping" is a key difference between Earthseed and Christianity.

An early and repeated poem is:

> All that you touch
> You Change
>
> All that you Change
> Changes you.
>
> The only last truth
> Is Change.
>
> God
> Is Change.
>
> *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*[20]

These stanzas work in a way similar to the illustrations in Le Guin's *Always Coming Home*. Like the illustrations, the poems are fragments that we put together, and they offer a culture that builds on an active, hopeful, utopian process. One difference, though, is Le Guin's attribution of her cultural fragments to a fictional past in comparison to Butler's depiction of a future religion. Still, in both cases, the reader accrues and holds these pieces together; when a poem intercedes in one chapter, it requires us to reflect and to connect it to what we read until the reading process is over. The poems may cause the reader to read more slowly, allowing for reflection on how the verses intersect with the characters' lives. Readers may see ways to listen, and consequently to act differently toward others.

B. Collective Individuality – the Polyvocal Diary and the Utopian Process

The diary is a narrative form that allows readers a way to see intimately the thoughts and actions of others in practical terms. The readers' identification with characters or narrators is important in terms of deciding whether a work is utopian or dystopian. The distance between the frame and the story invites different interpretations depending on who tells the story, and how it is told. A framing narrator suggests identification and differentiation between the characters (and readers). One critic points out that generally,

> We tend to accept the narrator's claims about her or his own intentional states and to question impressions and judgments about others which we would accept more readily if the narrative were third -person omniscient. In reading a story, we adopt, temporarily and to some extent, the perspective of the narrator.[21]

A first-person narrative perspective, such as the diary, allows Butler to intimately present her protagonist, Lauren Olamina. The diary allows the author to focus the readers' attention through the filter of the character's words. Butler chooses narrators and narrative devices to guide the reading process: *Parable of the Sower* in this way employs Lauren Olamina's first person diary. Authority is seen primarily through Lauren's subjective eye. *Parable of the Talents*, in contrast, draws on the multiple layers of narration. Butler uses the daughter, Vere, as the narrator who compiles diaries through her framing. Readers will obviously identify with different characters, but the focus Butler provides through the narrative framing is helpful in seeing how the novel prods readers to imagine utopia.

Critical dystopias are defined because of the critical and conscious distance between the characters and the readers. Maria Varsam extends Lyman Tower Sargent's definition

of the readers' role in the utopian response found in "critical" dystopias, such as the *Parable* novels. Varsam's article, "Concrete Dystopia: Slavery and Its Others" discusses the role of the first person narrators and how they may allow readers to "empathize" with the narrator or the protagonist's point of view as "most reliable." This identification invites readers to "condemn, as the narrator/protagonist does, those aspects of society that constitute the narrator's oppression" (Varsum 206). The identification with a narrator (or protagonist) as opposed to the oppressor is dependent upon many things, including the role of empathy and reliability. A look at each diary as an independent frame may help to see how the reader's empathy is won or lost.

Butler's polyvocal narrative invites readers to empathize and find reliable different narrators' resistance and oppression. The diary entries come from a number of characters, some easy to identify with and others causing discomfort or defamiliarization. Multiple characters' "utterances" enter into dialogical relationships. This Bakhtian discourse moves the object of reference "toward another's discourse, toward someone else's speech" (*Problems* 185). The utopian impulse suggests conversation with others as completely necessary. Butler's diaries paradoxically create a polyvocal approach that then allows her to combine the structure of the dystopia, with the multiple characters' debates, and a journey that is both individual and collective. The collaboration inspires utopian change not just for that individual, but communally, showing an individual utterance as in continual conversation with the community.

Parable of the Talents' is a diary that works self-reflexively, allowing other individual voices to speak. This creates a multi-dimensional, personalized, truth-telling story about a mother-daughter relationship that makes for a different reading activity and

a different utopian impulse from *Parable of the Sower*. For instance, *Talents* starts with the words of Vere, her daughter: "Lauren Oya Olamina Bankole. To those who loved her or hated her, she was simply 'Olamina.' She was my biological mother. She is dead" (7). She continues and explains the purpose of the book: "In order for me to understand who I am, I must begin to understand who she was" (*Talents* 8). Vere wants to understand herself and does this by reading from her mother's diary. Her narrative subverts the "great men" of history approach and instead incorporates the diaries of family members. Vere speaks about her desire to "love her mother," but explains that she can't because she blames her mother for ruining any chance she, her daughter, had for a nuclear family. She admits she never "trusted her" nor "understood how she could be the way she was – so focused, and yet so misguided, there for all the world, but never there for me" (7-8). Vere critiques her mother as ego-centered, even God-like, or at least someone who "needed large events to manipulate" (7). Vere's frame is complicated: she feels disdain, disbelief, and distrust for the woman who birthed her. Vere's narrative breaks with the convention of the narrative frame of many utopian novels that works to find utopia. It isn't clear that Vere knows where utopia is, or if she's seen it at all. Thus, Butler's second novel revises and interrogates the utopia postulated in her first novel, complicating the reader's journey to utopia.

To complicate the framing even more, we get another voice, Vere's father, Bankole, Olamina's late husband; Vere incorporates his memoir entitled, *Memories of Other Worlds*. His death occurs after the birth of Vere: during the take-over of Acorn by the Christian Crusaders, he is collared, electrocuted, and dies. Bankole is a trustworthy narrator who adds perspective to this time period, the "Pox," the time which led up to this

dystopian future. He is a doctor and becomes important to the community as Lauren's lover and as a practical man. His narration provides the reader with a different critical perspective on Lauren and Earthseed. Like him, we wonder how a young woman could believe in something so strongly. He reflects "I cannot recall ever feeling as certain of anything as she seems to be of Earthseed, a belief system that she herself created - or, as she says, a network of truths that she has simply recognized … Olamina believes in a god that does not in the least love her. In fact, her god is a process or a combination of processes, not an entity" (*Talents* 47-48). Bankole's narrative is a voice from our current moment and so resembles our understanding of the world and may help us understand Lauren. He also describes the tears, doubts, and weaknesses of Lauren that no other narrative perspective shows. The religious leader is not a cult leader or a heathen but instead is presented as a loving mother, a partner, and a thoughtful, balanced, and engaged leader.

Other diary entries come from Marc Duran, Vere's Uncle, and Lauren's brother. To the parody of the Christian Right, the character Marc supplies a satiric portrait of a religious right preacher. In his memoir, *Warrior*, he discusses hi life preaching for the political branch of the religious right called the Christian Church of America. As noted previously, Marc and Lauren's life are parallel, and the readers are left with a comparison between two different diaries of leaders from opposite political and spiritual poles. Each turns to religion to find answers to the societal violence and anarchy. For Butler, the Jeremiad form appears to be one way to indicate which leader's approach to utopian process is best.

C. Jeremiah and Utopian Social Dreaming

By adding yet another layer of narrative type to these hybrid novels, Butler again urges her readers to consider what the reading process has in common with getting to utopia and how the two are similar in process. She accomplishes this by adopting the Jeremiah role to see whether Lauren or Marc are reminiscent of prophets of this literary tradition and to remind us that she is writing a black novel with a utopian political purpose. Jeremiads, named for the prophet Jeremiah and the Biblical books, Jeremiah and Lamentations, are lamentations about spiritual and cultural downfall. In the United States, the American jeremiad appears in secular and religious discourses and the narratives often warn of upcoming disaster. African American writers adapted the form by drawing a parallel between the Israelites' injustices and the black slave experience in the United States. The "jeremiad" narrative addresses selfish human behavior, and aims to create fear to engender social change. The Black jeremiad writings cite God's promise, criticize the "declension or retrogression" from the promise, and resolve that society will shortly "complete the mission and fulfill its promise" (Egbuonu). The writing proposes, like Butler's own novels, to "uplift and unify" and to demand and reach equality.

Marc calls to mind a traditional "Jeremiah"; he is one who denounces irreligious actions. He proclaims the threat of war if bad religious and political decisions are made. The world falls apart around him, yet he never loses his belief in the staid, Old Testament, Christian God. Where Marc is the Jeremiah who preaches the old school fire and brimstone, Lauren Olamina adapts and shapes herself with everything and everyone around her. Lauren Olamina becomes known as "The Shaper," because she advocates

engagement and adaptation with communities around her. Marc, instead, stands rock solid, and unable to bend.

The stereotypical Jeremiad role differs from Lauren's own role as a new prophet who discloses utopian humanism combined with survival tactics. Like the Jeremiah of old, Lauren believes that change starts with the individual, building trust, to renew "the covenant to bind the people to god." Her prophecy contains testimony of a "common humanity" that comes out of the "text of an ex-slave's life" (Gates 171). But Butler's prophet, even though she resembles Jeremiah, preaching about an end of the world, yet gives her characters (and readers) hope. The readers weigh the two prophets. Although readers may not entirely agree with Lauren's ideas, Marc's approach is obviously dismissed. The way out of the status quo, or past a society in need of a Jeremiah, is paradoxically through a neo-slave narrative that is in an undercurrent of both *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents.*

D. Utopian Process in the Neo-Slave Narrative

By assuming the form of the slave narrative and by shifting focus from the past to the present and into a possible future, Butler's novels stress that present-day African Americans come out of a tide of suffering.[22] Recovering history, as baccolini discusses in "The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction," is instrumental as a "tool of resistance" for Butler's protagonists. Baccolini argues that, "it is authoritarian, hegemonic discourse [that] shapes the narrative about the past and collective memory to the point that individual memory has been erased; individual recollection therefore

becomes the first, necessary step for a collective action" (520-21). The argument baccolini makes is important for the *Parable* novels because they are NOT classical dystopias where "memory is trapped in an individual," or in nostalgia. Rather, Butler's novels, according to baccolini, are critical dystopias that "show that a culture of memory – one that moves from the individual to the collective – is part of a social project of hope" (521). This doesn't mean happiness, but rather an "awareness and responsibility" which are "the conditions of the critical dystopia's citizens" (521).

Butler's readers see the parallel to and the differences from the historical slave narrative (in content and form) in relation to this new form. In an interview, Butler affirms that her use of multiple narrators is to subtly create a new form and to "undermine the single-minded guiding voice of *Sower* – Olamina" (Radio). The "single-minded" voice in *Parable of the Sower* is taken over by communal voices, each of which represent slavery, and a personalized response to that slavery.[23] The comparison to earlier forms of slavery in the United States makes it historical and therefore "real" but also an uncertain possible part of our future, if we don't change things. In *Parable of the Sower*, the character Bankole explains that slavery goes back for many years and that the United States has "slipped back 200 years" (263).[24] Bankole's historical perspective brings slavery out of the past (the 1800s) and into our readers' contemporaneous present.

Butler represents three broad types of slavery.[25] One is found with the gated communities that also look like "walled-in" communities and are where citizens huddle together out of fear. Another type is found in the company towns and rooted in the connections between capitalism and laissez-faire attitudes to show slavery as an inherent part of capitalism. Last, the Christian Crusaders who collar of the individuals in the

prison camp are superimposed on Acorn. *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* are influenced by slave narratives not only through depicting slavery, but also through journey and escape motifs, and a vision of civil equality.

Butler extends her definition of contemporary experience of slavery by extrapolating from economic situations that already exist.[26] For instance, in *Crisis Magazine*, Butler points out that "Every now and then, it will come out that people have been held against their will and forced to work after having been seduced by lies about good salaries and that sort of thing. In this part of the country [California] they are usually Hispanic. I've heard of the same thing happening to Black people in the South. It's already happening. I'm talking about people who can't even leave. If they try, they are beaten or killed" (4). Butler explores these kinds of economic relationships to imagine and depict possible physical results. Readers may be like any one of Butler's narrators. Some readers aware of history have seen slavery and imagined it first-hand through instances similar to Marc's own bondage, sale, and release.[27] Capitalism is imagined and represented almost as though it were a character, like the debt slavery of Olivar, cloaking the citizens with the chains of the economic system.

Butler's new slave narrative also provides ample evidence of characters, such as Marc or Lauren, and by extension readers, leaving or escaping slavery. Whether history is repeated or not, whether we become extinct or not, the narrative asks us to consider that we do have a choice.[28] Both *Parable* novels incorporate characteristics of escape through learning to read and write into freedom. Lauren talks about how early slaves "sneaked around and educated themselves as best they could, sometimes suffering whipping, sale, or mutilation for their efforts" (196). One character, who becomes an

Earthseed leader, learns how to read and write because his mother "borrows" books from her master's library, similar to Frederick Douglass' experience as a child. Another example is found during the Camp Christian take-over where Lauren writes in her diary that it is the only place she feels "human, that God is Change, and that I will escape this place. As irrational as the feeling may be, my writing still comforts me" (202). These bits of writings function as profound points of resistance. One theorist likens this kind of resistance to the idea that where there is "more that is forbidden, the greater the number of potentially subversive actions becomes" (Ferns 135). This is why Camp Christian is one part of the novel that contains a large number of subversive actions that by example allow readers to also vicariously "escape."

