"*All the world's a stage,*
And all the men and women merely players"
(William Shakespeare, As You Like It)

Ritual Performance in the American Feminist Utopian and Dystopian Novel from the Twentieth to the Twenty-First Century

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Part I

1. Introduction

A press release by *UN Women* published one day before the International Women's Day in 2023 stated that “[m]ore women than ever hold political decision-making posts worldwide“, and that Europe and the Americas have now the most female ministers compared to any other region in the world (“Women in Power“).[1] Furthermore, the report shows that while gender parity is still a long way off and improvements vary widely by region, the overall number of women in political leadership positions has increased (ibid.). On the same day, *Human Rights Watch* published an article summarizing other findings of the UN survey on the social status of women worldwide, showing that despite sporadic improvements in the field of politics, governments worldwide have seriously attacked women's rights in recent years (Bergsten and Lee). Their research shows that on a global scope hard-won progress has been rolled back, accompanied by anti-women rhetoric and policies and increasing gender inequality. It is now believed that it will take almost another 300 years “to close the global gender gap in legal protections for women and girls (Bergsten and Lee). Their assessment shows that not only in a number of Asian countries such as Afghanistan, where the Taliban currently prohibit girls from attending school and leaving the house without male supervision, and China, where feminist voices are silenced by strict Communist Party censorship, but also in Western countries such as Poland and the United States, women's rights thought to be long established are once again under attack by reactionary conservative governments and legislatures. In 2020, a ruling by the Polish Constitutional Tribunal, an institution whose independence and legitimacy has been severely eroded by the conservative Polish government at the time, made access to legal abortion in the country essentially impossible, even in the case of rape or irreversible fetal defect. Just like women's reproductive rights, activists who advocated for these rights were increasingly threatened and endangered when

[1] The report shows that it is important to have women in leadership and decision-making positions because they care about social equality, human rights and gender equality and introduce relevant legislation. In societies, women's political participation is therefore an important tool for promoting social progress and equality in many different areas (“Women in Power“).

they publicly criticized the government and its anti-feminist agenda ("Poland: A Year On"). Although the new Prime Minister Donald Tusk of the economically liberal-conservative PO party, who has been in office since December 2023, is more liberal, it has proved difficult for Tusk to reverse the restrictive measures introduced by the previous government.[2]

Similarly, since Donald Trump became Republican president of the United States for the first time in 2017, the treatment of women's rights and their protections, particularly in the area of reproductive rights, has also changed dramatically for the worse. In particular, Trump personally as well as his administration have shown a blatant disregard for women by using derogatory language towards women and enacting dozens of regulations that threatened and destroyed women's progress, as Osub Ahmed outlines in an article for the *Center for American Progress* near the end of Trump's first presidency in late 2020. Ahmed highlights the

> administration's harmful regulatory agenda [as] part of a larger and unfortunately all-too-familiar agenda to strip women of their fundamental rights to control their own bodies and economic futures, while catering to social and religious conservatives and big-business interests.

She goes on to say that these efforts are a reflection of a narrow worldview rooted in racism and misogyny that treats women, and women of color in particular, "as objects to be controlled rather than full participants" in society.[3] This general image of women has manifested itself in American society and continues to have a serious impact on women's lives even after Trump's presidency has ended. Trump's newly appointed Supreme Court justices, who are lifetime appointees, have given the court a conservative majority that is challenging rights won in the

[2] An Amnesty International report from October 2024 lists the difficulties Tusk and his government are facing on this front (Anna Błuś, "A year after Tusk came to power, why is access to safe and legal abortion still a distant dream in Poland?", 15 October 2024, amnesty.org, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/10/a-year-after-tusk-came-to-power-why-is-access-to-safe-and-legal-abortion-still-a-distant-dream-in-poland/. Accessed online: 12 December 2024).

[3] Ahmed lists a number of regulations put in place during Trump's presidency, such as threatening private abortion coverage by making it more difficult and confusing for health insurance providers and insured individuals to access the procedure. Access to contraception was also made more difficult as the Trump administration's religious-based "moral code" allowed employers, universities, and insurers to oppose providing contraception on moral and religious grounds. The list continues with an erosion of equal pay regulations, weakening regulations to protect students from sexual harassment and assault, dismantling the country's family planning network, eliminating important nondiscrimination protections in health care, and limiting an increase in the overtime threshold.

past for women and minorities.[4] One of the most recent examples of restrictive policies regarding women's free choice over their bodies is the Supreme Court's June 2022 decision to overturn women's constitutional right to abortion in the United States. This has a direct impact on women's lives and will most likely result in more deaths, as studies have shown that legal abortions have a significantly lower mortality rate than pregnancy and childbirth.[5] Research has also shown that this policy change disproportionately affects young, poor black women and other women of color, further marginalizing this population group.[6] With Trump's renewed presidency in 2025, this is likely to have a renewed negative impact on the rights of women and minorities.

In addition to policies directly aimed at depriving women of more and more of their rights, the Covid-19 pandemic, which was only recently declared over by the WHO after more than three years, has led many governments to adopt harmful and reactionary policies, even if in some countries it was not an attempt to reintroduce outdated gender roles and stereotypes.[7] New surveys show that the pandemic has had a devastating impact on women and girls worldwide and has severely compromised the social progress achieved in previous decades.[8] Their

[4] During his presidency, Trump appointed three Supreme Court justices, Neil Gorsuch (2017), Brett Kavanaugh (2018), and Amy Coney Barrett (2020). These and other appointments dating back to the eighteenth century can be viewed on the official homepage of the United State Senate:https://www.senate.gov/legislative/nominations/SupremeCourtNominations1789present.htm. Accessed online: 26 June 2023.

[5] More detailed information on the studies' results can be found in an editorial of *Nature Online*, "The US Supreme Court abortion verdict is a tragedy. This is how research organizations can help." (*nature.com*, 28 June 2022, https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-022-01760-6. Accessed online: 6 January 2023.).

[6] Jessica Glenza (et al.) reported on these issues for women in their article "US supreme court overturns abortion rights, upending Roe v Wade" (t*heguardian.com*, 24 June 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/24/roe-v-wade-overturned-abortion-summary-supreme-court. Accessed online: 6 January 2023.).

[7] On May 5, 2023, WHO (World Health Organization) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus declared via Twitter that the COVID-19 Emergency Committee had recommended that the international health emergency be declared over, indirectly announcing that the pandemic had come to an end. Officially, nearly seven million people worldwide died from the virus, while many experts estimate the number of unreported cases to be around 20 million. Although the status of international emergency was lifted, it was declared that the virus is still dangerous and needs constant monitoring ("WHO chief declares"). The same need for caution and monitoring applies to the social impact of the pandemic, as measures to prevent the spread of the virus have had undesirable side effects for many people and especially women.

[8] Several media outlets and research institutes have recently published research pointing to the catastrophic impact that the covid pandemic and the measures taken by governments to prevent the further spread of the virus have had on the lives of women worldwide, e.g., the OECD (https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/caregiving-in-crisis-gender-inequality-in-paid-and-unpaid-work-during-covid-19-3555d164/) and business consultancy company McKinsey

results show that even in highly developed industrialized countries the situation for women has once again become more precarious as women have been pushed back into the domestic sphere and are often solely responsible for care work for relatives and children. Meanwhile, men have once again become the main breadwinner of the family, notwithstanding the fact that both men and women were forced to work from home during various lockdown periods. Nevertheless, women were stuck doing the housework and social progress was set back to where it was decades ago. It is evidence of how easily progress can be destroyed and old, outdated habits reintroduced.[9]

Aside from these unique historical events, gender theorists concerned with long-term developments have also warned of the erosion of important achievements in the field of gender equality. Concerns about social changes are also at the core of Judith Butler's 2019 essay "What Threat? The Campaign against "Gender Ideology". In it, Butler laid out the connections between the state, the Catholic Church, and the Evangelical churches in Latin America and their shared agenda against gender studies. Butler argues that their focus on the traditional family as a means to cure social ills means that they blame "gender ideology" as the main reason for the deterioration of social conditions in Western cultures (2). The public advancement of gender theory is interpreted as a threat to the family and biblical authority because it undermines and nullifies God's creative power (1-2). They understand "gender [...] as a single "ideology" that refutes the reality of sexual difference and that seeks to appropriate the divine power of creation for those who wish to create their own genders" (2). The Papal Family Council refers to the "fact," that is, their conviction that it is the nature of women to do the domestic work and that men are in the public sphere (3). Butler's position is that they fear that a gender diversity that deviates from the dichotic norm carries enormous disruptive forces and is a demonic force of destruction (4). She further points out that several governments in the Western world in recent years have blamed gender

(https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/covid-19-and-gender-equality-countering-the-regressive-effects).

[9] At this point, however, it should also be noted that there have also been increasing trends in the past two to three years, especially among younger women, who want to steer the role of women back into more traditional channels and portray themselves on social media platforms as so-called "tradwives": loving, "traditional" wives who take care of their husbands and the household, following the model of 1950s America. Various newspapers have reported on this trend in recent years, with *The Insider*'s Nicole Froio attributing the trend to women's "post-COVID work/life balance burnout".

ideology for poverty in their countries because it would undermine the model of the traditional family as understood in the Western sense, in which men provide the financial sustenance and women take care of the children and the household. They argue that a return to these values would reduce poverty and use the traditional family as a cover to justify cutting social security funds and dismantling the welfare system altogether. Butler concludes that people in need are thus forced to turn to religiously based social welfare, resulting in the church's indoctrination of society's most vulnerable social groups (4-7). The essay demonstrates the close relationship between the state's dismantling of the welfare system and the churches' efforts to expand their influence, with both identifying "gender ideology" as the root of all evil.[10]

The threat of stagnation and deterioration of women's rights in various countries and the persistent unfair treatment of women in Western societies coincide with a resurgence of feminist dystopian literature in recent decades, which has attracted attention not only in public reception but also in literary criticism. In 2018, the *New York Times* published an article about the apparent “growing preoccupation among writers with the tenuous status of women’s rights, and the ambient fear that progress toward equality between the sexes has stalled or may be reversed“ (Alter). The article states further that at “a time of increased unease about parity between the sexes, both new and classic dystopian novels seem to be resonating with readers and critics“ (Alter). Sarah Dillon agrees with this assessment, noting that the twenty-first century has witnessed a “reinvigoration of feminism“ and a “resurgence of feminist dystopian imaginings“ that have come upon society like a “tidal wave“ (169). She points out that the concerns of twenty-first century anglophone feminist dystopian literature “echo those of their twentieth-century predecessors, exploring dominant themes of control of reproductive rights, sexual and other forms of violence against women, and the balance of power between the sexes“ (ibid.). They often focus on the oppression of women and other social groups in patriarchal societies as a means of strengthening the power of men. For women in particular, the expression of fear and hope through the

[10] This argument can be taken as the basis for the novels of Atwood, Dalcher, Tepper, and Piercy, in which patriarchal, church-oriented state and/or social structures are the cause of women's miserable situation. Butler’s essay was published in *Glocalism: Journal Journal of Culture, Politics, and Innovation* (published online by “Globus et Locus“ at https://glocalismjournal.org, 2019, pp.1-12.)

concepts of utopia and dystopia can create an outlet for frustration and a call for social change.

Feminist dystopias, such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), were rediscovered in the first years of the new millennium and enjoyed great popularity, especially by a new generation of female readers, often moving on from young adult fiction.[11] Sophie Gilbert notes that *The Handmaid's Tale* in particular came into public focus under the Trump administration in the U.S., when women began taking to the streets in the guise of Handmaids during protests against anti-feminist laws planned by the government ("Remarkable Rise"). This is evidence of the extent to which women identify with literature (and its media adaptation) and use it as a tool to express their dissatisfaction with and protest against existing political grievances. But also feminist young adult fiction book series, such as the *Divergent* series (2011-2013) by Veronica Roth and *The Hunger Games* series (2008-2010) by Suzanne Collins, have been commercially successful and popular with readers for their portrayal of a young heroine fighting and triumphing against oppressive political regimes. In these series, two young women become the center and driving force of rebellions against authoritarian leaders. The demonstration and normalization of female power in these books breaks with the common notion that women only take passive roles and men only take active roles in political and social discourse.[12] Katniss Everdeen (*The Hunger Games*) and Tris Prior (*Divergent*) have become icons and role models for young women around the world in their own struggles against social injustices and (female) oppression in patriarchal and authoritarian political systems, though usually not to the same degree.[13] The

[11] The commercially very successful television adaptation of the novel by the American streaming service Hulu in 2017 (with five completed seasons already and the sixth currently in production) is another argument for the social relevance of the novel's topic in the twenty-first century (https://www.businessinsider.com/handmaids-tale-emmy-pushing-hulus-business-2017-7).

[12] Roberta Trites explains that in the U.S., the mentality of male power and agency versus female passivity and ownership is still very much ingrained in people's minds. Her research focuses on material feminism in young adult fiction, examining the relationships and empowerment in these novels and viewing the characters as complete beings who unite body and mind. She states that women have always been associated with the body, which can be owned, and men with the mind, which claims ownership (Trites). Accordingly, leading female agency in young adult fiction is by no means a commonplace.

[13] As described earlier, most feminists in Western societies are primarily concerned with the reintroduction of conservative laws that seek to curtail women's decision-making power over their own bodies. While these laws can also have fatal consequences for women, the current situation in other countries, such as Afghanistan and Iran, poses a far greater threat to women's lives. In the second half of 2022, women of all ages in Iran took to the streets without headscarves, which they are required to wear by law, to demonstrate against the death of a young Kurdish woman in police

success of the book series can be seen most obviously in the book sales and in the fact that they have been turned into films for the big screen, which in turn have also reached a wide audience and earned millions of dollars.[14] Margaret Atwood also gained renewed attention in various media and news outlets when *The Handmaid's Tale* was turned into a television series in 2017. Subsequently, Atwood published the novel's long-awaited and highly anticipated sequel *The Testaments* in 2019. Excellent reviews and several Emmy nominations for the television series and a series of book awards for the sequel again prove that the theme of feminist dystopia in particular is as relevant as ever.[15]

These feminist dystopias have in common that they all place a great focus on social, and often female oppression in particular, whereby ritual processes play an important role in the structuring of the fictional societies. As an important conceptual next step in the discussion of feminism and anti-feminism, the role of the political arena needs to be conceptualized, as it offers an important stage for ritual performance as a means of mediating power and social relations within societies, in the way Jeffrey Alexander interprets it. His interpretation and analysis of ritual acts, as well as those of other scholars in the field of ritual studies, will be part of the methodological approach of this dissertation. In each of the novels, rituals and ritual theory are used as a productive lens through which to examine the place and role of women in their respective societies. They are a tool not only used by the repressive governments to exert power and control over the population, but are also a means for the protagonists to cope with the traumatic and difficult situations they find themselves in.

In the academic field of anthropology, as well as in other disciplines, numerous definitions of the term ritual exist. Rituals are described as powerful

custody and to fight repressive dress codes enforced by the Iranian regime with the help of the morality police. Rothna Begum of Human Rights Watch has reported on the deadly dangers women face when they are caught by the morality police and taken into custody for not wearing the headscarf or not wearing it in the prescribed appropriate manner (Begum).

[14] More than 30 million copies of the *Divergent* book series have been sold worldwide (as of 2015), while the first *Divergent* film alone grossed more than 300 million US dollars (https://www.cinecitta.de/de/Die-Bestimmung-Insurgent-3D-272.html). Although the specific genre of film adaptations of young adult novels rapidly declined towards the end of the 2010s, the lasting impact of such books and films on an entire generation of young adults, especially that of *The Hunger Games* series, cannot be denied (Imam).

[15] Among other awards, in 2019 Atwood received The Booker Price for *The Testaments* (https://thebookerprizes.com/the-booker-library/books/the-testaments. Accessed online: 23 November 2022.).

mechanisms by which groups can be formed, transformed, inspired, and coordinated, or they can be a "socially stipulated imitation of teleologically opaque behaviour", as Whitehouse and McQuinn argue (1). Rituals are performances, a form of acting for a specific audience with the same cultural background and values. They define and order human life and are an essential part of human existence. Especially in times of uncertainty, rituals can provide security and support because of their repeatability and familiarity. They can serve as an escape from reality, just as the utopia can create a safe space and refuge from a reality that is too cruel and unjust to deal with on a regular basis. In the feminist utopia, rituals functioning as social mechanisms can be found as well, except that here they fulfill a different function. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's feminist utopia *Herland* (1915), for example, depicts a women-only society based on a fertility ritual that is the lifeline of their society and ensures its survival. Feminist utopias can thus provide insight into how ritual actions can be used in societies in positive and productive ways.[16]

The study of the multifaceted complexity of the field of ritual studies has come under closer examination with the cultural turn in the 1970s, Dietrich Harth and Axel Michaels highlight in their paper "Grundlagen des SFB 619 RITUALDYNAMIK - Soziokulturelle Prozesse in historischer und kulturvergleichender Perspektive" (10). This paper is an introductory treatise to the research conducted by Heidelberg University's research cluster 619 on ritual dynamics. The formation of the university's "Collaborative Research Center 169" ("Sonderforschungsbereich 169") in 2002 at the University of Heidelberg on ritual dynamics also helped to raise awareness of this rapidly expanding field. This research group was active until 2013, and at that time was the world's largest research network devoted exclusively to rituals, their change and dynamics, and their intersection with other academic disciplines. The group conducted basic research with regard to cross-cultural theory building and provided explanatory models for the socio-cultural meaning of ritual actions, reflecting the complexity and diversity of the field. In the context of this research-cluster, the anthology of lectures of the Studium Generale of the

[16] *Herland* in particular, however, has become controversial for its portrayal of women and feminist ideas. Leading literary scholars have debated in recent years whether or not the novel can still be classified as feminist in the modern understanding of the term. More details on this debate will follow in the corresponding chapter.

Ruprecht-Karls-University in the winter semester 2005/06, edited by Axel Michaels, stands out.

Especially ritual acts in the context of female representations in feminist speculative fiction have not been studied in depth yet. The aim of this dissertation is therefore to investigate the significance of rituals for the female protagonists of the selected novels. The role of women in society is as contested today as it was a hundred years ago. As will be shown, during this period, feminist utopias have evolved into critical feminist dystopias, and notions of what it means to be a woman have changed over the course of a century, as reflected in the century's feminist literature. As this thesis will argue, rituals, as essential components of society and integral to the structuring of everyday life, are a useful tool for interpreting the representation of women in various utopian and dystopian contexts.

The books discussed in this dissertation all fall into the genre of feminist speculative fiction and can be roughly divided into three categories: they are feminist utopias, dystopias or a utopian-dystopian conglomerate. Some also contain elements of science fiction and other literary genres which has become a defining trade mark of the genre, as Raffaella Baccolini acknowledges ((2004) 520). The literary canon selected for this dissertation is geographically limited to the North American continent, whereby, however, only a small portion of the great amount of feminist speculative fiction currently in circulation can be analyzed. The novels to be discussed were written exclusively by feminist-oriented authors from this region, with the oldest novel dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century and the most recent novel from 2017. The geographical proximity of the authors was a calculated decision to have a common cultural background for all authors. The shared cultural values are important because of the methodological approach of this work which is based in ritual theory. For this, a common cultural basis is necessary as the theoretical concepts used in the analysis of the texts come from experts whose work focuses on ritual theory in Western societies. Rituals and ritualistic performances abound in these novels, making it necessary for this thesis to focus on the rituals that are relevant to feminist debates and the construction and representations of female protagonists. This dissertation therefore does not claim to fully trace and explain every single ritual presented in the novels. Rather, it is intended to provide insight into the variety of rituals used in connection with female characters and the ways in which they can be analyzed.

The selection is based partly on the idea of including books that have not yet received as much attention by literary scholars, in addition to some of the more well-known classics. Against this background, the next introductory chapters are devoted to the current state of research in feminist speculative fiction as well as the characteristics of the feminist utopia and dystopia. In addition, an overview is given of the theoretical foundations used in the anthropological analysis of ritual actions and performances in the selected literature.

2. Feminist Speculative Fiction in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Century

2.1 Defining Feminist Speculative Fiction, Feminist Utopia, and Feminist Dystopia

There is little agreement about what exactly constitutes the genres of speculative fiction, science fiction, fantasy, utopia, and dystopia, Sharon Wilson states (1). Genres, Raffaella Baccolini (2004) argues, are “culturally constructed and rest on the binary between what is normal and what is deviant - a notion that feminist criticism has deconstructed as it consigns feminine practice to the pole of deviation and inferiority“ (519). Because genres were defined in a male-dominated scholarly context, it was primarily the views of men that decided what a genre was and, more importantly, what constituted valuable literature. These gender boundaries, Baccolini continues, must be challenged because their exclusionary politics have proven detrimental to women (ibid.). She therefore calls for an examination of the intersections between gender and generic fiction (ibid.). In other words, breaking down traditional genre boundaries holds great productive potential, allowing for greater diversity and an expansion of literary critical discourse. Speculative fiction, and especially feminist speculative fiction, as Baccolini notes, opens up this new space for feminist re-appropriations of generic fiction, which thus become a radical and oppositional strategy (ibid.).

Ritch Calvin notes that, given the diversity of the genre, there is a general consensus in literary criticism discourse that speculative fiction is particularly difficult to define, especially when used in conjunction with the adjective “feminist“.

Calvin points out that such attempts to define the term speculative and/or science fiction “will only ever be partial and contingent, at best“ (11). Esther Jones uses the term speculative fiction to group the genres of “science fiction, fantasy, horror and related forms within a kind of “super-genre“ that interrogates an empirical reality we presume we know through the strategies of discontinuity, change and difference“ (4-5). In her view, authors of speculative fiction use methods of extrapolation and cognitive de-familiarization to identify historical patterns, magnify temporary social and political problems, and imagine a future in which alternative approaches to justice might be conceivable (5). Emily Lange sees readers of speculative fiction confronted with the “task of imagining alternative realities of advanced technology, magic, or both“ (88). She further believes that speculative fiction “provides a new access within which authors can explore narratives of identity, interactions with social inequalities, and solutions to real-world problems“ (ibid.). Raffaella Baccolini in “The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction“ (2004) highlights the subversive power of science fiction as a form of counter-narrative to the hegemonic world order (519). Specifically, she asserts that an “analysis of women's take on science fiction allows us to recognize a subversive and oppositional strategy against hegemonic ideology“ (ibid.). This women's perspective, to which Baccolini refers, will be further discussed in the following chapters, which focus on the specifics of feminist speculative fiction in general and feminist utopia and dystopia in particular. The objective of this chapter is to establish working definitions for the terms feminist speculative fiction, feminist utopia, and feminist dystopia, which provide the framework for the works to be discussed in this thesis.

2.1.1 Feminist Speculative Fiction

> Because it is difficult to legislate relations between the sexes by conventional political reform, and because works of fiction can present a multiplicity of new arrangements, science fiction has had a particular affinity for feminism, and the attraction was mutual. (Sterling)

Feminist speculative fiction, Jeff VanderMeer writes in the foreword to his anthology *Sisters of the Revolution: A Feminist Speculative Fiction Anthology*

(2015) experienced its heyday as a genre in the late 1960s and 1970s in the United States, laying “the foundation for the wonderful wealth and diversity of such fiction in the present day“ ((2015) 1). Jenny Wolmark also observes a “significant convergence between feminism and science fiction“ (1) that began in the 1970s, “result[ing] in the production of texts in which gender and identity are central“ (1). These texts form the genre of feminist speculative fiction which, Anna Gilarek (2012) notes, is a marginal genre that discusses the same issues that preoccupy feminist theorists but presents and dramatizes them in the form of thought experiments (222). The de-familiarization and introduction of fantastical elements into the narratives neither “detract from the social significance of feminist science fiction“, nor do they diminish the impact on the target audience (223). VanderMeer also points out that the genre's flowering in the 1970s roughly coincided with the emergence of New Wave science fiction; a movement that is described by Bruce Sterling in the *Britannica Encyclopedia* as “[s]porting a countercultural disregard of taboos (particularly with regard to morals and sexuality), a fascination with mind-altering drugs and Eastern religions, and an interest in experimental literary styles“ (Sterling). VanderMeer draws a connection between the two (sub-)genres, believing that feminist speculative fiction and New Wave science fiction often share similar interests and curiosities “and in the subset of their convergence represented something truly new and different“ (ibid.).[17]

In an attempt to define the emergent literary bulk of feminist speculative literature in the 1970s and 1980s, Marleen Barr (1993) has coined the term “feminist fabulation“ as "an umbrella term that includes science fiction, fantasy, utopian literature, and mainstream literature (written by both women and men) that critique patriarchal fictions“ and which is specifically "engaged in the postmodern critique of patriarchal master narratives“ (12).[18] Barr argues that feminist fabulation “challenges fixed definitions of literary hierarchies“ and “replaces exclusion that can be attributed to gender and genre (ibid.). For Barr, feminist fabulation “is a canonical system which changes a canonical system“ (10). She argues that

[17] The movement of New Wave science fiction also had vastly expanded the sub-genre of “soft” science fiction which is “typically more concerned with exploring social aspects of the near future and of “inner space,” while “hard” science fiction features technology-for-technology’s-sake“ (Sterling).

[18] Kate McLean and Moin Syed have defined master narratives as “culturally shared stories that guide thoughts, beliefs, values, and behaviors (323). A further discussion of master narratives in relation to feminist and poststructuralist theory follows in chapter “2. Bloodchild - Octavia Butler“.

feminist fabulation as a literary canon, that includes various forms of feminist writing, “associates feminist speculative fiction with respected contemporary fiction and, by doing so, expands the definition of the postmodern canon“ (ibid.).

While Barr’s terminology has not caught on, Jenny Wolmark uses the term “feminist science fiction“ to describe the body of literary works that “brought the politics of feminism into a genre with a solid tradition of ignoring or excluding women writers“ (1-2). Wolmark argues that it

> draw[s] on feminist analysis of the construction of gendered subjectivity in order to suggest possibilities for more plural and heterogeneous social relations, and to offer a powerful critique of the way in which existing social relations and power structures continue to marginalise women. (2)

Before Walmark, Angelika Bammer in *Partial Visions: Feminism and Utopianism in the 1970s* (1991) also describes how feminist speculative fiction critiques the hegemonic elite and emphasizes the importance of revolutionary processes in the novels. Baccolini discusses the same revolutionary potential of feminist speculative fiction of the 1970s and 1980s in "The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction" (2004), noting the genre's contribution to the “exploration and subsequent breakdown of certainties and universalist assumptions“ (520). Baccolini further believes that this critique of hegemony derives its power from the fusion of genres, considering feminist science fiction of the 1970s and 1980s particularly interesting because it blurs the boundaries between genres and introduces conventions from other genres, “such as the epistolary novel, the diary, and the historical novel“ ((2000) 1).

The narratives of feminist speculative fiction are influenced by the particular wave of feminism in which they were written and, Pfaelzer argues, especially feminist utopias were written “in times of significant restructuring of women's social and political roles“ (282). With the onset of the first wave of feminism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the focus was on the social equality of women and men and the breaking down of the patriarchal structures that kept women out of social participation. The main feminist interests and objectives were, according to Pfaelzer, “suffrage, the eight-hour-day, women’s educational reform, and contraception“ (ibid.). The feminist literature that emerged during this period was mostly written in the form of utopias that envisioned the liberation of women

from patriarchy and oppression, laying the foundations for the feminist speculative fiction that developed in the 1960s and 1970s. One example of this literature is Gilman's *Herland*, which introduces a new interpretation of female agency in what Isabell Knight has called the "monogendered" feminist utopia (Knight qtd. in Pfaelzer 285). This type of utopia, Pfaelzer argues, challenges not only the readers' preconceived notions of assigned gender roles, but also those of the men in the story by arguing that the construct of 'masculine' and 'feminine' is inherent to patriarchal ideology and cannot survive outside of it (ibid.). Suzanne Romaine believes this to be the purest form of feminism as it eliminates conflict, gender inequality, and patriarchal oppression (329). Kirsten Imani Kasai, however, disagrees, arguing that the monogendered feminist utopia is too unrealistic to be helpful in a realistic debate about improvements in social conditions for women. She argues that “feminist writers [need] to envision inclusive alternate futures that propose realistic, cooperative societies that counter prevailing dystopian models“ (1377).

The onset of the second wave of feminism, beginning in the 1960s and lasting until the early 1980s, was influenced by French feminism and in particular by the theories of Simone de Beauvoir, expanding the philosophical foundation of the feminist movement by questioning the nature of womanhood and arguing that women are not born but rather become women through societal conditioning (“Women’s History“).[19] This phase of feminism focused on building on the themes of the first wave, with particular emphasis on equal pay for women, reproductive rights, women's health, educational equality and domestic violence (ibid.). Furthermore, Pfaelzer notes, “wider access to both professional and non-traditional jobs, shared housework, childcare, and the removal of cultural stereotypes“ (282-83) were major concerns for the women at that time. These themes feature prominently in the works of Octavia Butler, Sheri Tepper, Margaret Atwood, and Marge Piercy, among others, where the question of reproduction and the agency of the female body in relation to the male body plays an important role. In the works

[19] Mary Margaret Hughes Patrick’s doctoral dissertation *Creator/Destroyer: The Function of the Heroine in Post-Apocalyptic Feminist Speculative Fiction* (2017) focuses on Simone de Beauvoir's patriarchal myth-making of women as social persona and its influence on the role of the heroine in the feminist dystopia as both creator and destroyer of her dystopian society (University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Ann Arbor, 2017. ProQuest, https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/creator-destroyer-function-heroine-post/docview/1979139977/se-2).

of these authors, sex, childbirth and childrearing are much discussed topics. The importance of reproductive rituals is particularly evident as almost all the books to be discussed here take up and deal with sex and reproduction as an important theme. Both feminist utopia and dystopia emphasize the crucial role these rituals play in social arrangements. Marleen Barr in *Alien to Femininity - Speculative Fiction and Feminist Theory* (1987) supports this view when discussing the issue of childbearing and its male appropriation in patriarchal societies and how feminist writers of second wave feminism tried to reclaim this ritual for the female part of society (128). She argues that the either negative or positive portrayal of rituals like childbirth and motherhood in feminist speculative fiction are used to denounce patriarchal control of birth and are thus directly critiquing masculine interference in a feminine (ritual) process (ibid.). At the same time, Donawerth (1990) notes, medical technology as a means of birth control has also been a common point of discussion in the feminist utopias of the 1980s and 1990s (537). This can be observed particularly well in Sheri Tepper's *The Gateway to Women's Country,* where birth control and the use of contraception play a special role, leading Shiloh Carroll to conclude that Tepper's depiction of society in the novel can be read as a "battle of the sexes" (25) in which women gain the upper hand through their thoughtful use and combination of ritual, deception, and technology.

Third-wave-feminism continues the political evolution of the feminist movement and further influenced the themes of feminist speculative fiction. Its beginning is often traced to 1991, when Anita Hill testified before an all-male, all-white Senate Judiciary Committee about sexual harassment she allegedly experienced from Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas[20] (Brunell). Important themes of feminist fiction at this time were and still are the rights of non-binary people, the challenging of gender norms, expanding perceptions of gender, and utilizing irony, grassroots activism, and radical democracy to combat sexism, racism, and classism (Brunell). Over the course of the first two decades of the twenty-first century, Ostalska and Fisiak note in their 2021 compilation *The*

[20] Despite the credible testimony of Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas was nevertheless confirmed as a Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court and still serves as such (Brunell). In June 2022, various media outlets reported that he also voted to overturn Roe vs. Wade, the landmark ruling that protected federal abortion rights in the United States for nearly 50 years, while also calling “for the court to reexamine a slew of 14th Amendment due process clause cases, including past decisions that protect contraception access, same-sex relationships, and same-sex marriages“ (Snodgrass).

Postworld In-Between Utopia and Dystopia - Intersectional, Feminist, and Non-Binary Approaches in 21st-Century Speculative Literature and Culture, that the binary between utopia and dystopia has dissolved (3). The boundaries between waves of feminism are not always clear-cut, and many authors and works span or transcend these categorizations. The third wave saw an expansion of voices and perspectives in feminist speculative fiction, with increased focus on diverse protagonists, exploration of gender fluidity, and examination of intersecting forms of oppression. As a result, some feminist novels, such as *The Gateway to Women's Country* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, can be categorized as second and third wave feminism. Despite the supposed progress in women's rights, many feminist writers who followed the political situation and its developments feared a deterioration of the kind seen since Trump, which is reflected in the feminist speculative literature of the time.

During the 2000s and the 2010s, academic interest in feminist speculative fiction resurged in a variety of ways. Among the most recent publications in this field, published within the past two decades, are anthologies covering the entire developmental phase of speculative fiction.[21] Others, like Lisa Yaszek in *Galactic Suburbia: Recovering Women's Science Fiction* (2007) focus on a specific time frame of feminist writing.[22] Yet again others focus on more concrete texts that address issues of race, discrimination, and otherness, including a special interest in black feminist writers and writers of other ethnicities. But also Atwood's literary corpus has never lost its attraction to literary scholars and continues to be discussed in the twenty-first century. While Helen Snaith discusses the connection and representation of aging women in "Dystopia, Gerontology and the Writing of Margaret Atwood" (2017), Theodore Sheckels examines Atwood's work from political, economic, and sociological perspectives in *The Political in Margaret*

[21] In this context, the anthology by Eckart Voigts and Alessandra Boller, which covers the development of science fiction in literature and film from the late 19th century to the present, deserves special mention: Voigts, Eckart and Alessandra Boller. *Dystopia, Science Fiction, Post-Apocalypse: Classics - New Tendencies - Model Interpretations*. ed. Eckart Voigts. Band 17. Trier: WVT, Wiss. Verl. Trier, 2015. Similarly, the anthology *The Postworld In-Between Utopia and Dystopia: Intersectional, Feminist, and Non-Binary Approaches in 21st-Century Speculative Literature and Culture* (London: Routledge, 2021) by Katarzyna Ostalska and Tomasz Fisiak takes a specific look at the global output of feminist utopian and dystopian perspectives in speculative fiction, and just like Voigts, they do not limit themselves to the study of literature, but also look at film and art through different theoretical approaches.

[22] Yaszek focuses on feminist science fiction written in the post-World War II era to create a more equal future after the devastation of war (The Ohio State UP, 2007).

Atwood's Fiction (2016).[23] In “Neomedievalist feminist dystopia“ (2014), Daniel Lukes draws a connection from Atwood's work back to the Middle Ages, and in particular sees *The Handmaid's Tale* as a cautionary work against a backsliding and revanchist patriarchy. Taking a critical look at Atwood's use of religion in her work, Andrew Hoogheem in "Secular Apocalypses: Darwinian Criticism and Atwoodian Floods" (2012) explores the theme of survival with the use of religious beliefs and sees this as an attempt by Atwood to more closely connect the natural sciences and the humanities.

The topic of intersectionality is also still a much debated subject in the United States and has been explored in greater depth over the past two decades. Analytical works on the subject include Lewis Call's "Structures of Desire: Erotic Power in the Speculative Fiction of Octavia Butler and Samuel Delany" (2005), in which Call explores a re-writing and re-appropriation of stories of enslavement described in the works of Butler and Delany. Sami Shalk's *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (2018) examines the works of Octavia Butler as well as novels from the 2010s from the perspective of black feminist theory and disability studies. Katie Warczak, in her review of the book, highlights how Shalk, through these methodological approaches, points out that “[h]istorically, (dis)ability designations were used in an attempt to dehumanize people of color, women, non-gender conforming individuals, and LGBTQ+ populations“ (Review: *Bodyminds*) and that even today ableism is the reason for the mistreatment of black and disabled people in America. In *Diverse Futures - Science Fiction and Authors of Color* (2021), Joy Sanchez-Taylor shows how speculative literature written by authors of different races and ethnicities in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries creates images of diverse and inclusive future societies that break with the hegemonic Western European worldview. And in the field of Islamic theology, the controversial discussion of race and religion has also gained momentum, as is evident in Noor Hashem's article “Muslim American Speculative Fiction: Figuring feminist epistemologies, religious

[23] Political philosophy is also the critical lens Clare Curtis uses when she examines the works of Marge Piercy and Octavia Butler, using them as examples to correct the poor reputation the utopian ideal has gotten in recent decades. Her objective is to show that feminist utopias do not have the same destructive power as other utopian ideas because they are based on and include equality, pluralism, and ambiguity (Curtis, Clare. "Rehabilitating Utopia: Feminist Science Fiction and the Quest for the Ideal." *Contemporary Justice Review*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2005, pp. 147-62.).

histories, and genre traditions“ (2021) in which Hashem examines female Muslim agency in the growing literary corpus of Muslim feminist speculative fiction. The primary concern of all of these works is to address the problematic issues of race and discrimination, and to reflect on the major social issues facing American society in the twenty-first century.

The starting point for this dissertation is a topic that does not appear in the aforementioned studies. Litte attention has been paid to ritualized collective events in feminist speculative fiction that serve to integrate the population in accordance with the social system and bind them to the existing order.[24] Since feminist speculative fiction's full emergence roughly sixty years ago, the critical discourse in the genre has not yet considered this specific portrayal of ritual performances, although it is often integral to the plot development in the novels.

2.1.2 The Feminist Utopia

In the 1970s and 80s “utopian scholars have been coming independently to a generally similar understanding that utopianism has various manifestations“ (2), Lyman Tower Sargent outlines in his article “The Three faces of Utopianism Revisited“. Sargent himself defines “the broad, general phenomenon of utopianism as social dreaming“ (3), viewing it as “dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live“ (ibid.). Fátima Vieira reasons that at the heart of the utopian concept is the desire for a better, more equal life for all, which is fueled by modern, future-oriented thinking (6). Fredric Jameson argues that utopias “seem to be by-products of Western modernity“ (11) that “always aim at the alleviation and elimination of the sources of exploitation and suffering, rather than at the composition of blueprints for bourgeois comfort“ (12). The utopian text is to be read negatively, “as what is to be accomplished after the demolitions and the removals, and in the absence of all those

[24] One example to be mentioned here is the analysis of the ceremonial rape in Margaret Atwood's dystopia *The Handmaid's Tale* by Seeber, Hans Ulrich. “Die Frau, der Körper und die Dystopie. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.“ *Utopie und Dystopie in den neuen englischen Literaturen*, ed. by Hans Ulrich Seeber and Ralph Pordzik, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2001, pp. 163-82.

lesser evils the liberals believed to be inherent in human nature“ (ibid.). Regarding the evolution of the utopian idea in literature, Jameson positions More’s *Utopia* (1517) at the beginning of influential utopian formulations in which More abolishes the concepts of money and property (ibid.). Sharon Wilson points out, however, that the genre of utopia (as well as dystopia and science fiction) have existed for hundreds of years by most reckonings, and positions More's Utopia between the influential utopian works *Republic* (375 BC), written by Plato, and *Herland* (1915) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1).[25]

As a neologism, Vieira explains that the term utopia in its most literal translation means a "non-place", composed of the two Greek words “ouk“, here reduced to the letter "u", meaning "not", and “topos“, meaning "place", to which the suffix -ia has been added (4). In this form, Vieira argues, the word, and by extension the general concept of utopia, represent simultaneously a movement of affirmation and negation; an oxymoron that points to a particular ideal place while denying the possibility of its existence (ibid.). In the context of literature, Dunja Mohr in her book *Worlds Apart: Dualism and Transgression in Contemporary Female Dystopias,* asks what exactly a literary utopia is. Her own answer to this question is: “There are probably as many contradictory definitions and classifications of utopia (dystopia, and sf) as there are critics who try to answer this question“ (12). Commonly, Mohr argues, literary utopia is grouped together with other conceptions of better worlds and ideal societies (13). In her opinion, however, literary utopias can be understood as visionary reforms that describe an imaginary, ideal commonwealth “whose fictional inhabitants exist under perfect conditions in a perfect social, legal, and political system […]“ (ibid.).

Taking into account this general idea of utopia, the feminist utopia uses the same stylistic devices while adding principles of feminist theory. Francis Bartkowski interprets the feminist utopia as expressing a moral imperative, believing that it tells the reader as much "about what one can hope for as about what one must hope for" (4). The feminist utopia, Bartkowski explains, depicts a society that women

[25] For a more detailed analysis of utopian concepts in various fields, see Fredric Jameson’s *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London, New York, NY: Verso, 2005) and his article “Utopia as Method, or the Uses of the Future” in Michael Gordin’s book *Utopia, Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility* (Publication in partnership with the Shelby Cullom Davis Center at Princeton University, Princeton, NJ u.a. Princeton Univ. Press, 2010, pp. 21-44).

themselves have shaped; they are worlds created mostly by women for women, albeit sometimes in collaboration with men (ibid.). She emphasizes that feminist utopias are about longing and desire, anger and despair that are transformed into hope, making the principle of hope an essential concept in feminist utopian literature (10). It creates a narrative that expresses women's desires for change and shows a possible better future that (especially female) readers can identify with, turning it into "an exercise of the willful imagination that demands revolutionary transformation“ (8-10). Falk Jones sees this as self-affirmation, “encouraging innovative thinking and promoting critical consciousness" ((1990) 39), an essential component of feminist utopia, as Falk Jones sees the genre as a tool for the education of women. Feminist education, she argues, "must address tacit, often inarticulate knowledge", thus highlighting "the importance of symbols and metaphors to feminist education" (ibid.). In this context, Clifford Geertz points out the importance of not simply removing symbols that are harmful to women but replacing them with positive ones in order for social change to manifest (qtd. in Falk Jones (1990) 39). In essence, Falk Jones sees the feminist utopia as a means for female education, and feminist education in particular, as an education that goes beyond the familiar realm of “man-made“ education, since its utopian vision must create a new form of education from women for women. Feminist thought, and by extension feminist utopias, as Falk Jones argues, must therefore demand the transformation of the traditional worldview by valuing creative thinking and the ability to perceive and develop alternatives ((1990) 40). The ultimate goal of feminist education and feminist thinking must be the "discovery and creation of a world beyond patriarchy" (ibid.). Accordingly, Falk Jones argues, an emphasis on critical thinking must be a major element of feminist utopian fiction (42).

This type of feminist education dates back hundreds of years to the Middle Ages, when feminist writers began to embrace utopian thinking and applied basic concepts of utopian thought in their literary works. The earliest such example is Christine de Pizan’s *The Book of the City of Ladies*, written and published in 1405. As Jeffrey Richards explains, the book was a direct response to the misogyny of her time and an attempt to build a society based on fairness and equality (xxxv). A few centuries later, Lyman Tower Sargent and Lucy Sargisson remark, Mary Astell's *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694) continues this line of thought, presenting an all-female and completely asexual society as a solution to human

misbehavior caused by the sex drive itself (301). Keith Booker believes that women's utopian thinking in the United States seriously got underway in the second half of the nineteenth century with Mary Bradley Lane's *Mizara* (1880) and the works of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (338), whose fiction is primarily informed by “the idea that women’s lives were impoverished by narrow definitions of female fulfillment“ (Duquette 422).[26] In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's early twentieth-century *Herland*-trilogy, Booker then sees the “beginning of a fullblown [sic.] feminist utopian tradition“ (338). This tradition, according to Raffaella Baccolini (2000; 2004) and Tom Moylan (2000)[27], experienced a revival in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, before a general shift to the right in the 1980s and 1990s led to what has been called the "dystopian turn" in Anglo-American science fiction (Baccolini (2004) 520).

With the onset of the second wave of feminism in the 1960s, Marion Spies observes that women and feminist writers created feminist utopias in which they depicted areas of everyday life that they felt could not develop as expected in the past and that they felt needed to be radically changed (143). The themes of these utopias, according to Spies, most commonly include ecofeminism,[28] the female body as a body in its own right, and the downfall of male-dominated social

[26] The literary work of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, written in the second half of the nineteenth century, is not utopian or dystopian in itself, but her most famous work, *The Gates Ajar* (1868), incorporates elements of science fiction. The novel, like her later major novel *The Silent Partner* (1871), was a reaction to the devastation and loss of life caused by the American Civil War, Duquette explains (418). Phelps's “depiction of an embodied heaven, complete with middle-class comforts like strawberries and pianos, resonated with Americans reeling from the carnage of the Civil War, eager for the reassurance that they would be reunited with their loved ones eventually“ (ibid.). The belief expressed in the text in an earth-like afterlife in which people retain their physical form and can enjoy earthly pleasures can be read as spiritual science fiction. For more information on the life and work of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, see E. Duquette & C. Tevlin (Eds.). *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps*. Lincoln, NE: UP Nebraska, 2014.

[27] Discussed in Moylan, Tom. “'Look into the dark': On Dystopia and the *Novum*.“ *Learning from Other Worlds Estrangement, Cognition, and the Politics of Science Fiction and Utopia*, ed. by Patrick Parrinder, Liverpool UP, 2000, pp. 51-71.

[28] Ecofeminism (also called ecological feminism) focuses entirely on the relationship between women and nature and the extent to which both suffer in patriarchal societies ("Ecofeminism"). The importance of nature to human survival is also clearly addressed in some of the works mentioned in this dissertation, with Atwood's work also being re-examined from this perspective, for example in Allison Dunlap's “Eco-Dystopia: Reproduction and Destruction in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*“ (*The Journal of Ecocriticism*, 5 (1), 2013, pp. 1-15). Ecofeminist ideas are likely to become a much more widely debated topic again in the coming years as climate change intensifies and is felt more acutely throughout the world, and especially in Western cultures. Ecofeminists have long argued that gender inequality is linked to the ongoing environmental crisis, making it more relevant than ever (Bove). Further insight on the topic offers Douglas A. Vakoch’s (ed.) recently published anthology *Dystopias and utopias on earth and beyond - feminist ecocriticism of science fiction* (Routledge, London & New York, 2021).

hierarchies (145). Feminist writers use this literary and social ideal to create a world in which they are the designers of a world that is not shaped and controlled by patriarchal social structures that restrict their lives and exert control over their bodies. The feminist utopia, Donawerth and Kolmerten conclude, as well as its counterpart, the feminist dystopia, work to advance feminist critiques of much of Western culture, rather than limiting themselves to critiques of specific social or domestic practices (10).

