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# Ecofeminism in the Speculative Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin, Octavia Butler, and Margaret Atwood

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**Ecofeminism in the Speculative Fiction  
of Ursula K. Le Guin, Margaret  
Atwood, and Octavia Butler**

Cara Williams

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“I speak for the trees, for the trees have no tongues.” –Dr. Seuss, *The Lorax*

## Introduction to Ecofeminism and Speculative Fiction

At the beginning of Ursula K. Le Guin's novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Genly Ai, a male alien among the androgynous people of Gethen says,

I suppose the most important thing, the heaviest single factor in one's life, is whether one's born male or female. In most societies it determines one's expectations, activities, outlook, ethics, manners—almost everything. Vocabulary. Semiotic usages. Clothing. Even food. Women...women tend to eat less...It's extremely hard to separate the innate differences from the learned ones. Even where women participate equally with men in the society, they still after all do all the childbearing, and so most of the child-rearing.<sup>1</sup>

Such binary thinking is exactly the notion that Le Guin and other speculative fiction writers aim to challenge. And yet how can we not think of ourselves as essentially divided? For better or worse, the human being (amongst many other earthly animals) is a sexed animal. There are males and there are females. Perhaps, then, it is because of this biological dualism that we feel we must look at our world as fundamentally disparate, proposing that the world functions through interactions between members of a hierarchical system. However, to view the world through such a lens is to restrict each individual to his/her limiting biologism. To divide the world into two genders (male/female) is to limit individuals to generalized categories, subjecting them to identify with, fit in, and mold to a realized, arbitrary norm. Mary Mellor, an ecofeminist critic, writes, "If women's (and men's) position in the nature-culture dualism is seen as biologically determined or essentially different, it is clear that the dualism will never be bridged." So how *do* we bridge this gap? For novelists like Ursula Le Guin, Margaret Atwood,

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<sup>1</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Left Hand of Darkness," in *Hainish Novels and Stories*, ed. B. Attebery (The Library of America, 2017). 560-61.

and Octavia Butler, speculative fiction is a means by which to bridge the gap and explore ecofeminism.

From its start in the early twentieth century, the feminist movement has sought equality between men and women. First-wave feminists celebrated women as separate from but equal to men. In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir, a well-known feminist political activist, published her famous book, *The Second Sex*, jumpstarting the second-wave feminist movement that aimed to purge sex from its biologism and associated gender roles. After all, biology is not inherently sexist. In fact, organisms are distinguished between each other purely on the basis of size and motility of their gametes. And yet we are unwilling to part with the familiarity of “male” and “female” terminology even when it no longer accurately models reality. Trees are still distinguished by having different male or female plants (dioecious), or different male and female flowers on the same plant (monoecious). The engendering of plants brings to mind Carol J. Adams’ notion of the “absent referent”—a term she uses to address the cognitively absent party that is associated with an object. When thinking about a particular Ginkgo tree as female, women become the absent referent, suggesting that there is something woman-like about the tree—both do have ovaries. Conversely, there is then something plant-like about women; they are lovely as roses, as pretty as a field of daisies. As de Beauvoir illustrates, “In woman dressed and adorned, nature is present but under restraint, by human will remolded nearer to man’s desire.”<sup>2</sup> Thus enters ecofeminism, “a movement that sees a connection between the exploitations and degradation of the natural world and subordination and oppression of women.”<sup>3</sup> Both women and

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<sup>2</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Trans. H.M. Parshley. (New York: Random House, 1952), 159.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Mellor. *Feminism and Ecology*. (New York: New York University Press, 1952), 1.

the environment suffer a similar fate of reduction, implicating each other in their own tales of abuse and oppression.

Third-wave feminism emerged in the 1990's, finding fault in the current understanding of feminism that was limited largely to white, middle- or upper-class, heterosexual women. Third-wave feminism introduced the term "intersectionality" into the feminist movement, arguing that oppression due to race, class, and sex were marked feminist issues that should not be ignored. Along with intersectionality also came ecofeminism—a subspecies of feminism "that sees a connection between the exploitations and degradation of the natural world and subordination and oppression of women."<sup>4</sup>

Ecofeminism, termed by Francoise D'Eaubonne in the 1970's, began as a political movement that developed into an ideology, asking us to wonder what women and nature share in common that marks them for oppression. Early ecofeminists posited that women share a "special bond" with nature, existing somehow closer to nature than men do. However, Mellor and other ecofeminists disagree with this essentialist notion. Mellor argues that it is not that women are any more closely related to nature than men are, but rather that they are intrinsically more aware of their connection to it.<sup>5</sup> Human beings, and particularly women, are not "embodied" to nature. We are not living symbols of this esoteric "nature," rather we are "embedded" in it. We are an abiotic piece *of* nature, constantly exchanging resources with it, both beneficially, and unfortunately, detrimentally.

Speculative fiction writers like Ursula K. Le Guin, Margaret Atwood, and Octavia Butler use science fiction and ecofeminism as a thought experiment to explore how we grapple with our relationship with nature. These authors turn to utopia to hypothesize about the quintessentially

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 124.

symbiotic relationship we might have with our environment. They ask their readers to ponder what an environment would look like to demand respect from its inhabitants. In Le Guin's book of essays, *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, she writes:

Physicists often do thought-experiments. Einstein shoots a light-ray through a moving elevator; Schrodinger puts a cat in a box. There is no elevator, no cat, no box. The experiment is performed, the question is asked, in the mind. Einstein's elevator, Schrodinger's cat, my Gethenians, are simply a way of thinking. They are questions, not answers; process, not stasis."<sup>6</sup>

Le Guin posits that speculative fiction functions in the same way. Speculative fiction—encompassing science fiction, fantasy, utopian fiction, and dystopian fiction—holds up a critical mirror to the world of today while imagining the future of tomorrow. Much like Einstein's and Schrodinger's experiments the truth of the future can only be revealed in real time. And yet we wonder whether curiosity killed the cat. In this same way, we might ponder whether speculative fiction as thought experiment shapes the future? Le Guin, Atwood, and Butler are able to critically examine humanity through the lens of their symbiotic alien species. The essence of speculative fiction in these texts is ecofeminist; not that they favor the essentialism of femininity or a "feminine" environment, but rather that they posit a non-binary feminist philosophy in the ecological niche of humans and their environment.

Focusing on the cultural significance of "meat eating," this paper explores the association between the consumption of meat and patriarchy. Of course, meat eating has no implicit tie to men or the masculine, but has gained its association over time. In fact, while most anthropologists agree that the original hominids (humans) favored a hunter-gatherer society, it

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<sup>6</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, ed. Susan Wood. (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1979), 163.

was not until the 1960's that the phrases "man-the-hunter" and "woman-the-gatherer" were even used. From the 1960's to the 1980's paleoanthropology gained a lot of interest as books like Robert Ardrey's *The Nature of Man* series, Desmond Morris' *The Naked Ape*, and C. Owen Lovejoy's essay, "The Origins of Man" explained the hunting hypothesis, pegging men to be the ones who hunted for food and women as the gatherers and caretakers. However, perhaps more devastating is the "man is to meat as woman is to vegetable" analogy that underlies societal norms today. In fact, Adams argues that these sexist associations are so subliminal that they even appear in such innocuous parts of culture as fairy tales, priming our segregation of man's food and woman's food at a young, impressionable age. "The King in his countinghouse ate four-and-twenty blackbirds in a pie...while the Queen ate bread and honey."<sup>7</sup> The sexism of food segregation becomes a bigger problem when we look at it in a population rather than in an individual. Adams notes a study conducted by Peggy Sanday, an anthropologist at the University of Pennsylvania, who surveyed both non-Western and Western populations and found a correlation between patriarchal societies and meat-eating, and matriarchies and vegetarianism. In addition, the patriarchal meat-eating societies favored capitalism, while the matriarchal vegetarians favored egalitarianism.<sup>8</sup> Le Guin, Atwood, and Butler make a point of recognizing the functionality of a vegetarian, egalitarian society—suggesting that vegetarianism and ecological awareness might lead to a kind of feminist utopia.

### **I. Biodiversity and Motherhood in Ursula K. Le Guin's Hainish Cycle**

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<sup>7</sup> Carol J. Adams, 27.

<sup>8</sup> Peggy R. Sanday, *Female Power and Male Dominance: On the Origins of Sexual Inequality*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).



When we think of utopia we often imagine a beautiful place somewhere in the tropics where the sun shines every day and trees are overgrown with colorful fruits and flowers. It is summertime, always. The average utopia is reminiscent of Eden, where all things grow beautifully and plentifully, and all creatures are lively and happy. And yet how real is this “perfect place,” this “no place?” Can a place truly exist where all are satisfied ecologically, socially, and emotionally? For such a place to exist there would need to be an infinite amount of energy, space, and resources for which each species and blade of grass could coexist forever. Not even John Milton could make his paradise limitless; Adam and Eve are tasked with beating back the overgrown vines and branches in Eden. As Ursula K. Le Guin sets up in her short story, “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas,” for every person who benefits, there will always be someone who suffers. Thus, for these utopian paradises we must ask, “What’s the catch?”