Escaping through reading and writing becomes double layered. The characters escape their horrendous surroundings by sharing knowledge, and learning to read and write. Resistance takes many forms: the diary, the Earthseed stanzas, and examples of communal living. One main way the characters resist is through the continued emphasis on education and the intense fear when basic rights to education become watered down. If we cannot read and write then we are vulnerable to tricks and oppression. Lauren expresses strongly how she has to write and that "God is Change. I hate God. I have to write" (141). Lauren never stops writing and saves her writing as she hides her diary under floor boards. Given this risk, the power of the written word, telling the story of the individual and the collective, is emphasized as resistance.

Parable of the Sower and *Parable of the Talents* appear to be *novels* that resist domination, addressing it head-on by using the messages and demand for the freedom that is part of the slave narrative where people learned to read and write which brought

them closer to freedom. These novels contain a non-fictional, practical, scripture guide, *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*. Earthseed is Lauren's "discovery" – and the more she explores – the harder it is for her to see a time before *these observations.* By extension, readers are encouraged to see these observations as part of the dystopian reality around us. If these practical steps are followed, the story of resistance follows. Did Earthseed exist before Lauren discovered it? Lauren answers this question with circular "logic", or paradox found in Earthseed verses:

> Why is the universe?
>
> To Shape God.
>
> Why is God?
>
> To Shape the universe (69).

Lauren admits that embracing this "circular reasoning" is one way to resist these new camouflaged mechanisms of slavery. On a less paradoxical front, Earthseed texts also argue, "Embrace diversity […] or be destroyed" (176). Shaping God includes accepting diversity. Lauren uses Earthseed verses *ostensibly* to teach people to read and write, but they also provide her with an open platform for spreading the seeds of Earthseed.

Earthseed is about spreading the seeds of awareness and the necessity to "shape" society – an act in opposition to the institution of slavery where the status quo is intact. Slavery requires stagnancy. This is one reason that embracing entropy, the chaos of change, affords utopian process. By looking at systems that embrace the "status quo," such as institutionalized religion, Butler allows readers to see conservative ideology up close, and take note of who benefits and who falls out of favor because of it. It's obvious that Lauren does not benefit. Marc benefits, but it is unclear whether this is "true" across

the board and that is why we have sympathy for him. Rather than stasis, Lauren and Butler demand we see utopia as change. This is in contrast to many male depictions of utopia where "over there" and "then, not now" were the refrains. Butler subverts the unchanging nature of place, and instead places utopia amongst the rubble of change, where it is found seeping through the cracks of dystopia.

V. Conclusion

In this chapter, I've demonstrated how Butler uses parody to signify false utopian forms and adjusts multiple genres, including the slave narrative to engage readers in utopian process through a hybrid narrative. In other novels, Butler deconstructs the dichotomies of literal time – the past and the future – to allow the possibility of a reading process that is part of a utopian process and interrupting a linear flow of time. As Landry and MacLean tell us in their 1993 anthology, *Materialist Feminisms*, "What the [*Kindred*] novel's time travel literalizes is how the past never really vanishes; we are always already marked by our histories" (111). History never disappears and if we recognize that, we may avert the needless repetition of past errors and past oppressive relations.

The first person narrator, in the form of a diary, allows the reader to intimately see and respond to the character's process of self-awakening. The slave narrative makes the reader conscious of a collective community behind that voice. The characters are unique, as shown by the changing typeface. The multiple voices come up even in the way the narratives are portrayed. For example, the narrators appear as different kinds of texts.

Larkin's typeface is bolder and clearer than the other narrators' typefaces; one conclusion is that her words are separate from the others in a way that makes them more important. In addition, the Earthseed poetry is set-off from the diary narratives. The typeface for the poetry is bold, when it introduces a section or chapter, or with larger sized font, when they are situated within the chapter narrative. Assuming that Butler had this kind of control over the publication, this can be interpreted as her marking the visual collage of narrators and of narrative forms.

Butler's novels show a complex understanding of the importance of tolerance and empathy across differences. While it is impossible to show each reader's process, one result seems justified and interesting to note. An online community called "Solsed" states it grew out of Butler's Earthseed.[29] Here, and like Moylan's presumption of the critical dystopian text's function, the novels inspired political action outside of the act of reading and similar to the way Earthseed grew out of Lauren's observations. Here, again, the boundaries between lives lived and lives read combine. The words about the interconnectedness of all things are shared and they influence others on the World Wide Web. Similar to the way Lauren keeps her diary, as a method of sharing her thoughts to the collective, Earthseed "Shapers" are shaping social change and being shaped by it as well. Butler couldn't have known what might come out of her novels in terms of practical activity, and her parody is one way that readers might even consider this "social networking" utopian process.

Still, much of Lauren's utopian invitation rests on a materialist understanding of culture. Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature* suggests that language is "practical consciousness," a way "of thinking and acting in the world [with] material

consequences" (44). In *Parable of the Sower*, one obvious material consequence of Lauren's production of culture is the diary and printed stanzas of *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*. In *Parable of the Talents*, the multiple diaries show different material responses to the oppressions of different individuals. Vere introduces each character and diary excerpts. The diaries show the transgression and subversion of the rules for each author of their oppressors. Through language, readers are invited to imagine words that defy the patriarchal and oppressive social system in solitary acts of writing that become the vehicle for teaching the seeds of Earthseed.

ENDNOTES

[1] One theorist who discusses some of the political effects of parody is Judith Butler. See her "Conclusion: From Parody to Politics," in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 142-149.

[2] Butler's fiction reflects baccolini's idea that "Language – particularly its manipulation and control – is a central feature of the totalitarian regimes described in dystopian novels. History (the past) and reality (the present) are usually rewritten in an attempt to control everybody's present and future life. An independent use of language is similarly forbidden: writing a diary, reading books about the past [...] are all activities linked with language and are all forbidden in [dystopian] societies" (344).

[3] Talents 82. This is an example of intertextuality and of Butler's connectedness with different genres. This last sentence is harkening back to *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, in which James Weldon Johnson finally concludes that he should not have sold his "birthright" because he sold out on his blackness, and passed. Similar to the protagonist of the novel, Lauren is negotiating the conflicting institutions that inform her identity.

[4.] Other critics who have discussed the *Parable* novels have noted the existence of utopian possibility which has been called "dystopian optimism" (Miller 358), "critical dystopias" (Moylan 195), and "open-ended dystopias'" (Baccolini 16). These diverse categories suggest that dystopia is being redefined.

[5.] Similarly, raffaella baccolini concludes that Butler's *Parable of the Sower* belongs in the category of "open-ended dystopias" ("Introduction" 16). She advocates that recent literary dystopias, such as Butler's *Parable* novels, allow critics to rethink dystopia as a

literary genre.

[6] This was a 1994 essay. The term seems to have slipped from view until 2002.

[7] For my definition of parody as an incongruous imitation that deflates the original by exaggerating its characteristics, and an authorized transgression that is a vehicle for exploring political contradictions, see the scholarship section.

[8] Lauren has almost always lived in the walled-in community of Robledo. Lauren reports that walls surround almost all communities, rich or poor, but for different reasons. The state of affairs has gone down so much that no one feels safe from anyone: "In fact we passed a couple of neighborhoods so poor that their walls were made up of unmortared (sic) rocks, chunks of concrete, and trash. Then there were the pitiful, unwalled (sic) residential areas" (8).

[9] Interview with Larry McCaffery and Jim McMenamin.

[10] Emery Tanaka Solis, a twenty-three-year-old woman of mixed race (Japanese and black) escapes from her Mexican husband's company after his death; the company exploits her first by not paying her enough wages, and second, by taking away her two sons as payment. Lauren reflects that Emery's "debt slavery" condition might be illegal, but when a company acts as though your life can be exchanged for payment, then the company basically owns the person.

[11] "Strange Death" at The Economist discusses where some people in company towns had "not had cash payments for 15 years, thanks to their debts to company stores. They reminded people of massacres in company towns; in 1909 in Ludlow, Colorado, a private army of thugs shot thirty-two

workers and demolished their houses. And they argued that even the best-natured owners could be tyrants."

[12] Jim Miller's essay touches on Butler's point that the United States has become enamored with international capitalism to the point where the individual is much less important than the corporation (343).

[13] Judith Warner describes some of Phyllis Schlafly's goals in her review essay, "She Changed America," in the *New York Times*, January 29, 2006. She points out that, "In 1982 the E.R.A. died, just a few states short of ratification. By then, it had become linked in the public mind with military conscription for 18-year-old girls, coed bathrooms and homosexual rights. That public relations coup was largely the work of one clever, charming, ambitious, energetic, and forever ladylike woman: Phyllis Schlafly."

[14] Buchanan, "The Culture War."

[15] Even the behavior of people protesting at abortion clinics became violent where the "vigilante-style" actions and covert behaviors in ways that actually "defy public law and constitutional principles" (Slotkin).

[16] See Christian Coalition of America "Mission Statement." http://www.cc.org/about.cfm

[17] Bakhtin, "Discourse Typology in Prose," 187.

[18] He concludes: "What happened to me shouldn't happen to anyone, yet such things have happened to thousands of people, perhaps millions. I've read history. Things weren't always this way. They don't have to go on being this way. What we have broken we can mend" (102). Marc suggests that history needlessly repeats itself, but that things were and can be better.

[19] The character Travis remarks: “Entropy, the idea that the natural flow of heat is from something hot to something cool – not the other way – so that the universe itself is cooling down, running down, dissipating its energy” (195). Interestingly enough, the science community no longer uses the entropy theory; the idea of the universe as a closed system has been proven to be incorrect. Therefore, the chaos, heat, and disorder hypothesized by the theory are not the result of a closed system. But, Butler is using the theory as though it were true.

[20] *Parable of the Sower* 3

[21] “Storytelling and Moral Agency” 10.

[22] In slave narratives, “identity is often regarded as a function of place” (Andrews 379). The north symbolically altered the definition of humanity by restoring individual dignity and personal self-worth (380).

[23] I primarily focus on the collective and structural instances of slavery but there were others. Butler also points out where slave narratives document injustices associated with women. There is a "gendered nature of oppression produced by the institution of slavery” (Varsam 212). For instance, in Robledo, women are subjected to male control, such as Zahra Moss, one of Richard Moss's wives, who he purchased from her homeless mother when she was fifteen. Butler uses Moss to show the adaptation of patriarchal religion used to create false legitimacy in order for him to dominate his three wives and keep them from any form of education. Zahra never learns to read or write because she "already knew enough to suit him," Lauren says, which implies that sex was the only thing he wanted from her (200). This kind of mental slavery creates a net of chains that may be difficult to put into concrete pages of written evidence.

[24] Lauren alludes to slavery explicitly when she refers to their role as the "crew of a modern underground railroad," a reference to the underground networks slaves used to escape their masters.

[25] Sandra Y. Govan claims that "Butler treats the recurring themes of casual brutality, forcible separation of families, the quest for knowledge, the desire to escape, the tremendous work loads expected of slaves as efficiently as any of the narrators or documentary histories discussing the slavery experience" ("Homage" 91).

[26] The novels are similar to the slave narrative in that the reader is living at the same time as the narrator, but under different (less oppressive) conditions. Readers can speculate about the contemporaneous world and works similarly to the manner of the audience addressed in slave narratives. Similar to the slave narrative, the audience becomes important to the text's general meaning; for instance, slave narratives were meant to educate and cause white, northern people to act differently to stop the institution of slavery.

[27] In *Parable of the Sower*, Bankole practically says verbatim what she's said in her interview. He refers back to "the early 1990s while I was in college, I heard about cases of growers doing some of this – holding people against their wills and forcing them to work without pay. Latins in California, blacks and Latins in the south …." (263). This also helps to place Bankole's narrative perspective.

[28] Lauren talks about the different form resistance took at Camp Christian, recounting the tale of Day Turner, an obvious reference to history, and to Nat Turner. The captives act like slaves resisting by grouping together and planning an attack on the masters right

under their noses. The rebellion allows readers to witness the need for action even when all seems lost.

[29] Earthseed probably won't save the world, but it seems to already be influencing "the world" outside the book. Butler invites us to join in because she parodies the utopian genre, applies multiple text forms to cause the reader to feel unsettled, and incorporates the slave narrative to inspire us to see and end the slavery that exists around us. The readers process the texts interconnectedness – a part of the utopian practice.

Chapter Three: Imagining Subjectivity as Utopian Practice

> And what went on at the Oven these days was not to be believed . . . The proof they had been collecting since the terrible discovery in the spring could not be denied: the one thing that connected all these catastrophes was in the Convent. And in the Convent were those women.

> We [humans] are the only ones who can imagine paradise, so let's start imagining properly, so that it isn't about my way, my land, my borders, my values, and keeping out you and you and you. We're the only ones who can do that. So -- think it up ….Yes, the chances of paradise are small. So what?[1]
>
> Toni Morrison, *The Washington Post*, 6 Jan. 1998

Paradise, by Toni Morrison, is the story of a town named Ruby, founded and inhabited by free black men and women, and of their relationship to a household of women, white and black, who live outside of Ruby in an old Convent. In a Morrison novel, reading is not a discovery of answers, but of more questions, and it is in our reading process that utopia appears. This chapter explains the unique utopian reading practices that Morrison's narrative structure implies. Morrison's narration lacks a point of view character to provide coherence. The reader must become the "point of view" character. Not having one position to read from makes the experience of reading destabilized. The reading practice becomes practicing a state of intersubjectivity, transforming the more Western conception of a distinct "subject" and "object" into interconnectedness. In Morrison's *Paradise*, readers must actively co-create worlds, not in isolation, but in relation to one another, and furthermore, they must pull together the non-linear account into their own imagination of paradise.

