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Dystopia and Loci of Power: Language, Landscape, and Survival

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DYSTOPIA AND LOCI OF POWER:
LANGUAGE, LANDSCAPE, AND SURVIVAL

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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In selected twentieth and twenty-first century Anglo-American literary representations of dystopia, writers argue that language serves two fundamental purposes: first, to reveal restrictive structures of thought created by and essentially serving the interests of hegemonic forces seeking control of the citizenry; second, to show the ways in which protagonists undermine those power structures by building and owning their own language and belief systems. The political consequence, I contend, is exposing the discursive impasses created by hegemonic language and, ultimately, inventing dramatic new ways of engaging in constructive dialogue.

The introduction outlines the tangled relationships between the concepts of utopia and dystopia. Adapting Greimas' semiotic rectangle offers a new way of depicting these relationships and suggests that dystopias offer a solution to political impasses rooted in hegemonic systems of thought. Though literary critics have labeled language a defining characteristic of dystopian fiction, none has closely analyzed the specific ways in which political language and discursive processes operate within societies.

Early in this study, I look closely at Orwell's essay, "Politics and the English Language," where the writer warns of the dangers of hollow languages and ready-made phrases and proverbs. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Riddley Walker*, the film *V for Vendetta* and *The Handmaid's Tale* provide striking examples of the controlling power of language and

attempts by the oppressed to speak back to the hegemonies suppressing thought and self-expression. I then examine the value of place-based knowledge as well as location-specific belief systems as requisites for survival and sanity. In such texts as *The Mars Trilogy*, *Parable of the Sower*, *the Year of the Flood*, *Woman on the Edge of Time* and “The Birds,” writers of dystopias provide evidence for the necessity of reading and reconfiguring human expression. Lakoff’s work on metaphor and political dialogue helps to unpack both dystopian texts and current contemporary situations that highlight the importance of reaching compromises. In sum, these writers demonstrate that new strategies can be applied not only to a dysfunctional landscape but also to addressing impasses in today’s broken political discourse.

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To my sons Noah and Dagan, I hope that I have not in any way damaged you from my academic craziness. Without you two I would not have begun or finished.

I can only hope to protect you from dystopia: may we change enough and in time.

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Now, get to work on our evacuation plan!

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even (especially?!) when things are crazed.

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CHAPTER ONE

DEFINITIONS OF DYSTOPIA AND DIRECTIONS OF DISCOURSE: STEPPING INTO THE SHADOWS

Reading Chapter 11 of the 9/11 Commission's report, aptly titled "Foresight—And Hindsight," former State Department employee and the chief counter-terrorism adviser on the U.S. National Security Council, Richard Clarke, felt it worthwhile to mention in his testimony that "he was concerned about the danger posed by aircraft in the context of protecting the Atlanta Olympics of 1996, the White House complex, and the 2001 G-8 summit in Genoa [Italy]. But he attributed his awareness more to Tom Clancy novels than to warnings from the intelligence community" (qtd. in Kean et.al. 347). Not only did Clancy describe such use of planes that might have been heeded as a possible future scenario in his 1994 novel *Debt of Honor*, wherein a Japanese pilot crashes a 747 into the U.S. Capitol during a joint session of Congress, but a 1972 work, *The End of the Dream* by Philip Wylie, also graphically depicts a fully-loaded plane crashing into a high-rise apartment building in New York City. While neither plane has been hijacked, the Japanese mission in Clancy's text is a plot of vengeance for World War II, and in Wylie's, a homegrown terrorist has purposefully cut the power to the city, plunging it into a deadly darkness in the middle of a blizzard resulting in a plane crash (Clancy 751-766; Wylie 60-66). It is possible then, these authors suggest, that we may avert disaster by employing the imagination, either by borrowing that of the author or expounding on those written "new maps of hell," a now common image in the dystopian critical lexicon coined by Kingsley Amis, with our own educated and empowered imaginations (qtd. in Baccolini and Moylan 1).

Anglo-American writers of the 20th and 21st centuries spin tales of frightening plausible futures including chemical spills, political takeovers, nuclear war, environmental degradation and its accompanying panoply of climate change-induced horrors, and social system breakdowns, to name but a few. Often, a single text covers multiple disasters, such as social system breakdown paired with global warming in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, or are set in similar circumstances from one text to the next, for instance hot and overcrowded cityscapes of Harry Harrison's *Make Room! Make Room!* and Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*. By creating vividly realistic landscapes of apocalypse and writing languages that are both strangely familiar and alien to the reader, dystopian authors cunningly drag their readers into the void where humanity may be headed. In the genre of dystopias, language serves two purposes: either to reveal structures of restrictive thought created by and serving the interests of hegemonic forces who seek to control the thought processes of the citizenry; or to present the undermining of those forces by protagonists who seek to destroy the power structures by building and owning their own language and belief systems. The political consequence is to expose discursive impasses that are created by hegemonic language systems establish new ways of engaging in constructive dialogue. By examining the areas of language, landscape, and survival, loci of power can be discovered that are used to control, rebel, and occasionally compromise in dystopian texts.

This Introduction begins by defining the tangled relationships between the concepts of utopia and dystopia through a close study of the evolution of definitions and connections between the terms. Then, by adapting Greimas' semiotic rectangle, these relationships are depicted in a new way to suggest that dystopias offer a solution to

political impasses rooted in hegemonic systems of thought. Though critics have stated the importance of language to the genre and have even labeled it a defining characteristic, they do not closely read the texts with the goal of seeing how the knowledge and lessons of dystopia can be applied to current issues with political language and discursive processes in contemporary society.

Defining Dystopia

Dystopian literature has been with us for about 200 years. One of the foremost dystopian scholars, Tom Moylan, states, “the dystopia emerged as a literary form in its own right in the early 1900s,” and is, “largely the product of the terrors of the twentieth century. A hundred years of exploitation, repression, state violence, war, genocide, disease, famine, ecocide, depression, debt, and the steady depletion of humanity through the buying and selling of everyday life” (xi). Likewise, David W. Sisk states, “The term *dystopia* is not a new one. When J. Max Patrick used it in 1952, he thought he was making it up; in fact, however, John Stewart Mill coined the word in 1868. Mill had in mind Jeremy Bentham’s *cacotopia*—‘evil place’—which exactly fits the sense of the definition, but neither term seems to have caught the imagination of critics for the next hundred years” (5 italics orig.). Sisk then provides an example predating that provided by Moylan for the advent of the genre by more than a century: “The dystopia begins only in the mid-to-late eighteenth century, when the early promise of the Industrial Revolution—that technological progress would inevitably improve social conditions—gave way to increasingly impersonalized mechanization and exploitation” (Sisk 6-7).

However, both critics cite the rise of industrial production and alienation from the natural world through technology as major causes of the dystopian turn.

Similarly, M. Keith Booker sets up his definition:

Briefly, dystopian literature is specifically that literature which situates itself in direct opposition to utopian thought, warning against the potential negative consequences of arrant utopianism. At the same time, dystopian literature generally also constitutes a critique of existing social conditions or political systems, either through the critical examination of the utopian premises upon which those conditions and systems are based or through the imaginative extension of those conditions and systems into different context that more clearly reveal their flaws and contradictions. (*Dystopian Lit.* 3)

From the start, dystopias have functioned to critique societies and their flaws.¹ It is this element of critique that provides much to be delved into for the scholar today, now that dystopian texts have gained wider acceptance in the academic field.

¹ In addition, “Post Apocalyptic Fiction,” which appears to be considered only a subset of science fiction but does not get its own entry in the *Bedford Glossary*, often contains dystopic elements but may not, on the whole, truly function as a dystopia because these works deal more with the survival and/or aftermath of a cataclysmic event rather than the society that precipitated the event or arose after the disaster. While these fictions do prompt the reader to consider just what occurred to bring about such a disaster and what may be done to avoid such a thing in real life, some of them lack the full characteristics of the critical dystopia—which shall be discussed more fully in the following paragraphs of this chapter. A contemporary example of post-apocalyptic writing might be Max Brooks’ *World War Z*; a postmodern novel about the outbreak and subsequent war against the zombie hordes plaguing Earth. Additionally, a sub-category just for apocalypse-precipitated-by-virus today would have many film and television entries, perhaps underscoring our latent fears of world-wide viral infection: *Ultraviolet*, *Æon Flux*, the *Resident Evil* quadrilogy, *The Crazies*, *Daybreakers*, *I Am Legend*, *28 Days Later*, *28 Weeks Later*, *12 Monkeys*, *Outbreak*, *Contagion*, and *The Stand*. Though

The relatively recent origins of dystopia, then, should invite the question of why there are such bad future projections and why did they begin to be written? In *Transformations of Language in Modern Dystopias*, David Sisk states “The dystopia begins only in the mid-to-late eighteenth century, when the early promise of the Industrial Revolution—that technological progress would inevitably improve social conditions—gave way to increasingly impersonalized mechanization and exploitation” (6-7). This advent also receives attention from Tom Moylan in his *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, a book of essays on SF, utopia, and dystopia wherein he sets the date a bit later:

Dystopian narrative is largely the product of the terrors of the twentieth century. A hundred years of exploitation, repression, state violence, war, genocide, disease, famine, ecocide, depression, debt, and the steady depletion of humanity through the buying and selling of everyday life provided more than enough fertile ground for this fictive underside of utopian imagination. . . . [T]he dystopia emerged as a literary form in its own right in the early 1900s, as capital entered a new phase with the onset of monopolized production and as the modern imperialist state extended its internal and external reach. (xi)

Both critics cite the rise of mechanized industry as a dystopian trigger, but Moylan’s fuller definition includes the extended apparatus of the nation-state, an addition that is echoed in Kriss A. Drass and Edgar Kiser’s study, “Structural Roots of the Future: World-System Crisis and Stability and the Production of Utopian Literature in the United

these entries may not all fit the dystopian genre, they do provide interesting commentary on their separate outbreak causes and the subsequent attempts at containment or survival.

States,” which examines publication trends of both utopian and dystopian literature. This study concludes that during times of socio-political hegemony, dystopian production experiences a surge, but upswings in utopian production seem more likely during periods of flux and duress (433). Thus, during times of apparent stability of economy and a prevalent, culture-dominating ideology, writers project futures of extreme state-sanctions with social and cultural homogenization: in other words, they represent the worst-case scenario of the force currently in power. On the other hand, according to the study, during times of social and political unrest and unease, authors often represent futures more stable and orderly than the current climate. Although Drass and Kiser found the connection between utopian texts and crises more tenuous, and certainly works of any kind can be produced at any point in history, it stands to reason that during the worst moments writers could create plans for better societies to follow the current chaos. Two interconnected genres, dystopia and utopia. Our greatest fears and our greatest hopes bound together.

Not surprisingly, definitions of dystopias generally provide a simple contrast with utopias. For example,

The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms defines utopia as an ideal place that does not exist in reality. The word utopia, which comes from the Greek for *outopia*, meaning “no place,” and *eutopia*, meaning “good place,” is itself a **pun** referring to a nonexistent good place. [...] **Dystopias** are the opposite of utopias; they are horrific places, usually characterized by degenerate or oppressive societies. (Murfin and Ray, italics and bold orig. 493)

This definition, while typical, fails to show or exemplify the genre, reducing it to simplistic operational functions. A more useful approach is contained in Greimas' semiotic rectangle, which allows not simply for oppositional but also for correlative relationships between words or ideas. This relationship mapping works because Greimas posits, as many Structuralist critics do, that things can only be known in relation to other things—to use the French term added to the theoretical lexicon by Derrida: *différance*. The semiotic rectangle becomes a way of visually displaying the relationships, oppositions, and counter-forces of words and the objects they signify. Therefore, this web-like structure provides a way to examine the interconnectedness of the “-opias,” since they often function as facets of one another even within the same text: the Hitlerian society in *Swastika Night* is a utopian haven for most German men, at the pinnacle of the social strata, and a dystopian hell for all women, mere vessels for breeding and below the lowest social class of the novel—perhaps it is the idea of the utopia for a few that ends in creation of the dystopia for the majority. While it may seem at a glance that utopia and dystopia exist as opposites, a closer inspection of their definitions, offered here with those of their true opposites, provides clarification and better understanding of each word and their interactions.

Utopia: literally “no-place”; a certain community where, as Suvin explains, “sociopolitical institutions, norms, and relationships between people are organized according to a *radically different principle* than in the author’s community (“Theses” 188, italics orig).

Eutopia: literally “good place”; a certain community where, quoting Suvin again “sociopolitical institutions, norms, and relationships among people

[are] organized according to a *radically more perfect principle* than in the author's community" (189, italics orig).

Anti-Utopia: literally "against utopia"; a text written to critique a specific utopia or utopian thought (Baccolini and Moylan, "Dystopias" 5).

Dystopia: literally "bad-place"; a certain community where sociopolitical institutions, norms, and relationships are organized according to Suvin's "*radically less perfect principle*" ("Theses" 189, italics orig).

To map out these entwined relationships between words using the semiotic rectangle, direct opposites are shown in parallel pairs across the top and bottom (utopia/anti-utopia and eutopia/dystopia), yet these relationships are not simply binary ones and must be situated in the larger framework of their correlatives—wherein each word implies the other—designated by the diagonal lines (utopia/dystopia and eutopia/anti-utopia: contrary pairings). Part of the benefit of employing the diagram appears when each term must be considered within the context of all its associations, instead of whichever word the brain immediately jumps to in order to define the word via *différance*. However, Lakoff and Johnson's important 1980 work, *The Metaphors We Live By*, exposes the dangers of thinking in binary pairings, such as black/white, woman/man, and emotion/reason, to name a few: when we can imagine only one alternative, we become limited in our thinking and in our acceptance of variation. Even very young children can give opposites when provided with one word at a time: up/down, back/front, left/right, and so on. When we discover these structures always already present in our language, it should reveal our proclivity to pair items up, to limit ourselves to one choice and an Other. Through the semiotic rectangle, word relationships

it cannot truly exist. And in any case, we should avoid utopia to avoid its dark and inescapable underside. Any reader who has encountered Huxley's *Brave New World* might have begun thinking that the future of ease and technological advancement would be a great place to live; however, those paying attention until the end usually reject that version of reality as a deeply flawed one. This can be likened to any type of political promise of a better world by buying into and adhering to just one ideology. However, while dystopia inheres within the utopian ideal, it is exceptional because dystopia inhabits the Zone of the Achievable and Practical. In the dystopian text, where the hegemonic forces attempt to make language rigid and controlling for some utopian agenda, counter-narrative forces work against that desire to explode and fracture that stultifying lexicon. This is the Greimas model revised and writ large: two interconnected genres, dystopia and utopia. Our greatest fears and our greatest hopes bound together.

As some literary critics will refer to the same text with different labels, thereby underscoring the slipperiness and fluidity of these definitions, this diagram makes it easier to see why there *is* slippage of definition. While categories are not cleanly substitutable, they are deeply intertwined and often implicated within one another, as evidenced by David Sisk's statement that "Dystopia exists as fiction and as language in order to prevent utopia from jumping off the page onto the social planner's agenda" (93). The semiotic rectangle reveals the consequences of actions: Dystopia is indeed the counterweight to utopia, exposing the fact that supposedly perfect societies for some are most often built on egregious treatment of many, and for the oppressed, the utopia has a distinctly darker, dystopian appearance. Furthermore, my own interpretation of Greimas' overall work *On Meaning* leads to this conclusion: The world cannot speak for itself;

therefore, it is without defense in the human world of speaking and writing unless someone chooses to assign value to the earth by naming it and speaking on the world's behalf. So I theorize that when authors choose to write about the future, whether bad or good, for theory or for practice, they call this future into being with, perhaps, an express purpose of creating a defense for the earth or better societies. One particular subgenre of the dystopia, the critical dystopia, provides space for hope.

Definition and Characteristics of the Critical Dystopia

Moylan, Sisk, and Booker define certain parameters for the genre, but it is in Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan's *Dark Horizons* that dystopia's definition becomes extremely detailed and differentiated from other types (utopia and anti-utopia—that which is directly oppositional to the utopian text and/or utopian thought; the true opposite of utopia). Baccolini and Moylan articulate two main traits of dystopias—a hegemonic force that controls and limits language and a protagonist who works to restore it. The first major characteristic is the first encountered by readers—the *in media res* opening that drops the audience into a “terrible new world” that they must begin to understand and navigate despite the initial dislocation (Baccolini and Moylan 5). In contrast with other science fiction, utopias, and some anti-utopias—no dream or journey takes place to transport protagonist and reading audience to the new society of the dystopia: they are both always already there in the middle of the action (5). Gradually, as Baccolini and Moylan note, the protagonist begins to question the status quo of his or her own time and either develops a personal counter-narrative, such as a forbidden journal, or discovers a lost or taboo text still in existence. This counter-narrative exists to challenge the

hegemony at play in the dystopian fiction and its controlled language that the protagonist must face in the society (5). Perhaps it is precisely because these characters have been deprived or limited in their use of language that the dystopia and the *in media res* effect work. Walter J. Ong, writing about oral poets and their craft posits that these storytellers begin *in media res* “not because of any grand design, but perforce. They had no choice, no alternative” (15). The same is often true of the protagonist of the dystopia: given a glimmer of a chance to write down, read about the past, and somehow pass on his or her own story, it must begin right away. Exposition is, perhaps, a dangerous luxury. Often, the main character must begin to remake language because words and/or meanings have been changed or stripped away in order to control the society. Orwell’s paring down of the English language into “Newspeak” from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* stands as the most famous example and will be explored later in this dissertation along with other cogent instances of language as a means of oppression and resistance.

It is the critical dystopia that will be the main focus of this dissertation. Baccolini and Moylan then take the definition of dystopia a step further by building on founding field critic Lyman Tower Sargent’s separate category of the “critical dystopia”:

a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as worse than contemporary society but that normally includes at least one eutopian [good place] enclave or holds out hope that the dystopia can be overcome and replaced with a eutopia. (qtd. in Baccolini and Moylan 7)

They then add that critical dystopias “maintain utopian hope *outside* their pages” due to their open endings (italics orig. 7). Though a protagonist may die at or near the text’s end, the true critical dystopia allows the reader to imagine a future for that fictional world that may be better than the one that has been introduced and experienced through reading. Often, some sort of free zone or rebel underground provides this hope that all is not lost. Works such as *Swastika Night* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* function as critical dystopias because their endings are not closed. In *Swastika Night*, Alfred’s sons still live and possess the forbidden history book that could bring down Hitlerian society, while in *The Handmaid’s Tale* the academic conference at the novel’s end shows that Gileadean society has ended and become a matter for study. Both novels prompt readers to consider what in their contemporary society could, extrapolated to its worst end, lead to such futures, and to explore whether the dark fictional futures are possible in reality.

Dystopian Language and the Critics

The control of language is at the heart of dystopia. Many critics mention various characters who write for self-realization by creating their counter-narratives (most notably, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’s Winston, *We*’s D-503); however, few scholars go on to specifically explore that writing and *how* it functions within the novel especially. Thus, language receives notice as a central characteristic of the dystopia, but is mainly subjected to a checklist type of treatment: does this work also deal with control of language? Yes. Dystopia. Check. Additionally, Keith M. Booker highlights the important difference of language in the correlatives of utopia and dystopia:

Noting the high percentage of utopian/dystopian fictions that deal centrally with language, Walter Meyers has thus proposed that the attitude taken toward language is the fundamental factor that distinguishes between utopia and dystopia. Utopias, for Meyers, will give language its head, allowing it to grow and develop as it will; dystopia will seek in every way possible to exert an authoritarian control over language, preventing linguistic changes that might lead to heterodox thought.

(Booker, *Dystopian Impulse* 81)

However, the dystopia employs both of these aspects since the hegemony represents the dystopic controlling factor while the creating or recovered reading of a text embodies the utopian impulse that Meyer describes. Especially in those dystopias that include the creation of a secret text undertaken by the awakening protagonist (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *The Handmaid's Tale* are two popular examples), the recovery of words—thus history and memory—and/or the invention of words hearkens toward a better time. As the protagonist begins to create or read for him or herself “...the process of taking control over the means of language, representation, memory, and interpellation is a crucial weapon and strategy in moving dystopian resistance from an initial consciousness to an action that leads to a climactic event that attempts to change the society” (Bacconlini and Moylan 6). This personal taking control of language is not unlike finding one’s own voice as espoused by contemporary composition theory. Learning to write as the true self and to value that voice despite its differences and anomalies from Standard American English causes discomfort for some in control of language, such as teachers or government officials, while at the same time resonating with peers or even with the

writer, who has at last written something that matters personally. Through these counter-narratives, protagonists begin to take control of language in dystopia and reclaim it from the false and hollow narratives perpetuated by those in charge.

This friction between hegemony and counter-narrative often becomes a central part of the text. For example, the language of D-503's journal in *We* flowers gradually even as he becomes more and more certain that he will be discovered committing treason against the One State. Moylan observes that "Throughout the history of dystopian fiction, the conflict of the text has often turned on the control of language. . . . But discursive power, exercised in the reproduction of meaning and the interpellation of subjects, is a parallel and necessary force" (148). In D-503's One State, writing is not necessarily forbidden, but public expression must meet certain strict parameters, which his friend R-13, must do as a writer for the government. Imaginative, private writing, such as D-503's diary, would not be approved, most likely providing evidence of madness or treason. Generally, the protagonist resides where using language in a creative, personal way is forbidden:

Language – particularly its manipulation and control – is a central feature of the totalitarian regimes described in dystopian novels. History (the past) and reality (the present) are usually rewritten in an attempt to control everybody's present and future life. An independent use of language is similarly forbidden: writing a diary, reading books about the past, or playing a simple game of *Scrabble* are all activities linked with language and are all forbidden... (Baccolini, "Journeying" 344)

Yet the counter-narrative evolves by this forbidden practice of writing, of telling truths in the face of monolithic histories and, many times, under the threat of certain death for dealing in words and free thought. Thus, as Tom Moylan writes, "... control over the means of language, over representation and interpellation, is a crucial weapon and strategy in dystopian resistance" (148-9). By taking back language and talking back to the power structure, whether the counter-narrative becomes public or not, the dystopian protagonist refuses to let his or her knowledge be buried in the sands of conformity, sometimes imagining a future audience who will read these for-now-forbidden words.

Considering language's function between the realities of both the text and the reader, Ildney Cavalcanti writes briefly about the relationship between the circumstances of the dystopia and their contemporary world correlatives, stating, "I suggest that in the case of dystopia the relationship between language and referents can only be defined as deviant. . . . dystopias are *overtly* catachrestic [filled with intentionally misused words or strained word usages; broken metaphors, such as that found in *Ridley Walker's* dialect and especially in the misinterpretation of the Legend of St. Eustace, which will be discussed in Chapter Two] because they depict fictional realities that are, to different degrees, discontinuous with the contemporary real (although such realities are drawn in relation to, and as a critique of, the world as we know it)" (50, italics orig.). Cavalcanti's comments deal more with the critical function of the dystopia as it causes the reader's reflection on contemporary society and that society's possible implication in the creation of such futures. The catachresis, or broken metaphor, encompasses the whole dystopian text itself: despite the meaning of a certain metaphor within the fictional society, the metaphor also resonates with something in the author's society—and perhaps in the

reader's—that allowed such a future to be possible in the imagination. It is a fiction that supposes a past related to the reader's own, yet presents a future based on a further developed past that has not yet happened for the reader. The language of metaphor provides dystopia's eerie familiarity as well as its discomfiting disjuncture from the real because the reader may recognize the items juxtaposed to make the comparisons. It is in the odd combinations that the reader is unsettled. Certainly biblical texts provide a great deal of comfort and confirm belief for many people; however, taken from their usual contexts and used as the basis of society and law as in *The Handmaid's Tale*, they become strangely alien: known and yet not known.

This catachrestic effect, this playing with histories, such as in *The Handmaid's Tale*, then, makes the dystopia also function in a seer's role. Dystopias reveal our possible future histories. The official histories of the hegemonies and the counter-narratives of the protagonists serve as testing grounds for our own real-time futures. Writes McKay, “The ideological loading is surely semantic as well as formal: both the books within the books *Swastika Night* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are *history* books, read in the future times when history has officially ended or is only official. They describe and critique social/political institutions, and so have that additional social/political significance” (McKay 304, italics orig.). However, the bulk of McKay's article focuses on the act of reading and interpreting these counter-narratives rather than on the specific content or word choice employed in their creation. Certainly, the points that both hegemonic forces and dystopian protagonists choose to include influence how we see each side, when reading the texts as histories. Though both sides must use a predominantly narrative form, the events chosen for inclusion by the hegemony and

dystopian protagonists differ greatly. The reason for this difference in content is the meaning each side wishes to perpetuation. Regarding emplotment choices, Hayden White writes, “The historical narrative thus mediates between the events reported in it on the one side and pre-generic plot structures conventionally used in our culture to endow unfamiliar events and situations with meanings, on the other” (400). Even though dystopian narratives are fictional, they do contain histories of that particular fiction. The hegemony chooses which points it will place in a victorious narrative form, but the protagonist also makes choices that refute the official narrative in his or her own counter-narrative. Just as the forces in control of dystopian fictional futures carefully choose what their citizens will or will not know, the protagonists make similar choices in their own writings as they choose what to reclaim from the scrapheap of their cultures and lives.

Dystopian critic Tom Moylan also addresses the counter-narratives stating:

An important result of the reappropriation of language by the dystopian misfits and rebels is the reconstitution of empowering memory. With the past suppressed and the present reduced to the empirica of daily life, dystopian subjects usually lose all recollection of the way things were before the new order, but by regaining language they also recover the ability to draw on the alternative truths of the past and ‘speak back’ to hegemonic power. (Moylan 148-9)

Critics often point out these counter-narratives as reclaimers of history and words but seldom attend to the minutiae of language in them. Atwood’s text provides an example of its status as exemplar of the dystopic counter-narrative. Approaching dystopian texts

from mainly a feminist standpoint, Baccolini is concerned with the critiquing aspect that the counter-narrative makes possible. Yes, Offred writes in opposition to the master narrative, which does function as Baccolini suggests, but only the theme of her writing is addressed and not the semantics of it:

Through the epistolary account and appropriation of what the totalitarian state wants to deny her—memory, language, imaginations, and, hence, subjectivity—Offred creates herself and creates for her loved ones a possibility, an alternative world, in response to the obliteration of the individual; through memory, language, and imagination Atwood also provides a lucid critique of the patriarchal past. (“Gender and Genre” 23)

Though the Republic of Gilead forbids women the right to read, write, or live independent lives, Offred tells her reader a story that is an intermingling of her current life and memories of her older, happier one. Because her past is so very much like our own in America today, it provides excellent critical ground for the possibilities in our own societal structure that allow such a future. It also serves as a way to survive and stay human in Offred’s reality, as I will demonstrate in later chapters.

In another dystopia, Lauren Olamina writes a diary that also becomes the first text of her Earthseed religion. Regarding Lauren’s journal from *Parable of the Sower*, Baccolini states that

The very act of recording her life, narrating the story of her survival and also setting down on paper the principles of her new religion (the record of her community) constitutes one of the utopian elements in Butler’s novel. It is a site of resistance against the oppression of the all-too-believable

near future; it is a record of her utopian principles; it is a means of survival in that it empowers Lauren against the threats of enslavement and destruction on the part of the dystopian society. (“Gender and Genre” 25)

Lauren’s text, also set in a not-too-distant American future, allows the reader to consider what in our own society may very well lead to such events. Lauren is not forbidden to write, as Offred was, but reading and writing are skills that many in her time do not possess for schools have all but ceased to exist. Lauren’s talents, having been fostered by her father and stepmother who were both professors, make her an anomaly and also potentially dangerous to the rising tide of Fundamentalist Christianity.

What is lacking in the criticism, for the most part, is attention to the specific word choices protagonists make, the decisions on what knowledge to include and thus save in the counter-narratives, and the identity constructions made by the protagonists. However, the counter-narratives do exist within the texts and thus offer an alternative to the official version of history. It is these forbidden texts that call to mind the work of Walter Benjamin concerning history and the power of suppression, which I find is key to understanding language and texts found in dystopias. Benjamin writes that, “*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins” (“Theses” 681, italics orig.). History is written by the victor and is in fact a continuous stream of the accounts of the conquerors, and not the conquered (681). Winston, D-503, Offred, and Lauren all write against this stream: they are the conquered. Whether or not they believe their narratives will survive, they write them nonetheless, eroding the official solid surface the hegemony wishes to present. Through their accounts, moments are saved and available for retelling. The dystopian protagonists’ efforts to create their stories carve out space for other truths and

ways of being than the reality those same characters began with in their respective novels. By telling their own version of events, they have saved those moments from disappearing out of history entirely.

Certainly dystopian critics note and value the existence of counter-narratives, but close reading can reveal more functions than previously explored, such as reading dystopias as guides for survival both inside and outside the pages. Baccolini's words allude to this text-transcending feature, providing an entrance to the discussion for this work. The following quotation could pertain to any marginalized figure in the dystopia, not just females. Writing specifically about Burdekin, Orwell, Atwood, and Piercy, Baccolini concludes that,

Memory and recollections represent an alternative to the word denied to women; they embody women's reappropriation of language. Journeying to the past through memory and imagining a better future in twentieth-century dystopias may not necessarily lead to happiness, but can provide the characters with a reminder of the limits of our culture. Because we are embedded in (his)tory and, therefore, cannot ignore that the present originates from the patriarchal past, these journeys allow us to critically analyze the construction of gendered identities and to realize that they are a product of our culture and society. Because those who are the masters of language can create and define reality for us, memory and imagination without nostalgia, or language and storytelling, become fundamental tools in the deconstruction of the master narrative. Remembering, but remembering differently, allows us to break the hold tradition has over us,

and can become, in Adrienne Rich's words, a necessary "act of survival" which will set ourselves free. ("Journeying" 357)

Through the counter-narratives, the dystopian protagonists strive to work against their respective hegemonic forces. They make conscious word and event plotment choices to reveal alternative ways of living and surviving for past, present, and future.

One other characteristic of the dystopia is its ability to speak back to hegemony, a phenomena best described by Suvin, who details a process, one capable of lulling the unwary; one frighteningly part of our world:

Transfer ideologizing is the continually reinforced empathizing immersion, the "thick," topologically and figuratively concrete, and seamless false consciousness that injects the hegemonic bourgeois version of U.S. normality into people's neurons by "naturalizing" and neutralizing three imaginative fields: *historical time* as the space of alternative choices; the *foreign/ers*; and the *natural world*. Historical time is turned into the myth of technological progress, while the foreign and natural become the primitive, the savage, and the monstrous. (Suvin, "Theses" 194, italics original).

