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A New Kind of Social Dreaming: Diversifying Contemporary Dystopian Fiction

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DIVERSIFYING CONTEMPORARY DYSTOPIAN FICTION

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This thesis argues that the dystopian genre lacks diversity not because dystopian novels with a focus on issues of gender, race/ethnicity, and sexuality have not been written, but because these novels are assigned to other genres. Reevaluating the importance of a future setting to dystopian fiction opens the genre to stories whose characters need not exist in a future temporal landscape because their oppression exists in the present. The entrenched norm of a future temporal setting in dystopian fiction privileges the perspectives of a group of people who largely do not experience systemic oppression in the present: white heterosexual men. The idea that a dystopian protagonist is relatable to any potential reader, and that this figure is best depicted as a white heterosexual man, is terribly misguided—even dangerous. If the primary aim of dystopian fiction is social criticism that warns of oppression, we cannot be satisfied with a genre that almost exclusively concerns itself with the fears of white heterosexual men. By doing so, we limit our imagination to how this particular group could face persecution and ignore the ways other groups of people can, and historically have, been persecuted *because* they don't fit the privileged white heterosexual male position.

It is not an understatement to say that YA dystopian fiction is enjoying a golden moment. According to a 2012 *Jezebel* article, *The Hunger Games* trilogy, a dystopian series authored by Suzanne Collins, has surpassed J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series as the most-sold books on Amazon[1] (Barry). The first novel in the trilogy debuted in 2008, and the final novel, *Mockingjay*, was released in 2013. The trilogy has also been made into four blockbuster films (*Mockingjay* was split into two films). The final film debuted in November 2015 and had grossed $280,976,000 as of February 5, 2016, according to the film's page on *IMDB.com*. The success of *The Hunger Games* paved the way for numerous other YA dystopian fiction novels, including Veronica Roth's *Divergent* series, Allie Condie's *Matched*, M.T. Anderson's *Feed*, and revived interest in Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* series (the first of which was released in 2005). *Allegiant*, the third novel of the *Divergent* series, was published in 2013 and had a first printing of two million copies, a "number nearly unheard-of" in recent publishing history according to Michelle Dean in *The New York Times* ("Our Young-Adult Dystopia," 31 Jan. 2014).

However, YA dystopian fiction is receiving increased criticism for its overwhelming "whiteness" because of its moment in the spotlight. Kyla Bills makes such a critique in her article, "Why 'Divergent' and Other Dystopian Stories Aren't Such a Fantasy" when she writes, "We might be watching a bunch of white people go through horrible shit in a sorta-realistic future, instead of looking at the fact that this 'dystopia' has historically been a reality for people of color in American society" (*Milk*). While criticism like Bills' is currently heavy around the YA dystopian fiction market, it is no

[1] Ebook and print sales combined

less relevant to adult dystopian fiction, or dystopian novels that might be considered more "literary."[2]

Such criticism should also not just be limited to racial representation. While young women might currently be occupying the spotlight in the YA dystopian market, their presence is a relatively recent phenomenon that focuses exclusively on white heterosexual women, and they continue the tradition of the "everyman" figure within the dystopian world. By "everyman," I refer to the fact that the typical dystopian protagonist is meant to be a universal touchstone of humanity, a figure every reader can relate to by virtue of the fact that s/he (but typically he) occupies the narrative "I/eye" of the text and suffers particular persecution within the dystopian society. The female protagonists of YA dystopian fiction occupy this same position, but these novels frequently ignore any form of social critique or oppression that might be gender-specific; in other words, they could pretty much be substituted with young male protagonists and the stories would change very little.

Yet, there might be reason to conclude that the dystopian genre lacks diversity not because dystopian novels with a focus on issues of gender, race/ethnicity, and sexuality have not been written, but because these novels are assigned to other genres. In particular, a reevaluation of the importance of a future setting to dystopian fiction would open the genre's doors to a wealth of stories whose characters need not exist in a future temporal landscape because their oppression exists in the here-and-now. The entrenched norm of a future temporal setting in dystopian fiction privileges very specific forms of

[2] See also "Where Are the People of Color in Dystopias?" by Sarah Hannah Gómez, "Do Girls of Color Survive Dystopia?" by Victoria Law, "On The Erasure of People Of Colour From Dystopian Fiction" by Cate Young, and "The Racial Politics of Disaster and Dystopia in *I Am Legend*" by Sean Brayton

oppression; or perhaps I should say, privileges the perspectives of people who largely do not experience systemic oppression in the present. In fact, I question whether under current definitions, dystopian fiction is in many ways designed for (primarily) white heterosexual men to construct fantasies of their own oppression.

Therefore, the idea that a dystopian protagonist can be relatable to any potential reader, and that this figure is best depicted as a white heterosexual man (who continues to occupy the most privileged position in nearly every society, but especially in the United States and the U.K./Western Europe where the majority of dystopian novels are situated) is terribly misguided—even dangerous. If, as I will explore shortly, the primary aim of dystopian fiction is social criticism that warns of oppression, we cannot be satisfied with a genre that almost exclusively concerns itself with the fears of white heterosexual men. By doing so, we limit our imagination to the ways in which this particular group could face persecution, ignoring the ways other groups of people can (and as Bills argues, historically have) been persecuted *because* they don't fit the white heterosexual male position of privilege.

My primary concern at this time is to examine the characteristics of gender and race/ethnicity by focusing on the ways women and people of color (specifically African Americans) contribute to the critical purpose of dystopian fiction. Thanks to the women's movements of the 1960s and 70s, it is not particularly difficult to find dystopian novels that provide gendered critiques; however, it is much more challenging to locate texts overtly dealing with race[3] or featuring non-white protagonists.

[3] To be fair, there are dystopian novels that use aliens or other life forms to stand in for racial difference, but the focus of my work here is on novels that specifically speak to the effects of racial difference.

In the following section, I will focus on the definition of "dystopia"—and how the definition might be made more inclusive. The scholarship of Lyman Tower Sargent, M. Keith Booker, and Maria Varsam inform this section. Anne Cranny-Francis's work on feminism's use of genre fiction helps highlight the importance of academic criticism on genres not typically viewed as "literary." For the remainder of this thesis, I will focus on five novels that prominently feature women and/or people of color as protagonists: *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, *The Children of Men* by P.D. James, *J: a novel* by Howard Jacobson, *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, and *The Gilda Stories* by Jewelle Gomez. The first three novels are already included in the dystopian canon, while the latter two are not but could be, under a revised definition. Close-reading these novels, and especially how the protagonist functions within them, will show the necessity of diversifying the genre by exposing how certain forms of oppression are tied to characteristics like race, gender, and sexuality. I bring the novels of Atwood, James, and Jacobson together using theory by Giorgio Agamben and Carl Schmitt to show how these novels highlight the biopolitical State control that could be faced by women in the event of a global or national halt in reproduction. The following section makes an argument for Ellison's *Invisible Man* as a dystopian novel. Finally, I apply Emma Pérez's concept of the decolonial imaginary and Chela Sandoval's hermeneutics of love to *The Gilda Stories* to argue for its inclusion as a dystopian text. This range of theorists is an effort to show that one need not only view these novels through a very specific lens in order for them to do the work of social criticism. Additionally, *The Gilda Stories* is a unique example of a novel that features an African American, homosexual, female protagonist, as well as a

host of other non-white, non-heterosexual characters, presenting yet another way that the traditional "everyman" figure cannot speak to certain forms of oppression.

II. What is Dystopian Fiction?

In attempting to define "dystopia," I shall first turn—as many have done before me—to the scholarship of Lyman Tower Sargent. In "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," Sargent attempts to define such slippery concepts as "utopia," "eutopia," and "dystopia"—both in a literary and political sense. Sargent defines "utopia"[4] as simply "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space" (9). Sargent then distinguishes between "utopia" and "eutopia" by describing eutopia as "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space *that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which that reader lived*" (9; my emphasis). Finally, then, a "dystopia" is presented as the opposite of eutopia (but still a sub-set of utopia) as "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space *that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived*" (Sargent 9; my emphasis). I locate the initial discussion of terms using Sargent's definitions, even though I will dialogue with them throughout this thesis. For instance, it is important to consider what is meant in these definitions by "a non-existent society" and how our interpretation

[4] Thomas More invented the term "utopia" in his 1516 book of the same name. Utopia translates as "nowhere" (Sargent 5).

of this phrase could considerably impact the types of narratives that are considered dystopian.

While recognizing that Lyman Tower Sargent is one of the most prominent utopian scholars, his admission that "To further complicate matters, we are discussing living traditions which are always in process, only fixable at a moment in time and place" (3) justifies my questioning of the way in which we understand these terms. Sargent's definitions are over two decades old, and in that time the literary community has an even better understanding of the ways in which literature and literary interpretation have long been primarily concerned with the interests of white, heterosexual men. It is also important to acknowledge that Sargent's understanding of utopianism is broader than just the literary genre; however, the literary genre is my primary concern here. Therefore, any challenges to Sargent's terminology and definitions are strictly limited to literary categorization, not broader social constructions.

M. Keith Booker, author of *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism*, builds off of Sargent's work by emphasizing social critique as the main purpose of the dystopian novel. The presence of social criticism is, for Booker, what differentiates dystopian fiction from science fiction or speculative fiction more generally (Booker *Dystopian Impulse* 19). Booker also maintains that ". . . dystopian societies are generally more or less thinly veiled refigurations [sic] of a situation that already exists in reality" (*Dystopian Impulse* 15). Here, we again see the importance of social criticism to Booker's understanding of the dystopia, as well as how that criticism grows out of contemporary or past events. In order for a critique to be communicated, the

author must develop a situation that can be understood and related to by the reader. The easiest way to do this is by caricaturing an existing situation, such as Aldous Huxley does with consumerism in *Brave New World* and George Orwell with Fascism in *1984*.

Booker describes this transformative act as a method of "defamiliarization," another technique he sees as crucial within dystopian writing. Through defamiliarization, dystopian fiction writers use "spatially or temporally distant settings" to give readers ". . . fresh perspectives on problematic social and political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted or considered natural and inevitable" (Booker 19). Most frequently, we see authors of dystopian novels employing futuristic settings to create temporal distance between the dystopian society and the reader. This distance gives the reader space to join the author in a critical examination of the social, political, or cultural ideas present in the novel.