Carol Pearson highlights that the classic feminist utopias, up to the 1970s before they morphed into critical dystopias during the second wave of feminism, had a great deal of thematic crossover, such as absolute freedom from fear of rape or assault (51). These utopias share the abolition of class structure and (or) racial distinctions. Without the distinction of gender roles, Pearson continues, there is simply no social model for a relationship in which one person dominates another (ibid.).[29] This breaking down of traditional gender roles, Pearson argues, coincides with the feminist drive to eliminate the illegitimacy of children and the denunciation of unwed mothers, while establishing a natural equality between the two sexes (50-51). It is proof of how feminist writers reinvent ritual and tradition by changing the focus of the ritual action and the ritual agent. But Pearson also notes that women adopted the ideal, loving, and nurturing principles of the domestic sphere that patriarchy has branded them with and used them to create an equal and just feminist utopia (52). Women's utopian societies therefore have a tendency to extend the small unit of the nuclear family to a larger group of people who freely choose to live together, creating a form of peaceful anarchy. As a result of the dissolution of the family as the smallest social unit, Pearson sees the fact that children no longer have a surname that ties them to their parents, which is a solution to the problem of illegitimate children in a society (50-51).

This form of political organization, Pearson continues, is common in the genre because in such societies order is maintained not by force but by persuasion (Pearson 54). It is thus not kings and legislators who assume the role of law

[29] This kind of purely harmonious, equal and female-based society is illustrated by Gilman's utopia *Herland.* The novel describes a society in which a small group of women survive first a war and then a natural disaster, and then defy the laws of nature by founding a new race through immaculate conception triggered by the worship of a goddess. However, the term "equal" should be used with caution in relation to Gilman's novel, since for Gilman it means only the equality of white women; a problematic portrayal of a feminist idea that will be discussed in-depth in the chapter on *Herland*.

enforcers, but the community as a whole, made up of caring and empathetic mothers. As a result, the citizens of such societies are treated like children: They are all educated and loved, "encouraged by example and discussion to grow and experiment, but are cautioned to avoid actions which could destroy or damage them" (ibid.). Stereotypical human relationships have been replaced by the concept of free love, and at the same time every kind of sexual taboo has been abolished, with the distinct exception of rape, Pearson notes (56). The idea, common in the Western world, of entering into a love relationship with a member of the opposite sex to complete two incomplete individuals does not apply in this kind of utopian society. Men and women can freely enter into any kind of relationship, regardless of how short or long term the relationship will be or what gender the participants have. Consequently, Pearson argues, with the abolition of gender socialization and classification comes the end of dualistic thinking (57).

In the 1980s, the traditional utopian impulse lost its force, but the oppositional and critical potential of science fiction was rediscovered and revitalized by authors such as Octavia Butler and Ursula K. Le Guin. These writers, Baccolini (2004) argues, “turned to dystopian strategies to come to terms with the decade’s silencing and co-opting of utopia“ (520). The writings produced during this period by mostly feminist authors are critical and ambiguous, Baccolini points out, and became a preferred form of expression of struggle and resistance for these writers (ibid.). The dystopias of Butler, Atwood, Le Guin, and their feminist contemporaries differed from traditional dystopias in that they resisted closure and left hope for readers and protagonists: “the ambiguous, open endings maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work“ (ibid.). These critical utopias/dystopias with their tendencies to blur genre lines represent a site of resistance, Baccolini explains in “Gender and Genre in the Feminist Critical Dystopias of Katharine Burdekin, Margaret Atwood, and Octavia Butler“ ((2000) 30). In other words, the strong feminist utopian tradition that Keith Booker saw developing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did not disappear toward the end of the century, but reemerged in the disguise of the critical feminist dystopia.[30]

[30] Although Baccolini sees the full flowering of critical feminist dystopia in the 1980s and 1990s, she acknowledges in "Gender and Genre in the Feminist Critical Dystopias of Katharine Burdekin, Margaret Atwood, and Octavia Butler" that there are earlier examples such as Katharine Burdekin's 1937 Swastika Night (13).

2.1.3 The Feminist Dystopia

Just as the feminist utopia derives from the classical utopia, feminist dystopian narrative originated from the classical dystopia. The classic dystopia, Vieira notes, like the eutopia and other utopian subtypes, is a neologism derived from the word utopia (3). Dystopian visions have proliferated in literature, especially during the twentieth century, as a reaction to the catastrophic events of the century. Gregory Claeys sees humanity's apparent drive towards self-destruction as the cause that led to dystopian narratives which sharply satirized and criticized existing social structures. In literature, he argues, this was often achieved through the depiction of extremely exaggerated conservative societies ((2010) 107).

In a very broad sense, the dystopian idea can be described as "a fictional portrayal of a society in which evil, or negative social and political developments, have the upper hand […]" (Claeys (2010) 107). In literature it can also be used to satirize utopian ideas and societies by exposing their fallacies (ibid.). The beginnings of dystopia are traced by Gregory Claeys to the apocalyptic visions of antiquity and thus have existed since at least 1000 BC ((2017) 4).[31] Although the term dystopia has only been in common and public use since the twentieth century, Claeys notes that it was already introduced by Jon Stuart Mill during a parliamentary debate in the late nineteenth century ((2010) 107), underlining the political origin of dystopia.[32] After the dystopian idea found its way into politics and later into literature, scholars increasingly questioned the core ideas of utopian societies and pointed out their inherent dystopian character:

> the desire to create a much improved society in which human behavior was dramatically superior to the norm implies an intrinsic drift towards

[31] In the last decade, scholarly interest in the apocalyptic and especially the post-apocalyptic representation of society in literature has increased. For more information, see Diletta De Cristofaro's *The Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Novel: Critical Temporalities and the End Times* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019) and Eckart Voigts and Alessandra Boller's *Dystopia, Science Fiction, Post-Apocalypse: Classics - New Tendencies - Model Interpretations* (ed. Eckart Voigts. Band 17. Trier: WVT, Wiss. Verl. Trier, 2015).

[32] Unlike its counterpart, utopia, however, when dystopia is invoked, it is usually used as a synonym for dystopian literature, as Claeys ((2017) 5) notes. That dystopia also occurs outside of literature has been explained by Ruth Levitas, who points to the apocalyptic and dystopian-like state of the planet in the 1980s (Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, Syracuse UP, 1990, 195). For a more detailed discussion of the development of dystopia, see Gregory Claeys' *A Natural History: A Study of Modern Despotism, Its Antecedents, and Its Literary Diffractions*. 1st Ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

> punitive methods of controlling behavior which inexorably results in some form of police state. (Claeys (2010) 108)

The utopian impulse is inherently dystopian when taken to extremes and striving for the perfect society, revealing the close connection between the two seemingly contradictory value systems. Since perfection can never be achieved, Claeys argues, any society that does not conform to this ideal would have to be considered flawed and inadequate (ibid.).

Generally, however, Claeys understands utopia not as aiming at mere perfection, but as already being content with significantly improved social behavior and conditions, thus detaching the utopian ideal from its totalitarian and dystopian potential ((2010) 109). Nevertheless, this discussion raises the question of whether or not there can be finite definitions of the utopian and dystopian ideal. The fact is that both utopia and dystopia are highly subjective concepts and therefore rarely, if ever, mean the same thing to two different people, just like the utopian ideals of one culture can be the dystopian ideas of another. Since this thesis focuses on literature from the Western cultural sphere, the categorization of utopia and dystopia follows the general moral and ethical expectations of twentieth and twenty-first century Western civilization.

Unlike feminist utopias, which have the potential to show what an ideal society with complete equality between the sexes might look like, the feminist dystopia turns this vision on its head, usually by portraying a society in which a patriarchal government takes away women's rights, resulting in the oppression of women. The exploration of identity is especially prominent in the feminist dystopia which often focuses on sexuality and the relation between the genders as the central element to the conflict between individual desire and societal demand, as Keith Booker remarks (337). Donawerth believes that feminist dystopian visions are most effective when they take into account the reality of current political and social developments and think them through to their destructive end. They function as an alarm signal to draw attention to the deterioration of women's rights. This might be the reason why the feminist dystopia is still “by far the most popular form women science fiction writers have used“ to express their thoughts and concerns, Donawerth notes in her essay “The Feminist Dystopia of the 1990s: Record of Failure, Midwife of Hope“ (2000 (49)).

Dunja Mohr sees the feminist dystopias written and published in the United States since the 1980s as, in a sense, feminist utopian writing submerged, because the two genres constitute an interactive hemisphere instead of two distinct poles ((2007) 7). These texts, she continues, form a utopian-dystopian continuum in which utopian and dystopian narrative strands interweave (ibid.). Furthermore, in her monograph *Worlds Apart - Dualism and Transgression in Contemporary Feminist Dystopias* (2005), Mohr argues that contemporary feminist utopias and dystopias exhibit transgressive features and therefore form a new sub-genre: the "transgressive utopian dystopias" (3). She believes that the notion of dualisms and clear genre boundaries has excluded many literary works from a canon that favors and includes only a select few novels (1). Especially with regard to the supposed absence of feminist utopian literature in the twenty-first century, Mohr explains that feminist utopias are in fact not absent, but only present themselves in a different form. Both the feminist utopia and the dystopia aim to improve the situation of women in the world, but use different approaches and ways of thinking to do so. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan share this perspective and refer to what Mohr calls the "transgressive utopian dystopias" as critical dystopia. According to Moylan, in the twenty-first century, the critical dystopia has even been identified as a new force of utopian action, offering a space for a new form of political opposition fundamentally based on difference and multiplicity ((2000) 190). Raffaella Baccolini agrees with Moylan, arguing that “[u]topia is maintained in dystopia, traditionally a bleak, depressing genre with no space for hope in the story, only *outside* the story: only by considering dystopia as warning can we as readers hope to escape such a dark future“ ((2004) 520). Here Baccolini emphasizes the potential of critical dystopia for social change, for by rejecting the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel, the critical dystopia opens up a space of contestation and contradiction for those groups, like women and other marginalized groups, for whom subject status has yet to be achieved in the hegemonic order (ibid.).

2.2 Text Corpus

The corpus under consideration spans the period from the early twentieth century to the twenty-first century, encompassing all three pivotal phases of the

North American women's movement. The temporal scope, extending over a century of feminist literary production, is a deliberate choice aimed at facilitating an elucidation of the evolution and metamorphosis of feminist ideologies and the associated rituals within the examined literary works. The discourse commences with an exploration of a seminal feminist work that underwent scrutiny amidst the evolving moral ethos of the women's movement in the twentieth century. As posited by Keith Booker (338), Charlotte Perkins Gilman's utopian novel, *Herland* (1915), is widely acknowledged as the genesis of the North American utopian-feminist literary tradition. The succeeding installment in the series, the dystopian narrative *With Her in Ourland* (1916), in conjunction with the antecedent to *Herland*, *Moving the Mountain* (1911), constitutes a trilogy by Gilman. Within this trilogy, *Herland* occupies a distinctive role, serving as a medium through which Gilman effectively demonstrated to a broader readership the potential for the establishment and operation of a cultured and harmonious society when guided by women's ingenuity. *With Her in Ourland* delineates a contrasting paradigm to the utopian setting of *Herland*, as Gilman therein elucidates the actualities of global living conditions amid the backdrop of the First World War. The novel depicts the horrors of war, but especially highlights the burden of women in this world and its various societies. Because of this dichotomy and the now controversial use of racial ideology and eugenics in Gilman's fictional feminist writings, it will be interesting to discuss her work in the context of contemporary feminist writings more than one hundred years after its publication. The emphasis lies on rituals associated with motherhood, and in the latter part of the chapter, these are juxtaposed with Octavia Butler's portrayal of rituals linked to procreation and motherhood. Both narratives unfold in an alien environment, facilitating an analysis that transcends conventional human experiences and provides space for the comparison of two feminist narratives focused on motherhood from two different feminist eras.

Octavia Butler's short story "Bloodchild" "reflects on the extent to which patriarchal cultures find it necessary to use ideology, violence, and oppression to force women to participate in "natural" reproduction", as Michelle Erica Green notes in an essay on Butler's work (171). In the case of „Bloodchild", the burden of conception, pregnancy, and childbearing falls on men rather than women, reversing the roles of the heteronormative sexual ritual prevalent in Western culture. This is in stark contrast to the fixed and archaic gender roles often

discussed in feminist dystopias. Butler herself uses three different labels to describe the nature of her short story: she calls it a love story, a coming-of-age story, and her “pregnant man story“ (30). Butler's depiction of the dangers a boy takes on to essentially gestate the offspring of an alien species fits with the focus on medical issues that black American feminist writers tend to pursue, as Esther Jones notes (4). In this way, Jones argues, Butler's work is in a tradition of black women writers who “have long been aware of the complex nexus of personal health, larger societal problems and the challenge of locating the kind of medical care that attends to their needs as whole persons […]“ (ibid.). Hence, the aspect of Butler's African American heritage assumes pivotal significance in the comparative analysis of her short story with Gilman's novel, as it underscores a stark juxtaposition between Gilman's white supremacist first-wave feminism and the diversity-centric second-wave feminism prevalent during Butler's era. Butler's depiction of the dangers to a "birthing" male and female seduction prior to conception thus illustrates societal expectations of the intimate female performances of pregnancy and childbearing, which are far more life-threatening in the United States, particularly for black women, than for white women.[33] The two texts thus represent opposite ends of feminist thought: the first focusing on exclusion and white supremacy, the second on inclusion and diversity.

The second chapter takes a closer look at the oppression of women and female resistance to this oppression in two feminist dystopias from the 1980s and one from the twenty-first century. Sheri Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country* (1988) is a novel that blends different genre conventions and thus, Baccolini argues, “resists genre purity in favor of a hybrid text that renovates dystopian

[33] Over the past decade, numerous studies have been published highlighting the discrimination against black women in health care, i.e. Kristin D Mickelson (et al.). “Role of discrimination and resilience on birth weight: A systematic examination in a sample of Black, Latina, and White women“. *Women’s Health Magazine*, Sage Publications, 24 March 2022, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/17455057221093927. In December 2021, the U.S. Population Reference Bureau (PRB) also released a new study showing that black women who live and give birth in the U.S. are five times more likely to die from pregnancy-related blood pressure disorders and other medically preventable conditions than white women (https://www.prb.org/resources/black-women-over-three-times-more-likely-to-die-in-pregnancy-postpartum-than-white-women-new-research-finds/. Accessed online: 10 November 2022.). In the 1990s, when Butler published *Bloodchild*, the maternal mortality rate for black women was 18.6 (per 100,000 births), compared with 5.7 for white women, according to a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) publication (https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00035538.htm. Accessed online: 10 November 2022). These numbers illustrate why Butler would write a story about the deadly dangers of childbirth.

science fiction by making it politically and formally oppositional“ ((2004) 520). Moylan and Baccolini interpret this blending of genres as a key feature of the feminist critical dystopia of the 1980s and 1990s.[34] Wendy Pearson points to the use of science fiction elements in the novel but also draws attention to its homophobic and misandrist elements apart of the radically feminist agenda of the novel (200). She sees the reason for this in the social debates of the time the novel was written, noting that literature written in a homophobic and heteronormative environment reproduces key elements of contemporary mainstream culture (ibid.). Just as Gilman's radical views on eugenics and genetic engineering are reflected in *Herland*, Tepper does not shy away from using eugenics as the basis for building a new, "improved" population.[35] In this regard, Wendy Pearson describes Tepper's futuristic society as an "asexual future of a Women's Country in which there are only women and servitors, and in which men and homosexuals have vanished along with all the other non-domesticable species“ (203). Daphne Patai believes that feminist utopians like Tepper use the word "woman" as a synonym for the entire human species, placing women at the centre of humanity and thus turning patriarchal ideology completely on its head (182). As a result, Patai continues, their feminist utopias claim the status of the non-existent perfect world: the perfect, unattainable place is not simply a neutral place, but it must be feminist to achieve the perfection it strives for.

Diverging from Butler, Tepper adopts a more radical stance in her approach to feminist writing, despite both novels being shaped by the same feminist wave. Nevertheless, their substantive examination of feminist ideas exhibit stark contrasts, adding considerable value to the analysis of these two texts within the context of this study. Tepper pinpoints the nature of men as the main driver of social unrest and inequality and seeks to correct this through strict control of sexuality. In the novel, sexual intercourse is often merely a means to an end, performed twice a year during the carnival season, reduced to its sole function of

[34] The book by Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan (eds.) *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (USA: NY, Routledge, 2003) sheds more light on the subject of science fiction and the development of critical dystopia at the end of the twentieth century.

[35] Gilman's problematic ideology will be further discussed in Part II, Chapter I, but was also thoroughly explored by Alys Eve Weinbaum in her article *Writing Feminist Genealogy: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Racial Nationalism, and the Reproduction of Maternalist Feminism* (Feminist Studies, 2001, Vol. 27, No. 2, JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3178758. Accessed online: 16 October 2022.).

(monitored) procreation. Her dystopia is valuable to the discussion in this dissertation because its ideological congruence with Gilman's utopia is striking, and values such as ingenuity, calculation, and a certain amount of ruthlessness are portrayed as positive traits in women that will repopulate the earth with peaceful and sensible people. The novel presents the images of men and women typical in Western culture as opposing forces, with the former seen as destructive and reactionary and the latter as reasonable and future oriented. While Tepper perpetuates stereotypical classifications and characteristics of gender, she simultaneously breaks with them by placing women in political charge, allowing them to exercise complete population control. The rituals depicted in the novel, which are used in the three different societies, are connected by a radicalism that serves the rulers in each society to consolidate their power. Hence, although these societies are very different, their radical approaches to ritual as a means of social control are quite similar.

In comparison to Tepper, the second novel in this chapter, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), creates a contrasting social environment in which women are completely deprived of agency. The novel focuses on the relationship between women and their bodies and the loss of their autonomy over the same in an extremely conservative religious social climate and a political leadership that deprives women of any freedoms. The theocratic regime of the novel defines and controls the female body only as a means to repopulate Gilead after the birth rate has dropped drastically. The Gilead regime's control over the female body goes hand in hand with ritual performances designed to manifest women's subordinate position in society. These performances will be the focus of the chapter on Atwood's novel, as they provide insight into the ways in which the regime oppresses women. Furthermore, due to its status as a feminist classic and its importance during Donal Trump's presidency as a means of expressing American women's realpolitik protest, the novel offers analytical value in terms of the ritual structures used by the regime.

Christina Dalcher's novel *Vox* (2018), the third novel in the chapter, is similar in plot and structure to Atwood's novel and can as such be seen as a reinterpretation of *The Handmaid's Tale* set in the twenty-first century. Both novels deal with the extreme subjugation of women and the use of language in the context of ritual acts, although Dalcher addresses this subject much more directly in her

novel. Both regimes restrict women's ability to communicate with their environment through language to isolate and thus control them. The protagonist in Dalcher's novel is not only a neurolinguistic scientist, but the very title of the novel alludes to the central theme of the narrative, as "vox" translates to "voice" in Latin. Regarding the importance of language Ildney Cavalcanti points out that "[c]ontemporary feminist dystopias overtly thematize the linguistic construction of gender domination by telling stories about language as instrument of both (men's) domination and (women's) liberation" (152), arguing that "[l]inguistic control and the enforcement of strict linguistic normativity symbolically stand in for other forms of social (ideological, political, institutional) control" (ibid.). Language and the ability to use it freely are therefore essential to liberal societies, and restricting it can have severe consequences. Because of this fact and the novel's connection to Atwood's classic, it is worth looking at *Vox* in terms of the employment of ritual in a twenty-first century setting. While in *The Handmaid's Tale* a strict language norm is used as a form of social control, in *Vox* a monitor on the wrist of women and girls is used to police the number of words they are allowed to utter per day, limiting them to only one hundred.[36] The patriarchal ideologies presented in Atwood's and Dalcher's novels linguistically manipulate and dominate women in their respective societies which also relates to the way rituals are performed, considering that language can play an important role in ritual performances. The ways in which language, in its written and spoken forms, influences women's self-understanding in the context of ritual will thus be the subject of this chapter.

Aside from the critical dystopia, another prominent part of the canon of feminist speculative literature is literature for young adults. The third chapter is devoted, therefore, to Veronica Roth's *Divergent* (2011), the first novel in her trilogy set in post-apocalyptic Chicago. In contrast to the other novels within the selected text corpus, Roth's trilogy is not so much focused on sex and sexuality, but rather on political issues, initiation rites, social belonging, and injustice. This fact makes the analysis of the novel interesting, as it provides an insight into the rituals that

[36] Cavalcanti further points out that the ways in which women have been silenced by men over the centuries are numerous, such as "[s]trongly regulated forms of address and turn-taking; enforced use of formulaic or contrived speech (sometimes reaching the extreme circumstance in which the female protagonist has to communicate by following a script); prohibition of access to public speech, reading and/or writing, specially creative writing; denial of representation in political forums; or, more effectively, the cutting out of women's tongues" (152).

are primarily significant for young female readers. Keith Booker stresses that feminist dystopian literature usually emphasizes patriarchal oppression, highlights the destructive nature of male-led regimes and focuses on sexuality and relation between the genders (337). However, Roth does not make this the central theme of her *Divergent*-trilogy. In fact, gender stereotypes and gender inequality are not even mentioned in the novels, as gender parity prevails in this fictional society. Therefore, the feminism of the novel is expressed primarily in the absence of female oppression depicted. In *Divergent*, women and men are portrayed with equal potential for strength, military skill, and compassion, but also with potential for destruction and tyranny. That the hero of the novel is a young woman fighting for more democratic values in general, rather than against the one-sided oppression of women, emphasizes the narrative's underlying feminism, in which it is normal that young women fight for justice alongside men. This facet of Roth's trilogy makes the novel intriguing for examination in this thesis, as it offers a distinctive and captivating portrayal of feminism within the selected literary corpus.

Divergent foregrounds the importance of initiation rituals in young adult literature, where teenagers can even be completely excluded from society and disowned by their families if they fail the initiation process. Successfully passing the rituals determines the fate and lives of the initiates, who are willing to pass any test, no matter the cost, even accepting possible physical injury or death. This reckless and sometimes even self-destructive behavior is not uncommon in young adult fiction. Brutal initiation rituals, in one form or another, up to the point of a fight for life and death are central points in the *Divergent* series.[37] The initiation ritual is linked to the idea that the human body must change physically as well as mentally

[37] Feminist young adult literature of the last twenty years features young heroines who must survive dangerous, archaic, and patriarchal rituals to not only save their own lives, but also - figuratively - fight to save (or liberate) their entire society. Cheryl Cowdy notes that in Western culture, female self-mutilation, or the willingness to accept it as a means of initiation and ultimately transformation, has been a common theme since the Grimm fairy tales and found its way into Disney films such as *The Little Mermaid* (43). In the story about *The Little Mermaid*, the mermaid accepts the loss of her voice and severe pain throughout her body when her tail turns into human legs, symbolizing the transition from one stage of life to the next. And in the fairy tale of *Cinderella*, the two sisters cut off their toes to put their feet into shoes too small for their feet in the hope that the prince will take one of them as his bride and transform their lives from ordinary to extraordinary. It is clear, then, Cowdy concludes, that pain and initiation rites have a long history of symbiosis (ibid.). Cheryl Cowdy goes into further detail about this connection in her article "Resistant Rituals: Self-Mutilation and the Female Adolescent Body in Fairy Tales and Young Adult Fiction."

to be worthy of transformation, even if this means having to endure pain and physical violence.

The fourth and final chapter of the dissertation looks at one more feminist dystopia, Lidia Yuknavitch's *The Book of Joan* (2017) and Marge Piercy's feminist utopian-dystopian novel *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976). Because Yuknavitch's book is a relatively recent novel, little research has been published on *The Book of Joan*. Especially in comparison to Piercy's novel, regarded as one of the classics of feminist speculative literature, the number of publications on Yuknavitch's work is small. Both novels, however, have in common a focus on environmental destruction by humanity which Soraya Copley already thoroughly discussed in the context of Piercy's (as well as Atwood's) work in her article "Rereading Marge Piercy and Margaret Atwood: Eco-feminist Perspectives on Nature and Technology". Copley argues that women, oppressed by patriarchy for centuries and contained within the domestic sphere, have the potential for political subversion because, unlike men, they are not interested in maintaining the status quo (54). Copley, who sees patriarchal capitalism as the driving force behind the destruction of the planet and its environment, sees a connection between empowering women and saving the planet (ibid.).[38] The juxtaposition of a feminist environmental dystopia from the 1970s with one from the twenty-first century, along with the rituals linked to the critique of gender discrimination and environmental degradation, illuminates shifts in societal attitudes over the preceding decades. Female agency and ritualistic gender performance, as well as societal expectations of them in the context of environmental degradation, are foregrounded in both narratives. Moreover, both narratives explore societies devoid of gender distinctions, having forsaken conventional social constructs of gender for unique reasons and depicting these gender-neutral environments with considerable variation. In Piercy's novel, the rituals serve to promote social equality and gender neutrality, while in Yuknavitch's novel they contribute to social inequality and body distortion, juxtaposing two opposing worldviews that are still vigorously debated today.

[38] Anna Martinson's "Ecofeminist Perspectives on Technology in Science Fiction of Marge Piercy" (*Extrapolation*, Vol. 44, No. 1, 2003, pp. 50-68) further seeks to explore humanity's need to cope with the ever-advancing development of new technologies by looking at science fiction novels, and in particular science fiction novels written by women, that specifically address the intersection of gender and technology.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Ritual Studies

The modern academic field of “Ritual Studies“ emerged in the 1970s in the United States and is an interdisciplinary platform for the academic, critical, and systematic study of ritual, Paul Post explains ((2022) 743). The first concept of ritual, however, was introduced in the nineteenth century in connection with religious worship and to “identify what was then believed to be a universal category of human experience“ (Bell (1992) 14). This is what Paul Post considers the first of three distinct stages of development in the field of ritual studies. The second stage began in the 1960s, when rituals moved away from solely focusing on religion and were instead seen as an entry point into the study of a particular culture. The third phase, Post continues, began with the twenty-first century, when the field of ritual studies became incorporated “in a broad range of studies, including cultural memory studies, media and communication studies, death studies, leisure studies, material religion studies, migration studies, and many others“ ((2015) 1). This was the result of various disciplines being interconnected and integrated into large, multidisciplinary thematic complexes (ibid.). This “canon“, Post argues, offers “a strong theoretical foundation, a cross-cultural and comparative perspective, and an academic tradition which produces book series, journals, congresses, research programs“ ((2022) 743). In other words, the field of ritual studies in the twenty-first century is very diverse and has been integrated into other academic fields.

In this new diverse approach to ritual, Cheyney explains, questions about the content of rituals were re-evaluated by asking how symbolic activities used in rituals enable participants to appropriate, modify or reframe cultural values and ideas (522). Gavin Brown, like Post, also attributes this development to “a 'cross-fertilization' among a number of disciplines including anthropology, sociology, theatre and drama studies, religious studies, literary theory, and history“ (3). Brown, just like Alexander (2004 & 2011) and Post (2015 & 2022), also emphasizes an inherently interdisciplinary approach to ritual studies because ritual analysis is in itself interdisciplinary (ibid.). Over the last three decades, the study of ritual “has been reconfigured in a steady procession of theoretical movements from

functionalism and structuralism to more culturally linguistically centered approaches utilizing semiotics and practice theory“ (ibid.). In other words, Brown confers, ritual studies has moved away from trying to figure out what rituals can say about things other than ritual, i.e. mythology and religion, to focus more on what rituals themselves represent or achieve (ibid.). As a result of this shift, various fields of research related to ritual analysis emerged, including the aforementioned performance approach to ritual studies. Researchers from various fields (Schechner 1988, Brown 2003, Alexander 2004 & 2011) argue for the deep and natural connection between ritual and performance and believe that they have a deeper meaning for society. Figuring out what this meaning may be in relation to the representation of ritual in feminist utopias and dystopias is the overarching goal of this study.

The growth of the academic discipline of Ritual Studies since the mid-twentieth century is reflected, for one, in the establishment of the *Journal of Ritual Studies* in 1987, co-edited and published by Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew J. Strathern. As a collaborative couple, Stewart (Strathern) and Strathern have contributed extensively to the field of Ritual Studies and together have published more than 50 books, hundreds of articles, and a series of books on Ritual Studies in particular.[39] Also, the aforementioned formation of the Collaborative Research Center in 2002 at the University of Heidelberg conducted research on ritual dynamics for more than 10 years and greatly contributed to new realizations in the field. Axel Michaels and Dietrich Harth payed attention in particular to the interdisciplinary nature of ritual. They believe that to “read“ and interpret rituals as texts is one thing, but to analyze them from the point of view of 'scenic' performance with all the implications of staging, mimesis, dramaturgy, body language, scenery, props, and décor in general, is a far more complex process that also calls for new instruments on a methodological level (10). In their Collaborative Research Center, Michaels and Harth gave priority to those approaches that view ritual action as a complex process involving scripture, staging, and bodily expression (14). They also noted that there is a lack of cross-cultural comparative studies and of such long-

[39] This description is part of the "Notes on Contributors" of their 2021 anthology *The Palgrave Handbook of Anthropological Ritual Studies* (Switzerland, Springer Nature).

term studies that would have allowed them to observe ritual change in both micro- and macro-historical perspectives (ibid.).[40]

Outside of this research cluster, numerous scholars have made important contributions to this specific academic discourse. In this respect, Ronald Grimes in particular stands out as he has produced numerous studies since the 1990s, most notably *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* (1982), *Deeply into the Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passages* (2000) and *The Craft of Ritual Studies* (2014). In *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, Grimes offers an academic handbook for approaching ritual in terms of methodology and case studies, while in *Deeply into the Bone* his focus is on the adaptation of rituals in the form of rites of passage to modern societies. Furthermore, Catherine Bell's collection of essays *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (1992) needs mentioning because it changed the framework for understanding the nature and function of ritual, as Diane Jonte-Pace notes in her preface to the 2009 book edition.[41] Paul Post has also contributed a large amount of research to the nature of the study of ritual and to contemporary developments in the field, most recently with his two essays of the same title but different content, "Ritual Studies" (2015) in the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* and "Ritual Studies" (2022) in the *International Handbook of Practical Theology*. The essays address the general nature of ritual, its properties and variations, and recent developments in the field of ritual studies. Edited by Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew J. Strathern, *The Palgrave Handbook of Anthropological Ritual Studies* (2021) is the most recent and comprehensive work of its kind in the field of Ritual Studies. It contains synoptic and innovative analyses of a wide range of topics and theories while also considering the many disciplines that the field comprises.

The shift from a purely religious and anthropological perspective to a more comprehensive approach that includes aspects of other fields of research at the start of the twenty-first century brought, among other things, the aspect of performance to the center of attention and analysis of rituals. Since this dissertation's methodological approach to analyzing feminist speculative fiction is based on the performative act of rituals, this next chapter provides an overview of

[40] For more information on the project, see Heidelberg University's homepage at http://www.ritualdynamik.de/index.php?id=1&L=1.
[41] Jonte-Pace, Diane. "Foreword: Notes on a Friendship", Catherine Bell (ed.), *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. vii–xi.

this particular modern area of ritual studies. In addition, the beginnings of ritual analysis are discussed and an attempt is made to provide a definition of ritual that can be used to outline and identify the ritual processes in the primary literature of this dissertation.

3.2 Ritual Theory

Over the course of the development of ritual studies, several definitions of ritual have been developed and used in a number of academic disciplines.[42] Human rituals in modern and developed societies tend to be more complex, involving multi-layered performances with intricate social interactions, making a definition even more improbable. Because there is an enormous amount of ritual types, i.e. religious and secular rituals, rites of rebellion and dramatic performances, Bell argues that it is extremely difficult to determine the centre of a ritual or its boundaries, and a universal definition is hard to maintain (Bell (1992) 69-70). Paul Post agrees, pointing to the ever-changing nature of ritual practices. For Post, rituals are

> a more or less repeatable sequence of action units which take on a symbolic dimension through formalization, stylization, and their situation in place and time. On the one hand, individuals and groups express their ideas and ideals, their mentalities, and identities through these rituals, on the other hand the ritual actions shape, foster, and transform these ideas, mentalities, and identities. (Post (2015) 6)

Post lists numerous characteristics of rituals that illustrate their complexity. He argues that rituals are not based on traditions alone, but can be created anew ((2022) 744). Rituals can be performed by individuals as well as groups and are not limited to large, significant social events, but also take place "silently" in private without anyone observing them ((2022) 745). They can be self-referential, meaning that they do not always have to “refer to something outside of itself, [because] often the performance itself is of central importance“ (ibid.). Post goes on to state that a

[42] This chapter will not attempt to discuss ritual theory in its entirety, as this would go beyond the scope of this thesis. Basic features of the theory as well as important cornerstones will be mentioned here, but without claiming to be exhaustive, as the field of ritual research is large and diverse. The basic theories that are considered necessary for the analysis of Part II are presented in this chapter to give an insight into the diversity of the rituals presented.

ritual is a “colourful hybrid fusion of very different parts and units“ (ibid.) that can take any shape or form. Rituals can bring a community together and have positive effects on its people, but, as Post points out, rituals can also be destructive and harmful, negatively affecting the people involved and the community as a whole ((2022) 753).

In the beginning, research in the field of ritual studies generally belonged to the field of anthropology. As something of a pioneer, in the middle of the twentieth century Victor Turner conducted studies on human rituals and ritualization processes among remote tribes in southern Africa. This research (and that of some of his contemporaries, such as Arnold van Gennep, Mary Douglas, Clifford Geertz, and Roy Rappaport) still forms the basis for modern analysis of anthropological research on human rituals. Turner's major work, written in the mid-twentieth century, influenced many anthropological studies and scholars of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, including Jeffrey C. Alexander. Alexander, in particular, draws much information from the extensive research Turner and his peers conducted in “simpler“ societies, adapting and extending his observations to the social and ritual structures of complex modern societies. In this context, Turner’s concept of "social drama" as a central point of ritual action is considered the basis for the spread of “Ritual Studies“ into the field of “Performance Studies“, as studied by Erving Goffman and Richard Schechner, for example. However, Bell (1992) and Post (2015) have also noted that Turner's work in particular has been critiqued for some time. Turner used a comparative cross-cultural method that was influenced by comparative religious studies and the tradition of anthropological research. The main critique, according to Post, is that “comparative projects [as conducted by Turner et al.] often introduce certain concepts and presuppositions unconsciously and uncritically“ (Post (2015) 6) into the culture under study because “there is always a kind of canon of topics and repertoires [on the part of the observer] that remain in the picture“ (ibid.). Turner's work, however, is still considered an important part of ritual studies, especially because of the extensive contribution Turner made at the beginning of the academic discipline.

For the study of ritual processes in feminist speculative fiction, there will be no focus on the work of a specific anthropologist or sociologist. Rather a variety of approaches to the study of human interactions in the context of social drama and ritual action will be used, reflecting the variety and diversity of the field. The

approaches chosen are explained individually in each chapter after the close reading of each novel, as this is most conducive to understanding the rituals presented in the books. The following chapters examine what Turner and Alexander conceive of ritual processes, highlighting the changes that have taken place since the beginnings of ritual studies and the resulting interdisciplinarity. Turner was one of the forerunners of ritual studies and specifically analyzed “primitive“ societies, while Alexander puts his focus on modern and complex societies, requiring updating and adapting ritual theory from the past to fit the structure and workings of modern societies.

3.3 The Beginnings of Ritual Theory: Victor Turner

In his analytical approach to the study of human ritual processes, Turner used an evolutionary approach to reconstruct the beginnings of human rituals.[43] Richard Schechner, in his introduction to a new edition of Turner's work, summarizes the main points of Turner's approach to ritual studies. There, Schechner points out that Turner distinguishes between genetically fixed rituals as observed in insects and fish, a combination of fixed and free rituals in birds and mammals, and social rituals in non-human primates (11). Above these rituals from the animal kingdom, Schechner continues, human ritualizations are positioned, which are divided into three subcategories: social rituals, religious rituals, and aesthetic rituals (ibid.). Social rituals, it is argued there, occur in everyday life and can be observed at sporting events, amongst other things, while celebrations, observances and rites of passage are classified as religious rituals. Between these two categories, politics as an isolated entity has been placed, as Turner believed it to be located at the intersection of social and religious rituals. The last category, referred to as aesthetic rituals, include so-called codified forms and ad hoc forms of rituals (ibid.). This evolutionary approach, however, is at odds with the classic ethological assumption that considers rituals exclusively as "genetically programmed behavior" (ibid.). Turner, aware of this contradiction, therefore introduced the concept of liminality for the brain itself to resolve this paradox. He assumed that

[43] *The Ritual Process* is considered Victor Turner's most important work, containing his observations of ritual actions and processes among the Ndembu people of northwestern Zambia.(Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969).

“the human brain is a liminal organ operating somewhere between the genetically fixed and the radically free“ (12), this hypothesis forming the base for Turner’s theory on liminality in human ritualistic performances.[44]

Turner’s theory is partly based on the research of Arnold van Gennep whose research stems mainly from the beginning of the twentieth-century. Van Gennep’s work concerns the, what he labeled, “liminal phase of *rites de passage*“ (Turner (1969) 94). Here, a rite of passage is defined as a transition, as a person passes from one state and into another while the person’s status refers to “any type of stable or recurrent condition that is culturally recognized“ (ibid.). This tripartite theory, Turner explains, is subdivided into the phases of separation, margin (or limen), and re-aggregation. In the first phase, the ritual subject, or passenger, usually one or more persons from inside the community, becomes separated from their social group through symbolic actions performed by their fellow men. These symbolic acts signify the subject’s detachment from the social structure and its set of cultural conditions. Afterwards, the liminal phase takes place. During this phase, the passenger’s characteristics are ambiguous as he or she “passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state“ (ibid.). Once the ritual subject has completed this phase, it is time for the phase of reincorporation or re-aggregation. At this point, the passage is accomplished and completed. The traveller regains a stable position and is now expected by the community to behave within the norms of their newly acquired status. Turner concludes that the status of the individual or corporation within the community has changed as a result of the rite of passage and must therefore fulfill the social obligations of this new status (94-95).

In this kind of ritual, the phase of liminality is key to the performative act. The ritual person(s) who go through this ritual are called “liminal personae“ or “threshold people“ (Turner (1969) 95) who step out of the social positions that they occupy in their community for the duration of the ritual act. This factor contributes to the confusing and ambiguous nature of this phase: “liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned by law, custom,

[44] Schechner notes that Turner was unable to complete his studies on the role and influence of the brain on human ritualization due to his sudden death from a heart attack in 1983. Turner's last work dealt with the connection between the body, brain and culture with regard to human ritual performance (8).

convention, and ceremonial“ (ibid.). The liminal stage’s lawlessness thus has been likened to “death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or the moon“ (ibid.).[45] Accordingly, Turner notes that in this phase of the ritual, the liminal subjects must let go of everything that could identify them within their social group, they are either completely naked in this phase or wear paint and masks to symbolize their separation from the outside world (95). At this stage, these people no longer have any social status or possessions, their connections and relationships with their fellow human beings are cut until they reunite with them at the end of the ritual.

Cheyney points out that this type of ritual analysis was developed by Turner, van Gennep, and Geertz in the 1960s, who founded the semantic (or semiotic) schools of ritual analysis (521). In summary, their approaches "emphasize a ritual-as-language analogy that highlights the role of communication - or the ideas, values and attitudes that rituals embody and convey" (521-22). In contrast to the ritual models of Turner and his contemporaries, Cheyney notes rituals based on performance models tend to focus on the ritual participant as an active rather than passive actor and on the actor as an active constructor of the ritual message as opposed to a mere receiver of the ritual message (ibid.). These theories are based on the idea that "participants actively create rituals and use them to change their world" (ibid.), an interpretation that Jeffrey Alexander shares and whose theory of cultural pragmatics is discussed next.

3.4 Cultural Pragmatics - A New View on Ritual and Ritualistic Processes

In his approach to ritual analysis, Alexander sees people not as passive objects to whom life simply happens, but as active agents who construct their lives in the context of their cultural background ((2011) 6). In doing so, he believes that people continuously adapt their courses of action in pragmatic and meaningfully distinctive ways (ibid.). Alexander regards this as an interpretation of social structures in modern Western societies, which can be understood as a modernized

[45] Interestingly, bisexuality as a sexual orientation was also compared to the liminal phase of rituals, indicating the prevailing cultural gender bias that only heterosexual orientations and relationships were considered normal.

definition, adapted to contemporary times, of what anthropologists described at the beginning of the twentieth century when observing social processes in Central African societies: ritual processes in societies. Alexander argues that the cultural structures that define and continually reinvent people are very powerful as they provide the background representations for active social life (5). In his studies on cultural pragmatics, Alexander refers to and elaborates on the concept of symbolic action, first introduced by Victor Turner, Clifford Geertz, and Arnold van Gennep. In their research, Alexander states, they wanted to "draw attention to the specifically cultural character of activities, the manner in which they are expressive rather than instrumental, irrational rather than rational, more like theatrical performance than economic exchange" (8).

Alexander notes that much of his theory is based on Kenneth Burke, who introduced the concept of symbolic action in tribal communities, while Clifford Geertz further developed the same theme in the second half of the twentieth century ((2011) 7-8). Both wanted to draw attention to the specifically cultural character of certain social activities. Alexander argues, however, that given complex modern societies, in the decades following their research, it is meaning rather than action that should be the focus of discussion about cultural performance. Meaning, he explains, has a specific structure, and therefore cultural meaning is as potent as power, money, and status, the key traditional sociological concepts (8). Accordingly, Alexander believes it is imperative to investigate what makes meaning so important and what makes certain social actions and performances meaningful in the first place (ibid.). In this regard, Alexander states that "a sign's meaning derives from its relations - metaphorical, metonymic, synecdochic - to other signs in a system of sign relations, or language" (10). These signs and their meanings can only be meaningful in a particular cultural community where all members share the same background and values. Alexander refers to the example of actors on a stage who try to play their roles as well as possible by capturing the meanings of cultural structures (11). Meaning, Alexander argues, "is the product of relations between signs in a discursive code or text" (ibid.). It is a dramaturgy that, if it seeks to take meaning seriously, "must account for the cultural codes and texts that structure the cognitive environments in which speech is given form" (ibid.). Dramaturgy, he further explains, emerges from the confluence of hermeneutic, post-structural, and pragmatic theories of meaning's relation to social

action (ibid.). This synergy gives rise to cultural pragmatics, which asserts that "cultural practice must be theorized independently of cultural symbolics, even if fundamentally they remain interrelated" (ibid.).

As shown before, Turner's and Van Gennep's theories of ritual processes describe that all rituals involve liminal moments or phases in which traditional status distinctions dissolve, normative social constraints weaken and a unique form of solidarity or communitas emerges. Through this liminality, Alexander argues, the participating social group can return to an idealized state of simple humanity or, in other words, a community of equals. This dissolution of structure in turn initiates the erosion of the participants' socially constructed selves, allowing them to explore the potency of their "unused evolutionary potential" (Alexander (2011) 18). However, Alexander notes, Turner himself acknowledged that the relationships between ritual producers and audiences in post-industrial societies are more complicated and contingent than in tribal societies (on which he based his studies). The reason for this, Alexander argues, is that post-industrial social actors have a higher degree of interpretive autonomy, as they also have more control over their "solidary [sic.] affiliations" (ibid.). To mitigate the abstract nature of his theory, Alexander believes that Turner introduced the "concept of liminoid [sic.] to represent liminal-*like* moments and communitas-*like* sentiments that post-industrial actors experience in (ritual-*like*) social dramas that are more individualized and entered into more freely" (ibid.).[46]

With the concept of liminality in mind, Alexander sees at the core of either everyday cultural performance or performances for special social events, rituals of various kinds that take center stage. However, just like Post and Bell, he is of the opinion that a uniform definition of ritual is not ideal because of the complexity of the concept. Rituals, as Alexander understands them, are

> episodes of repeated and simplified cultural communication in which the direct partners to a social interaction, and those observing it, share a mutual belief in the descriptive and

[46] Alexander also proposes a modern prospective on cultural sociology as it has now taken a performative turn, whereby the theory of cultural pragmatics interweaves meaning and action in a non-reductive way. Cultural pragmatics is pointing toward culture structures "while recognizing that only through the actions of concrete social actors is meaning's influence realized" (Alexander (2011) 24). He justifies his approach by stating that in our "post-metaphysical world in which institutional and cultural differentiation makes successful symbolic performance difficult to achieve" (ibid.), cultural pragmatics can function as a social scientific response to the conditions of our today's world.

> prescriptive validity of the communication's symbolic contents and accept the authenticity of one another's intentions. (Alexander (2011) 25)

Alexander points out that this shared understanding of intention and content and the intrinsic validity of the interaction are responsible for a ritual's affect and effect. Accordingly, rituals have the power to intensify the connection of the participants and the symbolic objects with the observing audience. The observing audience, asserts Alexander, in this context is the relevant community at large, the society sharing the same cultural background (Alexander (2011) 25). He further states that when considering this definition, it is important to bear in mind that rituals have a different meaning in modern, complex Western societies than in simpler societies, as societies have changed from traditional to value- and goal-oriented societies (26). This means that contemporary societies "have opened themselves to processes of negotiations and reflexivity about means and ends", which not only result in integration, affirmation, and a collective spirit, but also in more conflict, disappointment, and feelings of bad faith (ibid.).

The Western view and understanding of rituals is heavily influenced by anthropological observations made by modernist and colonial thinkers who were impressed by the ritualistic processes that explorers encountered in "uncivilized" and "un-modern" societies (Alexander (2011) 33). Some of them associated the frequency of rituals with the putative purity of early societies while others interpreted ritualistic performances as distinctively primitive or as creating a mystical reality in which something that was invisible to the human eye takes beautiful and actual form; "the automatic, predictable, engulfing, and spontaneous qualities of ritual life was observed" (ibid.). Alexander finds that in earlier societies, rituals "were not so much practices as performances" and thus "they indeed are made of the same stuff as social actions in more complex societies", finding that "all ritual has at its core a performative act" (34). He finds that ritual social acts in particular have the capacity to fuse the various components of performance actors, audiences, representations, means of symbolic production, social power, and *mise-en-scène* (36-37). The affect of rituals, however, as well as the intensity of them varies from one society to the next. In so-called simple societies, for example, rituals play a central role while in more complex societies, rituals feature more strategic, reflexive, and managed forms of symbolic communication (39).

