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PETER LANG

Oxford • Bern • Berlin • Bruxelles • New York • Wien

Edited by Raffaella Baccolini and  
Lyman Tower Sargent

# TRANSGRESSIVE UTOPIANISM

ESSAYS IN HONOR OF LUCY SARGISSON



PETER LANG

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ALMUDENA MACHADO-JIMÉNEZ

Bleak Bodies: Genetically Engineered Women in  
Louise O'Neill's (Anti-)Utopian Patriarchal Satire *Only  
Ever Yours*

Utopian desire, inherent in human behavior, brings forth many kinds of utopias that can collide or ally to forge alternatives to a grim present. In her latest book *Fool's Gold? Utopianism in the Twenty-First Century* (2012), Lucy Sargisson offers the following examples of utopianism: apocalyptic, escapist, hierarchical, practical, speculative, and prefigurative utopias. Apart from these cases of utopia, I focus on another utopian model which has been persistent throughout history: the patriarchal utopia. Sargisson states at the beginning of her book that "utopianism is everywhere but not everything is utopian," and patriarchal utopias are highly representative examples of such a contradiction (6).

This utopian mode has been present from the beginning of the genre in Thomas More's *Utopia*. It can fit in many of Sargisson's categories: it can be escapist, in its attempt to find a lost paradise where women are never corrupted (in all senses); it can be practical, implementing an ideal conception of woman as reflected in religious or pseudoscientific gender essentialism. Patriarchal utopias can be speculative, inasmuch as they can actually provoke thought by posing alternatives to contemporary society. However, as Chris Ferns points out, "although utopias may sweep away such fundamental existing institutions as private property, money, or the Christian religion, they rely as heavily on the maintenance of patriarchy for their distinctive character as on the abolition or transformation of other aspects of society" (64). In this sense, I will refer to patriarchal utopias as any manifestation of utopian thought, fictional or real, that presents dominance over women, regardless of other possible sets of relations among

their inhabitants.<sup>1</sup> Patriarchal utopias are highly hierarchical, at least on one axis, male/female gender, similar to the utopianism that feeds the organization of religious fundamentalism (see Sargisson, *Fool's* 43). Such an unequal arrangement of reality based on dualistic opposition is what makes this utopianism anti-utopian.

Although this social phenomenon does not need to be dystopian per se, it eventually “resists the utopian impulse” – particularly, the impulses which dissent from the masculine heteronormative standards (Sargisson, *Fool's* 22). Moreover, patriarchal utopias coincide with Sargisson’s notion of anti-utopianism insofar as they deride female desires as naïve and ideal (and, needless to say, dangerous). This underestimation comes not only from the compliant members of the regime, but can come also from other male dissidents. Examples of such female degradation are the twentieth-century dystopias *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, with Lenina’s ambivalent feelings being disregarded, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell, with Julia’s revolution being doubted and ridiculed by her comrade Winston Smith – “You’re only a rebel from the waist downwards” (Orwell 179). Even though these novels have traditionally been catalogued as dystopias for their depiction of a worse society, they are also patriarchal utopias, given the manifest interdependence and conformity between the system and the male dissenter to control the female body. As long as male privileges are not questioned and patriarchy is left uncontested, the anti-utopian triumph of this social mode of organization is what, paradoxically, lets patriarchy reach a utopian state from a male point of view.

It is at this point that patriarchal utopias differ from Sargisson’s interpretation of utopianism in *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression*, for these utopian conceptualizations are perfection-seeking indeed. However, such a claim does not fall under a simplistic understanding of perfectionism. Quite to the contrary, perfection-seeking in patriarchal utopia becomes a lifelong process imposed upon women to achieve an

1 Hartmann identifies patriarchy as a system based on male interdependence and solidarity against women: “Though patriarchy is hierarchical and men of different classes, races, or ethnic groups have different places in patriarchy, they are also united in their shared relationship of dominance over their women; they are dependent on each other to maintain that domination” (219).

unrealistic ideal state of being. Of course, these utopias are full of (un)intended imperfections, but the idea of female perfection-seeking remains constant despite variations. From the figure of the virgin-mother to more contemporary photoshopped models that defy aging and gravity, women have been represented as unrealistic patriarchal conceptions of the ideal woman in order to be socially acceptable. This failed attempt to reach female perfection is what makes women enter in a static cycle of despair that supports male dominance.