The journey begins on the first page with the first line that reads: "They shoot the white girl first" (3). This opening resembles a mystery novel as we wonder who shoots

and who is being shot at. Questions accrue along with the details about nine men with guns who move "deep into the Convent," making it sound as though it were a war zone. We have to ask, why is this combative violence happening? Every answer that Morrison gives us comes at a price: more questions.

Paradise is an expression of utopian desire, rather than a description of "utopia." Feminism has transformed the genre of utopia from its preoccupation with environmental specifics and grand designs to shift toward the inner realms of its inhabitants. The utopian, literary scholar, Jean Pfaelzer argues that feminist utopia has "as much to do with fantasy, wish, anxiety, and defensiveness" as it does with "economics and ecologies" (Pfaelzer 100). This redefinition allows *Paradise* to be about utopia as a journey or process.[2] Feminist utopian novels contain journeys that take place amongst "multiple worlds in relation rather than in opposition."[3] The reading practice that results from this destabilized interconnection of worlds generates the utopian impulse in *Paradise*.

My interpretative method relies on Morrison's own theories of creative writing and audience. In a discussion about her writing, Morrison notes that she writes to make a reader work to fill in missing pieces and to interact actively with the novel. She says:

> My writing expects, demands participatory reading, and that I think is what literature is supposed to do. It's not just about telling the story; it's about involving the reader […] My language has to have holes and spaces so the reader can come into it […] Then we (you, the reader, and I, the author) come together to make this book, to feel this experience (Morrison, Interview with Tate 125).

Morrison expects the reader to "come together" with the author "to make this book, to feel this experience"; this expectation results in a practice where reader and writer together create meaning.

In addition, Morrison's definition of paradise emphasizes the importance of isolation or "separateness." The purpose of *Paradise* was to produce a "meditation" and an "interrogation of the whole idea of paradise, the safe place, the place full of bounty, where no one can harm you. But, in addition to that, it's based on the notion of exclusivity. All paradises, all utopias are designed by who is not there, by the people who are not allowed in" (Interview with Farnsworth). Can "paradise" exist if it excludes? Morrison suggests, "the notion of exclusivity" makes paradise impossible. But, paradoxically, Morrison also demands that readers imagine utopian outcomes by considering "paradise" as an everyday word. Paradise can't exist, but the impulse must exist, if we (her readers) are ever to get out of here.

I. Summary of Plot and Structure

In 1976, the year of the United States bicentennial, in a fictional town called "Ruby" in Oklahoma, nine men from this small place attack an even smaller group of women living in an old Convent, seventeen miles away. Toni Morrison's, *Paradise*, begins with this attack and the line, "They shoot the white girl first." The mystery surrounding this harsh opening unfolds in a pair of overlapping and multi-layered stories. The story of Ruby covers multiple generations from the town's African American forefathers, 158 freedmen, who migrated westward, and settled in Haven; the sons move the town again in order to retreat from the post-World War II disappointments and failures of society.

For twenty years, preceding the opening, Ruby has been a “Paradise” because it offered safety, and like-minded folks around them. However, tensions between the older and younger generations are increasing over the years as Ruby becomes more of a theocracy, and the young people, influenced by “start-ups” from the NAACP, begin developing their own ideas. The older and younger generations cannot find common ground. Reverend Misner mediates between the young and old, but both sides remain unhappy. Only when the Convent women are blamed can the two sides unite around an attack on this isolated group of women.

The Convent had been a Catholic school for Native American girls that the church closed but allowed the Mother Superior and Consolata to stay. These two women have lived most of their adult lives at the Convent, and have a deep connection born out of hardship, understanding, and love. Over the course of more than twenty years, Ruby women had come to visit. The narrator notes that there were "crying women, staring women, scowling, lip-biting women, or women just plain lost" who made the trek "back and forth" between Ruby and the Convent (270); "early reports were of kindness and very good food" (11)." In the early years, Ruby’s citizens came to the Convent school to buy vegetables and to get healing. They saw it as a hospitable place.

The second multi-layered story is about the five women who arrive randomly and make the Convent home. Morrison begins with “Ruby,” the briefest chapter, named after the Morgan twins’ sister who dies during the move to set up the town. The next chapters are organized roughly chronologically in the order of the women’s arrival to the Convent. But this vague nod to linearity disappears, as chapters move restlessly over episodes about Ruby’s men and women, and back to the Convent women whose

stories tell of their abuse, and flight away from their abusers. "Mavis" arrives first, to find the Mother dying, and Consolata exhausted and drunk on the floor. Mavis leaves home after she "accidentally" smothers her twins; she also leaves behind her abusive, alcoholic husband and two older children. Next, is "Grace," or Gigi, whose mother has sex with her boyfriend, and that causes the daughter to hate her and run away. Following that is "Seneca," orphaned quite young by a mother who was trying to do the right thing for her daughter; Seneca expresses her self-hatred in self-mutilation. Divine, whom Consolata renames "Pallas" arrives next, a waif of a young girl, who had been raped and almost drowned, and left by the wayside by an opulent but uncaring father and mother.

The next chapters form a loose grouping because they are named after women who are the most radical outsiders in their own communities. Patricia Best, Consolata, and Lone are the next chapters; they also model different reading practices by performing different interpretative narratives. Patricia Best, a woman of the all-black Ruby community, works to compose a history and genealogy of the Ruby families from bits of historical evidence gathered from family Bibles, oral stories, and direct questions about the family names of the founding 8-Rock people. Although Consolata's story has been interwoven in all of the preceding chapters, her title chapter shows in depth the process by which the orphan Connie becomes the Consolata who lives in the Convent, in part through her sexual affair with Deacon Morgan. The end of the affair devastates her and causes her to retreat from the visible world, no longer willing or able to see the world around her, although she develops a way to see inside others. After years of retreat, her rebirth happens when she realizes that other people are suffering and

through healing others, she begins to heal. It is her rebirth that allows the other women at the Convent to see her as a spiritual leader. Together, the Convent women dream "aloud" and share the pain that transforms their individual abuse and suffering into something communal and positive. Next is the spiritual healer and midwife of the town of Ruby, Lone DuPres, adopted by the DuPres a long time ago. She overhears the men's plans to attack and gathers town-folk who will go with her to warn the Convent women.

"Save-Marie" is the title of the final chapter and the novel ends with her young death. At the funeral of the young girl, Rev. Misner says he's decided to stay in Ruby, and work to heal the town. Following the funeral is a brief untitled section where the Convent women come back to life and appear to those people who had hurt them. The closing imagery is as enigmatic as much of the novel; it is a view of two women, Piedad and the unnamed woman whose green eyes are probably Consolata's. They sit listening to waves and the third person omniscient narrator points out the trash on the beach, the play of the waves that sound like a radio, and how the women console each other, intertwined, watching a ship that is both coming, and going, with an eye to the work of "Paradise."

What causes Ruby to decline to the point where nine men decide that the fate of their town rests on the killing of five women seventeen miles away is the obvious central question of the novel. We learn that Ruby's isolation causes inbreeding, which brings physical and spiritual sterility. The novel asks whether a *paradise*, an isolated community like Ruby, can still be paradise if it leaves others out. The novel also asks us to consider whether *Paradise* can be found in a racially diverse women's community,

open to racial difference but only admitting women. Utopian process comes from the kinds of possibilities that occur while reading about the relationship between the all-black exclusive town and the all-women's inclusive community.

II. Scholarship Surrounding the Reading Process of *Paradise*

Since its publication in 1998, a great deal of criticism has been written about *Paradise*.[4] The following section provides an overview of the range of scholarship, organized chronologically, with a focus on theorists' discussions of Morrison's view of her "participatory" writing method and what it means for readers.

Cathy Waegner's 1998 essay, titled "Toni Morrison and the 'Other' Reader," opens up questions about who Morrison considers to be her ideal reader. Waegner begins with excerpts of interviews and writing where Morrison states that her primary audience is "black people." Waegner also discusses Morrison's ideas about "participatory reading" that encourages readers to co-create narratives. She pays attention to how Morrison's primary audience and "participatory reading" might affect non-black readers and considers the connection between black sermons and story-telling techniques as impetus for Morrison's approach to the relationship between narrator, narrative, and audience. "Participatory reading" is not new for Morrison, especially not in the techniques she relies on in this trilogy which began with *Beloved*, continued with *Jazz,* and ends with *Paradise*. In *Jazz,* Waegner notes that "The identity, gender, and even ethnicity of the jazz-playing narrative consciousness is so (deliberately) ambiguously encoded into the text that even the most culturally different but sensitive reader can feel

impelled to join in the creative jam session." *Paradise's* participatory practice is "murkier," she notes, because readers are left with tiny bits of information and little "authorial" direction on reading and interpreting.

Theorist Barbara Christian, in "The Past Is Infinite: History and Myth in Toni Morrison's Trilogy," discusses Morrison's claim that "the past is infinite" to her. Christian surveys Morrison's historical influences, including, in *Paradise*, Morrison's interest in the all-black towns in the West and her reliance on Kenneth Marvin Hamilton's history, *Black Towns and Profit: Promotion in the Trans-Appalachian West, 1877 – 1915* (417-8). Christian suggests that such research demonstrates Morrison's desire not to be consumed by "the white gaze" (415). Christian explores how Morrison uses history to evoke "mythic stories," pointing out that the study by Hamilton provides Morrison with an historical model of "utopian" black towns in Oklahoma, which were referred to as "havens" and their citizens as "the Exodusers," aiming to leave white oppression behind. Like Morrison, Hamilton asserts that economics played a more important role than race or racism in creating these towns, but that racism was certainly one cause. Christian does not question why Morrison highlights the race of the citizens of Ruby, and not of the Convent women. Further, Christian argues that *Paradise* is a novel about the "choice of community" (419). Since Morrison's "narrative goal" is for her reader to be "crucial to the action of the novel" (422), the reader in *Paradise* must also make these choices. She concludes that Morrison's desire for an open ending, similar to endings found in oral story-telling conventions, is to invite "the reader to interpret these resurrections" of the women.[5] She asks whether the "work of

remembering the past – getting through it – endless, [whether] the dream of belonging always shifting, always becoming? Might this be Paradise?" (423).

Rob Davidson in "Racial Stock and 8-Rocks: Communal Historiography in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*" focuses on the "Ruby-centered narratives in *Paradise*" acknowledging that focusing on one part of the story defeats the contrapuntal structure. He argues that Morrison seeks to narrate not from an individual viewpoint, but for the community as a whole. The men of Ruby keep their patriarchal power in check by controlling the narratives that revise and construct their history. The men rightly believe that their power comes through the seemingly unimportant "stories." Davidson points to places where men dominate relationships through control of money and politics. It is the men, not the women, who meet about the Oven and the words on the Oven's lip; and it is the men, not the women who decide who is to marry whom. Ironically, the oven is transformed from functional and communal, to a place symbolizing male-centered, power and dominance over others.

Davidson points out that the communal history substantiates competing claims: the younger people want an open, dynamic understanding of history while the older men want to affirm and continue the status quo stories. The Morgan brothers keep control by invoking a "state of emergency" atmosphere.[6] Furthermore, this history is "gendered." Women who create stories are offering competing outsider views of history, hidden from the men. Davidson believes Patricia Best's character and job, as town genealogist qua archeologist, is one way Morrison models the reading or interpreting process. The town history is complicated, but eventually, Patricia Best constructs the lineage and deduces the reasons for the favoring of "coal-black" families;

her findings about the racism and sexism in the town are so troubling to her that she burns them. Davidson points out readers are prodded to gather information from multiple viewpoints, sifting through conflicting interpretations of events, especially different views on what happens to the women at the end of the novel.

Philip Page points out the various interpreting methods the novel encourages in "Furrowing All the Brows: Interpretation and Transcendent in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*" (2001). Page analyzes how the characters perform activities of interpretation that model behavior for the readers, noting that these narrative strategies make heavy demands on the readers. In response to this complex text, he explains, "all the participants' brows are furrowed in hermeneutic concentration" (638). For example, the characters interpret "meanings of words and thereby explicitly parallel readers' acts of contemplating the novel's texts" (639). His examples include the representations of the cross, when Pullman presides over K.D. and Arnette's marriage, and when he speaks of the "vast difference" between human and divine love. The readers are then privy to the individual characters' responses to Reverend Pullman's words. These internal musings by the characters end up informing the readers' interpretative process. Page relies on interviews with Morrison to explore her tactics requiring readers to enter into texts that have many holes and spaces for the reader. He argues that *Paradise* is even more participant-oriented, knotty, and ambiguous than any earlier Morrison novel (638).