Maria Varsam also sees defamiliarization as a key component of dystopian literature. In "Concrete Dystopia: Slavery and Its Others," she writes, "Applied to dystopian fiction, defamiliarization makes us see the world anew, not as it is but as it *could* be; it shows the world in sharp focus in order to bring out conditions that exist already but which . . . we can no longer see" (206; her emphasis). In other words, the world of the novel acts like a fun-house mirror by distorting the reader's own temporal and physical reality, but this distorted reflection becomes interpretive by making the reader's social and political reality more visible to the reader. Varsam also highlights the notion of potentiality in this passage; that is, the possibility for a society to change. In this sense, Varsam sees social criticism to be just as essential to the genre as Booker, for in

order to instigate social change, one must be able to imagine a world different from the present reality.

The other key distinction Varsam makes regarding dystopian fiction is the way it aligns the reader with the story's protagonist. In order for the work of dystopian fiction to serve as an interpretive lens for the reader, it must contain a protagonist with whom the reader can trust and empathize (Varsam 205). Varsam believes it is more useful to judge whether a text is dystopian from a reader-response perspective, rather than by authorial intention[5], because, ". . . 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). She argues that the protagonist's view of the socio-political landscape is the easiest and best indicator of whether a text is dystopian (Varsam 205). If the protagonist shows opposition to the current power structure, whether through thoughts, actions, or some combination, and imagines or hopes for a different world that she sees as "better," the text is quite likely dystopian. For this response to take place, the reader must be drawn into identification with the protagonist. If this identification is unsuccessful, the reader might align with the dystopian force of the novel, and the critique would be lost.

At this point we could ask, why bother with dystopian literature at all? Why care about its representation of traditionally marginalized populations? As a subset of science fiction/speculative fiction, and therefore genre fiction,[6] dystopian fiction has not escaped

[5] Varsam is directly engaging Lyman Tower Sargent's position that authorial intention is a primary basis for deciding whether a text is dystopian. See "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited."

[6] Matthew Schneider-Mayerson defines "genre fiction," also referred to as "popular fiction," in his article "Popular Fiction Studies: The Advantages of a New Field": ". . . a novel is 'popular fiction' if its success is measured (by the public and its publisher) as much by its sales and the devotion of fans (by its author) as opposed to timeless literary quality" (22). Genre fiction is therefore contrasted with "Literature" and houses such genres as the romance novel, the Western, science fiction, and crime fiction (21). Schneider-Mayerson

accusations of being formulaic or low-brow. However, Anne Cranny-Francis calls these accusations into question in the introduction to *Feminist Fiction: Feminist Uses of Genre Fiction*, by arguing that high-brow, literary fiction might be no less tied to convention than genre fiction—genre fiction is just more obvious about it. She writes that ". . . modernist and realist fiction, on the other hand, uses less mannered conventions and so achieves an apparent 'naturalization' which has the effect of obscuring its encoded ideological statements" (Cranny-Francis 3). While the obscured ideology of literary fiction might make it more insidious, that does not necessarily mean it has the greater influence on a culture or society. For instance, the readership of genre fiction is much larger than that of literary fiction. Genre fiction is popular fiction—in short, it sells (Cranny-Francis 2). With the recent explosion of interest in dystopian fiction, it is important to consider what messages and norms the genre is communicating to its audience, particularly if these messages and norms are being "naturalized" by the "everyman" figure of the white, heterosexual, middle-class male protagonist. To paraphrase Shannon Winnubst in "Vampires, Anxieties, and Dreams: Race and Sex in the Contemporary United States," if this "everyman" figure is the only one dreaming the dystopic nightmare (3), how will his dreams limit the genre's ability to raise audience consciousness of social criticism, or to even identify the issues caused *by* the historic dominance of the white, heterosexual, male in Western culture? This is certainly not to say that a novel cannot be both literary and dystopian. The majority of the novels

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also explains that "The contrast between 'popular fiction' and 'literature' occurs against the backdrop of continuing debates about the categories 'low' and 'high' culture . . . ." (22).

examined in this thesis are arguably both. However, when spoken of broadly, dystopian fiction is more likely to be thought of as genre fiction rather than literary fiction.

Another reason it is important to study this genre is dystopian fiction has the ability to identify and name oppressive situations and spaces, creating opportunities for conversations about these issues—and for positive social change. For this reason, we could view dystopian fiction as a form of Chela Sandoval's "prophetic love," in that the characters within the dystopic societies are searching for an alternative to the oppressive "system[s] of knowledge and power" that control their world, which in turn allows the reader to imagine alternatives to their current world view (Sandoval 145,6—146,7).

III. Gender and Dystopian Fiction: Fertility Crises and Policing the Female Body

In the last section, I brought the theoretical work of Lyman Tower Sargent, M. Keith Booker, Maria Varsam, and Anne Cranny-Francis together in order to present and challenge how current definitions of dystopian fiction limit the types of social criticism it can conduct, often promoting a distinctly white, heterosexual, male worldview. Now in this section, I demonstrate the need for diversifying this particular worldview, as diverse protagonists reveal the way oppression operates intersectionally. Three dystopian novels that focus on fertility crises show women's bodies becoming particularly oppressed by the State: *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood (1985), *The Children of Men*, by P.D. James (1992), and the recently published *J: a novel* by Howard Jacobson (2014).

The subject of the control of women's bodies and reproduction was the first major trend within the genre to destabilize the universality that is often associated with the dystopian fiction. The term "destabilized" refers to the fact that novels like *Handmaid,*

Children, and *J* do not show white, heterosexual, middleclass men as the primary victims of oppression. This trend broadens the dystopian landscape by showing how the issue of reproduction in particular necessarily places women at the center of the dystopian government's persecution and/or control in a way that men, because of their biological sex and therefore different reproductive role, cannot share. This creates room for a greater range of social criticism that accounts for differences in race, sexual orientation, class, and/or gender.

Theoretical Framework: Giorgio Agamben and Carl Schmitt

In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life,* Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben argues that the modern world is entering a permanent "state of exception" due to the State's increasing focus on regulating "bare life."[7] Agamben's use of the term "state of exception" comes directly from Carl Schmitt's "Definition of Sovereignty," and both theorists define it as a legal situation in which the sovereign has the ability to suspend normal law to accommodate a period of crisis (Agamben 11; Schmitt 5). One of Agamben's core arguments is that while the state of exception is inherent to the existence of law and therefore has always existed, we increasingly live in "exceptional" rather than "normal" legal periods (Agamben 20). According to Agamben, when the sovereign suspends normal law to account for events outside the jurisdiction of regular law, the suspension never disappears. In fact, it becomes the new "normal" (Agamben 174-175).

[7] For Agamben, the term "bare life" can be equated to the ancient Greek word *zoē,* which means "the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods)" (Agamben 1). *Zoē* is distinct from another ancient Greek term for life, *bios*, "which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group" (Agamben 1). We could loosely differentiate between *zoē* as occupying the sphere of the personal (the home), whereas *bios* was the sphere of public and political life.

A dystopian government is in many ways a literary example of the state of exception becoming the rule. In numerous contemporary dystopian novels, some catastrophic event takes place (e.g. global infertility) that requires or instigates a drastic socio-political change, often in the form of a repressive new government.[8] This new governing body becomes entrenched; it does not relinquish its power even if the original crisis is resolved. I would even argue that this pattern of events—catastrophe to dystopian government—is becoming more frequent than the pattern of older dystopian texts, like *1984* and *Fahrenheit 451*, where the dystopian State is already entrenched long before the events of the novel, and its generation is not necessarily explained. *The Handmaid's Tale* is another novel where the change in government actually creates the dystopian aspects the novel describes,[9] while *The Children of Men* and *J* follow this second pattern where the governing body is a reactionary force to a particular catastrophe. This shift is important because it marks a change in our cultural fears. We no longer fear that some outside force will invade and ruin everything, but that we ourselves will create a situation in which our "normal" way of life, and therefore government, no longer seems possible, resulting in the ascension of a dystopic regime.

In the case of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Children of Men,* the justification given for the state of exception is a global fertility crisis. In *Handmaid,* the theocratic government of Gilead implements extreme controls over women's bodies using the argument that this system will provide the best chance of reproduction. The government

[8] Or in more recent decades, the corporation, as Tom Moylan points out in "'The moment is here . . . and it's important': State, Agency, and Dystopia in Kim Stanley Robinson's *Antarctica* and Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Telling.*"

[9] Although this is compounded by human-caused environmental destruction that has severely impacted reproduction.

in *Children*, led by Xan Lyppiat, ostensibly exists to maintain order in the final years of humanity. While fertility tests are conducted on both men and women, at the time in which the novel is set nearly everyone in society sees this as merely an empty exercise. *J*, on the other hand, is set up a bit differently. Here, in addition to Agamben's state of exception, we see the presence of Carl Schmitt's figure of the Enemy. In "The Concept of the Political," Schmitt defines the Enemy as a specifically political adversary of the State who is "existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are possible" (27). In this sense, the Enemy must be truly Othered from the rest of society, which necessitates a grouping based on some kind of shared characteristic(s). Schmitt also maintains that the Enemy is only a political category and that "the state as an organized political entity" decides who the enemy is (Schmitt Concept 28-30).

While *J* is the only one of the three novels that specifically engages with Schmitt's figure of the Enemy, all three contain states of exception that focus on reproduction. The state of exception is created when some or all of the human population faces extinction. In order to ensure the existence of the State, the sovereign in each novel, represented by the theocratic government of Gilead in *Handmaid*, Xan Lyppiat in *Children*, and Ofnow in *J*, has a vested interest in ensuring controlled procreation. This interest becomes a justification for certain legal changes. In *Handmaid*, legal suspension is most apparent in women's loss of rights to money, education, and sexual agency; in *Children*, there are the human rights abuses against refugees/immigrants and the convicts at the Isle of Man penal colony, as well as government-encouraged suicide of the elderly; in *J*, we see a government-encouraged "forgetting" of genocide and erasure of history.