In other words, if a society portrays one set of values, beliefs, and opinions as the only set, it becomes the norm for all in that society and defines the limits of that society: people either live as the majority does, or they live differently. Here the binary trap comes back hauntingly: same/different, good/bad, us/them. The current reality becomes the preferred because it is the one known and continually reinforced by media and society. This "transfer ideologizing" becomes a thick cataract on society's vision and

people are precluded from seeing in other ways, imagination is curtailed and empathy may be jeopardized (194). Human historical time becomes a simple progression of events from the cave to the current reduced to a plottable and linear timeline, which makes people believe that history must always be equivalent to progress. And is not progress good and the obverse of regress? With this construction of time/history-as-progress, society is fooled into believing humanity must always move towards better times and people are removed from the responsibility for what actually happens because it is always deferred into the future. Foreigners become the Other, objectified and different. Therefore, those in the perceived majority may feel free to think less of them. Likewise, the natural world becomes Other: it exists as a subject for study or a vending machine for goods, not as humanity's home and legacy.

Insidiously, transfer ideologizing enters our conscious and unconscious thought in ways akin to all the best—or is it worst?—dystopias: through media saturation. The two-minute advertisement, the sound bite, the song, the politician's speech, the forwarded e-mail, the blog update, the text message, the status post, the tweet. In the 21st century we swim in a sea of suggestions, all the while provided with someone's template for a normal-and-happy-life at every waking moment with at least three items to purchase to gain this ideal happiness. Historical time is no longer dependent on our educated choices following one another in a cause-and-effect manner, but on the next version of technology that someone somewhere will inevitably invent to save us just in time. Those people, creatures, and places different from those in the cities of the western world become less than ourselves when defined by negation. We know what we are because we know that we are not them, and more importantly, because they are not us they cannot be

included in our communities. Without variation, our communities may likely become bland bubbles of homogeneity, and without accepting and confronting the differences every day, we become isolated and cut off from other possibilities: our language traps us. Imaginative language, as a personal human resource, has no place in a world with scripted outcomes. Rest assured, politicians claim. Our Technology is superior to that country's, to that disaster. Our Technology in the First World will save us. As easy as that was to write, and as horrifying as it is to believe, this is not much different from many peoples' reactions to the global warming crisis: we can go on living in our transfer ideologized cultural bubble, "Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers; // Little we see in Nature that is ours;" blindly believing that someone somewhere will invent a machine or process that will absolve us of our guilt in destroying the Earth, which has become only a lifeless object (Wordsworth ln. 2-3). Many cannot break the culturally formatted connection, to paraphrase the work of Lakoff and Johnson on the power of metaphor, which implies that the future must also mean progress and progress must also mean better, therefore the future cannot be anything *but* better than today. To simplify the research and apply it to this situation, we do not need to worry because history is progressive and progress means to go forward. The slick surfaces prevent our imaginations from creating languages that include ourselves in worst-case scenarios and this blocks us from awareness of dangers and other ways of living.

What has dystopian fiction to do with any of these real-world issues? What special features do they include to remedy this transfer ideologizing or to think critically about society? I contend that dystopian fictions employ language to provide stimulation that encourages critical thinking regarding possible futures, highlights the dangers of

language to empty out meaning while it also offers an antidote to this emptiness with location-specific narratives, and models strategies to survive apocalyptic situations by promoting reading of literal and symbolic landscapes. Furthermore, some dystopias offer new political paradigms for transcending broken dialogue that may also assist in bettering our real-time conversations. Each of these issues will be expanded upon in the following chapters.

In Chapter Two: “What is Empty Can be Refilled: Hegemonic Hollowing and Rebel Re-Storying,” language as a locus of power for both oppression and expression is explored. Orwell’s essay “Politics and the English Language” points out the dangers of hollow languages and ready-made phrases, which lead to hollow thoughts. Then I explore *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, an example of hegemonic language-hollowing carried to the extreme. This controlling power of language is then rebutted by refilling re-story-ers in *Riddley Walker*, *V for Vendetta*, and *The Handmaid’s Tale*, who provide textual examples of speaking back to the enforced textual suppression that hegemonic forces use to limit reality.

Chapter Three, “Connecting the Dots: Reading and Writing the Landscape of Dystopia” explores place-based knowledge and language, location-specific survival belief-systems expressed in proverbs, and place as necessary to survival and sanity. Through evaluation of the texts in this chapter, dystopia reveals strategies to think with as characters encounter and then interpret literal and political landscapes. When these dystopian protagonists encounter new areas and circumstances, they must learn new terms or create them to aptly fit reality. *The Mars Trilogy*, *Parable of the Sower*, *The Year of the Flood*, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and the short story “The Birds” provide

evidence of the necessity of reading landscapes well to survive, correctly interpreting political and social factors, creating proverbs name situations in which social stability is repeatedly threatened.

Chapter Four, “Dystopian Prophecy: Warnings for our Future,” examines the role that language plays in breaking political impasses. By using *The Mars Trilogy* paired with contemporary political language commentary, new strategies can be found in dystopia that may be applied in the dysfunctional American political conversation today. Lakoff’s work on metaphor and political dialogue helps unpack both dystopian texts and real situations to highlight the importance of reaching compromises. Additionally, *The Iron Heel* plays out scenarios akin to current events and serves as a warning text if language impasses cannot be overcome.

Finally, in the conclusion “Moving On: Not All Futures Must Be Dystopian,” recommendations for applying dystopian lessons to life crystallize. It would appear that a good part of the answer for our broken political discourse would be for governments to stop hiring futurists to tell them what to think and just read more dystopias. Additionally, directions for further use of dystopian fictions emerge related directly to place and use in classrooms.

CHAPTER TWO

WHAT IS EMPTY CAN BE FILLED: HEGEMONIC HOLLOWING AND REBEL RE-STORYING

*“Remember that a way to align your behavior with my desires
is to get you to accept my definition of reality.
Power rests in getting masses of people to accept your interpretation of events,
and this is firmly seated in the structure of language.”
~Frank Herbert, “Science Fiction and a World in Crisis” 94*

*“For every image of the past that is not
recognized by the present as one of its own concerns
threatens to disappear irretrievably”
~Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the History of Philosophy” 681*

Certainly it seems logical to say that language is a great concern of the dystopia, for without written language we would not have the text to consider in the first place. The dystopian text, however, presents an opportunity to look at language as loci of power both for oppression and expression. In the essay “Dystopia and its Histories,” Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan list characteristics of dystopias to differentiate them from the utopia. The second characteristic given, and the one most important for this chapter, is the counter-narrative that develops throughout the course of a dystopian text. They state that, “Throughout the history of dystopian fiction, the conflict of the text turns on the control of language” (5). After readers are dropped *in media res* into the dystopian society, they must begin to orient themselves about this new world. Often, along with the text’s protagonist, readers must learn hard lessons about this society they have bought into: “the dystopian protagonist’s resistance often begins with a verbal confrontation and the reappropriation of language, since s/he is generally prohibited from using language, and, when s/he does, it means nothing but empty propaganda” (6). As the main

characters cast about for meaning beneath what they took for reality, they begin to write a new story, often a personal one that contradicts the official version.

This “process of taking control over the means of language, representation, memory, and interpellation is a crucial weapon and strategy in moving dystopian resistance from an initial consciousness to an action that leads to a climactic event that attempts to change the society” (6). So not only does a hegemonic force exist that creates conflict by controlling and modifying language and meaning, but also a counter-narrative—a speaking back—must occur creating the impetus for the text’s plot. Looking only at novels, the predominance of the counter-narrative feature becomes apparent: the women’s language of the *Native Tongue* trilogy, Lauren’s journal in *Parable of the Sower*, the hidden and memorized books of *Fahrenheit 451*, Toby’s journal in *Year of the Flood*, D-503’s journal in *We*, the unfinished manuscript of Avis Everhard in *The Iron Heel*, and Knight von Hess’ book in *Swastika Night*. However, outside of work on Newspeak in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and some feminist criticism on women’s writing in the dystopia, an overview and inspection of the function of language in the dystopia is missing. In this chapter, I will examine the power of language as a tool for the hegemony to empty out meaning, providing a device for control; as an instrument of the protagonist to refill words with story and meaning, a corrosive truth potion to dispel the false realities of propaganda; and as a starting place for literature to leave the classroom as a call to activism, a mirror for reflection on the societies that allowed such texts to be imagined.

In 1945, three years before his famous novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* would be published, George Orwell wrote an essay “Politics and the English Language” addressing

a problem of language as an impediment to understanding as well as a pitfall for accepting words without thinking about their meaning. Thus, language is a two-edged blade: it can keep us aware and engaged, or it can numb the mind and reactions. “It [English] becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. The point is that the process is reversible” (Orwell, “Politics” 114). By attending more carefully to what is being said and written—and many times, what is not being said or written—we can have fewer foolish thoughts. While much of the first portion of Orwell’s essay addresses slovenliness of thought as demonstrated by various writing samples, the latter portion takes the personal laziness in expression to a further, more frightening point that he would explore in-depth in the dystopian classic *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Orwell stresses the connections among sloppy thinking, thoughtless writing, and political degradation:

But you are not obliged to go to all this trouble. You can shirk it by simply throwing your mind open and letting the ready-made phrases come crowding in. They will construct your sentences for you -- even think your thoughts for you, to a certain extent -- and at need they will perform the important service of partially concealing your meaning even from yourself. It is at this point that the special connection between politics and the debasement of language becomes clear. (Orwell, “Politics” 122)

Use of well-worn phrases and platitudes requires no depth of thought to write, and likewise, they require little to no thought or imagination to accept.² The listening

² Sportswriter Anthony Federico would have done well to heed Orwell on 8 Feb. 2012 when he ran the headline "Chink in the Armor: Jeremy Lin's 9 Turnovers Cost Knicks in Streak-stopping Loss to Hornets" on ESPN's mobile website. He only considered the

audience can easily consume and digest these meaningless words without even a hiccup. We need to be more like the Alchemist asking, questioning, and delving into what is behind the slick surface of reality in order to create our own thoughtful interpretations.

Hollow Languages, Hollow Thoughts

This control of language by hegemonic forces in the dystopia is often the first characteristic readers encounter. Propaganda in fictional ads and hegemonic slogans such as “BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU” and

WAR IS PEACE

FREEDOM IS SLAVERY

IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH

assault the eyes (Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* 2, 104). As a dystopian text progresses, the protagonist begins to consider language more carefully, and often to question the reality s/he lives in enabled by a rediscovered secret text or the creation of a secret text him or herself. Through this secret text, which serves as a counter-narrative, the protagonist seeks to explain the world, how the world came to be the way it is, or simply to record his or her own perceptions of the world. The dystopian narrative and its imbedded counter-narrative create a dialogue between viewpoints for the reader, who strives to understand the advent of the fictional society—perhaps especially how this dystopian world has gotten so far off track. Raffaella Baccolini provides an excellent assessment of language’s duality in dystopia:

stock phrase and not that, in this case, it created a racial slur for Lin, who is Asian. This cost Federico his job since readers were actually attending to the line’s implied content.

Indoctrination is so pervasive [in the dystopian society] that words mean nothing or they mean the exact opposite of what they once stood for; they have been reduced to a tool for propaganda and are thus harmless for the regime. The reappropriation of a meaningful, independent use of language becomes a highly subversive act in the dystopian society since it remains one of the characters' means of understanding, criticizing, and subverting the system. ("Journeying" 344)

Even though the reigning regime of a dystopian society endeavors to empty out language, and thus empty out meaning in order to gain control of people, the active re-creation and recovery of words allows protagonists to refill the language with the knowledge and customs of which they, through their official and controlled language, have been robbed while working towards either personal or total freedom.

A precise example of this hollowing out and refitting appears in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* during an exchange between Alice and Humpty Dumpty, and provides a distillation of the power of language akin to that seen in dystopian works:

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory'," Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't -- till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument'," Alice objected.

"When *I* use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean -- neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so

many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master -- that's all.” (Carroll 73, italics orig.)

Clearly, Humpty Dumpty has exposed the truth about language and power: when one belongs to the group in charge, words can have whatever meaning the hegemony decides and imposes upon the subjugated. Meaning is inherently the will of the master. Thus, meaning and the official version of truth can be manipulated to serve the interests of the prevalent power structure. To paraphrase Humpty Dumpty, it is not the meaning that matters, but being *the one who allocates meaning*; therefore, dystopian characters and, we ourselves—by attending to the feedback oscillation and using the text to critique our own society—must be wary of *who* is providing the definitions.

Orwell's classic *Nineteen Eighty-Four* presents the reader with a world in which language is regularly emptied of meaning. In this bleak future of perpetual world war, rations, and surveillance, the Party, to which everyone in Oceania except the proles³ belongs, believes that absolute authority over the means of verbal expression will bind the citizens even more tightly in its control by controlling the potential to imagine. Without the words to express other ways of being outside Party rules, no one will be able to imagine anything else. The Ministry of Truth, where Winston, the protagonist, works, “which concerned itself with news, entertainment, education, and the fine arts,” alters language, news, books, and all printed matter in order to control the hearts and minds of

³ *Proles*: short for proletariat. Supposedly the beneficiaries of The Party's social revolution, but in reality living and working in about the same or worse conditions than in the past. While they are not under constant surveillance, they cannot escape this hereditary underclass.

the people (Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* 4). During a lunchtime conversation between Winston and Syme, a philologist compiling the Newspeak Eleventh Edition dictionary, Syme gushes, “You think, I dare say, that our chief job is inventing new words. But not a bit of it! We’re destroying words—scores of them, hundreds of them, every day. We’re cutting the language down to the bone” (51). Syme continues, “Don’t you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thought-crime literally impossible, because there will be no words to express it” (52). This erasure of language is used to severely limit the possibility of memory or history. In fact, the Party’s slogan, “Who controls the past, controls the future; who controls the present controls the past,” blatantly admits to controlling information and, indeed, history itself (35). The Ministry of Truth considers the thoughts provided or provoked by words so dangerous that “memory holes” exist throughout the building bearing its name; Winston and other employees habitually stuff any scrap of writing from work tasks of the continual revision of history into these vacuum tubes where the texts are whisked off to the fiery furnace in the building’s depths (38). Even Winston, who recounts memories of some things from the time before the revolution and who works with language constantly, does not know from whence the name “memory holes” came; however, on investigation, an interesting parallel to Native American lore surfaces. According to Russell Shorto’s “Pilgrims and Indians,” the Wampanoag people, whom the Pilgrims found residing in the land upon their arrival to America, dug holes into the ground along trails where important events happened. As people walked the path, the “memory holes” provided a visual and spatial reminder to stop and relate the story associated with that particular location. Originally, the holes appear to have functioned as repositories of memory; these human

constructions facilitated the use of memory, narrative, and the mind. Winston's "memory holes,"⁴ however, serve the opposite purpose: to wipe out all traces of connection and remembrance from the pictorial and textual world.

⁴ Interestingly enough, the term "memory holes" now has two contemporary meanings in the technological jargon-laced realm of computers. Better still, both usages appear to stem from Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* building on of the original: dystopias can indeed influence reality! A friend of mine from my undergraduate program now works in the technical sector and provided me this very apt definition of the first kind of computer-related, built-in "memory holes":

Think of [a computer's] memory as a 20-story office building. The offices inside the building are the "blocks" of memory. For this example, we'll say that floors 1-3 and 6-20 represent "main memory" and are listed in the building directory, complete with office numbers (memory addresses). Our building directory guides the workers and general public (operating system/applications) to the appropriate offices. There are also offices on the fourth and fifth floors, but these are not listed in the building directory. These offices represent our memory hole. Although the rooms exist, as far as the building directory is concerned, they do not. A good example of this is in IBM-compatibles (most every Windows-based PC on the market today). The area between 640K and 1MB (memory addresses) exists, but is not located on the main memory map. In other words, the offices are there, but they don't appear in the building directory. Privileged entities (in this example, our building maintenance team) can access these addresses (offices), but the operating system and applications (the workers/general public) cannot. (Lilly)

In this instance, an intentional gap is left that the ordinary user cannot access, but those trained in the control of the computer or system can. Winston theorizes that the information he and everyone else stuffs into the tubes travels to an incinerator, but he does not know for certain where it is located—perhaps on the hidden floors—and he never mentions smoke coming from the Ministry of Truth in his exterior descriptions of that building. Perhaps the information does not disappear, but it only is available to those in the Inner Party. However, it is the second definition that I find more frightening and the most like the Orwellian meaning. Lilly adds, "I've also heard the term 'memory hole' used to refer to information that disappears from an electronic file or archive (like a website or database), almost never accidentally. It usually refers to some type of intentional removal of confidential/controversial information." This type of "memory hole," the intentional concealing and/or disposing of information to prevent it from being used or seen, derives specifically from Orwell. It is just such a hole that can be exploited and used for nefarious purposes—it is about just such memory holes the dystopia warns us.

Certainly, the official version of history provided by bodies such as Big Brother's Ministry of Truth would be easy for most to accept—thanks to the “memory holes” and other contrivances that dispose of the past—and the majority of residents in any given dystopian society seem to follow the party line thoughtlessly, willingly, even happily. In the Appendix to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell writes specifically about controlling thought through the narrowing down of language as exemplified in Newspeak, the language that Syme so enthusiastically codifies for the dictionary and with which Winston dutifully rewrites history at his day job:

This [narrowing of language] was done partly by the invention of new words, but chiefly by eliminating undesirable words and by stripping such words as remained of unorthodox meanings, and so far as possible of all secondary meanings whatsoever. To give a single example, the word *free* still existed in Newspeak, but it could only be used in such statements as “This dog is free from lice” or “This field is free from weeds.” It could not be used in its old sense of “politically free” or “intellectually free,” since political and intellectual freedom no longer existed even as concepts, and were therefore of necessity nameless. (299, italics original)

Newspeak attempts to reinforce exactly what Humpty Dumpty advised regarding words and power when he said, “The question is which is to be master -- that's all” (Carroll 73). If history is indeed written by the victors and the victors also designate the meaning of words, then the words used to write that history mean whatever the victors want them to mean.

Alternatively, if language is already controlled with mathematical precision and outbreaks of imagination and free-thought still break out, harsher measures must be employed. Enforcing the death of the imagination literally, Yevgeny Zamyatin's novel *We*—a reference to the 1920s Stalinist regime he himself inhabited—includes a portion wherein The One State, as the fictional ruling party is called, attempts to cement their control over the mathematically correct citizens by introducing an operation to cure humans of imagination. These people have been conditioned to believe that predictable preciseness is the only way to live and that imagination is an illness that must be eradicated in order for society to function properly. Thus some adults voluntarily respond to the ad to become “perfect, machinelike, and one hundred percent free,” but the children have to be forcibly restrained for the procedure (180, 183). The narrator of this novel, known to readers only as D-503, has moved from a full acceptance of the One State regime to a baffled, imaginative mindset after becoming involved with a woman freedom fighter I-330. Rather than aid in her group's scheme to bring down the system, he considers escape through the proffered operation that will “Triple-X-ray” cauterize the node responsible for the disease of imagination⁵ (180). However, his enthusiasm for ridding his life of this aspect is chilled when he sees a group of post-op patients on display: “‘People?’ No, that does not describe them. These are not feet—they are stiff,

⁵ A first-person example of surgically altering the emotional response occurs during Marge Piercy's *Woman at the Edge of Time* when the main character, Connie, undergoes a brain device implantation as part of an experimental treatment for mental patients: “Suddenly she thought that these men [the surgeons and researchers] believed feeling itself a disease, something to be cut out like a rotten appendix. Cold, calculating, ambitious, believing themselves rational and superior, they chased the crouching female animal through the brain with a scalpel. From an early age she had been told that what she felt was unreal and didn't matter. Now they were about to place in her something that would rule her feelings like a thermostat.” (276)

heavy wheels, moved by some invisible transmission belt. These are not people—they are humanoid tractors” (189). Zamyatin’s fiction portrays the worst possible outcome of zombie humans with no imagination, obedient to command and bent on converting others to their fallen state. It is not surprising then, that writing as a witness to a totalitarian regime, Zamyatin stated in a 1923 essay “The New Russian Prose” that “What we need in literature today are vast philosophic horizons. . . . We need the most ultimate, the most fearsome, the most fearless ‘Why?’ and ‘What next?’” (qtd. in Ginsburg xi). Based on his own context, this author projected the worst-case scenario of a social doctrine as a warning of possibilities.

If these texts such as *We* hold latent power for change in the real world, then in what way can various poems, plays, essays, short stories and novels be employed to present a coherent view, one that may lead readers into the realm of “What if?” and out again to society? Instead of a uniting theme of universal truth or great works, a theme of plurality of voices from many times and places may be possible, allowing readers to discover and define connections between works and their lives for themselves.

Likewise, only when the protagonists in dystopias begin to question their society, either through their own free choice or by accidental discovery, do they start to fill up language again with experience or recovered history. More succinctly, as Moylan writes, “An important result of the reappropriation of language by the dystopian misfits and rebels is the reconstitution of empowering memory. . . . by regaining language they also recover the ability to draw on the alternative truths of the past and ‘speak back’ to hegemonic power” (149). During these misfits’ and rebels’ quests for personal truth, community and historical truths often come to light allowing them, and thus the readers,

to see what may have happened in the novels' presumed pasts that brought about the current dystopian societies. Therefore, rediscovering words facilitates recovering memory, and rediscovering history leads to recreating words. In *Turning to Earth: Stories of Ecological Conversion*, Marina Schauffler writes of the value of narrative to conservation efforts and uses a term "re-story" to mean a return to a narrative lineage linking humans to the natural world (21). Similarly, dystopian characters must forge links between themselves and the past ways of thinking and being that have been lost and/or purposefully destroyed.

However, the protagonists themselves rarely believe that the "re-story-ing" processes they engage in will bring about any immediate positive result nor even be read by others, and certainly, most protagonists express doubts about the narratives they attempt to retrieve from the ash heap of history and memory. For example, on the day that *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s Winston begins his diary, he contemplates a possible audience: "How could you communicate with the future? It was of its nature impossible. Either the future would resemble the present in which case it would not listen to him, or it would be different from it, and his predicament would be meaningless" (Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* 7). Winston cannot see his position as a speaker of truth, a witness worthy to be heard, in part because he espouses The Party notion that being a part of the unthinking, undistinguishable whole is best, and in part because his job as a rewriter of news items makes him understandably suspicious of the viability and longevity of the written word.

Winston is aware as well of the ease with which history can be destroyed. Later the same day, as Winston returns to his work of destroying the past through rewriting and

disposing of now-erroneous history, he ponders, “How could you make appeal to the future when not a trace of you, not even an anonymous word scribbled on a piece of paper, could physically survive?”⁶ (27). It is Winston’s insider knowledge derived from working in the Ministry of Truth that ideally situates him to provide commentary on the dangers of history being written by the victors: “Day by day and almost minute by minute the past was brought up to date,” for “[a]ll history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and reinscribed exactly as often as was necessary” (40). Winston knows intimately the ease with which people, events, and places mutate, rearrange, and vaporize because he himself perpetuates The Party’s efforts to obfuscate. Yet, the drive to know and preserve history is very strong. Knowing from the moment he purchased the antique diary that eventually he will be caught by the continual surveillance, Winston cannot resist the urge to write just for himself. Aware that his personal record in the diary will one day be reduced to ash just like all the countless texts he has stuffed down the memory holes over the years, nonetheless, though he doubts himself, he keeps writing; even doomed, Winston is unwilling to give up the only thing that was his own: “the few cubic centimeters inside [his] skull” (27). The chance for self-expression, the opportunity to record the personal truths he experiences, constitute risks worth taking. Long after his arrest and extensive confinement in the Ministry of Love for re-education, he has an

⁶ A similar, hopeless sentiment is expressed by The Snowman in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* when he considers keeping a journal of his life after the lab-made plague has wiped out all of humanity (or so he believes) except for some experimental creatures: “But even a castaway assumes a future reader, someone who’ll come along later and find his bones and his ledger, and learn his fate. Snowman can make no such assumptions: he’ll have no future reader, because the Crakers can’t read. Any reader he can possibly imagine is in the past” (41).

exchange with O'Brien, his confessor and torturer, concerning the location of the past and memory. O'Brien begins by asking,

“Does the past exist concretely in space? Is there somewhere or other a place, a world of solid objects, where the past is still happening?”

“No.”

“Then where does the past exist, if at all?”

“In records. It is written down.”

“In records. And—?”

“In the mind. In human memories.”

“In memory. Very well, then. We, the Party, control all the records, and we control all memories. Then we control the past, do we not?”

“But how can you stop people remembering things?” cried Winston, again momentarily forgetting the dial [which controls electrical current that can be applied to him when he provides the wrong answers]. “It is involuntarily. It is outside oneself. How can you control memory?”

(Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* 248)

Even after all Winston has seen and suffered, he refuses to believe that The Party can get inside people's heads, into that last space that is truly personal and possessed.⁷ Even with all the attempts to manipulate how people perceive, even after the electric shock treatments, Winston still questions O'Brien's assertions of power though his thoughts are no longer clear. He still recalls shadowy memories and, although he trusts them less than he once did, they do still exist despite his extensive confinement, torture and

⁷ This attempt to cauterize the memory is parallel to the imagination removal surgery in Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, published in 1921, and believed to have been read by Orwell.

brainwashing. However, his attempt to re-story history ends with his reduction to a rehabilitated shadow self, gradually waiting out his few remaining days in the café not daring to write or really remember.

Refilling Re-story-ers and Rich Contexts

While *Nineteen Eighty-Four* deals with Winston's attempts to preserve history or memory, *Riddley Walker* explores its eponymous hero's search to give meaning in handed-down stories and relics dug from the earth. Riddley's attempt to re-story his neo-Iron Age world creates a counter-narrative that is also the telling of his own story. In Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker*, Goodparley, the pseudo-governmental and religious official who coaches Riddley about being the "connexion man"—the man of the tribe who gives meaning to the Eusa show⁸ by providing an anecdote and/or maxim to sum each one up for the gathered people—tells Riddley "What ben makes tracks for what wil be" or *What has been makes tracks for what will be* (121). The Eusa show consists of Punch and Judy puppets that perform for the gathered people at a farm or fents. Goodparley works the puppets inside the cloth-decked frame while Orfing speaks to the puppets and the tribal audience. The "connexion man" observes the show with the rest of his people and on the following night, the crowd gathers again to see what moral or summation he will give them. The Eusa show fulfills a religious ritual space within the culture of the text and has been handed down since the reformation of the government, or

⁸ The Eusa show is a traveling puppet show consisting of old Punch and Judy hand puppets controlled by the Goodparley and Orfing duo. These men were in charge of bringing this odd mix of history, entertainment, and religion to all the farms and hunter-gatherer clans. Eusa comes from St. Eustace on a 15th Century church wall painting (Walker 223-225).

“Mincery,” at some point after the nuclear holocaust. Likewise, the “connexion man” holds a special status within his group, but it does not provide exemption from regular work or better living conditions. Goodparley and Orfing do not appear to be hereditary titles, but in Riddley’s case, he carries on the role as his father and grandfather have done. When Goodparley relays this saying connecting past and future, he tries to educate his pupil about the importance of history: the things that are to come next stem from the things that came before the present time—an important idea in a text where those in power—the Pry Mincer⁹ and his representatives—seem determined to figure out what the scraps of the previous civilization they keep unearthing mean. Simultaneously, they also strive to decipher a story handed down about the 1 Big 1, or the atomic reaction: The Master Chaynjis.

Hoban’s novel, written entirely in dialect, can be challenging to read for the author makes use of a language in which the acquisition of morphology has ceased at the stage of overgeneralization. Riddley’s spelling does not simply reflect a lack of standardization. Characters’ speech shows a lack of differentiation among homonyms—only one spelling of a word exists instead of multiple ones with different meanings.

“Wud” means *wood* as well as *would*. “Groan” means *groan* as well as *grown*. Being stuck at this language acquisition level also means that past tense is formed with *-t* instead of *-ed* or any of the nonstandard forms. Thus “ternt” is *turned*, “yelt” is *yelled*. Perhaps this is because a lack of written and spoken English grammar does not exist in this present day of the novel. Without written records, standardized spelling does not exist, numbers can be substituted for words, and phonetic spellings abound in the dialog

⁹ *Prime Minister*

of the text. According to linguists Fromkin and Rodman, this overgeneralization process is also consistent with regular childhood language acquisition worldwide, but due to the radioactive fallout saturating the land and all in the society, the humans of the novel are not able to progress beyond this stage (334-336). Deprived of a strong connection to the past, Riddley's language is hollow and, at times, story-less.

Despite all the scientific knowledge lost in the nuclear war's aftermath, and the reduction of English grammar to the most simplistic forms, mainly from a loss of the irregular forms of plurals and verbs, and reliance on homonyms, Goodparley also recognizes the dangers of words: "Words! Theywl move things you know theywl do things. Theywl fetch. Put a name to some thing and youre beckoning"¹⁰ (Hoban 122). He knows, as does Riddley, that there is power in words. To put a name to something not only grants the power of using the word, but bestows power on both the word and the thing; somewhere between creating and naming technologies now lost, the last civilization lost control over them and became less civilized by losing words, knowledge, processes, and much of history, as well. In Riddley's world, knowledge was preserved through Punch-and-Judy-style puppet shows with Eusa stories in an effort to pass on what garbled history and scientific knowledge remained. These were delivered orally at "forms and fentses."¹¹ This drive to repeat and hand down precious fragments highlights again that memory entails "a social dimension" (Baccolini, "A useful knowledge" 118). Lorna, the "tel woman," or female soothsayer from Riddley's home "fents" discusses the

¹⁰ *Words! They'll move things you know, they'll do things. They'll fetch. Put a name to something and you're beckoning.*

¹¹ *Farms and fences*: Farms are the beginnings of new, permanent settlements that may become towns. Fences are wooden barricades, which enclose and protect a mobile population who travel to hunt, gather, and work at digs. These two ways of living are in conflict within the novel. Fences are the old way and Farms are the new.

instability of oral heritage with him before he makes his first “connexion,” or interpretation: “That’s what happens with peopl on the way down from what they ben. The storys go”¹² (Hoban 17). Thus, Lorna and Riddley both take part in passing down altered and incomplete knowledge, but it is what they have to share.