3.5 Gender as Ritualized Performance

Since almost all of the novels in this dissertation focus on gender and thus on ritual gender performances, a brief digression into the field of gender theory shall be given at this point. At the centre of the argumentation that will follow in the relevant chapters is Judith Butler's theory of gender performance and gender constitution. In her work, Butler describes the roles that men and women occupy in society in their daily lives, based on a distinction between the concepts of sex and gender. Butler theorizes that “the acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts“ (J. Butler 521). A gendered body, then, must be seen and interpreted as a deeply rooted character role that every person performs on a daily basis and that also depends very much on a person's cultural background. The male or female body is a “materiality that bears meaning […] and the manner of this bearing is fundamentally dramatic“ (ibid.). By this Butler means that the human body becomes a means of expression: One is not only a body, but one makes one's body (ibid.). This statement leads back to the aspect of drama that is inherent in everyone’s body. The human body, Butler argues, is a reflection surface for the cultural background in which the body exists and lives, referring to the theory of Simone de Beauvoir. Simone de Beauvoir, Butler stresses, already pointed out the historical aspect and perspective of the performance of the body in her mid-twentieth century manifesto *The Second Sex* (1949): the body does, dramatizes, and reproduces the historical situation in which it finds itself (ibid.). The elementary structures of embodiment are the constantly repeating dramatization, reproduction and doing of the body itself, which create the conditions for considering the performance of gender as a continuously performed ritual.

This approach reflects the aspects of social performance that Jeffrey C. Alexander addresses in his analysis of cultural pragmatics in the context of modern social performance, as described above. Alexander defines a ritual as episodes of repeated and simplified cultural communication, which is in line with what Butler interprets as gendered performance. The body and its perception in the world is not “predetermined by some manner of interior essence“, but “its concrete expression in the world must be understood as the taking up and rendering specific

of a set of historical possibilities“ (J. Butler 521). The gendered performance of the body is thus a ritual that is strongly influenced by the social and historical circumstances in which the performance takes place and therefore needs to be contextualized. What was considered a male or female performance in eighteenth century Europe can hardly be compared to the display of the same in the twenty-first century. The overall concept of clothing, often an integral part of rituals, especially for the ritual performance of gender, and which can also function as a ritual itself, changed rapidly over the centuries and with it the perception of what is female or male clothing. Clothing as part of the gender performance therefore has no relevance to the sexual body as such. Being a female human being is simply a facticity without further meaning,

> but to be a woman is to have *become* a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of “woman“, to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project. (522)

What Butler describes as a "repeated corporeal project" is in fact the ritualized performance of gender. This ritual is a performance with the most urgent goal of the performer's "cultural survival" (ibid.), meaning that the correct performance and presentation of one's gender within a particular cultural circle determines whether one is accepted or excluded from one's social circle. Social exclusion can have devastating effects on the individual in any society and lead to social isolation, sometimes even ending in death.[47] Butler describes the correct enactment of gender as the discreet way to enact one's gender, as it is of utmost importance that the enactment appears as natural as possible while hiding one's own genesis of the enactment (ibid.).

The performance of gender can be interpreted in light of what Alexander describes as the shared understanding of intention and content during a ritual process (Alexander (2011) 25; J. Butler 527). A correctly and effectively performed gender performance thus

[47] Various studies have shown the negative effects on the human body and mind when exposed to social isolation and exclusion, i.e. “Social Isolation in America“ by Paolo Parigi and Warner Henson II (*Annual Review of Sociology*, 2014, Vol. 40, pp. 153-71, JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43049530, accessed online: 6 August 2024).

> energizes the participants and attaches them to each other, increases their identification with the symbolic objects of communication, and intensifies the connection of the participants and the symbolic objects with the observing audience, the relevant "community" at large. (J. Butler 527)

Thus, people who intentionally or unintentionally do not abide by these social rules and principles are excluded from their larger social group and must bear the consequences. These consequences are often strongly felt by the reader, partly due to the narrative perspective used in the novels. Therefore, the importance of narrative perspective in relation to the variety of rituals will be addressed below.

3.6 Narrative Perspectives and Ritual Categories

The novels to be discussed here are written either from the perspective of the first-person narrator or from the perspective of a third person narrator. The novels of Dalcher, Atwood, Roth, Butler, and Yuknavitch are told (mainly) from the perspective of a homodiegetic first-person narrator, limiting the reader's access to the fictional world to the narrator's inner thoughts, feelings and perspectives while creating an intimate and subjective narrative. In contrast to the other novels, in Lidia Yuknavitch's *The Book of Joan*, the narrative perspective is primarily Christine's first-person narration, but she is only one of multiple main characters. The novel employs a complex narrative structure, blending Christine's first-person account with other narrative elements, including the story of Joan of Arc re-imagined in a post-apocalyptic future. This approach creates a layered storytelling experience, where Christine's narrative serves as a frame for exploring broader themes of resistance, identity, and interconnectedness.[48]

The narrators are always one of the main characters in the respective stories and, with the exception of Gan in Butler's "Bloodchild" and Van Jennings in Gilman's *Herland*, are female. The personal exploration of the narrator's reality intensifies the effect of the dystopian world and, above all, the rituals that unfold in

[48] Anne Jamison thoroughly analyses the layered structure of *The Book of Joan* in her article "Retrofuturist Feminism: Lidia Yuknavitch's "The Book of Joan"" from 2017 (Los Angeles Review of Books, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/retrofuturist-feminism-lidia-yuknavitchs-book-of-joan/, 2017, accessed online: 19 August 2024).

it. In regard to the execution of rituals, the feelings of the narrator are magnified by the direct description of and often participation in the ritual as it unfolds, removing distance between narrator and reader. In a dystopian context, an autodiegetic first-person narrator can contribute to the development of empathy for the protagonist. In contrast, in Gilman's utopia, the choice of a male first-person narrator in a feminist utopian novel is significant. It allows Gilman to explore and critique the internalized misogynistic attitudes and assumptions of the male explorers as they confront a society that challenges their preconceived notions about gender roles. Van Jennings' perspective provides a lens through which readers can observe the contrasts between the patriarchal society the men come from and the egalitarian, cooperative society of Herland.

Meanwhile, Piercy and Tepper both use a limited third-person narrator who mostly tells the story through the eyes of one of the main protagonists, therefore focusing on the feelings and experiences of a single protagonist. This narrative perspective facilitates a profound development of the characters in the two novels, as the reader can follow the change and mental transformation that Connie and Stavia undergo in the course of the story. Third-person narration, as opposed to the first-person narrator, allows for greater objectivity while simultaneously narrating the development of a character through which the story can be understood. For example, Connie and Stavia's mental growth and understanding of their respective worlds go hand in hand as their stories expand.

Regardless of the narrative perspective in the selected novels, ritual processes are omnipresent and thus influence the life of every character. For the purpose of this dissertation, a ritual shall be defined as a structured and symbolic action or ceremony that holds cultural, social, or spiritual significance within the fictional world of the narrative. These rituals serve to reinforce or challenge existing power structures, norms, or values related to gender, identity, and societal organization. The symbolic actions that will here be categorized as ritual acts are also essential for the development of the story and the characters and are therefore crucial for the overall understanding of the narratives. The rituals vary in nature, but can be largely divided into three different groups: Rituals related to the demonstration of power, rituals connected to the specific subjugation of women, and rituals concerned with personal growth and self-empowerment.

With that in mind, the following chapters will attempt to show the extent to which rituals in the context of feminist utopias and dystopias regulate human coexistence and are utilized to either oppress or empower women. It is argued that feminist utopian and dystopian representations of societies and women's position in them rely on rituals to maintain certain expectations of women that can either liberate or further oppress them, thus breaking with or further manifesting patriarchal structures.

Part II

CHAPTER I - Motherhood Reimagined: Fertility, Conception, and Birth Rituals in the Feminist Utopia and Dystopia

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's utopian novel *Herland* and Octavia Spencer's dystopian short story “Bloodchild“ will be the first narratives examined in the main body of the thesis. Although the two texts were published 70 years apart, *Herland* in 1915 and “Bloodchild“ in 1984,[49] both narratives aim at questioning and redefining notions of motherhood and the role of women prevalent at the time of their respective publications. *Herland* depicts an all-female society that does not depend on sexual reproduction for its continuation, making the male contribution to the process of procreation superfluous.[50] Gilman's utopia is based on the idea of a self-sufficient female society built on peace and a particular sense of equality within a small closed social structure. This, however, is accompanied with problematic representations of race and “medical“ concepts that Gilman presents as solutions to prevailing social ills in the early twentieth century in the United States.

Spencer in “Bloodchild“ experiments with placing the burden of conception and childbearing on young men instead of women. The short story can be seen as an analogy for the extent to which power structures between the male and female sexes affect the act of sexual reproduction, as the physical act of give and take must be constantly renegotiated between those involved in the sexual act. Decision-making power is turned on its head here: a female alien insect species appropriates young male human bodies to lay its grubs in. Ultimately, both narratives, in very different and even opposing ways, point to grievances regarding the treatment of women in patriarchally oriented Western societies, the United States in particular.

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[49] Butler’s short story collection *Bloodchild and Other Stories* was first published nine years later in 1995.

[50] The description of the act of procreation in *Herland* has already received attention from Stephanie Peebles Tavera who interprets it as a satirical form of sex education and a reaction to the Comstockian censorship (3). The Comstockian censorship was a reaction to the introduction of the "Law for the Suppression of the Trade in and Distribution of Obscene Literature and Articles of Indecent Use" in the 1870s, which banned the distribution of sex education material and attempted to abolish any public discussion of sex. (Peebles Tavera 3-4).

1. *Herland* / *With Her in Ourland* - Charlotte P. Gilman

As a feminist utopia, Elinor Bowers points out that *Herland,* just like Gilman herself, is not without controversy "when praised for its feminist qualities as it perpetuates many ethnocentric views of race and femininity" (1325).[51] It is a feminist utopia that uses the utopian trope of a single-sex society as the basis for its inhabitants to live together without conflict. *Herland* is not only characterized by a mono-gendered society, but also focuses heavily on one particular race of people. Alys Eve Weinbaum and Bowers both believe that Gilman's racism and her obsession with the purity and superiority of the white race also play a role in her novel, most prominently in the fact that she portrays the women living in Herland as white, being of "Aryan stock" (Gilman 161), even though their country is on the South American continent.[52] Bowers interprets this as an example of Gilman's racist belief in the superiority of the white race in light of her support of the Progressive movement, especially the movement's ideas regarding eugenics, evidence of which can also be found in *Herland* (1315-16). Gilman's ideas of feminism, Bowers further notes, can also be interpreted as a reaction to the prevailing notions of womanhood, as depicted in Coventry Patmore's *Angel in the House* "which provided descriptions of ideal womanhood at the turn of the twentieth century" (1317-1318). Having herself suffered from psychological problems during her marriage and after the birth of her child, Bowers states, Gilman opposed the notion of women as solely and eternally devoted and loving housewives and mothers (1318). Her portrayal of women in *Herland* is therefore far from the traditional picture of women and more in line with the emerging image of the so-called "new woman", who is depicted as independent (of men) and opposed to traditional values and relationships (1317). However, the feminist ideas in Gilman's

[51] Nevertheless, Bowers argues that Gilman does not succeed in writing a fully feminist novel that challenges the entire social order of her time. However, she does successfully challenge stereotypical assumptions about women and their abilities. Bowers continues that although *Herland* cannot easily be classified as a feminist novel with our current understanding of feminism, given the time in which she wrote the novel, she did turn the prevailing image of stereotypical (white) male superiority and female inferiority on its head (1325).

[52] For further reading on Gilman's racist ideology in conjunction with her fixation on tracing her own assumed superior genealogy back to William the Conqueror, see Alys Eve Weinbaum's article *Writing Feminist Genealogy: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Racial Nationalism, and the Reproduction of Maternalist Feminism* (Feminist Studies, 2001, Vol. 27, No. 2, pp. 271-302, JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3178758. Accessed online: 16 October 2022.).

work have been heavily debated in the past by various scholars who have argued against the radical feminist picture Gilman paints in her work. Bowers specifies that while Gilman's views of women and men were in line with the general zeitgeist of her era, twenty-first century feminism, with its inclusion of and focus on religious beliefs, socioeconomic status, race, and sexuality, clearly sees Gilman's novel as falling outside the boundaries of the genre of contemporary feminist literature (1314).

Beyond the scholarly discourse surrounding her work in the twenty-first century, Gilman's literary contributions speak for themselves as an endeavor to envision a world where women enjoy freedom and equality. In her essay “Women’s Fantasies and Feminist Utopias“, Carol Pearson points out that “feminist utopian fiction usually begin[s] by showing how women are profoundly alienated and limited by patriarchal society […]“ and then “go on to acquaint the reader with an alternative reality in which women could feel at home and manifest their potential“ (50). Frances Bartkowski states that “historically, utopia is an imaginative site of economic and affective abundance in which the story teller or history makers of utopia define their own notions of perfection and plenty“ (8). She adds that “feminist utopias […] posit societies which women have shaped themselves or in concert with men“ (8). Gilman's utopia reflects both statements, as most of her novel is set in a country completely isolated from the rest of the world, where only women have survived the separation of the land from the rest of the South American continent more than two millennia ago. Furthermore, *Herland* also falls into the category of scientific utopia, following in the footsteps of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888) and G. H. Wells's *A Modern Utopia* (1905), a fact Andrew Christensen points out when discussing the scientific side of Gilman's utopian vision (287). Simultaneously, because of the use of eugenics and the population principle in *Herland*, Christensen also points out that the novel can be considered a scientific dystopia (ibid.). Scientific utopias in particular, Christensen argues, are inspired by the advances in science and technology of the time in which they are written, leading the characters of the utopia to show interest in science and experimental behavior (ibid.). *Herland*'s narrative thus fuses aspects of feminist idealism, social reconstruction, and scientific experimentalism.

1.1. Conception Ritual: Immaculate Conception and Female Emancipation as Social Rituals

The backstory of *Herland*'s population is quickly summarized. The reader learns about the history of Herland through the eyes and voice of Van Jennings, one of the three travelers exploring the land. Therefore, various terms, observations and descriptions of the country and the women living there must be considered in the context of Van Jennings' own interpretation of the country's history and people, often showing his intrinsic disparagement of women in general. He explains that through a "succession of historic misfortunes" (Gilman 162), the once larger and more populous land of Herland, as the three male explorers from the "normal world"[53] call it, was decimated until only a "bunch of hysterical girls and some older slave women" (ibid.) were left alive. These women were the sole survivors of a natural disaster and subsequent revolt of the male slaves who "killed their remaining masters even to the youngest boy, killed the old women too, and the mothers, intending to take possession of the country with the remaining young women and girls" (162-63). The young women left alive, referred to as "infuriated virgins" (162) by Van Jennings, however, refused to submit to these "would-be masters" and "in sheer desperation […] slew their brutal conquerors" (ibid.). Thus, the beginnings of the Herlandian society encountered by Van Jennings and his two friends elude to the general superiority of white women portrayed in the novel. The young women, descendants of the former "masters" of the country, were able to free themselves of their soon-to-be male oppressors who were descendants of the former slave class. They learned, from the few elderly slave women that survived, how to live off the land and then found a way to procreate and create a new civilization consisting only of women and their female children.

The aspects of motherhood and reproduction are mentioned and discussed early on in the story. It seems strange to the three men to find a land populated exclusively by women who, against all odds, have survived apocalyptic events and eventually developed into a thriving civilization. After the catastrophe, a few babies

[53] In this context, the so-called "normal world" that is referred to here, means the world of the reader, the world in which the historically situated readers live and from where Van Jennings, along with his friends Terry O. Nicholson and Jeff Margrave, has travelled to explore this lost country. In the following, the word "Herland" is mostly used in the sense of the name of a country and not as a book title, which is why it is not written in italics.

were born to some of the “younger matrons who had escaped slaughter“ but only two of them were boys, and they did not survive long (163). Then, after a decade had passed during which the women started working together instead of fighting each other, “growing stronger and wiser and more and more mutually attached“, the miracle happened as one of the younger women became pregnant and gave birth to a child (ibid.). Assuming that a man must be responsible for the woman's pregnancy, the women searched the whole country but could not find one. Thereupon the women assumed that it was an act of the gods and “placed the proud mother in the Temple of Maaia - their Goddess of Motherhood - under strict watch. And there, as years passed, this wonder-woman bore child after child, five of them - all girls“ (ibid.). Van Jennings imagines this development as an evolutionary process:[54]

> Left alone in that terrific orphanhood, they had clung together, supporting one another and their little sisters, and developing unknown powers in the stress of new necessity. (ibid.)

At no point in the novel is it explained in more detail how it came about that this one woman suddenly became pregnant and gave birth to a total of five children. All that is said is that this new form of conception and motherhood had developed and with it a new tradition and interpretation of parenthood and mother worship.

The beginnings of Gilman's fertility ritual can be traced back to her understanding of eugenics as a mechanism of social control. The way the women in *Herland* reproduce can be interpreted as divine intervention or Gilman's idea that only one woman is most worthy of procreation. By denying all other women the opportunity to bear children, Gilman focuses on the eugenic idea that not all women are biologically worthy of bearing children and becoming mothers. Only the woman with the best physiological conditions is given the chance to procreate and in turn bear her five daughters. Since the daughters also conceive their daughters through immaculate conception, there is no danger of the bloodline being “weakened“ by mixing with “unworthy“ male sperm. Gilman describes how the separation of the

[54] Evolution in the sense of Darwin's theory of evolution means the change of a species to adapt to new environmental conditions ("Evolution"). In this case, the pressure of natural selection caused the Herlandian women to adapt their behavior due to an atmosphere of heroic struggle, which resulted in the “stock“ becoming tougher, as Van Jennings muses (Gilman 163).

women's land from the "man-country" (Gilman 140) led to the development of a superior race that eradicated human and genetic traits that could be considered undesirable and unnecessary. The male explorers are stunned by the "good strong sensible faces" (135) and the "solidity of those women" (136). Jennings concludes that "[n]ever, anywhere before, had I seen women of precisely this quality" (135), as they are "athletic-light and powerful" while also "calm as cows, for all their evident intellect" (ibid.). Jennings' description is indicative of the otherworldly nature of these women, a superior race of (female) humans unfamiliar to the three men. They were either used to the "gentle romantic old-fashioned notions of women as clinging vines" (134), or they were dividing them into categories of desirable and undesirable, the latter group being the larger and thus negligible by men (ibid.).[55]

Since the woman who became pregnant was brought to the temple of the Goddess of Motherhood, the women of Herland had inadvertently established a new tradition among their people, which can be described as a fertility ritual. Jeffrey Alexander describes ritual as

> episodes of repeated and simplified cultural communication in which the direct partners to a social interaction, and those observing it, share a mutual belief in the descriptive and prescriptive validity of the communication's symbolic contents and accept the authenticity of one another's intentions. ((2011) 25)

The woman who gave birth was taken to the temple and gave birth to four more children. Gilman's sequel to *Herland*, *With Her in Ourland*, goes on to say that the women who became mothers tended to stay in the temple, offering comfort and advice to the other women as required (Gilman 248). By placing the pregnant woman in the temple, the women believed that this act of divine intervention could

[55] Once more, Gilman's fixation with the practice of eugenics is evident in this context. The idea of eugenics, of breeding out unfit genetic material by allowing only certain people to reproduce ("Eugenics"), and Gilman's endorsement of this approach, which is more philosophical than actually scientific, are well documented and controversial in literary discourse (see Davis & Knight 2004; Settler 2003; Bowers 2018). The concept of eugenics is also present in Teri S. Tepper's novel *The Gate to Women's Country* (1988), in which townships ruled by a small female elite attempt to eradicate undesirable male characteristics. For this reason, while Tepper's post-apocalyptic novel can be read as a feminist utopia, the use of eugenics together with homophobic tendencies give the story a somewhat dystopian and disturbing character (more on this in Donawerth 1990), as will be discussed later in Chapter II.

be repeated to save their small society from extinction. This mutually shared belief among the women, which established itself as fact later on, is that only the first woman who gave birth to her five daughters and their offspring are worthy of procreation. This fact is not questioned by the other women, but is seen as a natural reaction to the assumed physiological superiority of one woman. In response to these events, the previously established social and cultural practice of educating and raising children was replaced by a new system that eliminated the previously established structure of the private family as the smallest social unit. As a result, all of Herland's women became one family, as they were all descended from one mother. This development is in line with Carol Pearson's assessment of feminist utopias, noting that patriarchy is always concerned with the problem of illegitimacy, whereas in feminist utopias “children are never illegitimate, because they all have mothers“ (50). In a figurative sense, all other women became mothers to the children because they “surrounded them [the children] with loving service, and waited, between boundless hope and an equally boundless despair, to see if they, too, would be mothers“, and thus ensure the continued existence of the women’s society (Gilman 164). The children are not considered the property of a mother, nor do they carry any reference in their name that would link a child to her mother, as no mother is individually responsible for childcare.[56] The “despair“ of the women described here can be interpreted in two different ways. First, it is not clear from the wording of the sentence from whom the women hoped to have children. Perhaps they hoped that the children would become pregnant when they grew up, or perhaps all the women were anxious to become biological mothers themselves. In either case, the women hoped that their small civilization would survive and grow, and both paths would have led them to that goal.

As time passed, none of the other women bore children. However, when the five girls reached the age of twenty-five, they too began to bear children, and

[56] Gilman's focus on motherhood, childcare, and creating the best possible environment for women to be mothers while also being financially independent and respected members of society clearly shows in *Herland.* Gilman giving her own young daughter into the care of her ex-husband led to a public outcry and negative reactions from her friends, Davis and Knight explain (x). In their book *Charlotte Perkins Gilman and her Contemporaries*, Cynthia J. Davis and Denis D. Knight examine the obstacles Gilman faced in her time and place her ideologies and ideas for social improvement in historical context. Gilman's labeling as an unnatural mother, given to her by the public after she gave up her child, and the subsequent public shaming may have played a role in the construction of the mother ideal in *Herland*. Further reading in Davis, Cynthia J. and Denis D. Knight (eds.). *Charlotte Perkins Gilman and her Contemporaries*. UP Alabama, Tuscaloosa, USA, 2004.

“[e]ach of them, like her mother, bore five daughters“ (Gilman 164). This seemingly simple act of childbearing, initially performed by only one woman and later by all her five daughters, is a ritual act to which Gilman added an element of “divine intervention“.[57] Each girl has five children when she reaches a certain age, without the natural sexual act of human procreation. With this first act of divine intervention, the small surviving group of women has completely left their previous social structures behind, only to enter a variant of what Victor Turner described as the liminal stage in ritual performances: by conceiving a child in this parthenogenetic way, which was and still is an impossible act in itself for the rest of humanity, the women began a new race.[58] This race could not exist at all according to the laws of nature known to man. Therefore, this new race of women has spent the last two thousand years in a kind of suspension from the laws of nature that control human existence.

The entire life span of the Herlandian women is rather obscure, for it seems to have taken place in a sphere outside the normal human world. It would appear as if they never left the liminal stage they entered into at the beginning of their fertility ritual, so that the beginning and the end of the ritual remain ambiguous. Turner points out that the attributes of liminality are necessarily ambiguous, since *liminal personae* at this stage “elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space“ (Turner (1969) 95). He concludes that “liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, […], to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon“ (ibid.). After the three explorers have found the land of Herland and surveyed its surroundings, they do not experience the land as particularly wild, but rather as civilized.[59] For them, however, it is a completely strange and unfamiliar-looking land that can be described as wild in the sense of unfamiliarity. At first glance, as the three men exit

[57] This "divine intervention" refers to the Goddess of Motherhood mentioned in the novel, whom the women of Herland worship as they try to make sense of the otherwise inexplicable pregnancies.
[58] Stephanie Peebles Tavera interprets Gilman's use of parthenogenesis in human reproduction as a form of social satire and a means of advocating for more female autonomy over their bodies (6). This, according to Peebles Tavera, was a direct response to the Comstockian Laws, which promoted a very restrictive approach to sex education for boys and girls. Furthermore, Peebles Tavera believes that it was a response to Maurice Bigelow's view that young women should not learn too much about their own bodies as a sexual being as it would give rise to too much unhealthy curiosity in the girls (6-7).
[59] On a similar note, it may also be argued that the male explorers enter a liminal stage by setting food into Herland, leaving behind their own natural world and coming back out of it when leaving Herland to show one of the women, Ellador, the rest of the world.

their plane, they are confused by the trees and the forest they encounter. The trees seem both familiar and unfamiliar to the men, for they had never seen “towering trees [that] were under as careful cultivation“ (Gilman 162) as those before them. In this sense, the country seems both foreign and familiar to the men, which is akin to a dream-like state in which the world around one appears real but odd at the same time.

In general, the aspect of motherhood in Herland differs from the rest of the Western civilized world as described by the three explorers. The stereotypical role of the mother and the cultural rituals associated with that role do not apply in this small, communal society. The "Queen-Priestess-Mother" or "First Mother", as the first pregnant woman is called, is seen as a kind of super-mother to all Herlandian women living during the events of the novel (Gilman 164). From a biological point of view, she is the ancestor of all the inhabitants of Herland and thus the founder of a new race. In this new society, certain cultural behaviors that are taken for granted in Western societies have disappeared, such as the tradition of men as protectors and guardians, and the ritual courting of women by men to find a wife. Similarly, certain physical characteristics typically associated with women have diminished in the women of Herland, as Terry laments when describing the women as “strikingly deficient in what we call “femininity““ (165). Femininity is “the fact or quality of having characteristics that are traditionally thought to be typical of or suitable for a woman“ (“Femininity“) which, for the three explorers, means that women are quiet, devoted to their husbands, dress according to society’s expectations and are “angelic homemakers“ (Bowers 1318). In response to his friend's observations, Van Jennings draws an interesting conclusion about the “feminine“ charms they love so much and which he no longer views as inherent to women. Jennings believes that women in his home country, the United States of America, have developed certain characteristics merely as a reflection of men - “developed to please us [men] because they had to please us [men], and in no way essential to the real fulfillment of their great process“ (165-66). In contrast, other qualities such as mother-love and sister-love have evolved and become deeply embedded in the women's society. This perceived absence of what Terry views as femininity among the women of Herland underscores the lack of rituals connected to the three men’s understanding of femininity in the Herlandian country. Here, women do not have to undergo arduous beauty rituals to appear attractive to a

man and the three researchers are confronted with women who appear to them as equals.

In *Herland*, a woman's fate and social security do not depend on a man's goodwill or his intention to marry her to make her a respectable woman with good social standing. Therefore, she is not subject to the interests and ideas of men about how she should look and behave. Social rituals common in early twentieth-century America, such as courtship and eventual marriage leading to total financial dependence on the husband, never developed in Herland.[60] Accordingly, the social construct of the so-called fallen woman, which was common in nineteenth and early twentieth century Western societies, has no meaning in *Herland*'s society.[61] In the novel, Terry's character is a representative of all these social rituals and the resulting harrowing restrictions that women must endure in the outside world. He is the embodiment of patriarchy, not considering these women to be *real* women at all since they do not correspond to his idea of a woman.[62] He states that where he grew up, men do everything because they do not allow their wives to work; “women are loved - idolized - honored - kept in the home to care for the children“ (167). It is at this point that Gilman's social satire becomes clear. By pointing out

[60] In *Women and Economics* (1898), Gillman puts forth her observation and conviction that humans are the only race in the organic world in which the female sex is entirely dependent on the male sex for sustenance, and they are also the “only animal species in which the sex-relation is also an economic relation“ (5). She goes on to argue that “[w]ith us [the human race] an entire sex lives in a relation of economic dependence upon the other sex, and the economic relation is combined with the sex-relation“ (ibid.). Gilman wanted to convey an opposite image to this dependence in her novel to portray independent and self-sufficient women.

[61] A fallen woman was a social outcast which, in the eyes of her society, has lost her good virtue and honor. Therefore, she is excluded from respectable social circles, having foregone her sexual purity and innocence, and falls victim to prostitution and violence, often resulting in an untimely death (“Fallen Woman“). Further reading on the topic in Margaret Wyman, “The Rise of the Fallen Woman.“ In: *American Quarterly,* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1951, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 167-77. JSTOR. Accessed online: 24 May 2016.
Aside from the technical meaning of the term, Offred in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* expands the meaning of the phrase as she interprets a fallen woman as a woman who has fallen in love. She muses that the expressions "falling in love" and "I fell for him" suggest that women seem to fall again and again, even in love, blinded by the realities of their situation (Atwood (1988) 237).

[62] Gilman was a tireless campaigner for women's rights and an outspoken advocate of women's financial independence from men. As Gary Scharnhorst notes, her work *Women and Economics* is widely considered the greatest feminist manifesto since John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* from 1869 (192). Her advocacy for women's independence led to her involvement in the nationalist movement, which was inspired by Edward Bellamy's utopia *Looking Backword*. In his utopia, Scharnhorst explains, Bellamy promoted a society of equals in which men and women enjoyed equal social rights and freedoms (ibid.). Accordingly, Scharnhorst concludes, the novel served as a breeding ground for reformist ideas aimed at changing the social substance of the United States of America, and it is believed to have also influenced Gilman's thinking and political writing. Further reading on Gilman's work and activism in Scharnhorst, Gary. *Charlotte Perkins Gilman*. Scarecrow Press, Metuchen, USA, 1985.

all the restrictions women face in the United States in the twentieth century, Terry powerfully demonstrates the freedom the women in Herland enjoy from societal rituals and the expectations placed on them. In this respect, *Herland* not only displays sophisticated ritualistic behavior in regard to motherhood and sisterhood, but also articulates the all-encompassing absence of socially restrictive rituals.[63]

Schechner has shown that there is a “continuous, dynamic process linking performative behavior - art, sports, ritual, play - with social and ethical structure: the way people think about and organize their lives and specify individual and group values“ (8). Against this background, the women of Herland reshaped their own lives and society, reorganizing their religious beliefs, rituals and education. They moved from pluralistic religious worship of multiple gods and goddesses to the monotheistic worship of their Mother Goddess, which later developed into a kind of maternal pantheism (Gilman 165). Pantheism refers to the belief that reality is interchangeable with divinity or that God is immanent or identical to the universe. It describes the theory that God is everything and everything is God, which is often also associated with nature worship ("Pantheism"). Thus, Herland’s women had developed a new system of ritual nature worship:

> Here was Mother Earth, bearing fruit. All that they ate was fruit of motherhood, from seed or egg or their product. By motherhood they were born, and by motherhood they lived - life was, to them, just the long cycle of motherhood. (166)

Motherhood became their religion and replaced the old rites and traditions of their former people. By bringing the first pregnant woman to their temple of the Goddess of Motherhood, there was a shared understanding among the women of the intention and content of the ritual, as well as the outcome they hoped for and desired. This shared understanding of the inner validity of the interaction and the intention and content of the ritual are the reasons why this ritual in particular has its impact and influence on the women of Herland. Through the effectiveness of this ritual process, the women developed into a sworn community. Turner explained that successful rituals energize and bind the participants of the ritual to

[63] The absence of socially restrictive rituals in this context points to the absence of hierarchies among the women who live together in their community, although of course it is implied that the women who bear children are more important and therefore more valuable to society as a whole (see fn. 52, p.51).

each other because the identification with the symbolic objects (or persons) increases as well as the connection of the participants with the symbolic objects (Turner (1969) 90). Thus, the ritual of motherhood became their new lifeline, their insurance for survival in an isolated land without outside interference. Motherhood became synonymous with nature, and women valued nature as much as themselves. Everyday interactions with nature, such as picking and harvesting food for their own survival, became their own ritual, representing a daily circle of life in symbiosis with nature. Out of this deep connection with nature developed something like a cult of motherhood, which is consistent with Gilman's ideas about the healthy and effective development of a nation. Dana Seitler points out that in her writings, Gilman sought to reform male structures such as the family by viewing motherhood as a place of biological value (74). She further explains that Gilman placed women at the center of national progress, that is, Gilman saw women at the center of the birth of history by separating reproduction from heterosexual and patriarchal authority (74-77).[64] Seitler continues to say that Gilman believed that women had the power and even the duty to advance the development of a particular race and nation through the application of the tactics of eugenics, without regard to the views of men (62). The cultic traits and obsession with motherhood evident in *Herland* can therefore be traced back to Gilman's ideology of women's ability to purify and strengthen a nation's people.

In summary, it was not only the rituals of conception and birth that were adapted to this prototypical mono-gendered society in *Herland*; the ritualized relationship between mother and child or, as in this case, exclusively the mother-daughter relationship, was also altered to fit the new social circumstances. As Carol Pearson notes, the women have initiated the dissolution of the nuclear family, thereby devaluing the biological connection between mother and child, a move frequently found in feminist utopian literature (56). This dissolution in turn leads to a redefinition of the ritualized mother-child relationship as a whole: communal responsibility for childcare and a de-romanticization of children in general take the

[64] Seitler further points to the fact that Gilman was an active reader of theories of civilization and degeneration, laying the foundation to also apply a modified version of Darwin's principle of natural selection to her writings and turned it into a theory of social evolution (77). In this instance, Seitler believes that Herbert Spencer's philosophical interpretation of Darwinism must have served as inspiration for *Herland*'s account of reproduction as well because her theory of social evolution leans in part on his philosophical concepts (ibid.).

place of the former nuclear family unit. In this way, Gilman presents here a feminist utopia that reflects the social changes she desired for American society as a whole. The result was that children, while highly valued in *Herland*'s society for their ability to strengthen the population, were also reduced almost to a mere means to an end. The ability to reproduce and breed a new race in complete isolation and in the total absence of males was granted only to one female bloodline, which apparently was used by Gilman to serve as proof of the successful application of eugenic tactics. Gilman tried to show that (white) women's natural superiority over men comes into full effect when left to their own devices and being able to develop independently from men. To support this argument, Gilman continued *Herland*'s story and simultaneously concluded the trilogy with the novel *With Her in Ourland.*[65] It is a narrative set at the time of World War I that highlights the destructive nature of male warfare. This final part of the trilogy sheds light on Gilman's view of the world's problems, as it was likely intended by Gilman to emphasize the problems of a world dominated by patriarchal structures while contrasting *Herland*'s peaceful civilization.

1.2. Gilman's *With Her in Ourland* - Dystopian Realism as Reinforcement of the Utopian Vision

Herland's sequel, *With Her in Ourland* lets the reader take a look at what sets the feminist utopia apart from Gilman's own experienced world. By juxtaposing utopian and dystopian narratives, Gilman gives her utopia more emphasis and legitimacy. She may also have hoped to gain more support for her more radical

[65] The first part of the trilogy, *Moving the Mountain* (1911), will not be discussed further in this dissertation, since the story line of the narrative is not related to *Herland* and *With Her in Ourland*. However, traces of eugenics are also evident in this story and even more strongly portrayed than in *Herland,* as the 1910s "were a period of tremendous visibility of eugenic ideas throughout the United States", in large part because of Progressive Era enthusiasm for scientific solutions to social problems (Rensing 96). In *Moving the Mountain*, the first half of the twentieth century saw the development of a new and improved American society that did not shy away from killing people deemed useless and unable to adapt to the new world order: "We killed many hopeless degenerates, insane, idiots, and real perverts, after trying our best powers of cure" (Gilman 104), an ethics professor at one point explains to a man who had returned to America after thirty years in Nepal. In addition, there were laws that regulated and even prevented the procreation of certain people, with some people being sterilized to ensure the integrity of the race. Further reading in Rensing, Susan. "Women 'Waking Up 'and *Moving the Mountain*: The Feminist Eugenics of Charlotte Perkins Gilman." *MP: An Online Feminist Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2013, pp. 96-120, https://www.academia.edu/11613762/Women_Waking_Up_and_Moving_the_Mountain_The_Feminist_Eugenics_of_Charlotte_Perkins_Gilman. Accessed online: 29 November 2022.

ideas for improving American society. Thus, the sequel offers an insight into Gilman's motivation for writing *Herland*, as it is a dystopian-like continuation of the utopian narrative. The dystopian aspects of the narrative in *With Her in Ourland* are based on real events and the often appalling social conditions in the world of the early twentieth century. The reader is given a comparison between the prevailing rituals that ensure peaceful coexistence in Herland and the destructive and brutal rituals that prevail in the rest of the world. At the end of *Herland*, one of the three male explorers, Van Jennings, from whose perspective also the sequel's story is told, falls in love with Ellador, a Herlandian woman. After marrying her in Herland, he decides to take her with him to show her the outside world. This venture is undertaken with the consent of the other Herlandian women as they consider reintegrating into the human world. However, before taking the risky step of presenting themselves to a world that seems bent on self-destruction and the oppression of women, they place Ellador in the care of Van Jennings so that she can explore the outside world and return with information to help them make their decision.

1.2.1 War as Social Ritual in a Feminist Dystopia

By allowing Ellador to leave the country of Herland and introducing her to the "real world" (Gilman 236), as Ellador herself calls it, Gilman inverts the classic utopian trope of a single, usually male, individual traveling to a foreign land to find a new and improved society compared to his own. Van Jennings and his two companions Jeff and Terry follow the same classic utopian plot line introduced by Thomas More when they leave their own world to find Herland. However, the three men have not perceived their world as a dystopian place until they reach Herland and learn of the perfectly harmonious and peaceful culture that the women have built in isolation over the centuries. It is only when Van Jennings takes his newlywed wife with him that he realizes how brutal and hostile his own world is. During their journey on a boat back to the United States of America, the three men learn of the war in Europe, which, as it will later turn out, turns into the First World War. Ellador has left her utopian home to travel to a world where patriarchy and its social conventions dominate and dictate women's lives. While Jennings still wants

to prove to her that men have created a world at least as good as that of the Herlandian women, if not better, he slowly realizes how dystopian his world feels to Ellador.

As they travel through war-torn Europe, Ellador's memories of her utopian upbringing are eclipsed as she is devastated by the sight of the destruction and suffering that people continuously inflict on each other in times of war. When Terry explains to her that “war is really the normal condition of human life“ (Gilman 247), a regularly occurring, cruel and ritualistic interaction between the different peoples of the world, Ellador breaks down in tears, wanting to go home to her mother: “Ellador’s mother was one of those wise women who sat in the Temples, and gave comfort and counsel when needed. They loved each other more than I [Van Jennings], not seeing them always together, had understood“ (248). At this point in the narrative, it becomes clear to both Ellador and Van Jennings that the sheltered life in Herland could not have prepared Ellador in any way for the social conditions in the outside world. Still in Herland, Van Jennings tries to prepare Ellador for her journey by teaching her as much as he can about his own world and its rituals, knowing full well that his own world must in many ways appear cruel and cold to Ellador. The previously described peaceful and harmonious rituals Ellador grew up with in Herland now stand in stark contrast to a man's world busy destroying itself through the use of war. War, as Terry mentions, is in his view the normal state of human life, and as he says this delights in his ability to shock Ellador with the facts of life he is so familiar with. Terry, who serves as the embodiment of Gilman's conception of harmful masculine character traits in both narratives, has always been at odds with the peaceful nature of Herland's culture and is very comfortable amidst the destruction caused by men. In *Herland*, he presents a dystopian figure in a utopian setting who challenges the purity and harmony of Herland’s society whenever the opportunity arises. In *With Her in Ourland*, the dystopian environment of the early twentieth century is exactly the kind of world in which he feels most comfortable. Now it is Ellador who functions as a utopian figure as she visits an alien and dystopian world, again contrasting utopian ideals with the reality of Gilman's own dystopian environment.

With Her in Ourland mentions certain rituals that Ellador seems to identify with, such as the rituals related to Christianity, because they remind her of her own ritual-based religion called Motherhood (Gilman 250). However, it is the broader

ritual of war that is all-encompassing and ever-present in the story. The narrative of war runs like a thread through the story and stands in stark contrast to *Herland*'s narrative of peace. Randall Collins notes that sociologists and anthropologists have argued for some time that human warfare is a social ritual and that political violence is itself a ritual process (118). Warfare, it is argued, is not so much an "effort at direct physical destruction as a symbolic use of violence to break the organizational solidarity of the opposing army" (ibid.). The basis for this argument is that politics, including warfare as an instrument of political power, is an emotional means of production and therefore part of the ritual process.

Because of the constantly changing nature of war, it cannot be analyzed and interpreted as a ritual like the ones described in *Herland*. Man-made war is the antithesis of the peaceful coexistence of the women in Herland. The rituals there are static, the ritual participants are aware that they are witnesses and participants in a ritual, and the whole process is fixed in a certain structure. Herland's rituals are based on a shared collective understanding between participants and observers. Philip Smith describes rituals of this kind as "predetermined to a large degree by rigid tradition and rules" (108). Wars, on the other hand, Smith explains, "are full of contingent happenings at both the cultural and social structural levels, and in consequence, actions and understandings have to be improvised by the participants" (ibid.). As with all other successful rituals, the cultural motivations for war must be maintained throughout the ritual, which "crucially depends on the work of practitioners in maintaining a sacred:profane code" (ibid.). The sacred:profane code is what distinguishes "ordinary" rituals from other, everyday forms of social action; it is the conditions that mark a social action as sacred in one form or another, thus highlighting the ritual as an exceptional action. To call warfare a ritual, Smith explains, two factors must be considered. First, the sacred and profane code for the rather confusing and changeable social action of war must be established (ibid.). Second, the "events" of war must be "accounted for as acceptable products of the code" (ibid.). If the code proves inadequate, the ritual motivations for war disappear and the ritual comes to an end (ibid.).[66]

[66] In his analysis of war as a social ritual Philip Smith to a large degree built his theory on the anthropological works of the French sociologist and anthropologist Emilè Durkheim, who also influenced the works of Victor Turner and Jeffrey C. Alexander. Durkheim mostly did his research on primitive peoples but newest research suggests that his ritual theories can also be applied to

The first chapters of *With Her in Ourland* explore the impact of the First World War in Europe on Ellador's general state of mind and the devastating consequences of this experience for her: “She saw the battle lines of trenches. She saw the dead men; she saw and heard the men not dead, where there had been recent fighting. She saw the ruins, ruins everywhere“ (Gilman 247). As Terry notes in his cynical attempt to shock and provoke Ellador, warfare between different peoples does indeed seem to be as old as humanity itself. The human race, Van Jennings notes, “has been fighting one another for all the ages, and we are here yet; some of these military enthusiasts say because of war - some of the pacifists say in spite of it, and I’m beginning to agree with them“ (249). However, it is not humanity as such that has been at war with each other repeatedly for centuries. It is primarily men who have practiced this kind of social ritual over and over again, exposing women and children to its brutality and violence. Gilman's decision to follow *Herland* with a war narrative was therefore deliberate and calculated to lend credibility and validity to her own radical feminist approaches.

Conover and Sapiro remark that radical feminists of second wave feminism held the belief that women possessed an innate moral superiority over men (1080), following Gilman's assumption that men were more prone to destructive behavior. Other feminist theorists of the late twentieth century attempted to explain why war as a social ritual is practiced mainly by men by pointing to the different upbringing of boys and girls. A difference in the early socialization of girls and boys, Conover and Sapiro argue, results in women being less prone to violent behavior than men (ibid.). Differences in sex and gender have certainly been used to explain why women behave more peaceably than men, but the aspect of motherhood and mothering has also been credited for this development. Feminist theorists such as Sara Ruddick have cited women's experience of mothering a child as a crucial factor in their peaceful behavior. She argues that “through the act of mothering "mothers" develop ways of thinking and acting that potentially serve as a basis of peace politics“ (40). Ruddick further argues that “women must be made to reflect on the public implications of their mothering so as to ensure that its practices are, in fact, transformed into those of peacemaking“ (222). However, Conover and

modern societies. Jeffrey C. Alexander’s *The Durkheimian Sociology* is a good starting point for further reading into Durkheim’s theories.

Sapiro believe that there are other theories that argue against the gendered assumptions and for the aspect of political feminism itself. This is, they state, because studies have shown that people who identify as feminists, regardless of gender, are less militaristic than those who do not agree with feminist ideology (1081). Maternal thinking in women, although Ruddick suggests that men can also develop these instincts when nurturing a child over a prolonged period of time, thus forms the basis for peaceful coexistence in a social setting. If war as a ritual is an expression of male aggression, then motherhood as an expression of female social intelligence and compassion can counteract this. At this point, the quintessence of the two narratives of *Herland* and *With Her in Ourland* intertwine, as they both elaborate, albeit covertly, women's experiences of motherhood and its associated rituals as a means of improving human society.

In essence, the portrayal of a world riddled by man-made war in the form of a ritual process was undertaken with the intention of contrasting Gilman's ideal feminist utopia with the dystopian state of the world at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The complete absence of war, devastation, and general self-destructive human behavior in this all-female society demonstrates the contrast with the social abysses that characterized early twentieth-century Western societies. The focus on the mother in *Herland* and the many maternal practices shown, which include essential ideas of nonviolent peacemaking that Ruddick refers to as renunciation, resistance, reconciliation, and peacekeeping (161), are central to the novel. *Herland*'s rituals are an expression of Gilman's deep-rooted desire for what she believed to be a more humane way of life, even if it involves some rather inhumane measures to achieve this goal. The nature-based aspects of motherhood depicted in *Herland*, the rituals that accompany it, and Ellador's despair at the sight of the world outside her home in *With Her in Ourland* thus go hand in hand, completing Gilman's argument for greater independence and social participation for women to advance the whole of humanity.