In *The Dispossessed* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin imagines two different kinds of utopia, one set in cold, harsh, and unforgiving environments. As the characters in these stories struggle to survive, Le Guin’s atypical utopias ask us to ponder to what degree a coddling environment accounts for its own oppression and the oppressive, hierarchical nature of patriarchy? Moreover, what is the cost of sustainability in such harsh conditions? Le Guin seems to argue that the natural environment is predictive of biological adaptability, which in turn supports a particular societal philosophy. As literary critic, Barry Pegg, writes, “The novels suggest that climate and topography should be seen as underlying human cultural systems.”<sup>9</sup>

*The Left Hand of Darkness* is one of the novels in Le Guin’s Hainish Cycle—a collection of novels and short stories set in the future where an intergalactic space station facilitates the travel, communication, and exploration of different planets. *The Left Hand of Darkness* takes

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<sup>9</sup> Barry Pegg, “Down to Earth: Terrain, Territory, and the Language of Realism in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*,” *Michigan Academician*, (1952): 488.

place on planet Gethen—the Hainish word for winter—where extreme cold threatens the survival of its inhabitants. The original Gethenians are not even native to the planet, which is unable to naturally evolve and support complex life forms. Rather, the people of Gethen function as a physical manifestation of Le Guin’s own “thought experiment:” the Hainish Cycle. The Gethenians began as a Terran experiment, who were interested in playing out a large scale social experiment that created an androgynous population of humans and then abandoned them to Gethen. Such lack of responsibility for life echoes the flippant treatment of lab animals such as mice, rabbits, and even *C. elegans* in the U.S.

Gethen is divided into two countries, Orgoryen and Karhide, with an expansive icecap surrounding them. As Terran visitor, Genly Ai, spends time in both countries, he learns about the different ways in which the Gethenians adapt and deal with their climate. Le Guin establishes Gethen with an existential nihilism reminiscent of Jean-Paul Sartre. The harsh cold is a constant reminder to Genly and the people of Gethen of the indifference of the abiotic environment to its inhabitants. The Gethenians are intruders, and the planet has no intention of supporting their survival:

Winter [Gethen] is an inimical world; its punishment for doing things wrong is sure and prompt: death from cold or death from hunger. No margin, no reprieve. A man can trust his luck, but a society’s can’t; and cultural change, like random mutation, may make things chancier. So they have gone very slowly. At any one point in their history a hasty observer would say that all technological processes and diffusion had ceased. Yet it never has. Compare the torrent to the glacier. Both get where they are going.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, “The Left Hand of Darkness,” 459.

Moreover, Le Guin sets individualism against collectivism, noting that on a biological basis an individual is more easily adaptable than a group of people. However, as Genly and Estraven, the former prime minister of Karhide, journey across the icecap, it becomes clear that survival is not self-contained; people have a better chance of surviving together than separately. The trade-off however is in speed; one can move faster alone, but has a better chance of survival while moving slower with others. Pegg notes such necessity of others:

The crossing of the ice-cap, a no-man's land separating and at the same time connecting the two countries, by the two protagonists in *The Left Hand of Darkness* involved mutual life-support in conditions of such severity that even a small injury to one would endanger the lives of both, and thus the ice-cap functions as a generalized metaphor for the human condition, that is, for the environments in which humanity finds itself living, challenging them as human beings in dialog with an environment and one another rather than as representing any galaxy, solar system, race, nationality, nation, or political party.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, while it requires an exorbitant amount of energy to survive in such harsh conditions, Le Guin's novel suggests that perhaps the distraction of survival is more freeing than limiting, and this is especially true in terms of sexuality.

Hermaphroditism is more common in the animal kingdom than most people realize, with many extant hermaphroditic avian and fish species. The "choice" between expressing hermaphroditism or permanent male/female morphology (sexual dimorphism) lies in a cost-benefit curve whereupon hermaphroditism is favored when the energy costs of producing male and female gametes/ sexual capabilities is less than the cost of reproductive failure (i.e. not having children). Reproductive failure becomes more probable as survivability declines—the

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<sup>11</sup> Barry Pegg, 489.

less likely a generation is to survive, then the less likely they are to have kids. While the hermaphroditic tendencies of the Gethenians were artificially instilled *in vitro*, Gethen's extreme climate actually supports the perpetuation of hermaphroditism in order to ensure reproduction. Furthermore, the fluidity of biological sex reveals itself in the Gethenian cultural attitude towards sex. Genly notes, "Being so strictly defined and limited by nature, the sexual urge of Gethenians is really not much interfered with by society: there is less coding, channeling, and repressing of sex there than in any bisexual society I know of. Abstinence is entirely voluntary; indulgence is entirely acceptable. Sexual fear and sexual frustration are both extremely rare."<sup>12</sup> Though Genly calls the Gethen environment limiting, I argue that its oppressive nature is what allows for sexual freedom, both biologically and culturally. The harsh reality of Gethen's extremely cold climate makes survival the number one priority of the Gethenians. A constant worry about survival leaves little room to worry about gender and sexual politics. Thus, Le Guin's novel suggests that harsh environments are more predictive of a utopic sexual freedom, than tropical and/or nurturing environments.

Le Guin also addresses the interaction between environment and sexual politics in her novel, *The Dispossessed*. The full title, *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*, clues readers into its utopian origins. The story takes place between a planet and its moon, Annares and Urras. Urras, the original planet, operates similarly to the U.S. whereupon capitalism establishes private property and class disparity. Annares, is Urras' moon, and was colonized by an anarchist named Odo who established an anarchist society devoid of any organized government. After many years of separation and animosity for Urras, Annares has agreed to send one man to Urras for research

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<sup>12</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Left Hand of Darkness," 518.

purposes. Shevek, an Anarresti physicist, is excited to exchange knowledge and ideas with the scientists on Urras, however, he also wishes to rekindle friendship between the two planets.

The utopia in this novel is clearly Annares, which emphasizes independence, freedom, and economic equality. Annares functions as a system where it is expected that the individual will contribute to the whole out of an intrinsic desire to do so. Annares then favors collectivism over individualism. However, this utopia is ambiguous because of the obvious faults in its operation. For one thing, both Shevek and his partner (the non-gendered and non-possessive noun meaning wife), Takver, begin to realize that while the labor union of Annaresti promotes freedom and does not force anyone to ever actually work or accept appointed volunteer positions, one would be looked down upon if s/he did refuse. Thus, the economy of Annaresti might give the illusion of freedom, but it only functions because of the social expectation to contribute. In anger, Shevek realizes the freedom on Annaresti means giving up individuality, not because of one's own choice to cooperate, but because of the societal expectation to do so. Shevek says, "The social conscience completely dominates the individual conscience, instead of striking a balance with it. We don't cooperate—we *obey*. We fear being outcast, being called lazy, dysfunctional, egoizing. We fear our neighbor's opinion more than we respect our own freedom of choice."<sup>13</sup> It is clear that Le Guin wishes to challenge our acceptance both of capitalist individualism as well as socialist collectivism, finding fault with both systems. Literary critics have been fascinated with the politics of *The Dispossessed*. However, the relationship between politics and ecology is missing from the conversation. In his article, "The Underestimation of Politics in Green Utopias," Werner Christie Mathisen extends his argument of political theory into conservation law:

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<sup>13</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Dispossessed," 875.

A significant reason for emphasizing the political importance of informal social control and the evolution of a new ecological sensitivity, is the threatening alternative emphasized by Le Guin of authoritarian ecopolitical regimes, resorting to harsh regulation to curb consumption and save the environment.<sup>14</sup>

While Mathisen does address how politics are affected by ecological conservation, he does not address how the physical environment of Anarres dictates the politics. Just as Gethen supported hermaphroditism in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the ecological conditions of Anarres actually dictate economical and governmental policies, allowing for certain strategies to be more adaptive to the environment. In fact, egalitarianism can be compared to the social behavioral patterns of animals, where animals of the same species often cooperate in order to exist in an environment with limited resources. Cooperation in a population allows for increased feeding time and more protection and defense against predators.<sup>15</sup> Often cooperation proves a good behavioral strategy when resources are low or hard to access. Shevek acknowledges the cooperative nature of the Anaresti, which inhabit a barren environment. “It’s not our society that frustrates individual creativity. It’s the poverty of Anarres. This planet wasn’t meant to support civilization. If we let one another down, if we don’t give up our personal desires to the common good, nothing, nothing on this barren world can save us. Human solidarity is our only resource.”<sup>16</sup> Shevek sees the cooperative nature of the Anaresti as the key to their survival. When resources are particularly hard to find, some populations in the animal kingdom resort to reciprocal altruism, a misnomer that maintains that in iterative times of sharing, an animal will share his food/mate/etc.

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<sup>14</sup> Werner Christie Mathisen, “The Underestimation of Politics in Green Utopias: The Description of Politics in Huxley’s *Island*, Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*, and Callenbach’s *Ecotopia*,” *Utopian Studies: Journal of the Society for Utopian Studies*, (2001):67.

<sup>15</sup> Dustin R. Rubenstein, “Cooperation, Conflict, and the Evolution of Complex Animal Societies,” *Nature Education* 3, no. 10 (2010): 78.

<sup>16</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, “The Dispossessed,” 748.

with another under the assumption that at a later time, the receiver will return the favor.<sup>17</sup> Such is the general function of the Annaresti society, where individuals accept job positions and share meals/living quarters with fellow countrymen.

There is an ecological price to egalitarianism as well. Annares is colder, drier, and harsher than Urras, having few native animals and plants of its own. Its inhabitants are subjected to vegetarianism due to a lack of available animals to eat.