The determining factor in the perpetuation of a fool’s paradise comes with what Sargisson, in *Fool's Gold*, calls sham utopianism. Particularly, this phenomenon of an enslavement that conspires with the patriarchal regime has a dramatic impact on the female body. Women then feel pressure to become themselves utopian products. In our global competitive market, each woman becomes a passive producer and consumer, as it is patriarchal capitalism that establishes the market conditions, and, in so doing, the female body and desire are commodified. Sarah Sceats broadens the paradox of perfection-seeking in patriarchal utopias in her analysis of female images in the media:

The implication of such advertising (for its purpose is to foster discontent and a sense of lack) is that our bodies are deficient, requiring the intervention of whatever is being offered [...] We are constantly bombarded with images urging consumption and promising instant gratification [...] We are simultaneously exhorted to be thin and to consume, to be hedonistic and virtuous, to worship the body and punish the body. (6)

When approached from the point of view of patriarchal essentialism, the natural female body presents limitations on its configuration and is exploited as a utopian space without barely any possibility of agency.

But, what happens with female bodies and patriarchal utopias in the twenty-first century? With the coming of the posthuman as a real possibility, there have been many authors who have escaped from the patriarchal mold as the only possible social configuration, and in doing so, they have also explored other bodily configurations as a source of transgressive utopianism. Paramount examples are Joanna Russ’s *Whileaway*, Marge Piercy’s *Mattapoisett*, and Octavia E. Butler’s *Earthseed*. Other authors

have opted to fight patriarchal utopia from within: by de(con)structing its foundations with a female rebel who exposes it as a feminist dystopia, as it is the case of Offred in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*; or by appropriating previously oppressive features as empowering tools, such as technoscience (see, e.g., Ellen Ripley in Jean-Pierre Jeunet's film *Alien Resurrection* and, more recently, Imperator Furiosa in George Miller's film *Mad Max: Fury Road*). All these works are clear representations of a militant feminist utopianism that sternly criticizes the monolithic tradition of the anti-utopian patriarchal utopia. Nonconformity emanates from the internal dissident of the story as well as the external dissident – the reader/spectator – who together reveal the system as a feminist dystopia. However, such mutual correspondence is not always evident, which makes the novel's position toward patriarchal utopia more complicated.

This is the case in *Only Ever Yours* (2014), the first novel written by the Irish author Louise O'Neill. This feminist contemporary dystopia obscures the boundaries between what is utopian and what is anti-utopian. The blurring of conceptual opposites does not entail a transgressive action nor enacts a utopian drive, but rather leaves the audience moved and deflated, with an emptiness that invites confessional criticism.

*Only Ever Yours* presents a theocratic patriarchal society in which natural women have ceased to exist, as daughters are unwanted beings because "a female baby was an invader, come to steal her mother's beauty. A female baby was dangerous" (O'Neill, *Only* 49). Hence, society creates gynoids, that is, female androids, for the species' survival – "eves." Traditional sexual intercourse applies only to the conception of sons, as eves are designed and assembled by Genetic Engineers in their laboratories. After this artificial genesis, eves are confined within the School until they reach seventeen when at this stage their future lives will be arranged in a Ceremony. After this event, eves will be assigned a function in society when joining one of the thirds within which they have been trained: they can become companions, who have to "obey their husbands and to bear as many sons as their wombs will hold" (364); concubines, devoted to "the physical gratification of the good men" (365); or chastities, who are actually the leftover eves: "In the uncommon event of an eve failing to prove attractive to the Inheritants, said eve will be inducted into the third of the chastities"

(150). The triquetra symbolizes the three thirds, as "separate entities, but inextricably linked": the ivory triangle represents the companions, the scarlet is for the concubines, and the ebony stands for the chastities (36). The story is narrated through the life of eve #630, freida, in her last year of school. Through her experience, the reader has an overall view of the eves' indoctrination and (re)formation in a posthuman patriarchal utopia that satirizes the Generation Z.