The memories tied up in stories and maxims keep almost all the knowledge, albeit incomplete and questionable, of “tym [time] back way back”; therefore, the knowledge lost holds power that is extended to those performing the shows, those able to write, or the “connexion men” who perceive and then speak a different, deeper meaning beneath the surface of the spoken puppet show performed for all the people in a clan. Everyone else can only absorb the show’s literal meaning and wait for the interpretation of the “connexion man.” Without access to the stories and the fragments of history available to Goodparley and other government men, they remain mere consumers of hollow narratives, not participants in the creation or understanding of them. In Riddley Walker’s case, after he becomes “connexion man,” his own knowledge of the things he has helped unearth for his job of digging old metal out of the ground; additionally, his knowledge of local lore combine with the new Eusa knowledge learnt from Goodparley, so that Riddley can begin to create a counter-narrative: his access to knowledge in both the informational and physical realms helps him be more suited to re-story his world.

The re-story-er blends knowledge and materials from disparate areas and creates something new, and in the dystopia, this creation is often in the form of the counter-narrative—the attempt to reinterpret and reconstruct a history. Scott Russell Sanders, English professor, writer and conservationist, states, “It is never a simple matter actually

¹² *That’s what happens with people on the way down from what they have been. The stories go.*

to see what is before your eyes. You notice what memory and knowledge and imagination have prepared you to see” (3). While multiple viewers may observe a specific event, what they see, remember, and comprehend from this event differs because of the individual schemata of each human. Riddley understands more about the world he lives in and the powers controlling it than others of his “fents” because of his own unique life experiences. Thus, his revision of history is colored by his viewpoint and offers a counterpoint to the official version of history that the Eusa shows, a kind of master narrative, espouse. Here, a thought from D-503, protagonist of Zamyatin’s *We*, beautifully expresses the difference between the silent, passive object and the active observer, who not only sees but can remember and assign significance: “The cold mirror reflects, throws back, but this one [the soul] absorbs, and everything leaves its trace—forever. A moment, a faint line on someone’s face—and it remains in you forever. Once you heard a drop fall in the silence, and you hear it now. . . .” (Zamyatin 89). Everything that occurs during a person’s life becomes part of them, and influences—whether they realize it or not—the things that follow. Through narrative, humans recapture and share these moments to educate, entertain and explain themselves and the world to others.

Narrative then, by its very nature, becomes a powerful repository of memory and an agent of change. Considering the power of narrative, Donna Haraway writes, “Stories are not ‘fictions’ in the sense of being ‘made up.’ Rather, narratives are devices to produce certain kinds of meaning. I try to use stories to tell what I think is the truth—a located, embodied, contingent, and therefore real truth” (Haraway, *Modest_Witness* 230). For Haraway, truth is a personal revelation: a narrative is true because it is a fact for one certain person in a certain place, and comes out of all the information that

particular individual knows, or from all their prior schemata, as does Riddley's story. Thus, Haraway does not approve of one bland, and emptied-out master narrative like that of which the fascist state in dystopia would approve, but rather the kinds of personal truths represented by the re-storied counter-narratives produced by the disenchanting protagonists as they search for meaning and therefore try to imagine other futures for themselves and the world. *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* Winston, too, feels this draw of the personal truth when he declares, "The obvious, the silly, and the true had got to be defended. Truisms are true, hold on to that! The solid world exists, its laws do not change. Stones are hard, water is wet, objects unsupported fall toward the earth's center"¹³ (Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* 81). Even amid the constant rewriting of history that he knows only too well, he believes that a return to the principles of the natural world will recover solidity. Often, these small narratives of everyday life garner the historian's disdain, but they are precisely what Haraway and fictional Winston agree are worth saving.

Riddley also turns to his personal observations in his attempts to refill the gaps in history. He considers things that he has personally witnessed in his life, the stories and connections Lorna and his father have shared, and he has an ability to apply these in problem solving ways, which sets him apart from almost everyone. He seems also to have an affinity for the places and spaces of his world that few others possess. When he learns that a section of woods on a nearby hill is set to be cleared by the "form" workers, he expresses his reason for liking the woods and his feelings about forest clearance,

¹³ Similar to "Maxims I," in Old English: "Forst sceal freosan, fyr wudu meltan//eorþe growan, is brycgian" *Frost shall freeze, fire burn wood//grass grows on earth, ice makes bridges* (156, ln. 1-2).

though there is nothing that can be done to prevent the work from happening: “It wer the shape of the groun I liket and the feal of it. That fealing you get on hy groun over looking the low”¹⁴ (Hoban 27). “I dint want no woodlings cleart there I jus wantit that place lef the way it ben. I tol my self never mynd but I myndit”¹⁵ (88). Riddley seems to be more in tune with the land than others, perhaps because he grew up moving about and living off the land. Now that people settle permanently in areas, the land has become an object to take and treat however they wish. Riddley represents Nature and intuitive knowledge, while the works perpetuated by the towns and the Mincery stand for a rush to regain dominion over all things through technologies.

Hoban’s *Riddley Walker* employs two key terms throughout the narrative that can expand more on the overall idea of the benefits of what knowledge we, as humans, should pursue and what is best left alone. “Lissening” [listening] and “sylents” [silence] play a large part in the plot. Riddley is the first we encounter who “lissens,” and this is to his credit because he is aware of much more in nature than most other people.

“Lissening,” “lissent,” or “lissen” occurs at least 65 times, “sylents” approximately a mere eighteen times in comparison. While “lissening” is an active process, “sylents” exists as a thing, anthropomorphic at times, acting on its own in the text. Riddley “lissens” to: the wild dogs howling, the wind sounds, the rain, the Eusa show, for what would happen next with Lissener, for Lissener once they were separated, the sound at Ground Zero of Cambry (Canterbury), the Eusa folk who once lived in a hole there, the dogs’ story, and the Ardship of Cambry. He finds that not only can he literally hear

¹⁴ *It was the shape of the ground I liked and the feel of it. That feeling you get on high ground overlooking the low.*

¹⁵ *I didn’t want to woodlands cleared there I just wanted that place left the way it had been. I told myself “Never mind” but I minded.*

things such as the dogs, wind and rain, but he can hear—and perhaps a better word is “sense”—people and events such as the location and intentions of Lissener, the Ardship of Cambry and the energy at Cambry. This “lissening” allows Riddley to avoid trouble by knowing the locations of people and objects, becoming nearly telepathic at times because he is keenly aware of his environment. Riddley is an astute reader of landscapes, a concept that will be visited in Chapter Three.

In the course of the novel, Riddley moves from hearing only the things he expects, such as wind, rain, and dogs, to being able to actually hear what people, animals, and the earth are thinking, sometimes even when he is distant from them. Early in the narrative, Riddley is told by Lorna, the tel woman,¹⁶ “Some times the nite is the shape of a ear only it aint a ear we know the shape of. Lissening back for all the souns whatre gone from us. The humminging of the dead towns and the voices before the towns ben there. Befor the iron ben and fire ben only littl. Lissening for whats coming as wel”¹⁷ (Hoban 17). Lorna recognizes that the night is a time for powerful things to happen and that perhaps “lissening” to the night is a way of accessing all the knowledge lost from their past. The dead towns’ “hummering” would be the regular city noises that no longer exist after nuclear war destroyed all major population centers. She knows that things existed before people could smelt iron and before they could regularly keep and easily build fire. Lorna also tells Riddley that the night listens for what is coming in the future as well. In fact, Lorna’s night shares much with contemporary philosophies of the

¹⁶ *Tel woman*: a soothsayer who holds tribal and mystical wisdom, but is not associated with the official Eusa shows or connexion men.

¹⁷ *Sometimes the night is the shape of an ear, only it isn't an ear we know the shape of. Listening back for all the sounds that are gone from us. The humming of the dead towns and the voices before the towns were there. Before the iron was and the fire was only little. Listening for what's coming as well.*

arbitrariness of time that postulate that past, present and future exist simultaneously. Thus, if humans could drop the construct of time, they too, like night, would hear and see all things. However, little does either of them know at this point, but Riddley himself will become endowed with these night properties and be able to hear things that are past as well as what is to come: in a sense he will transcend their fallen time. When he comes to Cambry, this extra-perceptory sense kicks in for him heavily: “That wer the hoal where the Eusa folk ben I lissent that strait a way”¹⁸ (160) and “I lissent it [the knowledge of the Green Man whose carved face he finds] ben past down 1 dog to a nother 1 man to a nother as wel”¹⁹ (168). Riddley now accesses more than even his “connexion man” abilities would have allowed: he can tap into forces past, present and future.

Before his visit to Cambry, Riddley found Lissener who was one of the Eusa folk,²⁰ in a hole in the dead town of Bernt Arse. Lissener has no eyes, nor holes for eyes, and his ears are also malformed, however, her says he pulled the dog to him and the dog pulled Riddley (78). Riddley and the dog pack travelling with him help Lissener escape from the government men, and Lissener reveals that he is also the Ardship of Cambry. After talking with the Ardship, or Lissener, Riddley understands that a rhyme he has heard all his life is actually a map for a real journey—one that might lead to the recovery of the wonders of the Atomic Age. While this may lead to useful knowledge that will make life easier and better for humans, it will also mean a return to the dangerous accumulation of “barms” [bombs] and war machines that led to their society’s current

¹⁸ *That was the hole where the Eusa folk were. I listened that straight away.*

¹⁹ *I listened it had been passed down one dog to another, one man to another as well.*

²⁰ Descendents from the scientific and intellectual elite of which the government has kept a remnant alive and hidden in order to extract all possible knowledge so as to return to a state of power. The Eusa folk are physically deformed, yet somewhat mystical.

fallen state. “Fools Circel 9wys”²¹ describes a journey the new Ardship of Cambry must take every twelve years through the main dead towns:

Horny Boy rung Widders Bel

Stoal his Fathers Ham as wel

Bernt his Arse and Forkt a Stoan

Done It Over broak a boan

Out of Good Shoar vackt his wayt

Scratcht Sams Itch for No. 8

Gone to senter nex to see

Cambry coming 3 times 3

Sharna pax and get the poal

When the Ardship of Cambry comes out of the hoal.²² (5)

At the end of the circle, after the Ardship has been placed in a hole in each town and asked questions about the past knowledge, he is taken to Cambry, asked some more, and beheaded so that the disarticulated head will perhaps “tel” the deepest secrets.

Obviously, Lissener would like to avoid this fate as well as keep the Mincery men from

²¹ *Fool's Circle Nine Ways*

²² “*Fool's Circle Nine Ways*”

Horny Boy rang Widow's Bell

Stole his Father's Ham as well

Burnt his Arse and Forked a Stone

Done It Over broke a bone

Out of Good Show evacuate[ed]

Scratched Sam's Itch for Number Eight

Gone to center next to see

Canterbury coming three times three

Sharpen an ax and get the pole

When the Archbishop of Canterbury comes out of the hole

getting the knowledge for themselves. Thus a deeper, more sinister meaning surfaces from the familiar poem and Riddley now plays a part in disrupting this order. Because reading and writing exist only for the Eusa show men, connexion men, and government officials who rarely appear or interact with the general populace, the stories can be changed and meanings can slip depending on each interpreter's viewpoint and personal knowledge. As Riddley moves around the "Fools Circel," he hears variants of what happened to Eusa when the Bad Time began: the Eusa folks' version puts blame on The Ram (the government) while Goodparley's Ram version puts the blame on Eusa and others like him. Because there is no written history from that time, the story slips and changes. Likewise, the reader becomes aware of the actual roots of the Eusa story when Goodparley shares a real piece of writing done in the reader's contemporary English. It is the legend belonging to a stained glass window, but the writing is all that they have. While we readers can understand every word, Goodparley provides a mostly erroneous interpretation, allowing only those of us outside the novel to truly see what has happened to produce their pseudo-religious Eusa fable. The description of an artwork depicting the life of St. Eustace becomes the basis for their retelling of the nuclear disaster as well as the cipher for once again accessing the "Master Chaynjis" (123-125). Religion, history and science become conflated in a mash-up, which still has gaping holes in it thanks to the degraded state of their vocabulary. These gaps drive the Mincery men to continue clinging to the "Fools Circel 9wys" tradition in hopes of recovering the answers they seek.

Later on, after Riddley runs away from civilization to find Lissener and falls back into the Mincery men's hands, Goodparley shares more of their science as it relates to the

Eusa story. Riddley, overcome by the slippery words presented to him states, “He [Goodparley] wer talking so many levvils at Ice I dint all ways know what he meant really I wisht every thing wud mean jus only 1 thing and keap on meaning it not changing all the time” (145).²³ In fact, Riddley began writing his account because he felt as if “Our woal life is a idear we dint think of nor we dont know what it is. What a way to live. Thats why I finely come to writing all this down. Thinking on what the idear of us myt be”(7).²⁴ For him, writing is a way to sort out what he thinks and feels, and to keep it in one place. When Goodparley and other officials talk, meaning and truth seems to slide around based on the situation or their personal goals. Because meanings shift readily when those in power wish it to, their language is hollow and slippery. For Riddley, the concreteness of writing allows him to nail down the meaning he wants and needs to help him make sense of his world.

Prior to this gift of written story from Goodparley, Lissener tells Riddley the tale of “The Lissener and the Other Voyce Owl of the Worl.”²⁵ While the legend from the St. Eustace artwork provides insight into the novel’s odd belief system, the tale serves as more of a metaphor. Perhaps this story is even more a place for “connexion” than the Eusa shows. An owl sits in the “worl tree”²⁶ and in his other voice he says the silence of everything in the world. This saying of the silences is the owl’s way of eating up the sounds of things because then those things will follow their sounds and disappear into the

²³ *He was talking on so many levels at once I didn’t always know what he meant. Really I wished everything would mean just only one thing and keep on meaning it, not changing all the time.*

²⁴ *Our whole life is an idea we didn’t think of nor we don’t know what it is. What a way to live. That’s why I finally come to writing all this down. Thinking on what the idea of us might be.*

²⁵ *“The Listener and the Other Voice Owl of the World”*

²⁶ *The world tree*

silence. Like all owls, he does his work only at night and assumes this will be enough to swallow the world up a little at a time without being caught. However, as a blind boy, Lissener himself is aware of what the owl is doing because he is adept at listening and can hear the owl saying the silences. The boy uses his time to listen them all back again by keeping them safe in his ears and memory all night. In the morning he let the sounds return to their objects, and the owl was none the wiser. At the conclusion of the story, Riddley asks if the owl is still trying and Lissener not only confirms this is true but he is certain that one day the owl will succeed because no one will be on guard “lissening” the sounds back to their rightful places (85-87). In this text, *The Other Voice Owl* empties out language by eating up all the sounds. Without the sounds, meaning and history become lost, much like in Riddley’s society. Conversely, *The Lissener* saves language by filling it back up when he speaks the sounds back. This parallels Lissener’s role in the novel where he serves as a conduit for lost technological knowledge that the Eusa folk supposedly access when in trance-like states.

In dystopias, the stripping of nuanced language and the purposeful control of language by the reigning power are common motifs. A Czech historian, Milan Hubl, is quoted by writer Milan Kundera in his work *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*: “The first step in liquidating a people is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then have someone write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was” (157). This is akin to Walter Benjamin’s notion of history written by the victor, and it summarizes the instrument of control of many a dystopic work. In the graphic novel *V for Vendetta*, set in England, and the novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*, set in the United

States, the heavy hand of the hegemony is replacing history. Interestingly, both these texts sprang from the Conservative politics of the 1980s. *V for Vendetta*, begun in the summer of 1981 and completed by 1988, the year that Margaret Thatcher started her third term (Moore 6) and *The Handmaid's Tale*, published in 1985, both reflect the political climate of the Reagan years in America. Both works, written and published in a time of Conservative hegemony, explore fascist states whose governments control communications tightly, thus suppressing meaning by emptying out history and replacing it with official, sanitized versions. While intense focus on the language, such as that in *Riddley Walker*, does not exist, writing and texts still play important roles in the novels as they combat their societies' transfer ideologizing.

Both of the 80s dystopias employ personal texts to refill language and, thus, history, while fracturing the master narrative. In *V for Vendetta*, Norsefire has, in the past before the graphic novel's *in media res* beginning, outlawed and confiscated movies, books, and artwork from before the advent of their regime. The government-run station appears to be the only choice for those wanting to watch television. All people deemed subversive elements in the population have been systematically eliminated. It is likely that the police, or Fingermen, would confiscate any objects or arrest any person found with these items of the past in their possession since they spy on the conversations in all the households (Moore 55). By robbing the people of their cultural heritage, the citizens of this dystopia have lost key reference points and generational touchstones.

Understanding most works of literature requires not only knowledge of word meanings, but also knowledge of contextual happenings and objects. If songs, artworks, and past writings do not exist in cultural memory, understanding and interpreting other works

becomes more difficult. V, the masked and erudite main character, hoards cultural contraband in his secret Shadow Gallery beneath London. He collects books, music, movie posters, films, and even grows a lost strain of roses. V does not save only high-culture items such as Shakespeare, but also pop culture ones like *Waikiki Wedding*, a 1937 movie starring Bing Crosby. He has amassed what Walter Benjamin refers to in his *Arcades Project* as a collection that is, “a grand attempt to overcome the wholly irrational character of the object’s mere presence at hand through its integration into a new, expressly devised historical system” (204-205). Therefore, even if V’s collection is one day allowed to be displayed and read, it could be very difficult, if not impossible, for a society removed from it to value those works without education and exposure to what has been saved. Of course, V has not been able to save one of everything, so cultural knowledge gaps will remain.

Cultural suppression is apparent in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, as well, where books except for Bibles seem to be illegal for all citizens of Gilead, but especially for women. When Offred answers the summons to her Commander’s study, she is surprised to see full bookcases without locks or covers—“an oasis of the forbidden” (Atwood 177). Even his simple “Hello” sounds foreign to her ears after learning to speak only the proscribed phrases of greeting permitted for the Handmaids to speak to each other: “Blessed be the fruit,” and “May the Lord open” (177, 25). The Commander asks her to play an outlawed game of Scrabble with him, something he cannot even ask his wife (177). Later, he gives her an old copy of *Vogue* that he has procured through his influence and position, proving that though many things are officially illegal, those in charge still have access to them (200). This begins her use of his secret library and she works her way through texts of

her choice (238). The second time Offred plays Scrabble with him, she describes the difficulty of suddenly being allowed unfettered creation with language:

Prolix, quartz, quandary, sylph, rhythm, all the old tricks with consonants I could dream up or remember. My tongue felt thick with the effort of spelling. It was like using a language I'd once known but had nearly forgotten, a language having to do with customs that had long before passed out of the world: café au lait at an outdoor table, with a brioche, absinthe in a tall glass, or shrimp in a cornucopia of newspaper; things I'd read about once but had never seen. It was like trying to walk without crutches, like those phony scenes in old movies. You can do it. I know you can. That was the way my mind lurched and stumbled, among the sharp R's and T's, sliding over the ovoid vowels as if on pebbles. (199, italics orig.)

Offred feels her rustiness with wordplay as she reawakens to a game once taken for granted. She feels the letters' sounds in her mind as she indulges in this taboo; words call up phrases, which lead to memories that she may be the last of a generation of women to hold. Though it has been approximately less than ten years since the Republic of Gilead and its oppressive policies were implemented, language and past commonalities already seem strange and surreal to Offred. She often recalls how flippantly she read and discarded magazines, dressed in clothes of her choosing, wore makeup, and loved. During these secret sessions with her Commander, she asks to know about what is going on in the larger world—something the Handmaids would not be permitted to know. When she tells him that society's goal of making life better for men and women by

restoring Nature's balance by placing men in charge has not made her happy, the Commander responds: "Better never means better for everyone, he says. It always means worse, for some" (274). Since he and his party are the ones in charge, they will continue to do what is best for them regardless of how the entire female sex feels. The reader is constantly reminded by authority figures in the text that while this reality seems strange and wrong for women who can remember the time before, after three or four generations it will be the norm: those girls and women will not have the prior schemata to imagine any other reality, nor will they have access to reading and literacy in order to discover this buried past. However, both *V for Vendetta* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, worlds in which freedom of expression by women is forbidden, possesses examples of suppressed personal truths providing counter-narratives from women in captive situations: Offred's authorial intrusions in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and particularly her discovery of another Handmaid's text, and Evie's discovery of Valerie's letter in Alan Moore's graphic novel *V for Vendetta*.

Providing an example of counter-narrative that is a specific reflection of one woman in a specific dystopia displays the way individual, personal truths disrupt the hegemonic official account. Offred, the only name the reader has for Atwood's protagonist, is the name assigned to her by her captors: it is simply a conjunction of two words, Of Fred; it is also a reduction of a woman. The genitive shows possession by her Commander and connotes the generative as well, calling up her function only as a vessel for making babies. As this woman, this Handmaid, tells her life story, her truth of a life lived before captivity in the USA and after in the Republic of Gilead—a repressive,

fundamentalist Christian society in the former United States of America—she occasionally addresses the reader, her imagined audience, directly.

A story is a letter. *Dear You*, I'll say. Just *you*, without a name.

Attaching a name attaches *you* to the world of fact, which is riskier, more hazardous; who knows what the chances are out there, of survival, yours? I will say *you, you*, like an old love song. *You* can mean more than one.

You can mean thousands.

I'm not in any immediate danger, I'll say to you.

I'll pretend you can hear me.

But it's no good, because I know you can't. (Atwood 53, italics original)

At this early point in the novel, Offred admits she does not fully believe in her imagined audience, the people of the future. However, towards the novel's end, her belief in her audience is greater because her need to believe in order to survive is greater.

But I keep on going with this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story, because after all I want you to hear it, as I will hear yours too if I ever get the chance, if I meet you or if you escape, in the future or in heaven or in prison or underground, some other place. What they [these other places where she will meet us] have in common is that they're not here. By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there, I believe into being. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are. (344)

As the novel progresses, her need to believe in the *You* she is addressing grows, as evidenced by the two previous quotes. She moves from a stance of employing the imaginary audience as a device that gives her someone to write to, to one of imagining an audience of true survivors who will hear her tale, even if only in its written form and not directly from her lips. Not only does this telling call a future, free audience into existence, it also provides evidence of the narrator as a real woman who lived and suffered simply because she married a divorced man, thus forfeiting her right to be a true Wife. If we readers exist for her as imagined audience, then she exists for us as an Alchemist re-story-er, showing us what may happen to society, and especially women, if a force such as Fundamentalist Christianity gains complete political power. In the field of history, those not permitted to voice the master narrative are, “less powerfully situated storytellers” (Jagtenberg and McKie 80), but I would add that their voices have the power to destabilize the histories written by the victors by scuffing up the showy, glib surfaces offered for general consumption. Offred is bolstered not only by her own storytelling, but also by a message in mock Latin scrawled on the underside of the shelf in the closet of her room that she finds completely by chance. It reads *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*, or “Don’t let the bastards wear you down” (Atwood 69). She imagines a history for this woman who has been the Handmaid of this house before her, the previous Offred. “Still, it was a message, and it was in writing, forbidden by that very fact, and it hadn’t yet been discovered. Except by me, for whom it was intended. It was intended for whoever came next” (69). She then places her own story in a continuum: her life before Gilead, the previous Offred who left the message, her captivity as Offred now, and the future *You* who will hear her story somewhere that *You* and she are free. Time must

continue moving forward; thus, she and her story will move on from her current bad place. The previous Offred's brief message empowers her to keep writing her own, and her own longer tale must bring about our awareness of the mixing of religious and political power in our society along with the imposed silences and dangerously slippery official narratives that combination enacts upon us. This same use of personal narrative to prove existence occurs during Evie's prison scene in *V for Vendetta*.

Originally written and published serially over a span of years from 1982-1990, and then compiled in 2005, *V for Vendetta* is a graphic novel set in England in the last decade of the 20th century after a nuclear war whose fallout affects even countries that have avoided direct hit by the bombs. In the wake of the post-war upheaval, a new fascist political party, "Norsefire," comes into power in England by promising security and stability (Moore and Lloyd 9, 26-28). Curfews exist for citizens, and increased video and audio surveillance help to guarantee that the population abides by all the laws. Fingermen, Norsefire's dirty cops, patrol the streets ready to administer personal and official justice to rule-breakers.

Evie, the heroine of *V for Vendetta*, enters the story through transgression of the curfew and attempted prostitution, leading to her rescue from the Fingermen by the vigilante V (12-14). At first, Evie offers to assist V with his plans to pay him back for saving her. Even though she has seen him blow up Parliament immediately after her rescue, being used as bait to lure a dirty priest, one of V's past persecutors, to his death shocks her (14, 45-54). After refusing to do any more killing, even for V, he takes her blindfolded to street level and releases her (98-100). Evie resurfaces later in the novel living hidden by a man named Gordon, who is subsequently killed in his own house for a

black-market deal gone awry. After finding a gun in his place, she goes alone to shoot his killer at a strip club, but is nabbed in the alley by a military figure (123-144).

Thinking herself jailed by the state authorities for attempted murder as well as her part in assisting with the priest plot, Evie suffers intense interrogation and even a waterboarding-esque form of torture (12-14, 148-161). While lying on the stone floor alone in her cell, she finds a scrap of toilet tissue rolled up and stashed in a crevice of the wall (154). Even though her imprisonment and torture are later revealed by V as a trial meant to free her mind, the letter—and I myself felt less tricked finding this out—however, is real.

V knew the woman Valerie because she was in Cell Four, or IV, next to him at an internment camp where they both were imprisoned and experimented on for being enemies of the government (174-5). V's supposed crimes are never revealed; however, Valerie had been openly lesbian and also a well-known film star. These were her only crimes in the eyes of the state; now, all that is left of Valerie is her abridged biography written on toilet tissue, which V somehow salvaged the night he burned the camp to the ground and escaped. Through her secretly scribed story on a bit of humble toilet tissue, Valerie reaches forward to the future, forcing her past and present into her readers' lives. So long as we read, she is.

I [Valerie] don't know who you are. Please believe. There is no way I can convince you that this is not one of their tricks but I don't care. I am me, and I don't know who you are but I love you. [. . .] I shall die here. Every inch of me shall perish...except one. An inch. It's small and it's fragile and it's the only thing in the world that's worth having. We must never lose it, or sell it, or give it away. We must never let them take it

from us. I don't know who you are, or whether you're a man or a woman. I may never see you. I will never hug you or cry with you or get drunk with you. But I love you. I hope that you escape this place. I hope that the world turns and that things get better, and that one day people have roses again. I wish I could kiss you. Valerie (Moore 154-160, 2nd ellipsis in orig.)

Valerie becomes the Alchemist re-story-er who takes her own situated truth from before and during imprisonment, and writes it, in effect altering the lives of her audience: first V, then Evie, and presumably, Evie-as-V's apprentice at the novel's end. Through narrative, Valerie transcends her execution, and her surviving history blends the personal and the official into a catalyst for Evie's move to action and the carrying out of V's final plans after his death: she gives V the "Viking funeral" he asks for by loading his body into a subway car of explosives and running it into the barricaded track beneath Downing Street (260-262). The graphic novel concludes with Evie donning V's mask and costume, taking in a new apprentice, and continuing the work of destabilizing Norsefire (262-263). Even though Evie herself lived through the nuclear war, her mother's death, her father's arrest and disappearance for once being involved in the Socialist party, and the murder of her lover, she remains only an observer until she reads and is empowered by Valerie's brief biographical letter. As Marina F. Schaufler observes, "Narratives play a powerful role in shaping spiritual understanding and moral action: they can lead us closer to truth than facts can, offering a depth of meaning—a resonance with the real—not found in cognitive schemes or abstract themes" (11). Like Offred, Valerie's narrative scuffs the slick surface of hegemonic reality revealing the people and stories which that power

structure occludes. The power of this letter, one of the few things kept intact from the original graphic novel to the film version, gives Evie the strength to endure the torture and finally choose death over betrayal of V, Valerie and her own now-cognizant ideals.

Likewise, Offred does not commit suicide as many of the other Handmaids do. I hate calling her that, Offred, because I feel complicit in her persecution by being forced to use this label that was forced on her. I wish for her name even though Atwood refuses to reveal it in her narrative, perhaps this is her last inch that *she* will not give, perhaps she wants us to imagine ourselves in that place of no personal name. It is as though Offred, and also Valerie, have read American poet Adrienne Rich's warning that "To assimilate means to give up not only your history but your body, to try to adopt an alien appearance because your own is not good enough, to fear naming yourself lest name be twisted into label" (142). Instead, Offred writes and believes somehow that her narrative will be read and that humanity will move forward to a time when women will be at the very least as free as they once were in her past—that of America in the 1980s. Both women, Valerie and Offred, reclaim their identities and personal, historical truths by writing forbidden narratives and believing they will one day be read by audiences. Likewise, both women's narratives could be fittingly described by V's motto, as seen in the graphic novel's artwork from the arch in the Shadow Gallery "Vi Veri Veniversum Vivus Vici,"²⁷ which V translates for Evie: "*By the power of truth, I, while living, have conquered the universe*" (Moore 43). Valerie and Offred's narratives provide ways to talk back to the hegemonic histories produced. Their stories refill the gaps left in official histories, thus conferring victory to the women whose tales have escaped censorship.

²⁷ Attributed to Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, though it is not a direct quotation

These women's words and belief in the power to imagine a future that has not forgotten them provides a vivid contrast to the sentiment of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s male protagonist Winston, who betrays his lover Julia, allows himself to be assimilated via reeducation, and then re-enters society as a rehabilitated Party member (Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* 287-297). When Winston stated that "All history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and re-inscribed exactly as often as necessary," he correctly used the word "palimpsest," yet forgot that it carries the connotation that the new text is written over the remnants of the old, thus the former may still be discerned by closer study (40). Therefore, the deeply flawed texts the Party paid him to write as Truth may one day be overwritten by another person, or regime. Big Brother may not have the last word. Unlike Winston, who has no Alchemist storytelling hope because he does not believe that his diary will survive nor does he suppose an audience outside his hegemonic structure, both of the women's narrative samples carve out space for change, much like that kind of telling Adrienne Rich calls for in her lecture "Resisting Amnesia: History and Personal Life" given as the Clark Lecture at Scripps College in Claremont, California in 1983. Winston's fears of obliteration resurface in the reader's imagination when Rich speaks about the danger of erasure, especially of women—more so of minority, Third World and lesbian women—in official versions of history and national narrative.