There was no grass for herbivores. There were no herbivores for carnivores. There were no insects to fecundate flowering plants; the imported fruit trees were all hand-fertilized. No animals were introduced from Urras to imperil the delicate balance of life. Only the Settlers came, and so well scrubbed internally and externally that they brought a minimum of their personal fauna and flora with them. Not even the flea had made it to Anarres.<sup>18</sup>

Here, Le Guin subverts the ark parable, recognizing both the prevalence and also the didacticism of parables. She tweaks these stories to offer perspective, suggesting thoughts instead of preaching at her audience. Moreover, biblical parables are of particular interest to Le Guin who is concerned with her own type of genesis, the Hainish Cycle. Such manipulation of biblical parables is also apparent in Le Guin's short-short story, "She Unnames Them," in which Eve unnames all the animals and then leaves Adam to live among the unnamed animals, the "dispossessed." In *The Dispossessed*, the original anarchic settler, Odo, a woman, is put at the helm, leaving the animals behind in the old world. While the Annaresti are capable of surviving on a vegetarian diet, the dearth of animals severely hinders the biodiversity of the planet. Takver even notes the lack of animal diversity as a point of dissociation from the world. Considering the

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<sup>17</sup> Dustin R. Rubenstein. 78.

<sup>18</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Dispossessed," 763.

biodiversity of Urras she says, “Think of it: everywhere you looked animals, other creatures, sharing the earth and air with you. You’d feel so much more a *part*.”<sup>19</sup> Takver argues that being a part of a large and successful ecosystem establishes identity and association. Thus, the barren lands of Annares are disassociating; even while the Annaresti are an egalitarian model system, they are not part of the natural ecosystem. Le Guin suggests that while one might feel like a cog in the machine of the societal system, there is value in being *a part of* a system. We need biodiversity and ecological systems to attach ourselves to our earth and even to each other.

Le Guin’s only caveat to the barren lands of Annares is fish, allowing for the consumption of fish in her vegetarian world. In *The Dispossessed*, Takver reveals herself to be a fish geneticist, supposedly working on increasing the fish yield in the Anarres oceans for human consumption. Takver reveals that her passion for studying marine life has really nothing to do with genetics or even agriculture. She explains, “I like marine biology...because it’s so complex, a real web. This fish eats that fish eats small fry eats bacteria and round you go.”<sup>20</sup> Takver seems to be admiring the zest for life, arguing that part of what makes the biological world so amazing is not the genetics, but the diversity of plant, animal, and prokaryotic life. While I will demonstrate how Butler’s and Atwood’s “fish caveats” are related to Christianity, Le Guin’s approach to fish consumption and the food chain is more pantheistic than representative of religious belief. Takver relays a sacredness of nature that is vast, diverse, and all encompassing. Her study of fish makes her feel one with her world rather than simply a creature *on* it. Fish then become a symbol of the pantheistic belief of ecological and environmental oneness. It is entirely possible to read Takver’s harmony with nature as essentialist. In fact, this may be exactly Le Guin’s point. To read a feminist essentialism into this moment with Takver is also to admit to a

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, “The Dispossessed,” 763.



human relationship with nature. Whereas the people of Urras are concerned with money, politics, and otherwise material/man-made frivolities, Takver reminds us of our biological, if not spiritual, connection to nature. Takver represents a tie to nature, and, more importantly, to biodiversity that is deeply rooted within us. We are reminded of Takver when we read about the coral reef depreciation, the tropical rainforest depletion, or any number of the alarming cases of species extinction. Takver's essentialism is perhaps intentional as she mirrors our inner connection to our own planet and its copious inhabitants.

Nature is often anthropomorphized as a woman, a mother. Nature is wild and temperamental, having unpredictable mood swings, but she can be gentle, kind, and most importantly she begets life. Nature's "motherhood" stems as far back as Milton, who spoke of the wombs of nature, chaos, and Eve. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton describes Satan's travels from his newly established republic of Hell to Eden on Earth. Satan's journey includes crossing the vast galaxy of God's Kingdom, flying "into the wild abyss/ The womb of Nature, and perhaps her grave."<sup>21</sup> Le Guin, Atwood, and Butler also address the perceived similarity between nature and women, calling attention to the comparison.

In *The Dispossessed*, Shevek looks at the dry earth of Annares and feels disgusted. "Sterility. Sterility on all sides. As far as the eye can see the infertile desert lies in the pitiless glare of the merciless sun..."<sup>22</sup> He uses terms like "sterile" and "infertile" to describe the land, suggesting that the value of the earth is in its ability to reproduce. Historically, women have suffered the same debasement, having had centuries worth of proving their womanhood through producing children—particularly male children. *Tota mulier in utero*. Woman is a womb, and so too is nature. Le Guin extends the comparison between nature and woman, challenging the

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<sup>21</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*. (London: S. Simons, 1667).

<sup>22</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Dispossessed," 758.

feminist essentialist notion that de Beauvoir articulated. Le Guin describes childbirth and motherhood in three different ways: objectively as one of the most machinate systems of nature, as beautiful and empowering, and as threatening to society. The first and second portrayals of motherhood occur within the same passage as Takver gives birth to hers and Shevek's daughter.

She did not howl or scream, she was not in pain, but when each contraction came she managed it by muscle and breath control, and then let out a great *houff* of breath, like one who makes a terrific effort to lift a heavy weight. Shevek had never seen any work that so used all the strength of the body. He could not look on such work without trying to help in it. He could serve as a handhold and brace when she needed leverage... 'There you are,' the midwife said quietly under the hard, engine-like pounding of Takver's breathing...<sup>23</sup>

Le Guin uses the language of machinery to describe the act of childbirth. She mentions the need for "leverage" and describes Takver's breathing as "engine-like." Such language may seem more appropriate for the description of a train than of a woman giving birth. Nevertheless, Le Guin's point is heard as she puts pressure on the idea that nature and woman are these unpredictable whirls of energy. According to Le Guin, woman is not a hurricane. In fact, neither is nature. Both childbirth and nature are actually rather empirical. The earth heats up, the pressure system drops, water accumulates, and a cyclone forms. Woman breathes heavy, pushes with every muscle in her body, and a child is born. These "miracles" or "freak accidents" of nature are not quite as mystical and unpredictable as they appear. They are—in the entire sense of the word—natural. Takver's labor acts as an attempt to disassociate womanhood from chaos and wildness.

Concurrently with the objective detail of the birth, Shevek offers his own personal

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 807.

perspective on the birth. Shevek is in awe of the strength and capacity of the female body. He sees childbirth not as impartially as Le Guin portrays it, but not quite as magical as other men might see it. Shevek marvels at the female capacity and recognizes its power and strength as something he will never experience. Through Shevek, Le Guin welcomes essentialist feminism. Women *are* fundamentally different from men, and it is this difference that makes them unique. Shevek expresses a desire to help in the birthing process. He wants to be a part of it, but knows how futile his efforts are. Shevek cannot share in this experience. Childbirth is an exclusively and singularly female experience. Such is a stark difference from *The Left Hand of Darkness* whereupon the Gethenian's hermaphroditism allowed for each individual to play both an active "female" role and passive "male" role in childbirth. Estraven himself claimed to have birthed and parented multiple children. Le Guin then posits that it is this isolation of specific function to a specific sex, characteristic of dimorphic species, which allows for oppression.

Later, Takver illustrates the danger of motherhood designated to one sex. Takver is the one who actually argues for the biologism of motherhood.

Pregnant women have no ethics. Only the most primitive kind of sacrifice impulse. To hell with the book, and the partnership, and the truth, if they threaten the precious fetus! It's a racial preservation drive, but it can work right against community; it's biological, not social. A man can be grateful he never gets into the grip of it. But he'd better realize than a woman can, and watch out for it. I think that's why the old archisms used women as property. Why did the women let them? Because they were pregnant all the time — because they were already possessed, enslaved!<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 876.

Here, Takver suggests that pregnant women are threatening to a society—particularly, an egalitarian society—because they put the health and wellbeing of their child above that of the community. Takver then offers a reason for the continual oppression of women, suggesting that women are fundamentally hierarchical. Pregnant women are “possessed” by their fetuses, which alter the brain chemistry of their host mothers to favor the life of the fetus above that of the community. Here, Le Guin challenges the utopic nature of egalitarianism, arguing that dimorphic species are biologically unable to coexist in a nonhierarchical community. If there is no sharing of the experience, burden, and interest of pregnancy by both sexes then there can be no egalitarianism. Le Guin’s utter refusal to devalue essentialism entirely actually acts as a literary ratchet that propels the evolution of ecofeminism forward.

Le Guin’s Hainish Cycle, particularly *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*, are quintessential novels of the speculative fiction genre. They offer readers an experience of sheer discomfort, holding up a critical lens to today’s society, while suggesting an alternate—not entirely preferable—future. However, Le Guin herself emphasizes her works as “thought experiments,” meant to imagine rather than predict. Moreover, through her works, Le Guin advances the ecofeminist movement by supporting ideals from both essentialist ecofeminism and current, third-wave ecofeminism. Le Guin challenges readers and ecofeminists not to accept new waves and definitions as total truths just as science does not completely negate older science. In 150 CE, Ptolemy provided empirical evidence that the Earth was the center of the universe. Though wrong, later scientists such as Copernicus and Galileo used Ptolemy’s theories and calculations to actually provide evidence for heliocentrism. Le Guin too recognizes value in past theories. Though no longer necessarily in total support, Le Guin draws upon first-wave ecofeminist theories as well as third-wave ideals to augment ecofeminism as a whole.