2. *Bloodchild* - Octavia Butler

Feminist utopian and dystopian novels written in the later decades of the twentieth century are considered historically unique in that they are located at an "intersection" where feminism, science fiction, utopian and dystopian thought, and postmodernism meet (Wolmark 3). Jenny Wolmark further believes that this has led to this literature being deeply intertextual, as its hybridity defies easy genre categorization, making it very effective at subverting clear distinctions between the self and the other (2). It also offers alternatives and “non-hierarchical definitions of gender and identity within which the difference of aliens and others can be accommodated rather than repressed“ (ibid.). Octavia Butler's literary corpus, including the short story collection *Bloodchild* (1995), can be located right in the middle of this literary tradition. According to Jim Miller, this makes her work particularly interesting because it “exists within the tradition of feminist utopian writing and, at the same time, seeks to contest it“ (337). Miller points out that Butler is particularly relevant with regard to the feminist writings of Charlotte Perkins Gilman because Gilman, as a white woman, wrote and theorized exclusively among and for white women, whereas Butler, a few decades later as an African American living in America, likewise produced her work within a largely white female tradition but also addressed a black audience (ibid.). This led Butler to frequently challenge the assumptions of white feminist utopian and dystopian writers in her work, “challeng[ing] not only patriarchal myths, but also capitalist myths, racist myths, and feminist-utopian myth“ (ibid.). Butler's short story “Bloodchild“ presents such a challenge to the system as it portrays the inversion of gender norms, in which young men are placed in the unusual position of having to give birth, looking at the ritual of childbirth and the concept of motherhood from a different and new angle. Set on a distant planet where a human colony is controlled by intelligent, insect-like alien beings, the story combines elements of social criticism, dystopia, and science fiction.

Butler’s fiction has already been analyzed in various ways. Mahdu Dubey finds that Butler’s work is mostly concerned with the themes of race and enslavement, which are most prominent in her novels *Kindred* (1979) and *Wild*

Seed (1980), but can also be found metaphorically in “Bloodchild“ (357).[67] Elyce Rae Helford has also paid attention to her use of science-fictional metaphors for the “feminine“ which challenge traditional representations commonly found in other literary genres (260). In this respect, Helford argues, Butler's fiction is closely related to postmodern feminist theory, which places the same emphasis on metaphors of this kind, as well as on reexamining “master narratives“,[68] which involves reconsidering the established patriarchal Western philosophical tradition of thought (260-61). Because of this influence, Helford also highlights the value of Butler’s work in regard to the impact of black feminist writing and sees in “Bloodchild“ an “excellent example of literature which bridges the gap between "high" and popular culture in a manner as complex and unique as her [Butler’s] position as science fiction's most prolific - if not only - African American feminist writer“ (259). She analyzes Butler's literary work in terms of what she labels "ethnesis" and "zoomorphesis," concepts that relate to critical race theory and the reconceptualization of species.[69] Helford argues that women and People of Color often appear as coded animal metaphors in the male-dominated literary canon. Butler takes advantage of this process in reverse, particularly in “Bloodchild“, by having an alien animal species exercise dominance over humans. In particular, the process of female insect-like alien beings impregnating young male "Terrans"

[67] Donawerth ((2000) 54) notes that slave narratives were frequently invoked by feminist authors of speculative fiction in the 1970s and 80s. In these cases, the plot usually focuses on the reproductive exploitation of women, as in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid's Tale*.

[68] Alice Jardine talks about master narratives in her book *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (1985) in relation to her theory of “gynesis“. Master narratives have been defined by McLean and Syed as “culturally shared stories that guide thoughts, beliefs, values, and behaviors (323). In essence, McLean and Syed believe that these narratives form the basis of what it means to be part of a particular culture, creating a framework for what is culturally acceptable and desirable. In Western culture, Helford notes, these are narratives written mostly by white males from the privileged classes, which also already reveals the problem with these narratives: they exclude and often negate the aspect of gender-related problems in society (261). In this regard, Jardine created the term "gynesis" to theorize the relationship between poststructuralism and feminism and to bridge the gap between French and American feminist thought while noting that "woman" as a sign has become a significant focus of rethinking literature, philosophy, history, and religion in the twentieth century (Jardine 24-25). Thus, Jardine uses the term "gynesis" to describe the process by which the sign "woman" is brought into the postmodern discourse of master narratives and how it becomes essential to new ways of speaking, writing, and thinking about Western symbolic structures (Quay 189; Jardine 25).

[69] Helford uses the term "ethnesis" to refer to textual representations of race that are always in a process of metaphorization (262). It is based on the assumption that minority races and non-human animal species are “labeled and addressed as gaps or spaces in Western patriarchal culture“ (261). This slippage between the "real" and the metaphoric often occurs conceptually and textually (ibid.). “Zoomorphesis“ is a term that Helford created to address the reconceptualization of species in literary texts which can “deconstruct humanist biases of traditional philosophical absolutes“ (262).

through “acquaintance rape" (264) represents a reversal of the typical trope in earlier master narratives and will be the main focus of the following chapter.

Thus, Butler's critical dystopian fiction challenges established gender norms by inverting stereotypes. Her experimental fiction joins the New Wave fiction of the 1960s and 70s that Amanda Thibodeau calls “a fundamental period in the evolution of the queerly constructed sf alien“ (263) and a phase that saw an “increase in feminist science fiction with its subversive representations of gender and power“ (ibid.). Tom Moylan (2000) sees the work of 1970s feminist writers like Butler as a continuation of 1960s feminist thought, keeping alive the hopeful spirit of the time. Simultaneously, Moylan points out that this period saw the emergence of the critical utopia, which acknowledged the pitfalls of the classical utopia by not focusing on perfectionism and rejecting the blueprint utopia while preserving its original dream (10). Jim Miller further argues that in her work, Butler most often uses the critical dystopia, in which she preserves a utopian longing despite her explicit rejection of utopianism, while also dismissing easy answers (357-58).

Esther Jones places Butler's speculative fiction within the larger context of black feminist American speculative writing, in which black women express survival strategies in a world created for and dominated by whites (6). Black women, who have always been medically neglected in the United States, use the genre to “cultivate a worldview and discourse in which survival [for black women] is possible. […] It is where radical forms of medical and social justice are imagined“ (6). In this regard, she argues, "Bloodchild" joins the ranks of black authors of speculative fiction who confront the mistreatment of black women in the United States in the field of medicine and resist the powerful aggression that shapes their relationship to Western medicine (5). Thus, Gan’s fear of being impregnated by a being who is not of his race, even though he loves her in some ways, reflects the fear of black women in American society. Gan goes through all the rituals associated with human courtship and sexual activity as a means of procreation in anticipation of facing life-threatening “childbirth“ at the end.

2.1 Power Structures and Inversion of Gender Roles

“Bloodchild’s“ story is set in a dystopian future where humans, in the story referred to as “Terrans“, have had to leave Earth and settle on other planets to survive. The Terrans live in the Preserve, an area where they are supposed to live in a harmonious symbiosis with the Tlic, the alien race that also inhabits the planet. The Tlic are insect-like creatures that need a host in which to lay their eggs to reproduce. The eggs grow inside the host and turn into grubs that would eventually kill the host they live in if not removed in time by the Tlic mother. As the Tlic have found that Terrans make excellent hosts for their eggs, they have created the Preserve to protect the Terran colony, on the condition that each Terran family must give one of their children to the Tlic as a host. A Terran who is injected with Tlic eggs in this way is then called N'Tlic. Gan, the protagonist of the story, is a Terran boy who belongs to the female Tlic T'Gatoi because his mother promised him to T'Gatoi when he was born.[70] The plot of the story revolves around Gan's accidental observation of a Tlic birth, in which Tlic eggs are extracted in an emergency operation from a living Terran body. Gan begins to reconsider his own role in the Tlic's life cycle and considers suicide rather than letting T'Gatoi implant him with her eggs. Finally, Gan agrees to the procedure, acknowledging the role he has to play in his society.

The entire plot is devoted to the grooming of Gan by T'Gatoi, with whom he has developed intimate feelings that resemble human love. T'Gatoi is portrayed as a sensitive being who is able to understand Terran emotions and who can empathize with Gan's anger and disgust at the procedure while assisting her in the emergency operation. At the beginning of the story, Gan's family is sitting in their house eating sterile Tlic eggs given to them by one of T’Gatoi’s sisters. These eggs

[70] Each Terran family living in the Preserve must give one of their (preferably male) children to one of the Tlic as a vessel for their grubs. This is part of a treaty between Terrans and Tlic that ensures peaceful coexistence. However, this agreement can also be interpreted as part of a structural enslavement that the Tlic exercise over the Terrans, although Butler herself states in the “Afterword“ to the story that she does not consider “Bloodchild“ to be a story of enslavement (O. Butler 30). Rather, she describes it as a love story “between two very different beings“, a coming-of-age story as well as her own pregnant man story (ibid.). Other literary scholars such as Elyce Helford see the overwhelming control that the Tlic exercise over the destiny of the Terrans as a clear sign of enslavement (266). Madhu Dubey, in her paper “Octavia Butler's Novels of Enslavement“, analyses the motive of enslavement in Butler's other novels that deal with slavery in more obvious ways, such as *Kindred* (1979) and the *Xenogenesis* trilogy (2000).

have a calming effect on Terrans, which is why they are used as sedatives. They induce dreams and calming illusions in the Terran psyche. In addition, the eggs have the side effect of extending a Terran's life by up to twice the usual lifespan if eaten regularly. A fragile symbiosis and the peaceful coexistence of the two species depend on the calming effect of the Tlic eggs. Terrans can benefit from the effect of the eggs on their bodies, while in return some of them must take on the task of becoming surrogate mothers for the Tlic grubs. Only when a mutual trust has been established can the Tlic be sure that the Terran is willing to give her his body and serve as a host for her children. In Gan's case, this process of trust-building began when T'Gatoi returned to the family after several years of absence. She had, in a sense, grown up with Gan's mother and had later witnessed Gan's birth and his growth into a young adult. T'Gatoi now acts as the guardian of the Preserve, having taken over her family business. Most of the Tlic are not as affectionate and respectful towards Terrans as T'Gatoi herself. In most cases, the Terrans are seen as living breeding stock that the Tlic need if they are to preserve their own kind.[71] Consequently, without supervision, the Tlic would simply take as many Terrans as they want without considering the possible harm to the Terran population. Therefore, the Preserve is necessary for the Terrans to live in peace and safety.

This motif of human-like beings living in a reserve on a planet inhabited largely by insect-like animals, living as if in a cage, already hints at the general direction of the rest of the story. Not only is our idea of the human-animal relationship and the accompanying abnormal distribution of power turned upside down, but the typical and familiar human gender models do not apply here either. By reversing gender roles, in "Bloodchild" the painful and potentially deadly experience of childbirth is usually imposed not on women but on men. Female Terrans are considered more valuable by the Tlic because they ensure the continuation of the Terran species by giving birth to more Terran babies. Although female bodies would be better suited as surrogate mothers for Tlic grubs due to their higher body fat percentage, the risk of too many of them dying during the birth of the grubs was considered too high. Therefore, young male Terrans have to take

[71] Terrans are considered by many Tlic to be simply a different kind of animal. After the Tlic discovered that their grubs grow stronger and more numerous in a Terran host than in other animal hosts, Terrans became the Tlic's preferred surrogates for their grubs.

on the burden of bearing children of a different species, which makes the birthing process even more dangerous.

The Tlic exercise their power over the Terrans in a performative and ritualistic way. According to Alexander, power is always performative in all its variations and enactment, and it is the dramaturgy created by the performative act that is crucial to avoid shaking the legitimacy of power ((2011) 4 ff.). The Tlic's exercise of power has the one purpose of imposing an alien form of motherhood on Terrans against their will.[72] Alexander further highlights that sociologists like Max Weber already pointed out that power is the ability to impose one's own desires against the will of others (4). Weber defines power as the "probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests" (53). Alexander further explains that power is exercised with reference to a particular belief, which transforms power into authority (Alexander (2011) 4). This is what happens to the Terrans in "Bloodchild". T'Gatoi, as the representative of her species, protects the Terrans living inside the Preserve from the rest of her species by exercising power over them:

> T'Gatoi was hounded on the outside. Her people wanted more of us made available. Only she and her political fraction stood between us and the hordes who did not understand why there was a Preserve - why any Terran could not be courted, paid, drafted, in some way made available to them. Or they did understand, but in their desperation, they did not care. She parceled us out to the desperate and sold us to the rich and powerful for their political support. Thus, we were necessities, status symbols, and an independent people. She oversaw the joining of families, putting an end to the final remnants of the earlier system of breaking up Terran families to suit impatient Tlic. […] It was a little frightening to know that only she stood between us and that desperation that could so easily swallow us. (O. Butler 5)

[72] Some of the Terrans also live outside the Preserve, where it is more dangerous for them because the Tlic can be less well controlled there. The Tlic's desperate drive to reproduce stems from their knowledge that they would have fallen victim to extinction had they not discovered Terran hosts. The previously used animals began to kill the Tlic eggs after implantation, thus freeing themselves from having to act as Tlic surrogates.

In this way, the process of Terran fertilization by the Tlic is transformed from rape to legitimate fertilization. In addition, the aspect of the union between Terran and Tlic families within the Preserve is used as a means to legitimize the confinement of Terrans, as it was believed that the joining of families would keep the peace because everyone had a vested interest in keeping it that way.[73]

It is this whole complex construct of power and control that forms the framework for the embedded ritual fertilization process. Elyce Helford sees “[t]he issues of power and control which determine human-alien gender relations in "Bloodchild" […] also suggestive of racial and species metaphors“ (265). The reinterpretation and re-contextualization of power structures becomes clear when T'Gatoi explains to Gan that the Tlic must be seen by the Terrans as protectors, not to be compared to those who would have killed or enslaved them on their former home planet. This situation, Helford argues, means to trade one form of oppression with another (ibid.). In order to escape certain death on one planet, they must now face forced cohabitation in combination with offering up their bodies to the service of the Tlic. The aspect of forcing young males into the position of motherhood by female alien beings that live in a matriarchal social structure reverses the common Western trope of women suffering under the oppression of male dominance in patriarchal social structures, Helford points out (ibid.). However, precarious co-dependencies between “oppressor“ and “oppressed“ lead in the case of “Bloodchild“ to less straightforward relationships than could be expected.

2.2 Conception and Birth Rituals with Reversed Gender Roles

The general order of reproduction is presented in reverse order, describing first a Tlic birth and then the process of conception. Witnessing a Tlic birth before

[73] Considering the political structures in "Bloodchild," one can quickly draw parallels to societal problems in the U.S. such as racism, slavery, and misogyny. The Terrans, whose skin color is not referenced in the narrative, are likely metaphors of oppressed Blacks and other People of Color in the United States. The fact that they live in a "cage" (O. Butler 20) controlled by an alien species is reminiscent of American segregation and the fact that black people were forced to live in certain neighborhoods only. White politicians controlled and decided where black people were allowed to live and thus also controlled their educational and social advancement opportunities. Statistics on the problem of racial segregation in American neighborhoods can be found in a research paper from the Urban Institute (Greene, Turner, and Gourevitch 2017, *Urban Institute*, https://furtheringfairhousing.mit.edu/sites/default/files/documents/racial-residential-segregation-and-neighborhood-disparities.pdf).

he has experienced it himself, Gan finds himself in a difficult situation as he now knows what it really means to be a host for Tlic eggs. The entire plot of the story can be read as a detailed depiction of the Tlic rituals of fertilization and childbirth, and this ritual cycle begins for Gan with a sterile Tlic egg. The egg is given to him by T'Gatoi and belonged to one of T'Gatoi's infertile sisters (O. Butler 23). While he receives a whole egg for himself, the other family members share another egg (3). As mentioned earlier, the eggs put the Terrans into a drug-like state in which they feel no pain and easily agree to whatever is asked of them. In Gan's case, T'Gatoi wants him to be completely relaxed that night because, on the one hand, she wants to reveal to him that this will be the last night of his childhood, as Gan himself says in the first sentence of the story (ibid.). On the other hand, she is also concerned not to let him suffer during the insemination. Accordingly, the use of sterile eggs is an essential means of initiating the ritual. Giving an entire egg to Gan, instead of just a small bite of it, is a symbolic gesture on T'Gatoi's part, tacitly expressing her affection for Gan but also acknowledging the magnitude of the event that follows. It is also the beginning of the liminal stage in the ritual process. While Gan remains in a drowsy state of complete contentment during the liminal stage, T'Gatoi was supposed to inject him with her eggs and then wait for Gan to clear his head and return to his normal state.[74] This procedure, however, is interrupted by the unplanned appearance of the Terran Bram Lomas. Once the preparations for impregnation had been set in motion, Gan should theoretically have reacted positively to T'Gatoi's revelation and agreed to become a surrogate carrier for her grubs that very night. But the unwelcome interruption by the other Terran from

[74] The administration of eggs to Terrans by the Tlic can also be interpreted as part of the structural control over and enslavement of Terrans, as this can be seen as a means of making Terrans compliant to the way the Tlic run things. However, it would not be accurate to describe the entire relationship between Tlic and Terrans exclusively as slavery. The *Britannica Encyclopedia* describes slavery as a prototypical relationship defined by domination and power ("Slavery"). Although there is no consensus on a specific definition of a slave or slavery, various fields of academic research agree on a set of characteristics that must be present for a relationship to be labeled "slavery." In general, slaves are a type of property, movable or immovable, who are not responsible for their actions and have very few, if any, rights in society. They have no personal freedom, have been removed from their lineage, and live as marginalized individuals in their society (ibid.). Slavery is also a form of dependent labor performed by a non-family member. Finally, the slave-owning society depends on the labor of slaves because it lives in a state of perceived labor shortage. Although some of these characteristics can be found in Butler's narrative, the relationship between Tlic and Terran is more complicated than a simple master-slave relationship. Aspects of mutual respect and shared dependence for survival have forged a deeper and complex bond between some individuals of both species, which can also be observed in Gan's relationship with T'Gatoi.

another family, who is about to be eaten alive by the grubs in his body, changes the entire situation, disrupts the ritual and brings home to Gan the true extent of what it means to become a surrogate for the Tlic. With the interruption by the stranger, the ritual persona of the narrative changes from Gan to Bram Lomas, who is used to represent the birthing ritual.[75] While Gan goes through the gentle initiation phase of the ritual, the following, very brutal final phase of the ritual, the extraction of the grubs, is passively performed by another Terran. The middle section of the ritual, the actual impregnation of the Terran host by its Tlic, is skipped at this point and placed at the end of the narrative. This fact underscores the magnitude of the commitment Gan takes on at the end of the story by agreeing to become the host for T'Gatoi's children, even though he knows at this point the full extent of the task. It is a sign of Gan's affection and even love for T'Gatoi, for he admits that he felt jealousy at the thought that his sister might take his place in the ritual if he refused.

The brutality of childbirth and the tenderness of the fertilization process stand in stark contrast, because the actual extraction of the grubs is a dangerous act. The survival of the Terran depends entirely on the skill of the Tlic in charge of the operation. Under normal circumstances, the Tlic in charge would give the fertilized Terran a sterile egg to intoxicate him. The Tlic would then stab the Terran with its stinger, which serves as an additional anesthetic (O. Butler 14). In the case of Bram Lomas, there is no time for this. The extraction can be described as an operation in which the Terran is cut open from the sternum to the lower abdomen with one of the Tlic's claws. Afterwards, the search for all living grubs inside the body begins:

> She found the first grub. It was fat and deep red with his [Lomas] blood - both inside and out. It had already eaten its own egg case but apparently had not yet begun to eat its host. […] By the time it ate its way out of Lomas's flesh, Lomas would be dead or dying […]. (15)

This very graphic description of the extraction process underscores the importance of timing in the birthing ritual, as it is crucial for the survival of the Terran and the grubs. If the Tlic were to take the grubs out too soon, they could die. However, if

[75] Elyce Helford calls this ritual a "blood ritual" by which she means the slicing open of the human body to extract the grubs (260). Giving the ritual this name draws a direct connection to the narrative's title "Bloodchild", as the Tlics' children are born in blood and even require it to survive and grow.

they wait too long, the Terran host will be eaten by the grubs. Because of the brutality of the birthing process, the main idea is also to not let the Terrans see in advance what the ritual will entail in detail; as part of the initiation of the ritual, they should remain mostly unaware until the day of fertilization. Therefore, it is detrimental to both Gan and T'Gatoi that Gan had to witness this part of the ritual before the time was right. If Gan's own fertilization had not been interrupted, he would only have learned the theoretical information about how to obtain the grubs until his own time came:

> I [Gan] had known all my life that this was a good and necessary thing Tlic and Terran did together - a kind of birth. I had believed it until now. I knew birth was painful and bloody, no matter what. But this was something else, something worse. And I wasn't ready to see it. […] The whole procedure was wrong, alien. (16-17)

Before T'Gatoi began the operation on Bram Lomas, Gan had to help her with the other part of the birthing ritual. In order for the grubs to survive after being taken out of their Terran host, an animal must be slaughtered. The body of the dead animal then serves as a replacement incubator, as the grubs still need to feed on blood and flesh to grow and fully develop into Tlic (O. Butler 12-13). This phase of the ritual bears similarities to other human rituals. In many human religions, Kai Horsethemke explains, the slaughter of an animal is part of rituals, i.e. to appease a deity, to ask for guidance or a good harvest (241). The animal sacrifice is usually related to superstition and is an expression of submission to an invisible power that guides and controls human life (ibid.). In this case, however, the animal sacrifice has no divine aspect, as it merely serves as a means to an end. T'Gatoi tries to save both the grubs' and Lomas's lives by transferring the grubs from his body into the body of a dead Achti, a large animal that is not further described but kept in the Preserve by the Terrans (O. Butler 13). In this narrative, the slaughter of the animal underlines the violent character of the ritual rather than giving it a divine aspect. It is a necessity and under normal circumstances not witnessed or executed by Terrans. Gan's active participation in the ritual process of another Terran lets him transcend the boundaries of his own ritual, enabling him to gain a deeper understanding of the ritual's processes.

After this experience and a conversation with T'Gatoi about the true nature of a Tlic birth, Gan's own fertilization ritual continues, as T'Gatoi must lay her eggs in a suitable host that night. The process of fertilization itself is portrayed as an intimate and loving affair and displays erotic elements:

> She [T'Gatoi] flowed around me and into my bedroom. I found her waiting on the couch we shared. […] I [Gan] undressed and lay down beside her. I knew what to do, what to expect. I had been told all my life. I felt the familiar sting, narcotic, mildly pleasant. The blind probing of her ovipositor. The puncture was painless, easy. So easy going in. She undulated slowly against me, her muscles forcing the egg from her body into mine. […] The small amount of fluid that came into me with her egg relaxed me as completely as a sterile egg would have […]. (27-29)

This detailed description of the moment of fertilization stands in stark contrast to the violent process of birth. The portrayal of the act is sexual and depicted in a way that mimics human sexual intercourse. The fact that the male part in this act is not the one who penetrates, but the one who is penetrated, and that he must be made compliant to a certain degree by a sedative, is a reversal of the traditional distribution of roles in sexual intercourse. Gan knows what to expect and how to move as the passive part during the act, because he has been prepared for the act all his life. This type of behavior and "education" is reminiscent of what was associated with young girls in Western societies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to prepare them for marriage and teach them how to behave during the "marital relations".[76]

Despite the fact that Gan becoming a host for T'Gatoi's children is part of a treaty between Terrans and Tlic in which the distribution of power is unbalanced, the sensual and loving description of the act is evidence for a deeper emotional

[76] At the turn of the century, various guidebooks were published to discreetly educate young women about "marital relations," a synonym for sexual intercourse, and what to expect when they became a wife. Guidebooks such as Emma Frances Angell Drake's *What a Young Wife Ought to Know* (The Vir Publishing Company, Philadelphia, USA, 1902) sought to advise women on topics such as "Home and Dress", "The Health of the Young Wife", and also "The Marital Relations". It was also recommended that young women not be taught too much knowledge about the sexual act and everything related to it, as it was feared that this might lead to curiosity and irritation in the young women, as Maurice Bigelow explained in his guide *Sex-Education: A Series of Lectures Concerning Knowledge of Sex in its Relation to Human Life* (The MacMillan Company, New York, 1916). Interestingly, this approach to the subject of sex education is similar to that of the Tlic, who also do not educate Terrans in advance about the full extent of the reproductive process. While young women were taught to submit, obey, and satisfy their husbands in the marital bedroom, young Terran boys are taught to submit and obey the Tlic's instructions during fertilization.

connection between Gan and T'Gatoi. However, Helford classifies this act as an acquaintance rape (264), that is, rape by someone known to the victim.[77] Gan's passivity during intercourse and his desire to prevent his sister from having to take his place in the Tlic life cycle if he rejected T'Gatoi that night is a pressure placed on him that contributed to his consenting to impregnation. In this scenario, T'Gatoi embodies both the subjugating pressures of patriarchal power structures and the maternal and nurturing nature of matriarchal power structures. Helford thus concludes that the female Tlic embody not only the possession of the female ovum, but also male penetration and ejaculation (264).

The relationship between Gan and T'Gatoi represents the difficult and conflicted relationship between the two species in "Bloodchild". The majority of the Terrans are essentially kept like animals and controlled by an alien species as part of a treaty to regulate cohabitation. Having been forced to flee their former home planet due to persecution and arriving on a planet inhabited by the Tlic, Terrans have traded one difficult living situation for another. Political systems that value basic human rights in the form of freedom of movement or freedom to live their lives as they see fit have been replaced by the need to adapt to a situation where the human species, for which the Terran colony is a metaphor, is not at the top of the food pyramid. Primarily because the stereotypical portrayal of sexual relations between the male and female gender has been turned on its head, the balance of power has changed drastically. Young male Terrans have little choice in the process of impregnation, just as young women all over the world are still forced into marriages and unwanted pregnancies.[78] In "Bloodchild", young male Terrans are subject to the arrangements their families have made with the Tlic. The Terrans have been made subservient to the Tlic and live by the rules that have been established for them. Every aspect of the human sexual ritual, in which women are normally wooed, seduced, and eventually conquered in one way or another, is imposed on the young men. The Tlic persuade, seduce, and impregnate the men,

[77] Definition taken from the *Online Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/acquaintancerape. Accessed online: 7 January 2023).

[78] There are numerous studies and statistics on the issue of forced marriage around the world and especially in the U.S., e.g. Esthappan, Sino (et al.). "Understanding Forced Marriage in the United States: Developing Measures, Examining its Nature, and Assessing Gender Disparities." *The Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, Vol. 36, 2021, pp. 5730-60, Sage Publication Online, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0886260518801935. Accessed online: 6 January 2023.

often without them knowing the full extent of the ritual, and in this way take away their freedom of choice over their bodies. "Bloodchild" is therefore an exemplary analogy for the struggles of women not only in Butler's time, but also today, when so many young women live in political and social structures that police their bodies and limit their opportunities to live self-determined lives.

Chapter Conclusion

Fertility, conception, childbirth, and motherhood are topics that are widely relevant to women and are vigorously debated. Both Gilman's novel *Herland* and Butler's short story “Bloodchild“ deal with these themes extensively, but in very different ways. The most important theme in both narratives is the process and definition of procreation, to which Gilman, who wrote her trilogy at the beginning of the twentieth century, chose a supernatural approach. Conception and motherhood are closely linked to (mother) nature as well as Christianity. The added biblical element of immaculate conception is at the core of the story, although here it is not a male-associated god but the female goddess of motherhood who is the reigning power to give life. However, this aspect has also been interpreted as representing a humanized version of the parthenogenesis of some insect species and seen as a satirical means of arguing for greater bodily autonomy for women.[79]

Nevertheless, Gilman’s racist ideology and her stance on the superiority of the "white race" cannot be ignored when analyzing her novel. Her fixation on racial purity is often prevalent in her writings and in this way at times overshadows the feminist ideas that also are at the core of her narratives. Because she wrote her novel in the context of the racial debate in the United States and was herself in close contact with activists of the nativist and restrictionist movements, as Alys Eve Weinbaum elaborates, her views on this subject naturally found their way into the

[79] Robert C. Elliott argues in his book *The Shape of Utopia: Studies in a Literary Genre* that the literary forms of utopia and satire are closely related (24). He defines satire as a secular form of ritual mockery, ridicule or abuse of a subject and notes that satirical elements have formed the basis for utopian narratives since Thomas More's *Utopia* of 1516 (ibid.). Although the two genres are not inseparable, Elliott believes that they are in their aim to criticize society. While satire criticizes the real world in the name of something better, utopia is a hopeful construct of a world that could be (ibid.). Elliott states that some of the most famous utopian narratives, such as More's *Utopia*, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, and also Gilman's *Herland*, clearly exhibit an exaggerated sense of satire.

story (279). Gilman's vision that only the most worthy woman was chosen to bear children, and then only her daughters were worthy of further procreation, demonstrates her views on blood and racial purity. Accordingly, contemporary debates about the value and validity of Gilman's feminist intentions are not unwarranted and need to be discussed.[80] The focus of this dissertation, however, is to understand feminist speculative fiction through the lens of fictional ritual practices in a feminist setting as a means of serving feminist reform, and in the context of its time, *Herland* is clearly concerned with feminist ideas and the plight of patriarchal social structures.

Octavia Butler's short story, on the other hand, uses a very different approach to draw attention to the social ills of the women of her time. Fertility was then, and still is, an important and much discussed theme in feminist utopian and dystopian narratives. Butler chose an unusual approach to highlight the social burden society placed on women by putting men in the position of having to bear children. The reversal of gender roles and stereotypes like this can be used to draw attention to dysfunctional power structures and highlight grievances in social structures. But Butler went one step further and put young men in the position of being used as living incubators by an alien species. This can be read as a metaphor for the alienation of women and the female body itself at the end of the twentieth century. As a black woman in America, Butler is aware of the difficulties that women of color in particular have in obtaining adequate and reputable medical care, and that problems during pregnancy and childbirth are more likely to lead to death for

[80] Further reading on this topic can also be found in Gail Bederman's *Manliness and Civilization* (1917), in which he addresses Gilman's image of the Anglo-Saxon civilized white woman. In addition, Dana Seitler's article “Unnatural Selection: Mothers, Eugenic Feminism, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Regeneration Narratives“ addresses Gilman’s problematic use of eugenics in her writings. Seitler points out that it has been recognized that the feminist writings of *fin-de-siècle* American literature are a product of their time and a continuation of the prevailing social problems and ideologies (62). Seitler continues that prominent turn-of-the-century American feminists such as Gilman, Margaret Sanger, and Victoria Woodhull advocated for women's sexual and economic freedom while emphasizing the importance of eugenics in terms of appropriate racial ideological American reproduction (67). The imperialist adventure novel, with its logic of race and civilization, is part of the literary canon of that period and a genre whose characteristics also fit Gilman's novel *Herland*. In this way, Seitler argues that the novel is an example of how feminism and eugenics were not two contradictory concepts at the beginning of the twentieth century, but even mutually constitutive, “each inextricably rooted in the constitution of the other“ (64). Therefore, Seitler interprets Gilman’s full body of work as a “means by which to gain a fuller purchase on the contemporary inheritance of early-twentieth-century feminism's campaign to free white women from masculine hegemony through a commitment to popular science“, referring specifically to the use of the eugenic discipline (ibid.).Consequently, Seitler believes that Gilman’s fiction and non-fiction combined function as a rescue for the feminist agenda (66).

women of color than for white women.[81] Of course, the ritual of conception and the ritual of birth are portrayed in her story as painful, intrusive, and life-threatening, but coupled with an air of compassion and gentle coaxing from the female Tlic. It paints a picture of the contradictory position of women in American society at the end of the twentieth century and even today. By focusing on the immense danger to the lives of the male Terran surrogates of the Tlic birth ritual, Butler reflects the dangers that (black) women faced before, during, and after childbirth.

Looking at the fertility ritual in Gilman's feminist utopian narrative, it is clear that it is used to emphasize the power of women when they are free to develop without interference from intrusive male behavior. In Butler's dystopian fiction, however, rituals are more overtly used as a critique of society and function as a warning sign to society when social conditions are rapidly deteriorating. This fact can also be observed in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, which will be one of the texts discussed in the next chapter of this thesis.

CHAPTER II - Rituals of Rape and Oppression in the Feminist Dystopia

This chapter examines the ritual enactment of rape specifically, and sexual rituals in general, as well as rituals aimed at female subjugation and humiliation in totalitarian and oppressive patriarchal societies in Sheri S. Tepper's novel *The Gate to Women's Country*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, and Christina Dalcher's novel *Vox*. The feminist debate in the United States in the 1970s changed the previously socially accepted notion of rape. In the past, rape was interpreted as a "natural expression of male sexual desire and an act of sex and lust" (Sielke 368). Rape was seen as a natural act rather than a violation of women's rights or even a criminal offense. Sielke notes that it is thanks to the work of feminist thinkers such as Susan Brownmiller and Kate Millett that this view of rape changed (ibid.). They saw rape "not as a sexually motivated act, but as a form of oppression, social

[81] For references see chapter 2.2. Text Corpus, p. 27.

control and political power; in fact, as the most significant expression of male dominance and a primary mechanism of male supremacy" (ibid.). While this definition of rape has generated some debate in the United States, as some reject the separation of sexuality and power, it underscores the fact that rape has been and continues to be used as a tool to oppress and objectify women (368-70).

Although the first two novels were written and published in the 1980s - T*he Handmaid's Tale* in 1985 and *The Gate to Women's Countr*y in 1988 - they show different perspectives on the reality in which the two authors lived. While Atwood, who herself was born and raised in Canada, imagined a completely bleak and dystopian future society of the United States, Tepper, who was born and lived her entire life in Colorado, drew a post-apocalyptic, dystopian picture of man-made devastation in which a utopian society of women established a new social order. Central to Atwood's novel is a ritual called “The Ceremony", in which the Handmaid is repeatedly raped by the Commander in whose house she is serving. In Tepper's novel, there is no institutionally sanctioned ritual rape as in *The Handmaid's Tale*, as the cohabitation of women and men is strictly supervised in Women’s Country, but procreation is still ritualized, closely monitored and highly selective. Moreover, it is the women who rule their towns and keep the men under control to prevent criminal acts. But in the part of the country called Holyland, a small patriarchal, backward-looking society marked by violence and incest uses rape as a means of controlling and breaking a woman's spirit. Tepper’s novel will also be examined in more detail in regard to initiation rituals and the importance of clothing for ritual purposes. In a final step, Christina Dalcher's novel *Vox*, which has similarities to the plot of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, is analyzed in terms of the family rituals depicted in the novel. The focus is more on the ritual-like oppression of women and subtle changes in everyday rituals that families face in Dalcher's imaginary totalitarian regime of the United States of America.

3. *The Gate to Women’s Country* - Sheri S. Tepper

The Gate to Women's Country, like Gilman's *Herland,* is a feminist utopia with problematic representations regarding the implementation of feminist ideas for social improvement. The novel is a feminist ecotopia, contrasting a utopian

matriarchy and two variants of a dystopian patriarchy. The plot is permeated with the social problems of the time in which it was written, reflecting themes of the feminist movement in 1980s America which Becky Thompson identifies as the domination of patriarchy over women, reproductive rights, and marital rape (338 ff.) The story is set in a post-apocalyptic world on the North American continent after former state structures have been destroyed and most of humanity has died out, resulting in a man-made devastation due to the use of weapons of mass destruction. In this desolate landscape, only a small number of people have survived, a handful of whom are women who have decided to form a new society. This society consists of several communities scattered across the Eastside of the North American continent, inhabited only by women, their children, and male servants. In addition to the society of women, two other societies have developed alongside the townships, which are the garrisons and the community of the Holylanders. Each of the townships is guarded by a garrison composed only of men, whose job is to protect the women in the townships. Twice a year, during the summer and winter carnival festivities, the garrisons' warriors are allowed to mingle with the women to celebrate and to procreate, thus ensuring the continuation of the townships and the garrisons. The theory behind this gender-segregated way of life stems from the Founding Mothers' belief that man's true nature, driven by aggression and brutality, has led to the devastation of the world. Accordingly, the Founding Mothers believed that a social system in which rationally thinking and compassionate women hold power and make the decisions would create a lasting, just, equal, and harmonious society.

The relationship between the women and the garrison is multifaceted and complex, suggesting a constant metaphorical tug-of-war between the civilized women of the townships and the archaic, phallocentric men of the garrisons for knowledge and, ultimately, power. This knowledge, however, is interpreted differently by the two parties. While the warriors believe that the women have hidden knowledge of secret weapons from before the Convulsions - the name given to the destruction caused by the war - the women rely on gaining insight into what is going on within the garrison to foresee a possible plot to take over the town. The women provide the garrisons with food, shelter, and clothing, while the warriors in return are supposed to protect the townships from hostile takeovers by other garrisons as well as from the Holylanders, a group of wild people living

outside the periphery of Women's Country. Religion, with its accompanying demonization of women, is used by the Holylanders to subjugate women and make them available to men as commodities to be subdued. Women are reduced to serving their husbands as sex slaves and are expected to bear male children. The ritual of sexual union between a man and his wife in Holyland is completely reduced to the basic function of procreation and is usually accompanied by the use of violence by the man to fulfill his "duty" (Tepper 209). This term has the same meaning in this novel as it does in Atwood's, namely the man's task of impregnating a woman through sexual intercourse without experiencing feelings of sexual pleasure. The exercise of power by men in Holyland is highly performative and physical, as it necessarily must be if men are to prevent the legitimacy of their power from being questioned or destroyed. The violence with which the men act towards the women is their way of performing their power and creating a dramaturgy, both of which are essential for the men to not lose their grip on power, according to the theory of Jeffrey Alexander ((2011) 4).[82]

Tepper's novel borrows heavily from Greek mythology, evident in the way she structures the township and the garrison. The township, run by women, bears similarities to the ancient Greek myth of the Amazons, while the garrison, run by men, follows the Spartan tradition. Walter Duvall Penrose notes that the Amazons, a group of female warriors, are said to have ensured the continuity of their society by meeting once a year with the males of a neighboring people to mate, giving them the boys conceived at these meetings, and keeping the girls to raise as Amazons (3).[83] The Amazons were considered inferior to men in terms of physical strength, but "used ingenuity and technology to subdue all of the nations around them […]" (ibid.), a strategy also employed by the women of Women's Country.

[82] The Holylander social structure, based purely on a strictly conservative Christian religious tradition, and their view of women accordingly, correspond to the society in Atwood's novel. Since an in-depth analysis of these social structures and the accompanying devaluation of women will follow in the chapter on Atwood's novel, this chapter on Tepper's novel focuses on the societies of the women and the warriors.

[83] Penrose analyses the myth of the Amazons in his book *Postcolonial Amazons: Female Masculinity and Courage in Ancient Greek and Sanskrit Literature.* He refers to a variety of accounts by different ancient Greek writers that refer to the myth of the Amazons and portray them in sometimes very dissimilar ways. The general consensus, however, seems to have been that the Amazons were the "formidable foes of the ancient Greeks" who were "smarter, faster, and better than men" (2).

The dynamic between men and women is overshadowed by misconceived honor and disruptive patriarchal structures that feed an unspoken mutual distrust between women and men. While every girl born in Women's Country ist staying with her family within her township, not every boy automatically leaves at a certain age to become a warrior. Since boys are turned over to the garrison at age five to be trained as soldiers, at age fifteen they must choose to either stay in the garrison and live a life of supposed heroism and glory or return to the city and be trained as servants in the women's household.[84] Since the latter option is interpreted by the warriors as a sign of effeminate weakness, boys who wish to leave the garrison must endure some hardship, usually in the form of bullying by their peers, before they can return home in a ritual that can be described as a choosing ceremony similar to the Choosing Ceremony in Veronica Roth's *Divergent*. This choosing ceremony is only one of many rituals described in the novel, for it is full of ceremonial and ritual procedures that serve mainly to regulate the separate relations between men and women.

3.1 Rituals as Means of Securing Social Structure

The rituals in the townships of Women's Country are exemplary of social performances as ritual events and the struggle for power within a comparatively small social group. They are essential to regulating the peaceful coexistence of women and men and thus form the backbone of their social structure and human interactions. However subliminally distrustful the social interactions in Women's Country between women and men may be, by and large the rules of civilized coexistence are mutually obeyed. This is because most of the population assumes that there is a balanced and reciprocal relationship of give and take between warriors and women and only the select few women in the township councils know

[84] In this way, life in the garrison parallels the warrior society of the Spartans, whose social structure the leaders of the garrisons modeled themselves on, as Shiloh Carroll analyzed (31-32). David Knottnerus and Phyllis Berry explain that in Spartan society, boys were also sent to train as soldiers at a young age and were expected to spend all their time training, while having little contact with women except at festivals (4). The need for constant training in war skills, Knottnerus and Berry continue, stemmed from the constant threat of other city-states attacking Sparta, as well as enemies from within Sparta (ibid.). This is also reflected in Tepper's novel, as the garrisons are constantly aware of the threat posed by the women, as well as the potential danger from garrisons of other city-states.

this to be untrue. These women have mastered and understood the conceptual issues of ritual social actions in an intuitive and practical way,[85] making it easy for them to lie and withhold information from the other townspeople and the warriors to keep the peace. Symbolic acts are essential components of social rituals, such as the handing over of five-year-old boys to their assumed warrior fathers or the town's carnival celebrations. During the carnival season, the women of the city and the warriors celebrate together inside the city walls for two weeks. Men and women come together to drink alcohol and enjoy themselves and - in a very controlled environment - have sexual intercourse. Polygamy is the social standard for relationships between men and women, although most older warriors and older women tend to have monogamous relationships with each other, meaning that they meet twice a year, during the winter and summer carnivals, to spend time together exclusively. The controlled environment in which couples can have sexual intercourse are special rooms that can be rented for an hour at a medical facility. In this way, the town's council women can track who is having sexual intercourse and take certain protective measures, such as inserting a contraceptive device into a woman's arm if pregnancy is not desired (Tepper 73).

The carnival ritual is essential to maintaining the balance of power in Women's Country. The carnival season is seen by warriors primarily as an opportunity to father children, preferably sons, who are later brought to them. The fathering of sons is interpreted by the warriors as honorable and increases the warrior's respect among his comrades. Accordingly, sexual prowess and high potency are valued in the garrisons as signs of strength and leadership. To keep the warriors' aggression and need for prestige under control, it is important for the warriors to believe that they will beget sons who will be given to them at the age of five. It is not until near the end of the story that it is revealed that the warriors actually do not father most of the children in Women's Country, but that the sensible, intelligent, and sometimes psychic servants are chosen for this task (Tepper 304-05).[86] In this way, the warriors are made to believe that, as physically

[85] See explanations of J.C. Alexander's theory in chapter 3.2 in Part I of this dissertation.

[86] In fact, all children in the townships are the children of the male servants, as the women try to breed out the undesirable masculine traits of the warriors. Since most of the council women are medically trained and therefore work in the medical profession, they have the opportunity to discretely influence human reproduction (Tepper 293-294). However, women are also carefully monitored by the Women's Council and, if deemed unfit to reproduce, sterilized. Unfit women are

strong men, they exercise some power over the women in the cities, when in fact the opposite is the case. Neither the warriors, nor the regular women are aware that they are being given contraceptive devices by the council women to prevent unwarranted pregnancies.[87]

One of the overarching themes of the novel is patriarchy and its manifestations in the three different societies of the townships, the garrisons, and the Holylanders. Shiloh Carroll examines the use of patriarchal structures in the novel in her paper “Both Sides of the Gate: Patriarchy in Sheri S. Tepper's "*The Gate to Women's Country*“. She finds that all three societies are influenced to varying degrees by this social construct, and the rituals of each society are closely related to the extent to which patriarchy controls their way of life (25). In Carroll’s estimation, the women in the townships are attempting to built an egalitarian, utopian society by the use of eugenics as a means to uproot patriarchal structures which they see as the core problem of past cultures (ibid.). In contrast, the garrisons' leaders have turned patriarchy into an all-consuming ideology that determines the entire life of the warriors and has the ultimate goal of overthrowing Women's Country. According to Carroll, the Holylanders act as a symbol of the worst kind of society women can live in, as it is based on the principles of conservative religion and male dominance (ibid.).[88]

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women who are considered silly and prone to irrational infatuations with men from which they do not grow out (291). Morgot admits that her practices are problematic and refers to herself and the other council women as the "Damned Few" (ibid.) who must make difficult decisions for the good and survival of their society. Carroll concludes that Tepper in this way acknowledges that the eugenic methods used by the women are unethical, but sees them as justified in terms of the greater good (34).

[87] In feminist utopias, it is rather unusual for sexual relations to be as strictly supervised as they are here. Other feminist utopias paint a picture of total sexual freedom, but here this is not seen as an effective way to build a peaceful society. Rather, Tepper portrays a totalitarian regime in disguise that seems like an attempt at a feminist antithesis to the totalitarian regimes seen in feminist dystopias, i.e. Atwood's *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

[88] The society of the Holylanders represents a dystopian society and shows a millennia-old worldview that dehumanizes and degrades women to the mere property of men. The structure of this society is designed to give women as little personal freedom and self-esteem as possible. Everything in this society is designed to take away a woman's freedom, free will and individuality. Rape, which is part of arranged marriages, plays a major role in this systematic scheme of power abuse and control. Their ideology is based on the religious traditions of the Puritans and forms the basis and justification for the treatment of their women.

3.1.1 Becoming a Man - Transition Ritual: From Boy to Soldier

An essential part of the women's deception of the warriors is the ritualistic handing over of the boys. This is a public and collective cultural event that depends on the simplified structures of symbolic communication as well as cultural interactions that rely on intuitive and unreflective trust (Alexander (2011) 26-28). The symbolic procedure of handing over the boys into the care of the garrison is characterized by a variety of ritualized symbolic communication and is, to a large extent, a cultural performance: a "social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation" (28). However, this meaning does not necessarily have to be believed by the performers themselves, as the main purpose of the performance is to make the audience believe in this meaning. The performance must be plausible to be effective (ibid.). The desired effect is that the people to whom the actions and gestures are directed will accept the motives as reasonable explanations. This is the theory underlying not only this ritual, but almost all of the women's rituals in Women's Country: their audience, the warriors of the garrison and the general population, must believe wholeheartedly in the validity of the women's rituals and thus in their intentions. In the ritual now to be discussed, the spectator or audience is the warrior Michael, whom Morgot, a woman from the town council, must convince that he has fathered her son Jerby. She must also convince him that she wholeheartedly wants her son to become a warrior. This is a particularly difficult task for the women on the town council, as they know the real reason for the boys being handed over into the custody of the warriors.