However, the central "crisis" of each novel can ostensibly be resolved by women's ability to conceive and bear healthy children.

Because all three novels emphasize human reproduction as the source of salvation, we see the respective States and Sovereigns engaging in a heightened level of biopolitics. According to Agamben, biopolitics occurs when ". . . the species and the individual as a simple living body become what is at stake in a society's political strategies" (Agamben 3). In *Handmaid, Children,* and *J,* the political strategy at hand is completely biologically-based because the State must find a way to prevent extinction of the human race or a specific human community. Since none of these novels take place in a biotechnologically advanced society like that of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World,* where human reproduction occurs exclusively outside of the body, regulation of the human body becomes essential to the survival of the State. Also, women's bodies come under more scrutiny and control than men's in these novels because while men are required for fertilization, women's bodies carry the child to term. The result is that women become reduced to their bodies alone; specifically, to their reproductive organs.[10] This reduction is most obvious in *Handmaid,* but it likewise permeates *Children* and *J.* These novels raise the biopolitical situation that in a society or community that can no longer reproduce, women's bodies become valuable for their reproductive role, and thus must be brought under State control. There are of course variations in the ways this control is manifested and justified by the State, but this variety merely shows the richness of exploring issues like fertility and reproduction in a dystopian context.

[10] As Offred, the narrator of *Handmaid*, says, "We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (Atwood 136).

The Handmaid's Tale

Of the novels examined here, *The Handmaid's Tale* most directly engages with the State's biopolitical control of women's bodies. While the ostensible need for this control is a drastic global decline in fertility rates, this is merely an excuse used to justify the totalitarian regime of Gilead and more efficiently control the entire population. The state of exception in *Handmaid* occurs after a coup overthrows the familiar American government. After the coup, the protagonist Offred claims that the army "declared a state of emergency" which is when "they suspended the Constitution" (Atwood 174). Offred never specifies who "they" are, but the fictional scholar in the novel's epilogue refers to this organization as the Sons of Jacob, a theocratic and totalitarian organization. The important point here is that the new "sovereign" of the State "suspended" normal, constitutional law, which Offred claims was supposed to be a "temporary" suspension (Atwood 174). Of course, this suspension is far from temporary and allows the new government to usher in a completely different legal and social system, creating Gilead. By using force and violence to establish power over the general population, the Sons of Jacob manipulate the law to bring about a permanent state of exception.

The Republic of Gilead then stratifies society based on alleged Biblical directives. In the upper classes, which Atwood spends the most time describing, women's roles are divided into four categories: Wife, Handmaid, Martha, and Jezebel. Wives and Marthas have distinctly unsexual roles within society; they are status symbols and mothers on one hand, and domestic help on the other. Handmaids and Jezebels, by contrast, are the two

sides of the society's sexual coin. The Handmaids are officially-sanctioned sexual partners intended only for purely reproductive purposes, while Jezebels live on the fringes of society and exist for the purpose of male sexual pleasure. Offred was selected as a Handmaid because of her demonstrated ability to bear healthy children, while her friend Moira admits to having been sterilized by the government before beginning her assignment as a Jezebel (Atwood 249). In this way, the government separates sex into licit and illicit categories, with the former elevated because it is intended for procreation. However, both roles are officially sanctioned, which demonstrates the reaches of the State's control: even illicit sexual unions have been accounted for within the societal makeup. This, of course, allows the State to control all of Gilead's female population, as well as the more powerful men who wish to have sex with someone besides their Wives or Handmaids. In addition to these measures, homosexual unions and masturbation are prohibited for both men and women.[11]

It is important to remember whom this social structure is intended to benefit. The men who hold power, like Offred's Commander, have much greater sexual freedom than women of all statuses and their poorer male counterparts. For those women who are permitted (or forced) to have sex, the sexual act has been made merely perfunctory. The Handmaids, of course, are assigned specific sexual partners and are not expected or encouraged to enjoy sex. When Offred describes sex with the Commander during the monthly Ceremony, she notes, "It has nothing to do with passion or love or romance or

[11] While it is certainly true that Gilead also limits male sexual expression, it is controlled in different ways; for example, men who do not have Handmaids or Econowives are prohibited from sex. However, even though the average man in Gilead might in many ways have as little power as Offred and other women, their male bodies still afford them rights such as owning property, controlling money, and the freedom to read and write.

any of those other notions we used to titillate ourselves with. It has nothing to do with sexual desire, at least for me, and certainly not for Serena. Arousal and orgasm are no longer thought necessary [for women]; they would be a symptom of frivolity . . ." (Atwood 94). Until she begins her illegal sexual relationship with Nick, the chauffer, Offred never enjoys sex under the Gilead regime and is discouraged from doing so. While the Jezebels arguably are allowed to be more "promiscuous," they still have little-to-no choice in when or with whom they have sex—their role exists to benefit the men who visit them.

On the other hand, for wealthy, powerful men like the Commander, the sexual act has been divided into the perfunctory and the pleasurable, but only in terms of time and place and the woman involved. The Commander has obligatory, reproductively-focused sex with Offred, but he is also allowed to have "illicit" unions with the Jezebels. While men like the Commander might well be forbidden from openly discussing the existence of the Jezebels, it is not so much because liaisons with these women are forbidden as because it would likely expose the unfairness and hypocrisy within the system, which could spark resistance among women and the lower-classes. Therefore, while there is not a black-and-white delineation of power between men and women in Gilead in terms of sex, those in power clearly benefit from the sexual hierarchy and use this hierarchy to control the rest of the population.

The justification for the rigid control of female sexuality is that women are deemed responsible for the fertility problems faced by Gilead. As Offred explains, "There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are

fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law" (Atwood 61). The "law" is based on an interpretation of certain passages from the Bible, especially the Old Testament account of Rachel and Leah in Genesis 30. When Jacob's wife Rachel struggles to conceive, she tells her husband ". . . 'Give me children, or I shall die!'" The passage continues, "Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel, and he said, 'Am I in the place of God, *who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb*?'" (*The Holy Bible*, Genesis 30.1-2; my emphasis). Jacob's response completely avoids any responsibility for their lack of children. He places the onus of generating children as a matter between God and Rachel. By saying that God has not allowed Rachel's body to generate children, the "failure" becomes Rachel's, not Jacob's. Rachel eventually asks Jacob to have sex with her handmaid Bilhah, who becomes pregnant, and Rachel raises the child as her own. Jacob's other wife, Leah, also uses this strategy after she is no longer able to conceive (*The Holy Bible,* Genesis 30.4-12). Jacob, Leah, and Rachel's use of handmaids for childbearing inspires the societal structure of Gilead, especially in the division of roles between Wives and Handmaids. If women's fertility is viewed as the problem, it "logically" follows that women's bodies hold the solution—if they are properly regulated.[12]

As a potentially fertile woman within Gilead, Offred's body becomes her sole measure of societal worth. If she does not bear a healthy child after serving as a Handmaid to three different men, she will be declared "Unwoman" and shipped off to the Colonies to be worked to death or poisoned from cleaning up chemical spills. Offred

[12] This Biblical scene is even referenced in the name of the theocratic organization that formed Gilead—the "Sons of Jacob"—which simultaneously evokes this Biblical scene and locates political power in male bodies by focusing on the sons born of Leah and Rachel's handmaids, not their daughters (*The Holy Bible,* Genesis 30.1-24).

relays the crux of her social standing when she alludes to the passage from Genesis in the doctor's office: "*Give me children, or else I die*. There's more than one meaning to it" (Atwood 61; author's emphasis). Her life depends on a successful pregnancy. However, Gilead's limited valuation of her body often causes Offred to view it with a mixture of love and hatred. She cares for it and about it because it's a part of her but on the other, but she also dislikes it for the way it defines her within society. For example, after her appointment with the doctor who offers to have sex with her to improve her chances of conceiving, she thinks, "I avoid looking down at my body . . . . I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely" (Atwood 63). By contrast, the men within the novel need not fear being declared "Unmen" because they cannot father a child.

The emphasis Gilead's leadership places on the role of women as almost exclusively reproductive agents frequently causes both society and women themselves to believe it's true. Offred oscillates between resistance and acceptance of this new societal teaching. She informs the reader numerous times of her dissatisfaction at being so defined by her body, yet she also occasionally revels in the limited power this definition gives her, such as when she torments the guards by swaying her hips when she passes by (Atwood 22). While Offred admits that this is merely the passive power "of a dog bone" (Atwood 22), it is for her a manner of resistance. In *The Past That Might Have Been, the Future That May Come,* Lauren J. Lacey reads Offred's thought in this moment as an acknowledgement of her overall lack of power because "Her status as an object of desire is all that gives her power in this world" (124). I push Lacey's idea further by stating that Offred is not only acknowledging but deliberately using this moment of power to give

herself agency. By deliberately playing into the men's sexualization of her body, she encourages them to view her with sexual desire—an aspect of sex that is denied her in her role as Handmaid. Offred's power also lies in the fact that these men are prevented by law from acting on their sexual desires, since they are too poor and powerless to have been assigned a Wife. To extend Offred's analogy, they are dogs tethered to a tree with the bone just out of reach. In this scene, Offred momentarily takes control of her sexuality; however, her agency is complicated by the fact that she is retaliating against people who are oppressed in many of the same ways as she. Yet these small instances of resistance are important because they prevent Offred from completely surrendering to the dogma of Gilead's elite.

The centrality of fertility for women in Gilead is problematic for Offred in part because it severely limits her "value" as a human being. During Handmaid training and initiation, Aunt Lydia frequently lectures the Handmaids about their need for sexual purity and obedience to the new order. She tells them, "A thing is valued . . . only if it is rare and hard to get. We want you to be valued, girls" (Atwood 114). However, Aunt Lydia is not being entirely honest here, or perhaps she does not fully understand the motives of Gilead's rulers. If the end goal were simply procreation, sex would not be restricted as it is in *Handmaid*. In fact, promiscuity would probably be encouraged, as it is in *The Children of Men*, because it would increase the odds of conception. So much of the "value" surrounding Handmaids is artificial—they are really *valuable*, not *valued*. By regulating reproduction, the leaders of Gilead fully control every aspect of their citizens'

lives from birth to death and their economic and political presence.[13] The women of Gilead are valuable because the republic's leaders can use their bodies to control the entire population. The Handmaids and other women are valuable not for their reproductive capabilities, but for the ways that State control of their reproductive capabilities benefits those in power.