## II. The Politics of Food Consumption in the Works of Margaret Atwood

We don't often talk about where our food comes from when we sit down at the dinner table. In fact, the coevolution of agriculture and capitalism has made interaction with our food in its "pre-meal" beginnings totally unnecessary for most of us. While such has made obtaining food and meals incredibly convenient, our naivety—not to mention, apathy—about where our food comes from has allowed for the gross abuse and butchering of animals prevalent in today's agriculture. Yet, the fact of the matter is that, for most of us, our food source comes from animals that have been bred, grown, and slaughtered for our consumption purposes. Carol J. Adams refers to these agricultural animals as "absent referents" in her book, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, arguing that the moment an animal is killed and carved for meat, the animal loses its identity as a living being and becomes just a body. We do not think of the food that we eat as an animal, but rather as "meat," removing identity and replacing it with objectification. More specifically, each particular animal has its own specific "referent" term. Cows become steak; pigs become pork, ham, or bacon. Deer becomes venison. "If animals are alive they cannot be meat. Thus, a dead body replaces the live animals. Without animals there would be no meat eating, yet they are absent from the act of eating meat because they have been transformed into food."<sup>25</sup> In this way, the butchering and consumption of agricultural animals is a feminist issue. More to the point, it is an *ecofeminist* issue. Women empathize with these maltreated animals, while the oppression of nature—domestication of wild pigs, cows, goats, etc.—for consumption displays our complete lack of ecological awareness and responsibility.

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<sup>25</sup> Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1990), 40.

Margaret Atwood's novels, *The Edible Woman* and the *MaddAddam* trilogy, illustrate this idea of the absent referent of food. She begins to explain her understanding of the notion in her first novel, *The Edible Woman*, a story about a woman so oppressed by the patriarchy that she finds herself unable to eat. At a dinner with her fiancé, Marian, the main character, suddenly begins to see the animal in her food:

She looked down at her own half-eaten steak and suddenly saw it as a hunk of muscle. Blood red. Part of a real cow that once moved and ate and was killed, knocked on the head as it stood in a queue like someone waiting for a streetcar. Of course everyone knew that. But most of the time you never thought about it. In the supermarket they had it all pre-packaged in cellophane, with name-labels and price-labels stuck on it, and it was just like buying a jar of peanut butter or a can of beans, and even when you went into a butcher shop they wrapped it up so efficiently and quickly that it was made clean, official. But now it was suddenly there in front of her with no intervening paper, it was flesh and blood, rare, and she had been devouring it. Gorging herself on it."<sup>26</sup>

Not only is Atwood embodying Adams' notion of the absent referent, but she is also suggesting consumerism as the cause of our ignorance. Consumerism meaning the economy of food through the marketing, manufacturing, buying, and selling of it. In this early work, Atwood begins to explore the relationship between consumerism and the absent referent. In many ways, *The Edible Woman* laid the necessary groundwork for Atwood's later novels, which expand upon this relationship.

In many ways, *The Edible Woman* laid the groundwork for Atwood's future novels, particularly those of the *MaddAddam* trilogy, a speculative fiction series set in a pre/post-

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<sup>26</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman*, (Toronto: The Canadian Publishers, 1969), 151-52.

apocalyptic future where tech companies and genetic engineering dominate the capitalist market. Atwood's MaddAddam trilogy further investigates the association between societal and male consumption of both animals and the female body. In *Oryx and Crake*, the first book of the *MaddAddam* trilogy, child-Jimmy witnesses the holocaust of a pile of sheep, cows, and pigs. As he tries to reconcile what he is seeing, he is both reminded of a barbecue while also horrified by the maltreatment of the animals:

At the bonfire Jimmy was anxious about the animals, because they were being burned and surely that would hurt them. No, his father told him. The animals were dead. They were like steaks and sausages, only they still had their skins on. And their heads, thought Jimmy. Steaks didn't have heads. The heads made a difference...<sup>27</sup>

The heads make a difference because the head houses the brain. These animals think, feel, see, smell, taste, and hurt all through the neural circuitry of the brain. When attached, the head controls the rest of the body. The head is what makes the animal whole. Thus, the severing of the head means the difference between a whole *animal* and a sectioned *body*. Jimmy's discomfort with the burning animals challenges his ability to remove the referent, the animal, from its associated product, food/meat.

Adams also addresses the connection between the consumption of animals and the consumption of women. She maintains that women are often compared to pieces of meat, and even notes that the reverse might also be true. She mentions the Canadian parody magazine, *Playboar*, trademarked as "the pig farmer's *Playboy*," in which a pig is featured on the front of an issue posed in a seductive position. Adams wonders about the possible effects of the photo. "How does one explain the substitution of a nonhuman animal for a woman in this pornographic

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<sup>27</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), 18.

representation? Is she inviting someone to rape her or to eat her?”<sup>28</sup> Here Adams argues that the line between sexual and edible is so nuanced that it is often indistinguishable. Atwood addresses the sexual-edible continuum in both *The Edible Woman* and *Oryx and Crake* as well. In the climactic scene of *The Edible Woman*, Marian bakes a cake and shapes it into a woman. “All that work had gone into the lady and now what would happen to her? ‘You look delicious,’ she told her. ‘Very appetizing. And that’s what will happen to you; that’s what you get for being food.’”<sup>29</sup> Here, Marian seems to be taking responsibility for the male consumption of the female body, saying, “That’s what you get.” She sees herself, and women in general, as consumable. She even neglects her own absent referent, as animal, mammal, living being as she reduces herself to simply “food,” a generalized representative, a cognitive place-holder for any edible object that provides nourishment. Earlier in the book as Marian becomes disgusted by the steak she and her fiancé are eating, she is reminded of the depiction of sectioned cows in cookbooks.

Watching him operating on the steak like that, carving a straight slice and then dividing it into neat cubes, made her think of the diagram of the planned cow at the front of her cookbooks: the cow with lines on it and labels to show you from which part of the cow all the different cuts were taken.<sup>30</sup>

Atwood is arguing here that the absent referent becomes simply a sum of its parts; parts hacked and sliced into their more recognizable shapes of Filet Mignon, skirt steak, prime rib, etc. Adams points out that when women are treated like “pieces of meat” at the consumption and disposal of society and men, women too are recognized solely as the sum of their parts, just like sectioned animals: “Meat for the average consumer has been reduced to exactly that: faceless body parts,

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<sup>28</sup> Carol J. Adams, 39.

<sup>29</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman*, 270.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.



breasts, legs, udders, buttocks.”<sup>31</sup> In *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood further emphasizes the consumerism of sectioned animals. When Jimmy visits Crake’s chicken-manufacturing department, he is horrified by the malformed creatures he encounters.

‘What the hell is it?’ said Jimmy.

‘Those are chickens,’ said Crake. ‘Chicken parts. Just the breasts, on this one. They’ve got ones that specialize in drumsticks too, twelve to a growth unit.’

‘But there aren’t heads,’ said Jimmy. He grasped the concept—he’d grown up with *sus multiorganifer*, after all—but this thing was going too far. At least the pigeons of his childhood hadn’t lacked heads.

‘That’s the head in the middle,’ said the woman. ‘There’s a mouth opening at the top, they dump the nutrients in there. No eyes or beak or anything, they don’t need those.’<sup>32</sup>

Arguably, this scene is particularly jarring to audiences because of its similarities to current slaughtering practices of agriculture today, as well as its imagining of a future in which this abuse is even more amplified. Such is the mark of speculative fiction—mirroring and challenging current “ethical” practices and providing a devastatingly real foreseeable future. Here, Jimmy is again met with the sickening horror of the headless animal in the face of consumerism at its most efficient. These creatures are only valued for the sum of their parts, prompting the genetic removal of any accessory and extraneous feature that might make them otherwise. Here Jimmy seems to be longing for the absent referent. While earlier he was disgusted by the idea that food stems from animals, now when the animal has been reduced to creature—morphologically altered to reflect its sole consumable role—he longs for the primal

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<sup>31</sup> Carol J. Adams, 58.

<sup>32</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 202.

relationship that domesticized animals like cows and chicken used to signify: hunter/hunted, predator/prey, human/animal. We used to have to catch our food, now we simply manufacture it—the term “manufacture” having both to do with the disassociation of self from food as well as with capitalist/consumerist big business.

Atwood also explores vegetarianism through the Crakers. Seeing the monstrosity in the hierarchal nature of humans, Crake decided to engineer a non-hierarchal people that subsisted only on foraging and community.

Hierarchy could not exist among them, because they lacked the neural complexes that would have created it. Since they were neither hunters nor agriculturalists hungry for land, there was no territoriality: the king-of-the-castle hardwiring that had plagued humanity had, in them, been unwired. They ate nothing but leaves and grass and roots and a berry or two; thus their foods were plentiful and always available.<sup>33</sup>

However, while we might be tempted to sympathize with Crake’s efforts to establish harmony in a people through their allocated vegan diet, Crake explains—almost in the same breath—that there is a market for beautiful children who are largely self-sustaining as they eat “nothing but grass” and “recycle their own excrement.” There is a hyper-efficiency to this kind of human that lacks the “thumbprints of human imperfection.”<sup>34</sup> Humans are—for all intents and purposes—disgusting animals that devour meat, excrete our undigested food, and copulate in a sweaty mess of bodily fluids. As British philosopher, Colin McGinn, puts it in his book *The Meaning of Disgust*, “the [human] body is a locus of disgust, a gruesome biological engine.”<sup>35</sup> Crake argues that companies can capitalize off these more beautiful and efficient humans. After all, Crake

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<sup>33</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 305.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 100

<sup>35</sup> Colin McGinn, *The Meaning of Disgust*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

himself has no intention of giving up the pleasures of meat. Crake and his capitalist coworkers are even illustrated as particularly savage, tending to “forget about cutlery and eat with their hands, and wipe their mouths on their sleeves.”<sup>36</sup> Atwood is not subtle about her association of corporate capitalism and male savagery.

Thus, it is Jimmy/ Snowman, and the Crakers themselves who turn Crake’s efficiency of veganism into meaning and beauty. Even Jimmy/Snowman turns savage in the face of starvation, but his respect for the Crakers keeps him from barbarity.