Alexander argues that a "successful [ritualistic] performance depends on the ability to convince others that one's performance is true, with all the ambiguities that the notion of aesthetic truth implies" (28). The ritual at hand takes place in the Warriors' Square, which is surrounded on three sides by colonnades: the Defenders Gate, the Battle Gate, and the Gate of the Warriors's Sons (Tepper 3). This square was built to represent and celebrate male strength and honor in regard to the role they play on the battlefield. The mother brings her five-year-old son to the Gate of the Warrior's Sons in the company of her family to introduce him to his warrior father. As she knocks on the gate, the gate opens and the place fills with

warriors who attend the ceremony as witnesses to the ritual (14-15). The words and actions of the woman handing over her son and the warrior receiving him are always the same and rehearsed to perfection, leaving little to no room for improvisation or misinterpretation of the ritual:

> A trumpet blew somewhere beyond the gate. Morgot swept Jerby up into her arms and retreated to the center of the plaza as the gate swung open […]. Then there were drums and banners and the crash of hundreds of feet hitting the stones all at the same time […]. One tall man out in front. Tall. And big, with shoulders and arms like great, stout tree branches. Everything became still. […] [Morgot] walked forward, Jerby's hand in hers. „Warrior," she said, […]. „Madam," he thundered. […] „Warrior, I bring you your son," Morgot said, pushing Jerby a step or two in front of her. […] The warrior starred down at Jerby and Jerby starred back, his mouth open. The warrior knelt down, put his finger to the flask of honey at his waist and then to Jerby's lips. „I offer you the sweetness of honor," he [Michael] whispered […]. Jerby licked his lips, then grinned, and Michael laid his hand on the little boy's shoulder. „I give him into your keeping until his fifteenth year," Morgot went on. „Except that he shall return to his home in Women's Country during the carnival holidays, twice each year until that time." „A warrior chooses his way at fifteen." Michael was thundering once more. […] „In that year he shall choose," said Morgot, stepping and leaving Jerby there all alone. (ibid.)

This ritual performance is charged with a (partially hidden) symbolic meaning. The intention is to convey as much pathos and honor as possible, as the boy is a symbol of the warrior's pride and fertility: he serves as proof that the warrior can produce male children who ideally become strong warriors themselves. After the boy is passed from his mother to the warrior, he is led around on his father's shoulders while the other warriors cheer and welcome the boy into the garrison. It is the pride and goal of every soldier to one day have fathered at least one boy to represent his manhood and fertility.

The initiation phase of this transition ritual already begins in Jerby's home, when his mother Morgot dresses herself and her son in festive clothing. Morgot wears a blue woolen veil over her head and a long, padded ceremonial cloak (Tepper 8). The blue veil can be interpreted in a number of ways, depending on the religious and cultural context one considers when taking a closer look. The exact manner in which Morgot wears the veil is not described in detail. However, since the material the veil is made of is wool, which is usually rather opaque, it can be assumed that Morgot wears the veil over the back of her head and not over her

face.[89] It is therefore likely that the veil is not worn in the manner of a mourning veil, as this would cover the face. Victoria George notes that in Western religious tradition, the color blue is associated with inspiration, power, wealth, and wisdom, and has associations with prestige, divinity, and grace (244). Also, George continues, it is the color used by the Catholic Church to represent the Virgin Mary, who wears a blue veil in many biblical illustrations (ibid.).[90] Since the women of the council direct the destiny of the township, they are also responsible for the performance of the rituals and know the actual, deeper meaning of each ritual, which remains hidden from most people. Considering the symbolic meaning of the blue veil, it can be seen as a silent display of superiority, as the women possess secret knowledge and therefore an advantage over the warriors. Thus, if blue represents wisdom and divinity, a blue headdress in this case symbolizes the intellectual superiority that some of the women have over the warriors. While Morgot must know about the hidden meaning of the veil, most of the other women who are handing over their boys partake in this deception as ignorant participants. From this perspective, the veil can be seen as an important means of symbolic production in this ritual as it is used as a tool of indirect communication.

While the other family members also dress festively, the focus is clearly on the mother's clothing. The clothing indicates that the family is stepping out of their usual routine and life for a few hours to participate in the ritual action that follows. As with many rituals it is the initiation phase that separates the "normal" persona of Morgot from the one participating in the ritual. After dressing, the family proceeds to the Warrior’s Plaza to begin the central part of the ritual. The knocking on the gate initiates the second phase of the ritual, the liminal phase. From this moment on, the ritual is staged to emphasize the warrior's masculine strength and physical superiority over the women. The procession of the warriors into the square resembles the deployment of a garrison on the battlefield, indicated by the roll of drums and the waving of flags. This parade also symbolizes an intervention in the

[89] Lindsay Baker discusses the Western culture of ritual dress in the context of funeral rituals in her article "Mourning Glory: Two Centuries of Funeral Dress.“ BBC Culture, 3 Nov 2014.

[90] George discusses in her book the significance and allocation of colors in the Christian and Hebrew religious traditions. This cultural background was chosen for the interpretation of colors as Christianity is the most fitting religion in relation to the author’s own cultural heritage, but also in consideration of the religious beliefs displayed in the novel itself. Tepper herself uses the scriptures of the Bible when describing the religious and moral values of the Holylanders, who strictly live by the word of the Bible.

otherwise highly regulated and segregated social fabric within Women's Country and underscores the fact that the liminal phase of the ritual has begun. Under normal circumstances, warriors are only allowed into the city during the summer and winter carnivals; however, when a boy is given to his warrior father, he and his entire garrison are allowed to enter the city walls to welcome the child into their midst. For the boy, this is an important rite of passage. He is expected to let go of his home, his mother, and his sisters to join the garrison. Finally, the boy must leave behind everything the warriors associate with supposed effeminate weakness and mildness, which is expressed in the phrase “I offer you the sweetness of honor“ (Tepper 14). This phrase implies that life outside the garrison cannot be honorable for a man. In the warriors' mind, their way of life is the only way for a man to live an honorable and therefore successful life.

The scene in the Warrior's Plaza is rich with symbolic actions performed by the participants in the ritual. Another symbolic action, the placing of the boy on the shoulders of his warrior father, also signals the beginning of a new life dominated by masculine power and ritual: his father's large, strong hands literally lift him out of his childhood and carry him into a new manhood and a life outside the city walls. As he sits on his father's shoulders, the other warriors call out the name of Telemachus, who was “the ancient one, the ideal son, who defended the honor of his father“ (Tepper 16). Telemachus thus represents the ideal man and warrior, an idol that inspires the young in their quest and pursuit of honor and strength. Before Michael and his century leave the Warrior’s Plaza, there is a moment of silence in which the warriors kneel before the two statues of Telemachus and his father Odysseus, paying their respects to their perceived honorable predecessors.[91] After the moment of silence passes, “drums and trumpets and bells began once more as the procession swept away towards the barracks“ (17). The sounding of drums, bells, and trumpets serves to announce the main part of the ritual and, later on,

[91] Carroll notes that the mythical Greek figures Odysseus and Telemachus are idolized by the warriors of the garrison, as they represent for them the "epitome of masculinity" (32). But Carroll also points out that while the garrison reveres the heroes of that era, they fail to live up to the standard of their idols. The heroes and warriors in Greek society possessed “a mentality of dignity, self-denial, and self-sacrifice“ (ibid.), protecting their people without ever being able to be a part of them. The warriors lived outside the community they protected, just like the warriors of the garrison. The difference, however, is that the goal of the warriors of the garrison is not the protection of their society, but their desire to overthrow and enslave the women living in the townships. Thus, they do not aim to protect them, but in fact endanger them. This desire to dominate Women's Country, Carroll argues, is consistent with patriarchal ideals of controlling and dominating women (ibid.).

also its end. The instruments create loud and imposing sounds that disrupt the otherwise quiet and peaceful life of the town, symbolizing once again the sharply contrasting worldviews of the warriors and the women.

While Morgot and the rest of Jerby's family return to their old lives and routines after the ritual ends, a new stage of life begins for Jerby. For him, the ritual in the Warrior's Plaza opens the door to a new stage of life that the liminal phase of the ritual has conjured up before his eyes. By crossing this threshold, he is not reintegrated into the society of the township but introduced into a new social construct with new rules and its own rites. Thus, Jerby does not actually re-enter or reintegrate into his old reality after the liminal phase, like his family does, but he enters a new reality. From now on, his path and that of his family go in different directions, taking them out of the liminal phase and into separate new realities.

3.1.2 Ritual Structure in a Warrior Society

After the boy is introduced to life within the garrison, he begins his training as a warrior, which is marked by masculinity rituals designed to give him security and confidence in his masculine abilities as a warrior. As mentioned before, the social structure of the townships and of the garrison were modeled after Greek mythology and ancient warrior societies, which is why Shiloh Carroll draws parallels with the ancient warrior society of Sparta.[92] The city-state of Sparta was structured as a “state-run social system dedicated to the development of all male free citizens as military warriors“ (Knottnerus and Berry 4) to meet the internal and external threats they faced. To accomplish this, a powerful mode of socialization and training was

[92] Not only does the garrison's veneration of Odysseus and Telemachus testify to the model on which the society is based, but the play "Iphigenia at Ilium“, a remake of the Greek tragedy “The Trojan Woman“, performed annually in the women's townships, also references Greek mythology and society. In the novel, the play is based on a millennia-old story from before the convulsion, about a conflict between two garrisons, the Greeks and the Trojans, sparked when a Trojan warrior kidnapped a Greek woman named Helen. The Greek garrison pursued the pair to the city of Troy, also called Ilium, and besieged the city for ten years (Tepper 28-29). In Greek mythology, Iphigenia is sacrificed by her father Agamemnon in order for his fleet to reach land safely. This reference, in conjunction with the meaning of the name Iphigenia, "strong-born" or “she who gives birth to strong offspring“ ("Iphigenia"), speaks to both the suffering of women at the hands of men and the strength of women in Women's Country. Thus, the play metaphorically represents the suffering women endured in the pre-convulsions era, and is likely performed again each year to keep alive the memory of the destruction and dangers of male pride and warfare, and that women are always the ones who suffer the consequences. It is also a direct response to the martial social structure in the garrison and shows that women still see men as the main source of their pain and problems.

introduced to ensure that warriors would “exhibit the necessary behaviors vital to the ongoing maintenance of the social order“ (5). This led to the implementation of a “rearing method“ that used instructional practices to accustom young boys to a particular way of life. The children, Knottnerus and Berry point out, were subjected to extreme discipline and a very strict form of instruction that strongly focused on military training (ibid.). Knottnerus and Berry argue that this rearing program can be analyzed using a theory of structural ritualization that focuses on the ritualized practices of social life and which states that such activities play a crucial role in reproducing social relations, identity, and social structure.[93] This theory is based on the assumption that the thought processes of the boys participating in the educational programs are subjected to a kind of brainwashing that welds them together as a unit. Joseph Bryant describes this process in Spartan society as "character formation" (63), which is part of a Greek principle called "agoge": an extremely disciplined, compulsory form of education (ibid.).

As for the garrison in Tepper's novel, although the training program is not explained in detail, it is clear that the boys undergo such Spartan training methods. Between the ages of five and fifteen, all boys are taught what makes an honorable warrior. The aspect of honor plays a central role in this training, as it is considered the most valuable quality of a warrior. Chernon, a childhood friend of Morgot’s daughter Stavia who is one of the main protagonists of the novel, has been fully indoctrinated by the garrison's own "agoge" and can effortlessly name all the things that are honorable for a warrior: “It was honorable to protect women because warriors needed them to breed sons and - so dogma had it - they were incapable of protecting themselves“ (Tepper 142). Moreover, because of their inherent weakness, women could not be trusted to handle weapons of any kind, so it was

[93] Like other ritual researchers, their approach assumes that ritual acts take many forms, such as the daily activities of people and the less frequent but still highly dramatized ritual practices shared by community members (Knottnerus and Berry 6). Their theory of structural ritualization focuses on interaction sequences and social actions that are found in different settings and has at its core the theory of “ritualized symbolic practice“ (7-8). Ritualized symbolic practices refer to the omnipresent “form of social behavior in which people engage in repetitious and regularized actions when interacting with others“ (8). Because such social practices occur throughout social life, they include standardized styles of interaction within different organizational milieus or subcultures, such as the garrison in Tepper's novel with its boys' training program. Knottnerus and Berry argue that the ritualized action repertoire comprises many daily life activities which rest on cognitive schemas. Although individuals may not think about or consciously attend to many of the ritualized actions that make up their daily lives, they argue that such behaviors are nevertheless based on a symbolic framework or cognitive structure (ibid.).

“perfectly honorable to conquer them and take the power away from them“, so it was “most honorable to remove the danger from them“ (ibid.). As clear as his views are on what is honorable, he also has a clear idea of what is not:

> It was dishonorable to make a Gypsy of a young girl as it unfitted her for breeding, or to make a whore of a boy as it unfitted him for a warrior’s life. […] Everyone agreed it was dishonorable, but sometimes the men did it anyhow. It was dishonorable, but it wasn’t hateful. […] It was dishonorable to drink so much during carnival that you couldn’t remember what women you’d been with, though most of the men had been guilty of that. (142-43)[94]

Unlike the society of the Spartans, who valued honor primarily in terms of their military prowess, the warriors of the garrison associate honor primarily with their ability to protect and, more importantly, control the town's women. Although the protection of women was also a main point in the rigorous training of the Spartans, their goal was not to overpower the female part of their society, but only to protect them and the children. And while these guidelines were generally accepted among the warriors, Chernon points out that the principles of honor were not followed one hundred percent. This inconsistency in the implementation of their "code of honor" automatically leads to the principles being valued less than they should, decreasing discipline and leaving room for transgressions.

Because of the warriors’ attempt at structuring their society in the same way as the Spartans did, their training of young boys included the principle of structural ritualization. Unlike the Spartans, however, who focused more on discipline and less on honor, the garrison’s ritualization failed because they were too focused on creating exceptions for themselves and putting too much importance on

[94] Chernon describes in this passage that homosexual relationships between men make them unfit for military service. Military service is the most important and honorable element in the lives of the warriors. Thus, exclusion from this service means that these men cannot lead an honorable life because of their sexual inclination. This is also evidenced by the fact that homosexual men are called "whores" while "loose women" are called gypsies. Homosexuality among men is considered worse than women prostituting themselves outside the walls of Women's Country. There are also other examples of homophobia in the book, which have been critically analyzed by Wendy Pearsons in her article "After the (Homo)Sexual: A Queer Analysis of Anti-Sexuality in Sheri S. Tepper's “The Gate to Women's Country““.

appearance than content.[95] The warriors neglect the five key qualities that the Spartans valued above else in their rearing program which are

> (1) extreme simplicity, austerity, and frugality in behavior and living conditions; (2) social unity, harmony, and homogeneity ("equality") of group members; (3) hierarchical distinctions and disciplined obedience to authorities and the state; (4) aggressiveness, competitiveness, courageousness, and a militaristic bearing; and (5) deceptiveness, secretiveness, and a opportunistic orientation. (Knottnerus and Berry 11)

Many of the points mentioned by Knottnerus and Berry are echoed in the behavior of the garrison. Their aggressive and military demeanor is pervasive, as is their deception, secrecy, and opportunistic orientation with regard to the attempted takeover of Marthatown. The hierarchical order is evident at every warrior ceremony when the strict military protocol must be followed that places commanders and centuries at the top of the military chain (Tepper 152). However, other aspects are ignored by the warriors, such as austerity and frugality in behavior and living conditions, as they strive to enslave the women and make them work for their own comfort. The careless enforcement of these qualities renders the resulting rituals ineffective and has already led to the corruption and ultimate collapse of Spartan society, Knottnerus and Berry note (27). And so the garrison of Marthatown meets the same fate at the end of the novel.

Rituals do not function correctly if the participants are not rigid in following the ritual rules and honoring the ritual structure. Knottnerus and Berry highlight that the symbolic framework and cognitive structure of ritualized symbolic practice must be kept intact and followed or the process will fail (8-11). The fact that Chernon is killed at the end of the novel along with the entire garrison of Marthatown in a battle orchestrated by the council women of Marthatown speaks to how important following the ritual structures in the garrison would have been (Tepper 308-11). Had they adhered to the ancient Greek code they so revered, they would not have perished on the battlefield. Disrespecting the women in their society and planning

[95] Chernon points out that many warriors were guilty of drinking too much during the carnival and afterwards could not remember with whom they had sexual intercourse. However, when a notice arrived a few weeks later informing them that they had impregnated a woman and nine months later it turned out that she had given birth to a boy, none of the warriors denied having fathered the child. Sexual prowess and the fathering of sons are more important than the code of honor, so here, too, appearances matter more than facts (Tepper 143).

to enslave them, the council women thought it best to kill the entire garrison in battle to eliminate the danger. By their actions, the men had proven to the women that their eugenics approach to correcting male behavior was justified, and so they themselves perished in their attempt to prevent just that.

3.1.3 Becoming a Man - Transition Ritual: From Soldier to Servant

Because the boy is a representative of his warrior father's masculinity and an affirmation of his strength and leadership qualities, it is considered shameful and dishonorable for a boy to leave the garrison when he turns fifteen. These boys are referred to as “cowards“, “tit-suckers“, and declared “impotent“ (Tepper 38). It is ultimately interpreted by the warriors as an insult to their father's masculinity, which is why boys who wish to leave the garrison endure a certain amount of bullying and abuse upon their departure:

> [e]veryone agreed that it was dishonorable to return through the Gate to Women’s Country. Only cowards did it. Cowards and physical weaklings, though even they could be put to work in the garrison kitchens or doing maintenance of some kind if they confessed their weakness to the Commander. Beyond being the butt of a bit of rough teasing or donkey play, they got on well enough. (Tepper 142)

A boy's transition from innocent childhood to glorious manhood is symbolized by passing through the Warrior Gate, then the shameful return to Women’s Country, if so chosen, must be through the gate back into the same. The boys must strip naked outside in the cold and in front of all the other warriors; a symbolic act of leaving life in the garrison and also meant to maximize shame for the boys (Tepper 152). Usually, the boys know who wants to leave the garrison before the ritual takes place, and then either avoid those who want to leave or bully them in front of the others to prove their own strength. In this instance, the violence that the future warriors inflict on the boys who will return to Women's Country serves as a bonding mechanism between those who stay, a ritual that binds together those who chose to become warriors. They distance themselves mentally and physically from their former comrades because they no longer (want to) feel connected to them and it

is considered shameful to stay friends with them. It is a rite of passage for both the boys who leave and those who stay, as they all have a decision to make that day. The ordeal thus creates an emotional situation that fosters cohesion among the boys who remain in the garrison. Bullying the others is a means of reinforcing their own conviction that they are doing the right thing as they are separating themselves from the boys who leave. As Cohen describes it, they seek confirmation from their comrades for their actions with regard to the aggressive process of separation from the boys who used to be part of their nuclear family, which is the objective of bullying (112-13).

After the five boys of Chernon's garrison who decided to leave military service were escorted to the gate house next to the Warrior's Gate, the remaining are being welcomed into their century by the respective centurion: "Honorable warriors of the garrison of Marthatown. We welcome you to the ranks of duty, discipline, and danger. We welcome you to the company of glory. We welcome you as companions in honor […]" (Tepper 152). The familiar phrases are repeated again which emphasize the values of warriors over everything else. While the newly introduced warriors celebrate themselves and rejoice in their "thundering glory" (153), the boys leaving the garrison were quietly taken away never to be spoken off again. These boys, however, are meant to emphasize and symbolize the utopian aspect of the novel. While the women try to breed aggression and hatred out of the men, the boys who come back to live as servants are reasonable, emotionally mature, and have balanced personalities (294-96).[96] Once the boys become adult men, they are used by the council women to produce more children, in the hope that increasingly more boys will forsake the path of the warriors and seek a peaceful existence. The women use these eugenic tactics to imitate natural selection, intending to create a social construct that they believe is more

[96] The selection is made by observing the boys and their mental development. If selected warriors or servants produce male children who have the tendency to return to the city, the medically trained women will use this donor for more women. However, if the opposite is the case, the town's women, unbeknown to themselves, will receive contraceptive implants to avoid getting pregnant by the wrong man or men during the carnival (Tepper 300-05). The implants are the women's means of enforcing their agenda of eugenics which includes the calculated death of unwanted warriors in orchestrated wars.

sustainable and healthy than those that humanity tried in the past and which nearly led to the extinction of mankind.[97]

The morality behind this ideology is questionable and Tepper takes a very radical feminist approach here. Almost all of the rituals introduced in the townships of Women's Country serve to reinforce the genocidal tendencies that are already present. Just as the patriarchal societies in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Vox* use rituals to subjugate and control women, Tepper uses a variety of rituals to drive the male warriors to their own demise without them realizing it. The result is the portrayal of a profoundly radical feminist society that is run and controlled by intelligent, strong, and sensible women trying to create a society on the basis of equality and peace. Tepper utilizes rituals as instruments of social control and takes them to extremes in this novel. This is evident not only in Women's Country, but also in the society of Holyland, the backward, primitive, and patriarchal counterpart to Women's Country.[98] The radical feminist approach that Tepper is taking might appear utopian to some readers, while others might interpret it as dystopian. Because of that, the novel stands in stark contrast to Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, a story that leaves no room for speculation about its dystopian character.

4. *The Handmaid's Tale* - Margaret Atwood

The Handmaid's Tale is a warning sign to society, dealing with deadly religious mania and sanctioned rape in the name of God. Ideally, people in religious communities create "rituals that will be emotionally satisfying, psychologically healing, and socially productive" (Zwissler 45), but Atwood reversed these

[97] This version of a utopian society that the women are trying to create is still very much in its early stages. It is not a static or blueprint utopia depicting an already established ideal society, as was common for a time in utopian fiction written by men: "[f]eminist utopian authors and critics have generally sidestepped the blueprint form to privilege instead a 'process 'or 'reproductive 'or 'critical ' model" of utopian fiction (Johns 174).

[98] The Holylanders also make excessive use of rituals, but in their case it is the male leaders of the communities who introduce abusive and degrading rituals to control the women in their society. They regularly beat their women and justify it by calling it a necessary "chastisement" because they believe that women are the source of all evil (Tepper 210).

attributes of religious rituals. Her novel “engages religious fundamentalism, sexism, racism, pollution, nuclear war, and political chaos“, thus uniting “the general contemporary sense of the tiredness of [the] world’s institutions“ (Campbell Reesman 6). The novel follows the story of the Handmaid Offred who lives in the fictional Republic of Gilead.[99] The Handmaids are subjected to harassment and repeated rape in the name of male supremacy and female inferiority, after being deprived of their human rights and freedom. In Gilead, the Handmaids are largely reduced to their reproductive capacities at a time when fewer and fewer children are being born due to an unknown worldwide decline in birth rates. The basis of this theocratic dictatorship, which equals a patriarchal, militarized police state, is formed by religious and biblical lore. The leaders of Gilead invoke this lore to justify the oppression of women and the supposed domination of men.[100] Offred’s story is written in the style of a record, a testimony to the conditions under which women must live in the Republic of Gilead. The structure and social make-up of Gilead is that of a highly religious sect that rigidly structures and controls its members, in this case the citizens, and seeks to observe and control people's lives right into the privacy of the home. Speech and language, body movements, style of dress: every part of daily life is routinely structured as laid down in the scriptures of the state.

4.1 Social Rituals in a Totalitarian Regime

The way Offred[101] describes her life, her daily routine and the society she lives in is scripted and ritualized at the same time; it is narrated soberly which underlines her hopeless situation:

[99] The novel introduces new social groups, such as Handmaids, Aunts, Wives, and Commanders, so these words are treated as proper nouns.
[100] In a 2017 essay in *The New York Times*, Atwood discussed her novel in the context of Trump's presidency in the United States. There, she reveals that her inspiration for the political structure of Gilead were her visits to several countries in the former Soviet Union in the 1980s. She “experienced the wariness, the feeling of being spied on, the silences, the changes of subject, the oblique ways in which people might convey information“ (Atwood (2017) 1) and incorporated this into the framework of her novel. Furthermore, Atwood’s Gilead was “built on a foundation of the seventeenth-century Puritan roots that have always lain beneath the modern-day America we thought we knew“ (2). This explains the novel’s strong focus on religion as the entire foundation of Gilead is built on Puritan religious lore.
[101] Offred's name is a reference to the word „offered", which “denot[s] a religious offering or a victim offered for sacrifice“ (Atwood (2017) 3). This is in addition to the more obvious meaning that Offred was robbed of her former name and had to take the name of her Commander, leading to the phrase "of Fred."

> A shape, red with white wings around the face, a shape like mine, a nondescript woman in red carrying a basket, comes along the brick sidewalk towards me. She reaches me and we peer into each other's faces, looking down the white tunnels of cloth that enclose us. […] „Blessed be the fruit," she says to me, the accepted greeting among us. „May the Lord open," I answer, the accepted response. (Atwood (1988) 28-29)

This paragraph describes the meeting of two Handmaids who are on their way to town to do the shopping for their respective households. They are only allowed to go in pairs, supposedly for their protection, although in reality this serves more as a spying mechanism between the two women. As Offred herself puts it, they are each other's spies: "[i]f either of us slips through the net because of something that happens on one of our daily walks, the other will be accountable" (29). In this way, the regime is able to control women even in situations where close surveillance is not possible, as it pits women against each other. The fear of punishment and retribution is too great, as one can never tell who really believes in the system and who is just playing along to survive. Even the use of an inappropriate formal greeting arouses suspicion, as this can be interpreted as an act of sedition.

In a religious community such as Gilead, ritual processes are of great importance, for collective rituals create commonality and cohesion in a society, while at the same time affirming the value and position of the individual within it; both, Zwissler points out, are necessary for the men at the top of the government to maintain their influence over the people and exercise their power over them (45). In the case of Gilead, rituals, such as the ritual greetings, serve to control and express the official religious worldview of Gilead's society. Individual thought and action are not values that this government wishes to uphold. It is therefore not surprising that *The Handmaid's Tale* is full of rituals and repetitive, ritualized actions; indeed, religious rituals are the glue that holds this oppressed and disenfranchised society together, as these rituals are largely violent and (or) deadly in nature. Above all, they serve as warning signs to anyone who might publicly oppose the state's political agenda. An example of this is the men's Salvagings that take place in a football stadium. These Salvagings are public executions of men whom the regime considers enemies of the state:

> Beside the main gateway there are six more bodies hanging, by the necks, their hands tied in front of them, their heads in white bags tipped sideways onto their shoulders. There must have been a Men's Salvaging early this morning. I didn't hear the bells. Perhaps I've become used to them. (Atwood (1988) 41-42)

The bodies of the executed men hang on a wall opposite a church and serve to make a rather macabre statement. Any man who defies the rules of God (and Gilead) will be executed and hanged in front of the House of God; a God who in earlier times was portrayed as forgiving and generous, but has now become an unforgiving and violent executioner of the regime's religious lore.[102] The beginning of this ritual killing ceremony is indicated by the ringing of the church bells, which appears to be a regular occurrence, as Offred points out that often she does not even hear the bells anymore because she has become accustomed to them. The ringing of the church bells, calling the faithful to gather in the church for communal prayer, has become an announcement of death in Gilead.

Another ritual that is mentioned only in passing in the novel and that is also aimed at what Gilead officials classify as the "redemption" of women, is the "Confession" or "Testifying". In this ritual, one of the women being trained as a Handmaid either confesses her sins from her previous life or she has to talk about a situation in which something bad happened to her, such as a brutal rape. The Aunt, a female overseer of the Handmaids' training, then asks the other women who is to blame for the incident described, and the only acceptable answer is to chant in unison that it is the woman's own fault. In this way, the women supposedly purge their souls of their past shortcomings. The reality of this ritual, however, is the brainwashing of women who are blamed for the crimes of men (Atwood (1988) 81-82).[103]

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[102] How God is portrayed in Christianity depends on whether one looks at the Old Testament or the New Testament. In the Old Testament, God (or Jehovah) is portrayed as the one who created the world. Themes of salvation, redemption, and ritual purity are ubiquitous and were likely an inspiration for the events in the novel. Throughout the Old Testament, John Barton explains, a strict moral code is found that calls for social justice and purity and emphasizes the duty of those in power to do justice and righteousness (10). All morality in the Old Testament is traced back to God, who is the source of all good (ibid.). The parallels to the moral code in Gilead are unmistakable and show how easily religion can be manipulated by a small group to oppress half the population of the country. The officials of Gilead put themselves in the position of executors of God's will and thus justify their cruelty by calling the killing of men and women not murder but salvation.

[103] Offred notes that during "Testifying sessions" it is safer to "to make things up than to say you have nothing to reveal" (Atwood (1988) 81). This implies that women always have something to

Collective ritualization serves on the one hand to create community, but on the other hand is also meant to confirm the individual's self-image as an important and indispensable member of his or her social group. In Gilead, the individual's personal sense of what is right or wrong, what is acceptable behavior and what is not, is eliminated as the individual adopts the community's notions of appropriate behavior. In so doing, individual thought and action are erased as power and control are left only in the hands of those at the top of the state. By controlling social behavior and thought processes, they are able to control the people themselves. The few people who fall through this tightly woven net are publicly humiliated and executed or taken to labour camps where they are most likely to be worked to death.[104] The death penalty, often carried out in carefully orchestrated rituals, is the ultimate instrument of power used by the government to exert its control by instilling fear in its citizens, thus eradicating possible uprisings or opposition. While men are mostly executed for their crimes, women who have committed a crime but may still be of value to the regime in the future are treated as “Unwomen“ and sent to labour camps as punishment, only to be returned to society when needed (Atwood (1988) 71). The indoctrinated ritual routines form the core of the political system and are essential for the maintenance of totalitarian power in Gilead. The repeated phrases, social restrictions, and prescribed behaviors ensure that anyone who deviates from the norm can be easily identified and eliminated before he or she becomes a real threat to the system.[105] In this case, rituals are used as a means to suppress and legitimize terror in an unjust dystopian system.

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confess or testify about because they cannot be without sin. It draws parallels to the Bible and the belief that all women are sinners because they are all descended from Eve, the personification of sin who seduced Adam and betrayed God ("Eve"). However, this view, which constructs Eve as the source of men's undoing, has been influenced more by "postbiblical culture" than by the biblical narrative itself (ibid.). Eve has become a symbol that “represents sin, seduction, and the secondary nature of woman“ even though these aspects are not part of the original Hebrew narrative of Genesis (ibid.). It is another aspect that the regime has twisted to justify its treatment of women.

[104] Being send to the labour camps usually happens to women who are no longer of value to the state, for example if they are diagnosed with infertility, or to women who have committed a state crime called “sex treason“ and “Gender Treachery“ (Atwood (1988) 53); terms for homosexuality which is now considered an insult to God in Gilead.

[105] Certain formulaic greetings and farewells, such as "Under His Eye" (Atwood (1988) 54), were introduced to create habits among the Handmaids. It is a message that God, and the regime as the executioner of his will, is watching their every move. Other formulas such as "Blessed be the fruit" and "May the Lord open" (29) refer to the role that the Handmaids are expected to fulfill as bearers of new life. These habits, as Offred herself states, are "hard to break" (34) and illustrate the power that the regime has over the citizens of Gilead.

In this system, Handmaids are of utmost importance to the government, which is why they are so closely monitored. Many women in their fertile years, who are theoretically capable of conceiving and carrying a child, are enslaved to serve powerful men and their wives as Handmaids. While Handmaids are officially considered highly respected and valuable members of society, in reality many women reject their existence.[106] However, the word Handmaid is used in this context to disguise the real role these women must fulfill in the households where they are placed: they are sex slaves who are repeatedly raped in the hope of impregnating them. The need and justification for the concept of Handmaids stems from the drastic decline in birth rates around the world for some unknown or unstated reason. The Gilead elite, however, believe this decline to be the result of humanity's blasphemous way of life and interpret it as divine intervention, an opportunity for humanity's redemption. This, they believe, can only be achieved by strictly adhering to God's Word as written in the Bible, while at the same time assuming the natural superiority of man over woman, also as written in the Bible. According to this worldview, the regime has begun to control women in every way possible, blaming the world's fertility crisis on what they see as women's unseemly lifestyles. Women must be brought back under the control of men so that they can lead women back to the Word of God. It is therefore not surprising that women are treated as objects; a woman “must be a worthy vessel“ (Atwood (1988) 75) to become pregnant, which means that she must take care of herself by exercising and eating healthily. The “Aunts“, older women and firm supporters of the regime's theological ideology, teach them how decent, God-fearing women should behave and how to take care of their bodies. They assist the regime in spreading its ideology and brainwash the women by trying to convince them that they have a better life in the Republic of Gilead than before: “There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it“

[106] This becomes evident in Atwood's sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Testaments* (2019), which details the back story of Gilead and its calamitous end. In a conversation between two girls at a school run by Aunts, they refer to the Handmaids as sluts who do not deserve to be named, even though “you weren’t supposed to be rude to the Handmaids or call them sluts, […], because they were performing a service to the community by way of atonement […] (Atwood (2919) 81).

(Atwood (1988) 34).[107] This logic seems particularly perfidious since Carol Pearson notes that a core component of feminist utopias is usually women's fear of rape or assault (51), which feminist authors seek to remedy. In feminist utopian societies, women can live free of this fear because not only violence in general, but gender-based violence in particular has been eradicated. Gilead is therefore an antithesis to the world of freedom and choice.

4.2 Sanctified Rape as Fertilization Ritual

Women in Gilead are denied any right to personal freedom and development as patriarchal rituals dominate every aspect of their lives. Zwissler highlights that rituals and ritualized behavior are expressions of inner thoughts and motivations of a (religious) community, which makes them extremely valuable for assessing ritualized patterns within religious regimes like Gilead (47).[108] The biblical story of Rachel and Jacob is used by the regime to transform and thus justify the rape and enslavement of the Handmaids.[109] While in the society of Gilead Rachel is represented by the Wives of the Commanders and Jacob by the Commanders themselves, the Aunts help to break the fertile Handmaids spiritually and groom them to take on the role of Bilhah. They prepare them to be raped repeatedly in a

[107] The phrase “Days of Anarchy“ is used to refer to the time before the founding of the Republic of Gilead, when individual freedom for men and women was considered a precious human right. In *The Testaments*, much of the narrative is devoted to Aunt Lydia's background, as well as to the origins of the Aunts in general.

[108] Before the actual beginning of the novel, Atwood chose a biblical quotation to familiarize the reader with the nature of her book: It is an excerpt from the story of Jacob and his two wives Rachel and Leah, representing the fate of the Handmaids in Gilead. The Handmaids must take on the role of Rachel's maid Bilhah, whom Rachel and Jacob use as a surrogate mother when they discover that Rachel is incapable of bearing children. In desperation, Rachel suggests that Jacob is to impregnate Bilhah in her place while Bilhah lies between Rachel’s legs on the lower part of her torso, symbolically mimicking Rachel's own impregnation through the vessel that is Bilhah's body. The Bible says that Bilhah freely agrees to the plan to act as a surrogate mother for Rachel, thus becoming another wife of Jacob ("Rachel"). In the biblical story, it is Jacob who declares that God decides whether a woman can have children or not, in this way excluding the man from responsibility in the case of childlessness. This belief has also been adopted by the regime. Although there seems to be scientific evidence that in Gilead it is mainly men who have become infertile, only women, and in particular the Handmaids, are blamed for their apparent inability to become pregnant (Atwood (1988) 70). During a routine examination, a gynecologist tells Offred that most of the men to whom the Handmaids are assigned are either sterile or infertile. He says this to Offred and at the same time offers to impregnate her himself during the examination (Atwood (1988) 70-71).

[109] In *The Testaments* it is clarified that the highest ranking Commanders are called the Sons of Jacob, referencing the biblical tale, who are married to the daughters of other Commanders (Atwood (2019) 11).

religious ritual and, most importantly, they indoctrinate the women in a way that convinces them that they should see this act as divine and honorable, resembling the religious aspect of ritual purification.[110] After all, the Aunts claim that they have been chosen by God to fulfill their natural and divine duty to humanity by bearing children conceived by the most worthy of men. Aunt Lydia is the most prominent Aunt in the novel, her character acting as a kind of mouthpiece for the regime, explaining the important role that the Handmaids fulfill:

> It's not the husbands you have to watch out for, said Aunt Lydia, it's the Wives. You should always try to imagine what they must be feeling. Of course they will resent you. It is only natural. Try to feel for them. […] Try to pity them. Forgive them, for they know not what they do. […] You must realize that they are defeated women. They have been unable… […]. The future is in your hands, she resumed. She held her own hands out to us, the ancient gesture that was both an offering and and invitation, to come forward, into an embrace, an acceptance. (Atwood (1988) 56-57)

Essentially, Aunty Lydia tries to convince the women that the rape they must endure should not be seen as rape at all, but as a divine necessity. She argues that the Ceremony, as the ritual is called, is the most important task and honor that can be bestowed upon them. She even calls for the women to forgive the Wives of their Commanders if they should treat them badly. The jealousy they must feel is only natural, according to the Aunt, since they themselves are barren. Ultimately, this is a plea to the Handmaids to forgive the women who assist their husbands in their rapes; for it must be terribly devastating to witness another woman carrying her own husband's child. Aunt Lydia believes that this burden is heavier for the Wives than the rape for the Handmaids, as the Wives also must attend and bear witness to the Ceremony.

[110] Ritual purification, also known as a purification rite, is an attempt to "reestablish lost purity or to create a higher degree of purity in relation to the sacred (the transcendental realm) or the social and cultural realm" ("Purification Rite"). These rituals can be found in all religions and cultures and take on a wide variety of types and forms.

4.2.1 The Ceremony

The Ceremony takes place once a month during the Handmaid's ovulation. The entire day of the Ceremony has a fixed structure and sequence, culminating in the ritual rape of the Handmaid in the bed of the Commander's Wife. A variety of preparations precede the Ceremony throughout the day to ensure that the Handmaid is ready for the night. This includes a bath that is prepared for her by the household's Martha, the name for the social group of housekeepers in Gilead, who herself is treated more like a slave than a servant (Atwood (1988) 72).[111] Like life in Gilead in general, the evening of the day of the Ceremony is completely ritualized and habitualised. The boundaries between the hours before the Ceremony and the Ceremony as such are very clear, as is the case with other rituals. The sexual intercourse between the Commander and Offred is the liminal act of the ritual, while Offred's one-day grooming represents what Turner called the phase of separation. This, as Turner describes it, involves symbolic behaviors that signify the individual's detachment from a set of regular cultural conditions ((1969) 94). On the day of the Ceremony, Offred is bathed and given a more refined meal than on other days, a pattern that is easily recognizable and repeated each month. The bath is reminiscent of the concept of ablution in Christianity, a religious rite that prescribes a "washing of part or all of the body or of possessions, such as clothing or ceremonial objects, with the intent of purification and dedication" ("Ablution"). The goal of the rite is ritual purity, that is, a state of ritual cleanliness that is necessary before the actual ritual can begin. In this way, the ritual persona is prepared for the upcoming ritual and declared worthy to participate in the ritual as purity of the soul has been achieved (ibid.). The use of rites such as ablution and ritual purification underscores the regime's stance that women must be cleansed of their sins, otherwise they are unworthy of conceiving the will of God. The special treatment Offred receives on this day sets her apart to some degree from her otherwise dull and uncomfortable life and is an indication that this is not a day like any other; it is a separation from Offred's normal routine and her life.

[111] In Gilead, a Martha is a servant who takes on the role of a cleaning lady, a cook and a maid in general. They too must wear certain clothes to be instantly identifiable and eliminate individuality. Just like the Handmaids, their names have been taken away as they have been reduced to the position they occupy in their respective households. (Atwood (1988) 72)

The ringing of the evening bell, rung by the Commander's wife, Serena Joy, heralds the evening Ceremony. After the bell rings, Offred leaves her upstairs room and goes downstairs to the living room. In this room, the entire household gathers to emphasize the importance and seriousness of the upcoming event. Each person in the household has a fixed place where they stand or sit:

> I [Offred] go in: so far no one else is here. I don't sit, but take my place, kneeling, near the chair with the footstool where Serena Joy will shortly enthrone herself, leaning on her cane while she lowers herself down. Possibly she'll put a hand on my shoulder, to steady herself, as if I'm a piece of furniture. She's done it before. (Atwood (1988) 89)

Offred is the only member of the household kneeling, indicating a position of submission. The rest of the staff stand behind her, while Serena Joy and the Commander are the only ones sitting. After Offred enters the room, the staff enters, followed by Serena Joy. The Commander is to enter last, immediately after everyone else has gathered in the living room. However, part of the ritual in this particular household is that the Commander always arrives quite late, so that Offred and the staff still have time to watch the news on TV - the only time Serena Joy tolerates this:

> This is the one good thing about these evenings, the evenings of the Ceremony: I'm allowed to watch the news. It seems to be an unspoken rule in this household: we always get here on time, he's always late, Serena always lets us watch the news. (Atwood (1988) 92)

It would appear that this derivation from the official ritual order is unique to this Commander's household and would probably not be considered acceptable if it became known to other high-ranking members of the regime. This small gesture by the Commander is directed at the Handmaid and the rest of the staff, ignoring the fact that his wife would probably like to get the ritual over with as quickly as possible. While the household's servants appear in their usual clothes, the Commander and Serena Joy wear festive clothes which can be interpreted as a means of symbolic production. Alexander states that social actors need objects that can serve as iconic representations to help them dramatize and make vivid the invisible motives and morals they are trying to represent (Alexander (2011) 31).

This includes the Bible from which the Commander reads the passage about Rachel and Jacob.

As the Commander enters the living room, the central phase of the Ceremony begins. He walks over to his leather armchair and takes the Bible out of a locked box that stands on a table next to the armchair:

> It's the usual story, the usual stories. God to Adam, God to Noah. *Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth*. Then comes the mouldy [sic.] old Rachel and Leah stuff we had drummed into us at the Centre. *Give me children, or else I die. Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her*. And so on and so forth. (Atwood (1988) 99)

After the reading, the Commander, Serena Joy and Offred go alone to Serena Joy's bedroom to re-enact the prophetic scene of Rachel and Jacob. The entire ritual has a highly performative feel and is a perfect example of a cultural performance. In the words of Alexander, it is a social process in which the actors, individually or collectively, demonstrate to others the meaning of their social situation ((2011) 28). However, this meaning does not necessarily reflect the subjective beliefs of the participants, because the meaning of the performance is primarily what the others are supposed to believe to be true. The scene of the Bible reading displays all the common denominators of a cultural, ritual performance: the actor or actors who enact the pattern described, in this case the Bible reading Commander; the observers or audience who witness the scene which are the other members of the household who in this way participate in the cultural extension of the script. The means of symbolic production in this case is the symbolically highly charged Bible. The performance, then, results from the participation and engagement of all the social actors involved in the dramatic social action. They are thus entering into and projecting the ensemble of verbal and physical gestures that constitute a performance. Finally, the social power that emerges from and is further established by the performance constitutes the last ritual denominator (30-32). In this case, the social power of the Commander is enhanced as his authority as head of the household is strengthened by the ritual reading and following rape. Only he has access to the sacred text that forms the basis of Gilead's religious order and code

of conduct, as women, regardless of their social status, are strictly forbidden to read anything at all.

The reading preceding the rape ends with the Bible verse “And Leah said, God hath given me my hire, because I have given my maiden to my husband“ (Atwood (1988) 101), whereupon the Commander closes the Bible and returns it to the table. At this point, the liminal phase of the ritual has begun. The reading is followed by a silent prayer, the point that separates the first from the second phase of the ritual. Afterwards, the Commander, Serena Joy, and Offred go to Serena Joy's bedroom where they lie down on Serena's bed in the prescribed position:

> The Ceremony goes as usual. I lie on my back, fully clothed except for the healthy white cotton underdrawers [sic.]. […] Above me, towards the head of the bed, Serena Joy is arranged, outspread. Her legs are apart, I lie between them, my head on her stomach, her pubic bone under the base of my skull, her thighs on either side of me. She too is fully clothed. My arms are raised, she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. […] My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he’s doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven’t signed up for. There wasn’t a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose. (104-05)[112]

This phase of the ritual, the liminal phase in which the “divine“ act of procreation is performed, could not be portrayed less emotionally by Offred. She has completely detached herself from the situation and her body, while her mind acts as a separate observer of the scene, taking note of what is happening to her body but not participating in the process at all. From a psychological point of view, it could be argued that Offred completely disconnects her mind from her body to protect herself from the psychological damage of the rape.[113] An indication for this is that

[112] There are multiple reasons for Offred to not call this rape, the main reason will be discussed shortly. However, the choice of which she is speaking is not really a choice at all as the women were given the choice to either be killed immediately, be worked to death in the Colonies or become a Handmaid. Opting for becoming a Handmaid really only means, under the given circumstances, to choose life over death.

[113] In psychology, this process is called "dissociation" and is defined as the process of separating oneself from something or someone or seeing oneself as separate from the body ("Dissociation"). Dissociation occurs during and after experiencing a traumatic event and serves as a protective measure of the brain (ibid.). Offred describes this mental separation during the ritual herself: “One detaches oneself. One describes“ (Atwood (1988) 106).

she says she would not call the situation either copulation or rape, as she does not even feel like an active participant in the ritual. Her body is simply used as a vessel by the Commander and Serena Joy in the hope of creating a new life.[114]

The regime of Gilead interprets the liminal stage of the Ceremony as a divine convergence with God. By attempting to channel God's powers to successfully conceive a child, they strive to fulfill Rachel's and Jacob's prophetic belief in God as the giver of life. Offred's description of the scene, however, points to the fact that all this is more of a theoretical ideal and that neither the Commander nor Serena Joy really believe in it:

> Serena Joy grips my hands as if it is she, not I, who's being fucked, as if she finds it either pleasurable or painful, and the Commander fucks, with a regular two-four marching stroke, on and on like a tap dripping. He is preoccupied, like a man humming to himself in the shower without knowing he's humming; like a man who has other things on his mind. It's as if he's somewhere else, waiting for himself to come, drumming his fingers on the table while he waits. […] This is not recreation, even for the Commander. This is serious business. The Commander, too, is doing his duty. (Atwood (1988) 105)

Pleasure, sexual desire, and excitement are not to be experienced by either one of the ritual's participants: "Arousal and orgasm are no longer thought necessary; they would be a symptom of frivolity merely, […]: superfluous distractions for the light-minded. Outdated" (ibid.). The sole aim of the Ceremony is the conception of a child; even the male orgasm is no longer interpreted as an orgasm, but as a divine discharge through which the spirit of God enters the womb of the Handmaid to impregnate her. If impregnation fails, it is always the fault of the Handmaid who is seen then as defective and damaged (Atwood (1988) 214).