Throughout her narrative, O'Neill exposes the toxicity of romantic love and the trivialization of rape culture in the patriarchal system. Accordingly, she reveals the fatalist perfectionism distinctive of patriarchal utopias: "It has created a situation where we are held up to such a more rigorous standard of moral behaviour than men are, that it is we that are somehow to blame when our bodies have been violated without our consent" (O'Neill, "Why" online). She also exposes the illusion of contemporary sham utopianism compliant with patriarchy, and how viral and devastating the pathological results of nurturing it are, even for feminist thinking. As many feminists, O'Neill has experienced the revelatory need to deconstruct the most ordinary, realizing how rooted this patriarchal perfection-seeking feeling is in every member of the patriarchal utopia: "I called myself a feminist, but in truth, I was buying into the patriarchy. I was internalising all of that misogyny, making it my own, making it my truth, and I didn't even realise it" (O'Neill, "My Journey" online).

The present study ponders O'Neill's destabilizing vision on utopianism in an anti-utopian setting. The appalling demystification of patriarchal utopia as a feminist dystopia is two-fold. On the one hand, freida is a compliant member of the Inheritants' regime – a very obliging one indeed, but she ends up devastated when her uncontrollable love collides with the system's brutality. On the other hand, the mockery of the Generation Z under new estranged parameters and the subjugation of freida and her friend isabel to the patriarchal system shockingly displays a bleak future brought about by the global latent passivity of the new millennium. Particularly, the notion of the posthuman and the cyborg are brought into the discussion as ambivalent ingredients in utopianism – in transgressive feminist utopianism or in the hierarchical patriarchal utopia. As Patricia Melzer argues, "the cyborg [...] can be both a patriarchal fantasy of dominating

technologies and a feminist tool of resistance" (25). O'Neill's patriarchal utopia ensures the eradication of the eves' utopian desire from the moment they are designed and assembled. And yet, their posthuman condition is not the conditioning factor that guarantees their subjugation; rather, it is a dormant transgressive quality that never comes to eruption. This way, the (re)formation process of the eves undergoes two phases: a *pre-natal* stage, concerning the criteria of the Genetic Engineers in the conception of gynoids, and a *post-natal* stage, which involves their subsequent indoctrination at the School Centre.

The *pre-natal* stage opens the debate on the figure of gynoids as a positive/negative portrait of women. Donna Haraway states that "a cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (5). If we consider that, paraphrasing Haraway's own words, a social reality is a political construction based on specific lived social relations, then the eves of *Only Ever Yours* are the creatures resulting from a globalized millennial patriarchal utopia. This statement can be validated considering that, according to Melzer, "globalization is driven by technology, and late capitalism is defined by the commodification of biotechnologies such as genetic engineering" (19). The use of genetic engineering in the process of creating eves supposes a tragic, albeit deliberate, flaw, seeing that they are conceived and trained as consumer goods. In spite of this, the damnation of eves in O'Neill's patriarchal (anti)-utopia is not a result of the intervention of biotechnologies on the female body, but rather of the continuance of certain natural female qualities.

As if working for a dolls' catalogue, the Genetic Engineers beget eves following specific beauty samples which will constantly surround the girls during their upbringing as a crucial part of the construction of their identities: "S41 Delicate Iced Chocco Hair. #66 Chindia Yellow eyes. *That's me. That's what people see when they look at me*" (O'Neill, *Only* 13). The novel presents an obvious resemblance between eves and Barbie dolls. The similitude is accentuated when the laboratories in the Underground, where the Genetic Engineers carry out their research, are described: "Lining the other wall is a row of clear boxes, each containing a naked sleeping woman. They are bald too, held in a standing position by white belts secured around their

feet, waist and head" (389). Posing obediently in plastic boxes and grasped by plastic wires, these half-formed eves await their moment to become of some use for society, that is, to become sham consumers and sexual objects.