This one [a rabbit] has no fear of him, though it fills him with carnivorous desire: he longs to whack it with a rock, tear it apart with his bare hands, then cram it into his mouth, fur and all. But rabbits belong to the Children of Oryx and are sacred to Oryx herself, and it would be a bad idea to offend the women.<sup>37</sup>

Much like Butler’s aliens, the Oankali, who see animals as something akin to “relatives,” the Crakers too find themselves identifying with their fellow earthly creatures. They are unable to detach themselves from the animals enough to see them as sources of food. Moreover, it is important to note that while Crake, a man, is the father of the Crakers, Oryx, a woman, is the mother of all the earthly creatures. Atwood emphasizes an ecological awareness in Oryx as both woman and mother. Atwood too embraces the essentialist notion that women are bonded to nature and the environment. However, Atwood does not exactly establish a clear-cut “man is to savagery and destruction as woman is to nature and harmony.” Crake, mad scientist though he is, still recognizes the destructive and anthropocentric nature of current human society, and creates a whole new “alien” species to replace our own. In this way, Crake and Oryx represent two solutions to a similar ecological problem. Crake, taking a top-down predator control approach,

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<sup>36</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 207.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

believes that the earth can only be saved if we destroy the destroyers, the predators, human beings. Whereas Oryx, representative Atwood's modern "mother nature," represents a bottom-up approach of ecological embodiment and responsibility for the earth's well-being. The Crakers respect Crake as a kind of old testament Yahweh figure, responsible for their genesis. However, they embrace a kind of "religion" more representative of Oryx's all-inclusive ecological oneness. Such environmental consciousness in religion is reminiscent of ecofeminist theology, a philosophy that believes in the sacredness of nature.

It is not only the association of meat as masculine and vegetables/fruit as feminine that is destructive, but also that the segregation is so strong that a man cannot also consume a vegetable nor a woman take pleasure in eating meat. "Men's need to disassociate themselves from women's food... has been institutionalized in sexist attitudes toward vegetables and the use of the word *vegetable* to express criticism or disdain."<sup>38</sup> Moreover, the terms "vegetable" or "fruit" have become metonyms for women or femininity. In Atwood's *Edible Woman*, Marian describes men's reactions to an advertisement for beer, reporting, "men who approved of the chest-thumping sentiments of the commercial tended to object to the word 'Tingly' as being 'too light,' or, as one of them put it, 'too fruity.'<sup>39</sup> Here, "fruit" has a derogatory association with femininity. However, it is not just men who are shamed for eating fruits and veggies, but women too are shamed for eating meat. While feminism and veganism might go hand in hand for some cultures there is another alternative to patriarchal dominance that actually includes meat in the diet. In fact, to argue that people should consult their feminine side for a more feminist and egalitarian lifestyle is to completely miss the point of feminism. Victoria Davion, a feminist philosopher

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<sup>38</sup> Carol J. Adams, 36.

<sup>39</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman*, 48.

cautions us not to confuse *feminist* with *feminine*. In her article, “Is Ecofeminism Feminist?”

Davion writes:

while ecofeminists are correct in challenging dualisms such as human/nature, reason/emotion, and masculinity/femininity, the solution does not lie in simply valuing the side of the dichotomy that has been devalued in Western patriarchal frameworks. Rather, traits associated with both sides of these false dichotomies need to be reconceived and reconsidered; if these traits are to be retained, totally new ways of thinking about them in a nonpatriarchal context are needed.<sup>40</sup>

To say that vegetables are feminine and meat is masculine is blatantly wrong, so why should we establish societal matriarchies or patriarchies off of these aberrant ideas?

Atwood expresses these concerns in both *The Edible Woman* and *The Year of the Flood*, the second book of the *MaddAddam* trilogy. In *The Edible Woman*, meat is the first thing to go from Marian’s diet, causing her to plunge into an anorexic refusal to eat anything at all. However, at the end of the novel, when asked whether she has eaten that day, Marian proudly announces, ‘I had steak for lunch.’<sup>41</sup> Marian is not only able to eat, but she no longer is crippled by her association of meat with male dominance.

In *The Year of the Flood*, Toby becomes a strict vegetarian after joining the God’s Gardeners, a society of vegetarians who believe in the preservation of life. However, while her connection to the Gardeners and devotion to vegetarianism may have served her before Crake’s apocalyptic wipe of man, the ecofascist rules and regulations of the sect stand in the way of her survival after “the waterless flood.” As she forages for food she is plagued with guilt when she

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<sup>40</sup> Victoria Davion, “Is Ecofeminism Feminist?,” in *Ecological Feminism*, ed. K.J. Warren, (New York: Routledge, 1994). 26.

<sup>41</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman*, 280.

resorts to eating “Chickienobs,” justifying the food as a vegetable because “they grew on stems and didn’t have faces.”<sup>42</sup> Throughout the story then, Toby self-flagellates for being a woman and for desiring meat, both of which are not entirely mutually exclusive. Concerning Toby’s inability to reconcile herself to her femaleness and her desire for meat, Lapointe takes up Davion’s notion when she writes, “Where patriarchal constructions of femininity, food-anxiety will almost certainly persist, re-manifesting ‘an ideal of female perfection and moral superiority [achieved] through denial of appetite.’”<sup>43</sup> Though vegetarianism might appear to harbor feminist ideals, we must be careful not to confuse the *feminist* with the *feminine*. Lapointe argues, “Women eat, and even eat meat.”<sup>44</sup> Correlation of meat eating and male dominance is not necessarily causation. Lapointe and Atwood would agree that it is only when meat eating becomes symbolic of neglect or abuse that it should be considered wrong.

As cows and pigs are linguistically divorced from their associated foods, they become, as Adams puts it, “absent referents.” These four-legged creatures are even allotted a variety of different names (i.e. meat, steak, beef, pork, bacon, etc.), however, fowl are not so lucky. Chicken, duck, turkey, and quail eggs mean both the literal animals as well as their associated meal. Moreover, in colloquial language we often pigeonhole men and women into distinct animal-types. “Men are pigs.” “I got that chick’s number.” It seems that men are often associated with the larger four-legged animals like pigs, while women are called “chicks” or “birds.” If then we are to apply the same linguistic rule to men and women, men can be disassociated from their animals by referring to their meat-like qualities. A man can be both a pig, and a meathead, or even just beefy. However, a woman suffers the same linguistic limitation as the fowl. To be a

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<sup>42</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, 129.

<sup>43</sup> Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989, quoted in Annette La Pointe, 147.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

woman is then to be both animal and meal. A woman is a flightless bird turned noodle soup. And, as Adams would argue, the reverse is also true: “The animals have become absent referents, whose fate is transmuted into a metaphor for someone else’s existence or fate.”<sup>45</sup> Thus, a chick is both a baby farm animal and an object of sexual desire. We stumble across the Ursula Hamdress paradox again. Should we eat women? Should we have sex with birds? Atwood illustrates this point in her *MaddAddam* trilogy. Working as a “scalie,” a glitzy stripper in *MaddAddam*, Ren’s job requires her to suit up into an outfit of skin-tight scales and feathers, giving her anonymity along with the sleek appearance of a fish-bird hybrid. Simone De Beauvoir speaks to this power of dress and makeup on the appearance of women in her famous book, *The Second Sex*:

The function of ornament is to make her share more intimately in nature and at the same time remove her from the natural, it is to lend to palpitating life the gelid urgency of artifice. Woman becomes plant, panther, diamond, mother-of-pearl, by blending flowers, furs, jewels, shells, feathers with her body; she perfumes herself to spread an aroma of the lily and the rose. But feathers, silk, pearls, and perfumes serve also to hide the animal crudity of her flesh, her odor.<sup>46</sup>

Ren’s scalie outfit allows her to step into another skin, almost literally. Her own identity becomes lost behind the scales and feathers, and she seems to melt further into this unnatural new animal, the fish-bird hybrid. Ren is both wild beast and feminine sexuality in one. Lapointe also addresses Ren’s outfit as bordering both animal and sex toy:

Fish-faced Ren is a generic friend to her clients, but she is also subject to the fish- scent associations of feminine sexuality [vaginal discharge], and to the food overlap that her sex work creates. On one hand, Ren as fish is both friend and food; on the other hand, in

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<sup>45</sup> Carol J. Adams, 42.

<sup>46</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, 158.

her avian accessories, she is overtly neither fish nor fowl, but some other ‘thing’ which her dying culture cannot identify.<sup>47</sup>

Ren then becomes a symbol of this cultural propensity for the consumption of the bird as animal and the consumption of women as birds and as sexual objects. Atwood maintains that we feed on animals both literally and metaphorically, through the perversion of nutrient-uptake and the pornography of animal sexuality. Furthermore, we find our women equally desirable and appetizing.

At the beginning of *The Year of the Flood*, Toby seeks employment in the anarchic, urban pleeblands. After selling her eggs on the black market only to discover she would no longer be able to have children of her own, Toby procures a job at one of the infamous SecretBurger fast food chains. In her essay, “Woman Gave Names to All the Animals,” Annette Lapointe notes Atwood’s poignant devolution of woman to animal (namely a bird), then finally to meat: “Toby must first cease to be able to ‘lay’ eggs before she can become meat.”<sup>48</sup> However, SecretBurger proves to be doing far worse than selling her body parts. The greasy burgers served at SecretBurger are noted for their mysteriousness. “No one knew what sort of animal protein was in them,” suggesting that perhaps one might find even human remains ground up into the slop that made up the burger.<sup>49</sup> Even more threatening than the mystery meat, is the manager, Blanco, who preys upon the young women that work for him. Having been a victim of Blanco’s sexual assault, Toby finds herself not only objectified and assaulted, but also robbed of any time to eat as Blanco requests Toby during her allotted break and lunch hours. Atwood’s

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<sup>47</sup> Annette Lapointe, “Woman Gave Names to All the Animals: Food, Fauna, and Anorexia in Margaret Atwood’s Dystopian Fiction,” *Blast, Corrupt, Dismantle, Erase*, (Waterloo, Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1014), 146.