Historical amnesia *is* starvation of the imagination; nostalgia is the imagination's sugar rush, leaving depression and emptiness in its wake. Breaking silences, telling our tales, is not enough. We can value that process—and the courage it may require—without believing that it is an end in itself. Historical responsibility has, after all, to do with action—

where we place the weight of our existences on the line, cast our lot with others, move from an individual consciousness to a collective one. But we all need to begin with the individual consciousness: How did we come to be where we are and not elsewhere? (145, italics original)

By allowing a standardized, sanitized version of history to prevail unchallenged, we condone the stifling of imaginations. A dangerous practice. Hoping for, desiring an idealized version of the past, as Winston has done by purchasing the kitsch and searching for song lyrics or stories from the proles, or even projecting these same hopes onto the future, cannot move humanity beyond current paradigms of social, economic, gender, and other power structures. All of these have existed in the past, and through the past—through our desire to replicate them—they hold onto the future. It is only an obsession with inert nostalgia. Rich does value the stories of those not part of the master narrative, but takes this idea further to an activist's stance: breaking the silence is not enough. Once we today consider these personal truths, or situated narratives, with what we already know, we must reconfigure how we fit ourselves into history and what this means for us and for our futures. Rich advocates a critical stance toward our current societies and our selves, as well as towards history, and this critical stance, or challenging of the master narrative, can be the beginning of change. Furthermore, I feel the re-story-ing process can lead to a refilling of language with meaning in our society.

By allowing ourselves as readers to take part in the “feedback oscillation,” we can begin to collapse the dichotomy between text and criticism, between the so-called real world and that of fiction. When the dystopian text we encounter requires us to draw on our prior schemata to orient ourselves in a new world, we draw on our reality. In

exchange, the dystopian text moves us, the audience, to critique our own society based on these possible outcomes posed within fictional borders. The reader can become the Alchemist by grasping these interweavings; the reader can become the Alchemist storyteller by writing and attending to personal, situated narratives in his or her own time. Thus the slick, official narrative of contemporary consumer culture may become pitted, scratched and fractured, providing openings for more and more local, personal stories to be heard.

CHAPTER THREE

CONNECTING THE DOTS: READING AND WRITING THE LANDSCAPE OF DYSTOPIA

*“We probably could have saved ourselves,
but we were too damned lazy to try very hard,
and too damned cheap”*

*~ Kurt Vonnegut’s suggestion of an epitaph
for the human race to carve into the Grand Canyon
for aliens to find*

*“Stories and facts do not naturally keep a respectable distance; indeed, they
promiscuously cohabit the same very material places”
~Donna Haraway, Modest_Witness 68*

Somewhere in the woods of western West Virginia, late spring, circa 1980:

“See this one? It’s got three different shaped leaves all on one plant: the oval, the one that looks like three fingers—like a paw print, and the mitten-shaped one. That’s sassafras.”

“Like the tea?”

“Yes, that’s the plant the tea can be made from, though I never did it. Try this. Break off a little piece from that sassafras twig...no, here where they’re small.... Put it in your mouth. No really, I wouldn’t give you something bad for you.... Chew on the end. It’s good. See?”

It was. It tasted good! In the eastern woodlands, I can still pick out the sassafras for a good, mouth freshening twig even though at that time I could not and still cannot tell between the far-too-many types of oak or pine trees, no matter how many times my father pointed out their differences. I was probably five or six when I learned about sassafras, standing in the late spring forest high above our green frame house. It is still true. True despite the fact I do not live there, that my house does not exist there now, that those

woods have since been timbered, and that my father has since left this particular realm of existence.

I grew up in rural West Virginia. It is not the first thing I tell most people, but I am proud of being from that place. From my family's subsistence farm we could not even see the next neighbor's house, just trees: thousands of maple, beech, poplar, oak, and pine, gripping the steep hillsides around our house in the hollow. My father grew up out on the ridge from there, too, and he tried to teach me about this place. About *his* place. He could identify the trees by leaf or by bark. He knew their names and for what they could be best used. He knew the native animal species by track and spoor. He could hunt them if he needed, but often he would just watch them. He belonged to that place, and he understood it. I thought, with childish certainty, that both he with his knowledge and that land with its natural heritage would be there forever. I could always come and go, but they would be there waiting for me when I had time to come back to finish learning from them and become their caretaker. I would drive or walk past the same spaces and hand the stories down to my own child. However, this is not what has happened. I write this page on a laptop computer that my father would not know how to use in a town over two hundred miles from that hillside. I sit in a coffee shop drinking a beverage I didn't even know existed until eight years ago but that I now drink nearly every day. More cars pass on the street outside the shop's windows in one hour than possibly went past my old house in three months' time. I feel very far from that place, yet at the same time I also feel the heft of it inside me. The weight of being from, of belonging to, a particular place. It is an anchor and a centering stone. It is also sometimes an albatross in a world that judges certain places and people harshly. If I have

lost both my place and my father, then I have turned to books—once my childhood companions in a place where neighborhoods full of friends did not exist for me as they did for the characters on my TV.

Place, memory, and language may very well be the foundation of much that we have, to this point, perceived as reality. As human. Certain places conjure memories and knowledge, and these could not be expressed, shared, and conserved without language. What does it mean to be from a place? To know a place and its inhabitants? Can these kinds of knowledge be of use to humanity even today? The dystopian fiction, with its inherent attention to language, provides examples of these very concepts. In turn, what can these examples, extrapolated from their author's current conditions and taken to the worst extremes, show contemporary readers about our own attitudes regarding the value of place, memory, and language today? In this chapter I will argue that by exploring nature and place-based knowledge and language, location-specific survival belief-systems, and place as necessary to survival and sanity, the dystopian genre offers strategies with which to think as characters encounter and then interpret literal and political landscapes, connecting the dots of available information, and using this information to survive by planning ahead and caring for themselves mentally and physically. Additionally, I argue that this ability to read the lay of the land is crucial to acquire and hone if people are to survive the challenge of a rapidly changing and mostly man-made world.

In dystopias, as in real life, people must identify and protect some sources of knowledge about the world. When personal sources of local, place-based knowledge are lost, Marina Schauffler writes, "Books can serve as wise elders, sharing the culture's

accumulated wisdom and helping both children and adults interpret their experiences outdoors. Scott Russell Sanders refers to the restorative and transformative power of words as the ‘alchemy’ of reading, where marks on a page transmute into vital and sustaining narrative” (54). In contemporary culture, where many families do not live in multi-generational family units, or even in close proximity to those generations and their accumulated wisdom, books can serve a similar role. While books may seem inert, their knowledge awakens when brought to life by the reader’s act of interpretation. Similarly, “Harvard ethnobiologist Richard Schultes observed that every death of a tribal shaman, who has unique knowledge of the properties of plants in their region, ‘is as if a library had burned down’” (qtd. in Jagtenberg and McKie 218). If humans have been cut off from the personal, they may then access the lost, forgotten, or missing stories through their written heritage.

However, inherent in this use of the written lies the danger of turning the text into a disembodied, undisputable monolith of authority and knowledge. The words themselves must not supersede the persons, places, and times from which they have come: there must be awareness of these factors as well as the cognizance of the words on the pages themselves. In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-François Lyotard writes, “But what is meant by the term knowledge is not only a set of denotative statements, far from it. It also includes notions of ‘know-how,’ ‘knowing how to live,’ ‘how to listen’ [*savoir-faire, savoir-vivre, savoir-‘ecouter*], etc. Knowledge, then, is a question of competence that goes beyond the simple determination and application of the criterion of truth...” (18). Lyotard’s definition of knowledge is the one I find most compelling. It is not merely that which can be learned by studying alone, but

the praxis, the very living of knowledge in the world. This, I feel, correlates with the local, situated, and embodied truths discussed in Chapter Two. If the world in which humans live constantly shifts, changing the faces of places and people more quickly than the natural processes of erosion, time and growth would, humanity must, nevertheless, connect our stories to their places if we are to personally scuff the slick surface of reality to retain and recover truths that may enable humanity to remember information important to survival, such as how to build simple machines and create goods and clothes by hand, and possibly even to survive future challenges.

Fortunately, human beings seem hard-wired to tell stories, and collections of folk tales from many cultures, such as those referenced in Lord's *Singer of Tales*, attest to their importance in specific locations over time. Tom Jagtenberg and David McKie, who combine environmental, cultural and sociological studies, write specifically about the value of narrative as a means of navigating one's environment: "[A]uthorship is a process of mapping or finding one's way in a symbolic world" (46). The stories created become symbols of the author, creating a personal mythos based on that author's specific places, experiences, and abilities. Story becomes symbolic of place. It stands in for the real that may or may not still exist. It is through this act of creating, of telling tales and writing them that those engaged in the process make sense of their own places and events; it is in this way that authors impose an order and sequence upon the happenings of their own times, places and imaginations to share them with others. Authors identify nodes of importance and use narrative to connect the dots so that readers may travel the same paths in the written, symbolic world if the physical manifestation of that is denied them.

Reading and Labeling the Landscapes: Deciphering the Dots

Narratives belonging to traditional communities are particularly good at identifying dots and connecting them. Regarding the closeness of people and places, biologist Donna Haraway writes extensively about story in *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan©_Meets_Onco Mouse™*, a philosophical text discussing the situatedness of all researchers and their research, and the importance of narrative to knowledge:

Not only is no language, including mathematics, ever free of troping; not only is facticity always saturated with metaphoricity; but also, any sustained account of the world is dense with storytelling. “Reality” is not compromised by the pervasiveness of narrative; one gives up nothing, except the illusion of epistemological transcendence, by attending closely to stories. I am consumed with interest in the stories that inhabit us and that we inhabit; such inhabiting is finally what constitutes this “we” among whom communication is possible. (64)

For Haraway, story and communication exist within discourse communities, and these communal and witnessing stories give an account of the world. They provide points of truths for specific people in specific places at specific times. For instance, the Wampanoag peoples mentioned in the previous chapter certainly employed the natural world to aid the remembrance and reception of stories with their “memory holes” dug into the ground at the locales of the events being related (Shorto). The audience could see before them where the story took place, tying the words and the location together in their memories and lore. Another earth-based storytelling device exists across the

Atlantic in southwestern Africa: “The Tshokwe people of northeastern Angola have a tradition involving continuous patterns in sand. The tracings are called *sona* and they have ritual significance. They are used as mnemonics for stories about the gods and ancestors. Elders trace the drawings while telling the stories” (Gerdes 171). With names such as “The Antelope’s Paw” and “The Spider,” the design of these *sona* call to mind the creatures that the stories involve (Demaine et. al. 126).

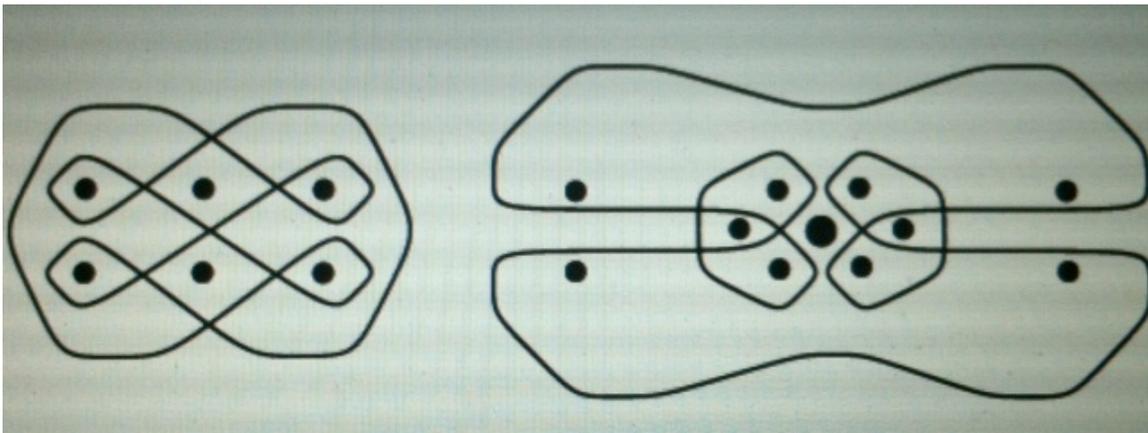


Fig. 2. Two examples of *sona*: “The Antelope’s Paw” (left) and “The Spider” (right) (Demaine et. al. 127).

Interestingly, each *sona* must be slowly traced in one single motion thus making one journey around the figure in the sand as the story progresses; sand drawings must be traced by looping around each dot, representing certain sequential points of the narrative only once (126-7). Perhaps these tracings become the portable version of “memory holes” for people of a nomadic culture; therefore, the traditional places associated with the lore must be represented symbolically. However, the visual representation of the story, drawn into the sand of the land where Tshokwe dwell, connects that land, the tale and the people despite a theoretical loss of specific place—their visual mnemonic’s portability allows it to be passed down even if the specific places where the story

occurred are no longer accessible by the people. Concerning native heritage, Schauffler and Saunders write that:

Indigenous people have a relationship with the land that extends back generations, providing a wealth of accumulated stories and a tribal sense of kinship. Outside this context, it can be harder to cultivate a sustained link with the land. For someone living in a transient and fast-paced society, “it is a spiritual discipline to root the mind in a particular landscape.” That discipline requires one to accept limits, adapting to the region’s topographic, climatological, and ecological constraints and declining opportunities that would uproot one. (Saunders qtd. in Schauffler 100)

Yet, those who come into a new place may lack the place-based knowledge to truly understand and survive in that area. Unable to see the greater fabric of their new home, migrants to an area may alienate themselves from long-term residents, similarly, long-term residents may be wary of greeting and openly sharing local, personal knowledge with these new people. Therefore, those newcomers may offend older denizens by their lack of consideration of traditional events and customs, or they may even suffer physically due to the missing information they have not yet gained access to or bothered to learn.

The naming of geographical features may be a means of interpreting the land. Certainly, before narrative can be created and symbolize a reality, new elements must either be learned or named. When residents and, by extension, readers encounter new terrain, they must also learn the labels. However, mere rote memorization of terminology

or perusal of dictionary definitions may not impart the true seriousness, the gravity of particular terms in particular settings. Mike Davis' *Ecology of Fear*, an exploration of the environmental and socio-political conundrum that is the state of California, provides an excellent example of the true meaning of geographical terms when colonists of British ancestry reached the West Coast and began to establish permanent settlements:

English terminology, specific to a humid climate, proved incapable of accurately capturing the dialectic of water and drought that shapes Mediterranean environments [such as California]. By no stretch of the imagination, for example, is an arroyo merely a 'glen' or 'hollow'—they are the results of radically different hydrological processes. The Anglos often had little choice but to preserve the more befitting Spanish terms although they failed to grasp their larger environmental context. (11)

To exemplify Davis' statement, an arroyo may appear on most days to be a dry creek bed in a ravine, perhaps with a trickle of water at its very bottom; however, these mainly dried up looking channels become deadly, raging torrents during rains. Furthermore, the rains do not have to occur where the human viewing, or worse yet, walking or standing in the arroyo is. Often, heavy rains at higher elevations miles away cause flash floods that sweep down the apparently dead streambeds, devouring everything in the chasm with little or no warning. Brush, debris, anything unlucky enough to be in the arroyo can be swept along, rolled over and over until the force of the water dissipates downstream. The flashfloods Easterners would be familiar with involve rains falling from visible storm systems localized in an area due to hills and mountains that drain a much smaller watershed. Seeing the heavy downfall or hearing the thunder in the immediate distance,

and observing the creek or river turn muddy and begin to rise, alerts the watcher to an impending flood. None of these warnings need to occur before arroyo flooding, which may lead to injury and death that could have been prevented by local knowledge of how land and water interact. The Spanish missionaries and settlers' language contained words that aptly fit these processes for similar climates in their native Spain, while the English vocabulary related more to the woodlands of the east and its climate.

In dystopias, also, naming and interpreting landscape is a common occurrence. An example of word-borrowing when the landscape exceeds the limits of a first language occurs early in Robinson's *Red Mars* which illustrate the two cardinal hypotheses of language and cognition laid out by Stuart Chase in the introduction to Whorf's *Language, Thought and Reality*: 1. "All higher levels of thinking are dependent on language." 2. "The structure of the language one habitually uses influences the manner in which one understands his environment. The picture of the universe shifts from tongue to tongue" (vi). As preparations for the oxygen tent city of Nicosia's dedication festival move into high speed, Frank²⁸ reflects on the early settlement of Mars that followed his and the other First Hundred's original mission and how some of the latter groups affected others. Of particular interest is the adoption of many Arabic terms to express landscape conditions on the planet early in their history, before the terraforming processes have taken hold.

²⁸ Frank Chalmers, a high-ranking member of the US contingent, felt he should have been the leader but John Boone was the heart of the mission for both crew and public. His jealousy and opposition to Boone color most of the early political action. He, in fact, carries out a plot to assassinate Boone on the night described here. Later, perhaps as an act of contrition, he sacrifices himself to ensure some of the other First 100's escape during the failed first rebellion.

The similarity was such that Arabic words were slipping quickly into English, because Arabic had a larger vocabulary for this landscape: *akaba* for the steep final slopes around volcanoes, *badia* for the great world dunes, *nefuds* for deep sand, *seyl* for the billion-year-old dry riverbeds . . . People were saying they might as well switch over to Arabic and have done with it. (Robinson, *Red 9*, italics orig.)

English, or even Russian²⁹—the other official language of the First Hundred’s original scientific mission—contains no words to differentiate among conditions encountered in a mostly desert landscape. The catchall *sand* was not nuanced to accurately express the various types of sand Mars colonists must encounter and navigate on a daily basis; therefore, the more expressive Arabic terms found their way into popular use. One does wonder whether recognizing *nefuds* and its effects on walking or driving required special consideration for the Martian traveler, since this is not addressed in the texts.

Nonetheless, words of this sort help to interpret the landscape. This attention to specific words appears again in *Blue Mars*, the final tome of the Martian trilogy, as Sax, the scientist and former teacher of Nirgal, recollects time spent with Maya, the female leader of the Russian contingent from the First Hundred. At this time, Sax and Maya are among a very few remaining original settlers, most of whom live in small groups or pairs across Mars, yet despite their greatly advanced ages, still play a vital political and social role on the planet. For fun Sax and Maya have taken to watching the sunset and naming the colors as they appear:

²⁹ Russian also has only one word for “sand”: *pesok* (Bormotova, Liliya. Native Speaker of Russian. Facebook Private Message to Author).

They made up names: 2 October the 11th Orange, Aphelion [the point of orbit in which a planet is furthest from the sun] Purple, Lemon Leaf, Almost Green, Arkady's [a red-headed member of the First Hundred] Beard; Maya could go on forever, she was really good at it. Then sometimes they would find a named patch matching the sky (for a moment, anyway) and they would learn the real meaning of a new word, which Sax found satisfying. But in that stretch between red and blue, English had surprisingly little to offer; the language just was not equipped for Mars. (Robinson, *Blue* 651).

The pair of sky watchers finds their vocabularies lacking when trying to name the Martian skies, even though both are highly intelligent and multilingual. With its thinner atmosphere, further distance from the sun, and red-colored landscapes, Mars, even after terraforming, still defies its residents' Earth-bound languages. No single Earth-based lexicon can accurately describe Mars; therefore, the people must borrow across dialects and invent new words to express their new realities.

Labeling landscapes becomes more difficult when those landscapes defy all previous human experience and entirely new realities need to be named. When dealing with words for time, which organizes existence, the new Martians do not seek out completely original or unfamiliar terms that aptly express their landscape, and instead rely on the systems tied to Earth-based knowledge of rotation/revolution even though they no longer match their Martian reality. The deep-seated maxim that "Time is money" perhaps governs the inability to outright reject former ways of organizing and quantifying the basic unit of a day and builds in a daily nefarious blank space because of the

inadequacy of the original system when applied to different, even alien, circumstances. By continuing to use Earth-based clocks, the Martians encounter a problem due to Mars' longer rotation: each day is slightly more than twenty-four hours long. Thus, "the Martian time slip" comes into existence, and, perhaps by virtue of being off the clock and thus off the record, becomes a time of excess, clandestine meetings and sometimes danger.³⁰

And then it was ringing midnight, and they were in the Martian time slip, the thirty-nine-and-a-half-minute gap between 12:00:00 and 12:00:01, when all the clocks went blank or stopped moving. This was how the first hundred had decided to reconcile Mars's slightly longer day with the twenty-four-hour clock, and the solution had proved satisfactory. Every night to step for a while out of the flickering numbers, out of the remorseless sweep of the second hand . . . (*Red* 20, ellipsis original)

Not only have the days lengthened compared to Earthly time scales, but the years also extend correspondent to Mars' longer orbital revolution. The calendar year (Martian year or M-year) consists of 669 Martian days, but the settlers do not add newly-named months or create an entirely new calendar. Instead, they double the already established Gregorian calendar months, providing two of each. For example, 1 February and 2 February or 1 March and 2 March³¹ and so on, to eventually make up a twenty-four-month year with twenty-one months at twenty-eight days and three months at twenty-seven days to equal the new 669-day M-year (*Red* 120-121).

³⁰ John Boone is murdered by Frank Chalmers' lackey during the Martian time slip at the dedication of Nicosia (Robinson, *Red* 20-23).

³¹ Another example of the dual months is seen in the quote concerning color names earlier in this paragraph: "2 October the 11th Orange" (Robinson, *Blue* 651).

Time words continue to perpetuate the landscape of the home world's influence on the Martian existence, perhaps reminding of the dangerous link to Earth that persists throughout the trilogy. Just as the new Martians cannot simply rewrite Mars in Earth's image literally—terraforming does not work well for many years—they cannot either create entirely new language to truly symbolize the reality of their life there. Writing about language as a means of creating order, Whorf states, "We are inclined to think of language simply as a technique of expression, and not to realize that language first of all is a classification and arrangement of the stream of sensory experience which results in a certain world-order, a certain segment of the world that is easily expressible by the type of symbolic mean that language employs" (55). Language does not merely allow humans to communicate or express feelings, but also provides the means by which humanity orders its existence. Humans cannot escape language because reality is governed and structured by it. Mars is not quite a clean slate, but it is a second chance for those able to escape the hot, flooded, and overcrowded Earth. Doubtless, the time terminology and organization persist because the early settlers need some sense of normalcy in order to psychologically adapt to their new home; however, it is also a perpetuation of a structure from the failed human experiment that life on Earth has become. This shared language and thus shared reality of experience allows many Earth-based corporations to see Mars and its valuable resources as simply extensions of the home world. The money that can be made from the expedition might take more time to retrieve, but the multinational corporations still feel it is fair game. The Martians did not describe their very different landscapes in alien-enough terminology to force those who would exploit them to

recognize their desire for autonomy. Mars eventually has to earn freedom for its land, resources, people, and economic policies through revolution.

Why, in most of Western culture, is this objectifying of landscapes the case? In *Language, Thought and Reality*, Benjamin Whorf writes, “Because we name things, [...] English and similar tongues lead us to think of the universe as a collection of rather distinct objects and events corresponding to words” (240). These named things become separate within the human consciousness; they are items to be labeled, owned, and appropriated. Also, by investing the landscape with names for every item in it, a collection of separate items appears. Each aspect, with its own discrete name now functions independently. Instead of a related, complex meadow ecosystem, working in various intertwined and intricate ways, it is too easy to see only the elements of milkweed, a groundhog, a crow, a stream, and so on. Labeling can break the bonds of relationships. Therefore, according to Jagtenberg and McKie, “Although humans generate both science and culture, the nature of the world they map, or the way they map the same world, invests that illusionary divide with material consequences. The resultant mappings fissure the organization of knowledge about the earth” (208). Because people can name something and place it on a map, they can claim it. This also leads to a propensity for conquerors, or the latest arrivals, to rename landscapes according to their own whims. Interestingly, Sanders uses the term palimpsest to describe his adopted home state of Indiana, and that definition could be aptly applied to any location found on Earth. These are places “written over by centuries of human scrawls and by millennia of natural ones” (“Landscape” 4). What is known and seen today skate superimposed on ages of story, written both by humans and nature. When living in an area, people may

begin to listen to this stratum of stories and use them to understand the other people and places they dwell with, but alternatively, they can ignore or belittle them as though these beings do not matter or exist, thus consigning them to unexplored and unread palimpsest status: to absence, to silence. However, just because humans can name does not mean that they also know, or deeply comprehend a place and all its layers of story, and it is this knowledge that becomes essential to survival in the dystopia.

The ability to read a landscape is crucial, even if those humans do not consciously connect with this landscape of which they are a part. Haraway writes that “Linguistic acts involve shared acts of interpretation, and they are fundamentally tied to engaged location in a structured world. Context is a fundamental matter, not as surrounding ‘information,’ but as co-structure or co-text” (*Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* 214). A community’s context shapes what people say, think and do, as seen in the California and Mars excerpts. Though the contemporary human may be often on the move and therefore know little about their current surrounding landscape, an attempt to decipher their surroundings may be in their best interest. People can learn about the things already in their natural world, begin to read and decipher the clues those other non-human aspects provide, and those things can, in turn, impart valuable knowledge that may lead to overall better health or even survival. Scott Russell Sanders, champion of staying put and knowing a place well, values highly the knowledge to be gained not just from human members of an established community, but from physical, plant, and animal denizens as well:

Native creatures inscribe their own messages on the landscape, messages that one can learn, however imperfectly, to read. Deer trails mark out

subtle changes in slope. The population of butterflies and owls and hawks is a measure of how much poison we have been using; the abundance of algae in ponds is a measure of our fertilizer use. The condition of trees is a gauge of the acidity in rain. Merely finding out the name and history of a plant may deepen one's awareness of a place. ("Landscape" 5)

While many humans may see only the monetary value of certain landscape features, resources, and creatures, Sanders sees what can be learned to improve and provide upkeep not just for the human community, but also for the natural one. For the resident of a dystopian text, however, knowing the landscape context intimately may be the difference between life and death.

Location-Specific Belief Systems in Dystopia

In Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, reading the climate shift, political trends, and growing social unrest, and thus, knowing, the landscape of their time becomes a matter of survival for the characters. Set in the span of years from 2024-2027, this dystopian text explores an America in which government, social programs, health care, the economy and just about everything has collapsed or is on the brink of falling into terrible disarray. The novel centers on the young protagonist Lauren Olamina, who spends hours studying any information she can acquire and preparing to live in the wild even though, at the novel's outset, she lives with her family in a relatively safe, walled neighborhood in Robledo, a fictional suburb of Los Angeles, California. Without the availability of idle distractions such as limitless internet devices, television, and video games, Lauren turns to combing her family's home library—mainly compiled by her

grandparents, whose house it was—for information, supplemented by a few newer things she gets when her father allows her to use his computer, reserved for telecommuting (Butler 57-58). Though illiteracy is rampant for many, Lauren and the other neighborhood children have been taught to read in her stepmother’s in-home school. Because of this, Lauren can read copiously about the wilderness, gun care, medical knowledge, native plants, and living off the land, and take notes. Though she lives a life much better than many in her decayed America of 2024, she doubts that she and her neighbors will be able to sustain their island of safety in the midst of growing chaos. Lauren considers all the events she observes as a trajectory that cannot be stopped: gradually, the outside world eats away at their security as first a little girl is shot through the gate, houses are robbed, then fires set and neighbors killed. To those outside, the walled community looks rich, though those living there are just surviving through communal hard work. Lauren ascertains, correctly, that they will one day be overrun. She errs only in thinking it will take longer for her community to succumb. Unlike most of the others in their enclave who worry but trust in their wall, weapons, and members, Lauren plans for worst case scenarios by creating a “grab and run pack” that eventually enables her and two others from her neighborhood, plus a growing band met in exile, to survive when many more are lost (58). This ability to not only see the concerns but also to extrapolate what they could lead to sets her apart from the rest, from the dead.

The dystopian genre is a testing ground for worst-case scenarios. In *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren’s youth and acceptance of the world as it is allows her not only to prepare for the worst but also to read the social, political and physical landscapes and use this knowledge to accept and learn the most she can in any situation. While still inside

the walled community, she reads everything, learns to skin rabbits, practices shooting, and even gains some basic martial arts skills. Whether she will ever use these things or not is of no concern: the chances are that she might and she leaves little to chance. Lauren blames the nostalgia of the grown-ups, her father and stepmother included, for occluding horrific outcomes from their minds, basically ensuring they take no extreme proactive measures, which seals their fates. People who can remember “the good old days” cannot believe that they will not return or that America is no longer a strong nation that takes care of its own citizens. Police and firefighters must be paid exorbitant sums to do their jobs. Things the novel’s readers expect to have done by public servants in their own time, such as investigate and solve crimes of all kinds and put out house fires, do not happen without those who want the services paying a fee, and even then the job is done shoddily.

The clash of nostalgia and reality is typified by Lauren and Cory. Lauren, who has never even known a world with streetlights recalls a certain night of her childhood: “City lights,” her stepmother, Cory, explains when she asks why people once couldn’t see so many stars; “Lights, progress, growth, all those things we’re too hot and too poor to bother with anymore” (Butler 5). When Lauren counters that there are city lights still, she is told that: “There aren’t anywhere near as many as there were. Kids today have no idea what a blaze of light cities used to be—and not that long ago” (6). However, it is their next exchange that begins to tease out the generational perception difference. “‘I’d rather have the stars,’ I say. ‘The stars are free.’ She shrugs. ‘I’d rather have the city lights back myself, the sooner the better. But we can afford the stars’” (6). Lauren suffers from far fewer delusions about what the future holds for Americans, her own community

and generation specifically. For her, the stars are enough. She does not yearn for a world she did not know and this yearning does not block her acceptance of what is possible, perhaps unavoidable now. If conditions outside their wall are worsening as the news and personal experience verify, then how can the walled community expect to outlast a rising tide of danger without outside assistance? For Lauren, the relative safety and certainty of the past do not exist. Being able to let go of outdated modes of thinking is a survival strategy that Cory and most of the other adults cannot employ, for they see the present and its landscapes through a nostalgic filter of the past, and this can be considered a weakness in perception. “It is never a simple matter actually to see what is before your eyes. You notice what memory and knowledge and imagination have prepared you to see” (Sanders “Landscape,” 3) and Lauren’s self-imposed education and outsider status due to her hyperempathy³² condition have made her wary, cunning, and ready to survive in the world she has watched, studied, and read.