In this creative process, Genetic Engineers play with the posthuman and have at their disposal the chance of materializing the patriarchal utopia's ideal woman because, "since they had the opportunity, it would have been foolish not to make necessary improvements in the new women, the eves" (O'Neill 49). Technological advances in the posthuman make possible what Thomas More once said – "that nature's defect may be redressed by industry" (199), in the form of alternative embodiments. The gynoid has the potential of reconciling women and technology as a form of resistance within and against patriarchy. Haraway suggests how the transition of power in the posthuman era can leave behind the comfort ensured by the old white capitalist patriarchy and with it a sexual hierarchy based on natural determinism. Instead, postmodern society is ruled by the informatics of domination, characterized by the infinite and polymorphous potentialities of genetic engineering. This transformation in the posthuman era also entails a shift from reproduction to replication. Thus, the application of genetic engineering in the creation of eves could result in the end of gender essentialism. Particularly, it could lead to the end of the reproduction of the species and motherhood as a state duty, because such labor is unnecessary thanks to replication. Genetic engineering could actually bring equality between the eves and the men of the regime – the Inheritants – but in fact it only augmented the gender gap in the system.

Posthuman women in this society are trapped in a submissive position regarding the male, despite all improvements: she is more beautiful, but also weaker, duller, and more self-conscious. Like Barbies, these "mechanical dolls" are created to be pleasing to the eye and with limited ability to communicate (O'Neill 46). Moreover, both female simulations are characterized by a dependence on consumerism. Despite this correspondence, one cannot blame the new plastic posthuman eve. Focusing on images from popular culture and, in particular, on the figure of the Barbie doll, Kim Toffoletti claims the transformative and transgressive potential of the dolls' plasticity, because this material is highly malleable and resilient. Rather than being merely a product of patriarchy, the plastic body "serve[s] as a strategy

to hack into the phallogocentric codes that structure ideals of femininity, and scramble interpretations of embodiment that reinscribe an unchanging and essentialised myth of woman as tied to nature" (Toffoletti 79).

The replacement of the natural woman by the eves exposes their parallelism with Fenichel's characteristics of plastic: "artificiality, disposability, and synthesis" (qtd. in Toffoletti 69). Curiously, this is a persistent pattern in patriarchal utopias, where female plasticity combines women's capacity for resilience with their disposability by the system and their lack of transcendence of the body. Particularly, the complex identities found in female bodies are reshaped in a single yet contradictory ideal of woman. The posthuman plastic self of *Only Ever Yours* enables the embodiment of such incongruity thanks to the material. Nevertheless, it is the dolls' creative process that leaves them rigid and without any possibility of articulation. Sherryl Vint observes that "what needs to be transcended in a move from humanism to posthumanism is not the human body but instead the narrow vision of humanity that has been characteristic of humanism as a discourse" (137). Hence, the conception of eves as posthuman beings exposes the work of the Genetic Engineers as biased toward a normative version of patriarchal femininity.

A process of intended uglification is carried out in the laboratories: despite eves' original attractive condition, the deliberate remnants of a primitive and dynamic female nature ensure the eternal quest for perfection and eves' constant unhappiness. Such bodily features aim to be selective as it depends on the fashion or necessities of the different Zones of the world (the Euro-Zone, the Chindia-Zone, and the Americas-Zone). Apart from the factors of aging and weight, two salient female features of a pre-existent natural condition and which persist in the creation of eves are "body hair" and "womenstruation." The former differs across the Zones' fashions and is exposed as an inconsistency in the Engineers' initial design: "I don't understand why we can't have laser treatment like the eves in the Americas do' 'Or better yet, be designed without body hair at all, like in the Chindia Zone'" (O'Neill, *Only* 20). However, the latter condition is left as an aberrant, albeit necessary, element for the perpetuity of patriarchal utopia, as only by having womenstruation can eves engender sons naturally: "We knew this [womenstruation] was our curse. We knew it had to be hidden"

(196). Paradoxically, Haraway's transition of reproduction into replication is only applied to eves, while reproduction is maintained as a symbol of biological fundamentalism that establishes hierarchical relations of power between men and women, but also between the human and the posthuman. O'Neill's novel evidences Sargisson's idea of patriarchal difference as a deviance from the norm, which "legitimises treatment aimed at inequality" and has a universalizing function. Concurrently, this patriarchal utopia marks another binary opposition between human/posthuman (*Contemporary* 74). So, the condition of eves as posthuman women supposes a double threat which has to be restrained. In the end, it is not nature's or technology's fault that causes gender stratification, but rather a mischievous misuse of power based on the essentialism of the former and the gendering of the latter in order to maintain the privileges of the male. Patriarchal utopia is unveiled as a dystopia, for it is exposed as "a utopia that functions only for a particular segment of society" (Gordin, Tilley, and Prakash 1).