<sup>48</sup> Annette Lapointe, 142.

<sup>49</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2009), 33.



combination of a mystery-meat-slinging fast food joint with the objectification and sexual assault of women suggests a culture of meat eating that favors capitalism, profit, and consumerism over both animal and women's rights. Fast food restaurants seek to yield the largest profit margins while occupying a monopoly in the industry, a competition that intrinsically favors quantity over quality. In fact, not only is Atwood's portrayal of the fast food industry nightmarish, but it is actually very real. In 2016, Hart Research Associates surveyed 1,217 women working in a fast food restaurant and found that 40% of women reported they were victims of sexual harassment, and 2% to sexual assault or rape.<sup>50</sup> Atwood's novel exposes both the exploitation of animals and women in the largely male-dominated fast food industry. *The Year of the Flood* obscures what it means to be "on the menu," suggesting that consumers can have their pick of the meat or the women.

Le Guin too focuses on the consumers of fast food, using a culinary metaphor to discuss questions of aesthetics. In her introduction to *A Fisherman of the Inland Sea*, Le Guin writes:

A lot of people really do get scared and depressed if they have to think about anything they're not perfectly familiar with; they're afraid of losing control. If it isn't about things they know all about already they won't read it, if it's a different color they hate it, if it isn't McDonald's they won't eat it. They don't want to know that the world existed before they were, is bigger than they are, and will go on without them.

They do not like history. They do not like science fiction. May they eat at McDonald's and be happy in heaven.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Hart Research Associates. "Key Findings from a Survey of Women Fast Food Workers," (2016).

<sup>51</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, "Introduction," in *A Fisherman of the Inland Sea: Stories*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), 6.

For Le Guin, McDonald's represents a type of monotony of living, in which one does not explore or ask questions. Moreover, McDonald's, whose menu is all-but questionably edible, represents a type of consumerism that treats "food" as different from animal. Food is not once cow or pig, but a burger or chicken nuggets. To eat at McDonald's is to systematically deny the burger as once an animal, slaughtered and manufactured for consumerist purposes. Not to mention McDonald's history of exploitation (i.e. Ray Kroc's takeover of the McDonald brothers' intimate restaurant). The consumption of McDonald's burgers is a guarantee insofar as it will be quick, cheap, and taste exactly the same every time. McDonald's is a well-oiled machine, taking out the humanity of the restaurant experience by replacing it with minimal employee interaction, minimal involvement with the actual food that is encased in plastic wrapping, and a minimal variety of choice. The average McDonald's has roughly 15 different options for hamburgers, and yet in the end, one still walks away with what amounts to be a very dressed up hamburger, but a burger just the same. McDonald's is not an experience. It is not an adventure. It is simply a guarantee of the familiar. Le Guin argues that in the consumption of a McDonald's burger we are trading human experience, human creativity, and the sanctity of food for the comforting familiarity of a quantitative, lucrative machine.

### **III. Butler's Utopia: Biblical Symbolism and Vegetarian Practices**

Octavia Butler combines environmental catastrophe with alien intervention to produce her utopic society. Butler's Xenogenesis trilogy tells the tale of a post-apocalyptic earth whose survivors have been rescued by an alien species calls the Oankali. In the first book, *Dawn*, the Oankali hope to coerce the surviving humans into a trade of sorts: offering protection and sexual pleasure in exchange for genetic material and cross-species offspring. *Dawn* begins on the

Oankali all-organic spaceship, where Lilith, a survivor of the apocalypse, is introduced to the Oankali and is tasked with teaching her fellow survivors about the Oankali and how to survive on the devastated, war-torn Earth.

The significance of Lilith's name is not lost on the readers. According to Jewish folklore, Lilith, was the first wife of Adam. Unlike Eve, who was created from Adam's rib, Lilith was created from the same dust as Adam. Lilith decided to abandon Adam and the Garden after refusing to be sexually subservient to him. Butler recreates the Lilith myth while throwing in some aliens for good measure. Butler's Lilith is the "chosen one," the one whom the Oankali chose to awaken and teach the other survivors. Of course, Lilith was chosen not through some type of prophesy, but through the Newtonian paradigm of trial and error as the Oankali carefully considered each captured human for the position. Additionally, the Oankali had hopes that she might find solace in mating with the first male, Paul Titus. However, when Lilith refuses, much like the legendary Lilith, to sleep with him, Paul Titus becomes angry and attempts rape.

To take a more evolutionary perspective on the sexual roles of men and women, we can follow anthropologist, Nancy Jesser's article, "Blood, Genes, and Gender in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and *Dawn*," where she argues that, "Lilith refuses to replay the earlier unfoldings of civilization from the raping caveman onwards."<sup>52</sup> As Lilith learns about the people she must awaken, she thinks carefully about the order in which she will awaken them. She decides that it would behoove her to awaken a woman first as there would be "no sexual tension."<sup>53</sup> She worries that a man might try to harm or rape her, and indeed this is what happens when one of the awoken women, Leah, awakens a particularly aggressive male. When seven more strong and

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<sup>52</sup> Nancy Jesser, "Blood, Genes, and Gender in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and *Dawn*." *Extrapolation: A Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy* 43, no. 1 (2002): 44.

<sup>53</sup> Octavia Butler, "Dawn," *Lilith's Brood*, (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1989), 161.

angry men are awakened, they hold Lilith down and attempted to gang rape her. It is only because of Lilith's Oankali-instilled strength that she is able to shake them. Lilith represents the biblical Lilith, insofar as she refuses to be subservient to men. Butler then subverts the "Man the Hunter" anecdote of early civilization. Jesser argues, "In its place, she articulate an idea of human social development more closely akin to feminist re-interpretations of Paleolithic society that place more emphasis on women's roles in food procurement."<sup>54</sup> Lilith is an embodiment of "Woman the Gatherer."

Though "Woman the Gatherer" appears to be a completely different than "Man the Hunter," Nancy Jesser is not so sure. She maintains that perspectival shifts do not alter the reality of biologism. "While it may be feminist to revise paleo-anthropology with women's roles as central if just as mastering, it is certainly not a story that takes the essential facts of biology out of the equation."<sup>55</sup> I argue that the "Woman the Gatherer" story places women in the power position rather than an Adam/Jesus figure. Moreover, where "Man the Hunter" organizes human civilization as it pertains to hierarchy, domination, and meat-consumption, "Woman the Gatherer" emphasizes society as communal, "gathering" insinuating both finding and mobilizing. When deciding the order of awakening, Lilith believes that she could easily handle "troublemakers," but does not want to unless it is absolutely necessary. She feels that establishing herself as somehow superior to the others would destroy any sense of community that she wants to build: "It would not help the people become a community, and if they could not unite, nothing else they did would matter."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Nancy Jesser, 44.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>56</sup> Octavia Butler, "Dawn," 161.

Jesser's argument falls flat as she conflates Butler's intention with the Oankali belief in biological determinism. Jesser sticks to the traditionally sexed humans for her analysis, writing, "I read Butler's historical and biological female body as a way to return us to de Beauvoir's concept of the 'situated body'... Butler proposes a world of interaction between the female body and the culture it is situated within, while condemning formulations of racial purity and cultural identities based on genes rather than history and experience."<sup>57</sup> However, the way in which Lilith views herself often differs from how the Oankali view her. For example, when the Oankali inform Lilith of her duty to awaken and teach her fellow humans, Lilith and Oankali have different and nuanced understandings of her job. The Oankali calls her job "parenting."

"That's the way we think of it. To teach, to give comfort, to feed and clothe, to guide them through and interpret what will be, for them, a new and frightening world. To parent.'

'You're going to set me up as their *mother*?'

'Define the relationship in any way that's comfortable to you. We have always called it parenting.'<sup>58</sup>

Butler explores the difference between the term "mother" and "parent." In using the term "mother," Lilith is assigning herself a gender role. Where the Oankali would be more likely to use "mother" to describe a person from which the maternal genes of an offspring come, Lilith sees "mother" as a female role—a role that has historically pigeon-holed women to their biological function. However, the Oankali call Lilith's job "parenting," a genderless, sexless position that involves caring for and teaching others. Butler makes a point of presenting the same job from two sides of a spectrum, from Lilith's deeply engendered notion of "mothering" to the

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<sup>57</sup> Nancy Jesser, 39.

<sup>58</sup> Octavia Butler, "Dawn," 111.

Oankali's rather objective and reductive understanding of "parenting." Both angles give the reader useful perspectives. Butler's utopia does not involve imprisoning women to their biological and sexed gender roles. The Oankali's use of "parenting" takes gender and sex out of the capacity to breed and rear offspring. However, Butler also seems to question whether a completely unsexed human existence is truly the answer to utopic existence. Kahguyat, an Oankali, mentions that he thought a man might make a better parent at first, but realized that Lilith, a woman, is the perfect choice. As he explains, 'I didn't want to accept you Lilith. Not for Nikanj or for the work you'll do. I believed that because of the way human genetics were expressed in culture, a human male should be chosen to parent the first group. I think now that I was wrong.'<sup>59</sup>

While the Oankali emphasize "parenthood" over "motherhood," their essentialist ideals still suggest a distinct difference between males and females, as articulated by Kahguyat. In this way, Butler seems to be propagating ecofeminism in a similar way as Le Guin. Through the Oankali, Butler both accepts essentialist ecofeminism and challenges it. Butler presents the concept of parenthood as both androgynously significant while also essentially meaningful. It is in this grey area between complete abandonment of sex/gender and imprisonment to it that Butler highlights true utopic existence.