It is also vital to note the distinction between the words "valued" and "valuable." We as readers are given a glimpse into this difference when Offred confesses, "I want to be valued, in ways that I am not; I want to be more than valuable" (Atwood 97). Being valued means being appreciated or esteemed, while the term valuable is more directly tied to monetary worth or being useful to someone. Part of the semantic difference is who has the control in each situation: in the former instance, it's the "valued" person who has the power, and in the latter, the power goes to whoever controls the "valuable" person or object. So while Aunt Lydia might tell the handmaids that their wholehearted adherence to the system will make them "valued," the handmaids can never be truly valued while they remain powerless within the system. While Offred is supposedly valuable to her society by being able to bear children (a "two-legged womb"), she is not valued for the simple fact that she is a human being.

The Handmaid's Tale, then, depicts a classic totalitarian government while specifically engaging with issues of gender and sexuality. The government of Gilead uses declining fertility rates as an excuse for strict sexual regulation, thereby gaining absolute

[13] In many ways, Gilead's control of sex resembles Michel Foucault's relation between sex and state power in the question: "All this garrulous attention which has us in a stew over sexuality, is it not motivated by one basic concern: to ensure population, to reproduce labor capacity, to perpetuate the form of social relations: in short, to constitute sexuality that is economically useful and politically conservative?" (Foucault 37).

control over the populace. This tight control over sex also limits reproduction by reducing the number of eligible sexual partners, thus prolonging the "crisis" that justifies Gilead's suspension of normal law.

The Children of Men

Unlike *The Handmaid's Tale*, P.D. James' *The Children of Men* portrays not just a declining population, but an absolute halt in reproduction; however, it still draws strong connections between reproduction and power. The novel states several times that male sterility is the cause of the global halt in reproduction,[14] not women, as in *Handmaid.* Even frozen sperm is found to be infertile (James 10). While male "culpability" in *Children* might suggest that women will hold more power as a result, the opposite is true. Just as in *Handmaid,* we see male power asserting itself over women, reinforcing the argument that reproductive crises in these novels ultimately have far greater political impacts on women than men.

The state of exception in this novel is declared shortly after the world realizes that there are no longer any pregnant women. The novel's narrator, Theo Faron, notes that once this global infertility crisis was discovered, the population feared a complete societal breakdown (James 56). However, Theo's cousin Xan Lyppiat was shortly thereafter elected to the new position of Warden of England, promising to bring peace and comfort to the British people for their remaining days. While this promised peace and comfort does exist for many people, including Theo, the reader learns that these benefits

[14] Interestingly, this plot point is changed in Alfonso Cuarón's 2006 film adaptation, which even in the film's trailer attributes the crisis to female infertility.

come at the cost of many other people's basic human rights.[15] Yet despite these many dystopian elements, the position of Julian as the first and only pregnant woman since Year Omega is of particular interest.

Julian's pregnancy goes unnoticed by the State because she is disqualified from the fertility examinations all healthy women undergo. No one who is considered "physically deformed, or mentally or physically unhealthy" is eligible for "breeding" in the event that a means for human reproduction is discovered (James 49). As a result, Xan's criteria for reproductive eligibility is its own eugenics movement. While he doesn't forbid reproduction between those he considers unfit, he certainly doesn't encourage it and tells Theo that unless it is the only option, he would prohibit anyone with a criminal record or a "psychopath" from breeding. However, he adds that in these cases, the mothers would ". . . be carefully chosen for health, intelligence, no criminal record. We'll try to breed out the psychopathy" (James 129). However, Xan's determination of those who are "fit" to reproduce becomes his Achilles' heel. Julian does not fit the ideal criteria for reproduction because her left hand is deformed, which ends up protecting her from Xan and the State's control until she is nearly ready to give birth.[16] Had Xan been less concerned with what he considers optimal reproduction, he would have had better odds of asserting his power over Julian and Luke. Xan's pursuit of genetic perfection brings

[15] Gascoigne, a member of the rebel group The Five Fishes, claims that Xan has maintained his position without re-election and uses a group called the "Grenadiers" as his own private army (James 72). Under Xan, new laws were established that created harsher punishments for criminals, implemented a form of "legalized slavery" (James 74) to manage immigration, and sanctioned mass suicides of the elderly, referred to as the "Quietus."

[16] It is also significant that the father of Julian's child, a former priest named Luke, was disqualified for sperm testing because he suffered from epileptic seizures in his youth (James 234).

about his downfall, for his belated pursuit of Julian leads to his death at the hands of Theo.

One of the most interesting aspects of James' novel is that according to Theo, the population at large has lost interest in sex. Sexual apathy is so great that Xan's government funds national porn shops in an attempt to stimulate public interest in sex. Theo attributes this disinterest to the fact that sex no longer leads to reproduction. He claims, "Sex totally divorced from procreation has become almost meaninglessly acrobatic" (James 145). In the world of *Children*, the seeming impossibility of human reproduction has led to an obsessive focus on producing babies. Without this component, sex serves no purpose to *Children*'s society. Theo continues, "Women . . . have at last an overwhelming justification for the pent-up resentment of centuries. We who can no longer give them a child *cannot even* give them pleasure" (James 145; my emphasis). The pattern of Theo's words in this final sentence establishes a hierarchy for women's sexual experience. It is the structural pattern of "if I cannot have X, I at least want Y," which sets up X as the main priority and Y as the consolation prize. While this logic is problematic from a feminist perspective, the emphasis on reproduction helps James deepen the State's interest in the sexual lives of its citizens and strengthens the biopolitical focus of the novel.

Power Issues

Several male characters in *Children* seek to capitalize on Julian's pregnancy to assert their own power, including Xan, Theo, and Julian's husband Rolf. Several times in

the novel, Rolf angrily notes that if Julian's child is discovered, Xan would use the child to solidify his power as Warden. Since Rolf believes he is the father of the child, he thinks he should become the Warden in Xan's place on the basis of having fertile sperm (James 208, 210). Obviously, there is no logical connection in Rolf's assertion that fertile sperm demonstrates leadership ability, but that is because Rolf is concerned with power, not leadership. In his mind, procreative power is the ultimate power, and in an infertile world, this is to some degree true. The question of Rolf ruling becomes moot when Julian confesses that Luke was the actual father of her child shortly after Luke's death at the hands of the Omegas. We might speculate as to whether Luke would have sought such power had he lived; however, the fact that he allowed Rolf to believe he was the father suggests that he perhaps feared being used as a "breeding, experimental animal"—a possibility that Theo almost suggests to humble Rolf (James 210).

On the other hand, it is never a question of Julian herself becoming the Warden of England. Despite the fact that she is the female half of this procreative miracle, she never once expresses desire for political power and no other character mentions this possibility. Like the women in *Handmaid*, she is simply a vessel for the generative power of Luke and then a symbol of hope that might be politically useful. Her body and child become a space for conquest and control by the men in the novel who seek sovereignty and power.

However, Julian cannot even be a fully-positive symbol, at least for Xan. When Xan suspects Theo is in love with Julian, he sneers, "Don't romanticize her. She may be the most important woman in the world but she isn't the Virgin Mary. The child she is carrying is still the child of a whore" (James 297). This statement harkens back to Xan's

eugenics policies. It seems that for Xan, Julian's symbolic or political value sustains damage because of the circumstances in which she conceived—she is not "morally fit" in addition to her physical deformity (James 129). Therefore, Xan's remark to Theo that he will "probably marry" Julian (James 296) becomes not only a way to entrench his power, but a calculated political move that will "redeem" Julian by establishing a "legitimate" family unit and making Xan the symbolic father of the new generations of humanity.

By the end of the novel, it is actually Theo who takes up the mantle of power and assumes a symbolic fatherhood. After Theo kills Xan, he removes the coronation ring that Xan wears as a symbol of his power and places it on his own hand (James 298). In doing so, Theo essentially declares himself the new Warden of England. Theo admits that taking the ring, ". . . had been instinctive and yet deliberate, a gesture to assert authority and ensure protection" (James 300). So, despite the fact that he has no biological connection to Julian's child and little political experience (beyond serving as Xan's advisor for several years), Theo takes it upon himself to rule England on the basis of protecting Julian. Despite Theo's proclaimed concern for Julian, he becomes defensive when Julian criticizes him for wearing the ring and thinks, "It must be for him to decide when he would take it off" (James 301). Already, Theo sees himself as the warden of Julian as well as England. In his first few moments of leadership, the only difference Theo demonstrates between himself and Xan is that he purportedly loves Julian; he even acknowledges that his governing policies will be little different (James 300). Presumably, Theo also plans to marry Julian, and while he might think his motives are purer than Xan's, assuming the position of Warden inevitably makes this decision political as well.

Sarah Trimble notes that Theo is also differentiated from Luke due to his sterility. She writes, ". . . Theo's sterility means that he avoids becoming 'a breeding, experimental animal' even as he ascends to the position of 'father of the new race' ([James] 198)—a rise to power founded on his claim to Julian's body and offspring" (Trimble 254). As Trimble points out, Theo's situation as a sterile male whom Julian loves and trusts puts him in an "all reward, no risk" position—he can assume the mantle of leadership by assuming surrogate fatherhood over Julian's child without his body falling under State control.

My pessimistic interpretation of the novel's conclusion also complicates our sympathy for and identification with Theo as the protagonist. According to Maria Varsam in "Concrete Dystopia: Slavery and Its Others," readers' identification with a dystopian novel's protagonist is essential to understanding the social critique of the novel (205). Yet while readers might feel skeptical towards Theo by the end of the novel, the fact that he establishes himself against the current power structure throughout much of *Children* still allows us to see the text as dystopian based on Varsam's criteria, though in a less clear-cut way, perhaps, than in *Handmaid* or *J*.