Lauren’s ability to connect the dots of social and environmental factors makes her an adept reader of her dystopian landscape in ways that others miss. Unfortunately, despite her knowledge, she becomes a sort of Cassandra-like figure. Though Lauren has accurately connected the dots of current events, forecasted the future, and provided a plan of action, most of her words go unheeded. Thus, like Troy, their homes and families, too,

³² Hyperempathy is an “organic delusional syndrome”—a condition caused in infants when pregnant women abused an intelligence-enhancing drug called Paracetco. Those afflicted feel the pain and pleasure of others: those whose suffering/joy they can see, hear, or even imagine. Some even have sympathetic bleeding, though this stopped for Lauren when she began menstruating. Lauren’s father made the family keep her condition a secret so that she would not feel weak or special, leading her to become helpless (Butler 11-12).

will fall and burn. Hoping to awaken more young people to her concerns and plans, Lauren carefully chooses someone her own age to finally reveal her thoughts to. Before things get too bad for their cloistered community, Lauren attempts to talk about her feelings concerning the future and the apparent unreadiness of the adults with her best friend Joanne Garfield.

Things are changing now, too. Our adults haven't been wiped out by a plague so they're still anchored in the past, waiting for the good old days to come back. But things have changed a lot, and they'll change more.

Things are always changing. This is just one of those big jumps instead of the little step-by-step changes that are easier to take. People have changed the climate of the world. Now they're waiting for the old days to come back. (Butler 57)

In Lauren's world, as in ours, global warming and environmental degradation, violent hurricanes, tornadoes, and snowstorms have and are decimating large swaths of the U.S. Various diseases run rampant nationwide and rain seldom comes to Southern California. Lauren sees that all these events, or dots, though localized at times, may soon have consequences for people everywhere that must be considered, and she tries to predict possible outcomes and plan for them. Since there is no way that she herself can absorb every book in their community, thus filling in more knowledge gaps she might have, Lauren encourages her friend to go through all the books in her own family's house, learning what she can so that she can teach others, reminiscent of the Book People of *Fahrenheit 451*, who must commit tomes to memory in case the books get burnt. "Books aren't going to save us," Joanne protests, but Lauren's response to her dismissal and

accurate prediction might serve as a guide for anyone. “Nothing is going to save us. If we don’t save ourselves, we’re dead. [...] Any kind of survival information from encyclopedias, biographies, anything that helps you learn to live off the land and defend ourselves. Even some fiction might be useful” (59). To get her started, Lauren lends Joanne a book on plants, instructing her friend to take notes. Unfortunately, Lauren’s trust is misplaced: Joanne neither heeds her advice nor keeps her confidence, telling her own mother, who tells Lauren’s parents. Lauren’s father reprimands her sternly and seeks to allay her fears, encouraging her to teach others about native plants and their uses instead of just scaring them to death (61-65).

Proverbs will become Lauren’s best teaching tool and also a dystopian survival strategy, but only after the destruction of her community. In addition to worrying about the fate of her family and community as she reads the landscape of their quickly collapsing security, Lauren has been wrestling with personal questions of faith and destiny. It is at this point of the novel that her ability as a writer of personally situated truths becomes important to the survival of many people. While taking notes, observing and learning about her world, Lauren began to secretly question the religion she had grown up with—her father the Baptist minister’s faith. Included in her notebooks are the verses and truths she discerns about her world and her ideas of God-as-Change: a new belief system for the world-as-it-is-now. These verses head most chapters of the novel and become part of the reading lessons she gives the adult members of the group that forms after the destruction of Lauren’s community.³³ She names her writings, and the

³³ Pyro addicts, people who take a drug that makes watching fire better than having sex, use a truck to ram down the neighborhood gate. They rape and kill most of the inhabitants, and then burn the houses. Lauren, whose father and one brother have already

path they engender, Earthseed and takes comfort from repeating these carefully crafted truths. After the fall of the neighborhood wall and Lauren's forced pilgrimage north, many of the people who join her group of homeless exiles easily take to the proverbs Lauren has written. Their relatively easy conversion may be related to Roger D.

Abrahams theory that:

Both proverbs and superstitions confront and attempt to control recurrent anxiety situations by giving them a 'name.' Humans, as cultural beings, have a 'rage for order.' Anxiety arises with the intuition of chaos, of disruption of the orderly procession of life, and of dissolution of group. *Proverbs 'name' situations in which social stability is repeatedly threatened*, the potentially disruptive forces coming from within the group. Superstitions give a name to occasions in which order is in danger of being disrupted (or susceptible to being reinforced) through forces outside the group. (Abrahams 47, italics mine)

These threatened humans, bereft of home, family, and community latch onto the strong group members, the protection they offer, and the empowering comfort offered by Earthseed proverbs. Lauren's verses teach that Change is not a god to appease, but one that they can choose to work with and perhaps create a better future. Lauren's Earthseed verses are proverbs attempting to name, shape, comfort and guide those in the novel.

Some of shorter ones stick readily in the mind of the reader, potentially becoming part of his or her own world:

disappeared during the course of the narrative, loses her stepmother and three remaining younger brothers. She ends up with Harry Balter and Zahra Moss, two neighbors, and they begin a trek north on foot. Along the way they gather a few trusted friends (153-206).

There is no end
To what a living world
Will demand of you. (137)

Anyone encountering a new situation, especially a difficult one, can take comfort not in what is promised but the fact that something can always be expected: there will always be demands made on those living in this world. Therefore, one should not be shocked when troubles approach, but meet them knowing that they are unavoidable. At the same time, Earthseed provides for those perhaps unready to confront a situation:

Earthseed
Cast on new ground
Must first perceive
That it knows nothing (179)

This verse appears and is possibly written after Lauren finds herself without her family and community. She has kept a notebook of Earthseed writings for years, but the proverbs are revealed only in conjunction with the narrative. Though she has read extensively and prepared a pack, she recognizes that she does not really know how to live outside the walls. Becoming aware of what she does not know is the first step to surviving: she tells a friend, Zahra,³⁴ that she will learn from all that she sees and

³⁴ Zahra was born and survived outside the walls until she was sold by her mother to her husband Richard Moss to be his third wife. Inside the neighborhood, she had been forbidden to learn to read and write or mingle with the others much. She steals peaches the first day she, Lauren and Harry are together so that they have fresh food to eat in addition to Lauren's pack items (170-173). This proves to her worth to Lauren and Harry as a valuable group member because they have money and weapons, but she has nothing material. However, the skills she gleaned as a child outside the walls resurface when she needs them again.

experiences outside the walls and adapt because she intends to survive (172-173).

Additionally, Lauren's dated state and park maps in her pack and her knowledge of ways to get water and identify useful plants give their group an advantage over others who do not have access to these things.

Most of the Earthseed proverbs, while imbued with a sense of fatalism, also provide space for empowered action: Lauren's foreboding knowledge to create her "grab and go pack," thus enabling her to survive, becomes metaphoric for Earthseed. Change will occur, so meet it in a state of preparedness. The most repeated passage crystallizes the Earthseed belief system and is the first chosen for use in Zahra's reading lessons:

All that you touch

You Change.

All that you Change

Changes you.

The only lasting truth

Is Change.

God

Is Change. (195)

This verse also emphasizes the interconnectedness of environments and humans. Yes, people can cause change to things, but these changed things will affect the people in return. There is no escaping Change; therefore, to be aware of this truth reminds a

believer to carefully consider actions before taking them—an interesting concept to impose on a man-made climate disaster such as the one in *Parable of the Sower*. Lauren-as-Writer provides the words, the vehicles for her small community to dare to hope and survive in their hostile landscape. Without her empowering words, it would be easier to succumb to the disasters and the anxieties constantly besetting them instead of bravely reading the landscape to keep walking north. As the group commits Earthseed proverbs to memory, they also commit to their own survival through acceptance of their situation and recognition of their abilities to learn and change.

Lauren's proverbs themselves advocate reading the environment as a survival strategy, and the simplistic nature of them allows for easy remembrance, which can also aid in survival. However, coming from a literate enclave in the midst of rampant illiteracy, Lauren does not discount the ability to read and write as a skill to aid survival. For her, teaching others basic literacy is a way to help them reconnect with their world and write their own observations as she has done. Earthseed proverbs are available to members in both oral and written forms depending on each member's education. But for those willing to learn, the proverbs become reading lessons even as the group treks north, becoming another proof of the following verse:

Your teachers
Are all around you.
All that you perceive,
All that you experience,
All that is given to you
or taken from you,

All that you love or hate,
need or fear
Will teach you—
If you will learn.
God is your first
and your last teacher.
God is your harshest teacher:
subtle,
demanding.
Learn or die. (Butler 279)

Lauren writes this reminding people of the wide availability of knowledge and chances to learn, and expanding upon the proverb “Everything you touch, you change; Every thing you change changes you.” Every single person, place, thing, or event can be a learning experience, even if it is only to learn what not to do. In order to truly see the landscape and decipher the meanings inherent in it and all it includes, landscape-readers must take everything into account. Even if the teacher is someone doing an objectionable act, ignoring that person is not an option. Seemingly unimportant elements cannot be discarded without consideration, or gaps in knowledge may prove fatal. Additionally, Lauren’s verses presuppose a community of believers who seek security, knowledge and a better future. Though she has mulled over many of them for years alone, she only spends one night outside the walls by herself. Not long after the group of Zahra, Harry, and Lauren reunited Earthseed makes its debut.

Additionally, proverbial survival strategies can take completely oral forms, as seen in Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*. Adam One³⁵ founds a location-specific belief system known as God's Gardeners, which also employs proverbs. These verses are mainly geared toward surviving a "Waterless Flood," a disaster that Adam One, an astute landscape reader, correctly predicts will soon wipe out most of humanity (6). The Gardeners try to live with little impact on the Earth, raising their own organic food, making much of what they use and wear, and showering once a week, which sets them apart from the surrounding people. However, in both belief systems—The Gardeners and Earthseed—the verses fulfill another of Abrahams' tenets concerning proverbs and superstitions: "This is the central function of all mnemonic devices, in fact—to make knowledge more memorable so that under stress conditions it can be recalled more easily" (51). Without the ability to remember and recall knowledge easily, all that has been gleaned and observed in the world will not do a believer much good if they cannot draw on the wisdom in moments of crisis. The Gardeners rely heavily on memory because Adam One rightly recognizes that they live in a surveillance state. Leaving any writing lying around would be asking for persecution of one or all members, especially of a noticeably fringe religion, therefore God's Gardeners train their minds. "Human memory," observes Walter J. Ong, "does not naturally work like a written or printed text or like a computer. Naturally, orally sustained verbal memory is redundant, essentially and not by default, echoic, nonlinear, and, unless supplemented by special intensive training, it is never verbatim for any very lengthy passage" (2). Among the

³⁵ The elders of God's Gardeners use the titles Adams and Eves. The numbers do not designate a hierarchy, outside of Adam One, but instead are designations of the role each play. For example, Eve Six is the keeper of the bees and herbal medicines. (Atwood, *Year* 45; 180-181)

multiple narratives of this novel, two very different surviving female Gardeners' accounts display the way that this wisdom and memory training help each woman outlast the Waterless Flood, though neither of them still actively resides within a Gardeners' community. The two points of view I choose to focus on are Toby and Ren—both women who came into the Gardeners not exactly of their own choosing, yet who learned from and used the knowledge imparted to them to read the landscape and survive the Flood.

Training in proverbs of survival, even for a short time, can be the difference between life and death. It is through Ren that many of the Gardeners' proverbs and rules get passed to the reader: as a child, she heard extensive repetition of proverbs embodying policies, such as the danger of writing things down, through her schooling with the Adams and Eves because theirs was a purposefully oral culture. Ren comes to the Gardeners with her mother Lucerne, who left a husband in a corporate walled enclave to be with Zeb, one of the Adams. At first, young Ren wants only to return to her father, home, and consumer lifestyle, but her education from a few years in the sect assists in saving her life though she forcibly returns to the corporate world and eventually rides out the Flood in an upscale sex club, Scales and Tails, where she works.

Trapped, alone, and aware of the pandemic, Ren falls back on her early survival training. Confined to the "Sticky Zone" because of a minor exposure to a customer from a rip in her Biofilm Bodyglove,³⁶ Ren is securely locked in alone with food, water, and filtered air as she awaits the results of her tests (6-7). Though Ren cannot grow food of

³⁶ A second-skin, living suit worn by the girls in Scales and Tails. They could be adorned with scales, glitter, feathers, or any sort of fantasy material, but served as a body condom as well.

her own and did not herself lay in a store of goods, she does know to conserve her supplies until someone can come to let her out because the door has a keypad and is locked from the outside to prevent possible contamination. Though she is locked in, Ren can view Scales through cameras and also has news sources until those go dark: “I knew I’d have to be practical, or I’d lose hope and slide into a Fallow state³⁷ and maybe never come out of it. [...] If I ate only a third of every meal instead of half, and saved the rest instead of tossing it down the chute, I’d have enough for at least six weeks” and she keeps track of the weeks by making marks with her eyebrow pencil (283; 315).

Because the Gardeners were a fringe religion that later became outlawed due to the bioterrorist activities of a break-off radical sect, they did not permit anything to be written down, preferring instead to trust all their wisdom to memory. However, early on, Ren writes her own name on the walls with the same pencil she used to mark the weeks (6) so as not to forget who she is even though as a child she learned from the Gardeners:

Beware of words. Be careful what you write. Leave no trails.

This is what the Gardeners taught us, when I was a child among them. They told us to depend on memory, because nothing written down could be relied on. The Spirit travels from mouth to mouth, not from thing to thing: books could be burnt, paper crumble away, computers could be destroyed. Only the Spirit lives forever, and the Spirit isn’t a thing.

As for writing, it was dangerous, said the Adams and Eves, because your enemies could trace you through it, and hunt you down, and use your words to condemn you. (Atwood, *Year 6*, italics orig.)

³⁷ The Gardeners’ term for the state of being depressed and disconnected from reality.

Now, however, Ren believes there is no one left to care about her words. Everyone learned to memorize great quantities of information, such as the thirteen hymns that are paired with thirteen sermons given by Adam One, which mark the chapters of *The Year of the Flood*.³⁸ Many of these contain religious, scientific, historical, and survival information that can be consulted through memory in a world where infrastructure collapses completely. Adam One successfully advocated for orality because, with power and infrastructure down, accessing computer-stored knowledge, which is the prevailing form of storage in this novel, would be impossible. Only by reciting the proverbs and singing the hymns can data be preserved.

One sermon and hymn pairing in particular embodies the multivalent properties of the Gardeners' oral traditions, which often blend Biblical stories, scientific information, environmental history, and survival techniques: "The Festival of Arks" sermon "Of the Two Floods and the Two Covenants" with its accompanying hymn "My Body is My Earthly Ark" (Atwood, *Year* 89-93). Adam One's sermon addresses the Biblical story of Noah's Ark, the saving of species, and God's Covenant with Noah and his sons. Then it addresses the coming Waterless Flood and the preparation of Ararats, hidden chambers of

³⁸ Sermon and hymn pairings from *The Year of the Flood*: "Of Creation, and the Naming of the Animals" & "When Adam First" (11-14); "Of God's Methodology in Creating Man" & "Oh Let Me Not Be Proud" (51-54); "Of the Two Floods and the Two Covenants" & "My Body is My Earthly Ark" (89-93); "Of the Gifts of Saint Euell" & "Oh Sing We Now the Holy Weeds" (125-127); "Of the Life Underground" & "We Praise the Tiny Perfect Moles" (159-162); "Of the Foolishness within All Religions" & "Oh Lord, You Know Our Foolishness" (195-199); "Of the Importance of Instinctive Knowing" & "God Gave Unto the Animals" (233-236); "Of the Trees, and of the Fruits in their Seasons" & "The Peach or Plum" (275-278); "Of Persecution" & "Today We Praise Our Saint Dian" (311-314); "Of God as the Alpha Predator" & "The Water-Shrew that Rends its Prey" (345-348); "Of the Gifts of Saint Rachel; And of the Freedom of the Spirit" & "When God Shall His Bright Wings Unfold" (371-373); "Of the Wandering State" & "The Longest Mile" (403-405); "On the Fragility of the Universe" & "The Earth Forgives" (423-427).

survival stores so that the Gardeners can outlast the next cataclysm as Noah did in the past. Certainly all the text of a sermon would be too much for complete memorization, but the shorter and related hymn provides an easier device to recall. Lines like “My body is my earthly Ark” and

“When Destruction swirls around,
To Ararat I’ll glide;
My Ark will then come safe to land
By light of Spirit’s guide” (Atwood, *Year 93*).

These lines remind the singer that his or her body is an important vessel, worth keeping well and safe. It also contains the plan to survive: as the Waterless Flood hits, go straight to the prepared Ararat and wait out the troubled times. While this particular pairing deals directly with survival preparation, many of the others contain knowledge that explains their religion, which is a carefully assembled Dadaist-like found item sculpture of religious, scientific, environmentalist, and survivalist tenets to save.

Memories function as storehouses of types of knowledge to safeguard in case of apocalypse. Even the titles of most Gardener Saints and Feast Days, and the sermons contain lists of people who aided nature and creation, as well as animals both living and extinct; these name-lists are important because their repetition keeps them alive in the minds of those doing the recitation. This Gardeners’ exercise is employed by Ren in her efforts to keep sane during the Flood:

Say the Names, Adam One would tell us. And we’d chant these lists of
Creatures: Diplodocus, Pterosaurus, Octopus, and Brontosaurus;
Trilobite, Nautilus, Ichthyosaurus, Platypus. Mastodon, Dodo, Great Auk,

Komodo. I could see all the names, as clear as pages. Adam One said that saying the names was a way of keeping those animals alive. So I said them.

I said other names too. Adam One, Nuala, Zeb, Shackie, Croze, and Oates. And Glenn—I just couldn't picture anyone so smart being dead. And Jimmy, despite what he'd done.³⁹

And Amanda.

I said those names over and over, in order to keep them alive. (Atwood, *Year* 315)

For Ren, the name-repeating ritual becomes a kind of superstition, a form of sympathetic magic she can practice to influence the outcome of the Waterless Flood in her favor. By repeating the names of those humans she knows and cares about, she wills them to keep living. They live because someone still remembers them. Sir James G. Frazer writes that “since [sympathetic magic] assume[s] that things act on each other at a distance through a secret sympathy,” Ren’s recitation of the names, in her mind, wills those people dear to her to survive (14). Though Ren’s adherence to Gardener philosophy could be described as reaching only a surface-depth employing mainly the proverbs that deal with the immediate need and superstition parts instead of those that deal with the dogma concerning living off the land, her reliance on these proverbs does give her comfort and sanity. In contrast, Toby keeps more elaborate records as she survives on her own in as much harmony as she can muster with their man-made second nature, wracked by climate change and rampant bioengineered plant and animal species.

³⁹ Jimmy, a character from the co-quel *Oryx and Crake*, was Ren’s first real boyfriend who had broken her heart.

Toby's use of memorized proverbs and knowledge operates at a deeper, more practical level. While the early stages of the epidemic rage, Toby locks herself in at her place of work and embodies one of the Gardener proverbs, "Use what's to hand" (259): she survives on the items in the spa that some might only have seen as herbal treatments, such as eating AnooYoo Lemon Meringue Facial, a treatment high in sugar, and afterwards she plants her own garden to supplement the skimpy one already on location (15-16; 265; 361). This is available to her because after receiving her new identity and employment as manager of the AnooYoo Spa-in-the-Park, Toby began hiding away supplies for her own Ararat in the spa's storeroom, as the Gardeners taught.

Just as Ren entered the Gardeners' lifestyle through the actions of others, Toby arrived into the Gardeners when Adam One, the leader, and some others rescued her from her pleebland job at SecretBurgers⁴⁰ at the request of Gardener member Rebecca. Rebecca, one of Toby's former co-workers, knew that Toby was in danger due to being constantly raped by the owner, Blanco, and sent her friends after the victimized woman. Toby had no choice but to live with the Gardeners on Edencliff Rooftop because it was located in a different pleeb than Blanco and he could not trespass in that area without starting a gang war. Though Toby often considers how she is a false Gardener, only living there and working because she cannot go elsewhere, she absorbs their training and eventually reconciles herself to the new way of life until she has to get a new identity to once again hide from murderous Blanco (256-264). She ends up as Tobiatha, working at the AnooYoo Spa-in-the-Park when the Waterless Flood strikes.

⁴⁰ An infamous hamburger chain in the pleeblands that sold burgers made from any protein sources put into a grinder. What is in that burger? A secret no one would likely want to know (Atwood, *Year* 33-34).

Apparently alone in the world, Toby hears Adam One's teachings speaking through memory and they bolster her resolve to survive for what ever may come next.

While the Flood rages, you must count the days, said Adam One. You must observe the risings of the Sun and the changings of the Moon, because to everything there is a season. On your Meditations, do not travel so far on your inner journeys that you enter the Timeless before it is time. In your Fallow states, do not descend to a level that is too deep for any resurgence, or the Night will come in which all hours are the same to you, and then there will be no Hope.

Toby's been keeping track of the days on some old AnooYoo Spa-in-the-Park notepaper. Each pink page is topped with two long-lashed eyes, one of them winking, and with a lipstick kiss. She likes these eyes and smiling mouths; they're companions of a sort. At the top of each fresh page she prints the Gardener Feast Day or Saint's Day. She can still recite the entire list off by heart: Saint E.F. Schumacher,⁴¹ Saint Jane Jacobs,⁴² Saint Sigurdottir of Gullfoss,⁴³ Saint Wayne Grady of Vultures;⁴⁴ Saint James Lovelock,⁴⁵ The Blessed Gautama Buddha, Saint Bridget

⁴¹ Author of *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered*. 1973. (www.schumacher.org.uk)

⁴² American-Canadian urban-renewalist and writer of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. 1961. (www.preservenet.com/theory/jacobsbiox.html)

⁴³ Woman in Icelandic lore who saved Golden Falls (Twitter message from Atwood to Gainer 24 Jan. 2012)

⁴⁴ Author of *Vulture: Nature's Ghastly Gourmet*. 1997. (www.writersunion.ca)

⁴⁵ Originator of Gaia theory

Stutchbury of Shade Coffee,⁴⁶ Saint Linnaeus of Botanical Nomenclature,
The Feast of Crocodylidae,⁴⁷ Saint Stephen Jay Gould of the Jurassic
Shales,⁴⁸ Saint Gilberto Silva of Bats.⁴⁹ And the rest.

Under each Saint's Day name she writes her gardening notes: what was
planted, what was harvested, what phase of the moon, what insect guests.
(Atwood, *Year* 163)

Like Ren, Toby employs recitation to keep herself present and living for a future of some kind. Toby's listing contains more of the historical memory of the Gardeners than Ren's, thus preserving the names and associated accomplishments of those Saints. Her memory saves these people and events from the ash heap of history. Having been an adult in the Gardeners for twenty years and one of the children's teachers, Toby had more time to internalize the hefty list of Saints' Days, Feasts and specific gardening and survival lore. The ordered celebration of the Saints provides a framework to recall important information that each person has contributed to humanity. These remembrances can serve as role models and even instructions for some of the best ways of being human. Recalling the history of what other humans have done in defense of nature allows survivors to remember difficulties faced in the past so that the same mistakes may be avoided now that the Waterless Flood has cleansed the Earth and survivors must start a

⁴⁶ Canadian ecologist, conservationist, and author of *Silence of the Songbirds*, which links coffee plantation growth with declines in songbirds. Shade Grown is a brand of organic coffee. (www.birdsandbeans.com/stutchbury.html)

⁴⁷ Crocodiles

⁴⁸ Paleontologist, evolutionary theorist, philosopher and science historian.
(www.stephenjaygould.org)

⁴⁹ Cuban bat researcher

new phase of stewardship. They also provide a support for keeping sane under stress. Unlike Ren's accounts that most often mention the easy-to-recall proverbs of Adam One, Toby grounds her knowledge in action: planting a garden for survival and relearning gradually to eat meat. Toby becomes a reader of landscape in her own right as she uses the proverbial and oral knowledge of the Gardeners to survive alone in the post-Flood world.

It is the world of small detail captured by the proverbs and oral teachings that displays their beautiful functionality as survival strategies. Alone in an abandoned beauty spa in the park, Toby remembers the proverb, "When the small creatures hush their singing, said Adam One, it's because they're afraid. You must listen for the sound of their fear" (5). The bleak landscape that can be seen, and must be read, from the spa's roof sets the scene of her isolation in the overly hot, post-Waterless Flood time:

As the first heat hits, mist rises from among the swath of tress between her and the derelict city. The air smells faintly of burning, a smell of caramel and tar and rancid barbecues, and the ashy but greasy smell of a garbage-dump fire after it's been raining. The abandoned towers in the distance are like the coral of an ancient reef – bleached and colourless, devoid of life.

There is still life, however. Birds chirp; sparrows, they must be. Their small voices are clear and sharp, nails of glass: there's no longer any sound of traffic to drown them out. Do they notice that quietness, the absence of motors? (Atwood, *Year 3*)

The once-garrulous, overcrowded pleeblands lie in ruins outside the park, as does humanity, for all Toby knows. Every day she looks out on this sad, depressing scene, yet she continues with her tasks of caring for her body, her haven, and her garden. The only sounds she can hear are birds, whose voices have been forgotten in the prior crush of civilization by most. Toby recalls Adam One's proverb to use small creatures' sounds as she listens to the night, since these creatures have become her only alarm system in case of intruders. Knowing her environment intimately through her own experiences and the passed down traditions of the Gardeners enables Toby not only to survive, but also to later rescue and administer aid to others, such as Ren.

When social stability decays, internalized proverbs can provide instructions that function like instincts. Both Ren and Toby survive through isolation from the rest of their Exfernal⁵⁰ communities while other Gardeners took shelter in various Ararats hidden in the pleeblands, obeying perhaps the most important tenet: "When the Waterless Waters rise, Adam One used to say, the people will try to save themselves from drowning. They will clutch at any straw. Be sure you are not that straw, my Friends, for if you are clutched or even touched, you too will drown" (Atwood, *Year 21*). Knowing their surroundings and how to survive both temporarily via the Ararats and long-term through scavenging, gardening and reusing will do them no good if they become contaminated. Therefore, it is equally important to know what the *people* in an environment will do in a given situation. Knowing the greed and ignorance of the general population of the pleeblands at the time, the Gardeners can be reasonably sure that most will have no plan and try desperately to save their own skins at all costs. Since

⁵⁰ The Gardeners refer to everyone living outside their order as part of the Exfernal world.

most have been wasteful of the Earth's resources and squandered their own lives on consuming, the Gardeners—who normally value life—know that if there is to be any hope for people to survive at all they must abandon External dwellers to their unavoidable fate. Thus, outsiders' disconnection with the land and animals forfeits their right to survive and rebuild a new world. Once persecuted by most other groups for their appearance, habits, and ways, the God's Gardeners become the stewards of a depopulated, but not yet barren world.

Place-Awareness is Necessary for Survival

Reading landscapes can be a challenging task for people unaccustomed to paying close attention to their surroundings or interacting with the Earth through gardening or hunting. Both the fictional Earthseed devotees and the God's Gardeners practiced religions based on the interconnectivity of people, land, and animals, emphasizing the need for all creatures to live in harmony and respect each other's needs as well as employing the abilities to read and understand landscapes. Similarly, socio-environmental theorists Jagtenberg and McKie write, "Spaces are places where different life forms compete and cooperate for the right to exist biologically and discursively; ecologies are not contextual in nature. [...] Ecologies are about interaction, flows, fields, systems, and space-time as well as the private spaces, worlds, and value systems of individual organisms" (xii). To these multi-disciplinary researchers, life forms compete through their biological processes for resources and space, and they engage in types of reasoning, albeit a rambling unspoken rhetoric of the usage of resources and spaces, intrusions, appearances, and absences, to make their case. How can a creature make an

argument for continued existence? By reading new landscape elements and adapting to changing conditions, and using what is at hand, such as birds nesting in human-built structures and lining their nests with our dryer lint. More blatantly, they can also confront humans and other species by attacking, such as in “The Birds” or *The Happening*, discussed later in this chapter, or the growing number of attacks by animals on humans living in what Mike Davis and others refer to as the “ecotone” (206). This is a “zone of transition between biological communities whose boundaries may be relatively abrupt (as between chaparral and lawns) or gradual (as between domestic, feral, and wild animals)” (206). All that are touched are changed. “Wildlife...becomes more urban in its basic subsistence patterns,⁵¹ while, at the same time, domestic species go feral” (207). Usually, the wild animals and those that go feral garner the label of pests and can subsequently be relocated or destroyed to make room for more people and/or buildings. The animals and nature become outsiders, Others, to the human communities that mainly feel they deserve primacy. Their stories become palimpsests and often the physical Earth and its creatures slip into the silence of absence unless some calamity occurs involving them and humans.

Nature provides an important backdrop, and sometimes insidiously character-like influence in the dystopian genre. Most of the contemporary dystopian texts deal in some way with nature as part of their landscape, and in most cases, if nature is mentioned, it is changed from what we today might recognize, having become more obviously man-made second nature. Global warming, played out in various possible ways, makes a drastic

⁵¹ *Over the Hedge* (2006) is an animated family film wherein a few woodland creatures become reliant upon the growing suburbia on the other side of the hedge to provide food for themselves instead of employing their traditional methods. This issue has entered into popular culture, but only as a medium for comedy, not serious discussion.

impact on the Earths of Robinson's *Mars* trilogy, Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, Wylie's *The End of the Dream*, Brin's *Earth*, Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, and Harrison's *Make Room! Make Room!*, to name just the novels covered in this work. Though the natural crisis may not be foregrounded in the plot, thus bringing it directly to the attention of the novel's readers, its inclusion as part and possible cause of the myriad issues leading to each society's current dystopian status is evident. Of these listed works, Wylie's is the earliest with a publication date of 1973. The rest span the decades up to and including the 2000s, with Atwood promising a third work in her series, that most likely will address the issues of climate change to some degree since it is rumored to fill out or continue the story lines set forth in the other two novels. Additionally, nearly all the novels in this list address the problems of trying to live off the land in its degraded state, shown by the examples of Lauren, Ren, and Toby. Certainly, for many contemporary readers, this may seem like an unthinkable regression since a good deal of people living in the First World today are several links in the chain removed from the production of their own food, clothing, and shelter. Yet somehow, these fictional dystopian folk are the descendants of each book's contemporary society, if readers buy into the suspended belief inherent in this genre that the seeds of the futuristic society presented in the text must exist now in the reader's own time, or that of the author: somehow, someone remembered and handed down the basics of agricultural and survival knowledge. Fredric Jameson writes, "Nature is related to memory not for metaphysical reasons but because it throws up the concept and the image of an older mode of agricultural production that you can repress, dimly remember, or nostalgically

recover in moments of danger and vulnerability” (366). It seems, then that humans *need* nature for both survival and memory.