Butler plays with the utopia-dystopia line in a very distinct way, using ecological relationships as a metaphor. Notably, Butler pays homage to Lynn Margulis, an evolutionary biologist whose highly criticized endosymbiotic theory is now recognized as the leading theory of early cell evolution. Margulis' endosymbiotic theory posits that the mitochondria in our cells were once actually free floating organisms that were absorbed by our cells and established a

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

mutual relationship. It is no coincidence that Butler's work is predicated upon the work of a highly criticized and suppressed female. Margulis' theory underlies the way in which the Oankali view their relationship to the humans. Margulis was also known to perpetuate the notion of symbiotic relationships as being perhaps more fundamental to evolution than competitive relationships. She argued that relations involving mutual cooperation in which both organisms are able to give and benefit from the exchange are particularly important to evolution. The Oankali might agree with Margulis, identifying with the mitochondria as a beneficial symbiont with humans. However, Butler also makes a point of suggesting otherwise. In *Adulthood Rites*, Nikanj explains his likeness to the human mitochondria, "however, his parent, Dichaan, warns him of identifying in this way. 'Nika...' Dichaan deliberately tangled his head tentacles with those of Nikanj. 'Nika, we aren't like mitochondria or helpful bacteria, and they [humans] know it.'<sup>60</sup> To view the Oankali as mutual symbionts like mitochondria would be to recognize the utopic nature of their intervention in the post-apocalyptic human affairs. However, Butler is careful not to completely glorify the Oankali. There are even Oankali, such as Akin, who feel that their relationship with the humans is actually predatory. Akin argues,

'But we will be Oankali. They will only be...something we consumed.'

Dichaan lay back, relaxing his body and welcoming Tikuchahk, who immediately lay beside him, some of its head tentacles writhing into him.

'You and Nikanj,' he said to Akin, 'Nikanj tells the humans we are symbionts, and you believe we are predators. What have you consumed, Eka?'<sup>61</sup>

Here, Butler borders the line between utopia and dystopia, finding—as is often found in nature—an extremely nuanced division between mutualism and predation. Dichaan argues that what

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<sup>60</sup> Octavia Butler, *Adulthood Rites*, (New York: Warner Books, 1988.) 183.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

separates mutualism from predation is consumption. However, ecologically speaking this is not always true. In fact, many cooperative mutualisms involve consumption. A classic example is the mycorrhiza fungus and tree root relationship in which the fungus is able to absorb more nutrients from the soil (mostly nitrogen and phosphorus) for the plant to consume, while the tree supplies the fungus with carbohydrates for energy consumption. Here both species are involved in the facilitation of consumption. To counter both Akin and Dichaan, consumption is not always negative. More to Akin's point, there are "mutualistic" relationships that involve fail-safe mechanisms to prevent one species from exploiting the other. For example, yucca moths lay their eggs on the flowers of yucca plants in exchange for pollinating the yucca plants. However, if a yucca moth lays too many eggs on the flower, the yucca plant will destroy the flower and the eggs to prevent over-exploitation of their "deal." Such is Akin's fear. He worries that while the Oankali claim to make an even exchange between themselves and the humans, Akin believes that the Oankali are behaving like the yucca moths, overexploiting the humans by perpetuating their own species while giving very little in return.

Finally, it is important to remember what exactly the Oankali immediately offer to the humans and how they go about this offer. When the Oankali argue that they can give the humans sexual pleasure like they've never felt before, all of them immediately refuse. In *Dawn*, Lilith is finally coerced into engaging in sexual communion with Nikanj. Nikanj tells Lilith that she can either choose sex with it or let Ooan, its parent, "surprise" her into sex.<sup>62</sup> When Lilith finally concedes she says, 'Wake up and do whatever it is you claim you have to do. Get it over with.'<sup>63</sup> This is certainly not the most convincing consent. In fact, such coercive language seems reminiscent of the kind of rape and sexual violence cases surfacing today. Often rape

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<sup>62</sup> Octavia Butler, "Dawn," 101.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.



occurrences go unreported due to the ambivalence of the language, action, and intention of the assaulter who may claim that he/she is actually giving the victim something he/she wants. Jesser argues, “In the coercive nature of gene exchanges in *Dawn*... Butler echoes ‘she said no, but her body said yes’ rape defenses, making them *morally* reprehensible.”<sup>64</sup> Butler’s poignant “rape” scenes offer more support for the dystopic nature of Oankali intervention as she causes the reader to wonder whether rape is either necessary and/or acceptable for the survival of the human species.

Sexual coercion is not limited to the Oankali. In fact, the rape that is attempted and occurs amongst the humans is more blatant and obvious. Moreover, Butler equivocates human-human rape with consumption, often connecting the men’s desires for meat with their desires for women. While Atwood and Le Guin show their disgust for fast food corporations, Butler draws a connection between the actual food served at such establishments, hamburgers, and sexual misconduct/ rape. In the first book of Butler’s *Xenogenesis* series, Lilith is introduced to another human being, Paul Titus, who has been awake on the Oankali space vessel. As they talk, Titus prepares himself lunch arranging his vegan ingredients to look like familiar food items such as sandwiches and French fries. Titus reveals how much he misses hamburgers, all dressed up with “cheese and bacon and dill pickles.”<sup>65</sup> As they continue to talk, Titus makes sexual advances toward Lilith, resorting to brute force and finally to violent abuse. Though, Lilith escapes rape, she leaves Titus’ home unconscious and with several broken bones. Amie Breeze Harper analyzes this scene in her article, “The Absence of Meat in Oankali Dietary Philosophy,” wondering whether there is a connection to Titus’ yearning for hamburgers and his lack of awareness of the violence of both spending his formative years in a hamburger culture as well as

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<sup>64</sup> Nancy Jesser, 44.

<sup>65</sup> Octavia Butler, “Dawn,” 117.

a culture that teaches him that Lilith is also available for him to consume—whether she agrees to it or not.”<sup>66</sup> To extend Harper’s point further, have women become less individually important to men than their meat? Titus is able to describe the exact hamburger he is looking for, including unnecessary detail about extra toppings. However, Lilith is only attractive to Titus insofar as she is a woman. His excuse for his pursuit of her is that he “never got to do it before. Never once with a woman.”<sup>67</sup> Lilith is reduced to just a woman, just the sum of her female body parts. Titus fantasizes about meat, burgers and bacon, with more lust than he fantasizes of women. Just as Ursula Hamdress, the gussied-up pig from *Playboar*, suggests an appetite for meat and sex, Butler too obscures the line between hunger for meat and desire for flesh. Butler even goes so far as to argue that perhaps we are beginning to confuse the two, lusting for red meat and hungry for women.

Butler contrasts human meat-consumption with an alternate trophic interaction: the Oankali vegetarian diet. Finding nourishment from plants more metabolically efficient, the Oankali preserve the sacredness of animal life as a shared experience. Amie B. Harper discusses as much in her paper, “The Absence of Meat in Oankali Dietary Philosophy.” Harper maintains that the Oankali vegan practices are in accordance with their philosophy of economic and environmental harmony. They identify themselves as “traders, offering extended life, fast healing, sexual pleasure, and peace in exchange for genetic diversity.”<sup>68</sup> Thus their consumption of goods is always holistic and reciprocal. Human consumption works quite differently, valuing man-made profit over living beings. Harper writes, “Oankali (and the literary creator of the

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<sup>66</sup> Amie B. Harper, 121.

<sup>67</sup> Octavia Butler, “Dawn,” 124.

<sup>68</sup> Amie B. Harper, “The Absence of Meat in Oankali Dietary Philosophy: An Eco-Feminist Vegan Analysis of Butler’s *Dawn*,” *The Black Imagination* 9, ed. S. Jackson & J.E. Moody-Freeman. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2011), 112.

Oankali, Octavia Butler) connect a society's consumption philosophies to either perpetuating or destroying physical and emotional harmony of the human body and spirit as well as the ecology of the earth."<sup>69</sup> To the Oankali, humans treat their earth like they treat their bodies: feeding it cheap dead meat and expecting beauty to grow from it. Though the Oankali question whether the hierarchal nature of human beings makes them a suicidal species, Butler plays with the idea that humans are not suicidal, but rather, cannibalistic. For all intents and purposes the average American diet consists of a hearty serving of meat, be it chicken, fish, cow or pig. Not only do we eat these animals, but we consume their products as well. We get milk and cheese from cows and goats, and we eat chicken eggs and even fish eggs (caviar). Nevertheless, the large majority of us do not even see the animal before it appears on our dinner plates. There is an entire economic sector devoted to the breeding, growing, and butchering of our food that goes under the radar of most individuals.

However, we are not just consumers of food, unlike all other living species on earth; we also create products to consume as well. These products are organic and inorganic, metaphorical and real. We consume art, literature, stories, and ideas. But we also produce and consume technology, weapons, plastic, aluminum, and countless other harmful and non-biodegradable elements. We cannot walk a mile without being reminded to feed ourselves. Feed your stomach with a cheeseburger. Feed your mind with a university-level education. Feed your adventurous-side with a vacation to South Africa. Feed your loneliness with social media. Feed your ailments with drugs. When we create a world that is 100% "edible," it is no wonder that we look to each other hungrily. The nuclear war that brings down humanity before *Dawn* even opens, was not a suicidal final solution, but rather a ravenous feast of self-consumption in an attempt to feed our

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 112.

voracious and never-ending hunger. Lilith tells a fellow survivor that she was an anthropologist before the war broke out. Lilith had gone exploring different cultures. “It seemed to me that my culture—ours—was running headlong over a cliff. And, of course, as it turned out, it was. I thought there must be saner ways of life...It wouldn’t have mattered much anyway. It was the cultures of the U.S. and U.S.S.R. that counted.”<sup>70</sup> Lilith notes that Western culture is what caused the war. While the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. differed economically and politically, they both valued consumerism. Carried by the ideals of capitalism, the U.S. consumer market was able to keep up with the supply-demand chain, while the U.S.S.R. was still struggling to mass-produce. However, the insufficiency of mass-production created a consumerism that was easy to visualize.