Linda Krumolz suggests in "Reading and Insight in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*" (2002), that Morrison's narrative "guides the reader into the volatile conjunction of race and gender" (21) through a "process of revelation or insight that is best understood not as an unveiling but as a vision of the many veils of history, ideology, and desire through

which we see the world" (21). Krumholz points to two moments where the reader gains such insight: near the opening, the description of the leap of the "bodacious black Eves" (18) and the reappearance of the leaping women, some two-hundred-fifty pages later, where they seem to come back to life. Krumholz uses Morrison's essay, "Home," to discuss a possible utopian function of reading *Paradise*. In that essay, Morrison describes the novel as working towards a state of "insight" into others. On the basis of this comment, Krumholz suggests that "outside" boundaries means that Morrison poses a "multiple or nomadic subjectivity" rather than a fixed, unified one. The Convent women create a safe house by not submitting to the social values surrounding them, but instead dealing with the "scary things inside," as Consolata says (39). On the other hand, Ruby retreats from the "scary things" outside them and tries to create safety through embracing sameness in their retreat from others.

Krumholz further argues that Ruby's repetition of the safe "haven" has meant that difference has been erased. Ruby's exclusivity stamped out difference because it feared "Out there ….Where random and organized evil erupted when and where it chose" (*Paradise* 16). Krumholz takes feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti's work on "nomadic subjectivity" as a way to challenge the "phallogocentric" community of Ruby, and provide a "heterogeneous, changing, and transgressive subjectivity" in the women at the Convent (24-25). A "nomad" subject isn't "homeless" but constructs new subject positions out of new configurations of gender and race; these new forms lead to new understandings of humanity and divinity. Divinity, in the novel overall, is understood as those interpretative strategies that wrestle with "difference." The contested locations - the Oven, the family tree, the pure blood-line, the white girl, the cross - are all

reconfigured. Instead of a fixed identity, "stepping-in" (or "seeing-in") offers the women ways of practicing agency, understanding, and healing (29). Krumholz refers to Wolfgang Iser's work to support the idea of the transformative journey that reading literature can provide and the ways that reading exposes "readers' unconscious ideological assumptions," enabling them to "'reread' themselves in the world" (30). The "visible or inexpressible forces" with "a process of reading" opens up spaces that are "in-between spaces where new forms of political subjectivity" can be explored (Krumholz 30). Divinity, as a process of insight, is explored in *Paradise* but not a single truth is found. Morrison leaves us with the question, what *insight* does Paradise offer us?

Using ethnography and literary analysis, Timothy Aubry studies the reception and responses of the audience members to Morrison's *Paradise* on the Oprah Winfrey show. In "Beware the Furrow of the Middlebrow: Searching for *Paradise* on the Oprah Winfrey Show," Aubry examines the "middlebrow" audience in Oprah's book club and their response to *Paradise*. Aubry studies Morrison's complicated interactions with the audience as they ask her and Winfrey difficult questions about what meaning the text offers, and what "understanding" the text offers. Ideally, Morrison wants her audience to find the process difficult, but the journey to also be "*enjoyable*" (355). According to Aubry, Morrison desires to provide readers an "eternal, mutually constitutive relationship between struggle and pleasure, or between struggle and paradise" (355). Most importantly, the "weight of interpretation" must be on the reader (357).

Aubry points out parallels between Morrison's "textual devices" and Ruby's "exclusionary tactics"; he suggests, that Morrison doesn't want to "exclude" her readers

the way the citizens of Ruby exclude outsiders (364), instead offering them a position that allows identification with others as well as difference. Aubry believes that Morrison uses defamiliarizing narrative tactics that demand openness (364), and that she "saturates her readers" yet fails to "provide the explanations necessary to interpret those details" (364). Describing reading *Paradise* as similar to the experience of falling in love, which is the "task of approaching otherness," Aubry shows that Morrison's readers are offered a "dialectical interchange between returning to and departing from the familiar safety of what is known."[7] This process demands the crossing of boundaries that "apprehend unfamiliar modes of subjectivity, and thus begin the dialogue necessary to constitute a more inclusive community."[8] It is "stepping out" and "stepping in" – the meditative healing process practiced by Consolata and Lone -- that begins the dialogue needed for expansive and inclusive community.

Each critic brings a slightly different approach to our theoretical understanding readers' relation to *Paradise*. Waegner began this discussion by focusing on Morrison's statements about her "ideal" reading audience. Christian's focus on Morrison's project to involve the readers by using historical influences leads her to consider whether paradise is the constancy found in shifting and becoming. Rob Davidson reviews the history of Ruby by using Patricia Best's family tree research to show how the citizens manipulate their stories to control those less powerful. Philip Page sees the complexity of the text as an invitation to ponder how the multiple characters' viewpoints influence the interpretative process. Linda Krumholz addresses Morrison's unique reliance on expanding our viewpoint to show a new vantage point, a "nomadic" subjectivity to unveil the instability that "informs action and responsibility"

requisite for Morrison's idea of paradise (31). Timothy Aubry analyzes Oprah's "middlebrow" audience readers. All these scholars are interested in how the reading process encourages talking across differences.

To this scholarly collection, my dissertation adds an examination of the readers' process as utopian practice. The technical obfuscation Morrison causes due to her lack of one solid "point of view" character forces the reader to actively sort through all of the conflicting retellings of events. The reader is projected into a shifting subject position, producing a state of uncertainty and "intersubjectivity," and must construct a viewpoint, relying on interconnection rather than isolation. This state of interconnectedness depends on "participatory" reading, and constitutes the utopian process of Morrison's novel. Utopia lies within the reader.

Paradise invites readers to identify and empathize with characters who are alike and different from them. The resulting interconnectedness resembles the journey to self-awareness that the psychoanalytic theorist, Jessica Benjamin has labeled "intersubjectivity." [9] Intersubjectivity is the idea that in order to understand the other, the self has to be understood, in the sense of recognizing one's own historical responsibility for injury, failure, loss, and destructiveness. Morrison's use of consciousness raising groups as part of the Convent women's healing process is intersubjectivity in practice.[10] In her book, *Like Subjects, Love Objects: Essays on Recognition and Sexual Difference*, Benjamin defines intersubjectivity in his way:

> Intersubjectivity was formulated in deliberate contrast to the logic of subject and object, which predominates in Western philosophy and science. It refers to that zone of experience or theory in which the other is not merely the object of the

> ego's need/drive or cognition/perception but has a separate and equivalent center of self (30).

This recognition of the "self in the presence of the Other" is the prerequisite for healing personal as well as collective or cultural traumas, such as slavery or institutionalized sexism. Intersubjectivity is followed by the challenge of "thirdness," which is "the challenge to overcome denial and dissociation in regard to ourselves as well as others" (Benjamin 141). This practice is part of the coalition process. The readers' journey must thus include getting to know the self and the other through stories that are painful, multi-vocal, and dialogical. The Convent women practice "loud dreaming," a nurturing that is physical and psychic and models the readers' approach to utopia. The stories challenge readers to find the self in the other, thereby creating new subjectivities that provide "collective healing" but that also allow women to remain distinct from each other.

III. Reading History into Utopian Practice - Ruby

The endless circular references to the history of Ruby make linear progress through *Paradise* difficult. In fact, Morrison rewrites historical stories to prepare us for how unsettled the past really is.[11] Some of her novels contain stories that take on mythic proportions, guiding us to think about what stories or myths we believe to be true. Utopian scholar Carol Farley Kessler makes a similar point when she argues, in *Daring to Dream: Utopian Fiction by United States Women Before 1850,* that

> ... if we understand that utopias usually index -- however obliquely -- the wrongs, the lacks, and the needs experienced or recognized by authors .... then

> by reading these utopias we obtain a sense of history-as-experienced .... From these utopias we can learn what the wrongs have been. Knowing them, we can seek to change. No one of us is an island: if circumstances diminish any of us, we all stand deprived of enjoying the accomplishments any diminished person might have attained. Hence, the recovery of women's past is imperative (xiv-xv).

Utopian literature recovers history and reviews the documents of yesterday, in order to create this necessary literary *and* political act. Morrison follows this premise and recovers the history of African Americans and women. In the fictional town of Ruby, *Paradise* explores the effects of slavery and aspects of the Black Migration (between the late eighteen hundreds and the early nineteen hundreds) when approximately thirty Oklahoma towns with predominantly black populations were founded. Morrison researched and explored how these communities were created to be safe, essentially utopian, havens far from white racism. Through the Convent in *Paradise*, Morrison also taps into women's history, drawing on a broad range of historic women's experiences, from communal spiritual experiments, such as the Shakers, to feminist collectives and consciousness raising groups of the 1970s. For each possible group, Morrison posits and then explores the question about whether or not an all-black-township or an all-women's Convent could be home to "paradise."

In multiple interviews and essays, Morrison has addressed why she opened *Paradise* with the line - "They shoot the white girl first" - a sentence that seems far removed from any idea of paradise. In her essay, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," Morrison argues that her goal for *Paradise* was to "engage and disrupt the reader's racial imaginary"

which she does by noting the race but not designating which Convent denizen is “the white girl.” [12] Morrison wants readers to reject "racial representations" and to read race differently. She wanted *Paradise* to move beyond a white gaze but not to reify or sanctify blackness. Morrison explains that she wanted the opening line to force the readers to participate, making the readers conscious of their own assumptions about race and racial identity, destabilizing race as a marker. Her readers are prodded to see difference in the “shifting and multiple subject positions” as well as the destabilization of racial identity (Krumholz). The shifting subject positions Morrison creates cause readers to look inward, which may allow us to see ourselves differently. Ultimately, Morrison’s ideal seems to be a reading process that opens up in the tension between the communities. *Paradise* - and utopia - lie not in Ruby or the Convent but between these communities, in the reader.

In an interview, Morrison explains why she entertains but never answers who the white girl is. Morrison wants readers to see race as "unimportant." Critics argue whether or not this idea of a race-free marker in a Morrison story is possible. Is race empty, then, or full? Is the ambiguity fair? One critic notes that *Paradise* shows the connectedness of race to "gender, class, and sexual relations" and that Morrison "displaces whiteness and the power of the white gaze without reifying blackness" (Krumholz).

A destabilized image of race identification opens the novel and closes the novel. The novel opens with the men of Ruby killing the women of the Convent. At the end of the novel, we are still unsure which men were part of the “lynch mob” and whether the women are truly dead. This section of the dissertation explores the town of Ruby by

following the non-linear utopian reading process that Morrison offers her readers. From the start, *Paradise* is a treacherous reading journey. It begins with the internal monologues of the men as they ruminate individually, and jumps around to different points of view; while there is some difference of opinion, all the men agree that the Convent women are bad. Yet, just as the narrative fails to identify "the white girl," it fails to identify the names of the men who storm the Convent and kill her. Only re-reading can bring that knowledge into relief. For example, one male character obsesses about this "new and obscene breed of female" because they live independently from men and outside societal norms. We are moved through the narrative with an unknown, constantly shifting third-person-point-of-view narrator who withholds information. We see into the minds of most characters, but jump from one to another not necessarily in chronological order. Consequently, readers are forced to become their own point of view, to offer their own interpretations of events, their order, and their meaning.

When the men assault the women of the convent with guns, handcuffs, and Mace, the narrator says, "God on their side, the men take aim. For Ruby"(18). The punctuation emphasizes the men are doing this "For Ruby." Only later do we learn the importance of the town's name, commemorating the sister of the twin patriarchs, Deacon and Steward. The wording produces ambiguity about what the men believe they are doing and whether they are right in shooting these women to uphold community norms. Their actions are evidence of patriarchy of an extreme nature. The words imply that the men feel God is with them. But the interpretation of that belief is left to the reader.

While the narrative perspective, here, is a collective, internal, male point of view, the point of view shifts throughout the novel, allowing readers to see how the men's hatred of women and outsiders comes to be. When accounting for her decision not to offer readers a "leading character," Morrison told Oprah that it was "Because [she] wanted to force the reader to become acquainted with the communities" and she wanted to create a way to identify with characters that involved "a structure of empathy difficult to imagine, less individual-centered, less competitive, and more inclusive" (Aubry).

The history of Ruby is first painted in broad strokes that get more detailed as the novel moves disjointedly through time. Near the start, where the attack on the Convent is shown, one character turns off a kitchen pot on the stove and reflects on the fact that the pot was about the same size as the one his mother bathed him in when he was a small boy. Morrison begins this historical moment with an intimate detail. However, the narrative then shifts to dry and objective, back to personal. One Morgan twin describes how his birthplace went "From Haven, a dream town in Oklahoma Territory, to Haven a ghost town in Oklahoma State. Freedmen who stood tall in 1889 dropped to their knees in 1934 and were stomach-crawling by 1948" (5). Morrison's description humanizes the dates and suggests the utter disempowerment of the men of the all-black towns. Bringing the viewpoint back to the Convent, the collective male narrator explains that the men are attacking the women because they are *women* and *outsiders*. The narrative voice pronounces that, "nothing inside or out rots the one all-black town worth the pain" (5). Morrison thus implies that those all-black towns came at a price – the price of exile, exclusion, and misogyny. This exile was explained in the story of the town's "Disallowing."