Theo's appropriation of the Wardenship suggests that the Agambenian state of exception created by the fertility crisis will not end any time soon. In fact, the novel itself seems to question whether Theo will give up his newly-acquired position, for as Xan asks, "'Have you ever known anyone to give up power, real power?'" (James 127). Since political power in *Children* is viewed by several characters as dependent on procreative power, James effectively highlights the link between the two concepts. Because dystopian fiction serves as a social critique, her novel asks readers to consider the

connection between reproduction and political power in their contemporary lives. This critique might have been sharper if Julian, not Theo, served as the novel's protagonist; however, by choosing to narrate the story through a male voice, James foreshadows the political power and dominance of men that permeate the novel.

J: a novel

Howard Jacobson's recently-published dystopia, *J: a novel* (2014) links reproductive crises and State control of the female body in a slightly different way than *Handmaid* and *Children*. In this novel, the event that provokes the State of Exception is not a matter of global infertility, but a mob-orchestrated genocide of the Jewish population in England, known as WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED. The ruling political body that rose to power in the aftermath of this genocide is called Ofnow, the "non-statutory monitor of the Public Mood" (Jacobson 16). Under Ofnow, nothing is expressly illegal or forbidden, but many things are discouraged or expected to be forgotten. This includes, for examples, people's former names before the introduction of Operation Ishmael, a measure introduced to, as one character puts it, "[grant] a universal amnesty" (Jacobson 91) and erase any distinctions between those who perpetrated the violence of WHAT HAPPENED and those who were destroyed. While on the surface everything seems fine, the members of Ofnow chart an increased pattern of seemingly inexplicable violence and rage within society.

One vital difference between the State of Exception in *J*, as compared to *Handmaid* and *Children*, is that it is instigated by the masses, rather than a politically-

motivated person or group. In one of the narrative asides, we read a fragment from an "unwritten letter" by a Jewish character who lived prior to WHAT HAPPENED. In this letter, he writes, "What it won't take, because it won't need—because it never needs—is an evil genius to conceive and direct the operation. We have been lulled by the great autocrat-driven genocides of the recent past into thinking that nothing of that enormity of madness can ever happen again—not anywhere, least of all here" (Jacobson 306). This letter points out a potential blind spot in our imagination of atrocities like genocide in that they need not be perpetrated by a Big-Brother-esque figure. While George Orwell's *1984* protagonist Winston Smith might believe that "hope . . . lies in the proles" (Orwell 69), *J* shows that the masses are also capable of atrocities. Jacobson draws readers' attention to this very possibility in order to break the expectation that dystopian worlds only exist under totalitarian conditions. While the State does step in to modify law in *J* after the genocide, the novel does not limit the responsibility for the dystopic societal conditions to Ofnow alone—e*verybody*, every survivor, shares in the guilt. The culpability of the nation as a whole becomes crucial to understanding the sacrifice that the protagonist, Ailinn Solomons, is asked to make by having children—she and her child will not only become a tool of the State, but of an entire population on the road to recovery.

Eventually, Ofnow employee Esme Nussbaum discovers that the uptick in the country's violent behavior directly connects to the extermination of the Jewish people. She argues that a crucial "natural" antagonism that provided the remaining non-Jewish citizens a way to measure their own identity has been lost. In fact, Esme notes, "*We are who we are because we are not them*" (Jacobson 245; author's emphasis). Esme

eventually convinces the rest of Ofnow that they need to restore this antagonism in order to keep the populace from tearing itself apart through misdirected rage. To do so, they will need to find a surviving Jewish man and woman who are willing to have a child and serve as symbols of their people. The search for such a couple leads Esme to Ailinn Solomons and Kevern "Coco" Cohen, who are unaware of their Jewish heritage. Ailinn agrees to participate and shows a greater level of acceptance of her identity than Kevern, to whom the knowledge of his ancestry realizes his worst fears. When Ailinn becomes pregnant by Kevern, despite his outright resistance to the project, he cannot bear to bring a child into what he believes will be a life of "misery" and kills himself (Jacobson 340).

Ofnow's argument for restoring the Jewish population is devoid of any attempt at reparation for the survivors; it is merely considered necessary for national survival. Esme believes society requires conflict between the dominant culture and the "Other"—represented by the Jews—in order to survive. She explains, "You don't kill the thing you love, but you don't kill the thing you hate, either. You dance with the thing you hate to the music of the spheres. And all remains well—relatively speaking . . . . The madness is to think you can dance alone, without a partner in mistrust" (Jacobson 244). Esme's understanding of the components of societal harmony resembles Carl Schmitt's idea of the Enemy. According to Schmitt and Esme's logic, society requires the potential for conflict with the Enemy. However, complete domination of the Enemy can never be realized because society needs the Enemy in order to have someone against which to define itself.

In the years leading up to WHAT HAPPENED, the people of Britain begin blaming the national Jewish population for the nation's problems and decide that these problems would be resolved if the Jewish people were destroyed. The non-Jewish population of this fictional Britain establishes the Jews as the Enemy of the State and as such declares "war" on this group. As Schmitt writes, "War follows from enmity. War is the existential negation of the enemy. It is the most extreme consequence of enmity" (Concept 33). Schmitt's progression here requires the establishment of an Enemy *before* conflict occurs. However, Schmitt also acknowledges that war with the enemy is not always realized, but it is always a possibility (Schmitt "Concept" 32). Because the Enemy in *J* is actually a portion of the national population, this "war" is manifested as genocide.

The request for Ailinn to have a child, then, becomes a purely political matter of restoring society's Enemy. She is not asked to continue the Jewish line for its own sake, but for the sake of the nation—really, for the sake of the non-Jewish portion of the nation. While there is the possibility that Ofnow will locate other surviving Jewish women, Esme considers Ailinn the best candidate. For Esme, Kevern is merely a bonus: "Well, if she understood the logic of matrilineality adequately, the clearing of Kevern was of less consequence than the clearing of Ailinn. She wasn't saying Kevern was immaterial to her plans . . . but she could afford a degree of blurring around Kevern that she couldn't around Ailinn" (Jacobson 293). Because of the matrilineal focus of Orthodox Judaism, it is Ailinn who is vital to the project of "resurrecting" the Jewish people. Not only does she possess the physical ability to bear children as a woman, she also has the "authenticity" as a woman of Jewish heritage. The fact that Kevern is also Jewish would help the

project, but more so because Kevern has what Esme considers an alienating personality than because it solidifies the "Jewishness" of the child, since this can be accomplished solely through Ailinn. Instead, Esme hopes that Kevern will provoke the antipathy that is necessary to restore the balance of antagonism, which she feels Ailinn is too likeable to inspire (Jacobson 320-321). Interestingly, Ailinn is not physically *forced* to bear a child in *J*, but her relationship with Kevern is manipulated by Ofnow and Esme from the beginning with the hope that they will fall in love and progress to children themselves. After Ailinn discovers her heritage, she agrees to procreate knowing full well that she and her child will be used as a political tool to reestablish a healthy British society.

In some ways, Ailinn is doubly-bound to the State compared to Offred in *Handmaid* and Julian in *Children.* While her body is similarly thought of as a vessel, not just any woman can serve in her place—it is her Jewishness that makes her valuable to the State and allows her to assume the role of the Enemy. On the other hand, Kevern's suicide shows how men are able to escape the State control exercised on women in reproductive-focused dystopian novels because their bodies are not deemed essential for the project of procreation. While one might argue that Kevern's suicide is hardly an escape, as he is choosing death, Kevern effectively dodges the political ramifications of fathering a child by killing himself. In this way, Kevern resembles Luke from *Children.* Because of women's reproductive role, the State and Sovereign have a vested interest in keeping them alive and gaining political control of their bodies.

Discussion

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood, *The Children of Men*, by P.D. James, and *J: a novel* by Howard Jacobson are only three examples of novels that focus on the specific ways crises of fertility and reproduction make women's bodies particularly vulnerable to dystopian regimes. By understanding these novels within the context of Giorgio Agamben and Carl Schmitt's explanations of the state of exception and the Enemy, we can better see the connection between reproduction and power and the ways these concepts affect men and women differently.

IV. Race and Dystopian Fiction: *Invisible Man* as Dystopian Novel[17]

The fourth section will broaden the previous discussion of gender and reproduction by looking at the particular forms of oppression faced by non-white characters through Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*. This novel is currently not considered a dystopian novel (nor part of science fiction or speculative fiction). However, slight but crucial modifications to the genre definitions discussed in section II easily allow for its inclusion, which would greatly benefit the possibilities of dystopian fiction.

Invisible Man (1952) has long been considered a classic work of American, specifically African American, fiction. Even though Ellison resisted labeling *Invisible Man* a "social protest novel," it does critique several pertinent social issues, the most notable being the treatment of young African American men during the 1930s. While *Invisible Man* can certainly be viewed many different ways—African American fiction,

[17] When discussing the presence of race in dystopian fiction, it is important to note that the Jews are a "people" or a "tribe," not an ethnicity or race (despite rhetoric that would label them as a race, such as that used by Hitler's Third Reich). However, the Jewish people are frequently perceived as "Other" by Western society in much the same way as people of color and have undergone similar types of discrimination and persecution.

modernist fiction, social protest novel, and *bildungsroman*—it may also be viewed as a dystopian novel. In fact, because it was published in 1952, *Invisible Man* can even be read as a canonical dystopian text, in the company of such classics as *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley (1932), *1984* by George Orwell (1949), *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury (1953), and *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess (1962). My research to date has not yielded any prior work examining *Invisible Man* as a dystopian novel. Therefore, I hope to introduce a new perspective on this classic work of American fiction, while addressing reasons why novels that depict historic and present-day social concerns like systemic racism should be reconsidered for inclusion in the dystopian genre. The definitions of dystopia by Sargent, Booker, and Varsam discussed earlier will be of particular importance here.