Body imperfections are perceived negatively after a severe conditioning process of shame and disgust. By perceiving womenstruation as impure – "chastity-ruth hung the tainted sheets outside my cubicle for the five days that I bled as a sign that I was unclean" – eves end up abhorring every trace of naturality (O'Neill, *Only* 196). The reason for such contempt relies not in the source *per se*, but in the subsequent sacrifices made in order to overcome them. This supposes an exhausting feeling of self-consciousness due to social pressure, as can be appreciated in the motto "you may be perfectly designed, but there is *always* room for improvement" (38). This eternal quest for female perfection is what characterizes patriarchal utopias, and yet, the reader witnesses how tiring it becomes for eves to become perfect:

They have told us that in order to succeed we need to be good girls, we need to follow the rules, we need to look pretty and speak nicely and be pleasant. I've tried. I've waxed every last hair on my body. I have taken my pills. I have gone to bed hungry every night since I was four years old. I've done everything they have told me to do and here I am, ten days left, and I don't know if it's enough. (283)

The novel offers a more complex identification of the utopian flaw: eves' utopian desires are not eradicated at their birth. The process is far slower and persistent, as if it were a dripping water torture. During the *post-natal*

stage, there exists at the School a wide range of techniques of indoctrination which have as an ultimate goal the submission of eves through paradoxical (de)sexualization, emotional censorship, and sororities without solidarity. Since eves are in a boarding-school, indoctrination can be utilized inside and out of the academic life. Within the school there are a number of subjects that bolster patriarchal domination: PE, unacceptable emotions, organized recreation, calorie calculation, comparison studies, little mama, social graces, and sex-ed (O'Neill, *Only*).<sup>2</sup> These subjects are compulsory to all the eves, regardless the third they will later join. Ironically, eves do not receive any instruction about chastity-life when it is precisely chastities who are in charge of the School's education. But, as has been aforementioned, they "are not wanted like the concubines are. They are not necessary like the companions" (39). O'Neill uses the farcical to display the grim reality in an imperceptible manner. She portrays the fearful consequences of making fun of the trivialities that hide the darkest and most difficult weeds that need to be eradicated from patriarchy.

To understand the paradoxical (de)sexualization I examine Organized Recreation and Sex-Ed.<sup>3</sup> Organized Recreation is aimed at combating "female hysteria syndrome [...] until the urges dissipate" by introducing eves in glass coffins (O'Neill, *Only* 43). Paradoxically, freida affirms that it is in the coffin with the mist choking her that she feels free. Whereas the idea of death as a possible utopian transgression will be readdressed, it is striking how the repression of their sexual arousal – considered to be an infection between eves – is combined with an education based on

2 The hilarious word game reminds us of another peculiar school, that of the Mock Turtle from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*: "Reeling and Writhing, of course, to begin with [...] and then the different branches of Arithmetic — Ambition, Distraction, Uglification, and Derision [...] there was Mystery [...] ancient and modern, with Seaography: then Drawling — the Drawling-master was an old conger-eel, that used to come once a week: he taught us Drawling, Stretching, and Fainting in Coils" (76–77).

3 I prefer the term "desexualization" to terms like "asexuality" or "asexualization" as many patriarchal utopias restrain female sexuality while they still consider female sex essential for the continuation of their utopias. Indeed, many patriarchal utopias have a religious influence, and consequently, their female ideal is a virgin-mother – contradictory in her asexuality and unfeasible for female humans.

mainstream pornography. In order to be perfect concubines, eves must be assimilated by an oversexualized culture where their bodies are commodified. For this, they ironically must act sexual, even though they do not know how to: "Make noise. Make sure that you *look like* you're really enjoying it" (216, emphasis added). Another manifest contradiction in eves' sexuality is associated with their education being based on rape culture. eves are taught to always be willing, but at the same time they must maintain their purity until the Ceremony in order to reach the most elevated third, that of the companions. However, freida is bewildered by such ambiguity: "We have never had a class on how to say no to men while simultaneously never saying no to them" (186). In their last year, eves are trained in the final Inherent Module where the Inheritants begin the courting, that is, hunting. The coercion of eves by men to have sex is so burdensome that eves realize they do not have any other choice in this society: "What difference does it make anyway, freida? It's not like we can say no" (220).