Reading the landscape of nature-as-discovery provides meaning and centeredness for formerly disconnected, and possibly damaged humans. Much of Western humanity today lives in the midst of a disposable culture built atop the unread palimpsest of nature, and therefore needs a novice landscape reader as a model. Marge Piercy’s time-traveling eutopian work, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, explores divergent possible futures as experienced by the main character, Connie, who must learn to read nature anew to understand its value and this, in turn, helps her give meaning to her own life. To borrow words that exemplify the radically different view of nature and place from one of the futuristic characters Connie meets, “‘Place matters to us,’ Jackrabbit said. ‘A sense of land, of village and base and family. We’re strongly rooted. People of your time weren’t? So I’ve been told—’” (*Woman* 116). This sentiment, expressed so bluntly by the character addressing Connie, the woman from the past, or New York City of the 1970s, echoes the concerns expressed by Sanders:

Insofar as we are nomads, adrift over the earth and oblivious to its rhythms, we cease to acknowledge the fecund mystery that sustains our existence. We take inordinate pride in our own doings. Acting without regard for the effects our lives will have upon a place, we become dangerous, to ourselves and our descendants. If our own senses fail to teach us, then disasters will, that the land is not merely a backdrop for the human play, not merely a source of raw materials, but is the living skin of the earth. (“Landscape,” 8)

Woman on the Edge of Time uses Connie's present of the 70s as a turning point: if she is able to help those of Jackrabbit's time, then a peaceful agrarian future is possible; if she cannot, then another dystopian reality will come to be. Luciente has been chosen to reach into the past to contact someone, and this project is regarded as so vital that her other work is allowed to go undone. This mysterious and important problem is never explicitly explained but it is implied that either Connie and those of her decade will make good choices regarding the Earth and its people, or the future will be in peril. Jackrabbit already summed up the prevailing relationship between people and place in Connie's time, yet they still attempt contact. This can perhaps be explained by Ernst Bloch's quotation from *A Philosophy of the Future*: "In the history of revolution, deep faith in man and deep faith in the world have long gone hand in hand, unmoved by mechanistics and opposition to purpose" (140). Connie's deep faith in both man and nature must be awakened in order to save the future, literally, within this novel. However, the reality of what constitutes a good future is something that challenges all Connie's preconceived notions of progress and her expectations of the place of technology; she will have to learn to be unmoved by mechanistics before she can truly assist in revolution.

In the eutopian future that Connie, who is also a patient in an insane asylum in her own time for most of the novel, visits through a sort of hallucination/teleportation link with a woman named Luciente, things do not appear as Connie herself would have predicted. In this future landscape there are no flying cars, glass domes, or mammoth skyscrapers (Piercy, *Woman* 60). Instead, she often feels incredibly disappointed on her first visits there because the future society of Mattapoissett reminds her—very

unfavorably—of agricultural Mexico, which her family had migrated from to the city (61-65).

Yet, the more she visits this future, the more attractive it becomes as she begins to learn about why things are the way they are. Each person has “per”⁵² own room to live in, though the dwelling itself is shared; people work at jobs they like and take turns serving on the defense team and the governing body; responsibility for the children is shared among three mothers and the whole community; no community can begin a new project or use the land without approval of all the communities in that area; and they must raise their own food. Though Connie’s time period of origin is considered pivotal by her future friends, the events that led to such a civilization as they have are not revealed by Piercy. Certainly many aspects of life in the 1970s could have led to a societal and governmental breakdown in the United States; nuclear escalation, pollution, and overpopulation were a few concerns of the time. Though Connie directly asks her hosts if it was a nuclear war that caused them to regress—for she sees their life as a difficult one filled with work that people of her time fled and considered beneath them—the actual event or series of events is never revealed, leaving the reader, like Connie, to question how this could be. To her, this is not progress.

Like many citizens of the 20th century, Connie has lived in several places, none of which seem to hold much meaning for her: she is disconnected from her landscape. Instead, she focuses on people such as the little daughter Angelina, who was removed

⁵² Short for “person” – this is the gender-neutral pronoun used by the future dwellers.

from her care⁵³ and adopted by a wealthy white family (97-98). Likewise, she equates having money with a better future. As she reflects on her first few moments in Mattapoisett, her expectations of future-as-progress collide with reality as well as her own history:

Well, what did I expect from the future, Connie asked herself. Pink skies? Robots on the march? Transistorized people? I guess we blew ourselves up and now we're back to the dark ages to start it all over again. She stood a moment weakened by a sadness she could not name. A better world for the children—that had always been the fantasy; that however bad things were, they might get better. But if Angelina had a child, and that child had a child, this was the world they would finally be born into in five generations: how different was it really from rural Mexico with its dusty villages rubbing their behinds in the dust? (65)

If the connotation of the word “future” is “progress,” this agrarian, communal world seems to be a regression according to Connie’s 1970’s viewpoint. Work was supposed to get easier for humans, not stay the same as it was for her own poor family.

Changes in what a person considered “good” are not easily orchestrated. After first meeting Luciente and seeing her “kenner,” a computer worn on the wrist, Connie expects that technology will continue to erase and remove humans from nature,⁵⁴ and this

⁵³ In a fit of rage over the loss of her husband Claud, she cursed at the girl for making noise by kicking her feet and wearing a hole in her shoe. Then she flung her against the door breaking her wrist. (Piercy, *Woman* 53-54)

⁵⁴ Not unlike the anti-nature sentiment expressed in Zamyatin’s *We*: “Man ceased to be a savage only when we had built the Green Wall, when we had isolated our perfect mechanical world from the irrational, hideous world of trees, birds, animals. . . .” (93, ellipsis orig.)

is exactly the horrible future she travels into by accident late in the novel. There she meets a woman named Gildina, a contract sex worker for hire by mid-level executives, and learns that people get genetic alterations, forty is considered old enough to be euthanized, space platforms are operational, and machines exist to take care of every need (281-295). This side adventure functions as what Schauffler terms a “revelatory moment,” one that, “represents quantum leaps in perception, where one’s vision is . . . miraculously enlarged. The ordinary appears extraordinary as one glimpses a new dimension of being. These experiences can extend one’s understanding not only of self but of place” (81). This revelatory moment crystallizes the value and importance of the future Luciente and Jackrabbit inhabit, and highlights Connie’s value as someone who can ensure that future’s existence. When the future Connie thought would exist appears, she reads it for the dystopia it is and finally understands Luciente’s drive to fight against that techno-nightmare world becoming reality. Faced with the loss of the simplistic but wholesome future already made known to her, Connie realizes that Mattapoissett’s place and people are worth more than she thought possible. Connie moves from an experience of being disconnected from nearly everything, including place, to one of caring deeply about a future she will not really exist in enough to fight for it back in her own time.

Connie’s singular experiences as a time-traveler allow her a radical perspective that I believe many dystopian authors try to engage for their reading audiences: through these texts readers can stare into the howling void of possible futures, but remain somewhat safe in their own time unless the texts prompt us to question the choices individuals and corporations make in society and what outcomes they may plausibly lead

to in the future of the reader.⁵⁵ Connie's growing ability to read and consider natural landscape changes her. In "Dwelling: Making Peace with Space and Place," Deborah Tall explains:

Places are ephemeral when they are treated as dispensable, when we are not embraced by their traditions or when the traditions have drained away. Even for the exiled modernist James Joyce, Dublin is what solidly persists when chronological time breaks down in his work and fantasy takes over. Place is the concrete, time the fluid. For most of us in this century, it is the reverse. (115)

If places are considered only as inert objects to be acted upon, then humans can do whatever they like to them. When people fail to read the palimpsests of places and the traditions they contain, the landscape becomes absent or a mere stage on which to walk. Place should serve a centering feature as time moves, yet the concept of time has usurped place and left humans ungrounded and unable to read their surroundings. There is always time extending on into the future perpetually, but setting changes. In the novel, Connie witnesses the impossibly fragile, ephemeral nature of Luciente and her people's future when she ends up in Gildina's apartment. She can tell how unlike either her present or Luciente's present it is, but there is no doubt that it is real for Gildina. Additionally, both Luciente and Gildina's futures could result from actions taken by those in Connie's time, and it is *Connie's* present that must necessarily make one of these futures possible: Luciente's Mattapoisett society contains festivals, stories, carefully chosen technologies, and a balance with nature that allows just the right number of people to live simply and

⁵⁵ For the purposes of this dissertation, I do not define corporations as people despite the U. S. Supreme Court ruling in *Citizens United vs. Federal Election Commission* in 2010.

well. Gildina exists in a strictly class-stratified society where lower level members exist as working slaves eating artificial food and serving as walking organ banks to the ultra rich high on their space platforms above the pollution of New York City. They cannot both exist in the same space and time.

Permeable Membranes: Literature, Landscape, and the Reading Audience

*“Like a protein subjected to stress, the world for us may be thoroughly denatured,
but it is not any less consequential.”*

~Donna J. Haraway, Simians, Cyborgs and Women, 209

Through narratives such as Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*, the reader is challenged via Suvin’s “feedback oscillation” to critique not only the characters’ actions but also the society that s/he actually lives in every day. By employing the imagination through the reading of texts—specifically dystopian texts for my purposes here—a reader can enter into situations via the characters that may allow for a better understanding of people and their places. Therefore it is inside the imagination storehouse of literature that we can learn from others about ourselves and the possible consequences of our collective actions. Reporting on a 2006 interdisciplinary conversation among several scholars regarding the state of the humanities in the 21st century Jan Parker writes,

Literature offers truth claims, offers experiences that are received as “true” and invite responses as if to reality, but is fiction. Humanities’ narratives contain “structures that are good to think with” as one speaker put it. The sheer plurality and complexity of types of humanities text demands that the reader model what it is to live and act in a complex world. The confident reading of such multiple narratives and the confident evaluation

of knowledge arising from different knowledge systems are much needed skills in today's complex and information-overloaded world. (92)

Our fictional worlds develop in an emulsion of real-world context, and it is this connection between the fictional world and the one we—as citizens of the world and more importantly as citizens of exact places in that world—inhabit every day that relates to local, situated knowledge, a concept Donna J. Haraway, biologist and philosopher, often employs in her writings. Haraway believes that there is no one unifying, complete, and objective Truth for everyone, but instead, truth exists subjectively in context and refers to those things known to be true by a specific person who dwells and knows intimately a specific location,⁵⁶ a similar sense to Parker's truth claims in literature. Thus place-knowledge, constructed locally in a specific situation by a specific community, is not the kind recorded in fact-books or spoken by mainstream media; yet, that cannot detract from its value as specific truth. This particular type of knowledge travels, passed along by word of mouth, or maybe a written note or page if one knows where to look or whom to ask. Sometimes referred to as folklore or woodcraft (i.e. the skills used to live off the land), this is not the popular knowledge of the majority or the academic knowledge of textbooks. However, this does not make it any less true or valuable. Before stores provided consumers with various pricey methods for wart removal, certain people knew that water caught in an oak stump will cure warts. This folk remedy, proven and explained by science far after its invention, works: Truth. Oak stumps contain tannic acid and the application of this acid will reduce some warts. Of course, that saying came along most likely before the rain contained industrial waste acid, but one does not

⁵⁶ The general sentiment from *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* 203-230.

need to know about acid at all. What one does need to know is how to tell the difference between an oak stump and a maple or a pine one. This is the knowledge of place: what is true, what works for a certain person in a certain place with the items available—use what’s to hand. This is the knowledge that homogeneity of the global marketplace elides and slicks over with that thick cataract of transfer ideologizing. We are in danger of losing more than just home remedies, and throughout the dystopian genre characters often survive based solely on these local, situated and embodied truths. At our own peril do we ignore decades, perhaps centuries of the accumulated wisdom of the human experience in context with nature.

An impressive example of local knowledge comes into play in Daphne du Maurier’s, “The Birds,” later a horror film classic of the same title, which provides an example of the folklore and survival skills valuable in times of crisis: our imagination gets a structure good to think with in regards to a natural crisis, as Parker’s panel suggested. During an attack of all sorts of birds, handyman/woodsman, Nat Hocken, of England’s countryside saves his family while everyone else waits for official help that never materializes either via instruction from the wireless radio or in the form of direct intervention. Because Hocken knows the area birds’ patterns and the tides, he is the only human in the region who knows what to do and when to act. The short story, horrific in its carnage of both people and birds, leaves the reader wondering if Hocken’s is the last little family on earth. Everyone else ignores the warnings to board up windows and all entrances against the birds’ initial attack and they even laugh off Hocken’s advice after his family suffers a mild skirmish with birds coming in the bedroom windows before the first real onslaught. His ability to know wind and tide patterns, as well as to identify each

type of bird that is massing to attack gives him an advantage when facing them. Even though the announcer from the news channel advises people to remain inside and secure their property, everyone expects the radio to broadcast official instructions about other plans, perhaps involving the military: someone in charge will fix it, removing the common individual from responsibility and worry (165-190). However, technology fails them when the radio signal disappears and no official word arrives in the following morning as the birds continue to assail the houses (192). Dependence on outside sources for electric power and foodstuffs becomes a secondary weakness to those surviving subsequent onslaughts of bird attack. “There isn’t going to be any news... We’ve got to depend upon ourselves,” he tells his wife and sets out to see if the birds’ melee abates with the ocean’s cycle (192).

After securing his family, Hocken looks about the area noticing no smoke from other chimneys and also takes a closer look at the birds. He realizes, in their sated condition, full of flesh, they cannot do much but wait and watch. More importantly, he sees that this is the perfect opportunity to attack and rid themselves of the most of them; however, he cannot understand why no one appears to be acting on this knowledge. He, a common man with a war veteran’s pension knows, so certainly “They,” the ones in charge, must know. Even Hocken, the observant survivor does not quite value his own truths enough, does not understand how specialized and prescient this information is to the situation! He still waits for some outside help believing that all the aid has gone to more affluent areas⁵⁷ (195-6). At the beginning of the second night’s attack, his wife

⁵⁷ In the contemporary novel *World War Z*, when a zombie virus begins to spread, a Japanese survivor relates similar empty phrases of comfort overheard as he fled the metropolitan area alone instead of waiting for help: “The government’s going to have to

cries out in desperation: “Won’t America do something?” The birds’ anger at human disruption and destruction of their habitats, migration routes, and food chains drives the creatures to retaliate in an effort to survive (165-197). The humans perceive the birds’ actions as crazy or unnatural, however the creatures act as threatened people might if their homes and food supply were under assault. Since the birds are perceived as Other, it has been too easy to abuse them and their habitats. Haraway, however, reminds us that, “We act and are inside *this* world, not some other. We are subject to, subjects in, and accountable for *this* world—materially and semiotically—in terms of some objects and boundaries and not others.” (*Modest_Witness* 99, italics original). Responsibility lies with humankind in both word and deed for the birds’ destructive rampage: polluting their home, our very same home of Earth, brings vengeance from a unified, flying, and brutally destructive community. Du Maurier’s short story gives the reader’s imagination room to consider what could happen if nature took action against the human community.⁵⁸

A stronger warning of future woes comes from John Brunner in his preface to Philip Wylie’s *The End of the Dream*, the very text containing the plane crash eerily akin to 9/11 mentioned at the beginning of Chapter One: “But what you have here is a prophecy in the most ancient sense of all: not a prediction of what certainly will come to pass, but a description of what is likely to come to pass unless people mend their ways”

declare a state of emergency”; “Did you hear there was an outbreak last night, right here in Sapporo?” No one was sure what the next day would bring, how far the calamity would spread, or who would be its next victim, and yet, no matter whom I spoke to or how terrified they sounded, each conversation would inevitably end with “But I’m sure the authorities will tell us what to do.” (220)

⁵⁸ In a more recent film, *The Happening*, the plants in highly populated areas simultaneously release a gas toxic to humans in an effort to cull the offending population and restore balance to the earth.

(6). This pervading sense of prophecy, which is perhaps nothing more than an astute and entirely awakened imagination, runs through many dystopian works, even becoming part of the mystery of the plot in Russell Hoban's post-apocalyptic work *Riddley Walker*. After a nuclear war has destroyed much of the world, a few clans gathered in rudimentary villages, reminiscent of early Anglo-Saxon society, repeat their fragmented knowledge of history as warning—it is easier to understand the dialect presented in the novel by reading it aloud. Even children living in this society know the basics of haughty Eusa's story:

“Eusa sed, I woan be tol by amminals.” (31)

[The Hart uv the Wud, the Stag speaks:] “Nuthing wil run frum yu enne mor but tym tu cum & yu will run frum evere thing” (31).

[Dogs' prophecy:] “Thay dogs howlt & a win cum up. Thay ded leaves wirtl & rattelin lyk ded birds flyin. Thay grayt dogs stud on thear hyn legs & talking lyk men agen. Thay sed, Eusa aul thay menne leaves as rattelt that's how menne peapl yu wil kil. Then thay dogs begun tu tel uv tym tu cum. Thay sed, The lan wil dy & thay peapl wil eat 1 a nuther. The water wil be poysun & the peapl wil drink blud” (32).

Eusa, their mythical Adam-figure based on a description of a long-lost stained glass of St. Eustace at bombed out Canterbury Cathedral with the original story distorted over time, refuses to listen to nature, or the animals.⁵⁹ The stag predicts that man will have great weapons and subjugate all creatures that will flee him, yet someday that dominance will

⁵⁹ See a similar occurrence of the conflation of religion, science and every day existence post-nuclear war in *A Canticle for Leibowitz*.

end and man will flee everything and this warning goes unheeded by Eusa because it seems to be an impossible reversal of fortunes. At the time of the novel's present-day, this scenario has indeed come to pass; humans rarely travel alone or after dark for fear of attack by animals, especially by packs of dogs. Despite their constant threat, dogs seem to hold a special place in this mythology and also in the novel, and they are the speakers of doom in "tym tu cum," or "time to come," as well as in "time back way back." However, Eusa will not obey mere animals and it can be gathered that the people did just as the stag and dogs said they would, bringing widespread nuclear destruction upon everything. In willful ignorance of nature's warnings, as represented by the stag and dogs, man suffers at the mercy of creation. Few humans hold any knowledge of better times outside the legends, but Goodparley, the Pry Mincer and holder of more historical knowledge fragments than most, shares some writing and knowledge of times before their own with the main character, Riddley. This knowledge-sharing completely rearranges, yet confirms his view of humanity as currently in a fallen state:

*Riddley we aint as good as them befor us. Weve come way way down from what they ben time back way back. May be it wer the barms what done it poysening the lan or when they made a hoal in what they callit the O Zoan. Which that O Zoan you cant see it but its there its holding in the air we breave. You make a hoal in it and Woosh! No mor air. Wel word ben past down thats what happent time back way back.*⁶⁰ (Hoban 125, italics original).

⁶⁰ *Riddley we ain't as good as them before us. We've come way, way down from what they been time back way back. Maybe it were the bombs what done it poisoning the land or when they made a hole in what they called the ozone. Which that ozone you can't see*

Remnants of history appear throughout the novel, passed down by word of mouth even though the spellings and meanings have “chaynjd,” [changed]. Contemporary readers can construct, or imagine, a scenario wherein many radioactive bombs fell on England, or perhaps some sort of reactor exploded; this problem, compounded by the hole in the ozone layer, leads to high mortality rates, low intelligence along with rampant distrust of science and technology.

While the scientific data exists embedded within myth, the remaining humans know exactly the outcomes of employing technologies such as those we use in our contemporary societies: nuclear weapons, nuclear power plants, and damaging gases in the atmosphere. They reap the consequences of our today since the latest date Goodparley recalls seeing carved into stone is 1997 (Hoban 125). Instead of digging up metal and technological artifacts and seeking to understand their uses or construction to thereby return to the glory days of their lost past, all items get broken up and used for parts immediately. Riddley, through his insatiable curiosity and avid imagination, however, uncovers a plot to revive the knowledge of “the Littl Shynin Man the Addom” [a combination playing upon both the Biblical first man Adam and the physics concept of the atom] (Hoban 30). Since the knowledge passed down exists in an incomplete form, the people possess little factual information to explain what they see and find, nor do they have the knowledge to prevent the same nuclear mistakes from occurring again. They seemed doomed to repeat the Eusa story over and over by gradually crawling out of the Stone Age, into the Iron Age and blasting into the nuclear one. Even those such as Riddley, who seem to think a little more clearly, do not have enough contextual

it but it's there holding in the air we breathe. You make a hole in it and Whoosh! No more air. Well word has been passed down that's what happened time back way back.

information to decipher cause and effect. They serve as a warning to us in our contemporary society, but their ignorance and fear binds them into the loop of destruction: with a lack of context the shreds of knowledge become dangerous.⁶¹

Contextualized knowledge, a tool for sustainability and survival when fully comprehended by a people, once again eludes and harms a community in Wylie's *The End of the Dream*, a collection of incidents strung together to create a pastiche narrative of a dystopian American future. Set in the early 2020s, the fictional society appears more like our own than Riddley's Iron Age world; in an episode entitled "Editorial Addendum: The Results," the government attempts to cover up several nuclear incidents at power plants when the scientists blow the whistle leading to massive public outcry and the shutting down of the suspected plants. However, forced to make do without electricity, citizens take the power companies' and elected officials' word that things will be repaired and inspected so that their lives will be easy again. Given a choice between known comforts resulting in death or hard work resulting in a possibly safer future, the citizens take the empty promise, bringing on Wylie's comments: "A technological society cannot persist as a democracy unless the people in their majority understand both technology and ecology well enough to know what they are doing" (Wylie 92-93). The regular citizen, even one living near a nuclear power plant, is not educated enough in the processes of nuclear production of electricity and disposal of wastes, and those processes' subsequent costs to nature and humans, to make an informed decision: s/he cannot imagine what these facts could possibly mean arranged in various scenarios. Since the problem seems too big and too specialized, citizens can excuse themselves from involvement by

⁶¹ This same loop of humanity's slow rise, nuclear cataclysm and tragic fall occurs repeatedly in *A Canticle for Leibowitz*.

accepting the promises of leaders caught deceiving them only days before. Mistakenly, they trust corporations and the government to work in the best interest of the people. In this event from *End of the Dream*, not enough people die to force the citizens to take radical action. The loss of life might be considered negligible, especially since this case involved the poor and migrant classes who have the least recourse to legal action (91). Even though scientists leak the story creating massive media outrage, the average American, inconvenienced by this nationwide nuclear power plant shut down, eventually does not care enough about radioactive pollution but wants to run their multitudinous appliances. It is not always easy to do the right thing, especially when the effects are not immediately evident and NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard). It is too easy to believe that bad things only happen to other people.

To continue following this vein of politician/citizen joint culpability and its link to a failure of imagination that might have led to safeguarding resources for future use or ensuring a livable world for humans, I turn to another literary example. Sol, the detective Andy's roommate in Henry Harrison's 1973 Malthusian classic *Make Room! Make Room!*—the novel on which the quite dissimilar film *Soylent Green* was based—is one of the oldest living people—at age 75—that mandatory roommate Andy knows (Harrison 11). He can remember things that Andy does not even believe existed: the taste of real coffee, Virginia ham and roast beef (122, 123). Towards the end of *Make Room! Make Room!* and just before Sol dies from complications with a broken hip and pneumonia, he makes a powerful speech about political guilt in Earth's current, depleted condition:

I blame the stinking politicians and so-called public leaders who have avoided the issue [of overpopulation and its environmental effects] and

covered it up because it was controversial and what the hell, it will be years before it matters and I'm going to get mine now. So mankind gobbled in a century all the world's resources that had taken million of years to store up, and no one on the top gave a damn or listened to all the voices that were trying to warn them, they just let us overproduce and overconsume until now the oil is gone, the topsoil depleted and washed away, the trees chopped down, the animals extinct, the earth poisoned, and all we have to show for this is seven billion people fighting over the scraps that are left, living a miserable existence—and still breeding without control. So I say the time has come to stand up and be counted. (175-6)

Sol issues a call to action; to finally speak up and fight back, although the time for action that could bring about substantial positive change seems to be long past for what is his present day. He leaves the relative safety of their apartment and heads out to counter protest those opposing family size laws. It is during this event that he suffers his broken hip: Sol's final gesture of activism trampled underneath the crush of humanity (176).

As one human, Sol, without family or community continuity, cannot effectively transmit his memories and knowledge to effect any real change. Employing the feedback oscillation, it is not too far a leap to see that the isolationism promoted in contemporary society, with its lack of communal spaces and activities and its ever-growing technological erasure of person-to-person contact, works against the retention and transmission of useful, local information. In a unique approach to interconnectivity of humans over time, Joanna Russ' 1975 feminist text *The Female Man* contains several narrative threads perhaps occurring simultaneously in the realities of what may be four

versions of the same woman: Jeannine, stuck in a permanent Great Depression Earth; Joanna, a 1970s feminist and possibly an English professor; Janet, resident of Whileaway, a women-only utopia; and Alice-Jael a warrior/assassin from a futuristic Womanland.⁶² The world in Alice-Jael's time has been ravaged by war between the men and women, with women currently victorious. Despite the incredible narrative layering and questioning of male socio-economic power structures throughout this novel, it also makes direct environmental connections to a recent pollution issue. On February 7, 2008, an article "The World's Dump: Ocean Garbage from Hawaii to Japan" by Kathy Marks and Daniel Howden appeared telling of "The Great Pacific Garbage Patch"; a glop of plastics and other floating trash approximately twice the size of the State of Texas and held in place by currents that "stretches from about 500 nautical miles off the Californian coast, across the northern Pacific, past Hawaii and almost as far as Japan." Stunningly, Russ' words in *The Female Man*, penned thirty-three years earlier vibrate sympathetically: "Somewhere stories are put together by antiquarians, somewhere petroleum is transformed into fabric that can't burn without polluting the air, and won't rot, and won't erode, so that strands of plastic have turned up in the bodies of diatoms at the bottom of the Pacific Trench" (171). This brief quote, part of a description of a changed man—or what passes for feminine in Manland—then may become a segue into discussions of worldwide chemical load, referred to in science fields as the body burden, of all Earth's inhabitants, relevant to public health concerns as well as of pollution and garbage disposal theories. Through the fictional text, our imaginations are awakened and

⁶² Alice-Jael, I feel, is a prototype for William Gibson's dangerous heroine Molly "Steppin' Razor" in his 1984 cyberpunk classic *Neuromancer*.

we can question: How many pieces of plastic *does* the average human dispose of in a day? A week? What comprises the long-term waste management plans for each community? Does it become easier to critique our actions if the scene is set on another planet? Why should we even think about all of these things?

I believe the ability to ask these questions and begin considering answers is part of the power of dystopia as it motivates readers to turn to their own societies and confront the issues that have allowed the fictional worlds to exist, built as they are on the authors' own societies. The power of dystopias to encourage imagination and empathy can be revealed by closely looking the power of language at work within dystopias: as a tool of the hegemony to empty meaning and of protagonists to create counter-narratives; to create place-based knowledge and location-based survival systems; and finally, to address aspects of prophecy as written in both fiction and commentary by dystopian authors.

Therefore, places must become real and valued to readers: both the places they encounter within texts and the places in which they live while reading the texts. Certainly everyone cannot always remain in the same homeplace, but they can learn more about the locations they do inhabit. Tall writes,

The easy replacement of home ignores its emotional charge for us, ignores how important familiarity is in the constitution of home. Frequent dislocation, or the sudden destruction of a known environment, can be fundamentally deranging. It means the loss of personal landmarks—which embody the past—and the disintegration of a communal pattern of identity. (104)

Whether people can walk past their own “memory holes” and share their associated stories, or they must take their *sona* with them to tell tales in other places, these narratives help people understand who they are and how they are situated in this world. These stories allow for a continuous identity in a time when even nature may change.

According to Ong, “Human memory never recalls simply words. It recalls also their associations” (22). These skills have been accessed in oral cultures worldwide, and it may be to humanity’s benefit to do so again to prevail against contemporary isolation and disillusionment that can be a product of an increasingly technological and mechanized society.

Not surprisingly, an inability to read landscape and sustain authentic face-to-face social interaction play key roles driving the conflict in many dystopian texts aside from *Woman at the Edge of Time*: Zamyatin’s *We*, Forster’s “The Machine Stops,” Huxley’s *Brave New World*, and Laumer’s *Future Imperfect*.⁶³ In all of these, various protagonists who have been sheltered by man-made structures and devices must confront nature, and it is often a shock to their once well-ordered, easy and mechanized lifestyles. Yet, even as these characters suffer confusion and disorientation, they glimpse fragments of themselves in the alien world, such as in *We* when D-503, the narrator and builder of the Integral—after meeting the hirsute humans outside the Green Wall—“glanced at my own hairy hands, and I remembered: ‘There must be a drop of forest blood in you’” (Zamyatin 193). In a moment of stress, as he tries to elude a government spy, he is reminded of the wild reality that has been carefully hidden from everyone in their ordered city, as well as his own human connection to it. Though he may run from agents, he

⁶³ Laumer, Keith. *Future Imperfect*. Wake Forest, NC: Baen, 2003. Digital ed. via DailyLit.com

cannot escape his human history and personal connection to the rebel population. D-503's glimpse of his hairy hands is his revelatory moment. Interestingly, an exploration of an Old English found text provides further insight into these flashes. In an article about the Bewcastle Monument, anthropologist Keith Basso is quoted:

In many instances, awareness of place is brief and unselfconscious, a fleeting moment (a flash of recognition, a trace of memory) that is swiftly replaced by awareness of something else. But now and again, and sometimes without apparent cause, awareness is seized—arrested—and the place on which it settles becomes an object of spontaneous reflection and resonating sentiment. It is at times such as these, when individuals step back from the flow of everyday experience and attend self-consciously to places—when, we may say, they pause to actively sense them—that our relationship to geographical space are most richly lived and surely felt. (qtd. in Orton 63)

This is not unlike Walter Benjamin's biographical flashes of recognition, or revelatory moments, in "Berlin Chronicle" as he walks through the Berlin of his present and sees fragments that recall his childhood and schooling in that city, in the better times before World War I. Though the landscape has changed with time and the conflicts his country's leaders have set loose, he still can connect to places and link memories to read locales long gone.