While dystopian fiction often accomplishes defamiliarization and distancing through a futuristic temporal setting, it is worth questioning whether this trope should be considered a requirement. In fact, although dystopian societies are now commonly depicted as occurring in the near or far-distant future, the utopic tradition from which dystopian fiction diverged did not originally depend on a futuristic setting. Anne Cranny-Francis makes this point clear when she describes how the traveler figure in Thomas More's *Utopia*,[18] Raphael Hythlodaeus, describes utopian societies that he encountered in the story's *present*. The societies described by Hythlodaeus are instead geographically separated from what is identified as the current society of England. It wasn't until 1883 that a futuristic setting was used for a utopian novel, which was achieved through the use of a dream-like state in the protagonist (Cranny-Francis 116). While utopian and

[18] *Utopia* was published in 1516 and is considered the first work of Utopian fiction.

dystopian fiction have different conventions and goals, it is important to note that temporal distancing was not the original type of dislocation used in utopian fiction, especially if making an argument for novels that are not currently categorized as dystopian to be considered dystopian. A novel that presents a fictionalized rendition of the past also distances the reader from the depicted events. This technique might even have a greater long-term effect because every year that passes moves the reader further from the historical moment being described, creating a larger temporal distance. While there might be certain advantages to setting a dystopian narrative in the future, it is not the only way to create defamiliarization.

If we amalgamate the theoretical work by Booker and Varsam, a dystopian novel must utilize a defamiliarized and distanced setting to clearly place the reader in line with the novel's protagonist to issue a critique of the society in the novel, and as a result the aspects of the real-life socio-political landscape that the novel exaggerates. This definition of dystopia does not differ much from the definition by Sargent presented earlier: "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived" (Sargent 9). In both cases, the fictional society is used to help the reader realize and contemplate something about his/her current society. The element of social critique is therefore also present.

One of the greatest differences, however, is the description of the fictional society as "non-existent" verses "defamiliarized and distanced." This difference in terminology becomes crucial when determining which works of fiction are considered dystopian.

Sargent does not specify in his article what he considers to be a "non-existent" society. For instance, is a non-existent city a city that appears in literature under a certain name without corresponding to a real-life city of the same name (e.g. the city of Bellona in Samuel Delaney's *Dhalgren*)? Or is any city described in a work of fiction inherently fictional? The acceptance of novel's like Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and its sequels as works of dystopian fiction would seem to indicate the latter interpretation, as the trilogy begins in Los Angeles, CA. Since there seems to be some generic precedence that a city in a work of fiction can be considered "non-existent," no matter its existence in real life, it is certainly not incompatible with a defamiliarized and distanced setting. For example, *Invisible Man* meets the criteria of defamiliarization through Ellison's rendering of New York City in the 1930s through the perspective of a young black man. Even white readers who lived in New York City during this time would have experienced a very different city *because* of their race. In this way, we can imagine how the text would be defamiliarized for a white audience—the racism and violence the narrator experiences in the novel is a result of his position as a black man, and the novel's social criticism hinges on the protagonist's race (and to some degree, gender). In other words, we could not switch out Ellison's narrator for a white man and end up with the same story, nor could a white reader relate to the specific experiences of oppression suffered by the narrator.

Power and Authority within **Invisible Man**

Since an authoritative governing body of some sort is very frequently at the center of conflict in dystopian fiction, it is necessary to examine the power structure at work

within *Invisible Man*. Broadly speaking, the power structure of *Invisible Man* shows wealthy white American men, at the top of the power structure, while people of color—specifically the narrator, who is a young African American man—are at the bottom. We see this structure exhibited in nearly every scene of the novel, perhaps with two arguable exceptions: the narrator's expulsion from the African American college run by Dr. Bledsoe and the scene between the narrator, Tod Clifton, and Ras the Exhorter. However, even though no white male characters are present during these scenes, their influence and authority are still felt. Dr. Bledsoe expels the narrator to keep the school in good standing with the white community. Similarly, the narrator's dispute with Ras centers on why the narrator and Clifton follow the Brotherhood rather than Afrocentrism. Therefore, we as readers see how thoroughly the authority of the white power structure has established itself within the American socio-political hierarchy, as the authority remains in place even when unaccompanied by the presence of the authority figure.

The idea of white authority in *Invisible Man*, and all of the methods used to maintain this authority, is based on the historical and contemporary power dynamics of the United States. However, the novel's power structure also dovetails perfectly with the fascist and theocratic governments represented by the dystopian novels discussed earlier in this thesis. It is primarily *because* Ellison's novel engages with these types of injustices and oppressions within the recent historical past that this novel has not previously been examined through a dystopian lens.

Remaking Identity in Invisible Man[19]

Invisible Man describes several important events related to the perpetuation of power over the novel's protagonist on a mental and physical level in order to reconstruct his identity to better fit the society's overarching power structure. In particular, the shock treatments forced onto the narrator in the Liberty Paints factory hospital and his renaming by the Brotherhood (Ellison 309) reveal this attempted identity reconstruction. The narrator is caught in an explosion while working at Liberty Paints, where he sustains several injuries and loses consciousness. When he wakes, he finds himself in a hospital where he is tied down, kept in what he describes as a transparent "box," and subjected to frequent electric shock treatments, which the head doctor believes perform the same function as a traditional lobotomy. After the treatments, the narrator cannot remember his name or any other aspect of his identity. He has been "reborn" or "remade" by the white doctors, and while the pseudo-lobotomy does not have lasting effects, it temporarily obliterates the narrator's knowledge of who he is.[20] Between these shock treatments, the narrator registers the "whiteness" dominating this scene—the white doctors and nurses, the white chair in which the narrator sits (231), the white overalls he now wears (231, 244), the "clinical whiteness" of the room (238), and the "white mist" of his lost memory (241). The overwhelming presence of the color white suggests several things: a sterile,

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[19] It is important to note that the governing body's quest to remake the protagonist's identity in *Invisible Man* bears great similarity to Big Brother's efforts to remake Winston Smith into a loyal follower of the Party in Orwell's *1984*. After Winston is arrested by the Party for "thought crimes," a prominent Party member called O'Brien begins the process of remaking Winston. As O'Brien tells Winston, "There are three stages in your reintegration . . . 'There is learning, there is understanding, and there is acceptance'" (Orwell 264). Torture is part of the first stage; the Party must destroy Winston's resistance to their ideology by breaking down his mind through pain and fear. Like in *Invisible Man*, this torture involves electricity when Winston is imprisoned in the Ministry of Love (Orwell 248).

[20] These shock treatments are also reminiscent of the electrified rug during the battle royal scene earlier in the novel (Ellison 27).

medical environment; a *tabula rasa* for the narrator's identity; and that the narrator is in a place controlled by the white power structure.

There are also several references in the hospital scene connecting the narrator's experience to a rebirth. For instance, during this scene the narrator references hearing a woman's cries and moaning, reminiscent of a woman in labor (Ellison 235). He also alludes to feeling surrounded by a crushing pressure, suggesting the journey through the birth canal (232). After the first round of electric shocks, the narrator even notes, "My mind was blank, as though I had just begun to live" (233). Finally, the narrator has a node and cord attached to his stomach, which is removed after one of the physicians commands the other to "get the shears" and the narrator responds, "I recoiled inwardly as though the cord were part of me" (243-244). This exchange suggests that the node and cord are symbolic of an umbilical cord; its cutting symbolizes the narrator's release from the "womb" of the hospital. The narrator then wanders about New York in a disoriented state until he is rescued by a new mother figure, a woman named Mary.[21]

This chapter culminates in the narrator's discussion with the factory director, who informs the narrator that he has been "cured" and will be released from the hospital (Ellison 246). While the use of the term "cure" directly refers to the injuries the narrator suffered during the factory explosion, an additional subtext is at work. For it was not only the narrator's injuries that the doctors attempted to treat—one doctor proposes that the narrator should also be castrated. The head doctor actually advocates for the shock treatments as an *alternative* to both a traditional lobotomy and castration. This

[21] The name "Mary" could further signify motherhood because of the strong Christian association with the Virgin Mary as the mother of Jesus.

conversation alludes to the practice of castration and other forms of sterilization as a treatment for psychological disorders in the early 1900s. According to Deborah V. Dolan, psychologists and psychiatrists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries advocated for the involuntary sterilization of both men and women as a "cure" for mental health issues and to prevent these disorders from being transmitted to future generations. She writes, "Thus, by the turn of the [20th] century, the belief that eugenic breeding would improve the human race, the belief that the reproduction organs were involved in mental, personality, and behavior disorders, and Progressive Era concerns with poverty, disease, degeneracy, and crime merged to support an involuntary sterilization movement" (Dolan 100). The narrator's involvement in the paint factory explosion could have suggested to the doctors that he was potentially dangerous or "degenerate." Based on the motive for castration at this time, it logically follows that the shock treatments were intended to function as a psychological or social corrective to the narrator's behavior, rather than his physical injuries. It should also be noted that Liberty Paints' motto alludes to the racist belief that "white is right,"[22] which lends further support to the connection between this scene and the eugenics movement referenced by Dolan.

Thus, these shock treatments in *Invisible Man* can be viewed as an attempt to control the narrator in a manner consistent with dystopian themes. The end goal of the Liberty Paints doctors is to reshape the protagonist into a being they can control. Even though the shock treatments only temporarily affect the narrator, they succeed in setting him on a new path, for it is in his disoriented, post-shock state that he makes the impromptu speech that attracts the attention of the Brotherhood. Through this

[22] "If It's Optic White, It's the Right White" (Ellison 218).

examination, we see how *Invisible Man* portrays power structures that desire domination not only over their subjects' bodies, but their minds and identities.