The Oankali then function as the anti-humans, looking at existence as an exchanging of goods rather than a food chain. The Oankali would never and could never hurt another living being for consumption.<sup>71</sup> To do so would not only mean pain for themselves, as the social behavior of the Oankali is extremely empathic, but it would be like severing and eating their own arm; it would be cannibalism. Butler then argues that perhaps the first step in fighting this cannibal nature of ours is through our diets. By instilling a more vegetarian or even vegan diet, we might be more willing to adopt a more holistic life philosophy and treat animals as equally deserving of life. Butler believes that there is a way for humanity to live on, but it no longer involves the consumption of agricultural farm animals.

In the last book of her *Xenogenesis* trilogy, Butler combines Christian symbolism with her emphasis on food in order to accentuate the importance of human ritual as well as to challenge the perception of women. Much like Atwood’s series, Butler’s series also points to possible connections to ecofeminist theology. However, Butler uses Christian parables and

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 116.

symbols as metaphors rather than didactic tools of theological concern. The main character's name is Jodhas, an ooloi Oankali who is sexless. Jodhas' name is reminiscent of Judas, a disciple of Christ who helps in Jesus' arrest. Later, Jodhas meets Jesusa and Tomas (obviously Jesus and Thomas the Apostle) who are both human and fertile. Jodhas falls in love with these humans and understands the power of his healing touch on them; once engaged in sexual congress the humans will be unable to sexually touch each other or to leave Jodhas for an extended period of time. They will all be bound to each other. Like Atwood, Butler too addresses the blurring of the line between food consumption and sexual consumption as Tomas says to Jodas, 'It's a good thing your people don't eat meat. If you did, the way you talk about us, our flavors and your hunger and your need to taste us, I think you would eat us instead of fiddling with our genes.'<sup>72</sup> Butler emphasizes that the language used to describe sexual desire and hunger resembles one another, and perhaps, to a certain degree, the physiological response feels the same as well. At the end of the book Jodhas reveals his Judas-act to Jesusa and Tomas. Having neglected to tell them that they would be unable to leave him once they sexually engaged with him, he continues to have sex with them. When they attempt to leave him, they discover that they are unable to go very far without him and feel they have been betrayed. Just as the kiss of Judas, imprisons Jesus, so too does Jodhas' touch imprison Jesusa and Tomas to him.

Though Jodhas and his fellow Oankali follow the same vegetarian diet as their parents in *Dawn*, Butler makes an excuse for the consumption of fish. Jodhas informs his Oankali sibling about human meat-consumption. 'You have to remember to let them be Human. They've killed fish and eaten it all their lives. They know we hate it. They need to do it anyway—for reasons

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<sup>72</sup> Octavia Butler, *Imago*, (New York: Aspect, 1997), 155.

that don't have much to do with nutrition."<sup>73</sup> Butler identifies the consumption of fish as a Christian ritual. The continual eating of fish for non-nutritious benefits suggests that ritual and custom are incredibly important to humans. Thus, by eating the fish, Jesusa and Tomas can still hang on to a piece of their humanity as they learn to live in harmony with the Oankali. Butler argues that custom and faith are human tenets that will never be excised from them. Jesusa and Tomas are willing to accept species integration and a new life with the Oankali, only with the caveat that they are allowed to keep their religion and let faith live on. Butler's own symbolic "Jesus fish" brings to mind both the Christian connection of fish (Greek, "ichthys") and Christ (Greek, Iesus Christos) as well as the pagan symbolism for the female reproductive organ.<sup>74</sup> Fish mean faith and fertility, a compromise between the Oankali and the humans.

Similarly, in Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, fish-consumption becomes ritualistic. Jimmy/Snowman convinces the Crakers that he is to be allowed one fish to eat per week. "Snowman can't live on clover. The people would never eat a fish themselves, but they have to bring him one a week because he's told them Crake has decreed it. They've accepted Snowman's monstrosity..."<sup>75</sup> Though the Crakers are happy to supply him with the fish, they refer to his fish eating as "monstrous" yet somehow acceptable. In *MaddAddam*, as Toby replaces Jimmy/Snowman as the leader of the Crakers, they inform her, "You will eat the fish, and then you will say the stories of Crake, as Snowman-the-Jimmy always did."<sup>76</sup> The Crakers have then associated Jimmy/Snowman's fish eating with storytelling. They have established a ritual of offering a fish, consumption of the fish, and then storytelling. This ritual is very similar to that of

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<sup>73</sup> Octavia Butler, *Imago*, 172.

<sup>74</sup> Elesa Coffman. "What is the Origin of the Christian Fish Symbol?" *Christianity Today*. 2008. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2008/august/what-is-origin-of-christian-fish-symbol.html>

<sup>75</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 101.

<sup>76</sup> Margaret Atwood, *MaddAddam*. 39.

the Christian faith in which the priest makes an offering of the host, Christ's body, eats the host, and then relays stories of Christ and God from the bible. Atwood suggests here that all people need ritual and story. In this post-apocalypse, this new species of human still desires story, and even though Crake thought he had "erased the God gene," the Crakers still believe in a higher power. In her *MaddAddam* trilogy, Atwood establishes a post-apocalyptic "church" in which fish becomes the host, an otherwise cannibal act of the consumption of "body," and Jimmy/Snowman and Toby become priests who justify the ways of the Gods, Crake and Oryx, to the Crakers.

### **The Future of Ecofeminism and Speculative/Science Fiction**

Contemporaries and long-time friends, the late Ursula K. Le Guin and Margaret Atwood often commented, critiqued, and admired each other's work. However, while Ursula K. Le Guin often referred to her work as science fiction, Margaret Atwood identifies her novels as works of speculative fiction. In her essay, "My Life in Science Fiction," Atwood defines the nuanced difference between the two: "For me, the science fiction label belongs on books with things in them we can't yet do or begin to do, such as going through a wormhole in space to another universe; and 'speculative fiction' means a work that employs the means already to hand, such as DNA identification and credit cards, and that takes place on Planet Earth."<sup>77</sup> While Atwood's definitions do satisfy the difference between her works and Le Guin's, Atwood notes that the terms are "fluid." Both, Atwood notes function in similar ways as they explore "the consequences of new and proposed technologies in graphic ways, by showing them as fully operational," "the nature and limits of what it means to be human in graphic ways, by pushing the envelope as far as it will go," "the relationship of man to the universe, an exploration that often takes us in the direction of religion and can melt easily with mythology," "proposed

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<sup>77</sup> Margaret Atwood, "My Life in Science Fiction," *Cycnos*, (2005).

changes in social organization,” and “the realms of imagination by taking us boldly where no man has gone before.”<sup>78</sup> Both speculative fiction and science fiction have the capacity to simultaneously look backwards and forwards, showing us what we’ve done, what we’ve created and destroyed, and showing us what we can do—the possible and the inevitable, good or bad. However, Le Guin warns readers of reading science/speculative fiction as a road map. In her introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness* she writes, “Science fiction is not predictive; it is descriptive.”<sup>79</sup> Science/speculative fiction does not attempt to predict the future, but rather seeks to imagine “what if.” The works of Le Guin, Atwood, and Butler have then been successful works of science/speculative fiction, concurrently revealing latent pathways of ecofeminist inquiry.

While their speculative fiction does not scientifically predict the future, Le Guin’s, Atwood, and Butler’s roles in ecofeminism suggest some direction for the future of ecofeminist theory and literature. Though preserving the essentialist notions of ecofeminist through the examination of exploitation of female characters, these authors have also offered avenues of further exploration of ecofeminism through the creation of alien species. Just as Butler’s main female character, Lilith, also represents the oppression of black females, so too do her aliens represent the oppression of the “other.” Atwood and Le Guin also highlight the bias of otherness through alien-species creation and coexistence. The future of ecofeminism is then investigating the interrelationship between the environment/nature and the “other.” How does the oppression of nature echo the oppression of the LGBTQ community? How do our fears of over-active AI or

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, “Introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness*,” *The Language of the Night*, 156.



the devolution and repossession of nature reflect Muslim communities? To what degree are nature and terrorism linked?

The intersection of science/speculative fiction and ecofeminism provides for a plethora of future work. In her collection of essays, *The Language of the Night*, Le Guin writes,

What we are, who we are, and where we are going, I do not know, nor do I believe anybody who says he knows, except, possibly, Beethoven, in the last movement of the last symphony. All I know is that we are here, and that we are aware of the fact, and that it behooves us to be aware—to pay heed. For we are not objects. That is essential. We are subjects, and whoever among us treats us as objects is acting inhumanly, wrongly, against nature.<sup>80</sup> 116

Just as science continues to feed our hunger for knowledge, science/speculative fiction is long from exhausting the human imagination and our capacity to wonder. Moreover, as Le Guin, Atwood, and Butler prove through their writing and their stories, we are probably much closer to global suicide, than science, literature, or our investment in either is to extinction. And yet, as a colleague and I wrote in our musical, *Autumn Calling*, “the future is not something to fear; it’s something to live for.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>81</sup> Brett Steinberg and Cara Williams, *Autumn Calling*. 2017.

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