The landscape evokes and past and present collide in one body. As an astute reader of landscapes and predictor of futures of the non-fiction variety, Benjamin writes of the experience of being overtaken by memories:

The déjà vu effect has often been described. But I wonder whether the term is actually well chosen, and whether the metaphor appropriate to the process would not be far better taken from the realm of acoustics. One ought to speak of events that reach us like an echo awakened by a call, a sound that seems to have been heard somewhere in the darkness of past life. Accordingly, if we are not mistaken, the shock with which moments enter consciousness as if already lived strikes us in the form of a sound.

(Benjamin, "Berlin" 634)

For Benjamin, the act of these sudden remembrances has a sensory effect on him; he is shaken by recognition, by an impact that is palpable and aural. For those in the fictional dystopian text, such as Lauren, Ren, Toby, and even Connie, this is often a key to survival when others fall. People aware of place hone in on cues missed by those more oblivious to their surroundings. In times of crisis, trained memory comes to the aid of dystopian protagonists who trust in their own cultivated ability to remember. Yet, like Benjamin, these events of enlightenment are not limited to fiction.

Perhaps as long as humans have been handing down lore in story format, whether it be oral or written, these narratives have been couched in their natural surroundings, their landscapes. Story has been anchored in a setting that seemed ageless and certain. From the gnomic lines of "Maxims I" at the beginnings of English Literature, "Frost shall freeze" to now, much has changed. In 2012, it cannot be said along with "Maxims I" that "Winter is coldest" with temperatures hovering around the 40 and 50 degree marks. The words once used to anchor human memories to places may no longer apply. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, during Winston's re-education/torture, he tries to fortify the veracity of his

own memory by stating: “The solid world exists, its laws do not change. Stones are hard, water is wet, objects unsupported fall toward the earth’s center” (Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* 81). When everything he has believed and experienced becomes untruth, perverted by the brainwashing process, Winston goes back to the things that supposedly exist beyond the realm of human control. Since these things must always be true, then truth must exist outside of what the Ministry can control; therefore, it is safe from human tampering. Unfortunately, humanity now exists in a time of “man-made, urbanized, in crisis second nature” – just after the first of the year 2012, the State of Ohio called a halt to at least four Marcellus Shale fracking sites near Youngstown after several localized earthquakes, most notably one of a 4.0 magnitude on Saturday, December 31, 2011 (Buell 109; Schneider). Youngstown, Ohio, does not sit on the edge of a tectonic plate or in an otherwise active earthquake zone. Through the use of the controversial shallow fracking process of pumping slurries of various compositions into soil and rock layers in order to extract difficult to reach gas pockets, humankind now has inadvertently acquired the ability to trigger earthquakes.

Stones are not nearly as impenetrable as Winston once believed: our interpretation of landscape must be altered. Mike Davis, writing of humans’ interaction/interference with earth even before this discovery, stated: “This is not random disorder, but a hugely complicated system of feedback loops that channels powerful pulses of climatic or tectonic energy (disasters) into environmental work” (19). Perhaps because the Earth seems so very large, with places as of yet unknown and unseen by humans—such as deep in the core or the oceanic trenches—people think they cannot really, truly effect significant change to the planet. That reason is often cited as evidence

by contemporary climate change deniers: humans are too small to have any significant long-term impact on the Earth. Yet, the recent Ohio earthquakes tell another tale for anyone willing to read, or to feel. If humans do enough damage, release enough energy, the Earth will react: this is not an inert stage but a living being with stories that must be understood. Haraway compares this man-made second nature to a lab experiment: “Like a protein subjected to stress, the world for us may be thoroughly denatured, but it is not any less consequential” (*Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* 209). People have not made themselves masters of anything, only changed a set of rules they barely understood to release a Pandora’s Box of new ones they do not have the power to read and fully comprehend. If, as Frye suggests, “The fundamental job of the imagination in ordinary life, then, is to produce, out of the society we have to live in, a vision of the society we want to live in,” I say that dystopia is a perfect proving ground for this task. The dystopian literary imagination enables us to look upon the worst, theorize about how it came to be, and turn to our own society better prepared to work against that outcome. Two pills are offered:⁶⁴ the blue is a return to the world with its slick surfaces intact. The red is a chance to see beneath the surface, to look at the matrix. Take the red and grab a flashlight, it’s going to get darker before it gets light—if it ever does.

⁶⁴ In *The Matrix*, Neo is offered two pills because he has professed a desire to know what the Matrix, and thus, reality is. The blue will allow him to forget what he has learned and go back to what he believes is reality, while the red one that he chooses wakes him up in a world where humans are enslaved electrical food for our robot overlords.

CHAPTER FOUR

DYSTOPIAN POLITICS: PLACES FOR TESTING NEW PARADIGMS OF COMPROMISE AND SURVIVAL

“But the larger problem [. . .] is that our language is inadequate to describe the political dynamic. The left-right paradigm is insufficient, in that it presumes everything can be explained within the context of back-and-forth shots fired between political ‘tribes’ that have coalesced within the two party system.”

~Jane Hamsher, “We Need a New Language of Politics”

*“If you want the truth to stand clear before you, never be for or against.
The struggle between ‘for’ and ‘against’ is the mind’s worst disease.”*

~Sent ts'an, c. 700 C. E.

The term *optimism* was coined in 1737 and *pessimism* in 1795, between the coinages of *utopia*, the earliest at 1516, and *dystopia* in 1868 (Davis 283; “Utopia”; “Dystopia”). Often, works of literature are labeled optimistic or pessimist, even if they are not utopian or dystopian. Yet, literature cannot be separated from the culture in which it is incubated: writing is always both the writer’s and the culture’s. Interestingly, political affiliations can also be labeled optimistic in that a side promotes change, or pessimistic, because a side must guard against the impending fall of morals, and these affiliations and their associated discourses are becoming a more inescapable part of American culture. Furthermore, dystopias and politics share a deeper link. According to Drass and Kiser’s study on the trends in dystopian publication, as presented in Chapter One, dystopian publication peaks in times of political and cultural stasis. Thus, it is not surprising that an explosion of adult and young adult dystopian fiction publication in America occurred between 2004 and 2011;⁶⁵ these works, born out of the political

⁶⁵ YA: *I Am Number Four*, novel 2011/film 2011; *The Hunger Games*, novel 2008/film 2012; *Matched*, novel 2011; *Uglies*, novel 2011; A: *The Road*, novel 2007/film 2009; *Oryx and Crake*, novel 2004; *The Pesthouse*, novel 2008

hegemony of the G. W. Bush era of the years 2000-2008, present various grim futures for their respective audiences. While the adult fictions mainly dealt with “bestial, plague-ridden world[s] where civilization has collapsed,” their young adult counterparts paint futures where “adolescence is a kind of life-and-death popularity contest” (McGrath 10). The popularity of these texts for both groups of readers has led to movie versions of several, widening their audience to include those not enamored of books but still interested in the story. What makes these works popular and what benefits can be gained from this craze? To truly understand and unpack these texts, the culture they grew out of must be examined critically, and their popularity makes them optimal tools for predicting the future, or at least conjecturing possible futures humanity might like to avoid.

Interviewed by a college reporter just a few years before her death in an in-home accident, Octavia Butler addressed the catastrophic future landscapes she wrote about in her dystopias:

“So do you really believe that in the future we’re going to have the kind of trouble you write about in your books?” a student asked me as I was signing books after a talk. The young man was referring to the troubles I’d described in *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, novels that take place in a near future of increasing drug addiction and illiteracy, marked by the popularity of prisons and the unpopularity of public schools, the vast and growing gap between the rich and everyone else, and the whole nasty family of problems brought on by global warming.

“I didn’t make up the problems,” I pointed out. “All I did was look

around at the problems we're neglecting now and give them about 30 years to grow into full-fledged disasters." (Butler, "A Few Rules" 165)

Butler directly points out to the interviewer, and her audience, that she did not dream up her dark fictions out of nothingness: they are indeed grounded in our own society. The essay in which this quotation is found comes, not from an academic journal with a smaller audience, but from newsstand monthly *Essence* magazine, reflecting her own African-American ties and the general popularity of her works. People read dystopias: on March 1, 2012, the *Hunger Games Trilogy* holds places two through five on the Amazon Top 100 list in Books ("Amazon Best Sellers"). In a time when many other works languish on the shelves, these dark predictions sell copies and also fill theatre seats. Evidently, taking a look into the abyss, while frightening, is something humans are drawn to doing. If this is the genre that has people's attention, then it is through this genre that humanity might be made to consider actual consequences in contemporary society.

But why bother? Why not just have a good, scary story and then get on with life? Why all of this gazing upon contemporary reality? Donna Haraway states that the context, the very cloth of reality out of which these tales have been cut, is of greatest importance and therefore deserving of examination:

For us, that is, those interpellated into this materialized story, the biological world *is* an accumulation strategy in the fruitful collapse of metaphor and materiality that animates technoscience. We act and are inside *this* world, not some other. We are subject to, subjects in, and accountable for *this* world—materially and semiotically—in terms of

some objects and boundaries and not others. (*Modest_Witness* 99, italics orig.)

Though science may search for technology that can fend off mounting environmental problems, that may make people into cyborgs or at least prolong lives biologically, they cannot entirely remove humans from their immediate, Earthly context and the political conundrums that dominate the current social semiotics. That is, humans are a part of this planet. There is no Planet B. Either people take accountability for their dwelling places, their language and themselves, or all will be lost. Haraway reminds us of a semiotic responsibility to this world: to call it into being and importance by naming it properly and thus conferring significant value on all that is left here. More is at stake in the language game. Responsibility must be taken to address the various political impasses that keep people in harmful relationships to the Earth, other belief-systems, and each other. Humankind must take ownership of this world—physically and semiotically—or perhaps stewardship would be a more apt term for what Haraway is calling for us to do. More care must be taken in uses of words and places if humans are to continue as a species: we must create a new language to address the places and situations that now exist.

Critical readers are better prepared to comprehend and unpack the language they encounter, whether in a work of fiction, a newsfeed, or from the pundits on the television/computer/smartphone screen. Contemporary cognitive linguist George Lakoff helps to lay out the current thinking conundrum in America in a more recent article, “Palin Appeals to Voter Emotion: Dems Beware,” from 19 August 2008, originally released by the author on line, forwarded throughout the internet, and reposted in

numerous venues. Lakoff claims that: “Our national political dialogue is fundamentally metaphorical, with family values at the center of our discourse.” He goes on to state that in recent presidential campaigns, until the 2008 Obama campaign, Republicans have had election-day success by reframing concepts that actually have been the stronghold of the progressive movement in order to filch voters for their own agenda.

A great many working-class folks are what I call "bi-conceptual," that is, they are split between conservative and progressive modes of thought. Conservative on patriotism and certain social and family issues, which they have been led to see as "moral," progressive in loving the land, living in communities of care, and practical kitchen table issues like mortgages, health care, wages, retirement, and so on.

Conservative theorists won them over in two ways: Inventing and promulgating the idea of "liberal elite" and focusing campaigns on social and family issues. They have been doing this for many years and have changed a lot of brains through repetition.

By highlighting certain polarizing issues such as abortion, gay marriage, and religion, Conservatives have managed to push differences to the forefront and perpetuate the belief of the godless liberal out to destroy classic American life and that there is no middle ground. It can be stated, then, that language holds great power to divide people when they do not unpack, do not comprehend the meaning or the motives behind it. If America is to have an educated citizenry, capable of carrying out those challenges inherent in the Constitution and its democratic processes, more readers and critical thinkers are going to have to practice carefully unpacking language and train to be capable of this tough work.

The propensity of the English language for binaries traps politics in an oversimplified either/or situation. How successful could this method of restricting thinking be? I myself once collected a student's paper concerning the possibility of a global environmental collapse in which this person wrote, "Democrats don't believe in God." There was no textual link between the Bill McKibben's "Worried? Us?" and religion. There was no argument being presented by the student other than that he was angry about one quotation from the article about Americans' piggishness for luxury items at all costs regardless of consequences.⁶⁶ Other than the fact that environmentalism was then heavily associated in the media with former Vice President Al Gore of the Democratic Party and his documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, the student had no reason to even consider that there could be a valid point being made by an author who, I would like to add, neither revealed his own political affiliation nor mentioned the words Democrat, Republican, or Al Gore. This also relates directly to Lakoff's bi-conceptual thinking model: the article says something bad about Americans, therefore it is unpatriotic and must be entirely false. Americans must remember that there is room for many viewpoints and that common ground still exists if only we can listen for it in the enforced silences of our national discourse.

Luckily, these skills are not new, nor are they foreign to America. In his essay "Barn Raising," Daniel Kemmis writes of his immediate family's life on the Great Plains' frontier of America, where neighbors needed each other for survival of the community no matter what their individual differences might have been. While Kemmis does not strive

⁶⁶ "Enlightened governments make smallish noises [about climate change] and negotiate smallish treaties; enlightened people look down on America for its blind piggishness. Hardly anyone, however, has fear in their guts" (McKibben 202)

to reclaim this sense of community for nostalgia's sake, he sees the value of that community of social and democratic practice. "Republican [i.e., those of the American Republic] theorists have always understood that citizens do not become capable of democratic self-determination by accident," Kemmis states (171). Instead, they gain this capability by seeing and living face-to-face self-government practices throughout their lives (171). For example, even though his own mother, Lily, heavily disapproved of a neighbor whose actions and language appalled her, she still knew that she must interact with him in order for personal communal events, such as their barn raising, to occur. On a larger scale, this community, so isolated and by necessity self-sustaining on the Great Prairie, could not afford to alienate any able member in order for it to continually function. Their ability to read their specific landscape revealed that survival necessitated compromise. Lily might not have wanted to speak or work with the man, but she understood that his help was still needed and his work was still good despite their different sensibilities; thus, open hostility never broke out between the two and they upheld their communal responsibilities (170-172). Today, however, Kemmis writes that Americans, as a nation, are schooled, "in the politics of alienation, separation, and blocked initiatives" (172). Constructive dialogue has reached an impasse: all sides declare themselves too different, too independent to do the tough work of compromise. People cannot, for the most part, speak past their own interests and enter into the language of viable compromise with the opposition even for the greater good.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Not to be taken ironically as when the line "The greater good" was said and repeated each time in the film *Hot Fuzz*; this film is a satire on utopian tendencies and their fascist underpinnings.

If Americans' real-life or real-time community and political conversations have reached loggerheads, how then are they to re-enter this communal practice of deliberate, considerate decision making? I believe that dystopian writings provide a rich textual storehouse that can give a critical reader—one who is also a member of actual communities—needed space and practice for considering social and political scenarios. Thus, literature can aid in reviving political dialogue in America. Through the dystopian trait of dislocating the reader by dropping him/her into an unfamiliar, yet in some respects, eerily similar fictional society, the reader can begin to question not just the textual world, but also the world from which the fabric of the text has been woven. A technique often employed to achieve dislocation for the reader is placing the action on a fictional world; it would seem that alien worlds provide a safer space for critique than our own. An excellent extended example of this sort of critique appears in Kim Stanley Robinson's vast *Mars Trilogy*,⁶⁸ where a joint team of mostly Russian and American scientists, astronauts, and cosmonauts travel to Mars to found a research community as a first settlement. By setting the majority of the action off-Earth, readers must first orient themselves into the new world and then decipher the decisions and discoveries that have made this off-planet move possible, profitable, and even necessary. Through Robinson's critique of the new civilization as they struggle first for survival and then for autonomy from Earth by crafting their own constitution, as well as by exploring the economic and political wrangling in the latter two-thirds of the work, much indirect commentary concerning the Earth and issues of our own time is included.

⁶⁸ *Red Mars*, 1992; *Green Mars*, 1993; *Blue Mars*, 1996. Each exceeds 500 pages and the original trilogy does not include a later collection of short stories from 2000 titled *The Martians*, which provides alternate narratives not necessary to the understanding of the larger works.

The primary conflict of the trilogy centers around the fact that many members of the original team of settlers, known collectively on Earth and Mars as the First Hundred, violently disagree on how to treat the physical body of Mars. Two polarized viewpoints dominate the Mars debate: The Reds believe Mars should be left as it is, reflecting its unspoiled opportunity as a space to try new ideas, and that humans should adapt to its conditions; meanwhile, the Greens want to transform Mars' rocky, barren landscape into a new earth via science and technology in order to meet humans' needs more easily, also reflecting all they have already known and with which they are mentally familiar. These two viewpoints clash throughout the three works, with their adherents unable to find much common ground until the final tome. Ann, the geologist who wants to live on Mars with as little human impact as possible leaving the planet in its natural, or "red" state, says to Sax who wants to "terraform"—or make Mars more "green" and Earth-like—"I think you value consciousness too high, and rock too little. We are not lords of the universe. We're one small part of it. We may be its consciousness, but being the consciousness of the universe does not mean turning it all into a mirror image of us. It means rather fitting into it as it is, and worshipping it with our attention" (Robinson, *Red* 177). Ann, the purist, sees value in things as they are; however, she cannot at first admit the necessity of some changes for the human community to survive in a new place because their home planet is hot, overcrowded, and deteriorating.

These two characters, Ann and Sax, personify two disparate stances here on contemporary Earth: deep-green ecology activists wish for an untouched Nature such as Ann has on Mars and believe that all things impeding this return to true green should be abandoned, while this view is opposed by technological futurists who would agree with

Sax that all things and theories must be tried, working with whatever conditions and discoveries available, to make life easier and better for all people, possibly abandoning or moving beyond nature in the process. In *Eco-Impacts and the Greening of Postmodernism: New Maps for Communication Studies*, Tom Jagtenberg and David McKie write, “The idea that nonhuman species and ecologies have rights and that humans have obligations toward them is still, however, highly radical because it profoundly challenges our conventional notions of community and social contract” (104). Most contemporary humans, when asked to list the aspects of their communities, would probably list specific people, groups of people, businesses, schools, churches, attractions, and maybe some locations like malls or parks. Trees, watersheds, native and invasive animal species, soil types, and native and invasive grass and plant species would most likely be missing from the majority of lists. The Enlightenment lord-of-nature view, on which many humans seem to still be stuck, objectifies these non-human-centric community members and removes them from consideration when making short and even long-term decisions that may well affect and destroy these members and their communities.

To add consideration of these natural factors into contemporary decision-making processes would require new patterns of thinking that may feel alien at first. Yet, it is believed that the Iroquois Nation once gathered on this very continent and considered how decisions would affect the tribe seven generations hence before coming to a conclusion on major issues (Owens 23). Through the extremes exemplified by the century-long struggles of fictional Ann and Sax, the reader can perhaps more readily consider the dangers of these two binary opposite viewpoints in his or her own

ecosystem. Watching and judging fictional conflict on another planet should cause reflection on one's own society. Indeed, dystopias are designed to encourage this kind of reflection.

True communication and resolution, however, do not come any easier for the fictional characters than they would for any humans: in fact, it takes over one hundred years for Ann and Sax to come to an understanding regarding their political and philosophical differences, and this is achieved in part only through an innovative, and also controversial, life-prolonging procedure.⁶⁹ The continual success of this procedure, which may be taken multiple times, finally depends upon memories and their deep connection to the places they occurred: without their personal human histories, those undergoing the treatment end up dying of brain aneurisms because their minds cannot function without reference points, their own memory holes or *soma*, to personal past histories. Their pasts have become palimpsests, absences that must be recovered in order to survive. This vital human connection to place and humanity is best stated by Dianne Chisholm in her article "The City of Collective Memory": "The subject and object of memory are con/fused in space: in collusion they conjure the memorial city, which is primarily a city of the dead" (204). The memory cannot exist without the places, and the memorial city cannot exist without the rememberer. Because the surviving First Hundred cannot easily return to Earth and the true beginnings of their human memories due to climatic and political upheaval there, they are taken back to their original landing and

⁶⁹ The life-extending procedure becomes a point of contention on Earth because, even though it is freely available on Mars to all Martians through their barter/need-based economic system and guaranteed through their Constitution, on an already overpopulated Earth it is quite expensive. This makes the procedure available only to those with the monetary means to obtain it: often these are the same people who control and exploit other poorer people and scant resources.

residential site, Underhill, and given the memory treatment that allows them to go on living (Robinson, *Blue* 672-703). Sax, who led the assault on their fatal failing memories explains his rationale for this location over other historic Mars locales by stating, “Place was crucial, all their lives had served to show that. And even the people dubious, or skeptical, or afraid—i.e. all of them—had to admit that Underhill was the appropriate place, given what they were trying to do” (699). Only at this site of so many firsts shared by the whole landing crew could the experiment to prolong their lives function. Even years after technologically extending human life spans and chemically remembering the experiences of those lengthened lives can Ann and Sax reach an understanding and agreement.

After the memory treatment, their advanced age and joy at recollecting pasts long forgotten allows them to see in spite of the differences of their respective environmental, technological and political stances to their underlying similarities of shared human experience (712-717). After their reconciliation, the two former foes discuss the naming of the always-evolving political situation on Mars.

Many times they came back to what it might mean to be brown [the new term for a combination of red and green philosophies]. “Perhaps the combination should be called blue,” Ann said one evening, looking over the side at the water. “Brown isn’t very attractive, and it reeks of compromise. Maybe we should be thinking of something entirely new.”

“Maybe we should.” [Sax] (730).

Does this show the reader that the two views exist too far apart to be reunited with less than extraordinary means? Or rather, does it show how easy it is to let our differences

separate people to this extreme degree when it is indeed possible to reach a point of compromise? The near-future location of dystopias allows for distance and an outsider perspective to consider social and political conflicts from all the sides presented in a more detached way than is possible for many in the real world of conflicting opinions. The next step is to turn the gaze back onto the society that generated the dystopia and still employ that same all-encompassing viewpoint.

Dystopias have shown that attention to language and place matter, that presumably scientific objectivities to landscapes only hinder understanding and possibly survival. Humans cannot, above all, become subsumed by glossy surfaces of contemporary life. They cannot afford to disregard memory. They cannot be silent. There is too much at stake. Margaret Atwood writes that we must

insist on *what is*, in the face of ideological spin, popular consensus, and official denial: Orwell knew this takes honesty, and a lot of guts. The position of odd man out is always an uneasy one, but the moment we look around and find that there are no longer any odd men among our public voices is the moment of most danger—because that’s when we’ll be in lockstep, ready for the Three Minutes’ Hate. (Atwood, *In Other Worlds* 147-8, italics orig.)

Once readers have looked into the darkness, they cannot refuse to speak back to it. Those awake and making noise, Atwood’s “odd m[e]n out,” have a duty to shake other sleepers into human consciousness, and dystopian texts provide a strategic way to accomplish that ends. Though American colleges and universities are currently stereotyped as hotbeds of liberal indoctrination, this may in fact be another creation of certain media elements. It

might be more apt to state that many professors go out of their way to conceal political affiliations and opinions because of this backlash against a supposed liberal elite.

Zencey, however, associates rootlessness as another cause of our nation's polarized, discussionless, contemporary political conundrum: "Another, less obvious consequence of academic rootlessness is its effect on the political psyche of the nation. I think it contributes, through a connection that is subtle but undeniable, to the shallow and emotional nationalism that is too much in evidence on our campuses" (Zencey 16).

While everyone may be encouraged to participate in a 9/11-memorial event, few if any events are held regularly questioning the possible causes of that event or the drastic fallout in the ten years plus since that day. To question is to arm the terrorists, or some such nonsense, and any event held is subject to ridicule as well as possible efforts to protest, boycott, or stop it. Yet, to protest any local, state, or federal policy with which one disagrees is now more likely to bring down police action on even peacefully assembled protestors. For example, at University of California, Davis on November 18, 2011, Jason Dearen of the *Huffington Post* reported that students participating in a sit-in to show solidarity with the overall Occupy Wall Street movement as well as with students at UC Santa Cruz who had been jabbed with batons by police a few weeks prior were heavily doused with pepper spray in order to forcibly remove them from the scene.

As the next Presidential Election of 2012 approaches amid this increased state brutality toward protestors, I cannot help recalling the last one. During the sharp economic downturn and Presidential Election of 2008, I experienced a great deal of trepidation about the future: my imagination, due to reading a large quantity of dystopian texts, was working overtime. Early one morning, as I read through my daily deluge of

emails and news in one of my personal accounts, I felt a shock of complete terror.

Enclosed in one of my rich-site summaries, or RSS, newsfeeds was an article by Naomi Wolf, “Thousands of Troops are Deployed on U. S. Streets Ready to Carry Out ‘Crowd Control.’” If the title alone did not frighten me, the first paragraph certainly did:

Background: the First Brigade of the Third Infantry Division, three to four thousand soldiers, has been deployed in the United States as of October 1. Their stated mission is the form of crowd control they practiced in Iraq, subduing "unruly individuals," and the management of a national emergency. I am in Seattle and heard from the brother of one of the soldiers that they are engaged in exercises now. Amy Goodman reported that an Army spokesperson confirmed that they will have access to lethal and non lethal crowd control technologies and tanks.

The very first images leaping into my head were of the faked terrorist attack that Margaret Atwood employs in *The Handmaid's Tale* to install the fundamentalist Bible-based regime in charge of America's government.

It was after the catastrophe, when they shot the president and machine-gunned the Congress and the army declared a state of emergency. They blamed it on the Islamic fanatics, at the time.

Keep calm, they said on television. Everything is under control. . . .

That was when they suspended the Constitution. They said it would be temporary. There wasn't even any rioting in the streets. People stayed home at night, watching television, looking for some direction. There wasn't even an enemy you could put your finger on. (225)

Why did these narrative fragments flash into my mind, occupied as my thoughts were with the ever-increasing and non-stop rhetorical build-up for an historical election in which I had immersed myself? Or were these narrative-based flashes of memory a warning I heeded? In “Thesis on the Philosophy of History,” Walter Benjamin locates great power within memory: “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was.’ . . . It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (Theses, 257). These texts on martial law—one a news item and one fictional fragment, created from the political climates of two Americas two decades apart triggered this flash for me. Does recognition impart preparedness? Perhaps. I posted links to the article in two places on-line garnering responses from other concerned citizens that we may, in fact, be in for trouble should the election have difficulties such as in previous years. It was with much relief as I wrote this following the election, that nothing overtly militaristic seems to have happened immediately in regard to the election of President Obama. Yet, what benefit can be gained from this flash of recognition as it applies to literary texts?

Perhaps my misgivings, then as now, have a more documented, dystopian origin. Jack London’s *The Iron Heel*, America’s earliest dystopia first published in 1907, chronicles a leader of the Socialist party as he campaigns and agitates for social and economic reform in turn of the century America. Ernest Everhard’s story, written by his wife Avis as she waits in hiding for what will be a doomed second wave of revolution to begin, is discovered in an old tree and provides insight seven centuries in the book’s past by covering the years between 1912 -1931; however, the authorial voice in the Forward discounts much of the accuracy and chalks the heroic portrait up to the devoted, loving

wife's interpretation of the events (1-4).⁷⁰ A section of this novel, which caused Naomi Wolf's text on the suspension of civil law that I read in my own present time to resonate like a tuning fork, occurs during a speech made by Ernest at a private dinner party just before he ran for Congress on the Socialist party ticket. Avis' father invited several community civic leaders and, as was his pleasure, encouraged Ernest to engage them in debate. Written following the passage of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act of 1890 but before its use in breaking giants such as Standard Oil, Ernest asks what they will do, "When the combination of the trusts will control all legislation, when the combination of the trusts will itself be the Government" (London 87). As expected, all the men shout that they will not join the forced militias and that the American citizens will rise up outraged to fight for their freedom. Everhard, however, an astute reader of political and economic landscapes, sees their future more accurately when he makes the following prediction:

"You would go into the militia yourself," was Ernest's retort, "and be sent to Maine, or Florida, or the Philippines, or anywhere else, to drown in blood your own comrades civil-warring for their liberties. While from Kansas, or Wisconsin, or any other state, your own comrades would go into the militia and come here to California to drown in blood your own civil-warring." (88)

Yet the men still protest that civil law and common sense will not allow such an atrocity as Americans being forced to kill Americans to occur on American soil, walking right into Ernest's rhetorical trap—and later in the novel, into the same literal trap about which

⁷⁰ Not entirely unlike the academic conference "Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*" at the end of *The Handmaid's Tale* wherein the male scholars of the paper panel belittle and question Offred's account (Atwood 379-395).

they have just been warned: “Not when the Government suspends civil law. In that day when you speak of rising in your strength, your strength would be turned against yourself. . . . The courts interpret the Constitution, and the courts, as Mr. Asmunsen [whose granite quarry profits are greedily absorbed by the railroad] agreed, are the creatures of the trusts” (88). Whether they object to enforced militia service or not, whether they believe the law is fair or not, lawful provision for a reserve force of citizens has nonetheless been created to “take the mob by the throat” (89). In the chapter titled “The End,” both Asmunsen and another guest of that evening, Kowalt, die just as Ernest foretold: when the California militia is called up against the farmers of Missouri, both men refuse to go, are given a mock court martial trial and then executed via firing squad (153). Even with Ernest’s warning, which should have alerted the men to the trouble coming, they still do not learn to read their landscapes in order to survive.

Ernest’s awareness of the laws debated and passed in Congress allows him knowledge that these men laugh at, that they call dreams and refuse to believe: Ernest can connect the dots that others do not even believe exist because he reads clues they have missed. The ruling class, or Oligarchy, as London labels them in *The Iron Heel*, holds the wealth, power, and even the dissemination of information—especially after breaking up and outlawing the Socialist presses, which had been some of the few papers trying to inform citizens of pertinent national news and policies (105-112). Just because something—in this case, militia conscription to fight against other Americans on American soil—seems incredibly inhuman or alien to what one person, or even many people, deem to be American, does not mean it cannot occur. When too much power

resides in the possession of a few, they have much to lose and far greater means to keep control.

Fifty-four years after London's work was first published, in President Dwight D. Eisenhower's formal farewell address to the nation, he invoked a similar, more direct warning to the people of the United States—a stance many might find surprising in light of his distinguished military background.

In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together.