Finally, the liminal phase ends with the climax of the Commander:

> He comes at last, with a stifled groan as of relief Serena Joy, who has been holding her breath, expels it. The Commander, who has been propping himself on his elbows, away from our combined bodies, doesn't' permit himself to sink down into us. He rests a moment,

[114] Offred's separation from her surroundings can also be interpreted in regard to Turner's theory about the liminal phases of a ritual: "During the intervening "liminal" period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the "passenger") are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming stage" (Turner (1969) 94). Turner describes liminal entities, in this case Offred, as being "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (95).

> withdraws, recedes, rezippers [sic.]. He nods, then turns and leaves the room, closing the door with exaggerated care behind him, as if both of us are his ailing mother. (Atwood (1988) 106)

The end to the sexual intercourse is just as distanced and formal as the previous steps and leaves no room for emotions of any kind. When the Commander leaves the bedroom, the Ceremony is over, the liminal phase has concluded and the third phase, the reintegration phase, begins, in which the ritual person(s) return to society and life continues as usual. The impact is immediate, as the leeway Serena Joy gives Offred before the ritual by allowing her to watch television is gone immediately after the Commander's departure:

> Serena Joy lets go of my hands. „You can get up now," she says. „Get up and get out." She's supposed to have me rest, for ten minutes, with my feet on a pillow to improve the chances. This is meant to be a time of silent meditation for her, but she's not in the mood for that. (ibid.)

This finalizes the day of the Ceremony and life in the Commander's household takes its usual course. The distribution of power between the couple does not change before, during or after the ritual, as the real power always lies with the Commander. However, the concessions made by the Commander to the other members of the household come to an end, and deviations from the household rules are no longer tolerated or ignored. Serena Joy's refusal to follow the rules of the Ceremony and take time for silent meditation, as well as her cold behavior toward Offred, are signs of her disregard for Gilead's masculine doctrines and how little she believes in them. The strength with which she holds Offred's wrists during intercourse also indicates her disdain for the entire procedure. She, too, must play her part in this ritual and keep up appearances to maintain her status as the Commander's Wife in a regime that views women as either commodities or incubators.

In Gilead, life as a woman, regardless of social position, is characterized by oppression, paternalism, and subjugation. Depending on a woman's social position, this is felt to a greater or lesser extent. For Serena Joy, too, this life is not easy and so Offred wonders for which of them the Ceremony is worse, for the Handmaid or the Wife. Still, the Wives of the Commanders try everything to make it more bearable for themselves, torturing the Handmaids as much as they can on

any other day. They do not allow them to use or possess anything that might make them appear more attractive in a man's eyes, for their jealousy is all-encompassing. This is particularly evident in Serena Joy's behavior after the Ceremony and in her weeping during the reading of the Bible verses as she tries to suppress her sobs as best she can, hoping to preserve her dignity in front of the members of the household (Atwood (1988) 101).

Because the regime in Gilead considers the connection between sex and pleasure illegitimate, sex is a duty that every Commander must fulfill without feeling lust and pleasure. Women are expected to bow to the divine law, which makes them empty vessels waiting to be fertilized, or guardians of children. However, sexual desire needs an outlet, and so one evening the Commander tells Offred that during the time the regime was established, not only women but also men were seen as problematic. Because of constant state control and the ensuing limitations they became unfocused and no longer had any interest in marriage and daily life. The need for sex was part of this equation, but since sex purely for the sake of it was strictly forbidden, men found a secret outlet to act out their fantasies and desires (Atwood (1988) 221). A kind of brothel was set up, which the men refer to as "The Club" (248), where influential men go at night to enjoy themselves and have sex with prostitutes called “Jezebels“.[115] These women wear heavy make-up, tropical dresses and “all kinds of bright festive gear“, with some wearing “olden-days lingerie, shortie nightgowns, baby-doll pyjamas [sic.] [and] the occasional see-through negligée“ (246-47). They are adorned with “feathers and glisters, cut high up the thighs, low over the breasts“ (246). This club violates the regime's strict laws regarding the nature of sexual relations. The Commander, however, sees a flaw in these regulations when he explains to the surprised Offred that

> you can’t cheat Nature. […] Nature demands variety, for men. It stands to reason, it’s part of the procreational strategy. It’s Nature’s plan. […] Women know that instinctively. Why did they buy so many different

[115] The name “Jezebel“ also comes from the Bible and is a description for a woman that is seen as “the epitome of an evil, non-believing female“ (“Jezebel“). From her narrative, it appears that she wielded considerable power and was one of the few women to do so in the Bible, and the dislike of her can be attributed, at least in part, to the general biblical dislike of powerful women (ibid.). The Jezebels in Atwood's novel exercise sexual power over the politically powerful men and do not fit into any official category for a chaste woman set by the government. Still, these prostitutes are desired by the men for their sexual availability and sinful inclinations.

> clothes, in the old days? To trick the men into thinking they were several different women. A new one each day. (249)

While the Commander acknowledges that the regime's ideology is flawed, he sees the flaw only in the fact that it has taken away the freedoms and choices of men, but not of women. It shows that the Commander agrees with Gilead's assertions about the need for women's subordination, claiming that men need variety to ensure human survival. However, the women referred to as Jezebels are not for procreation, but for the pure pleasure of the powerful men, rendering the Commander's argument invalid. The Jezebels are the product of a society that has been deprived of the right to sexual expression and whose privileged male members are secretly taking back what they have been denied and what they cannot get at a once-a-month ceremonial ritual.[116]

4.3 The Salvagings - Execution as Ritual

The Ceremony is not the only ritual in the novel that stands out for its misogynistic brutality. Earlier in this chapter, the men's Salvagings were already addressed: ritual punishment procedures that are, at their core, public executions. In these procedures, men and women are kept separate, which means that women only have to witness other women receiving the death penalty for their crimes. For this reason, the male executions are not reported in the novel, but the women's executions are described towards the end of the book in greater detail. The Salvagings described by Offred are characterized by extreme cruelty and brutality that appeal to the most basic human instincts and are again examples of Turner's rituals of liminality. During the two phases of the Salvaging ritual, the liminal phase is even more pronounced than during the Ceremony described earlier. The procedure of the Salvaging ritual is introduced by the ringing of bells, initiating the physical and mental separation of the participants from their daily routines. While the bells ring, the women of the neighborhood of all categories gather in front of an

[116] Kathleen Barry, in her book *The Prostitution of Sexuality* (New York UP, USA, 1995), writes about the ways in which prostitution is entrenched in societies and how women form the overwhelming majority in a society that suffers from sexual repression in strictly conservative regimes.

old library building, next to which a wooden stage is set up. As usual, everything and everyone has their place:

> At the front of the stage there is a microphone; the television camera is discreetly off to the side. […] Women's Salvagings are not frequent. […] We take our places in the standard order: Wives and daughters on the folding wooden chairs placed towards the back, Econowives and Marthas around the edges and on the library steps, and Handmaids at the front, where everyone can keep an eye on us. We don't sit on chairs, but kneel […]. On stage, to the left, are those who are to be salvaged: two Handmaids, one Wive. Wives are unusual […]. (Atwood (1988) 284-85)

Again, the Handmaids are the only ones who must kneel in the front to have them under better control. Only the Commander's Wives and their daughters are allowed to sit, while all other women must stand at the sides, indicating the social hierarchy in Gilead. After the women have taken their places, the bells stop and an Aunt enters the stage, goes to the microphone and gives a short speech to the audience. Few details are given and the crimes of the three women are kept secret to avoid a flare-up of the same crimes in the following days (which has happened repeatedly after previous Salvagings). Then the three victims, who appear to be under the influence of drugs, are led one by one to the front of the wooden stage. White sacks are placed over their heads and their hands are tied behind their backs before the stools they are standing on are kicked away; they are hung in front of the audience (288). At the same time, the kneeling Handmaids must participate in the death of the women by taking a rope that lies in front of them and represents the essential means of symbolic production for this part of the ritual:

> […] I've leaned forward to touch the rope in front of me, in time with the others, both hands on it, the rope is hairy, sticky with tar in the hot sun, then placed my hand on my heart to show my unity with the Salvagers and my consent, and my complicity in the death of this woman. […] I don't want to see it anymore. I look at the grass instead. I describe the rope. (ibid.)

The rope plays an important role in this ritual as it is used as a metaphor for the bond between the Handmaids. While the "salvaged" women are hung on stage and strangled to death with the ropes around their necks, the Handmaids must touch the rope in front of them in unity, as this is meant as an act of consent to the killing

taking place on stage. They are thus forced to show their approval and consent to the killing of the women; if they do not act accordingly and are observed by the Guardians, the next Salvaging could be their own. The grabbing of the rope while laying one hand on the heart can be interpreted as a brief liminal stage within the actual liminal stage that the Handmaids have previously entered. In this case, the Handmaids become one being and in unison metaphorically condemn the three women on stage to death, punishing them collectively for their supposed crimes.

After this first part os over, the Aunt on stage ends the official part of the Salvaging by announcing the end to those present over the microphone. While the Wives and their daughters, the Marthas and the Econowives can now leave, the Handmaids are held back and asked to stay behind for the second act of the ritual. An official women's Salvaging may also serve to punish a man who has committed a particularly heinous crime against a Handmaid, such as (unsanctified) rape (Atwood (1988) 290). In this case, the Salvaging takes an even more murderous turn. The Aunt asks the Handmaids to all gather in a circle in front of the wooden stage while two Guardians carry the man in question inside:

> Two Guardians, not the same ones that have taken away the rope, come forward now from behind the stage. Between them they half-carry, half-drag a third man. He too is in a Guardian's uniform, but he has no hat on and the uniform is dirty and torn. His face is cut and bruised, deep reddish-brown bruises; the flesh is swollen and knobby, stubbled with unshaven beard. […] Even from where I'm standing I can smell him: he smells of shit and vomit. […] I stare at him with revulsion. He looks drunk. (ibid.)

The formation of the circle initiates the second part of the ritual. The man is thrown to the ground by the Guardians, in the middle of the circle of women, before they quickly leave the scene. The Handmaids are now to punish the man for the crime committed, as they see fit, after the Aunt blows the whistle: "There's an energy building here, a murmur, a tremor of readiness and anger. The bodies tense, the eyes are brighter, as if aiming" (ibid.). The description of the Handmaids' changing behavior is raw, it reads as if a predator is preparing to attack as the women dehumanize themselves. Thus, they enter the liminal stage again, only this time the feeling is more intense and fundamental and speaks to the core of the women's basic instincts and their interconnectedness during the ritual. When they learn of

the brutality of the man's crime, the alleged rape of a pregnant Handmaid who subsequently lost her child, the women reach their mental tipping point:

> A sigh goes up from us; despite myself I feel my hands clench. It is too much, this violation. The baby too, after what we go through. It's true, there is a bloodlust; I want to tear, gouge, rend. We jostle forward, our heads turn from side to side, our nostrils flare, sniffing death, we look at one another, seeing the hatred. (290-91)

At this point, the women have reached a trance-like state. Although Offred could not bring herself to look at the hanging corpses on stage not ten minutes ago, completely horrified by the cruelty and injustice they all must endure, now she cannot help wanting to tear this man apart with her own hands. The bloodlust they all feel is deliberate and brought on by the training of the Aunts and the regime, who want the women to lose their own sense of morality so that they simply function in the prescribed manner. The group dynamic that develops in this situation cannot be resisted: it is an all-consuming emotional need for the women who finally are being handed an outlet for all the anger and rage they feel at being treated the way they are. Although this particular man is not responsible for their own miserable situation, they gladly accept this offer from the regime and direct all their anger at him:

> There's a surge forward,[…]. The air is bright with adrenalin, we are permitted anything and this is freedom, in my body also, I'm reeling, red spreads everywhere, but before the tide of cloth and bodies hits him Ofglen is shoving through the women in front of us, propelling herself with her elbows, left, right, and running towards him. She pushes him down, sideways, then kicks his head viciously, one, two, three times, sharp painful jabs with the foot, well-aimed. Now there are sounds, gasps, a low noise like growling, yells, and the red bodies tumble forward and I can no longer see, he's obscured by arms, fists, feet. A high scream comes from somewhere, like a horse in terror. (291-92)

It is a vivid and cruel portrayal of a man being beaten to death by women who, having been robbed of every ounce of their free will and power by the ruling elite, take full advantage of even this little bit of power and freedom they have been given. At that moment they do not think about what they are doing, nor do they think about the consequences of their actions. They are simply in the moment, mindless and without any self-control, in a form of liminality Turner associated with

death, darkness and the wilderness. Turner reflects that the liminal stage of a ritual is a phase in which the ritual participants are not supposed to be aware of themselves or reflect on their behavior, they are just there ((1969) 95).

Not even when the Aunt announces the end of the bloody spectacle with her whistle do the women stop. The Guardians must intervene and pull the women off what is left of the man. The women's minds were truly blank, following only a primal impulse of revenge, driven by hatred and desperation, which they want to direct at anyone who surrenders to them (Atwood (1988) 292). In this scene, one gets the impression that the man has been used as a human sacrifice by the government to appease the Handmaids. They realize that not every woman accepts their new life under this religious regime as easily as they would like. Through this cruel ritual, they give the women something to direct their anger towards, most likely hoping to give them a sense of justice and control. After the ritual the women seem confused and disoriented: “Some lie on the grass where they’ve been hit or kicked by accident. Some have fainted. They straggle away, in twos and threes or by themselves. They seem dazed“ (ibid.). Offred herself is horrified at her own behavior as she realizes what she and the others have just done. Now, in the reintegration phase, after the Handmaids have gone through the ritual, they must live with what they have done. In the end, the government has once again instrumentalized the women to push its own bloody agenda. The regime justifies killings by setting its own citizens against each other in ritual processions, making them accomplices to its own crimes.

The government of Gilead plays women of all classes against each other by depriving them of their basic human rights, thus creating envy and jealousy among the women, while simultaneously manipulating the women into becoming monstrous beings. But it is not only the Wives and the Handmaids who are made to compete with each other, as the Marthas also look to the Handmaids with subliminal envy and hatred, since they must serve them in the same way as they have to serve the couple at the head of the household (Atwood (1988) 91). They live in a system that favors only men and, while promoting male supremacy, makes women entirely dependent on the goodwill of the men who have made them their property. In such an environment, the systematic abuse of certain sections of the population thrives, with the ritual rape of Handmaids only a small piece of the regime’s puzzle. Every ritual in Gilead is designed to scare the citizens as much as

possible and make them compliant while exerting as much control as possible over their women. These rituals are intended to maintain an image of women that denies women any civil or human rights and makes them slaves to a fundamentalist and fanatical state. Christina Dalcher's novel *Vox* also deals with the total oppression of women in an ultra-religious and conservative regime, with the story focusing on one particular woman and her family and the changes that they undergo during a time of suppression and violence.

5. *Vox* - Christina Dalcher

Dalcher's novel has numerous parallels with Atwood's narrative about the abysses of a fanatically religious regime in a dystopian version of the United States of America. *Vox* tells the story of cognitive linguist Dr Jean McClellan and her family, her husband Patrick and their four children, three boys and a girl. At the beginning of the story, the United States government is dominated by a religious sect called the Pure Movement. This movement has introduced completely new rules for social interactions and behavior, forcing every girl and woman to wear a counter on their wrist to monitor the number of words spoken in a day; each member of the female sex is only allowed to speak one hundred words a day. If the counter exceeds this number on any given day, the girl or woman wearing the counter on her wrist is treated with electric shocks that increase in severity with each additional word. In addition, women are forbidden to work, except as housekeepers, while reading in general has also been abolished. Household books must therefore be kept under lock and key by the male head of the family and girls' education at school is reduced to how to run a household successfully. No such measures have been introduced for the boys and men so that they can continue with their lives as before. Throughout the novel, Jean's struggle to accept her changed circumstances is portrayed, revealing the anger and despair she feels - also on behalf of her daughter. Although, as many reviewers of the book have pointed out, towards the end of the novel Dalcher's story "morphs from a glum prophecy into a Hollywood-style thriller […] and a wrap-up so convenient it beggars

belief“ (O’Grady 2018), it nevertheless focuses on some important elements of government oppression and the subjugation of women in various ritual-associated contexts that will be looked at more closely.[117]

5.1 Social Performances in Family Rituals under Political Oppression

The main focus of the novel is the slow and steady elimination of women's basic human rights. In *Vox*, not unlike the women in *The Handmaid's Tale*, women are degraded to the property of men through the deprivation of their rights and passports. Their passports have either been taken away or invalidated by the government, removing their only means of escape from the country. Every decision a woman makes has to be approved by her husband, making it difficult to run a household efficiently with only a hundred words a day. In relation to women's silences in dystopian novels, Libby Falk Jones has written an essay entitled “Breaking Silences in Feminist Dystopias“, in which she examines Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Jean Auel's *The Clan of the Cave Bear.*[118] The essay is also relevant to *Vox*: “In the patriarchal societies depicted in these speculative fictions, women are objectified and repressed; the dominant metaphor is that of silence“ (Falk Jones (1991) 7). She argues that women who are no longer allowed to read, write or think have lost their voice, which is to be understood metaphorically in *The Handmaid's Tale*, as the government's motto is "Blessed are the Silent" (8), and to be taken quite literally in *Vox.*[119] However, the silence in *The Handmaid's Tale* and in *Vox* cannot be seen in the same light. The women in Gilead live in very restricted circumstances, but they can still speak to themselves or to the other servants indefinitely when the opportunity arises. The women in *Vox* do not have this

[117] One of the few analytical works published to date on Dalcher's novel is Kelly D. Macomber’s master thesis "Women's Rights and Religious Bias in Dystopian Speculative Fiction: A Closer Look at Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* and Christina Dalcher's *Vox*," (2022). In it, Macomber examines the impact of extreme religious interpretation on women's lives in relation to gender bias.

[118] *The Clan of the Cave Bear* is the first part of a prehistoric book series that speculates on possible modes of communication between Neanderthals and Cro-Magnon humans. For that reason the book will not be further discussed in this dissertation.

[119] Falk Jones goes on to argue that this means that the systemic and institutionalized silencing of women is a way of dehumanizing women that for millennia has allowed men to see them only as objects. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the silence is accompanied by the restriction of women “to limited roles of servitude - Handmaids, Wives, Aunts, Marthas, even Jezebels - and valuing only their service or their reproductive capacity“ (8). In this way, the silence of the women becomes omnipresent through the absence of their voices.

“luxury“. Jean describes herself as "a woman of few words“ (Dalcher 1), a reference to the word counters that she and her daughter Sonia are forced to wear on their wrists.

As the plot unfolds, more and more details about the lives of women under the rule of the Pure Movement become known. With the help of flashbacks, the novel paints a picture of the liberal and democratic U.S. transforming into a religious-based dictatorship; a transition that affects even the smallest detail of normal family life, not unlike the developments in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Here, the contrast between the small, everyday family rituals that used to take place in the family home and their disappearance becomes very clear. Dalcher's novel does not focus on the central social ritual(s) of this dystopian society (as opposed to the monthly rape of the Handmaids in Gilead), but rather on the more subtle decay and eventual absence of the everyday rituals that humans unconsciously follow.

Ria Smit notes that rituals within a family have an important function, as they promote stability in daily family life as well as in difficult times of stress, making them an integral part and constant of family life (355). In this context, several studies have been conducted on the importance of family rituals for all family members. According to Fiese (et al., 2002; cited in Smit 355), studying family routines and rituals can show how families find success and meaning in their life together. However, a distinction must be made between family routines and rituals. Fiese (et al., 2002) explains that

> [r]outines of daily family living differ from family rituals insofar as routines entail communication about specific tasks that need to be performed regularly, while rituals are forms of symbolic communication and repetitive social interaction which usually require an enduring and emotional commitment. (ibid.)[120]

[120] Barbara Fiese (et al.) published another study in 2006 focusing specifically on routine and ritual elements in family mealtimes. There, Fiese states that a further means for distinguishing between family routines and rituals in regard to mealtime are along the dimensions of communication, commitment, and continuity (Fiese et al., 69 (2006)). Routine communication is direct and instrumental with the intention to get something done, i.e. telling a family member to take their elbows off the table. Routine commitment focuses on the task itself without further thinking about it, meaning that each family routinely commits to family meal times without actively having to assess whether one attends or not (ibid.). Fiese continues that routine continuity relates to the things like seat arrangements at the table and doing the same chores before and after dinner (ibid.).

Furthermore, Fiese references research that suggests that family rituals can be divided into three categories: family festivals (i.e. annual celebrations found in the larger society, such as Christmas), family traditions (i.e. weddings) and family interactions or rituals of everyday family life (i.e. the dinner routine) (356). It is argued that the aim of family rituals is to promote a sense of belonging and to create solidarity between family members, as well as to maintain meaningful interactions between the members involved (ibid.). In relation to *Vox*, the studies conducted by various scholars about the effects of family rituals on the sense of belonging and mutual understanding in a family are of particular interest. Ross and Van Rensburg (cited in Smit) found that

> rituals contribute to a feeling of intimate attachment among family members which underscores the family as being a safe social milieu where emotional supportive exchanges take place. Furthermore, rituals tend to solidify the connection between generations through the practice of family traditions that span generations. This also creates the opportunity for the promulgation of the family's shared beliefs and values. […] Moreover, family rituals also affirm a common identity which, to some extent, gives the specific family unit a unique and distinctive character. (ibid.)[121]

In a family unit, not unlike in wider society, rituals can be interpreted as social acts that serve to express emotions and strengthen family bonds. It can be concluded that when these rituals cease to take place, the inner core of the family disintegrates, ultimately leading to the family's destruction.[122] Jean's family experiences such a change in their family life. The slow disintegration of family bonds is illustrated in flashbacks scattered throughout the novel. As the novel is written from the perspective of a first-person narrator, from Jean's point of view,

[121] All of these studies dealing with the meaning and effects of family rituals have been conducted in Western societies and are therefore reliable references for the meaning of rituals in the Western world today.

[122] The teachings of the Pure Movement were likely inspired by the beliefs of the Puritans. The family also played an important role in Puritan society, as it was closely intertwined with the church and the community at large. For the *National Humanities Center*, Christine Leigh Heyrman has collected and summarized several important studies on the topic in "Religion, Women, and the Family in Early America", including Edmund Morgan's outstanding work *The Puritan Family* (1966). She summarizes his conviction that the family in "early New England […] embodied the broader Puritan emphasis on hierarchy and order" because it was believed that "sanctity ran in families" (Heyrman). Thus, she concludes that the family was brought into direct contact with God and given the divine duty to produce godly children (ibid.). More information on the Puritans and their religion follows later in this chapter.

the reader is directly experiencing her struggle to come to terms with her new reality. Jean often reflects on how her family used to interact and how she and her husband Patrick spent their time together:

> Used to. Here's what used to be: we used to stay up late talking. We used to linger in bed on weekend mornings, putting off chores and reading the Sunday paper. We used to have cocktail parties and dinner parties and summer barbecues when the weather turned. We used to play games - […] As for me, on my own, I used to have girlfriends. „Hen parties," Patrick called my nights out with the girls, but I know he didn't mean it unkindly. […] We used to have book clubs and coffee chats; we debated politics in wine bars, later in basements - our version of reading *Lolita* in Teheran. (Dalcher 7)[123]

The events and activities Jean describes largely take place in her family home. Some of them are family routines, while others cross the threshold into family tradition and ritual. Cocktail and dinner parties with friends and neighbors are described as regularly recurring events. In terms of family communication, these activities are important for intra-family bonding and for strengthening friendships and neighborly relations. Regularly repeated, seemingly everyday activities such as barbecuing with neighbors in the summer months form the basis for deeper, meaningful interpersonal relationships. Due to the social restrictions introduced by the Pure Movement, not only have communal activities disappeared, but personal friendships and family parties have drastically diminished. Since women are not allowed to speak more than a hundred words a day, maintaining friendships between women has become almost impossible. This in turn leaves about half of the country's entire population socially isolated, with women and girls at the mercy of their male heads of household.

[123] The reference to reading Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita* in Tehran draws parallels between Jean's life and life in the Islamic theocracy of Iran. *Lolita* tells the story of a middle-aged American man who falls in love with a young girl and later kidnaps her to have sex with her. Reading such a book can lead to a prison sentence in Iran for indecent behavior, which equates to Jean's situation when she tries to discuss politics with her friends. Jean puts the U.S. under the rule of the Pure Movement on par with Iran in terms of human rights violations, the subjugation of women, and government oppression in general. Especially since the death of the young Kurdish woman Jina Mahsa Ameni and the subsequent mass protests, the problematic human rights situation in Iran has again come into focus and has attracted worldwide attention, which has been widely reported (e.g. "theguardian.com" has collected various articles on the situation in Iran and published them collectively on their homepage (https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran. Accessed online: 3 May 2023.)).

But it is not only friendships that are declining; relationships between family members are also suffering when family rituals are changed or dissolved altogether. An example of this is the family's daily dinner, which represents a typical, low-key family ritual. Jean's family consists of four children and her husband Patrick, with both parents leading busy lives when they used to have full-time jobs. Before the Pure Movement forced citizens to restructure almost their entire daily routine, family dinners were relaxed events in the McClellan household. However, under the new regime this routine underwent drastic changes. Now, while her sons and husband engage in the usual chatter about school, her daughter Sonia

> nods when appropriate, wrinkles her nose when [Jean‘s] young twins, not understanding the importance of yes/no interrogatives and finite answer sets, ask their sister to tell them what the teachers are like, how the classes are, which subject she likes best. So many open-ended questions. (Dalcher 1-2)

The difference between the behavior of six-year-old Sonia and her younger twin brothers is quite obvious; all-encompassing family conversations are no longer possible as the female family members are excluded from the conversations. The high-spirited dinners of the past have given way to a tense atmosphere in which the dinners now take place. This atmosphere is mainly due to the strained relationship between Jean and her eldest child, her fifteen-year-old son Steven, who has begun to embrace the teachings of the Pure Movement:

> Woman has no call to the ballot-box, but she has a sphere of her own, of amazing responsibility and importance. She is the divinely appointed guardian of the home…. She should more fully realize that her position as wife and mother, and angel of the home, is the holiest, most responsible, and queenlike assigned to mortals; and dismiss all ambition for anything higher, as there is nothing else here so high for mortals. (52)[124]

[124] The metaphor of the “angel of the home“ is a reference from the Victorian area and its teachings about “The Angel of the House“ that dominated social developments in the nineteenth century. In the former British Empire, Nicola Humble explains, a new emphasis on the importance of the home as a key element of Victorian culture developed during the Victorian era (220). It is usually assumed that this change in family policy was the result of the rise of the evangelical movement with its emphasis on quiet, domestic virtues: “The middle-class Victorian woman lived increasingly apart from the arena of work, her role as domestic doyenne bolstered by any number of texts selling her the image of herself as „the angel of the hearth““ (ibid.). To support this viewpoint, Humble states

This is a passage from Steven's textbook, illustrating how the Pure Movement manipulates the younger generation into believing their ideas of ideal family relationships and dynamics, as well as gender role performances. This notion of female domesticity originates in the belief that it is primarily the female presence that transforms a house into a home, thus making the female presence at home essential for domestic happiness. As a result, women are excluded from public spaces and kept exclusively indoors. The teachings of the Pure Movement are based on the beliefs and traditions of the Puritans, a religious reform movement that sought to "purify" the Church of England and rid it of the remnants of the Catholic Church in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries ("Puritanism").[125] In the same spirit in which the Puritans sought to reform the state, the church, and the lives of the people, in their view improving them, the Pure Movement sees itself as bringing salvation to the people of the United States who have lost their inner connection to God and to themselves.[126] When the textbook states that the woman is a divinely appointed guardian of the home, it refers to the Puritans' belief that a covenant relationship with God was necessary to be redeemed by God from all sin ("Puritanism"). To make this palatable to the younger generations, a woman is described by the Pure Movement as a queen while being praised for fulfilling the supposedly divine task of being a devoted servant to God, her husband and children.

The reason that the Pure Movement places so much emphasis on intervening in and controlling the family life of its citizens can also be found in the teachings and social structure of the Puritans. In Puritan communities, the family unit was

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that countless manuals and pamphlets were printed with the purpose of propagating female domesticity, including explanations on how to build the perfect home (221-22). However, in terms of religion, the teachings of the Pure Movement are based on Puritan values, indicating a contradiction in the Movement's teachings and its leader Reverent Carl Corbin.

[125] It is likely that the Pure Movement was also inspired by the Puritans in choosing its name, since Puritanism is literally the pure or purified interpretation of the Bible. In addition, for their motto "Make America Moral Again" Dalcher likely wanted to reference Donald Trump's motto "Make America Great Again", given that the novel was written during his presidency. The Trump administration and its political and social agenda is thus associated with the same destructive potential as the political leader of the Pure Movement.

[126] The Puritans became known primarily "for a spirit of moral and religious earnestness that informed their whole way of life, and they sought through church reform to make their lifestyle the pattern for the whole [English] nation" ("Puritanism"). Their reformist teachings contributed to the outbreak of the English Civil War and the founding of the American colonies in New England, where they fully implemented their way of life (ibid.). In this way, Puritanism has demonstrated its potential to stir up conflict and controversy throughout history.

strongly influenced by Puritan religion and rituals; in particular, Amanda Porterfield notes, the relationship between husband and wife was considered sacred, as the wife's relationship with her husband and with God was one of submissiveness and humility (81). Special attention was also given to the education of children, as the Puritans praised the obedience of young children to God and the head of the household. Martha Saxton stresses that they considered it beneficial to take children away from their mothers at adolescence because they believed they were better able to maintain a stronger relationship with God that way (82). If a child had lost its way and strayed from God, the child could only be redeemed through religious education and obedience. In this regard, Saxton continues, girls bore a special burden, as they were all associated with the corruption of Eve and therefore catechized separately from boys in adolescence (ibid.). Thus, the Pure Movement has also introduced segregation in schools according to the biological sex of children, with girls being taught only what they consider necessary to successfully run a household as a woman and a wife in later life.

Having thus formed and established a pejorative view of women's place in society, it is logical that the family dinner rituals have become more stressful for Jean as they are overshadowed by Steven's new curriculum at school. Even when Jean and Sonia finally get the counters taken off their wrists as an incentive to persuade Jean to do important work for the government, the dynamics of the family dinners have already changed to the point where a return to the previous state is unthinkable:

> Even without the metal contraption on my wrist, dinner is a quiet affair tonight. Steven, normally garrulous in between forkfuls of food, hasn’t mentioned school or Julia King or soccer. The twins seem confused and shift a little in their chairs. Sonia alternates between staring at her plate and staring at my left wrist, but she’s been silent since she got home form school. […] As for Patrick, he eats, takes his plate into the kitchen, and escapes to his study with a tumbler of bourbon and a few court words about having to meet a deadline. (Dalcher 61)

The damage caused by the wrist counters is omnipresent. The children's confusion about the situation and their family life and routines in general is palpable. Research in developmental psychology has found that “warm, responsive, and sensitive interaction patterns“ during family meals are a key element for optimal

child development (Fiese et al. (2006) 68). Family interaction patterns that can be observed during a routine mealtime are often consistent with the overall health and functionality of the family, because “mealtimes provide a window into significant patterns of social interaction“ (ibid.). Mealtimes illustrate a family’s identity and create a sense of group membership that is relevant to child development. Sonia's apathetic behavior and her twin brothers' confusion about their parents' and siblings' behavior therefore symbolize the rift in family dynamics and otherwise normal family rituals. Steven has become estranged from his family, especially his mother and sister, and for Jean's husband, family dinner has become something to get over with quickly. The family's cohesion crumbles because Jean does not want to submit to the Puritan family rituals, but her son has long since been indoctrinated by the teachings of the Pure Movement and no longer respects his mother because of her refusal to conform. Jean’s home and family life has suffered a major disruption due to the serious changes introduced by the government, making the importance of family rituals for a healthy and functioning family unit painfully clear.

This example illustrates that the oppression of women by the Pure Movement is manifold, but it is not expressed in all its aspects as blatantly as when word counters are fitted to women's wrists.[127] In many respects, the word counters are just the beginning. They set off a snowball effect, slowly destroying social rituals and thus relationships between neighbors and even within the family itself. Young children are indoctrinated at school by being taught a simplified version of the biblical scriptures that places women entirely under male custody. Another step in the process of women’s oppression is the invalidation of women's passports and personal identity cards in general. In this way, the government deprives women of their right to vote and to actively participate in society. They degrade women not only to second-class citizens but also to male property (Dalcher 5). However, certain areas of daily life are maintained by the government to keep up the appearance of a functioning country with normal social rituals:

[127] In her review of Dalcher’s novel in *The Women's Review of Books*, Hagar Scher points out how easily social control measures like a word limit for women could be implemented in today's societies. What may seem unrealistic at first glance is actually not that far-fetched when considering what an Apple Watch and a FitBit can already monitor today (8). Scher notes that “[l]ike the best speculative fiction, *Vox*’s main conceit contains more than a kernel of chilling plausibility“ (ibid.), which is why dystopian fiction like Dalcher's novel encourages readers to think critically about their own reality.

> Some of life's little sillinesses remain the same. I still drive, hit the grocery store on Tuesday's and Friday's, shop for new dresses and handbags, get my hair done once a moth down at Iannuzzi's. […] My leisure reading limits itself to billboards advertising the latest energy drink, ingredients lists on ketchup bottles, washing instructions on clothing tags. […] Sunday's, we take the kids to a movie and buy popcorn and soda […]. Sonia always laughs at the cartoons that play while the audience files in. The films are a distraction, the only time I hear female voices unconstrained and unlimited. Actresses are allowed a special dispensation while they're on the job. Their lines, of course, are written by men. (15)

In the Pure Movement's version of the United States, public entertainment is still allowed to a certain extent. But not a single woman can escape the restrictions imposed on them. Actresses are allowed to say as many words as are necessary for their role in a film, but they are also puppets in the regime of the Pure Movement. They are used as a means of distraction from the unjust reality in which the rest of the female population lives. This is no more evident than in the public shaming of women who have fallen from the government's grace. Just like the public Salvagings in *The Handmaid's Tale,* in Jean's world the ritual public shaming of supposed female sinners has been stylized into public entertainment.

5.2 Rituals of Public Humiliation

In *Vox*, it is Steven's girlfriend Julia King who faces the consequences of violating the Pure Movement's code of conduct. Women who do not follow the government's rules, whether because they do not conform to the heterosexual norm, have publicly denounced the regime, or, as in the case of Julia King, because they engage in extramarital sex, are deported and sent to labor camps somewhere in the Midwest of the country.[128]

However, before arriving at the labour camps, the women are publicly humiliated on national television in front of a live audience where they are expected to confess their sins. For the Pure Movement this is a necessary step before the women's spiritual healing through hard physical labour can begin in the camps.

[128] The use of labor camps for nonconforming women is another detail inspired by Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Julia is picked up late one evening by an “ambulance“ which takes her to her new permanent home, as Jean describes it (Dalcher 149). While Steven stands aghast and motionless, not having anticipated Julia's mother's screams and despair, Julia, who lives with her family in the house next door, is taken away by armed police officers. Although both Steven and Julia have committed a sin in the eyes of the Pure Movement, it is only Julia who will suffer the consequences. Steven, who admitted to the authorities that he had sex with her, stated during interrogation that he felt confused and seduced by Julia, claiming that he did not know what her intentions were. He reproduces the Pure Movement's assumptions about the devilish female gender constantly trying to seduce and harm innocent men.

The next day, when Jean turns on the TV, Julia King's public shaming is on just about every channel:

> The program will air today, and tonight, and probably for most of the next month until there’s a new victim to parade in front of the press. They always handle it this way, usually inserting the footage into some show they know people will be watching. It’s sinister. (Dalcher 153)

The Pure Movement wants all citizens to watch the public shaming, even those who do not actively tune in. When Jean comes home that afternoon, she finds Sonia sitting in front of the TV watching cartoons. In a split second, the image on the screen changes:

> There she is, Julia King, up on the screen in the time it takes me to locate the remote. She’s in a drab gray smock, long-sleeved and down to her ankles, even in this heat, and her hair is cut, which I don’t remember them doing to Annie of Mr. Blue Pickup Truck fame, but maybe they’ve changed something, introduced a new brand of humiliation into their ritual. Reverend Carl stands beside her, sober and sad, and begins reciting the relevant bits from the Pure’s manifesto. (159)[129]

This scene illustrates the general ritual desecration of the female body in the Pure Movement.[130] If a woman does not meet the high standards the Pure Movement

[129] Jean is referring here to her former neighbor Annie, who was also publicly humiliated by the Pure Movement before being sent to the labour camps, because she was accused of infidelity.
[130] Hagar Scher points out the similarities of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* to the Salem witch trials of the late seventeenth century, as opposed to *Vox*'s similarity to 1950s suburban America

demands of her, she is declared unworthy of her role as a woman in the Pure Movement's society. The spectacle that the Pure Movement stages for Julia King can be interpreted in three different ways, as the intention of the ritual in this case is multi-layered. On the one hand, the public shaming can be classified as a humiliation ritual intended to discourage other women from following in her footsteps. Accordingly, it is assumed that the blame lies solely with the woman who must have seduced the man with her diabolical powers; the man who participated in the sexual act is not even mentioned by name.[131] In this case, ritual acts, religious belief, and symbols are combined to create a public display of female shame. It is a typical ritual composed of a "stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests" (Deflem (1991) 5). Apart from the sequestered location, which a public television studio with a live audience really cannot be called, all the other features are present in Julia King's humiliation ritual.

Rituals of humiliation can be seen as a subgroup of the so-called apology rituals, as Kampf and Löwenheim point out in their study on rituals of apology in the global arena. They are basically a twisted version of apology rituals, as the offended uses the chance of a public apology to humiliate the offending party. In the process, the actual intention of reconciliation between the two parties involved takes a back seat. Leech and Tavuchis (cited in Kampf and Löwenheim) developed a theory of apology rituals by stating that "[o]n the verge of an apology ritual, the direct participants are in a state of imbalance" (Kampf and Löwenheim 47), which is to be resolved in the course of the ritual:

> During the ritual, the offender performs a reparative, corrective act - the apology - thus positioning him- or herself, symbolically and temporarily, as inferior to the victim. As a result, at the end of the ritual the offender restores balance by an exchange of non-balancing acts. (ibid.)

(9). However, the public display of condemned women on national television also feels like a modernized version of said trials, as there is nothing Julia can say in her defense that would absolve her of her crimes. Her conviction is certain, and the public display serves only to humiliate the woman and to reassure the Pure Movement of its own moral superiority and state power.

[131] At this point, however, it must be mentioned that although Steven was not publicly punished for his behavior in this case, he nevertheless has to make up for it later. After realizing what his actions have caused, he runs away from home in the hope of finding and saving Julia. When he is caught, he too is put on public display as a shameful example of male weakness (Dalcher 282).

In theory, these actions are based on the assumption that both parties are willing to go along, with one participant voluntarily admitting wrongdoing and apologizing to the other. In Julia's case, this is clearly not intended, because Reverend Carl's goal is complete humiliation; he claims to be a representative of the entire country, which Julia has deeply offended by her behavior. Therefore, his ritual of apology has turned into a ritual of humiliation. Moreover, there is research that suggests that

> apology, even if made voluntarily, is to some degree mortifying […] [and] in humiliation rituals […] the humiliating element of apology is foregrounded, as the offended party forces the offender to participate in a degradation ceremony as a condition for settling the score. (50)

The entire setting of the live broadcast of Reverent Carl's sermon and the degrading position into which Julia is forced fulfill all the characteristics of such a humiliation ritual.

Beyond this, however, there is a third way to interpret this scene; it can also be seen as a cleansing ritual, the aim of which is “to deal with the notorious past of a transgressor who has committed a serious offense, and to allow the transgressor to purify him- or herself from this problematic past behavior by creating a new, positive self-image“ (Kampf and Löwenheim 48). Cleansing rituals aim to redeem a perceived wrongdoer and are therefore intended as positive reinforcement for the person concerned to change their behavior for the better. The aim of such a ritual is to create the appearance of a moral act and the image of a moral agent (ibid.). It is likely that Reverend Carl had such a ritual in mind when he introduced Julia to national television; however, Julia does not voluntarily participate in this ceremony, which is the most important prerequisite for a genuine cleansing ritual: the transgressor voluntarily and knowingly apologizes to the offended out of a need to make amends. Julia, on the other hand, is not allowed to speak a single word during the public procedure, which turns the ritual into a staged, religious farce.

Chapter Conclusion

The rituals analyzed in this chapter show how the feminist dystopia plays with the role of ritual in society and how it can be manipulated and distorted. Rituals of oppression are a common tool used by governments to threaten the population and keep them in line. Often these rituals are disguised as fertility or family rituals, which in turn serve to push women into a position of supposed natural inferiority to men. Rituals that once celebrated female nature and the female body have been twisted in the feminist dystopia and used as weapons against women. While in the feminist utopia conception and birth rituals are celebrated as sacred acts, here these rituals are used as a control mechanism to exert power. Especially in *The Handmaid's Tale*, it becomes clear how distorted pregnancy and all the rituals surrounding it have become. Most of the Handmaids, while fearing the ritual monthly rape by their Commanders, still desire pregnancy because it would make their lives easier for a while: the other servants and the Wives would must treat them with care and kindness. However, giving birth in Gilead means on the one hand that they could die in the process, since only the life of the child counts, and on the other hand that they will be taken to a new home shortly afterwards, where the torture starts all over again. Rituals associated with sexual activity and freedom, which previously had positive connotations, are now being distorted and deliberately misinterpreted to suit the agenda of men in power. They convey an image of women as inherently flawed, implying women's inferiority and the need for men to control them.

It has also been shown that the family plays an important role in these dystopian societies. The propaganda of the totalitarian state has to permeate every part of social life to manifest its poisonous message in people's minds. Family rituals such as the daily dinner are dominated by male household members to whom the government has given all power over the family. In *Vox*, the oppression of women through a counter on their wrist can be seen as a metaphorical critique of the general oppression of women by governments in the real world through the introduction of anti-women laws. The oppression of women can be insidious and go unnoticed by members of society until it is too late. These measures are then

justified with newly created truths and rituals to show that women's position in society can never be equal to that of men. Here, rituals related to the female body are used as weapons of subjugation and to impose radical conservative worldviews as a countermeasure to liberalism, gender equality, and female emancipation.

But rituals are not always used as oppressive means in dystopian feminist writing. In *The Gate to Women's Country*, women living in the townships must perform a seemingly uninterrupted series of ritual acts that serve as lifelines to keep men's destructive behavior at bay. Through these rituals, they aim to convince the men that it is they who have power over the women, when in fact it is the women who manipulate the men for their own benefit. Ultimately, these rituals, which were supposed to reinforce the garrison's self-image and their sense of masculinity and heroism, are used by the women to deceive them, leading to their eventual death. In this way, the garrisons' own masculinist rituals blinded them to the truth that was happening right before their eyes.

All three novels engage with the dangers that religious mania and misinterpretation pose to society, and see conservative interpretations of religion, such as that of Puritanism, as a major cause of the oppression of women. Ritual acts are used as weapons of control and manipulation in these novels by instilling fear inside the communities. In *Vox* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, rituals are used as weapons against women to maintain government domination over them. The novels focus on the subtle function of ritual acts, highlighting the often-unnoticed destructive nature of oppressive states. This emphasizes the danger posed to women around the world by political systems that twist and distort religious texts to further their grip on society. In these systems, women are portrayed and perceived by men as dangerous and unworthy or incapable of a self-determined life. Thus, men create rituals that legitimize their social control and subjugation of women. Dangerous and harmful power structures are remarkably easy to establish, either through manipulation of pre-existing political systems or through unrest that brings a new political elite to power. They can lead to the majority of a country's population being permanently deprived of their basic civil rights, which in turn can and almost always does lead to rebellion. Against this background, among other ritual performances, the next chapter will also look at rituals connected to rebellion in Veronica Roth’s feminist young adult novel *Divergent.*

CHAPTER III - The Rebellious and the Dystopian: Youth and Ideology in Young Adult Feminist Dystopian Fiction

6. *Divergent* - Veronica Roth

Young adult literature literature often features adolescent protagonists who challenge dominant power structures as part of their development and transformation.[132] At the beginning of the twenty-first century, young adult fiction with a focus on feminist and at the same time dystopian storylines became very popular among young people worldwide.[133] Of particular note are two three-part book series that were also made into successful Hollywood films, reaching an even wider audience and drawing attention to the trope of the young female protagonist in a dystopian setting. These are, on the one hand, the *Hunger Games* series, which depicts Katniss Everdeen's struggle for survival, and, on the other, the *Divergent* series, which tells the story of Beatrice Prior. The two series not only share the same readership, but also certain similarities in the characters and plot development. Katniss Everdeen and Beatrice Prior are the two main protagonists in their respective series. Both are 16-year-old strong young women who start to fight against the dystopian, totalitarian, and oppressive political systems they were born into. However, both initially refuse to accept the role of rebellious leader into which they are catapulted by events beyond their control. Interestingly, it is the act of rebellion in these novels, performed in a ritualistic manner in both series, that helps both Katniss and Beatrice realize their full potential for personal growth and leadership. An atmosphere is created in which Katniss and Beatrice's rebellion against oppressive and brutal systems is representative of teenage rebellion in

[132] Lili Mei-Ling Wilkinson dedicated her doctoral research to the topic of. For further information, see Wilkinson, Lili Mei-Ling. *The Politics of Empowerment: Young Adult Literature, Heterotopia and the Possibility of Social Change*. Minerva Access, University Library Melbourne, Australia, 2015, https://www.academia.edu/24379865/The_Politics_of_Empowerment_Young_Adult_Literature_Heterotopia_and_the_Possibility_of_Social_Change. Accessed online: 20 September 2024.