Oversexualization influences not only their physical reality but affects the configuration of their virtual selves on social networks. At the same time, the exposure of their bodies and their overdependence on online opinions affects the eves' perception and configuration of their physical selves. As Haraway says, the posthuman shows a fluctuation being between reality and virtuality that can expand the corporeal limits. With it, communications technologies, together with biotechnologies, are "crucial tools recrafting our bodies," insomuch that they embody new alternative social relations for women (33). In this way, the posthuman fluctuates between reality and virtuality. Nevertheless, even though it could be another transgressive form to overcome the imprisonment of eves, social networks are also dystopified, as the eves' judgments are devoid of self-love and female solidarity. In addition, instead of being used as an extension of the body, the virtual realm functions as a distorted mirror where the real eve is confronted with the virtual eve. Such confrontation results in a feeling of distress due to the impossibility of achieving that perfection of their own virtual selves.

Social networks such as MyFace become a space for eves to exercise their rivalry and contempt for their sisters. Contests like *Your Face or Mine* or *Who Wore It Better* are a continuation of the female failure of solidarity that can be found in the subject of Comparison Studies or the weekly

ranking of the School. Eves with a higher position can achieve popularity and have higher chances to be the companion of the most important Inheritant. As if competing for the title of prom queen, eves acquire an egotistic drive that can only be satisfied by the humiliation of their sisters:

These tasks *are* preparing us for our lives after School, a life in which concubines and companions might share their men but are otherwise eradicated from one another's existence. We may be sisters, but in the future we will not associate with each other. We will not speak to one another. We will be invisible to each other. That is the way it has always been. (O'Neill, *Only* 186–187)

The expected result is what I call sororities without solidarity, or hereafter, patriarchal sororities. The lack of empathy and understanding between eves and their superficial conversations evince the bleakness of this sorority – in the sense of social organization of women – and leave this collective body at the mercy of patriarchy. But still, the sacrifice of the sororal community does not assume individual mindfulness, as eves' narcissistic desires originate from the commodified happiness of sham utopianism.

Under the name of Disneyfication, Darko Suvin explains how the commodification of desire serves as a strategy for capitalist patriarchy's sham utopianism to ensure infantilization, "an infantile 'security blanket'" that impedes any kind of transgressive construction of the self and the community ("Theses" 194). Like Barbies, eves' understanding of the pursuit/purchase of happiness, that is, the accomplishment of their utopian desire, is reduced to the selection of clothes, drugs, and beauty products. eves are besieged with advertisements which stress the need for these goods as if they were miraculous. The ultimate improvement of eves comes with re-design (i.e., plastic surgery), as it not only camouflages eves' changing age and weight but brings about the belief in the genuine possibility of retrieving their unaltered default image. This is the most longed-for commodity, as it grants women the distinctive perfectionism of patriarchal utopias. Infantilization of consumers in this sham utopianism turns literal with anti-age re-designs or, more concretely, with companion vaginal re-design, as any physical trace of maternal experience is regarded as disgraceful.

Plastic surgery holds a transgressive potential because of its possibility of creating multifaceted alterations. Nonetheless, this potential utterly

fails, because, by defying aging and weight changes, women embody perfectionism and fixity and conform to the normative standards of patriarchal utopia. eves can undergo anti-age re-designs and evade the passing of time. This action has a utopian drive that can actually be achieved with the posthuman. The anti-utopian patriarchal utopia of the Inheritants sees the danger of the ever-lasting women, as it breaks the rule of plastic disposability. Hence, eves are programmed with a termination date when they become forty, since they are no longer functional for the patriarchal utopia. This form of life expiration is only applied to companions and concubines, as these two thirds are in contact with the Inheritants. The termination date is also commodified, and the impossibility of chastities to reach this good causes them anxiety: "As if anyone would want to become a chastity, faced with a lifetime of caring for newer, more nubile students as you grow old and decrepit, without the *luxury* of a Termination Date appointed to preserve your beauty" (O'Neill, *Only* 51, emphasis added).