In the late nineteenth-century, the founding families of the black township of first Haven and then Ruby, left Mississippi and Louisiana; slavery had ended and in the late 1890s the promise of land in the West was appealing for many new immigrants.[13] Originally, the family members left the South and trekked all the way to Oklahoma, migrating west and north in search of an already existing, open black township. Morrison's historical research on the towns included a column in newspapers titled, "Come Prepared Or Not at All" which appeared between 1891 and 1892, in *The Langston Herald*. This Oklahoma newspaper called for "active, energetic men and women with some money" who were "prepared to support themselves and families until they could raise a crop." *The Herald* explained, "If you come penniless you must expect it to get rough" (Taylor 146). These townships inspired dreams but excluded based on money. Morison found this idea of the all-black-township useful for analyzing the role of racism and sexism in creating the nation because it allowed her to explore the grounds for and possible outcomes of separatist enclaves (Cornier 8). Morrison thus implies that the fictionalized Ruby has real roots in African-American history. She came to one conclusion about what the exclusivity might mean, positing that if rejected repeatedly, the result might be to create an exclusive town of one's own people. The final rejection in the novel is from the ironically named town of "Fairly."[14] This rejection from other black men was the "final" rejection, which evolves into that story, "The Disallowing." Morrison found this idea of the all-black-township an interesting place to explore the outcome of separatist enclaves.

Morrison addresses this complicated history of the West and separatist towns also by showing how these townships take land originally occupied by the Native Americans.

These all-black-townships exclude anyone from the outside and also “occupy” land formerly lived on by Native Americans of the Five Civilized Tribes.[15] Before the black townships formed, there had been intermarriage between Native peoples and the Blacks freed from slavery. After slavery, mixed-heritage families were part of the 8-Rock families as implied by the name “Blackhorse.” Morrison creatively uses the history of the Western frontier to study race relations among Native peoples, Blacks, and descendents of white European. Her choice of the west as the setting opens up the complex, brutal history of racism in the early U.S. years; while it does not justify their actions of exclusivity, it does create a sense of sympathy for the founding fathers.

During reconstruction, the Western states experimented with different racial governments, including a predominately black Oklahoma state government.[16] Outside of the black communities, most folks felt strongly against the idea of blacks governing themselves but especially didn’t like the idea of blacks governing people of other races.[17] However, close to forty all black-townships like Haven and Ruby existed, whereas today, only twelve remain. The idea of these free territories inspired talk of utopia, as shown when one politician promoted "a paradise of Eden and the garden of the Gods" (Taylor 145).[18] Many blacks migrated to this “paradise of Eden,” hoping to create all-black-townships and farming communities. Jim Crow racism caused the subsequent demise of many of these towns. Blacks became disenfranchised; they had little control over local government, and courts and state offices were no longer open to them. Oklahoma was no longer anything close to Eden and this quandary is what inspires Morrison’s “interrogation” of paradise.

Morrison depicts her fictional all-black towns to destabilize constructions of race and challenge racism in our reading process. The reading process is destabilized through portraying many different social constructions of race and racism, as well as issues around gender.[19] The rigid patriarchy and separatist power structures in Ruby are undermined by the destabilizing reading process. While Ruby is exclusive, and the reading process may feel exclusionary, Morrison pushes readers to sift through characters, producing alternative understandings of categories, and the possibility of new and coalitional subjectivities outside of the hierarchies of Ruby. Although Ruby began with utopian ideals, it becomes "authoritarian, hierarchical, and patriarchal" like many utopias (Sargent "American" 40). Evidence of this rigidity in Ruby may be seen in the section on the politics of the town oven. The men use their authority over the women to decide that Haven's once useful, communal oven would be taken down, piece by piece, and packaged lovingly for the new town Ruby. The women resent the time and space spent packing since the oven no longer has a useful function. The packed oven represents patriarchal authority and the separation of the genders in Ruby. Another site of mistaken patriarchal care-taking is the wall the men build around the town, metaphorically keeping their women safe, but literally excluding others.

The men of Ruby believe it is necessary "to withdraw from 'the world' to practice their beliefs" (40). First Haven and then Ruby begin with the principles of equality, and shared goods, but evolve so that they are no longer communal. Instead, Ruby's history becomes cleaned-up through falsified stories about sharing of goods and money; we learn that the bank's practices are not equal or open, and that the town has exiled families due to a desire for coal-black homogeneity. The original patriarch, aptly

named “Big Papa,” and his son, “Big Daddy,” head the families. The families begin to see themselves as the “chosen people,” leading them to believe in their own dominance and authority. Morrison highlights this belief, noting that isolation “carries the seeds of its own destruction” (Farnsworth).

Moreover, Morrison points to the negative outcomes of such exclusivity through a sermon by Reverend Cary entitled, “What Have You Given up to Live Here?” He asks:

> “What sacrifice do you make every day to live here in God’s beauty, His bounty, His peace?”
>
> “Tell us, Reverend. Say it.”
>
> “I’ll tell you what.” Reverend Cary chuckled.
>
> “Yes, sir.”
>
> “Go ahead, now.”
>
> Reverend Cary had lifted his right hand straight in the air and curled it into a fist. Then one finger at a time, he began to list what the congregation had deprived itself of.
>
> “Television.”
>
> The congregation rippled with laughter.
>
> “Disco.”
>
> They laughed merrily, louder, shaking their heads.
>
> “Policemen.”
>
> They roared with laughter.

> "Picture shows, filthy music." He continued with fingers from his left hand. "Wickedness in the streets, theft in the night, murder in the morning. Liquor for lunch and dope for dinner. That's what you have given up" (Morrison 274).

This call-and-response informs the reading practice because it resembles oral story-telling practices. The call-and-response structure also attests to the necessity for an audience and speaker, as well as for a dialectical relationship between them. The audience participation engenders a discourse between speakers (like the Reverend) and listeners, like the worshippers at church. While Morrison's readers aren't actually at this event, or listening to the story, they nevertheless participate in this exchange. Generally, oral story-telling signifies the importance of overlapping but separate subjectivities.

Ruby controls meaning in the town through a conservatism that resembles a historical community form called a "gerontocracy," where (male) citizens over fifty control the "legal" system, including administrative, legislative, and judicial positions. On the one hand, the town seems to be communal and free of unjust systems because there are "no lawyers and no judges, simply citizens acting together" (Sargent 45). On the other hand, the twins, Deacon and Steward, run the bank, deal with judicial disputes, and control the social structure by excluding the light skinned, even causing the death of the light skinned wife, Delia, of a founding town member, Roger Best. Morrison juxtaposes this rigid patriarchal town with the Convent women's community to present other ways that separatist enclaves originate, organize, and continue. While not perfect, the women offer some feminist practices that push readers to see the benefits of coalition practices for the creation of a more utopian world.

IV. Reading History into Utopian Practice – The Women

In an interview, Morrison agrees that the Convent women's home is supposed to remind the reader of shared political and social communes and other forms of communities that developed during the Second Wave of Feminism in the 1960s and 1970s. Just as Morrison explores separatist enclaves built in Ruby on race, she also explores separatist enclaves built on gender – in the all-female Convent, again drawing on her knowledge and research of historic Shaker communities as well as the Separatist enclaves of 1970s feminism.[20] The consciousness-raising groups and the early Shakers had unique ways of envisioning utopian worlds through the use of process rather than end-oriented models of change. Morrison incorporates the people-oriented importance of the process and the visions that provoked utopian thinking.

The Convent had evolved into a male-free crash-pad where five women live. They accept each other first as outsiders, regardless of age, race, sexuality, or class. They are a bizarre "family" unit. Life is simple: they all cook and tend the garden. The door is always unlocked. Money is mentioned but essentially unnecessary. The women share the house communally; they sleep in hammocks instead of beds and write their thoughts on the walls instead of paper. They converse with their ghosts, laugh with the memory of their babies' voices. This family is non-biological and challenges conventional, nuclear, biologically based family structures.

The ideals and practices of the Convent women are central to the utopian practice in the novel. The Convent provides a place to examine coalition building as a utopian practice, in part because this coalition is non-hierarchical. The Convent also moves beyond interrelated racist and patriarchal structures to form an attitude about space as

communal. Morrison creates a "communal form of agency" (Cornier 12). The women hide from their feelings and then heal through them. They collectively construct an unconquerable group identity because it is based on empathy, love, caring, and cooperation. Some may argue that the Convent's ideal qualities do not compensate for its exclusivity – only women live in the Convent. The Convent women, however, learn to share their painful realities, a sharing that some feminists have called an important element of utopia (Pfaelzer 101).

The parallels between Shaker and communities at the Convent are many: in both places, women hold important spiritual and social positions and rely on a physical and spiritual sense of interconnectedness, both groups have a high regard for celibacy, which affected how the communities developed. Celibacy also allows women a way to control their bodies. The Shakers, an early American communal living experiment, resemble the Convent women's spiritual, anarchistic, equitable life in remarkable ways.[21] The Shaker communities and the Convent women redefine family as extended, rather than nuclear; both see the body as sacred but not evil; and both view nature as a web.

The Convent women embrace and receive power while celebrating the mystical through dreams and trances. Their mysticism is similar to the Shakers' ideas about the transference of knowledge from one state of consciousness to another.[22] The connection between the Shakers' beliefs and the Convent women is cultural and spiritual. Consolata transforms into a "mother" figure similar to Mother Anne, a revered Mother of the Shaker community in the mid-1800s who practiced family or "domestic spiritualism" (Humez xxv). Morrison suggests that this extended, spiritual,

non-biological family is necessary to a vision of utopia or paradise. Similar to the feminist communities of the sixties and seventies, the Convent grows because it does not have a closed membership (unlike Ruby, which welcomes no one). The Convent relies on drifters, people moving between communities. As a result, the idea of a nuclear or biological family is revoked. Instead, mothering is a "social practice with socio-political implications" (Cornier 6). The Shakers and Convent women subvert the institutions of marriage and family as a means to share Christian "values" (Humez xvii). There are no prescribed "natural roles" to fulfill, but rather all are interconnected as subjects

Morrison is also referring to feminist ways of organizing communities in the late 1960s and 1970s, including collectives and the practice of "consciousness raising." Consciousness raising, a form of political activism, allowed women to join together equally, and educate each other through their lived experiences of oppression. Some groups held weekly meetings of women-only discussions where talk would be focused on a subject (such as child-bearing or discrimination). Rules were rejected as hierarchical and each woman had a voice. Valuing the individual experience allowed feminists to start with the basic level of "feelings" and to harness them to make political change.[23] In consciousness raising groups, women pooled their experiences, and, once shared, they became the basis for actions. The Convent women community accepts such a fluid notion of identity and that enables their ongoing, coalition work.

The process of reading through the Convent women's fluid identity teaches us to embrace and imagine community that manages to have "differences." Like the consciousness raising groups of the 1970s, the convent women discuss their spiritual

and political oppression by naming it. What is different is the way Morrison complicates the idea of "identity" by her refusal to hold onto an "identity politics." Because Morrison rejects the idea of a stable, fixed subject, readers witness the importance of creating community through nurturing differences by means of coalition. Some of the Convent women don't even like each other, as shown when Mavis and Gigi start fighting in the car, and continue wrestling in the middle of a road. The women's healing is partially possible because of a "blessed malelessness" of the house that made them feel "protected" and "free of hunters" (Morrison 177). But, like Consolata, each woman heals with and through others – even and including some women from Ruby, like Soane, who seek the renewal and openness the Convent women offer.

The existence of the Convent community invites readers to think about different kinds of utopian exclusivity and when they are enabling or destructive. The women's community rejects violence and the "stable hierarchical structures" that use violence as "power over" another person or group (Cornier 13). It's clear that Morrison isn't saying that exile works. But, similar to the activist Bernice Johnson Reagon, Morrison provides a "yours only" space and "while it lasts" uses it to act out community and "to construct within yourself and within your community who you would be if you were running society" (357-58). The women are a separatist, nurturing space in process. The Convent is also an example and product of coalition work. The many subject positions are not "natural" but constructed, and they are kept up with work from willing subjects.

V. Practices of Language: Reading Utopia as Process

By foregrounding interpreting practices, Morrison breaks with patriarchal history, in favor of oral, collective, and sometimes conflicting stories. Morrison invites her readers to see how and where the function of language oppresses. For instance, Ruby men try to "arrange" their women's minds (61); they keep images such as the "nineteen Negro Ladies," remembered and intact (109); they control history by claiming the Twins contain it in their "total memory" (107); and that they claim they should be obeyed as demonstrated by the shouting at the town meeting over some words (107). One instance of the men's attempt to control meaning is the debate over the words on the town oven – once clear but now partially lost: "Be" or "Beware" "the furrow of his brow." It is this distinction that causes verbal warfare between the young and old men of Ruby. The story began in the early years of Haven where the men proudly made a communal oven so that their wives and daughters would never have to work in a "white-man's kitchen" (Morrison 99). In addition, the oven became a central place where news, gossip, and stories were exchanged. The men decided to move the oven to Ruby when they relocated just after World War II; the women didn't want it because it had no function. The third person narrator notes that "the men loved putting it back together" but that the women felt it was wrong to let "a utility" become a "shrine" (103). The omniscient narrator considers looking at how unexcited, even negative the women felt about keeping it, but the men wanted to keep it yet only for the specific purpose of keeping the town's stories intact. By this point, the narrator notes, the houses had electricity, so cooking occurred in private spaces, and the oven was a romantic remnant of the communal space. In Ruby, young people would hang around

the oven, “not canning, ” playing music, not old-fashioned “live chords praising His Name,” but “radio music,” and leaving soda pop cans everywhere (111). There is a town meeting held in “God’s house” about the words on the oven and Reverend Misner mediates between the sides. The old, want the word “Beware” because they think the phrase was a command, or warning, that God should and had to be obeyed. The young prefer the word “Be” because they see the phrase as a motto to live by and see themselves as God’s instruments. The old and young fail to resolve their differences, and Morrison offers their dialogue to the readers to puzzle over a resolution, thus involving them in the creation of utopian possibility.