The Brotherhood's renaming of the narrator when he joins their network is another act of control being exercised on the narrator's identity, but this time by a different embodiment of the power structure. When the narrator attends a gathering of the Brotherhood after agreeing to be their speech-maker, he is told he must undergo a transformation. Ellison writes, "'This is your new identity,' Brother Jack said. 'Open it.' Inside I found a name written on a slip of paper. 'That is your new name,' Brother Jack said. 'Start thinking of yourself by that name from this moment'" (309).[23] Here, Brother Jack is not simply giving the narrator a "code name" to be used only on Brotherhood business; he intends it to accompany the narrator's new self, as evidenced by his use of the word "identity." Brother Jack then tells the narrator that he should forget his former self and internalize this new one so deeply that it replaces who he used to be. While on the surface Brother Jack's instructions sound far less sinister than O'Brien in *1984* when he tells Winston, "We shall squeeze you empty, and then we shall fill you with ourselves" (Orwell 260), they are in many ways seeking the same end. The Brotherhood ultimately wishes to unmake and then remake the narrator into a man who will personify its dogma. However, the narrator eventually drops his idealization and association with the Brotherhood, and the novel ends with him having retreated underground, deciding on

[23] This is also a connection to the practice of white masters renaming African American slaves. See Judie Newmann's article "The Black Atlantic as Dystopia: Bernardine Evaristo's *Blonde Roots"* in *Comparative Literature Studies* 49.2 (2012).

his next move. *Invisible Man* therefore leaves us on a hopeful note, in that the narrator is now aware of his oppression and seeks ways to subvert the power structure.[24]

Invisible Man contains many of the overarching themes that most classic dystopian novels share, such as an oppressive power structure that governs society and officially sanctions language and knowledge, as well as a protagonist who experiences physical, mental, and/or emotional persecution at the hands of the power structure. Yet despite these similarities, I have yet to find any research that considers *Invisible Man* as a dystopian text. The publication of the novel places it well within the era of what are generally considered the genre's flagship texts. Because of its status as a classic work of American fiction, *Invisible Man* perhaps even challenges our conception of what qualifies as a *classic* dystopian novel.

V. Race, Gender, Sexuality and Dystopian Fiction: *The Gilda Stories*

While the inclusion of novels featuring non-white protagonists could in-and-of-itself open the door to vast new territories of social criticism for dystopian fiction, the possibilities produced by the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality within the genre yields additional unique perspectives. Jewelle Gomez's novel *The Gilda Stories* (1991), while categorized as horror/vampire fiction, supernatural fiction, or lesbian fiction, is yet another example of how the current genre boundaries of dystopian fiction marginalize novels whose primary social criticism is rooted in issues of race, gender, and/or sexuality.

[24] We could therefore even read *Invisible Man* as a "critical dystopia," a term defined by Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan as dystopian texts that "maintain a utopian impulse." This impulse is accomplished by inserting the possibility of a hopeful future through an "ambiguous, open ending" that "resist[s] closure" (Baccollini 7). Novels such as *Handmaid* and *Kindred* also fall into this category.

Gomez's novel uses the interstitial figure of the vampire to break free of Western-imposed binaries and marginalization of difference, as well as critiquing Western/Anglo abuses of power towards the "Other."

In her 1986 article "Black Women Heroes: Here's Reality, Where's the Fiction?", Jewelle Gomez reflects on feminist science fiction and fantasy novels and asks, "Where are the black women?" (10). While we are admittedly three decades ahead of Gomez's question, it is sadly still relevant—in dystopian literature as well as science fiction and fantasy more generally. Aside from the novels of Octavia Butler, such as *Kindred* and *Parable of the Sower*, it is challenging to recall another dystopian novel featuring a female protagonist of color.[25]

Gomez's question parallels a similar question asked by Emma Pérez in *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas Into History*. Pérez argues that the dominant historical narrative has been constructed using a "colonial historiography" (4) that erases the presence and contributions of people of color (in her text, specifically Chicanos/as) from history. Pérez believes that Chicana scholars need to construct a "decolonial imaginary," which liberates people of color from the colonizer/colonized binary (5) and involves searching for the "interstitial moments" that provide room for Chicanos/as to write themselves into history (xvi). *The Gilda Stories* effectively writes African American women (as well as Native American women and homosexual men and women)

[25] I am speaking here of American and British dystopian fiction. Afrofuturism is currently making strides in introducing an African presence in dystopian fiction; however, this genre does not yet have a significant presence in the U.S. dystopian market. Afrofuturist dystopian novels would be an excellent place for further research.

into the genre of science fiction/fantasy, and as I argue, into dystopian fiction, through the interstitial figure of the vampire.

Gendered and Racialized Social Critique in The Gilda Stories

The Gilda Stories follows the protagonist Gilda, whom we first observe in the opening pages of the novel as a young African American runaway slave in 1850 and follow through her transformation into and life as a vampire through the year 2050. Gilda is nurtured and mentored into her new vampire life by Bird, a female Native American vampire, who eventually becomes Gilda's lover. Gomez's vampires bear little resemblance to the death-and-destruction-wielding vampires that prey on humans in most vampire fiction. Instead of killing for blood, Gilda is educated not only in how to leave the humans she takes blood from alive, but also to give them a "gift" in exchange. This gift is unique to each person, but because the vampires can read humans' thoughts, it is typically providing them with psychological or emotional comfort.

Even after escaping from the slave plantation on which she was born, Gilda still faces significant threats to her safety as an African American woman. While on the run, she is discovered and nearly raped by a white man. Later, after she's been taken in by the original Gilda (the protagonist's namesake) who runs a brothel near New Orleans, she is accosted by a client of the house who demands to have sex with her. This man finds young Gilda desirable both because of her female gender and as an African American. He tells the original Gilda, "I bet you could do a lot of business with that nigra girl, Miss Gilda. You don't know what kind of opportunity you lettin' pass by" (Gomez 31).

Sensing young Gilda's fear of the man and unwillingness to have sex with him, the original Gilda offers her protection and sends the man away.

Gilda's position as an African American woman compounds the "gendered nature of oppression" (Varsam 212) found in novels like *The Handmaid's Tale, The Children of Men,* and *J* with the racialized nature of oppression. When Gomez describes how Gilda first meets the aforementioned man in the brothel, she explicitly links race and gender: "The Girl [Gilda] had not known the auction block. She had never stood upon one and had never had any occasion to see the one used regularly in the center of the city. His look, however, made her know it intimately" (Gomez 29). Here, the objectifying male gaze seeking to claim sexual ownership of Gilda's body is akin to the economic possession of slave bodies in the American South.[26] Due to the historical reality of slavery in the United States, as well as the vulnerability female slaves experienced through the not-infrequent violation of being raped by their white masters (Varsam 212), Gilda's identity as an African American woman positions the novel to make gendered and racialized critiques of Western patriarchal society. As has been demonstrated numerous times in this thesis, the traditional "everyman" dystopian protagonist could not be substituted into this novel with the same results.

These kinds of racial and gendered struggles do not entirely disappear after Gilda transforms into a vampire. Throughout the novel, we see Gilda confront racism and sexism. While her heightened senses and increased physical strength help protect Gilda from being lynched and raped, being a vampire does not change the fact that she exists in a black female body, which gives her much greater awareness of and investment in

[26] And arguably, to any situation of slavery that has, does, or will exist in the future.

human social movements towards gender and racial equality. In fact, in the section of the novel set in Manhattan in 1971, Gilda reflects with anger on her fellow vampires' "inattention" to human concerns such as race (Gomez 180). For Gilda, race in particular seems to transcend humanity, making it one of the few things that she still has in common with humans. This is a large part of why Gilda struggles throughout the novel to live as a vampire, rather than a human—advice that Gilda repeatedly receives from her vampire friends Sorel and Bird.

In the last twenty pages of *The Gilda Stories*, Gomez takes us into the future of 2050, which her chapter title dubs, "The Land of Enchantment." Unfortunately, there is little that is "enchanting" about the future "earth" Gilda inhabits. Environmental destruction and disease have ravaged the planet, resulting in economic collapse and those who can afford it fleeing Earth through space travel. Those who remain are essentially trapped, unable to raise the exorbitant sums or meet the health qualifications to receive passage away from Earth. The Earthbound population has been left to fight over the remaining resources, and the wealthy hire Hunters to seek out the recently-discovered vampires in order to take their blood. After becoming vampires themselves, securing immortality, the wealthy destroy their vampire creators, violating the central vampire code (235). Gilda, like other vampires, now lives a nomadic life with a crew of hired guards in whom she places only minimal trust.

Rather than creating a novel about vampires that focuses on death, Gomez creates vampires whose focus is love. As the original Gilda tells the protagonist Gilda after she begins transforming her into a vampire, "You must also remember, later, when time

weighs on you like hard earthenware strapped to your back, it is for love that we do this" (Gomez 47). In fact, love is almost exclusively the motivation any of the vampires in the novel have for turning a human into a vampire, and this is particularly true for Gilda. She only transforms two humans: Julius in 1971, and Ermis in 2050. The dedication to love rather than fear and death echoes the utopian possibility of differential consciousness presented by Chela Sandoval in *The Methodology of the Oppressed*.[27] In *The Gilda Stories*, the love that is so frequently the motivator for one vampire to transform a human acts as a "punctum" (Sandoval 140,1) to lead the new vampire into a previously unknown space—the space of immortality. From this new space, Gilda's vampire family are removed from "the ties that bind being" and "enter the differential mode of consciousness" (Sandoval 140,1). Nearly all of the vampires who play a large role in the novel exist in the non-dominant realm of society: they are women, people of color, homosexual, or some combination of these identities. As such, they would be considered vulnerable to the dominant white patriarchal culture and therefore vulnerable to the specific forms of violence typically inflicted on bodies marked as different from that of the white, heterosexual male. However, the increased physical strength, speed, and immortality of the vampires remove them from much of the persecution they might otherwise experience in American society. This interstitial space removes these marginalized characters from colonial and patriarchal control, giving them space to forge their own community founded on the principle of love rather than fear and death.

[27] Differential consciousness is also referred to as Barthes' "third space," Derrida's "*différance,*" and Anzaldua's *coatlicue* state, among other terms developed by twentieth century theorists. Sandoval argues that these are essentially just different ways of naming the same state or possibility.

The only white, heterosexual, male vampires we see in the novel are Samuel and Fox. Both are presented as mentally and/or emotionally unstable, with Samuel stalking Gilda at various points in the novel because of her relationship with a female vampire who deeply wronged him, and with Fox reveling in his ability to cause pain and fear in others. Read through the lens of Sandoval and Pérez's theoretical texts, neither of these men can successfully obtain differential consciousness or the decolonial imaginary *because* of the privilege and power they experienced as white men, and which they feel they have now lost (in the case of Samuel, in losing his wife and humanity[28]), or can now capitalize on even more through increased physical strength and immortality (in the case of Fox). Neither Samuel nor Fox enact a hermeneutic of love, preferring instead a patriarchal Western hermeneutic of fear and domination.