Re-designs also stabilize possible weight changes. However, eves are constantly pressured beforehand to abstain from eating the temptations found at the section of the FatGirl Buffet at the Nutrition Centre. Anorexia is praised as a symbol of strength, but it serves as a means of achieving submission. Actually, Sceats argues that anorexia's refusal of food implies a refusal of social connection due to the fact that "food is a weapon and a means of communication in this world. But more than this, forbidden foods themselves become a measure of delight, of transgression" (112). freida's best friend isabel is a habitual consumer of the FatGirl Buffet. She is marginalized and criticized as a weak girl, though this weakness is actually a site of resistance against patriarchal beauty standards. Her fatness becomes an act of rebellion. However, isabel unavoidably yields to authority when she is obliged to undergo a re-design. As one of the eves asserts, "they did it to *control* her. It's so weak" (O'Neill, *Only* 181).

In a posthuman world entirely dominated by patriarchal utopia, suicide proves the only effective act of utopianism, but it never becomes a turning point in the system's stability. isabel's behavior about her external image is a transgressive attempt to defy the system. And yet, her transgression is futile in that isabel is amended to a default form by the Genetic Engineers. Such physical improvement is a gesture of forgiveness from the leaders, but not

because of compassion (such flaunting of the laws would not be permitted in any case), but rather, it is the infatuation of the Original Father with Isabel that keeps her alive, for she will become the Father's companion. Shortly after she starts her new life, she kills herself. Since they were friends, Isabel's suicide means the end of immunity enjoyed by Freida, who is accused of being defective and sent to the Underground to go through genetic testing. Together with other lifeless naked bodies, she will be reprogrammed to finally "be of some use" for further research by the Genetic Engineers (389). Together with Isabel's suicide, Freida's passive, albeit willing, acceptance of her death is the most transgressive act in the novel, accomplishing what Sargisson labels as "ironic utopia" through death. Such contradiction is even more accentuated when analyzing suicide: "the ultimate self-destruction is the subject permitted agency. Only in this act of transgression can one assert one's will" (*Utopian* 141). Eves' regained agency through death leaves readers in a quandary: either to live selflessly and devoid of utopian desires or to die trying to reach one's utopian aspirations. These are the only possible alternatives found in *Only Ever Yours*, and both of them promote somehow the anti-utopianism of patriarchal utopia.

Patriarchal utopias offer bleak futures to bleak bodies. Such bleakness can be understood in its most literal sense, as can be inferred from Eves' pallid faces and bony structures. Their corporeal inhibition is the result of other simultaneous manifestations of bleakness: their dullness and desolation are the side effects of a body without culture, confidence, self-awareness, and sisterhood. Likewise, the notion of the body presents multiple interpretations: bleakness affects the individual body, the collective body, and the narrative body (see Sargisson, *Contemporary* and *Utopian*). The conditioning of Eves' bodies as living corpses enables the creation of patriarchal sororities, where the feeling of female solidarity cannot grow as a result of a noxious competitiveness. O'Neill plays the macabre satirist by burlesquing the Inheritants' phallogocentric regime. Tragic death functions as the turning point of the story, where patriarchal utopia turns into feminist dystopia, inasmuch as the textual body of this form of utopianism offers death as the only utopian alternative. Despite all this, the reading and deconstruction of patriarchal utopias and dystopias is very important, because, as Sargisson affirms, "notwithstanding the overwhelming bleakness

that pervaded these texts, they almost all contained some glimmer of hope, and *more importantly*, I suggest, they stimulate thought" ("Dystopias" 41). After reading *Only Ever Yours*, the easy-going attitude of the Generation Z crashes into a wall of reality. The impact is so tremendous that it leaves us too damaged to keep on moving. And yet, there is an uneasiness that urges the reader to overcome such paralysis. Women in O'Neill's patriarchal utopia are condemned to a bleak life of commodified happiness, but she invites the reader to defy such conformism. If only we cooperated actively in (de)constructing our contemporary reality differently, this invitation could become a utopian transgression on behalf of those who never learnt to dream.