The women do not see a purpose for the oven and deny any reverence for it. In one humor-filled conversation, resident Anna Flood reflects that the words probably were "Be the Furrow of *Her* Brow" (159). The women’s narrative voices differentiate themselves from the male hierarchy by making fun of the situation. Morrison offers her readers the opportunity to think about the patriarch making the oven into a literal and metaphorical place of oppression where the younger generation’s ideas are being left behind and they’ve become exiled by their own community. Morrison implies that grasping for power, which includes trying to control all meaning, is oppressive. The reader, as point of view character, is given enough direction to reach a conclusion that the men’s attitudes are limiting and that stagnancy is anti-utopian but must re-construct the words on the oven as his or her own.

VI. Stepping-In: Intersubjectivity and Reading

Paradise is narrated through multiple voices showing that Morrison assumes it necessary to provide multiple perspectives: non-white, white, masculine, feminine. One narrative voice running the length of the novel is Consolata Sosa, an orphan, and later a spiritual Mother. Consolata's gaze becomes a sympathetic gateway into the women's consciousnesses. Consolata, the "Consoler" sees inside the other women; this sight eventually becomes unbearable for her because of all the pain, and secretes of those around her. Readers begin to practice "seeing in," as Consolata calls it, or "stepping in" as Lone calls it; we begin to start seeing inside the characters and seeing how healing can happen (247). In some ways, this is a semi-magical perspective; for example, with Mary Magna, Consolata practiced stepping in and the Reverend mother "glowed like a lamp till her very last breath" (247). In other ways, "stepping in" is an intimate look at pain reconfigured into utopian hope.

The practice of "stepping in" is revealed in *Paradise* during a visit with Lone DuPres who visits Connie from Ruby. The narrator explains that they sense a crash on the road below, and they rush to see it. At the road, they discover an automobile accident; the son of Deacon, Connie's ex-lover, lies dead. Lone asks Connie to bring Scout back to life by "stepping-in," which means Connie will find a "light" in him. In hushed breaths, the women converse about this healing ability. Lone says, "I'm too old now. Can't do it anymore, but you can" (245). Consolata pretends she doesn't understand but Lone demands, "Go inside him. Wake him up….Step in. Just step on in. Help him, girl!" (245). Less than a minute goes by and Scout begins breathing again; his friends are a bit wary and surprised but relieved, so do not question what has happened. Lone

convinces Consolata that she was right to do this, only "using what God gives you" (246).

The reader's point of view is Consolata's during this scene; we witness firsthand her empathy and healing. Connie removes her glasses and focuses on the blood in Scout's hair. The narrator describes that she

> saw the stretch of road he had dreamed through, felt the flip of the truck, the headache, the chest pressure, the unwillingness to breathe. […] Inside the boy she saw a pinpoint of light receding. Pulling up energy that felt like fear, she stared at it until it widened. Then more, more, so air could come seeping, at first, then rushing rushing in. Although it hurt like the devil to look at it, she concentrated as though the lungs in need were her own (245)

With her glasses off, Connie's vision changes and she sees people from the inside. She experiences Scout's memory, finds his energy source, and fills his lungs as though they were her own.

When Connie steps in, she looks for the "pinpoint of light" (the life force) until he starts breathing again. Morrison pushes her narrative to a place of healing or utopian hope by bringing Scout back. Lone tells Soane (Scout's mother and wife to Deacon with whom Connie had the affair many years ago) what happened and how Consolata heals their son, Scout. Subsequently, Soane and Connie become friends and cross-culturally bond, not in spite of, but because of Connie's elicit affair with Soane's husband. Soane brings cookies to thank Consolata for Scout "with all my heart" (246). They form a friendship that lasts and they "traded that basket back and forth for years" (247). These women and a few others from Ruby are unique because they can cross over to see the other side.

The reader becomes a "point of view character" as a result of a number of Morrison's narrative tactics. First, the reader is pushed to accept a subject position, but on that depends on the existence of others – that of the fictional characters. Like Connie bringing Scout back to life, the reader finds the light of the character and guides it to existence. Second, the narrative voice moves through multiple perspectives simultaneously allowing readers to see inside Scout, Consolata, Lone, and others. Morrison invites her readers to come over to the other side through imagining a different way of being. Assuming different points of view means that the readers have to open to an intersubjective state of being dependent on both "dependence and eroticism" (Pfaelzer 101). In Pfaelzer's usage, rather than something negative, dependence is seen as a kind of corrective/connective where strength is found: readers' dependency on others is awakened through empathy and connection to others. Third, taking another's point of view may carry with it an erotic charge. What Consolata teaches the women at the Convent is to share feelings, to risk, as Audre Lorde would say, "the erotic electrical charge," and to "pursue genuine change within our world"[24]

One example of an erotic, charged exchange occurs at the Convent in a scene of ritualized eating and dancing. The Convent setting is described by the narrator just before the men arrive to kill them. The narrator beckons readers with an ornate description of "The rain's perfume was stronger north of Ruby, especially at the Convent, where thick white clover and Scotch broom colonized every place but the garden" (283). Morrison further describes the Convent women as "aroused from sleep by its [the rain's] aroma." When they are all awake, they gather in the kitchen, and then stick their hands out into the rain. The rain cleanses and washes any premonition of harm away. They feel the rain "like lotion on their fingers so they entered it and let it pour like balm on their shaved heads and upturned faces" (283). The rain

is “entering,” suggesting an erotic, liberating women’s passion. The “balm” connotes a level of spirituality and healing. The narrator compares the dancing women to children enjoying the “thrill” of ocean water. But these are “holy women dancing in hot sweet rain” who are part of a rapturous, sensual, mystical experience. Readers are invited to participate by seeing these passionate, joyful women dance in the rain, enjoying the healing company of one another.

Morrison spends many pages on Connie’s sexual relationship with Deacon and how this physical “holy” relationship transforms her. Although Connie’s transformation is individual, it is about an understanding of the mind and body as spiritually whole. The writing in this section is exceptionally sensual, producing the feeling of interconnection through wonder and love. At one point, Deacon tells her how lovely she is: “I’ve never seen anything like you. How could anything be put together like you? Do you know how beautiful you are? Have you looked at yourself?” Consolata answers, “I’m looking now” (230). Then Consolata spots what he wants her to see: “two fig trees growing into each other” (230) an emblem of intersubjectivity.

Only later does Consolata realize her mistake, overstepping Deacon’s boundaries and biting his lip during a kiss. His anger appears after “she had hummed over the blood she licked from it. He’d sucked air sharply. Said, ‘Don’t ever do that again’” (239). He recoils, at “first startled, then revolted,” because she was "bent on eating him like a meal," his revulsion caused by his fear of difference and of women (239). At this point, the reader cannot empathize with Deacon. Only later, after the assault, when he recognizes his hatred and arrogance and self-righteousness as evil (240) can the reader share this alternative point of view.

Seeing inside the other is an important part of accepting difference through empathy. When the insight disappears, heartbreak and blindness, metaphorical and literal, *Paradise* suggests, are the result. Connie's heart breaks when Deacon leaves, and she prays, "Dear Lord, I didn't want to eat him. I just wanted to go home" (240). Her loss is complicated because it includes her orphaned state, and her schooled religious beliefs where she learned to separate the flesh and spirit. This crisis transforms her ability to see; instead of the outside of people, she sees what is inside:

> Her colorless eyes saw nothing clearly except what took place in the minds of others. Exactly the opposite of that blind season when she rutted in dirt with the living man [Deacon] and thought she was seeing for the first time because she was looking so hard. But she had been spoken to, half cursed, half blessed. He had burned the green away and replaced it with pure sight that damned her if she used it (248).

From *this* moment, Connie wears sunglasses inside and outside. She comes to see but the distinction between herself and others is no longer solid, so the narrator notes, "The dimmer the visible world, the more dazzling her 'in sight' became" (247).

This insight is what Consolata shares with the other women at the Convent. As spiritual mother, she reflects to the other women on the meaning of her affair and a different way to see it, allowing us to join in her utopian healing process. Consolata maintains that it isn't true that Eve is an example of a bad woman and Mary a good one (262). As their spiritual leader, she compares the spirit with material objects, such as "bones": both are substantial; both are parts of a whole. Morrison implies that we

should learn from Consolata's experience and see ourselves as whole. For readers have a similar utopian process and need to attend to all of our "parts" together, not separately.

Connie transforms, showing the reader that individual change is possible. No longer a drunk, or “craving only oblivion,” Connie progresses to wholeness, with the readers as witnesses. At first, Morrison depicts Connie living amongst old wine bottles, dirt, and no daylight. She retreats from life, peering out periodically, wearing sunglasses inside and outside. But later, she orders the women to cook and sit for dinner. She begins, “With the aristocratic gaze of the blind she sweeps the women's faces and says, 'I call myself Consolata Sosa. If you want to be here, you do what I say. Eat how I say. Sleep when I say. And I will teach you what you are hungry for'" (262). She orders the women to the basement to clean; they ritualistically (and symbolically) claim the depths and start to cleanse themselves. Consolata teaches the women to heal themselves individually and collectively. Healing is necessary for self-understanding and empathy – both crucial to working across differences.

Morrison uses various symbols – the cellar or basement, templates the women draw on, and Biblical allusions to Genesis - to show that these women are ready and capable of participating in a communal healing process. The narrative viewpoint shifts to a collective one when it says “they” don’t know what to do (262). Consolata orders them to lie on the cellar floor naked and find a comfortable position. She paints each woman's body in a silhouette, and under her gaze they were “reluctant to move outside the mold they had chosen” (263). Her outlining the women holds them in the ritual: "Once the outlines were complete, each was instructed to remain there. Unspeaking.

Naked in the candlelight" (262). This process of stark, cold nakedness begins the possibility of renewal.

VII. Loud Dreaming as Intersubjectivity

The reading process in Morrison's *Paradise* is constituted as the practice of intersubjectivity as shown by the Convent women's interactive sharing of stories in the novel called "loud dreaming." While the readers do not actually perform dreaming aloud, we are invited and do read others' stories willingly, and these provide an internal view of characters. The premise is that if we dreamt aloud, then our fears and nightmares would be public and we would feel less isolated, and therefore more interconnected. Loud dreaming is a practice of opening up and sharing the personal amongst a group of empathetic, caring individuals. Here, loud dreaming is a metaphor for a practice that allows one to stay, and tell, as well as to listen to those stories of others around you, without judging. It is a way of exercising where we practice wearing the others' shoes.

The loud dreaming session begins with - "In the beginning" - but then continues - "the most important thing was the template" (263). This opening echoes the first words of Genesis: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters" (Genesis: 1.1-3). In language reminiscent of the Bible, Morrison recounts how Consolata guides the Convent women to find "form" and to face "darkness" within. These women do not fit the templates of "true womanhood," so they begin in the cellar to create themselves anew.

Morrison focuses on the templates and uses them to model utopian self-reflection. Each woman claims responsibility for her own naked form (symbolized by the templates), yet the women act together, accepting responsibility for shared pain. They go shopping for paint, colored chalk, and paint thinner, and later return to add details to their templates. They begin to draw, “first with natural features: breasts and pudenda, toes, ears and head hair” (265). Then they draw their secrets. Seneca draws her self-hatred in one of her "more elegant scars" (265). But later, "when she had the hunger to slice her inner thigh, she chose instead to mark the open body lying on the cellar floor” (265). Pallas draws her unwanted baby, the result of a rape; she draws it with fangs and inside of her, still not speaking about her rapist. Grace draws the lost locket clasped around her neck, unwilling to disclose her lover's name. The collective narrator explains that the “bodies below” become so seductive, “they had to be reminded of the moving bodies they wore” (265). This narrative “dreaming” invites readers to partake, to witness and share pain – a practice that should be emulated outside the reading process.

In Morrison’s *Paradise*, collectivity is thus crucial to reading process and so to visions of utopia. In “loud dreaming,” each woman shares her pain, so this dreaming is communal. The women participate fully, feeling as though each dreamer's tale were her own. Hence, they physically share the dystopian realities that brought them to the Convent. This communal psyche allows them to learn to let go and to heal. They experience Mavis shopping, the stifling car, her feelings of confusion and dread at the accidental death of her twins as though each experienced her memories. The narrator says the women "smell the perfume of sleeping infants and feel parent-cozy....They

adjust the sleeping baby head then refuse, outright refuse, what they know and drive away home" (264). The narrator moves from each individual to the next, describing her pain, which makes the burden lighter for the individual because the group together bears the pain. Sharing individual oppression is similar to the function of the consciousness raising groups of the late 1960s, where individual issues become related to the communal, and part of the intersubjective mindset required for political activism.