We could also interpret Gomez's choice to cast those who are typically marginalized in society—women, people of color, homosexuals—as her vampires as a way to bring those who are in the background to the foreground. This interpretation helps us see how Gomez is enacting Sandoval's claim: "If we can agree that past U.S. peoples of color have served grammatically as representatives and functionaries of *différance* in the service of dominant relations—surviving in that in-between (silent) space that made social order, alliance, affinity, even love between white skins possible—then today, with *différance* set free . . . the nature of love in the West is changing" (151,2). By uniting the concept of the vampire—a figure who traditionally exists on the fringes of human society in literature, in the "in-between (silent) space," a being to be feared as Other—with

[28] And possibly in feeling emasculated by the vampire who changed him, Eleanor, who seduced his wife and changed him into a vampire without his consent.

people of color and other marginalized groups, Gomez flips the script of both canonical vampire narratives and the American rhetoric of white, heterosexual, male supremacy. In fact, this reversal allows Gomez to cast primarily white, heterosexual, male humans in the role of undesirable Other, highlighting the "vampirism" of Western culture on non-White and female bodies, as well as the environmental devastation caused by the West.

The "Vampirism" of Western Culture

In fact, the environmental devastation as a result of Western consumption and capitalism are the direct causes of Earth's apocalyptic state at the end of the novel. In the sections set in 2020 and 2050, Gilda notes the degree of environmental damage and its resulting effects on global economies, agriculture, and the health of the human population.[29] While the novel only broadly gestures to those responsible—for instance, implicating "the Government" (capitalized, as if to indicate a greater level of power or authority), the lack of specifics could be an indictment of Western culture more generally, with its focus on consumption and disposability.

There are also references to the wealthy upper class's abuse of their resources in relation to the vampires. Since their wealth cannot help them if there are literally no more resources to be had, the wealthy who remain on Earth have turned to capturing vampires and forcibly transfusing their blood in order to gain immortality. Because they kill the vampires from whom they have stolen blood, the wealthy humans break both the vampire

[29] Specific examples include how overpopulation in California led to economic collapse (226); the population fleeing from urban centers to the country seeking food and fresh water, only to starve from lack of agrarian knowledge or be shot by locals protecting their land (222); and references to the planet as "dying" (241) and "poisoned" (224).

code of not killing your creator as well as violating Gilda's family's practice of *exchange* when taking blood. In this sense, the wealthy and the Hunters have become more *vampiric*, in the traditional sense of the word, than Gilda or her family have ever been. They prey on others, on the remaining vampires, rather than taking blood in an act of exchange. There are also connotations of rape in the forcible taking of the vampires' blood, echoing the attempted rape Gilda experiences as a runaway slave. Finally, the clear association of wealth with the persecution of vampires and "theft" of their blood could well be viewed as social criticism of capitalist culture, especially since these same people are implicated in the exploitative practices that destroyed the Earth in the first place. Gilda and other vampire's connection to their native land, the soil of which they sew into their clothes to protect them from dangers like running water and direct sunlight, also highlight this connection between the destruction of the environment and the destruction of the vampire population. In all of these cases—rape, environmental destruction, slavery, and the hunting of the vampires—there is a clear power binary and an absolute lack of symbiosis.

VI. Neo-Slave Narratives[30] and Concrete Dystopia

At this point, I want to "bring the threads together," so to speak, by continuing my analysis of *The Gilda Stories* in tandem with *Invisible Man* to show how the two are connected under Maria Varsam's study of the neo-slave narrative as "concrete dystopia." In her article, Varsam asks the important question: "Is it possible to speak of slavery, a

[30] According to Ashraf H. A. Rushdy in *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, neo-slave narratives "represent slavery as a historical phenomenon that has lasting cultural meaning and enduring social consequences" (533).

historical fact, in relation to dystopian fiction?" (203). She then examines slavery's presence in dystopian fiction and as historical reality, arguing that historical realities like slavery provide the writers of dystopian novels with a social problem that can be used to connect "the past, present, and future" (Varsam 209). Neo-slave narratives, in particular, trace the effects of slavery on future generations as well as society itself.[31] Varsam also argues that neo-slave narratives frequently incorporate "issues and themes" also found in dystopian fiction (204). In her article, Varsam explores African American slave and neo-slave narratives and introduces the term "concrete dystopia" to describe their relationship to the dystopian genre. She defines concrete dystopia as ". . . those events that form the *material* basis for the content of dystopian fiction which have *inspired* the writer to warn of the potential for history to repeat itself" (209; her emphasis). In other words, concrete dystopias show the past, present, and future as deeply interconnected not only through history's ability to inform the present, but in the possible reoccurrence of the past in the future. This definition becomes essential when examining neo-slave narratives such as *Invisible Man* and *The Gilda Stories* as dystopian novels.

Invisible Man, The Gilda Stories*, and Concrete Dystopias*

Invisible Man falls well within the neo-slave narrative category. While the novel does not take place within the historical event of slavery in the United States because of its setting in the 1930s, it certainly bears witness to the after-effects of slavery and the hierarchical social structure it represented. Therefore, it is essentially forward-casting

[31] For Varsam, important examples of the neo-slave narrative within dystopian fiction are Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred* and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

because Ellison shows that the effects of slavery are still very much present and will carry into the future unless radical change occurs. The power imbalance between whites and African Americans as a result of slavery also allowed for numerous injustices to be committed against African Americans and other people of color.

Invisible Man also contains many of the forms of oppression faced by the protagonists in classic dystopian novels. Varsam identifies this overlap when she writes that ". . . slavery's effect on its victims is to constitute them as powerless as possible in a system that functions by physical and psychological intimidation" (221). As previously discussed, *Invisible Man* provides numerous examples of "physical and psychological intimidation" being perpetuated against the narrator and other African American characters. Since Ellison's novel asks readers to sympathize with his narrator about the injustice and oppression he faces, we successfully align ourselves with the protagonist. Readers, particularly white readers, become distanced from the fictionalized 1930s world of the narrator, which successfully meets another criterion for dystopian fiction. Finally, because Ellison successfully aligns readers with the protagonist, the neo-slavery themes of this novel become social critique—fitting not only within concrete dystopia but in Booker's primary requirement of dystopian fiction.

The Gilda Stories, on the other hand, actually begins within the historical reality of slavery with Gilda fleeing from her Master's plantation after the death of her mother. While it might appear that Gilda effectively escapes and the slave narrative aspect of the novel has been left behind after the first section, Gomez maintains a focus on the racism Gilda experiences as she moves forward in time, eventually culminating in Gilda being

faced with a return to slavery if captured by the Hunters in 2050. Additionally, Gomez focuses on Gilda and other characters' sexual agency throughout the novel, recalling the "gendered nature of oppression" Varsam connects to the female slave experience (212). In addition to the attempted rape Gilda experiences when fleeing the plantation, the section set in 1955 centers on Gilda and Bird helping a prostitute escape her brutal vampire pimp, Fox. While slavery based on race doesn't necessarily resurface, Gomez connects it to other potential forms of slavery—sexual, the more fantastic vampire slavery at the novel's end, and the imprisonment/"slavery" of the humans forced to remain on the dying Earth by wealthier or more politically powerful "Off-worlders."

This narrative strategy forces readers to connect these various forms of oppression as one long history of slavery, as well as its potential future. In other words, Gomez follows in the footsteps of Octavia Butler and Margaret Atwood in her use of slavery as concrete dystopia as described by Varsam: "Since slavery is depicted as a form of 'totalitarian' oppression in future worlds, these dystopian fictions problematize its status as a system of oppression and exploitation *located exclusively in the past*" (210; my emphasis). Gomez clearly links the futuristic dystopian horror with American slavery in passages such as, "Thoughts of the Hunters, armed with drugs and other weapons to ensnare her and her family, caused Gilda to shiver with the memory of her escape from the plantation . . . . Those who came now were more silent, more expert, but essentially the same" (234) and "This horror [the hunting and forced sharing of blood] was slavery come again" (235).[32] The explicit connection between what might be recognized as a

[32] Interestingly, in the final section of the novel it is not Gilda's race, sexuality or gender that endangers her, but the value of her vampire blood. Considering historic U.S. "one-drop rule" and miscegenation laws,

more common dystopian "world" and the historical reality of slavery links past and future in a way that warns of the possibility for history to repeat itself. This is one way in which *The Gilda Stories* performs social criticism with a forward-thinking agenda.

VI. Discussion

It has been 25 years since *The Gilda Stories* was first published by Firebrand Books, and City Lights Books is set to release a 25th anniversary edition of the novel in April 2016. Writing about the publication history of *The Gilda Stories*, Gomez states, "One editor from a commercial publishing house had rejected my novel . . . stating, 'Your main character is black, a lesbian and a vampire. That's too complicated'" (Gomez "Gilda Lives"). Yet her "complicated" protagonist is exactly what enables the novel to perform its particular social critique and "social dreaming"[33] (Sargent 3). If we view *The Gilda Stories* as a dystopian novel, this new edition also instills hope that there is a readership for dystopian fiction that strays from the "everyman" protagonist, and that the type of criticism it conducts remains relevant, and even necessary.

Indeed, recent developments such as the Supreme Court ruling that states cannot ban same-sex marriage, movements like Black Lives Matter, and the continuing issues surrounding social and economic equality for women suggest that destabilizing the white, heterosexual, male dystopian protagonist is as necessary as ever—and long overdue. Rethinking the aspects of genre definition, especially temporality and the "realness" of

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this plot point is bitterly ironic and reinforces the Othered position Gilda and her vampire family occupy (as non-human, but also as non-heterosexual, non-white, or non-male).

[33] Sargent defines social dreaming as ". . . the dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live" (3). Sargent considers social dreaming as the base for utopianism.

dystopian settings, that have in large part restricted dystopian fiction's social dreaming to one group's hopes and fears would help us better hear the dreams and nightmares of those who have long been marginalized and oppressed *precisely because* they are not the "everyman" figure. Future dystopian research on other novels featuring women, people of color, LGBQT characters and topics, and non-Western settings (such as in Afrofuturism) is needed for dystopian fiction to fully realize its capacity to dream. We need diverse voices to represent diverse experiences of the world and, in the case of dystopian fiction, to have a better understanding of the multiplicities of oppression at work in contemporary (and future) society.

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