[133] Various newspaper articles were published over the last decades to support this fact, i.e. Debra Donston-Miller's article *Why Young Adults "Hunger" for The Hunger Games and other Post-Apocalyptic Dystopian Fiction* (Forbes Magazine, 20 Nov 2014, https://www.forbes.com/sites/sungardas/2014/11/20/why-young-adults-hunger-for-the-hunger-games-and-other-post-apocalyptic-dystopian-fiction/). Accessed online: 29 September 2024.

general; they are equal to rites of passage, a stage that everyone goes through before growing into a fully formed adult. In *Divergent*, Beatrice Prior has become the face of rebellion in her society and represents the possibility of peace and equality, but is denied the chance to grow up in the peaceful society she helped create as she eventually sacrifices herself for the greater good. The last months of her life, however, are marked by rebellious actions and the struggle for freedom and equality.

The story is set in Chicago after a post-apocalyptic event destroyed the former United States. Beatrice grows up in a society that is divided into five factions, with the name of each faction representing the main characteristic of its members: Abnegation, Amity, Candor, Dauntless and Erudite. At the age of sixteen, teenagers of all factions meet to take part in the annual Choosing Ceremony: a ritual in which the teenagers must choose the faction they want to spend the rest of their lives in. During the ceremony, Beatrice decides to leave her own faction of Abnegation in favor of Dauntless, where she is trained in combat and protecting the city from unknown dangers outside the tightly secured city walls. Over the course of her training, Beatrice finds out that she has a cognitive condition called “divergent“ in which people have several strong character traits instead of just one. These people have a broader and more complex understanding of morality, social interactions, and life in general than the rest of the population, enabling them to make not only free but also better-informed decisions about moral dilemmas and the complexities of politics and human relations. Because of this cognitive independence, the so-called “Divergents“ are feared by the rest of the population and the politicians, leading them to either hide their true nature or risk being murdered by people who feel threatened by them.

The motif of the rebellious heroine runs through the entire plot of this trilogy. The focus of this chapter is on the first part of the trilogy, which ostensibly depicts a functioning society and political system that emerged after an unspecified apocalyptic event destroyed the previously existing political order of the United States of America. Although it is never explicitly stated what led to the destruction of the previous world, it is suggested that misguided rebellions and revolutions may have played a prominent role in this. As a consequence of its history, this newly founded society naturally wants to prevent rebellions at all costs to protect its social structures. As a result, the government created a system of factions to which

people belonged exclusively and unequivocally. It is a means of state oppression and prevention of independent thought, but unlike the other feminist dystopias discussed in this thesis, it is not an oppression directed only against women. Rather, the novel does not distinguish between men and women in terms of their freedom and rights. Both sexes are portrayed as equally capable of goodness and strength, but also of tyranny and cruelty. In this respect, Roth's novel is distinguished by the fact that its feminist agenda puts an emphasis on the capable female heroine who never experiences discrimination on the basis of her gender and whose gender is relevant only in terms of its analytical potential for literary study. Discrimination in the novel occurs only between factions, and between factions as one entity and factionless as another. This non-discrimination in regards to gender roles marks a kind of feminism not found in the other novels in this dissertation.

6.1 Political Ritual in Disguise - The Choosing Ceremony

To help young people decide which faction they should choose at the age of sixteen, the Choosing Ceremony is divided into two parts. While the first part, the Aptitude Test, is an informal precursor to the actual event, the second part, the actual ceremony, plays the more important role, as in this part of the ceremony the teenagers must make a decision in front of their friends and families that will affect the rest of their lives. In the Aptitude Test, they are tested to see which faction best suits their personality. Ideally, at the end of this test, only one faction, meaning one personal character trait, is clearly established as the dominant characteristic. If this is not the case and the test result shows more than one dominant trait, the test result is deemed inconclusive. The person in question is branded a divergent who is highly likely to be factionless or dead.[134]

[134] The factionless are a group of stigmatized outcasts who are denied access to the five factions: “To live factionless is not just to live in poverty and discomfort; it is to live divorced from society, separated from the most important thing in life: community“ (Roth 20). In the novel, community as a whole is understood as the lifeline of human togetherness, since it is here that human rituals and social interactions unfold and develop their meaning. Only in the context of a community does human nature fully blossom, irrespective of its importance for the effectiveness of social

6.1.1 The Aptitude Test

With the exception of the inconclusive test results, any teenager who receives a clear result is still free to choose the faction of his or her liking, regardless of what the test result indicates. Officially, the test is only supposed to help the teenagers, or dependents, the term used for them during this time, make their choice and give them guidance. They can then decide for themselves whether they want to take the result into account or not. However, the government makes them aware that the high risk of not fitting in if they choose a different faction than the one suggested in the test result. Accordingly, the official recommendation is to choose the faction that corresponds to one's test result. If one fails to adapt to life in the faction one chose during the Choosing Ceremony, there is no way to return to the faction one came from or to join another one if one stayed in the faction one was born in. If one fails in this way, one has to live with the factionless and is excluded from the rest of society. It is a difficult decision for a sixteen-year-old teenager who is under pressure to make life-changing decisions while factoring in the associated consequences. The need for conformity and the pressure to “fit-in“, not just with one’s peer group but also with the faction of choice, is ubiquitous. The faction leaders, who are all involved in the governance of the city, even though the faction leaders of Abnegation have the final say, can be compared to modern politicians who, according to Alexander, serve as symbolic representations of people's hopes, fears, and dreams of collective life within a society ((2011) 1). In this respect, the advice of faction leaders carries great weight with people because they trust that with their help they will make the right decisions.

The nature of the Aptitude Test makes it clear that the test is an instrument of the government to control its citizens. Each faction, while not officially mandating a specific behavior, certainly expects its members to behave and live their lives in a certain way, making it easy to control people's behavior and actions. Beatrice was born into the faction of Abnegation, which means that idleness, vanity, and even celebrating a birthday are not tolerated as it is considered self-indulgent. Members of the community are expected to be completely selfless at all times and

performances and rituals. Accordingly, belonging to a social group is essential for survival and exclusion from such a group can have dangerous consequences.

even a quick glance in the mirror at one's appearance is considered misbehavior (Roth 2). The people of Erudite, on the other hand, are supposed to constantly strive for knowledge and enlightenment and never be satisfied with the level of knowledge they have already attained. When people's minds are made to behave in such ways, it is easy for a government to exercise power over them. Therefore, the Aptitude Test and the Choosing Ceremony are ritualized performative instruments used by the government to maintain law and order. It is precisely for this reason that the government must keep the group of factionless people as small as possible:

> Because they failed to complete initiation into whatever faction they chose, they live in poverty, doing the work no one else wants to do. They are janitors and construction workers and garbage collectors; they make fabric and operate trains and drive buses. In return for their work they get food and clothing, but […], not enough of either. (25)

The treatment of the factionless shows that they are considered outlaws by the government, undeserving of a life of dignity and respect. Since faction rules cannot be applied to keep them under control, the factionless are kept in check by giving them only the bare minimum of what a human needs to survive. They serve as a deterrent and a warning to the rest of the population not to break the rules and to abide by the common social procedure, especially at the Choosing Ceremony. It is a ritual that serves to emancipate oneself from childhood to become a full member of society.

The pressure to fit in and make the right choice already starts during the Aptitude Test. To take the test, the participant drinks a serum that catapults them into a dream-like state. It triggers hallucinations of specific scenarios in which one has to make a choice between two possible options. These automatic and intuitive responses provide information about which faction the test person is best suited for. Throughout the test, the test administrator and the person being tested are connected via small electrodes attached to their heads. This way, the test administrator can follow every decision the test person makes and identify the appropriate faction. In the simulation, Beatrice is exceptionally aware that she is being tested and is therefore able to make better informed decisions, knowing that she is not in any real danger (Roth 17). The awareness Tris shows of her situation

should not be possible, as the serum is meant to prevent the subject's subconscious from realizing that it is being tested. Beatrice's reactions naturally alarm her administrator Tori, who realizes that she is divergent: "My conclusion […] is that you display equal aptitude for Abnegation, Dauntless, and Erudite. People who get this kind of result are… […] called *Divergent*" (22). Tori explains this quietly to Beatrice as she looks around nervously. Her behavior is an indicator of the danger Beatrice would be in should her test result become public (22).

On a deeper level, this insight into the Aptitude Test procedure allows a glimpse into the inner workings of the society as a whole. Especially interesting is Tori's reaction when she explains that the state of mind known as divergence is considered extremely dangerous, and what effects this has on the city's political system. It is obvious that the established rituals have a very clear goal: the attainment of total control by the political elite over the city's population. This control is exercised through power, ideally without the people even realizing that they are being controlled. In fact, the entire social fabric of the city is based on strict social and ritual performances, as each member of each faction displays a certain expected behavior and unconsciously performs the role that is expected of them in society on a daily basis.

6.1.2 The Choosing Ceremony

A few days after the Aptitude Test is completed, the actual Choosing Ceremony takes place in front of the teenagers' parents, the city's leading politicians and selected members of the five factions. The ceremony takes place in a building called the Hub (Roth 4). On the twentieth floor of the Hub is the ceremonial room, which is the mise-en-scéne, the setting of the ritual. Beatrice describes it as being

> arranged in concentric circles. On the edges stand the sixteen-year-olds of every faction. We are not called members yet; our decisions today will make us initiates, and we will become members if we complete initiation. (39)

The particular distinction made between initiates and members is another indication of the impact of the Choosing Ceremony on people's lives. Not even as children are they considered full members of their birth faction, as they are referred to as dependents until they actively choose their own faction (42). This setup of the ritual, the social pressure to conform and to make a decision according to the test result is a means of oppression and control by the city officials. The dependents will also lose part of their identity as they will have to discard their surnames after the Choosing Ceremony, another symbolic act of cutting the cord from their former lives (40).

The dependents sit in the farthest circle from the centre of the room, in front of them a row of chairs forms a new circle reserved for the parents. The circles of chairs are divided into five sections according to the faction system. The symbolism of the five-faction social system is palpable in every social interaction and serves to strengthen the political system: the less ambiguity and variation visible in the system, the less room there is for scrutiny and questioning of the system. In the centre of the room, within the third circle, are five large metal bowls, each containing a substance representing each faction: “gray stones for Abnegation, water for Erudite, earth for Amity, lit coals for Dauntless, and glass for Candor“ (Roth 40). In alphabetical order, the teenagers' names are called out, an invitation to come forward and make a decision. Having very conflicted feelings about her choice, given her result in the Aptitude Test and her general insecurity about her birth faction Abnegation, Beatrice feels the weight of the impending decision even more than others. As much as she wants to belong to her birth faction and please her parents, she has always been attracted to Dauntless, although she is still unsure whether she can successfully pass Dauntless initiation rituals. The fear of failing is constantly on her mind. This inner dilemma represents the typical experience of a teenager emancipating herself from the parental household. The factions of Abnegation and Dauntless represent sensible, selfless, and measured adult behavior on the one hand and youthful, risky, and daring behavior on the other. In every respect, Beatrice’s decision to leave Abnegation in favor of Dauntless is symbolic of the rebellion against and detachment from familiar and sheltered childhood as she enters the early stages of adulthood.

The actual performance of the Choosing Ceremony bears distinct similarities to other rituals of adolescent rites of passage. Before the dependents come forward

individually to make their choice, the leader of the Choosing Ceremony, who is a leading political figure of one of the factions, as the “responsibility to conduct the ceremony rotates from faction to faction each year“ (40), gives a short speech reminding the participants of the ceremony of the history and importance of the upcoming decision:

> Our dependents are now sixteen. They stand on the precipice of adulthood, and it is now up to them to decide what kind of people they will be. […] Decades ago, our ancestors realized that it is not political ideology, religious belief, race, or nationalism that is to blame for a warring world. Rather, they determined that it is was the fault of human personality - of humankind’s inclination towards evil, in whatever form that is. They divided into factions that sought to eradicate those qualities they believed responsible for the worlds disarray. […] Those who blamed aggression formed Amity. […] Those who blamed ignorance formed Erudite. […] Those who blamed duplicity formed Candor. […] Those who blamed selfishness made Abnegation. […] And those who blamed cowardice were the Dauntless. (Roth 42-43)

Here, it is apparent that it is human nature in general that the leaders of the city fear and therefore seek to control by categorizing and policing the population as closely as possible, dividing it into factions. The Choosing Ceremony is, in the words of Alexander, a cultural text performed by a relatively small group so that its meaning can be communicated to other members of society who share the same values ((2004) 531). The active agents of the ritual, the dependents of each faction, perform a social act that decides the future of their place in society, for which it is necessary that the audience understands the meaning and the outcome of the ritual.

Social and ritual performance consists of five main components that actively influence the success of the performance. The means of symbolic production Alexander refers to in his theory of symbolic performance are one of the essential ingredients for the success of any ritual and are clearly evident in this case: the five large metal bowls in the centre of the room are heavily charged with symbolic meaning as the dependents sacrifice their own blood to forge a bond between themselves and the faction of their choice. The blood sacrifice is highly symbolic and is underscored by the ubiquitous mantra “faction before blood“ (Roth 48). The phrase implies that one must either physically cut all previous ties to one's home faction before entering into a new one, or manifest the ties one already has to one's

home faction if one has decided to stay. The stage for the ritual is the large circular room in the Hub which illustrates the importance of the ritual, as it is a building that has immense symbolic significance: the Hub is the tallest building in the city and houses the city's government, thus representing the city's centre of power (47). The actors are the most essential part of a ritual and a performance, since without them no performance is possible. In this case, the actors are made up of the entirety of the town's dependents who elect their factions on that day. The parents and political representatives present during the ceremony form the audience (or observers) and are another indispensable part of any ritual. The dependents, who are now active players in the ritual, use the means of symbolic production to convey and perform the cultural script as it is expected of them. Not only are the five bowls important, but also the knife with which they must cut themselves so that the blood can drip into the respective bowl. They have to convincingly perform a process that Alexander calls “cathexis“, with the right techniques and tools because the relationship between actors and audience depends on it ((2011) 30). Cathexis, Alexander explains, is the process of investing mental or emotional energy in a person, animal or idea and is thus an essential part of any ritual that actors must focus on to convey their message in a believable manner (ibid.). Within this framework, during the Choosing Ceremony a relationship between actor and audience, the cathexis, can be established by dripping blood into a bowl. In this case, the dependent as the actor creates a connection with the audience of the respective faction that is meant to last a lifetime.

Beatrice is aware of the importance of this act as well as the severity of the established, thus barely noticing the knife cutting into her hand as she holds her arm over the five bowls. Once the decision is made, the dependent walk over to the faction of their choice without being allowed to return to their home faction (Roth 48-49). The breaking of the family and faction bonds is immediate and irreversible. Once all dependents have made their choice, the factions leave the ceremonial room separately, with Dauntless leaving first. With this act, the rite of passage is complete and Beatrice leaves the Hub with her new faction, having symbolically left her childhood behind whilst entering adulthood. On her way to becoming a full-fledged member of the Dauntless, however, there are many more rites of initiation and trials that she must pass. In the Dauntless faction, there is not just one major initiation ritual, but many smaller ones that, if successfully passed, together lead

the way to full membership. The smaller initiation rituals are designed according to the ideals of each faction, which means many physically demanding rituals for Dauntless initiates, where they are expected to demonstrate courage and strength. The heroine undergoes a drastic mental and physical transformation as a result of successfully completing the initiation rituals and emerging as a new member of society.

6.2 The Nature of Dauntless Initiation Rituals

After successfully completing the Choosing Ceremony, each faction has their new initiates go through a series of initiation rituals to test their compatibility with the faction. The Dauntless faction has demanding and sometimes even life-threatening initiation rites. Initiation rites are diverse in nature and have been a common feature in many different societies for thousands of years. Alan Morinis describes them as an important step in the transition from adolescence to adult status, an expression of the individual's importance inside the group, relieving or channeling the psychological stress of role change, alleviating the social stress of role change, contributing to the development of valued virtues such as courage and forbearance, and educating youth in the mysteries and techniques of adulthood (52). Dauntless initiation rituals exhibit many of these attributes. Immediately following the completion of the Choosing Ceremony, the initiation rituals for the new Dauntless initiates begin and will last for several weeks. In the case of the Dauntless faction, the initiation ritual consists of several different tasks and rituals that vary in form and difficulty. All of these smaller rituals serve to train the initiates for the tasks they will have to perform after initiation, to test their courage, but also to weed out those who do not have what it takes to be accepted into Dauntless. Max Gluckman points out that the multitude of smaller rituals, which in their entirety form the actual initiation ritual, is typical of initiation rites in that they are seen as a sequence of rites designed to change people's social relationships ((1962) 1).

After Beatrice and the other Dauntless initiates leave the Hub, their first challenge is to jump on a moving train and jump off again at Dauntless

headquarters. The Dauntless are thrill-seekers, as Beatrice calls them (Roth 55), and already in this first challenge, one of the initiates is reluctant to take the plunge:

> "Well, I'm not doing it," says an Amity boy behind me [Beatrice]. He has olive skin and wears a brown shirt - he is the only transfer from Amity. His cheeks shine with tears. […] "I'd rather be factionless than dead!" The Amity boy shakes his head. He sounds panicky. […] I don't agree with him. I would rather be dead than empty, like the factionless. (54)

The boy is factionless less than an hour after the Choosing Ceremony is completed. He is overwhelmed by fear and paralyzed by panic, unable to leave behind the characteristics of his former faction and transition into a new one. Initiates must pass every single initiation ritual to become a full member of Dauntless and avoid the homelessness and destitution of the factionless or even death. The process of psychological transformation is, according to Morinis, a crucial component of initiation rites (153). The boy was not capable of the psychological transition from Amity to Dauntless so soon after leaving his home faction. His mind could not adapt to the new situation as quickly as was necessary. Similarly, a Dauntless-born girl did not make it onto the roof as she fell out of the train and into her death. In her case, she lacked the physical ability to make the jump, perhaps being too hesitant to do it properly, whereas Dauntless allows for no hesitation or doubt. Neither the faction-transfers, nor the faction-born are safe from the brutal reality of the initiation rituals.

The physical and even mortal danger that the initiates are confronted with by their trainers is extreme. Initiation rituals, Turner notes, serve the purpose of rendering the participants down into some kind of primal human state, divested of specific form and reduced to a social condition that is without or beneath all accepted forms of social status ((1969) 169-70). Beatrice recognizes this form of dehumanization and realizes for herself:

> I tell myself, as sternly as possible, *that is how things work here*. We do dangerous things and people die. People die, and we move on to the next dangerous thing. The sooner that lesson sinks in, the better chance I have of surviving initiation. (Roth 56)

The character of initiation rites as threshold rituals comes through here. During the initiation phase, initiates are in a social vacuum; they must remove their former

faction clothing and are given uniforms that every initiate must wear during training. The Dauntless faction literally strips them of their former identity by making them appear interchangeable to the outside world, also a common feature in transition rites according to Turner ((1969) 95). In this way, the initiates are further dehumanized and seen as expendable by the rest of the group. Their value and importance to the group is determined solely by their success in the initiation rituals. This symbolism of nakedness and alienation can be interpreted as the rebirth of the initiates, especially for those who transferred into the faction. Those who do not make it to the end are only ever really remembered by the other initiates, and thus represent no loss to the faction society as such.

All the elements that are part of the initiation are tools for psychological and physical transformation. While physical transformation is achieved through hard physical training, learning martial arts and weapon training, psychological transformation is much more difficult to accomplish. The train that takes the initiates from the Hub to Dauntless headquarters literally transports the initiates from their former home and childhood to their new life and position in society. It symbolizes the transition and passage so common and essential to initiation and puberty rituals, Morinis argues (153). In this sense, it is not the physiological aspect of puberty that is of interest, but its social aspect.[135] In *Divergent*, the psychological aspect of social puberty, of mentally detaching oneself from one's former life and committing one's body and mind entirely to the new community, is symbolized by the physical act of jumping. The initiates must first jump onto a moving train, then jump off again, and shortly afterwards jump from the roof onto which they have just jumped from the train into a hole whose lower end cannot be seen from above. The jump into the unknown as a symbol of bravery and fearlessness is omnipresent in Dauntless society and essential to the faction's understanding of itself. It leads the way to integration and acceptance which is key when wanting to survive in a hostile and strange environment. Beatrice volunteers to be the first jumper and has to cope with this psychological change in a short time:

[135] Arnold van Gennep made a clear distinction between social and physical puberty. While physiological puberty refers to the bodily changes during young adulthood, social puberty, according to Gennep, occurs outside of physical development and marks the child's (or adolescent's) social transition out of childhood and its subsequent integration into the new social sphere of adulthood (65-67).

> This [the jump] is a scare tactic. I will land safely at the bottom. That knowledge is the only thing that helps me step onto the ledge. My teeth chatter. I can't back down now. […] Goose bumps rise on my pale arms, and my stomach lurches. If I don't do it now, I won't be able to do it at all. I swallow hard. I don't think. I just bend my knees and jump. (Roth 58)

Beatrice's body shows clear signs of severe psychological stress, and yet she finds the courage to jump and eventually lands safely at the bottom, her fall stopped by a net: "I look up at the building and laugh, half relieved and half hysterical. My body shakes and I cover my face with my hands. I just jumped off a roof" (ibid.). The adrenaline in her body makes her laugh and become hysterical, accompanied by feelings of accomplishment and pride. During the initiation rituals, Beatrice's psychological development is constantly tested, deepening her bond with the new faction while distancing her from her home faction. umping off the roof marks the end of the first initiation phase after having made it to the Dauntless headquarters. To mark the occasion, each initiate can choose a new name as a further symbol of the beginning of a new life with Dauntless. Beatrice takes this opportunity to shorten her name to Tris, the name by which she will be known in Dauntless from now on and by which she will therefore also be referred to in this work from now on (ibid.).

The initiates' psychological change and growth are only part of the process, as their physical development is also tested daily. As part of the initiation rituals, the initiates must compete in fights to train their technique and strength in physical combat: "The purpose of this is to prepare you to act; to prepare your body to respond to threats and challenges - which you will need if you intend to survive life as a Dauntless" (Roth 83). These training battles are demanding, as the instructors expect them to fight until they are physically unable to continue, because giving up is not an option (95). Since Tris lacks physical strength, the fights cause her a lot of pain. During her first fight, she is brutally beaten up by another initiate and the fight ends with her losing consciousness:

> My knees give out and the floor is cool against my cheek. Something slams into my side and I scream for the first time, a high screech that belongs to someone else and not me, and it slams into my side again, and I can't see anything at all, not even whatever is right in front of my

> face, the lights out. Someone shouts, “Enough!“ and I think *too much* and *nothing at all*. (111)

Morinis considers physical pain during initiation rituals also as an integral part of the initiation ordeal (151). Pain must be endured to make the transition from initiate to full member, and is used by the Dauntless instructors as a means of learning: “Those who don’t learn fast will get hurt“ (Roth 83). These are struggles for survival, for the possibility of accidental death is as real as that of not succeeding in initiation and having to live factionless.

In addition to the brutal and demanding initiation rituals during the initiation phase at Dauntless, there is always a process of integration, but it is not as straightforward as it appears at first glance. Tris becomes aware of this when she is invited by Dauntless-born and fellow initiate Uriah to an internal and informal Dauntless initiation ritual normally reserved for the Dauntless-born. The feeling of being an outsider is still strong in Tris, even though she has already successfully gone through the first initiation rituals. Some of the Dauntless-born initiates still refer to her as a “Stiff“ - a derogatory term for members of Abnegation, as they are seen as humorless and unemotional by the other factions (Roth 211). Despite the teasing, Tris’s psychological transformation as part of her initiation is already rather advanced. When she asks Uriah where they are going and what the ritual will entail, he replies to her

> “[s]omething dangerous“, […]. A look I can only describe as Dauntless mania enters his eyes, but rather than recoil from it, as I might have a few weeks ago, I catch it, like it’s contagious. Excitement replaces the leaden feeling inside me. (210-11)

The reserved and quiet mindset Tris grew up with has already been replaced by the Dauntless' sense of adventure. However, it also shows that Tris is not considered a full member of Dauntless until she has successfully completed all of the initiation rituals, regardless of how successful she has been in the rituals she has already passed. This particular ritual then turns out to be a test of courage, as Tris is asked to zip line down a tall building in the middle of the night without being able to see the end. She has to trust that the zip line will not break and that the other members of Dauntless will secure her well enough so that she does not fall

out or slide to her death. Once again, a blind leap into darkness symbolizes Tris's separation from one more piece of her old self, and even a bit from her role as an outsider inside the group of initiates, while simultaneously marking the beginning of a new closeness to the Dauntless community.

One factor contributing to the sense of alienation between faction transfers and Dauntless-born is the fact that they are separated in the early stages of initiation. Initiates generally have very low social standing in Dauntless society, but faction transfer initiates rank even lower and are ignored by most Dauntless members (Roth 70-71). Tris realizes that her chances of survival at initiation are not good, since she is the smallest initiate and the only Abnegation transfer (72). While the transfers and the Dauntless-born are trained separately, they are ranked together at the end of each of the three initiation phases. The final ranking determines not only what kind of job an initiate can apply for after initiation, but also whether they can stay with Dauntless at all. At the end of each initiation phase, the lowest ranked initiates are cut and must leave the faction to live with the factionless. This, Morinis states, is a typical scenario for survival of the fittest during which the initiates are subjected to an inordinate amount of suffering as a means of sorting out the weakest members (158).

Initiation rites are always also an expression of the values and expectations of a society or culture that new members must fulfill and live up to. The way the rituals are performed and the nature of the rituals themselves provide a clear insight into the inner workings of a society. The Dauntless faction is a harsh environment where those who transfer into the faction experience a brutal awakening. The ideology of the faction revolves around physical strength and dominance, making integration difficult or even impossible for those who cannot keep up. Getting through the initiation phase and then adapting is a complex process and both physically and mentally exhausting. During and after the initiation phase, dress plays an important role in the faction of Dauntless and has a great influence on the opinion one has about oneself, as well as on the opinion others have about oneself. Dress is a crucial element of initiation rituals in particular, but also of ritual performance in general.

6.3 Dress in Transition Rituals and Adolescent Rebellion

In addition to the main ritual features that classify the Choosing Ceremony as a rite of passage or coming-of-age ritual, there are other, more subtle means of production that are used during the initiation rituals. Clothing is heavily charged with symbolic meaning not only in this case, but in the entire *Divergent* society in general. Each faction has its own style of dress, which it uses to show its identity as a community while distinguishing itself from the other factions (Roth 42). “Dress of an individual is an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body“ (Eicher & Roach-Higgins 7) and

> includes a long list of possible direct modifications of the body such as coiffed hair, colored skin, pierced ears, and scented breath, as well as an equally long list of garments, jewelry, accessories, and other categories of items added to the body as supplements. (ibid.)

Especially in the initiation phase within the new faction, clothing and other physical changes are an important means of separating from the old faction, a symbol for leaving childhood behind and beginning a new phase of life.

In Dauntless, it is mainly the faction transfers who try to adapt to their new environment by changing their external appearance. Dauntless members are known for their black clothing, their pierced noses and ears, and their often conspicuous and extravagant tattoos, which are all typical characteristics of a youth subculture (Eicher & Roach-Higgins 9). Thus, each of the initiates performs a public yet private and individual rite of passage as part of the overall initiation process to further integrate into their new group. For Tris, who lived and grew up in Abnegation, this change feels particularly new and strange, as Abnegation members are expected to be selfless and not care about their appearance or indulge in what they perceive as vanity. Now Tris must find herself and figure out who she is outside of the restrictive environment in which she was raised. The “ugly and gigantic“ (Roth 86) clothes from her former faction are soon replaced by a “knee-length black dress“ (ibid.), chosen by her friend Christina. This scene, taking place in a sort of dressing room at Dauntless headquarters, represents a transitional phase of Tris's general transformation and emphasizes the importance of clothing and bodily change in the development of an individual's self and identity.

Tris closes her eyes as Christina puts together a new outfit for her, a gesture she uses to distance herself from her old self before opening her eyes to the woman she has now become. After applying eyeliner and detaching her hair from the hair band so that it falls in large waves around her shoulders, Tris opens her eyes to find that their former "dull, greyish blue" has been transformed by the eyeliner into a piercing blue (87). Her features appear softer and fuller, and she feels that her face and entire body are now "palpable" (ibid.); her body has been transformed through a quick but efficient ritual. She abandons the shy girl from Abnegation and embraces the confident woman from Dauntless. She will find “new habits, new thoughts, new rules“ and “will become something else“ (ibid.).

Dress in its entirety describes “body modifications and supplements [which] function as alternates of body processes or as media for communication“ (Eicher & Roach-Higgins 10). In this sense, another important part of the rite of passage that Tris undergoes is her getting a tattoo and, at the very beginning of her time in Dauntless, her name change from Beatrice to Tris. After being restyled by Christina and observing the differences in her appearance in the mirror, Tris realizes that “Beatrice was a girl I saw in stolen moments at the mirror, who kept quiet at the dinner table. This is someone whose eyes claim mine and don’t release me; this is Tris“ (Roth 87). The change in clothing alone has altered the way Tris's body functions as a means of communication in exchange with those around her: while Beatrice still played the social role of a girl, Tris's appearance is that of a woman. In addition to this transition, and certainly the most permanent change Tris undergoes, is the acquisition of a tattoo. Eicher & Roach-Higgins explain, that a tattoo is an adornment with aesthetic qualities and serves a social function as a means of communicating individual or social norms (11). Thus, a tattoo is a means of communicating one's body to the outside world. It serves as a very personal statement and is also highly regarded in youth subcultures. Tris is aware of the impact a tattoo will have on her mental attitude toward her former home and family, knowing that “[the tattoo] will place another wedge between me and my family that I can never remove“ (Roth 90). However, for Tris personally, the tattoo symbolizes not only a wedge and a symbolic distancing from her family, but it is also a bridge that connects her to her old self and her family, which is evident in her choice of motif: she chooses three ravens to tattoo on her collarbone “marking the path of

their flight - toward my heart. One for each member of the family I left behind“ (Roth 90).

Tris's changed mental state and her newfound physical strength combined with a change in the way she dresses and adorns her body are not only signs of transition, but also of rebellion. As social rituals, rebellions and revolutions develop their own dynamics and dramaturgy in relation to the beliefs of the rebels and revolutionaries and in relation to the power of the state.[136] When counter-movements in the form of rebellions arise in response to the rise or consolidation of power, these often lead to revolutions and the overthrow of established power structures. This concept can also be applied to the adolescent rebellion in Roth's novel. Adolescent rebellion is primarily aimed at questioning and challenging the parental structures with which one has grown up, but it can also extend to the values and structures of society as a whole (Pickhardt). Tris's decision to leave her home faction of Abnegation is a signal to her parents that their societal values do not match her own and that she needs to find out who she is outside the parental home. Later in the novel, after her successful initiation, Tris also becomes a rebel against the current state structures, expanding the initial private adolescent rebellion against her parents into a broader, more general rebellion against society and those in power.

When it comes to defining the concept of rebellion, one must distinguish between a rebellion and a revolution. In many cases, a rebellion is distinguished from a revolution in terms of its immediate goals. In the nineteenth century, the term revolution was used primarily to describe events of social unrest, as it meant the overthrow of one class by another.[137] In a political sense, Peter Furtado notes,

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[136] In regard to state power, Alexander notes that while culture is deeply emotional, internalized, and subjective in a social context, power, in contrast, is rooted in calculation and decision making, externalized, and more objective ((2011) 6). This contrast between the concepts of culture and power can have explosive consequences if their conceptions do not coincide within a society. Just as human rituals are highly performative and symbolic acts, power in all its variations and manifestations has a highly performative aspect. Like ritual, Alexander elaborates, power is usually exercised with reference to a particular belief that transforms power into authority and thus legitimizes it ((2011) 2). Rebellions and revolutions function in the same way, which marks them as cultural performances of the masses.

[137] Furtado explains that a revolution was often preceded by a popular uprising, which then became an indicator of an impending revolution that usually ended with the overthrow of a king or queen by the people (7-8). However, the word and concept of revolution acquired many other layers of meaning over time: “the assertion of popular sovereignty and social justice, the sweeping away of oppressive institutions and corrupt privilege, a root-and-branch change in institutions and ways of thinking, the release of creative energy and imagination to escape the cruel stasis of a failed system;

a rebellious people usually seek autonomy from a ruling tyrant, while revolutionaries seek to overthrow the tyrant (9). This distinction is important because it accounts for the likely outcome of the two movements: a revolution is more likely to succeed, while a rebellion often fails to achieve its goals (ibid.). These political and social movements are often preceded by a prolonged period of political stalemate, "usually combined with a building sense of injustice based on structural imbalances […], exacerbated by anger at the corruption of those in power" (ibid.).[138]

In the case of *Divergent*, it is primarily the rebellious actions of teenagers and teenage groups that catch the eye, which is to be expected in a young adult novel. In this context, Susanne Schröter points out that anthropological research has shown that teenage rebellions can also be interpreted as a social ritual because they represent a transformation from "non-adult" to "adult" (53). Tris wants to break away from her parents and the code of conduct that her faction imposes on its members. Since Tris does not identify with values that expect her to be completely selfless, she chooses a path that better suits her definition of self. However, the fact that she is divergent means that selflessness is still a part of her character, as becomes clear again at the end of the third book when she sacrifices herself for the good of society. The importance of her divergent character traits illustrates the multi-layered facets of the human mind and its ability to make complex decisions; a trait that the government fears. As teenagers, Tris and her friends act on adolescent instincts, driven simultaneously by idealism and self-doubt, as they question and ultimately fight existing social, political, and cultural structures.

Adolescent rebellion as a ritual in itself, but also as part of the broader category of social rituals in *Divergent*, is openly displayed during the Choosing Ceremony when Tris and her brother Caleb, to the shock of their parents, decide to leave their home faction of Abnegation and choose Dauntless and Erudite,

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and also chaos, mob rule, the adoption of terror as a tactic to enforce the new order, and increasingly authoritarian government prepared to enforce social and political change at all costs" (ibid.).

[138] Given the different goals and functions of a revolution and a rebellion, their performative acts also differ in their enactments. Max Gluckman states that a revolution most often works toward the overthrow and destruction of an established system, while a rebellion generally aims only to depose a head of state to protect the currently dominant political system and prevent its collapse at the hands of corrupt politicians ((1963) 130). This definition of a rebellion differs slightly from what Furtado describes, as Gluckman speaks of rebels actively fighting against the political leader to remove him, while Furtado sees them in the more passive role of independence seekers.

respectively (Roth 48-49). This act is part of a “dissolution of kinship ties“ (Schröter 51) as they begin to follow their own instincts, thus not only starting a rebellion against their parents and their social values, but also, unknowingly, triggering a political earthquake: Since their father is the de facto leader of their town at the time of the Choosing Ceremony, Tris’s and Caleb's decision to leave their own faction is seen by his opponents as a weakness in the faction's values, therefore openly questioning Abnegation's suitability as the town's leading faction (Roth 180). Tris becomes aware of the extent of her father's disappointment in her decision when she glances back at her parents as she leaves the room with her new faction: “My father’s eyes burn into mine with a look of accusation. At first, when I feel the heat behind my eyes, I think he found a way to set me on fire, to punish me for what I’ve done, but no - I’m about to cry“ (48).

Arguably, the social ritual of teenage rebellion is a perpetual liminal phase that can last for a number of years, comes in different forms and variations, and can extent to a political dimension. One of the most common motives of this ritual is to distance and dissociate oneself from the parental household by changing one's clothing and general outward appearance. Youth subcultures, the most overt form of adolescent rebellion, form their own cultural and social milieu by forming ritual communities and introducing “their own values, their own mode of behavior, their own music, literature, art and - last but not least - a set of rituals which keep the group together“ (Schröter 52).[139] This includes tattoos and piercings as a means of emancipation from the parental home and social background. In most cases, Schröter argues, members of youth subcultures grow up to be well-adjusted members of society and leave their rebellious past behind (53). In the case of the faction system, however, this is not the case. This system strongly encourages its members to stay true to the habits and rituals of the subculture they enter into during adolescence at the Choosing Ceremony. Growing out of one's subculture within the faction system means that one will most likely end up on the streets living factionless.

[139] Various youth subcultures in Western societies that emerged during the twentieth century exemplify this fact. Youth cultures such as punks, hippies, and skinheads define themselves in opposition to existing social norms and create their own *counterworld* (Schröter 54), thus entering a state of rebellion against the value system and rules of their parents' generation (ibid.). Accordingly, adolescent rebellion is also an expression of a deep aversion to existing social norms and an experimental phase in which young adults try to understand themselves and the world around them.

Each faction represents and cultivates its own moral and cultural standards, forming individual subcultures within the larger cultural framework of post-apocalyptic Chicago. Following Schröter's definition of youth subcultures, the faction of Dauntless can be interpreted as the very own rebellious subculture of the *Divergent* society, with all its dangerous rites of passage and active attempts to distinguish itself from the other, more peaceful factions. Members of Dauntless are portrayed as courageous, strong-willed, and rebellious. The rebellious nature of Dauntless is conveyed primarily through their commonly assumed fearlessness and a certain style of dress that is perceived as provocative by the other factions. As a result, Dauntless members are often viewed by the other factions in the same way as other subcultures in any given society, which is as disrespectful and arrogant, two character traits that Schröter also generally associates with rebellious youth behavior (51). The members of Dauntless never let go of their adolescent rebellious attitudes and retain their feelings of pride in this distinction towards the other factions throughout their lives.

Chapter Conclusion

Adolescent and teenage initiation rituals are an important part of social interaction and provide the foundation for young adults to grow into full members of society. The development and presentation of one's identity goes hand in hand with social rituals and cannot be separated from society as a whole. However, rebellious behavior as a social ritual can be observed not only in the very intense and confusing years of puberty, but also occurs as a social movement that encompasses all aspects of social life. In the context of feminist dystopian young adult fiction, rituals of initiation herald a new phase in the lives of young people. In the case of Tris, the Choosing Ceremony, intended as a means of ritual social control of her society's youth, paradoxically leads Tris to rebel against her family as well as the prevailing social structures. The system that was supposed to prevent rebellions and revolutions has become responsible for creating them.

Rituals of social control can thus also have the opposite of the desired effect, creating chaos instead of stability.

Rites of passage can be interpreted in a variety of ways; they can be seen as rites of separation, transition, or incorporation, as van Gennep points out (166). In the case of *Divergent*, the initiation ritual in the form of the Choosing Ceremony primarily fulfills the function of a ritual of separation, in which the members are either separated from their family, their childhood and their former identity if they leave their faction, or from the other factions if they decide to stay. Afterwards, in the initiation phase, they become rites of transition, which only fulfill the function of an incorporation ritual for those who have successfully passed through the transition phase. The act of initiation is fundamental for young adults because it is a means of emancipating oneself from parental control. For feminist young adult fiction, this is all the more true because the female protagonist often must emancipate herself from parental (male) control. While Tris's father is deeply hurt by his children's decision to leave their home faction, her mother, as revealed later in the novel, has anticipated and supports her children's decision. The father's authoritarian pride is juxtaposed with the mother's sensitivity and understanding of their children's needs. Roth's novel offers a huge variety of rituals that exemplify how teenage rebellion and initiation rituals intertwine and work together to portray teenage angst in regard to decision making at a young age. The Choosing Ceremony especially serves as a metaphor for the life decisions young adults are facing in our societies and how confusing their feelings of loyalty are in contrast to the need for self-fulfillment.

CHAPTER IV - Gendered Performance as Ritual in the Futurist Feminist Dystopia and Utopia

The two books to be discussed in this chapter are Lidia Yuknavitch's *The Book of Joan* (2017) and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976). Both novels portray a kind of ritual that has not been explored before in this dissertation and that can appear as a sometimes more, sometimes less sacred act that is

regularly repeated and has an impact on the protagonists' lives. While the dystopian novel *The Book of Joan* plays with the more theatrical aspects of human sexuality and gender performance, *Woman on the Edge of Time* depicts the realities and social consequences of unchanging and strict gender norms, while contrasting this dystopian setting with a model of total gender fluidity in the utopian parts of the novel.

At the time of writing this dissertation, Yuknavitch's book has been analyzed in only a handful of scholarly works, primarily in the context of representations of new Anthropocene societies in post-apocalyptic social orders.[140] Published in 2017, *The Book of Joan* came out at a time marked by the scandals and sexist transgressions of then and soon to be again-President Donald Trump and the unfolding of the me-too movement. Violence against women, structural abuse in various industries, and rising populism coupled with a strengthening of conservative and patriarchal worldviews have led to a deterioration of women's rights and weakened the movement for gender equality in the USA.[141] In this context, in the year of the novel's publication Jeff Birkenstein and Ericka Manthey addressed *The Book of Joan*, along with Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, in their article "Margaret Atwood and Women's Dystopic Fiction". Birkenstein and Manthey believe that dystopian fiction, such as that written by Atwood and Yuknavitch, seeks to provoke vigilance and action from its readers because "[a]ssumed inevitability [in people's minds] breeds complacency" (246) and plays into the hands of power-hungry politicians.

Since then, the novel has also been mentioned in a handful of newspaper book reviews, which describe the novel as having "the same unflinching quality as earlier works by Josephine Saxton, Doris Lessing, Frank Herbert, Ursula K. Le

[140] For a discussion of *The Book of Joan* in the context of post-apocalyptic narratives, see Diletta De Cristofaro's *The Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Novel: Critical Temporalities and the End Times* (London, England: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020) as well as Hope Jennings' "Anthropocene Storytelling: Extinction, D/Evolution, and Posthuman Ethics in Lydia Yuknavitch's The Book of Joan" (In: *Taylor & Francis*, online journal, Vol. 30, Nr. 1-4, 2019, pp. 191-210.).

[141] Various newspaper articles from that time demonstrate how much society was concerned with these social issues, such as Charlotte Higgins' article "The Age of Patriarchy: How an Unfashionable Idea Became a Rallying Cry for Feminism Today" (*theguardian.com*, 22 June 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jun/22/the-age-of-patriarchy-how-an-unfashionable-idea-became-a-rallying-cry-for-feminism-today. Accessed online: 15 January 2023.). In addition, *The New York Times* devotes an entire home page, "The #MeToo Moment", to the development of the me-too movement and the newspaper articles written about it (*nytimes.com*, "The #MeToo Moment", Jessica Bennett (ed.), https://www.nytimes.com/series/metoo-moment. Accessed online: 15 January 2023).

Guin, and J.G. Ballard" (VanderMeer (2017)). *The Book of Joan* mixes historical and literary figures with elements of science fiction and feminism, with ecofeminism occupying a particularly prominent role. In contrast to Piercy's utopia, which also addresses the theme of ecofeminism by outlining a healthy symbiosis between technology and nature to advance the progress of human civilization, Yuknavitch sees technology as detrimental to human development.

7. *The Book of Joan* - Lidia Yuknavitch

Yuknavitch's feminist dystopian narrative discusses and speculates on issues such as gender stereotypes and the threat of man-made environmental collapse due to accelerating climate change on Earth. The deformation of the human body, leading to the disintegration of gender categories as we know them, and human sexuality are also themes addressed in the novel and will be discussed in more detail in this chapter as well. The focus on the destruction of the planet and the exploitation of its resources is central to Yuknavitch's dystopia, as is its openly displayed and explicitly (eco)feminist agenda. This is especially evident when one considers the names of the three main female characters. Christine Pizan, a woman who lives on the space station CIEL and from whose first-person perspective the story is told, is a reference to the medieval Italian feminist court poet and author Christine de Pizan.[142] Joan possesses supernatural powers and serves as a representative of humanity's intimate yet often schizophrenic relationship to nature and the planet. Her character is modeled after the medieval French freedom fighter Joan of Arc, who fought for French independence in the fifteenth century disguised as a man and was later canonized by the Catholic Church. The novel's third main character, Jean de Men, Joan's and Christine's antagonist, is introduced as the male, megalomaniacal head of CIEL, the

[142] Pizan (in Italian Cristina da Pizzano) was born in Italy in 1364 but lived in France throughout the majority of her life. She is the first known woman to have developed and written a feminist utopian work, *The Book of the City of Women*, as early as the beginning of the fifteenth century. Richards points out that her work is an act of rebellion against the contemporary social subjugation of women in medieval France as she portrays a society that is run by women and caters to their needs (xxxv).

aforementioned space station housing the survivors of the ecological collapse.[143] This character is a reference to the medieval French poet Jean de Meun, who became famous as one of the authors of the infamous French poem *Roman de la Rose*, a notorious literary work that implicitly refers to and celebrates female choice, independence, and sexuality.[144]

In his 1516 utopian vision, Thomas More was already aware of the power that interpersonal sexual attraction wields, and so, in constructing his personal ideal of utopia, he envisioned “severe punishment of slavery and death for sexual relations outside marriage“ (Sargent and Sargission 301). He recognized that even in the most immaculate society he could imagine, sexual attraction was stronger than people's fear of the law and its punitive institutions. Accordingly, Sargent and Sargission state, he believed that only the most extreme punitive measures would be able to truly curb people's desires and sexual impulses and make them adhere to the socially accepted sexual norms of his time (ibid.). They point out that utopias written around the same time as More's even included lethal methods of punishment for people who deviated sexually from the norm, such as stoning men and women caught in committing adultery (ibid.). At first glance, this is incongruous with our modern notion of utopian social structures, but Margaret Atwood already concluded that totalitarian regimes of all kinds, whether utopian or dystopian, seek to control and restrict sex and procreation as much as possible (cited in Sargent and Sargission 316). Sargent and Sargission highlight the fact that More's *Utopia* is constructed as a totalitarian regime with a sexual morality that every citizen had

[143] In naming the space station CIEL, Yuknavitch established another connection to French culture, as ciel is the French word for sky or heaven. On the one hand, it is a refuge where the rest of the people can spend the remainder of their lives after the apocalypse. On the other hand, however, "heaven" can also stand for the "afterlife", or life after earth. Since in Christian belief only the deceased go to heaven, it serves as a metaphor for the fact that the survivors of the apocalypse on Earth, despite their escape, are nevertheless already dead and have no future (“Heaven“). Since the dwelling place of God in the Christian religion is also believed to be in heaven, the name CIEL for the space station may also indicate that Jean de Men sees himself as the new God, since he is also trying to establish himself as the creator of a new human race on CIEL (Yuknavitch 249).