As in consciousness-raising groups, communally taking on the burdens of patriarchy allows for utopian transformation. The "loud dreaming" result in "half-tales and never-dreamed [ones that] escaped from their lips to soar […]. And it was never important who said the dream or whether it had meaning" (264).

Loud dreaming is compared to a "shriek" where the accused are named and blamed. Grace shares her experience and fear when she is separated from her boyfriend at a violent political rally. The narrative voice recounts that each woman "blinks and gags from tear gas, moves her hand slowly to the scraped shin, the torn ligament" (264). Day after day, the Convent women confront their pain collectively. The abuser and abuse once named are no longer able to strangle them, or oppress them. Isolation had robbed the women of sharing their experiences, thereby causing them disempowerment. Through loud dreaming – telling and hearing their stories – the women convert their suffering into a collective experience that regenerates them as powerful agents.

VIII. Utopia and the Reader as Point of View Character

a. The Yearly Christmas Pageant

In Ruby, the family's stories are told yearly in the Christmas pageant. In the section of *Paradise* that is an account of the pageant, the reader is presented with different points of view and given little help in ordering them into a coherent story. The pageant reproduces the power dynamics of the town by inventing a "new" reading of their social structures each year. The pageant, a meta-narrative moment, highlights Morrison's desire for her readers to engage emotionally and with intersubjectivity; readers see the play and then watch the play through the eyes of the characters Misner and Pat Best as they discuss what the production "means."

Through the Christmas pageant, Morrison elicits a participatory and utopian "reading" process. Reverend Misner and Pat Best (town historian) discuss and interpret this re-creation of the town's history. The pageant aims to represent the story of Joseph and Mary, turned away from the inns in Bethlehem, along with the story of their exile, in the Disallowing. However, the play only represents seven of the nine founding families. Why there are two missing families is Pat Best's impetus for gathering information to put together a family history. Misner, too, doesn't understand the missing families, but Best does little to help him see the little she does know. Instead of making him feel welcomed, she mocks him. Misner still tries by talking about the connectedness of the world, trying to understand these families; he speaks about how isolation kills and that he is an "outsider" not an "enemy" (212), when Best replies, that in Ruby, outsider and enemy are the same. In the background, the narrative gives voice to occasional sentences from the play such as "God will crumble you!" The surrounding energy is tense and unhappy, but Misner still wants Pat to explain this to him because he wants to be a part of this town and find a "real home" on earth, not in

heaven. Pat goes home and burns her notes about the town and regrets the act but realizes what she knew all along was true--that Ruby's hierarchy was based on color--a form of racism. In the end, she also becomes like the "eight-rock" by excluding others as she did to Misner during the pageant.

Paradoxically, Misner and Best's insight provides readers with the awareness that the current families in power are abusing authority and masking this abuse in their "own revisionary process" (29). The play helps to solidify history by recreating it - right before the citizens' eyes and in a way that seems to uphold the status quo, but that the reader knows is unjust. Readers see how difficult it is for members of the town to even know "history" because history is rewritten to fit the needs of those in power.

b. Dead or Alive or Somewhere In-Between

Similar to the way the Christmas play works, the Ruby citizens' stories about the dead Convent women are shown to be lively and changeable constructions. The stories proliferate and make visible what each character reads into the narrative results of the shooting, and whether it means the women are dead or alive. The outcomes are many and seem to suit the tellers' truths, including social, political ideologies. One story is that the nine men went to persuade the women to "leave or mend their ways," which was followed by a fight when "the women took other shapes and disappeared into thin air" (296). This story shows male anxiety about the disappearing women – if this is what happens, they have no control over these "shapes."

Misner and Anna are out of town the night of the attack, so Misner asks Patricia, the character working on the town's lineage, for a report. She gives him two versions of

what happened. One was that nine men "had gone to talk to and persuade the Convent women to leave or mend their ways; there had been a fight; the women took other shapes and disappeared into thin air" (296). The other was that five men went to tell the women to leave and that four men went to stop them; however, the plan went wrong and they were attacked, and shot at the women, killing the old one. Pat tells Misner to "choose for himself which rendition he preferred" (297). But, Pat withholds from Misner her own interpretation, stating that it was clearly a case that nine 8-rocks men murdered "five harmless women" because the women were impure, unholy ("fornicators at the least, abortionists") and "because they could – which was what being an 8-rock meant to them and was also what the 'deal' required" (297). The narrative alternates between what Richard thinks and what Pat believes frequently enough so that we know there isn't just one truth. The novels' characters entertain different "readings" of the disappearance but there is no single answer. Lone believes that God has given Ruby another chance and that he actually "swept up and received His servants in broad daylight, for goodness' sake! Right before their very eyes, for Christ's sake!" (298). Lone ascribes to the women the power of reincarnation: able to die yet live in spite of the men's violent oppression. Lone seems to believe that the women's deaths, if mourned similar to Christ's death, would allow the citizens (men) of Ruby a chance to change.

Morrison offers the insights of young people of Ruby as another possible way to interpret the Convent women's murders. Immediately after the murders, the young people of Ruby call the attack an omen, and they pour these thoughts into the graffiti over the oven, making it "We Are the Furrow of His Brow" (298). If we *are* "the Furrow," their argument was that we are required to act God-like toward others,

showing love, rather than killing. Morrison presents readers with different views of God and beliefs to show how belief and action are related. How are we like or different from the men of Ruby? How are we like or different from the women at the Convent? How aware are we of our "social location" and what power we have? How might insight into our power help us discern ideology and allow us to work as readers across differences? The novel allows the reader to focus on his or her ability to see our connections to power and to choose to be visionaries, or to uphold the status quo.

IX. Intersubjectivity in the Afterlife Here and Now

In this last section, I explore the afterlife of the Convent as a result of the reading process, a move from an “historical” narrative where the women remain dead into a utopian ending, where the women do not so much survive as influence the ability of others to see their limitations and imagine a better world. As noted earlier in this chapter, and similar to Linda Krumholz’s argument about the role of the reader in creating utopian process, Morrison’s characters invite readers to see “the unseen signs of historical, psychological, spiritual, and economic forces” (31). “Stepping-in” allows readers to “read the world and their positions in it in new ways" (Krumholz 31). The women are not literally brought back to life but exist intersubjectively in the readers’ imagination. These women had learned to heal by projecting their pain outward, and by drawing their painful realities onto the templates. Similar to the ways that the women characters draw themselves and recreate their internal pain on external object, Morrison provides her readers with ways to come to self-awareness and healing. Through “loud dreaming,” the Convent women learn to feel and share pain together and to experience

the world through others' eyes. Through empathy, the reader restores the connection between the women at the end of the novel, helping to construct a paradise.

Although the women are killed by the Ruby men, they appear to those who in their previous lives had violated them. For instance, Mavis appears to her daughter Sallie inside an ordinary restaurant where they eat breakfast. Sallie thinks how happy she is to see her mother but how odd to be told to "eat your eggs" after such a long separation (312). Like Sallie, readers are uncertain how to make sense of the appearance of Mavis at the diner. Mavis tells Sal she always loved her and that she won't be back. The "reality" of the scene is called into question when Sal wonders if her mother's visit *really* happened. For Sal, and for the reader, empathy, the basis for intersubjectivity and utopian change, is practiced at the breakfast table.

Pallas appears, but doesn't talk to her mother, who can see her daughter but can only make strange "glug-like" noises (312). The mother's loss is exemplified by her repeated portraits of her daughter, never able to capture her. Pallas comes in the sliding door, intent on digging under her bed for her new "expensive" and "leather" traveling shoes (312). The setting sun is the backdrop, as the women drive off "into a violet so ultra it broke [Divine's] heart" (312). Readers grapple with Divine's heartbreak and her realization that she betrayed her daughter. Readers are also able to empathize because we see what makes both characters tick. Acknowledging suffering, raising consciousness, is the first step for the characters and readers in utopian process.

Characters appear and disappear in ways that disrupt linear thinking, suggesting that what we learn to see is a matter of perspective. Divine sees Pallas walk up to the house, and she tries to talk to her, but the narrator fails to tell the reader whether or not Pallas

sees her mother. We may assume that she doesn't, or it is left out, or that Pallas no longer sees her mother because she doesn't have to. The character Grace angelically swoops out of nowhere into her father's presence at a prison picnic. She calls him "Daddio" and treats him in a completely off-handed matter. Grace, also known as "Gigi," wears military garb; her father, perplexed, asks if she's in the army. This moment is playful and serious because she is a foot soldier now, her garb representing her as a militant feminist, cousin to Joanna Russ's Jaelle, or Marge Piercy's Connie. Insight is not so much given to the readers about "daddio's" perspective; rather Morrison seems to suggest that this visit was for Grace to see and let go of his control.

Morrison's readers are privy to information without any guidance as to how to interpret it. For instance, Seneca appears to her mother, who recognizes her in a parking lot, but Seneca doesn't realize it is her mother. Still, the mother character, Jean, is filled with hope, as is the reader, because Seneca has given up self-mutilation. Our reading practice contains both the mother's thoughts and Seneca's, allowing us the possibility of bridging their viewpoints. There is no closure here, but there is a moment of intersubjectivity for readers.

X. Conclusions: Is it a Door or a Window?

The Convent women in *Paradise* act like storytellers of the oral tradition, opening the "ending" up to the readers. Morrison wants the reader to do some critical work by requiring that he or she have "inward vision" and the ability to "step inside" or see the self in the other. We step into a character, gain insight, step into the next, and gain a different kind of insight. Some of the characters have limited insight, some have a mere

fragment that later proves important during our reading. Morrison allows insight to come from multiple sources: spirits, memories of previous generations, divinations, as well as other unknown mystical qualities, even grace. The imagination allows us to see and to admit that there is much we cannot see - things beyond our understanding.

At the Convent, Anna and Reverend Misner are presented with a moment in which to practice insight. Back to discover the real happenings of the Convent women, they are visited by visions. One notices a window, and the other a door, but really they "sensed it, rather, for there was nothing to see" (305). Misner feels "the window in the garden" that calls him "toward another place - neither life nor death - but there, just yonder, shaping thoughts he did not know he had."[25] What is interesting here is that the reader is given an open point of view, seeing Misner, who is fairly self-reflective, unable to access all his knowledge. The narrative shifts to one of the few times Morrison uses a second person address: "What would happen if you entered? What would be on the other side? What on earth would it be? What on earth?" (305). The questions imply that entering it would be beyond earthly knowledge. This “door” or “window” implies a narrative experience of intersubjectivity, a threshold that connects two perspectives.

The final images in *Paradise* return to Piedade and the unnamed woman who is Consolata and also every woman. The reader’s role is to continue to pull together references to Paradise especially those in Piedade’s songs that imagine the solace of home. The last paragraph concludes with the rhythm of water and travel --

> When the ocean heaves sending rhythms of water ashore, Piedade looks to see what has come. Another ship, perhaps, but different, heading to port, crew and

> passengers, lost and saved, atremble, for they have been disconsolate for some time. Now they will rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in P(p)aradise (318).

Who are "they" who need to rest? One possibility is an incarnation of the Convent women who've come to shoulder the process of change. The ocean's rhythmic waves hit the shore, while Piedade watches the coast, waiting with the other woman to see what ship arrives.[26] Images of Piedade, the ship, and the unnamed woman represent process and utopian hope. Images of boundaries abound in these last few pages, for example, the image of water "elegantly" meeting the shore. Images containing opposition show the ever-present potential for change and coalition. Morrison concludes with water, a form that is itself intersubjective. Much of her novel deals with this point of intersection, where shore and water meet, and where ships float and travel to new places.

These passengers are paradoxically lost on the ocean, but "found" because they are landing with the promise of renewal. They tremble, but we are not sure why. Is it fright, cold, or excitement? Or is it a trembling of transition or change? Like other interpretative moments in Paradise, readers are given openings rather than closings. In context, many images in *Paradise* are about "process" and interconnection as the optimum balance. Transition -- the trembling and disconsolation involved in the trip to shore -- is proffered as paradise. Morrison implies that people on their way to paradise are really people looking for Consolation. But before too much consolation occurs, "they" like us, must take on the "work" of "paradise." The character, Billie Delia, on walking out of Ruby, offers the readers vengeance and hope that the Convent women

are alive and will return to Ruby. She wonders, "When will they reappear, with blazing eyes, war paint and huge hands to rip up and stomp down this prison calling itself a town?" (308). When? Paradise is, in fact, "down here," on Earth, found in our imagined potential. Paradise is a place of tiring and never-ending work where we imagine and perform the preparations necessary to step-inside the other, and to transform our relationships to those around us, to create new subjectivities and new alliances.