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DUNJA M. MOHR

## Entangled Utopianism in the Anthropocene

### The Dystopian Spirit of the Twenty-First Century

Twenty-first century speculative fiction has taken a prominent and widely visible dystopian turn – dystopia “defines the spirit of our times” (Claeys 498). As Jill Lepore writes in a piece titled “A Golden Age for Dystopian Fiction” in *The New Yorker* in 2017, “[d]ystopias follow utopias the way thunder follows lightning” and relates this upsurge of dystopian fiction to a distinct disappointment with the political promises of the twenty-first century, for example, an open society, individual economical gains, and beneficial technological progress. Reading Barack Obama’s 2008 speech in New Hampshire about the utopian impetus of the American creed, “Yes, we can heal this nation. Yes, we can repair this world. Yes, we can,” as the “lightning, the flash of hope, the promise of perfectibility” then halted by the new presidency, Lepore relates politics to the reading of dystopian literature, where “polarized politics” are expressed in a “duel of dystopias,” “a proxy war of imaginary worlds.” When Obama publicly criticized a politics of objectivism, an individualism severed from relationality, his referencing of Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) resulted in an upsurge of interest in Rand’s book, while Donald Trump’s election triggered a renewed interest in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and in Margaret Atwood’s famous *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985). The latter gained momentum as a prophetic political allegory of twenty-first century American politics with a surprising fan following, including admonitory dress-ups in Handmaiden gowns, popularized by the multi-Emy and Golden Globe award-winning Hulu TV series adaptation (2017–) of the

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# TRANSGRESSIVE UTOPIANISM

In 2014, when Lucy Sargisson was promoted to professor in the School of Politics and International Relations, at the University of Nottingham, she became the first and, so far, only, professor of utopian studies. This choice symbolized the centrality of utopianism to her life, thought, and educational practice. In three books, each in their own way groundbreaking, a fourth book co-authored by one of us, and in important articles, her work falls into four primary areas: political theory, feminism, environmentalism, and intentional communities, with much of her work intersecting two, three, or even all four. And in all her work, she brings the lens of utopianism to bear on the subject and, in doing so, illuminates both utopianism and the subject at hand. The volume honors Sargisson's contributions to the field of utopian studies, with contributions by Ibtisam Ahmed, Raffaella Baccolini, David M. Bell, Suryamayi Clarence-Smith, Chris Coates, Elena Colombo, Davina Cooper, Rhiannon Firth, Ruth Levitas, Sarah Lohmann, Almudena Machado-Jiménez, Dunja M. Mohr, Tom Moylan, Robyn Muir, José Reis, Lyman Tower Sargent, Lucy Sargisson, Simon Spiegel, Maria Varsam, and Laura Winter.

"Utopian scholars and practical utopians alike can be nourished by the richly diverse articles of this touching tribute to an important activist scholar. This timely collection is a treasure trove of vital insights into how thinkers and activists sharing a vision of a better world can collaborate to help move us toward it. Sargisson personifies key utopian themes in her engaged teaching, feminist and ecological sensibilities, literary analysis, on-site communal research, and insistence on the dynamic link between utopia and politics. By transgressing disciplinary and normative boundaries that confine our imaginations and actions, she frees us to explore our aspirations and imperfections, our individuality and connection to others, our powers and vulnerabilities."

**Michael S. Cummings**, Professor Emeritus of Political Science and University of Colorado President's Teaching Scholar

"I have known Lucy since 1999 when, together with Jim Arnold, we formed the initial secretariat for the newly reinvigorated Utopian Studies Society. As we came to know her, it was evident to us that Lucy was greatly respected by colleagues and students alike. Some of them have honoured her in this volume. Her genuine openness to collaboration and her spirit of positivity contributed significantly to the ultimate success of the endeavour. Though our professional lives were lived in very different settings, we shared a love of the Scottish landscape and an enduring interest in Utopian and communitarian projects, historical and contemporary. The warmth and sincerity of her friendship is valued by very many people among whom I am privileged to be included. If he were still with us on this earth, I know that Jim would be in wholehearted agreement."

**Lorna Davidson**, Retired Director, New Lanark Conservation Trust and former Secretary of the Utopian Studies Society

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Edited by BACCOLINI and SARGENT



# TRANSGRESSIVE UTOPIANISM: ESSAYS IN HONOR OF LUCY SARGISSON



Edited by  
RAFFAELLA BACCOLINI  
and  
LYMAN TOWER SARGENT

Peter Lang