Eisenhower, like the fictional Ernest who rightly feared the connection between the trusts and the federal government, foresaw times where the close ties among government, military and the commercial sector could have disastrous consequences for average citizens. When the small groups controlling each piece of the military-industry-government triad consist of mainly the same people, those particular interests may outweigh any other concerns by voting citizens, the environment, or any outside element. Has the American citizenry relinquished the duty to guard against the merging of powers, which Eisenhower alerted them? Have they abdicated their rights to read landscapes,

especially political and economic ones? What can reach those who have fallen asleep on democratic duty?

The imagination stretches to decipher one's situation, to place oneself in historical relation to the reality or text one is engaged in reading, especially in the characteristically dystopian *in media res* beginning. However, this peculiar, disorienting aspect of literature—being dropped without exposition into narrative—is one of its greatest powers. This mental dislocation and reorientation, discussed by Baccolini and Moylan who claim that, “cognitive estrangement is at first forestalled by the immediacy and normality of the location. No dream trip is taken to get to this place of everyday life,” (5) is a common feature of dystopia. The reader does not have to suspend disbelief right away to take a magic journey to the dystopian world, instead the author tosses the reader in from page one. There is no warming up period: dystopia is always in Game On mode. This insistency of the narrative forces the reader to swiftly adapt and adjust to understand the plot. After stepping back from the text, prior schemata must be adjusted to accept and understand the fictional reality by comparing the dissimilar to the similar.

This idea relates to Darko Suvin's “feedback oscillation,” wherein the text moves the reader into a new space that temporarily disorients him/her (qtd. in Moylan 8). Thus, the reader considers not only the original work, but his or her own society as well. Any reader struggling to understand and fictionally enter the society of the text must use *a priori* knowledge to begin. What in this unfamiliar textual world is similar to what the reader already knows? If something is entirely alien, how can it be approached and understood—is it in any way comparable to what we already know? Reflection upon the text being read and the society that may have led to the text's creation challenges the

reader's assumptions about his/her own time. While reading literature seems to be an avenue to critical thinking about one's society, the words of Dana Gioia, former Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, echo ominously "As this report unambiguously demonstrates, readers play a more active and involved role in their communities. The decline in reading, therefore, parallels a larger retreat from participation in civic and cultural life" (qtd. in NEA x). When reading falls from favor, we seem to be more easily led into dangerous socio-political waters; therefore, engaging with texts old and new keeps citizens civically engaged and aware. Then they may begin, among other things, to speak and act against the unguarded consolidation of powers portrayed by Atwood, London, and Eisenhower.

The strangely familiar yet oddly dislocating effect of the dystopia may be its biggest benefit to learning to read landscapes in real life, for humanity does not at this moment have the kind of artificially extended time that Robinson's Martians possess. However, among other dystopian dot connectors, it does have the fictive reflections of Nirgal, a genetically engineered offspring of some of the First Hundred,⁷¹ born on Mars, as he ponders the differences between the above-mentioned scientific Sax and his "mother" Hiroko while still living at her secret base, Zygote, at Mars' South Pole. It is through a third figure, named the Alchemist in Robinson's texts that corresponds to the wide-sighted landscape reader, that the boundaries between binary opposites can finally collapse and blur. It is this third figure that the reader must strive to become. Nirgal, though created by science, is human. Here in Zygote, Nirgal, who came of age in a

⁷¹ In *Green Mars* it is revealed that Hiroko secretly collected DNA samples of all the First Hundred and created genetically engineered children without most of the donors being aware of the children's existence or their own chromosomal contributions.

sheltered and highly intellectual environment, thinks of science as the white and the natural world as green:

It was the white world, Nirgal saw suddenly. The white world inside the green, the opposite of Hiroko's green world inside the white. And they [Hiroko and Sax] had opposite feelings about them. Looking from the green side, when Hiroko confronted something mysterious, she loved it and it made her happy—it was *viriditas*,⁷² a holy power. Looking from the white side, when Sax confronted something mysterious, it was the Great Unexplainable, dangerous and awful. He was interested in the true, while Hiroko was interested in the real. Or perhaps it was the other way around—those words were tricky. Better to say she loved the green world and he the white. (Robinson, *Green* 15)

When Nirgal expresses these ideas to his friend and teacher Michel, the psychiatrist of the First Hundred, the older man's response provides both the young Martian and the reader with a name for the combination of the two forces: "In archetypal terminologies we might call green and white the Mystic and the Scientist. Both extremely powerful figures, you see. But what we need, if you ask me, is a combination of the two, which we call the *Alchemist*" (15, italics original). Nirgal sees the connectedness and value of green *and* white from growing up learning at the sides of both Hiroko and Sax; nevertheless, he cannot fully unravel the conundrum at his young age, but he knows instinctively that they are irrevocably intertwined and that both ways of thinking include good things. It is Michel's summation of the two-in-one that crystallizes the solution:

⁷² Term for "life force" coined by the medieval mystic Hildegard of Bingen.

Both are valuable and each should hold the other in balance. It is only by internalizing and attending to knowledge and by respecting the conversations of both the Green and the White that humans can hope to attain balance and attempt to craft sustainable futures. Michel's use of the Alchemist figure gives a name to the blending concept needed for survival, allowing his young student to understand years before Ann and Sax can reach this same point, even though Michel himself often struggles with perception that is still connected to his child and young adulthood on Earth. Nirgal, a product of genetic engineering on an entirely new planet can read the landscape from a viewpoint that is personally inaccessible to Earth-centric Michel and the novel's audience, except as it appears in the dystopia. As critical readers of textual, literal, and theoretical landscapes, people must become Alchemists considering all the sources at their disposal by delving into them and deciphering meaning for themselves. Outside of the texts, readers must not let the usage of specific words and phrases block understanding and communication with one another. Language may be the path to reconciliation and compromise, or it may be a continual communication breakdown.

This communication breakdown, this impasse of polarizing terms, was laid bare recently on Comedy Central, where many people disenfranchised with the infotainment on the major networks now turn for something that more closely resembles news reporting. Though *The Daily Show* is often the subject of ridicule by so-called legitimate news outlets, it sometimes serves as a forum for, among other things such as interviews with thought-provoking questions, corralling video or audio footage of political figures regularly contradicting themselves. Stewart also uses the clips to deconstruct the tangled language of political rhetoric in America, targeting members of both the Left and the

Right. In the opening segment from 4 April 2012, Stewart comments on Sarah Palin guest hosting *The Today Show*, which she called “infiltrating” when she was, in fact, invited to do it. The following is my transcription of Jon Stewart’s close reading of Palin:

Stewart: “Ooooh, ‘infiltrating’ *The Today Show*, I think it means you’ve cynically exploited a manufactured notion of yourself as a crusader against a monolithic exclusionary activist liberal media whilst actually enjoying a mutually beneficial symbiotic relationship with them only to the detriment of the rest of the country.

Then he proceeded to show clips from an interview segment entitled by *The Today Show* “Going Rogue” between regular host Matt Lauer and Sarah Palin; This title very pointedly plays into Palin’s “infiltration” theme. In the first clip, she speaks about Mitt Romney as the likely Republican nominee: “Anybody running on the GOP ticket would be infinitely better than what we have today with these failed Socialist policies.” Unable to let this pass Stewart intrudes: “Ah, ‘failed Socialist policies’ of Barack Obama. I get it. Now, at two minutes later. Same interview...” and the clip resumes with Palin responding to a question regarding who is benefitting in the current economy:

“For Whom? Maybe for those, some [sic] on Wall Street.”

Stewart: “Right! Wall Street. Fat Cats reaping the benefits of the ‘failed Socialist’... Wait. That doesn’t make sense! Oh, you know what? Who gives a shit if it doesn’t make any sense? It’s seven in the fucking morning. People are watching while mistakenly buttering Pop-Tarts.

But if you really want to know why some people are *kind* of infuriated with you, it's not your Common Sense Conservatism, or your Mama Grizzly tenacity. It's the casual manner with which you accuse everyone you disagree with of dividing America while simultaneously and very casually doing this”:

Stewart returns to another clip where Palin responds to a panel question on whether Oprah's faltering OWN network will last the year: “I think it's gonna be around if she'll get some Conservatives on the show. Some patriots who understand the Constitution.”

This is followed by a cut to Stewart:

Heeeey, did you see it right there? That's it! Oprah would do well if she would just “get some Conservatives on there.” You know, “patriots who understand the Constitution.” Right there. That's it. In a nutshell. The simplicity and prejudice of your worldview that the patriotism and goodness of something is in direct proportion only to the amount of Conservatism in said thing. AND that equation so rules your life that you offered that advice spontaneously to the question, “How do you think Oprah's doing?”

I've gotta tell ya, lady, that must be exhausting to live like that.

Although, liberals who are patriots –it's pretty funny.

Stewart plays the mock audience, at times nodding, going along with whatever Sarah Palin says, but then jumps out of that character into his critical self, ripping into the ideology behind her sunny smile and chirpy tone. He keys in on the use of “Socialist,”

which became a flash-point word for descriptions of most of President Obama's plans, whether implemented or not, before and during his first term. He holds up Palin's own words as evidence that the economic policies are not Socialist, else the Wall Street insiders would not be the ones on top. After this somewhat humorous attack, he fires an insightful shot: Palin and her Tea Party-brand of Republicanism have equated patriotism, goodness, and Conservatism. They are now publically synonymous and inseparable. Of course, Obama and Oprah will fail if they do not embrace or at least espouse Conservative viewpoints. Because they do not adhere to these terms, they are unpatriotic Socialists who do not understand the Constitution, and therefore, they are bad. Binaries leave no grey area; the trap is built into to current language paradigms.

By establishing traits with positive connotations for her own side—"patriot, knows the Constitution," anti-Socialist—Palin leaves any opposition in the negative camp. Anyone not actively attending to the language and its quickly changing contexts could be taken unawares by appearances and positive feelings produced by Palin's carefully constructed visage, diction, and tone. Lakoff writes this warning, "The words draw you into their worldview. That is what framing is about. Framing is about getting language that fits your worldview. It is not just language. The ideas are primary — and the language carries those ideas, evokes those ideas" (Lakoff, "Man"). So the choosing of words is highly important, as Ann and Sax have already shown. Breaking these difficult and polarizing political impasses is so important that we should go so far as to create a new language to address the problems that we face, becoming Alchemists in our own right. If all our other dialogues are fraught with carefully crafted frameworks and connotations, then we must begin anew.

There is, however, hope that this new language can happen. Underneath all the contemporary shouting and name-calling, research shows that political factions share more common ground than they can possibly admit. Michael Sandel, a political philosophy instructor, stated in his lecture, “The Lost Art of Democratic Debate” that “A better way to mutual respect is to engage directly with the moral convictions citizens bring to public life, rather than to require that people leave their deepest moral convictions outside politics before they enter.” This dictum does not ask either side to abandon its deeply-held beliefs, but to recognize them outright and make them a real part of the conversation. This does not mean to use them as a shield or a weapon but to address them as concerns.

Just as in the fictional work, only after Ann and Sax really attend to and recognize the value of each other’s viewpoints regarding the physical body of Mars can they meet in compromise. Additionally, they must talk one on one, without their former assorted parties of supporters: Ann’s radical Reds, who have been looked upon as terrorists and Sax’s incredibly intelligent scientists, who favored technology above all else. In the lecture “On the Moral Roots of Liberals and Conservatives,” psychologist Jonathan Haidt said,

If our goal is to understand the world, to seek a deeper understanding of the world, our general lack of moral diversity here is going to make it harder. Because when people all share values, when people all share morals, they become a team. And once you engage in the psychology of teams it shuts down open-minded thinking.

This is part of the problem for the Martians, and it is very much part of the problem in America today. Each side has its own language and even its own Ann or Sax, and they huddle up, turning their backs and stopped up ears to the opposition. But all is not lost. Haidt also claims that both sides of the political spectrum have the same moral organizers: “Harm/Care,⁷³ Fairness/Reciprocity,⁷⁴ Ingroup Loyalty,⁷⁵ Authority/Respect,⁷⁶ and Purity/Sanctity.⁷⁷” Liberals concern themselves more with Harm/Care while Conservatives feel strongest about Purity/Sanctity; this is true world-wide, also, according to his study.⁷⁸ Despite that difference, each side does care about the other aspects, and this is the ground that must be renamed and approached with respect. This is where dystopia points the way to creating a new language, free from prior frameworks, that breaks impasses in the real world.

In order to understand the dystopias’ real world origins, readers must understand at least some of the multi-textual elements employed by authors and, just as crucial, the cultures from which they wrote. As Baccolini states:

[D]ystopia shows a complex relationship to history. On the one hand, like utopia it is normally located in time and space and requires a similar suspension from them; on the other, even more than utopia, it is immediately rooted in history. Its function is to warn readers about the possible outcomes of our present world and entails an extrapolation of key features of contemporary society. (“A useful knowledge” 115)

⁷³ Keeping people, animals, and the Earth safe from harm; taking care of the same

⁷⁴ Equal access to resources; People getting what they deserve

⁷⁵ Sharing traits with a specific group and remaining true to that group above all else

⁷⁶ Recognizing and submitting to those in power; showing deference to those in charge

⁷⁷ Keeping categories untainted; holiness of certain conditions, states of being

⁷⁸ Visit www.YourMorals.org to check personal moral organizer levels

However, Baccolini, Moylan, and Suvin—major players in dystopian criticism—end with the theoretical; they do not, at least in published work to date, extend their admonishments into practicum. If, as Lakoff and Smith state, “Democracy, in the American tradition, has been defined by a simple morality: We Americans care about our fellow citizens, we act on that care and build trust, and we do our best not just for ourselves, our families, our friends and our neighbors, but for our country, for each other, for people we have never met and never will meet.” Then common ground can be found, and it can be more appropriately renamed so that it may be considered and discussed anew. Suvin writes, “The aliens—utopians, monsters, or simply differing strangers—are a mirror to man just as the differing country is a mirror for his world. But the mirror is not only a reflecting one, it is also a transforming one, virgin womb and alchemical dynamo: the mirror is a crucible” (Suvin, *Metamorphoses* 5). Again, the Alchemist reference appears. The crucible boils down the dross metal, refines it into something purer, higher: the Alchemist changes base metal to gold and the dystopian crucible produces clearer vision of the reader’s own world. Readers look at the dystopia perhaps recoiling in shock or horror at what they behold. How much greater, then, is the shock when they connect it to their own society, as something directly a product of their reality? But it is the last part of his statement that is the crucial one: this literature must be more than a mirror, it must also be a crucible—a place of reading and an agent of change in real-time. It must aid readers in becoming the Alchemists of political language.

CHAPTER FIVE

MOVING ON: NOT ALL FUTURES HAVE TO BE DYSTOPIAN

*“Better never means better for everyone. . .
It always means worse, for some”
-Margaret Atwood, The Handmaid’s Tale, 274*

As a child, I attended a small, country American Baptist Church with my mother. The minister, though nice enough all the rest of the time, was a terror in the pulpit. He would yell and pound the podium, exhorting us to avoid hellfire and damnation. I was, quite frankly, scared to death. I even had a belief that the floor furnace in our frame house was one of the doorways to Hell, since I could see fire down there. I knew the grate of that furnace was hot enough to burn bare feet; therefore, I did not want to spend all eternity down in its dark, metal depths. However, I was then, as now, able to escape much unpleasantness by reading, but since I was not permitted to tote Judy Blume or Laura Ingalls Wilder along to church, I had to read the Bible to put my mind somewhere out of reach of his terrifying sermons. What chapter did I return to more often than not, on these literary escapes? Revelations. Of all the things I could have picked, I chose the one that still confounds theologians and contains possibly some of the scariest language in the whole Christian Bible. At one point, I even tried drawing the monsters and other characters mentioned in its verses, but drawing the Whore of Babylon on one’s Sunday school bulletin is not approved church behavior. It seems I’ve been messing around with depictions of the end of the world for a very long time.

This dissertation began by defining the tangled relationships between the concepts of utopia and dystopia. A version of Greimas’ semiotic rectangle laid the case for moving away from the ideal and impossible into the real and practical, which can be

achieved by contemplating dystopia. Darko Suvin's "transfer ideologizing," identified as a danger to guard against both for the dystopian citizen and the real world denizen, reveals that people live in a world of easily-consumable surfaces that must be broken through so that legitimate conversations and relationships can take place. The dystopian fiction emerged as a place to explore and model the ways in which language can be used for control and, more importantly, for speaking back to control.

Next, in Chapter Two, examination of texts provided examples of the ways in which hegemonic forces construct language for control while dystopian characters reclaim and employ language to resist those in power as well as to determine what knowledge about history might survive in opposition to the master narratives. Where *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* Winston fails, *The Handmaid Tale's* Offred and *V for Vendetta's* Valerie succeed because they refuse to believe their stories can be erased entirely. They trust to future readers to find their texts and retrieve them from the palimpsest to which the powers-that-be would have consigned them. Then Chapter Three continued the use of dystopian fiction as exemplar of the power of reclaimed language by evaluating texts that revealed strategies to think with as characters encountered and then interpreted literal and political landscapes. Characters in *The Mars Trilogy*, *Parable of the Sower*, *The Year of the Flood*, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and the short story "The Birds" proved the necessity of reading landscapes well to survive, by correctly interpreting political and social factors, and creating proverbs name situations in which social stability was repeatedly threatened.

Finally, Chapter Four examined the role that language plays in breaking political impasses. *The Mars Trilogy* and *The Iron Heel*, paired with contemporary political

language commentary and Lakoff's work on metaphor and political dialogue unpacked dystopian texts and real situations to highlight the importance of reaching viable compromises. These texts provide hope that new strategies can be found in dystopia that may be applied in the dysfunctional contemporary American political conversation.

Yet this problem of America's dysfunctional political conversation is many-layered, and possibly has an ignorance of landscape at its heart. A related topic, though outside the main scope of this work, is the centrality of place to humanity and future. Given more time, the aspect of place and its influence on humans would provide much more insight into the dystopia, and thus society. Scott Russell Sanders claims that the restless habits and self-centric focus of much of humanity today that have led to this carelessness for places: "We take inordinate pride in our own doings. Acting without regard for the effects our lives will have up on a place, we become dangerous, to our descendants and ourselves" ("Landscape" 8). Much of the Western world has become self-centered, and self-righteous in its own opinions, whether regarding politics, land, food sources, or even other people, to the detriment of society as a whole. Whether it is the incessant narcissism of social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Google+, and Pinterest, or the drive for certain outward appearances by any means, the self and the presentations of that manufactured self, trump most contemporary spare moments. Is more fuel needed for overly-large vehicles to drive everywhere? Drill more. Build pipelines across miles of countryside to transport difficult to extract and process resources. Delve into the Earth's crust until earthquakes rattle windows and then maybe keep right on going. In a recent article addressing the popularity and hype of the

upcoming release of the film *The Hunger Games*, climate writer for *ThinkProgress*, Joe Romm, chimed in on the dystopian work:

But like much (though not all) post-apocalyptic fiction, the book spends exceedingly little time actually explaining to anyone how we got in this mess.

Indeed, after reading all 3 books, I find only one sentence devoted to explaining what caused the apocalypse: [The mayor] “tells of the history of Panem. He lists the disasters, the droughts, the storms, the fires, the encroaching seas that swallowed up so much of the land, the brutal war for what little sustenance remained. The result was Panem, a shining Capitol ringed by thirteen districts...”

Sounds a lot like global warming, though the books do not flesh out what happened. (ellipsis orig.)

Romm appears to wish for more back-story making links to current climate problems more obvious for readers. However, this technique is, as shown in the previous chapters, characteristic of dystopian fiction. All the problems happening in contemporary society appear in the mayor’s line. Readers do not need this history included in the novel *because they live it*. If they do not recognize these stories of disaster brewing in their current landscapes, then it is the dystopia that can make them begin to see.

It is time to re-remember that humans are in fact a part of this planet that they live on: part of, not masters of, not disconnected from, the processes of life on Earth. It is necessary to recognize that people have what Jagtenberg and McKie call an “ecological self”: “*The ecological self* is a recognition of interconnection and involves our

identification and symbiosis with nonhuman worlds—a recognition that out ‘there’ is in ‘here’; the material world forms part of our extended body” (138, italics orig.). Humans cannot be separate from their environment physically, mentally, or chemically. Buell states, quite disturbingly, that, “No young person alive today has been born without some in utero exposure to synthetic chemicals that can disrupt development. Everywhere today, human bodies come into the world bearing the marks of environmental deformation already in place, not anticipated” (112). No person living today, no matter if they live in the industrialized world or are one of the very few unexploited aboriginal tribes is without a “body burden, the total of all the environmental contaminants that people have stored up in their bodies” (Buell 117). Even people who may retain mental and traditional ties to their places carry this body burden created by those who would subjugate and neutralize their surroundings. No one can escape these alterations to the Earth no matter where on the planet they dwell. Furthermore, no one can escape the Earth as Robinson’s Mars settlers did by traveling to and establishing a permanent human community on another world: there is no Planet B.

In Chapter One, I stated, based on Greimas’ theories in *On Meaning*, that because the world cannot speak for itself, it is without defense in the human world of speaking and writing—unless someone chooses to assign value to the earth by naming it and speaking on the world’s behalf. Likewise, geographer Anne Buttimer writes that “life in residential areas involves a dialogue of behavior and setting, of demand and supply; it is thus essentially a condition of *becoming*. Such a condition is seen to arise when resident communities engage in creative dialogue with their environments, molding, re-creating and eventually appropriating them as home” (22, italics orig.). Humans need to speak for

and in consideration of their locations. Authors of dystopian texts, then, choose to write about dark futures, and by doing so they call these futures into being for the duration of the reader's interaction with the text, whether written or visual: readers' reflections upon the societies out of which these dystopian futures grow must begin to speak for the earth if these futures are to be avoided. The dystopian crucible that reveals, the feedback oscillation that readers participate in when challenged to read critically, must create dialogue between humanity and the earth.

Additionally, it would be a worthwhile future endeavor to develop lesson plans or instructions for creating such plans as related to dystopian fiction to encourage teachers and students to search for and apply the models for landscape reading and communication facilitating to their own lives and communities. When texts are chosen, whether by the independent reader or for the classroom, their ability to serve as this crucible must be considered, even favored. Here, Baccolini's work on dystopia and Walter Benjamin's work in "Theses on the Philosophy of History" collide in a vortex of the power of memory:

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was.' . . . It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger' (VI 247) [...] that is why memory is important, 'for every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns'—and thus is not remembered—'threatens to disappear irretrievably' (V 247). Thus a society that is incapable of recollection, recognition, and remembrance is without hope for the future, as it shows no concern for the often silenced histories of the oppressed, the

marginalized, the dispossessed. (Benjamin qtd. in Baccolini, “A useful knowledge” 119)

By reading varied authors and learning about culture in those times and places, readers are, to borrow the often-quoted phrase of Toni Morrison regarding the purpose of *Beloved*, “giving blood to the scraps.” Hearing other viewpoints and playing out worst-case scenarios prepares readers’ imaginations for the situations they may face in the real world. An act of reading, reflecting on, and critiquing their own society and its products, flakes away some of the glossy, media-induced sheen, allowing the reader to gain traction on this newly roughed up surface in order to contemplate reflection-induced action: they must begin living their own counter-narratives! Following the caution from Moylan that “without a grasp of both the actual social relations and the horizon of possibilities at any historical moment, the intensive and extensive analysis needed to critique and look beyond the present situation is doomed to the failure of being lost in the immediate, the local and the micro” (*Scraps* 61). Readers cannot lose their shock and horror at the truths revealed through reading; at the same time, they cannot be overcome by hopelessness. Instead, they must be prompted to critique and work for change in order to avoid the fates presented to them in the fictional world.

[F]or if a reader can manage to see the world differently (in that Brechtian sense of overcoming alienation by becoming critically estranged and engaged), she or he might just, especially in concert with friends or comrades and allies, do something to alter it—perhaps on a large scale or ever so slightly, perhaps in a stable and solid rock—so as to make that world a more just and congenial place for all who live in it. (Moylan 5)

The time is past to theorize about the change dystopian literature can make. The time has come to put this theory to the test. It is as Hiroko, the Japanese agriculturist and Mother Goddess figure encountered as part of The First 100 in *Red Mars* would say: *Shikata Ga Na*—there is no other choice.

Dystopia functions as a way to test where humanity's current paths are headed with less damage than living them. Authors such as John Brunner, Margaret Atwood, Philip Wylie, and Octavia Butler all address the use of prophecy and prediction in the texts of their own creation and those of others. In the Preface to Philip Wylie's *The End of the Dream*, John Brunner writes, "But what you have here is a prophecy in the most ancient sense of all: not a prediction of what certainly will come to pass, but a description of what is likely to come to pass unless people mend their ways" (qtd. in Wylie 6). Margaret Atwood takes a darker view, contending that the path to a so-called better future will lead inevitably through dystopia: "To move us toward the improved world—the utopia we're promised—dystopia must first hold sway. It's a concept worthy of doublethink" (Atwood, *In Other Worlds* 149). Then she follows this statement by also announcing that the better society never arrives. Yet, reading her works such as *The Handmaid's Tale* or *Year of the Flood* demonstrate that this is not necessarily the case: there is no avoidance of the worst, but there can, as in her fictions, be survival of it: survival for the prepared and the strong. In 1973, Wylie proposed that: "A technological society cannot persist as a democracy unless the people in their majority understand both technology and ecology well enough to know what they are doing" (93). Thirty years later, Frederick Buell, writing about dystopian predictions in one chapter of *From Apocalypse to Way of Life: Environmental Crisis in the American Century* stated,

in response to those who called writers and predictors of doomsday scenarios quacks when their predictions did not come to pass, “That apocalyptic prophecies do not come true thus does *not* mean that the problems they highlight have completely disappeared and that the environmental concern can simply be dismissed” (71, italics orig.). The concerns still exist. The techno-environment quandary has not been resolved. Perhaps humanity is not any closer to understanding how deeply intertwined everything on this delicate planet truly is.

Critic Darko Suvin addressed this prophetic turn in fiction when he stated that, “In the twentieth century SF has moved into the sphere of anthropological and cosmological thought, becoming a diagnosis, a warning, a call to understanding and action, and—most important—a mapping of possible alternatives” (Suvin, *Metamorphoses* 12). But though literature has been calling out to readers, sometimes screaming at them, not enough are reading, and in turn heeding these cautionary tales. Why? Why are many not moved to radical action by these nightmare scenarios? Could they be paralyzed by fear and hopelessness? Writer Milan Kundera disagrees when he states,

People are always shouting they want to create a better future. It's not true. The future is an apathetic void of no interest to anyone. The past is full of life, eager to irritate us, provoke and insult us, tempt us to destroy or repaint it. The only reason people want to be masters of the future is to change the past. They are fighting for access to the laboratories where photographs are retouched and biographies and histories rewritten. (22)

Will it be only the greed of the victor to create his or her own triumphant history, like that in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, that motivates anyone to action? I myself cannot be that

cynical, though I can see much in our society that makes that quotation possible. Certainly, the past exists and is there to teach, but humans can no longer avoid considering the future, though it is always out in front of them, untouchable and unattainable. It is still changeable. Perhaps the activist's stance is the more hopeful alternative to the fascist temptation of control in Kundera's quote. Again, the Martians point the way forward: "If you could make a living while saving the world—if it represented your best chance for stability and long life and your children's chances—then why not? Why not?" (Robinson, *Blue Mars* 188). I do not like that in the last few weeks I have been reading about creating a clean room and makeshift decontamination room in my own home. I know what basic supplies I would need to create this, though I do not yet own them all. A minor radioactive or quarantine event might make this necessary. That is not the future I want to choose though I cannot reject the knowledge of what to do just in case. I have looked into the abyss too long and it does darken the vision. I think more avidly than in the past of creating grab-and-go packs for each member of my household, like Lauren of *Parable of the Sower*. I worry about the things that have led me to taking the advice of my dystopian texts. Why would anyone write such things, and better yet, why read them if these worries are the results?

In a blog discussing her recently-released dystopian long short-story "I'm Starved for You,"⁷⁹ Margaret Atwood mused about readers' inquiries into her eerily accurate ability to predict the future, which sounds very much like reading the landscape and connecting the dots:

⁷⁹ In a world where jobs, food, and decent housing are scarce, people sign up for Consilience, and a nice helping of constant surveillance. Here they can have no contact with the outside world as they spend one month being inmates of a prison and the next being employees of the prison and the surrounding town.

The future is like the afterlife: no one can actually go there and return. So I can't predict the future; it just looks like that sometimes. I don't stargaze: I read the newspapers. And the magazines. And the blogs. They don't tell me the future, either, but from them I can gather bits and pieces that might be fitted together into something fictional, but plausible. ("Margaret")

Atwood relies on the clues of this contemporary world to create her nightmare visions of completely imaginable futures. In the bits and pieces, the odds and ends of her society, she reads the palimpsests and writes them large for more people to see. However, Octavia Butler provides the best answer I can find for all this dark divination and its consequences:

So why try to predict the future at all if it's so difficult, so nearly impossible? Because making predictions is one way to give warning when we see ourselves drifting in dangerous directions. Because prediction is a useful way of pointing out safer, wiser courses. Because, most of all, our tomorrow is the child of our today. Through thought and deed, we exert a great deal of influence over this child, even though we can't control it absolutely. Best to think about it, though. Best to try to shape it into something good. Best to do that for any child. ("A Few Rules" 264)

So, authors write dystopias to shape the future and people read them to be shaped and, in turn, react in real ways that create different paths, different possibilities, for themselves and the planet.

Readers, then, must not be afraid to travel into the fictional dystopian future to bring back the knowledge that will prevent them from going there in their reality. By encouraging the reading and reflecting on dystopian texts, as well as other kinds of texts, readers may become something better, more in tune with humanity's limitations and on guard against preventable apocalypse at all cost. Readers must become Alchemist restorers who can see the value in seemingly disparate elements and use what is good and available from each to shape a better future for all and not just for some. Listening to each other and achieving respect are goals that need to concern every individual. Perhaps, instead of hiring scholars of utopia, dystopia, and science fiction to work for them as futurists, our elected officials should just stop arguing amongst themselves, save some taxpayer money and read the dystopias themselves. For in the end, the entropy of hegemony is not the answer. Instead, revolution is infinity: it is constant growth and newness. Dead, stagnant languages cannot name our contemporary conditions. We must read dystopia. We must read our landscapes. These readings must inspire us to create a new, ever-evolving language that breaks through the impasses inherent in our old ways if we want to do more than merely survive.

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