ENDNOTES

[1] Toni Morrison's comment is interesting because it reflects her ability to make it sound normal, or everyday, to talk about paradise. She personalizes it, so that it is not "my" this and that; it has to be our ideas. This quotation demonstrates the need for agency, for a strong sense of subjectivity in order to create a community that is made up of what Jessica Benjamin has called “intersubjectivity” (also part of the title of the chapter). Later, I explain the importance of this concept for the reader's utopian reading process. However, an individual response to Morrison’s novel certainly depends on the historical period, the culture, the time and place, as well as other texts that the reader is familiar and/or saturated with.

[2] Tom Moylan argues that *Paradise* names no "pristine utopian space, but it does look with great pain and yet sensitivity at the implosion and destruction of utopian dreams as well as the traces of utopian possibilities in an all too typically violated and violent situation. Clearly dystopian in form yet hopeful in spirit, Morrison's mainstream novel moves beyond the dystopia as it has previously been written and in doing so opens a space for a creatively utopian negativity" (*Scrap* 278).

[3] Donawerth and Kolmerton 14.

[4] A few essays that focus on *Paradise* but less on the reading process include Sr. M. Doretta Cornell’s essay, "Toni Morrison's *Paradise*: The Struggle to Become Utopia"; and Katrine Dalsgard’s, "The One All-Black Town Worth the Pain: (African) American Exceptionalism, Historical Narration, and the Critique of Nationhood in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*."

[5] Christian worries that Morrison has simply replaced the ancestor's story with the women's mythic narrative and wonders whether these women will also have to exclude others.

[6] The controlling stories include the story of the "Disallowing" told elliptically throughout to rationalize Ruby's exclusivity.

[7] Aubry 368. In addition, Aubry also makes an analogy between the experience of reading the novel, knowing "too much and, at the same time, never knowing enough, reproduces, significantly, the staggering, uneven trajectory of love" (364).

[8] Aubry 368. Later, I also add to this discussion of Morrison's willfully confusing readers to motivate them to become better acquainted with others and to use dissonance as a means to allow a more "unknowing approach to racial otherness" (369).

[9] The idea of intersubjectivity, which has been brought into psychoanalysis from philosophy (Habermas 1970, 1971, 1992), is useful because it specifically addresses the problem of defining the other as object.

[10] The utopian historian Jean Pfaelzer argues, in "Subjectivity as Feminist Utopia," that feminist utopias are unlike stereotypical male utopias, which tend to view "difference as inseparable from autonomy and control" (95). The Convent women show feminist utopias as "organized around social projections of intersubjectivity" (Pfaelzer 100).

[11] On Morrison's use of history, see Magali Michael Cornier's essay, "Re-Imagining Agency: Toni Morrison's *Paradise*"; Katrine Dalsgard, "The One All-Black Town Worth the Pain: (African) American Exceptionalism, Historical Narration, and the

Critique of Nationhood in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*"; and Rob Davidson, "Racial Stock and 8-Rocks: Communal Historiography in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*."

[12] For instance, in the essay "Home," Morrison discusses the difference between writing narratives and writing argument: where "Unlike the successful advancement of an argument, narration requires the active complicity of a reader willing to step outside established boundaries of the racial imaginary" (8-9). For Morrison, the rhetorical form of "argument" does not allow her the same kind of freedom she finds in fiction. She finds more leeway to address difficult parts of the reader's racial (gender) imagination in the novel.

[13] The story of the number of families is unclear; some stories talk about fifteen original families, others almost nine, and in 1968, only seven exist. The nine families included Blackhorse, Morgan, Poole, Fleetwood, Beuchamp, Cato (Best), Flood, and two branches of DuPres. Other young people became part of Ruby although they had been orphans.

[14] Morrison's language here is dogmatic, even shedding light on the soon to be visible totalitarian nature of the patriarchs. They were "bound by the enormity of what had happened to them. Their horror of whites was convulsive but abstract. They saved the clarity of their hatred for the men who had insulted them in ways too confounding for language: first by excluding them, then by offering them staples to exist in that very exclusion. Everything anybody wanted to know about the citizens of Haven or Ruby lay in the ramifications of that one rebuff out of many" (189). Thus, Morrison sternly condemns the Black men who hated other black men more than the white men who had

enslaved their ancestors.

[15] Also see, George Carney, "Oklahoma's All-Black Towns" in *African Americans and the Western Frontier* (147).

[16] Quintard Taylor, in his book, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West*, uses newspaper articles to uncover the role of blacks in social, political, and economic spheres in the nineteenth century frontier. For instance, Taylor looks at the politics of blacks like Edwin P. McCabe and William Eagleson, both Kansans, who recruited blacks for settlements in Oklahoma. Eagleson went to newspapers and advertised the availability of an abundance of water and easy-to-work land. He wooed blacks with the idea of starting fresh by [giving] "yourselves and children new chances in a new land, where you will not be molested and where you will be able to think and vote as you please" (qtd. In Taylor 144).

[17] The Republican and Democratic political parties were split on the issues of race. At the Democratic convention in 1892, one member argued that voting Republican was a vote for "Negro domination, race mixing and race war" (qtd. In Taylor 145). Although the West may have been advertised as Eden-like, yet it contained racism. One Democrat's hatred came out as, if the "'Negroes try to Africanize Oklahoma they will find that we will enrich our soil with them'" (Taylor 145). Thus, the exclusivity of the communities of Haven and Ruby can be partially explained by their being surrounded by such deep hatred.

[18] Haven and Ruby resemble the historical town of Boley - founded on ex-Creek Nation land by white entrepreneurs, William Boley, a railroad manager, and Lake Moore, a

former federal officeholder. Although they were white, they hired an African American, Tom Haynes, to promote the town. By 1907, the town contained one thousand people, and two thousand farmers lived in the surrounding area. Boley supported black churches, schools, department stores, and restaurants.

[19] Fredric Jameson reinforces this sense of utopias as heuristic tools for creating social debate, judging it useful to understand utopian discourse generally as “an object of meditation. . . whose function is to provoke a fruitful bewilderment and to jar the mind into some heightened but unconceptualisable consciousness of its own powers, functions, aims, and structural limits” (Jameson, 1988: 87-88)

[20] Some of the ideas in Lee Cullen Khanna’s essay, "The Subject of Utopia: Margaret Cavendish and Her *Blazing-World*," can be useful for describing the utopian dynamism found in this unlikely comparing of the Shakers and the Convent women. Although Khanna's essay is about a utopia written centuries ago, her words can be equally applied to Morrison's text, where utopia is figured as a "dynamic process as much as an achieved state" (Khanna 16).

[21] Carla Peterson provided me with this possibility of connecting the Convent structure with the social and spiritual structure found in the Shaker communities.

[22] It may be a bit of a stretch to say that Consolata, the second Mother, stands in for a leader like Ann Lee or Lucy Wright in the Shaker community. But these women do resemble each other in their leadership capabilities. Consolata develops “new, orderly physical worship forms, such as choreographed religious dance, and the idea of ‘the presence of angels’ to teach ethical precepts that would advance community life”

(Humez xxiii). Different states of being, intoxication for example, are also seen in both communities.

[23] As Sarachild wrote in 1969, "We assume that our feelings are telling us something from which we can learn... that our feelings mean something worth analyzing... that our feelings are saying something political, something reflecting fear that something bad will happen to us or hope, desire, knowledge that something good will happen to us. […] In our groups, let's share our feelings and pool them. Let's let ourselves go and see where our feelings lead us. Our feelings will lead us to ideas and then to actions."

[24] Lorde 59. Other passages include: “The erotic functions for me in several ways, and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference” (56).

[25] Morrison 307. Misner decides to stay in Ruby. He argues, "there was no better battle to fight, no better place to be than among these outrageously beautiful, flawed and proud people. Besides, mortality may be new to them but birth was not. The future panted at the gate" (306).

[26] Foucault calls the ship and the crossings of ships on the ocean the “greatest reserve of the imagination" (27).

Conclusion: Reading Utopian Narratives in a Dystopian Time

I began this dissertation with the idea that the three authors, Ursula K. Le Guin Octavia E. Butler, and Toni Morrison wrote texts that contain contemporary, feminist, innovations of utopia although the landscapes they place these works in are dystopian. Each text--Le Guin's *Always Coming Home,* Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents,* and Morrison's *Paradise*--shows a window through which utopian possibility peers although it may only be a shadow behind a dystopian sheet. As it developed, this dissertation became a feminist study of the reading process of contemporary utopian novels by these three women novelists. These novels are not utopias, in the sense of place, since they are set in dystopian times. Instead, they are utopias that reveal themselves through the reading process. I explore the reading process as a part of a text's presentation of utopian desire.

The readers' process is an important part of utopian narratives today. Where early utopian novels educated the reader through naïve visitors, or visits to another geographical location followed by a dry discussion meant to convert the character and reader to a new world, these current feminist novels educate the readers through tactics such as multiple or self-reflexive characters and dialogues meant not just to explore the place but to explore what history and future challenges are part of utopian desire. Instead of converting one character or reader at a time, the new template of feminist utopian narrative works on perception and imagination as socially transformative.

The first chapter focuses on Le Guin's 1985 *Always Coming Home,* set in a future United States polluted by environmental toxins and divided between a patriarchal Condor

nation, and a communal, matrilineal, and non-hierarchical Kesh culture. Le Guin uses a made-up language, constructed without hierarchies, concepts from Native American oral story-telling practices and Taoist philosophy, and multiple narrators to encourage a collaborative reading process where readers weave together a utopian vision from the pieces of Kesh culture, balanced against the Condor. The second chapter examines Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1997). In this future, California has disintegrated into anarchy and violence, and Lauren Olamina survives the razing of her walled community, creates Earthseed – a new philosophy-religion, and founds a utopian settlement that is destroyed by Christian fundamentalists. Butler parodies false utopias--gated communities, company towns, and the Christian Right--and presents Lauren's religion, Earthseed, built on the idea of "God is Change," as a utopian alternative. Butler merges the genres of diary, scripture, jeremiad, and slave narrative to offer a collaborative reading experience. False utopian ideals of exclusivity, security, and institutionalized religion are resisted by parody and through meditating on Earthseed Scriptures. The third chapter considers Morrison's *Paradise* (1998), which is set in western United States and recounts the story of an all-black town, Ruby, and its destruction of an all-women "convent" on the town's outskirts. Because Morrison tells her story with non-chronological fragments and multiple viewpoints, the reader must become the point of view character, constructing a coherent narrative and image of paradise from conflicting accounts. Morrison explores spiritual connectedness and healing by drawing on the history of all-black townships and all-women communities. The narrative strategies of these novels--defamiliarzation, polyvocalism, fragmented structure, and meditation--encourage readers to collaborate in exploring utopian desire.

Each author uses different tropes associated with utopia and dystopia to demand active thinking and collaboration in terms of the readers' relations to the texts. Le Guin's narrator Pandora visits utopia located in a quasi-familiar California that has undergone dramatic changes due to earthquakes, volcanoes, and environmental destruction. Utopia is on the map but it is a changed landscape, and a different understanding and appreciation of the Earth. One of Le Guin's narrators actually straddles this future and its past (which is *our* present) and mediates between these times in a humor-filled, realistic way. Butler's *Parable* novels use conventions relating to utopia and dystopia; she combines a plethora of genres, such as diary, scripture, and the slave narrative, to create unique reading processes. Butler creates a hybrid genre using the tactics and narratives of freedom, inspired by these historical conventions. She revises the slave narrative's discourse on freedom, by combining it with the anxiety employed in classic concrete dystopias about total domination. Butler's narrator, Lauren Olamina, effectively resists the dystopia and reveals what Tom Moylan calls, "traces, scraps, and sometimes horizons of utopian possibility" (Scraps 276). Last, Morrison toys with the utopian convention of one narrator (or character) who travels to this better place to learn about it, loves it, and upon returning home, works to convince others of the wonders of the new place and time. Morrison stands this convention on its head by refusing a central point of view character; instead, the reader is forced into this role, seeking narrative coherence. Morrison layers her stories and creates events that are retold in conflicting ways. Enough is left up to the reader who is then invited to sift through to find some image of paradise.

What does the reader gain from reading these examples of utopian literature?

We see that utopia and dystopia are interconnected and pluralistic. This is one reason that looking at "multiple worlds in relation" is more helpful than seeing worlds in opposition.[1] The readers practice seeing their reality defamiliarized when they look up from the text to the present reality. These novels explore new ways of "seeing" that can alter the imagination. Le Guin pushes the reader to engage in a linguistic system that embodies interrelatedness. These words change the way we see ourselves when it is our language that begins to sound strange next to Kesh conceptions of connectedness. Butler's texts open utopian process through the scriptural Earthseed verses strewn throughout. The readers meditate on Earthseed scriptures and bear witness to the effect these verses have on everyday practices in a dystopian time. Morrison supplies her readers with methods to step inside the others' shoes through a narrative that steps-in or sees-inside the other, allowing for healing and understanding. Each novelist invites us to see utopia not as a place - but as a way of relating.

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[1] Donawerth and Kolmerton 14. Fredric Jameson also arrives at this conclusion in this recent book, *Archaeologies of the Future*. He says that utopia isn't a "conceptual nugget" to extract, store, and build off later (175) but a means of "structural relationality" (221).

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