[144] In the novel, Jean de Men is celebrated for his misogynistic poetry, which he displays all over his body in the form of skin grafts, so it is likely that Yuknavitch intended to make this connection. For further background information on the content of Jean de Meun’s work see Huot, Sylvia. *The Romance of the Rose and its Medieval Readers*. Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1993. In a book review, Jean de Men has also been described as “terrifying and buffoonish, […] like our era’s current tyrants“, likely a reference to then-President of the U.S., Donal Trump (VanderMeer (2017)).

to follow, hoping to eradicate sexual desire altogether and view sexuality solely as a reproductive means (301).[145]

In *The Book of Joan*, sexual relations, as one of the most basic forms of nonverbal communication that two people can share, also become grounds for punishment, albeit in a completely different context. In classic dystopian fiction, Sargent and Sargission point out, sexual relationships are manipulated by state power as a mechanism of social control (304). They argue that this suggests that sex as a deeply human ritual is more powerful than the state and its mechanisms of control (305). The extent to which this can be observed in Yuknavitch's novel will be discussed in the first part of this chapter. Subsequently, the second part elaborates on the ritual elements of self-inflicted body modifications and alterations as essential components of the human ritual experience. The chapter concludes with an analysis of a multi-layered execution ritual, at the end of which Jean de Men's true biological sex is revealed.

7.1 Transformation of Sexual Rituals in the Face of Body Devolution

The Book of Joan centers on the story of the two main female characters, Joan and Christine. While Joan possesses supernatural powers that have enabled her not only to survive the destruction of the planet, but also to continue living on it, Christine belongs to a small elite group that managed to leave Earth before it became an almost uninhabitable wasteland. Christine now leads a miserable and very restricted existence aboard CIEL. The appearance and exterior of the space station hints at the physical deformities that the humans who inhabit it have undergone over time. Although Christine has not “seen CIEL from the outside for a long time, […] I remember it looking like too many fingers on a ghost-white hand“ (Yuknavitch 4). In this way, CIEL is a mirror image and metaphorical representation of the bodily deformities of its inhabitants. It is believed that “radical changes in the ozone, atmosphere, and magnetic fields caused radical changes in morphology“

[145] Furthermore, Sargent and Sargission draw attention to the fact that the idea and concept of utopia is heavily influenced by the time in which it was written and the prevailing political and cultural circumstances. Personal belief and cultural context are therefore essential to understanding utopian, as well as dystopian, narratives (316).

(6). These changes in human morphology were accelerated by the extreme lack of sunlight and the constant exposure to extraterrestrial radiation to which humans living in space for extended periods of time are subjected. Christine takes an analytical viewpoint when she describes herself as a human being without any identification of sex or gender:

> My head is white and waxen. No eyebrows or eyelashes or full lips or anything but jutting bones at the cheeks and shoulders and collarbones and data points, the parts on our bodies where we can interact with technology. I have a light rise where each breast began, and a kind of mound where my pubic bone should be, but that's it. Nothing else of woman is left. (9)

Christine describes her body as having been transformed into something completely genderless, leading to the feeling of having lost her sense of biological sex and gender identity. In this context, it is important to consider the definitions of a person's biological sex and gender, as they do not refer to the same thing. Judith Butler makes a clear distinction between the biological sex one is born with and the culturally shaped gender identity one grows into over time: "[…] gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (519). The stylization of the body that Butler refers to can be observed in Christine's perception of herself, or more precisely, the lack of such stylization. This highlights the fact that it is not only clothing and a certain behavior that constitute and stress the perception of a certain ritual gender performance, but also the nature of the body itself. Christine herself notes that almost all of the physical features that once identified her as part of the female sex and gender have now disappeared. As a result, she feels that even if she were to wear a woman's dress, she would not be able to recapture the feeling of being a woman.

But it is not only the shape and contours of her once human body that have radically changed: the skin of the people living in CIEL has completely lost its pigmentation, leading Christine to describe her skin as "Siberian, [b]leak and stinging" (Yuknavitch 9). This reinforces the impression she has of herself as a person who is largely without a specific gender identity (ibid.). As Christine looks at herself in the mirror, she reflects on this new breed of people shaped by living in

space and concludes that they “are an ugly lot aloft in CIEL“ (11). Since their bodies lack hair and pigmentation, they give the impression of an "army of marble-white sculptures" (ibid.), which is further emphasized by the fact that their bodies are incapable of sweating, a formerly basic bodily function.

In the light of these impressions of the new human body that Christine shares, it is difficult to think of her body as human anymore. Given this, it is hard to imagine that this new kind of human is still able to convincingly perform a realistic gender performance; a performance that can be considered one of the most basic, intuitive, and unconsciously performed human rituals. Gender performance is a social performance in the sense that Jeffrey Alexander presents it as a human ritual performance: as “episodes of repeated and simplified cultural communication“ between members of the same community who are sharing the same cultural values ((2004) 527). The performance of gender, then, is a kind of ritual that can only be recognized and understood in its entirety by members of the same cultural background through mostly nonverbal communication in the context of a culturally shared value system. People belonging to the same cultural background are able to recognize and understand the cultural meaning of a particular performance or ritual, and are thus able to understand its intent and content. In light of the emergence of this new human species, the formerly easily recognizable performance of gender has now become obsolete, as the very core of gender performance has vanished. In other words, the once mundane and intuitive ritual of gender performance has all but disappeared, making it impossible to distinguish between members of the male and female sex. The CIEL population has transformed into a desexualized community, without external or internal sex organs as a basis for rituals of gender performance.

7.1.1 Re-Imagining Rituals of Sexuality

Judith Butler argues that gender roles often function as a survival strategy for members of a society and can therefore result in punitive consequences for deviating from a particular norm shared by the majority of the community (522). Breaking gender norms, which in most cultures and societies consist of a rather limited binary classification, occurs when the traditional and historically developed

notion of a particular gender system is broken. This means abandoning the concept of discretely performed gender types to which every member of a given society tacitly agrees:

> The tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of its own production. The authors of gender become entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one's belief in its necessity and naturalness. (ibid.)

Christine reports that she can barely remember the features and dress that once distinguished her as a woman, and that she even has difficulty recognizing those around her as male or female. In the case of the population of CIEL, this dissolution of the collective agreement to perform, produce, and maintain a clearly distinguishable gender role model was deliberately brought about by their leader, Jean de Men. In this small realm where he rules over the last remnant of humanity, both the actual performance of gender and explicit sexual acts are in themselves grounds for punishment, usually in the form of solitary confinement: “Chief among the CIEL offenses are any acts resembling the act of sex, the idea of sex, the physical indicators of sexuality. All sex is restricted to texts, and all texts are grafts“ (Yuknavitch 34).

Faced with the total restriction and prohibition of any kind of physical sexual experience and expression, Christine, along with Trinculo, her childhood friend, never tires of rebelling against the restrictions of the performance of the sexual act.[146] In his former life, Trinculo was an engineer and in this capacity he designed and built CIEL. Only the elite and the richest people on Earth have been able to escape the collapse of the planet's entire ecosystem, which brands Trinculo as an outsider who regularly and repeatedly rebels against the norms and regulations of CIEL. In particular, he enjoys undermining the suppression of sexuality. This rebellion has become a refuge for both him and Christine and is meant to be a “fuck-you to this idiotic space-condom we live within“ (Yuknavitch 26). Trinculo has

[146] The role of Trinculo in the novel is twofold. On the one hand, he is a character of comic relief who makes jokes even in the darkest moments. It is therefore easy to understand why Yuknavitch chose the name of the royal jester from William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and gave it to Christine's companion. On the other hand, his last name is "Forsythe," which, if traced to the Gaelic roots of the word, translates to "man of peace" ("Forsythe"). With his inventions, wit and humor, he represents the antithesis of the destructive nature of Jean de Men.

invented a very grotesque and rather obscene way to act out his rebellious sexual acts, as he combines the performative act of rebellion with his desire to express himself sexually. Despite being physically incapable of performing any sexual act, Trinculo invents machines designed to imitate the male sex organ. He attaches these devices to his body and encourages Christine to act out the ritual of sexual union with him:

> [A]n intricate belt, silver, bloodred [sic.], and black, secured by leather straps and silver chains that web across his chest and shoulders like some deranged spider's design. In front, at the sides, and it looks to me even in the rear, the belt grows appendages about a foot in length. (27)

Judith Butler suggests that the "body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time" (523), which offers an explanation for the motivation behind Trinculo's invention and his overall very overt and almost aggressive sexual behavior. Each of the artificial appendages protruding from his body looks as if it has been "soldered and carved with great attention and detail" (Yuknavitch 27). The appendages are long enough to move and dance around his body with each of his movements, creating a "half-dangling, half-dancing effect" (ibid.). While some of them have the appearance of cylindrical, phallic appendages that end at "their tips with pewter-balled roundness" (ibid.), others have the form of gourds and are even to a certain extent motorized: "He flips a couple of switches and his hips begin to buzz and whir like some gigantic and wrong insect" (27-28). By strapping on this apparatus, Trinculo, who describes himself as a "genital entrepreneur" (29), becomes the embodiment of sexual activity with the sole purpose of mimicking the ritual of human sexual union. This can be understood as an attempt to reclaim his lost sexuality, which he sacrificed for a life on CIEL, whose leader then imposed a ban on all sexual acts in an ironic twist. Moreover, the scene is a testament to human's deep need and desire for sexual expression and highlights the centrality of sexual acts as a social ritual for interpersonal relationships. When the ability to live out one's gender or sexuality disappears, it is inevitable that people begin to (over)compensate for this loss in one way or another. This extreme example therefore reinforces the impression that human sexuality and the associated sexual performance are central to human existence.

But not only does Trinculo defy the rules of CIEL that prohibit sexual activity of any kind, Christine also uses the display of her sexuality and sexual desires as one of her few real means of rebellion against the repressive system. While Trinculo uses his invention as a means of self-expression, Christine's performance in a prison cell during solitary confinement is a direct and obvious act of rebellion and defiance. As she is confronted in her room with Trinculo, who has the device strapped tightly around his body, she can already “hear the buzzy whir of mechanical sentries approaching“ (Yuknavitch 32). Since small cameras are hidden in every room of CIEL, no forbidden act goes unnoticed by the authorities. Although this fact is known to the residents of CIEL, Christine and Trinculo decide to act out their fantasies and accept the consequences of their actions. Anyone caught committing a crime such as the deliberate and explicit display of sexual acts receives solitary confinement in CIEL's own Panopticon as punishment. Each cell of the panopticon is equipped with tiny cameras and multiple sensors that allow for constant monitoring of those incarcerated (33). The sensors can even measure the prisoners' heart rates and biological status, as well as record and assess their thoughts and dreams (33). After a cynical and humiliating idea of the CIEL director, these cells are called Liberty Rooms because they are supposed to give the prisoner the opportunity “to explain one’s crimes, revise one’s values, repent“ (33). The Liberty Rooms are completely white, with the floor, walls, and ceiling radiating a complete whiteness, becoming a blank canvas for each prisoner's expressions of repentance and redemption (33). Christine, however, uses this cell as a stage for her self-expression and to further provoke de Men and his regime by undressing, pressing herself “ass side down to the white floor of the Liberty Room“ and beginning to masturbate (35).[147] Given the physical changes her body has undergone during her stay at CIEL, the act of masturbation in this context is a metaphorical act. Christine uses the cell as a stage to perform and mimic this

[147] The choice of masturbation as a performance in the cell is also an act of rebellion against de Men's ban on any representation of sexuality and gender performance. His prohibition is consistent with church and state regulations of the Middle Ages, when masturbation was considered a “mortal sin, diabolical, and analogous to murder, thus meriting eternal damnation“ (Patton 291). These associations with masturbation were voiced by the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages, and many other religions followed in their classification of the act, Patton explains (ibid.). Later, physicians in Europe and America associated masturbation with “insanity, neurosis, neurasthenia, and various diseases whose aetiology [sic.] remained unknown until the twentieth century“ (292). The act of masturbation as a performance of rebellion is thus another connection Yuknavitch makes to the Middle Ages in her novel.

sexual act, which can no longer be performed in its original form by anyone in CIEL. Her ability to physically experience sexual arousal has disappeared, as have the external and internal sex organs. Although the original purpose of rituals performed in societies is to bring members of a society together, thus creating meaning and strengthen their social cohesion, the performance of this solo-ritual still has the capacity to achieve meaning. Christine's indirect audience, the guards who observe her in her cell, unconsciously contribute to the validation of this ritual of rebellion and sexuality as they act as observers who mirror the intent of the ritual: sexual self-expression in the face of subjugation and oppression.

The performance displayed by Christine is not only an active act of rebellion, but also an escape from her surroundings. In this case, she represents a ritualized persona who, as Bell states, develops a strategic scheme to dominate the sociocultural situation into which she has been forced ((1990) 305). By performing this “show of autoeroticism“ (Yuknavitch 36), Christine attempts to regain power and control over her body that has otherwise been taken away from her. It is an attempt to reclaim power and autonomy over her own body by voluntarily performing the physical ritual of masturbation while involuntarily participating in Jean de Men's ritual of punishment and humiliation. It exemplifies the fact that rituals are intrinsic activities that constitute the creation of the social body and that “mold[s] the body as an autonomous local sphere for the struggle of social forces - a struggle that defines a person in relation to the system of power he or she has internalized“ (Bell (1990) 307). In other words, Christine's behavior and social performance as a person in her own right and in relation to CIEL's society changes in the face of social upheaval and altered circumstances as the social environment shapes personal development.

7.2 Rituals of Self-inflicted Body Disfigurations

Given the changes that have occurred in terms of the representation of sexuality and gender, it is also necessary to address the importance of dress as part of the human ritual representation of gender, which is usually marked by its distinct absence in the novel. In Western cultures, gender has long been an indicator of the distribution of social power within a society, as gender

performances with masculine connotations are seen as more powerful and are thus considered to be more influential. The superiority of the "masculine" over the "feminine," as well as the female body itself as a subject in Western culture has long been a topic of debate and has been discussed at length by thinkers such as Michelle Foucault and Simone de Beauvoir. As Ponterotto points out, the "second sex" has always been one of the main victims of the limitations of a socially constructed binary that places the white, male, heterosexual, middle-class human subject at the top of the social pyramid and everyone else underneath (134). Since a gender distinction can no longer be meaningfully made in *The Book of Joan*, a new way of distributing and assuming power is required. In the novel, Christine notes that “[i]n the wake of our hunger, up here in our false heaven, skin grafts were born. […] Before long, you could judge people’s worth and social class by the texture of their skin“ (Yuknavitch 16-17). Regardless of their gender, the richest and most influential inhabitants of CIEL are now identifiable by the degree of scarring on their skin, which reminds Christine of a

> great puffed-up flesh palimpsest - graft upon graft, deep as third-degree burns, healed in white-on-white curls and protrusions and ridges. One had to stare into a face for longer than a minute to find the wallows where eyes should be, the hole where the mouth still lived. Even hands bloomed with intricate and white raised welts and bumps. (17)

This describes the extent to which CIEL's society has been structured in a new way. The disappearance of gender opens up the possibility of a new form of performance that is still based on people's outward appearance, but not on the distinction between the two sexes. Instead of an intuitive gender performance, Christine, just like the rest of CIEL’s population, has grafted the essence of her character and soul, as well as her social status, directly onto her body. She uses the white, marble-like surface of her skin as a blank canvas waiting to be transformed and thus given meaning.

This new form of performance is called skin grafting. Grafts, Christine explains, are “skin stories: a distant descendant of tattoos, an inbred cousin of Braille“ (16).[148] For the population of CIEL, the procedure of skin grafting, in which

[148] That the art of skin grafting has become the new means of distinguishing social positions is no accident, given Christine's name. The historical Christine de Pizan was a social outsider, a woman

literary texts of varying length and depth are inscribed into a person's skin, has become the new form of bodily performance and a new form of ritualized symbolic communication. Alexander notes that a society cannot exist without this type of communication, as even the earliest forms of human social organizations were characterized by the centrality of such ritual acts ((2004) 527). Skin grafting is further evidence of the replacement of one social ritual by another. As mentioned earlier, when a basic social ritual such as gender performance becomes redundant within a community, it must be replaced by a new ritual performance that has the same effect of structuring the lives of the members of the community. When gender performance is interpreted and considered as an essential human ritual performance within a given society, Ridgeway argues, it acquires a regulative function, as it governs and dictates gendered power relations (149). In this context, Judith Butler notes that in a patriarchal-oriented society, the male gender is valued more highly than the female gender, while in matriarchal societies the opposite is the case (521). In CIEL's society, where not only the naturally experienced performative aspects of sex and gender have disappeared, but also their artificial replication has been banned, the total disregard for what constitutes the female gender has taken extreme forms. As skin grafting has become the most popular form of self-expression, the grafts produced by CIEL leader Jean de Men have become the gold standard for this type of artificial performance. His grafts focus primarily on the creation of so-called “romantic grafts“; a cynical term for an extensive assortment of "poems" that adorn his entire body and revolve around the theme of rape and female infanticide (Yuknavitch 20). None of the grafts on Jean de Men's body are specifically described in the novel, but they are said to be written in the form of a female first-person narrator whose language and actions aim to sanction, validate, and accelerate crimes such as rape and female homicide: “In his world, for his women, happily ever after meant rape, death, insanity, prison, or marriage“ (21). The impact on society as a whole is quite clear, as CIEL's society

living in a world dominated by men, and an avid political writer who authored several books on political theory. Both Christines are distinguished by their writing and also experience similar living situations as foreigners in a strange land. While the historical Pizan lived in the small and isolated cosmos of the medieval French court, the fictional Pizan lives in an isolated space station. Both are also connected by the fact that they produce and perform texts for their king or leader. With her character of Christine, Yuknavitch has set a modern version of the historical figure in a dystopian world that is the antithesis of de Pizan's medieval feminist utopian works. For more information on the life and works of Christine de Pizan, see Kate Langdon Forhan's *The Political Theory of Christine de Pizan* (Routledge Publishing Company, London, 2002).

is centered on the occult worship of its leader, resulting in Jean de Men's ideas, preferences, and commands becoming the only acceptable universal truth within their society. Accordingly, Jean de Men's misogynistic views of what was once considered the female gender are adopted by the majority of his followers as “he took this broken romance trope and elevated it to the level of an almighty text“ (ibid.), thus permeating human consciousness at all levels. In this way, the expression of ideas such as femicide, misogyny, and the general devaluation and degradation of the female sex on the human body became a new kind of ritual and a form of communication. It is also a testament to the importance and influence of social power on members of a society if one considers that Jean de Men was a woman in his former life and realized that a male gender performance would give him more power than a female gender performance. This is even more true when violence and the devaluation of other people are incorporated into his performance to generate fear and exert control over the rest of the population.

7.3 The Impact of Gender Performance in Relation to Social Power during an Execution Ritual

As the sadistic leader of CIEL, Jean de Men is initially introduced as male, displaying an irrepressible thirst for power, admiration, and control. Near the end of the story, during an attempted execution, de Men's true biological sex is revealed, which comes as a shock to all onlookers of the execution. The manner in which this revelation takes place is particularly interesting, as it occurs during an event that can be described as a multi-layered theatrical and ritual performance in which a woman is to be executed at the hands of the leader himself.

Like other inhabitants of the CIEL space station, Jean de Men revels in the theatrics of a grand entrance and a well-staged show. The more the unconscious and subtle everyday representation of gender disappears, the more people crave other ways to express themselves. Jean de Men uses all the stylistic means at his disposal to make his performance as pompous and spectacular as possible. When de Men enters the hall where the execution is to take place, Christine sees the "entourage of power" in all its ugliness (Yuknavitch 233). Jean de Men appears to her as colossal and arrogant, while the flesh of his grafts drags behind him in the form of a bridal train, involuntarily imitating a reptilian glide and the typical ssss

sound of a snake (233-35). It is a "grotesque train of flesh" (240) that spreads out on the ground behind him. He carries himself with an enormous amount of self-confidence and pride to emphasize his social position and the power he claims for himself in CIEL's society.

The theatrical setting of the execution has similarities with the theater stage of ancient Greece, a stage for theatrical as well as ritual performances. It is the physical space that Jean de Men uses to perform and deliver his message to the audience. Theatrical staging, Alexander emphasizes, is an important means of ensuring that the message of the performance is unequivocally conveyed to the audience ((2004) 532). Despite the widely known dispute and competition between Christine and Jean de Men not only for the best body grafts, but also for personal freedom on CIEL, both try to convey an air of mutual respect for the other in front of the audience. In a spirit of false admiration on both sides, Jean de Men had asked Christine to write and perform a play before the "venerable execution" (Yuknavitch 235) of a prisoner, to which Christine, pretending to be flattered by the proposal, agreed. The real purpose of the execution, however, is to create a spectacle to enact a ritual of power that will further manifest de Men's claim to power. He uses violence as a means of intimidation and fear-mongering, which is especially emphasized by the fact that he always carries killing instruments and surrounds himself with heavily armed guards (237). They are his ritual tools in staging his cultural performance and give him credibility in his assertion of power. According to Alexander, these tools are also elemental to a successful ritual performance ((2004) 529). The cultural text that underlies the performance is played in such a way that the meaning of the subtext can be conveyed to the audience. In this case, Jean de Men wants to convey the message to the audience, whom he considers his subordinated subjects, that he alone is capable of exercising power. Jean de Men's entire appearance is an instrument of power, as he is by far taller and more massive than everyone around him. He also wears a heavy crimson robe, which has been a royal insignia of the British Monarchy for centuries, tracing its origins back to the “fourteenth century manuscript Liber Regalis (Latin for ‘Royal Book’)“, Laurie Wickwire notes (Coronation Robes). Jean de Men's theatrical display of power and his personal feud with Christine serve as an all-encompassing frame story in relation to the execution and the theatrical performance that accompanies it. It is a living and performative stage for the

execution ritual in contrast to, but also in conjunction with, the actual physical stage in the form of the Greek amphitheater. Thus, there are three different ritual performances that work towards the imminent execution of the prisoner: The actual execution at the center of the performance, the play that is preceding the execution, written by Christine and performed by unspecified actors, and finally, as a framework for both rituals, the power ritual performed by Jean de Men himself.

The markers for a ritual performance as pointed out earlier, which include the actors of the ritual, the audience, the mise-en-scène, the means of symbolic production, and the factor of social power distribution, are all at play in this scene in different ways and change in the course of the ritual action. While usually in a ritual performance the roles of the active and passive participants as well as the ritual setting are clearly assigned and do not change, in this case the different aspects of the performance change as the ritual progresses. While the intention of the core ritual is the execution of a prisoner, the outcome of the ritual will be the liberation of the same and the revelation of the true gender of Jean de Men. The change in ritual perspective primarily affects the distribution of power during the ritual acts. Social power determines which performance may be performed at all, under what conditions, and in what form. The composition of the audience is also subject to its control, as are the reactions that the audience is allowed to show. Most importantly, the interpretive authority over a ritual performance is also subject to social power and may not necessarily be independent of the actors and the audience themselves. Social power, symbolic knowledge, and interpretive sovereignty over a performance may be either closely related or separate, Alexander makes clear ((2004) 533).

All of these factors are found in the mise-en-scène of the execution ritual. Jean de Men exerts his power over the audience to get them to respond to the theatrical performance in a way that supports his claim to power. As Christine describes it, the audience craves a "good execution story" (Yuknavitch 239). They must show that they enjoy the violence to the same degree as their leader, without showing weakness or disgust, lest they themselves become the targets of the next execution. Accordingly, the audience's "glowing bodies" (237) rave about the violence to the same degree as Jean de Men. Christine's play as such is about the life and death of the novel's title character, Joan, whom de Men considers his enemy. Joan represents nature and humanity in a way that challenges de Men's

claim to power, his style of government, and his conception of human life. The play's official ending was supposed to be Joan's burning at the stake and de Men's victory over her, allowing for only one reaction from the audience.

The play, however, is interrupted when de Men realizes that the play will not end as he had originally agreed to, and he realizes that Christine has betrayed him. Enraged by this discovery, he decides to begin with the execution of the prisoner. Public executions have a long tradition in Western history and were popular in Europe as early as the Middle Ages (Royer 322). Indeed, both the setting of the novel's plot and the characters are strongly reminiscent of a European royal court during this period. Jean de Men, with his pompous and regal appearance, crimson robe, and dragging flesh in the form of a bridal train, certainly sees himself as the king of CIEL and the space station as his royal palace. Considering that the names of the other characters, Christine, Trinculo and Joan, are also borrowed from European medieval history and literature and have ties to royal courts, the historical reference becomes even clearer. An execution as the climax of de Men's theatrical performance fits this picture. Katherine Royer describes ritual executions in the Middle Ages as a form of "[s]pectacular justice" (322) and "displays of spectacular brutality in the name of justice" (320) which served the purpose of making "everyone aware, through the body of the criminal, of the unrestrained presence of the sovereign" (Foucault 49).[149] Foucault describes executions as a royal spectacle of truth and power in which "the physical strength of the sovereign [is] beating down upon the body of his adversary and mastering it" (49; Royer 321). Rituals of executions in Medieval English culture had symbolic meaning and were the product of a particular set of political circumstances (Royer 322). It is believed that during the reign of Edward I, public executions became common as a ritual to sentence convicted traitors. These men were "dragged through the streets of the city either on a hurdle or tied to the tail of a horse, hanged and often cut down while still alive,

[149] Royer points out that the modern interpretation of the cruelty and brutality displayed at public medieval executions must be considered in the context of their time. Georg Rusche and Otto Kirchheimer interpret ritual executions as part of a "system that was primarily the expression of sadism" (cited in Royer 320) carried out in an era of socially accepted cruelty before, according to Elias, Erasmus, emerging capitalism, rationality, and the absolutist state civilized people (cited in Royer 320). Royer further notes that historians assume that the bodies of convicted criminals were mutilated to assert state power (321). She points out that the elements of cruelty that shock modern historians may not have been seen as so extraordinary by contemporaries because it was a society that had become accustomed to cruelty, and thus argues for an analysis of these rituals in the historical context of the Middle Ages (320).

disemboweled, castrated, beheaded and finally quartered“ (323).[150] Both traitors and people who were considered political opponents and a threat to the royal claim to power received this death penalty and met their deaths in a violent manner (ibid.).

Jean de Men rivals the medieval English and French kings in terms of cruelty. The woman to be executed had been captured on earth and is a close friend of de Men's enemy Joan. The public execution of this woman is not only a signal to his subjects, but also a message to Joan as well as Christine, whose play he interrupts when he realizes that it calls into question his legitimacy and power. Enraged by Christine, he walks over to the woman strapped to a litter in the center of the stage. He takes out a scalpel that he had hidden under his robe and

> slices open the pants of the woman […], drives the scalpel between her legs quickly, and then lets the silver tool drop to the floor, digging his fingers between her legs. He plunges his hand, the wrist, forearm, elbow up into her body, […], and then he pulls his hand back out. Blood and sinew and slime juice over his hand and arm. […] Then he brings the bloody mass to his face and eats at it […]. (Yuknavitch 243-44)

This extremely brutal treatment of the woman is a message to Christine and a demonstration of his power to Joan that it is he who will win in the end. Since the woman had lived with Joan on Earth, her body had not changed in the way that the bodies of the people on CIEL had. She was still a normal human female. Royer points out that the specific nature of the ritual of public execution not only served the purpose of consolidating the monarch's power, but was also an indication of the nature of the crime committed (328-29).[151] In Jean de Men's eyes, the "crime" of the woman on the litter consisted of conspiring to commit high treason with Joan, but he most importantly also resents her biologically functioning body. After

[150] Before execution became a ritual to be watched and enjoyed by the public, Royer explains, it was already common for the head and genitals of the enemy to be presented to the victorious king on the battlefield, while the heads of traitors were visibly displayed on bridges for the people to mock (324).

[151] Many accounts from the Middle Ages show that people were concerned with the exact manner of execution, as it was considered a “re-enactment of the crime upon the body of the criminal“ (Royer 329). Thus, multiple crimes required multiple deaths, meaning that each cut on the body commemorated a crime. Furthermore, Royer explains that each severed limb was often sent to a specific geographic location symbolically associated with the crime or the criminal (ibid.). That de Men consumes the internal tissue he has extracted from the woman's body with his own hands conveys the same symbolic meaning. He devours the functioning reproductive organs from one body and places them in another, simultaneously absorbing and destroying them.

mutilating the woman's body, de Man declares, “[i]f I cannot make life, I’ll take it - from its very core.“ (Yuknavitch 244). Due to the deformities of the human body on CIEL, humans had lost their ability to reproduce, which was a direct death sentence for de Men and his empire. Although de Men attempts to alter his body, transforming it from female to male to meet the patriarchal demand for power, the desire to create life as the woman he once was remains. De Men's dislike and anger toward the woman from Earth is reflected in the way he tortures and tries to kill her. When he himself cannot create a new life, de Men interprets it as an insult to his person that this woman should still be able to bear a child. As Royer notes, “[t]he rituals of inversion that characterized these events advertised the condemned's dishonor, for the king had been personally offended and his honor restored through the ritual“ (330). In other words, public execution as a ritual is an act of revenge centered on the greatest possible humiliation of the prisoner or traitor and the restoration of the king’s honor.

De Men's attempt to execute the woman fails, however, and with supernatural strength the woman manages to attack him. At this point, the ritual focus shifts again. Whereas the focus had previously shifted from the play to de Men's attack on the woman, it was now shifted to an attack on de Men first by the mutilated woman and then by the actors in the play. During the attack, which is also an attempted execution of de Men, his acquired gender performance breaks down as his true former biological sex is revealed:

> Jean de Men has the breasts of an old woman. […] Jean de Men is not a man but what is left of a woman […]: sad, stitched-up sacks of flesh where breasts had once been, as if someone tried too hard to erase their existence. And a bulbous sagging gash sutured over and over where… where life had happened perhaps in the past, or not, and worse, several dangling attempts at half-formed penises, sewn and abandoned, distended and limp. (Yuknavitch 245)

The description of de Men's former human body and the changes made to it paint a clear picture of the importance of gender classifications and the role they play in relation to social power structures. Cecilia Ridgeway points to the regulatory functions that gender performances provide to society and argues that gender is “a multilevel structure, system, or institution of social practices that involves mutually reinforcing processes at the macro-structural/institutional level, the

interactional level, and the individual level“ (146). She views gender as a primary cultural framework for organizing social relationships (147). Individuals with a shared cultural background can “coordinate effectively“ (ibid.) if they have shared knowledge that forms the basis for joint action in a social setting. Common knowledge, according to Ridgeway, is cultural knowledge shared by all members of a society (ibid.). An important part of the shared cultural knowledge is a “shared way of categorizing and defining "who self and other are in [any given social] situation so that we can anticipate how each of us is likely to act and coordinate our actions accordingly“ (ibid.). In other words, gender performances frame social interactions within a social sphere by enabling individuals to categorize their interlocutors.[152] Jean de Men's attempts to alter and reshape his body are evidence of the important role attributed to the representation of the male gender performance.[153] To legitimize his claim to power and to avoid having his position threatened or challenged by other influential and perhaps male members of CIEL’s society, de Men disguised and disfigured himself. The disguise of his former sex and gender is used as a means to circumvent the socially prescribed notion of male superiority and female inferiority. Birkenstein and Manthey see in de Men’s action the attempt to exchange the female body for “dogmatic supremacy“ (244) and thus embodying the “identity of misogynist powermonger“ [sic.] (ibid.).

Just like the body modifications, de Men uses the regular performed executions as a means to maintain power. The public unveiling of his body and his eventual death represent a public humiliation that was also significant to medieval execution rituals. According to Royer, the display of the body as it is cut into pieces, burned, or torn apart served to degrade the prisoner and elevate the ruling king

[152] Ridgeway further points to the function and social meaning of sex or gender as the primary cultural frame “for making sense of *self* and *other*“ (149). Our cultural definition of this frame manifests inequality because it creates two distinct sets of interests for individuals. These interests, Ridgeway argues, “affect the extent to which individuals actively gender their behavior“ (ibid.). She goes on to say that the notion of gender as a cultural framework creates a belief system that privileges men over women and gives most men, as well as the women who benefit from established male dominance, an active interest in enforcing and maintaining that system (ibid.). The example of Jean de Men shows how a pervasive obsession with male power can drive a person to extreme measures and the use of violence to maintain power.

[153] Christine describes the remains of de Men's breasts as what is left of a woman, rather than a mere reference to de Men's former biological sex. In this instance, the distinction between the two terms "sex" and "gender" has merged into one and the same. In a theoretical context, it would have been more accurate to refer to de Men's body as formerly female. Ultimately, however, both biological female sex and woman as a gender construct are seen as inferior in patriarchal societies and not associated with strength and power, Carroll notes (27). De Men has essentially transformed his body into a dysfunctional hermaphrodite with no hope of imitating nature.

(330-31). De Men became a victim of his own obsession with the display of cruelty and so his life came to a humiliating end. Shortly after his true biological sex is revealed, de Men is killed by the very woman he actually wanted to execute, indicating a dramatic change in the distribution of power that occurred over the course of the three rituals. While at the beginning of the ritual social power was entirely in the hands of Jean de Men, towards the middle of the performance power shifted in favor of Christine. This shift was triggered by the content of Christine's play, especially the ending when Joan achieves victory over de Men. By changing the ending of the performance without de Men's knowledge, thus humiliating him in front of the audience, Christine temporarily wrested power away from de Men. In the final stage of the performance, de Men's former victim then in turn claims social power for herself by taking a knife and disfiguring de Men's face by cutting off a large portion of his facial grafts (Yuknavitch 245). The confusing events in this tripartite ritual illustrate how important social power is to a performance and how it can influence and completely change the outcome of a ritual.

The example given has shown that performance of gender and the distribution of power are fundamental elements in almost all social interactions known to mankind. Even if the ritual performance of gender as such is no longer possible, the idea of the former performance is still unconsciously present in people's minds. Thus, the notion of the superiority of the male sex and gender has also survived, leading women like Jean de Men to adopt a male gendered performance to support their claim to power, which is justified solely through the use of coercion and violence.[154] It is interesting, however, that he chose a name that can be given to both men and women, hinting at the androgynous nature of his own transformed body. This demonstrates the power that ritual gender performances still have despite the elimination of their usefulness and feasibility. Even after the disappearance of the physical means of gender performance, there is still a "tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions […]" (J. Butler 522). In Yuknavitch's novel, the

[154] In another article, "Gender as an Organizing Force in Social Relations: Implications for the Future of Inequality" (In: *The Declining Significance of Gender?*, ed. by F.D. Blau (et al.), Russel Sage Foundation, New York, USA, 2006.), Ridgeway points out that inequality and discrimination based on gender performance still exist in modern societies. Whether the complete absence of gender performance in society would help to remedy this problem is a question that will not be answered within the scope of this thesis, but based on her novel, Yuknavitch appears to believe that it is not possible to completely eradicate this mindset from the human brain.

social power that results from gendered performances can be observed in the performance of violent rituals such as executions. The novel is an example of how easily ritual performances can change and be manipulated through the use of power, violence, and deception.

The following novel also analyzes the parameters for gendered performances and the power and influence they can develop. Although the use of violence and abuse of power by men also occur in Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, they are described less vividly and in close relation to the reality experienced by the author herself. The main focus of the next chapter, therefore, is on gender rituals in the United States of America in the 1970s and the utopian counterpart that Piercy creates in her novel as a proposal for the improvement of American society.

8. *Woman on the Edge of Time* - Marge Piercy

Woman on the Edge of Time (1976) is a feminist dystopia discussing the often devastating effects of patriarchal social structures on women, especially women of color, in the United States of the 1970s. This grim reality is juxtaposed with an imaginative feminist utopian future society based on complete equality, social justice, and individuality. Piercy depicts a depressing and hopeless life for the Mexican-American protagonist, Consuelo (Connie) Ramos, whose character is representative of New York City's impoverished Spanish-speaking immigrant communities in the late 1970s. Daily life in these communities was often marked by violence, social oppression, and poverty.[155]

Connie is described as a destitute and exhausted woman who, after an unsuccessful attempt to convince her niece Dolly to leave her violent boyfriend Geraldo, is forcibly committed by Geraldo to a New York mental hospital. She is

[155] In terms of the social and racial issues of the time in which Piercy lived, Francis Bartkowski argued that “Piercy chose Connie to narrate her own story because her life is one in which many of the social practices criticized by contemporary feminism are brought to light“ (53). Makinen states that the main themes of the novel, class, gender, and race, are pervasive and form the basis of Connie's social oppression (17) in which Angelika Bammer sees an exposure of the power dynamics in patriarchal structures (96).

deemed a danger to society, her young daughter, and herself as she exhibits violent outbursts caused by her drug abuse in the past. During her time in the clinic, Connie discovers that she has the ability to connect telepathically with Luciente: an androgynous-looking woman from a futuristic society in the year 2137 who lives in a community called Mattapoisett, somewhere in the northeast of what is now the United States of America. This society is the opposite of the oppressive and violent world Connie lives in: it is a classless community where gender stereotypes have been abolished, children are born by machines, and where children are encouraged from a young age to know themselves as best they can to become a healthy and functioning member of the community. In regard to these aspects of childbearing and child rearing, Kathy Rudy believes that Piercy's feminist utopia was inspired by Shulamith Firestone's work *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), in which Firestone states that romance, love, motherhood, the biological family, and childhood were patriarchal institutions used to oppress women (Rudy 29; Firestone 232). Firestone especially had a problem with the aspect of traditional childbearing and childrearing that is imposed on only one half of the population, and thus sees women as a "slave class" that must maintain the human species “in order to free the other half for the business of the world“ (Firestone 232). To achieve gender equality, Firestone believed that artificial reproduction was the best way to liberate women and break the child's dependence on the mother.[156] Piercy takes this theory and contrasts it with the subjugation and discrimination of women she has observed in her own reality.

The aspects of interest that will be examined in more detail in this chapter are the gender enactments in Connie's reality as well as in Luciente's utopian future. First, the chapter focuses on various gender performances of men and women in Connie’s reality, before the specific rituals of female gender performances in the novel will be considered more closely. Towards the end of the chapter, the naming ritual, an important rite of passage in Luciente's community, is discussed in the context of the overall social structure of her world.

[156] However, Rudy also points out that many feminists rejected this approach because it was considered too radical and they feared that the technology could easily be abused (30).

8.1 The Ritual Body - Gender Performance in a Patriarchal Society

One of the most important social features of the patriarchal system in which Connie lives, and which strongly influences the way women dress and perform their gender, is the fact that women are rarely or never portrayed as independent subjects. Women are portrayed as the weaker other in contrast to the strong male. Veronica Hollinger endorses this perspective in her work about aspects of feminist theory in science fiction literature. Hollinger (2003) suggests that “all feminist theories resist the ideological self-representations of the masculinist cultural text that traditionally offers itself as the universal expression of a homogeneous “human nature““ (125). Since the beginning of the European Enlightenment movement in the early years of the eighteenth century, the narrative of a homogeneous human nature has been characterized as “white, male, and middle-class“ (ibid.). This resulted in women barely having been “represented as subjects in their own rights“ (126) as they were not seen as active agents in society or even in their own lives. Feminist theorists attempt to dissolve this assumption by advocating for social justice and equality for women. The hegemony of the patriarchal order, Hollinger argues, “has meant inequality and oppression for women as the “others“ of men“ (ibid.).

Hollinger's theory of the oppression of women is very present in Piercy's novel. As a result of this worldview, the way gender roles are performed on a day-to-day basis in the world Connie lives in differs from their representation in the utopian future Piercy juxtaposes with Connie's bleak reality. Connie's life, which takes place in a poor, immigrant-dominated neighborhood in 1970s New York, is marked by male privilege and female oppression at every turn. In this environment, the performance of the oppressed female gender seems to be the only way to realize and express the female gender at all. Because of the social composition of the population in her neighborhood, it is not only white men who exert power over Connie and the other women in her life, but also men of color. This can be observed from the very beginning of the novel. Geraldo, the violent boyfriend of Connie's niece, is the stereotypical embodiment of the male oppression that women face on a daily basis. The way he acts out his gender speaks to the brutal and violent socialization that the children in Connie's neighborhood are exposed to. Geraldo is

described as an elegant looking man whose appearance hides his underlying violence (Piercy 7). He was once a fairly successful drug dealer, but after the collapse of the drug trade and a sharp decline in his income, he began forcing Dolly and three other girls to work for him as prostitutes. Despite his appearance as a "medium-tall grifo[157] with fair skin, gray eyes, kinky hair […] that he wore in a symmetrical afro" that makes up his elegant appearance (ibid.), his manners and actions paint a very different picture of his character. Geraldo is aggressive and violent in his interactions with women, calling Connie a "fat and worthless old bitch" (ibid.) when she tries to protect her niece from his aggression. His disrespect for women is evident in his every word and movement, hitting Connie so hard with his arm that with the back of her head she hits the end of the sink in her apartment. Geraldo's behavior is consistent with the character traits of masculine superiority expected of the men of his time.[158] Connie observes how strongly male authority is also embedded in her thinking, "how she [Connie] had jumped to the stove when he [Geraldo] rapped out that curt command. She resented obeying him automatically, instinctively jerking at the loud masculine order" (9). Despite her hatred and contempt for Geraldo, Connie instinctively obeys his commands, immediately and without hesitation, because she fears his aggression and the punishment that awaits her if she disobeys. Dolly, too, simply accepts this violent performance of the male gender ritual when she shrugs in response to Connie's question about how she can still defend Geraldo and be with him, "He is my man, [...]. What can I do?" (21). The aggressively executed male gender performance is perceived by the women as a social reality that they must live with and that cannot be changed by them or for them; at least not in the social class they were born into.

In his overall portrayal, Geraldo's character functions as a blueprint for the destructive image of masculinity prevalent in Connie's time. "His beauty only made

[157] According to the *Online Urban Dictionary*, the slang word *grifo* is a "local Mexican term meaning filthy pothead" ("Grifo").

[158] It is also further evidence of the patriarchal social structures that defined life during this time. Men like Geraldo view women like Connie as worthless commodities and women like her niece Dolly as property. Gerda Lerner points out in *The Creation of Patriarchy* that men in patriarchies develop property claims on women and that owning women thus becomes a status symbol (212-13). Meanwhile, Leila Ahmed shows that the commodification of women regulated by law can be traced back to Mesopotamian society, where a special law gave men complete power over women (15-19). Patriarchy's need for dominance and ownership, Lerner argues, usually focuses on controlling women's reproductive capacity rather than women themselves (214). Therefore, forcing women into prostitution and viewing them as worthless outside of that sphere is a millennia-old expression of patriarchal structures.

him more hateful" (Piercy 9), Connie notes as she reflects on the aggressive and violent men who have already accompanied and shaped her life:

> Geraldo was her father, who had beaten her every week of her childhood. Her second husband, who had sent her into emergency with blood running down her legs. He was El Muro, who had raped her and then beaten her because she would not lie and say she had enjoyed it. (9)

The way men are expected to behave is reflected in the brutal experiences Connie has already had in her life. Although at first glance this behavior may not appear to be a discreetly performed gender performance, that is exactly what it is. The way the men behave is the "normal" and expected representation of a successful male gender performance that does not arouse suspicion or irritation in other members of society. It appears as if Connie experiences male aggression in regular, even ritualistic cycles that appear to her as the way life works for a woman of her origin.

This depiction of gender conflict is not uncommon to feminist writing in particular and to dystopian fiction in general: “Centrally concerned with the clash between individual desire and societal demand, dystopian fiction often focuses on sexuality and relations between the genders as elements of this conflict“ (Booker 337). The same can be said of feminist utopian writing, in which individual gender interpretations and executions are embedded in the broader social structures. Here, it is used as a means to show how the free expression of a person’s gender and identity can positively impact the individual and society. This is achieved by the individual attaining inner peace and general satisfaction with oneself, thus becoming and acting as a functioning and valuable member of society. Not only Gilman's all-female society in *Herland*, but also Piercy's utopian society serve as examples of this type of society. In Piercy's novel in particular, it is clear that the egalitarian and individualistic model of society in the utopian future is a means to show the inadequacies in Connie's world, which is a reflection of the world Piercy herself lived in when she wrote the novel. In terms of the ritual of gender performance, the utopian vision in Piercy's novel stands in stark contrast to the allocation of gender roles in Connie's time.

8.1.1 Contrasting Gender Performances: Connie vs. Mrs. Polcari

Katherine Bell points out that the late twentieth century was a time when various academic fields revisited the image of the body (Bell (1992) 96).[159] Feminist scholars pioneered “the recognition of gender as a fundamental condition of experience and as an analytic category for specifically addressing the body’s relation to language and identity, writing and power“ (ibid.). As a result, the body was no longer viewed merely as a physical instrument of the mind, but as a more complex and irreducible phenomenon that constitutes the "social person" (ibid.). The ritual body, in other words, extends to the ritual female performance of gender, which features prominently in Piercy's book.

In Connie's world, only a certain type of woman and female behavior, which includes important indicators of gender such as dress, gestures, and facial expressions, is recognized as an accepted representation of the female gender. Connie feels that she does not fit this model, believing that her body does not conform to the common expectations of a perfect female body in her time. She is convinced that a young, womanly, and attractive appearance, that would make her life easier, is entirely unattainable for her. As a result of her insecurity, many of Connie's observations of other people, especially women, revolve around their appearance, leading to an evaluation of their overall attractiveness, which Connie simultaneously interprets as a measure of their social worth. One scene in which this way of thinking becomes clear is when Connie's social worker, Mrs. Polcari, visits her. Connie describes her as

> slim, with short brown hair smooth as a polished wooden bowl to her cheeks. […] [S]he wore silver earrings with little green stones that might

[159] Bell (1992) notes that during the twentieth century a variety of academic fields have shown renewed interest in the role of the social body (95). The French anthropologists and sociologists Marcel Mauss, Robert Hertz, and Émile Durkheim, for example, countered the Darwinian argument that bodily expressions, especially facial expressions, were genetically determined and therefore natural and universal. Bell highlights that Mauss and his contemporaries proved that they are in fact social and learned (94). Toward the end of the twentieth century, Bell continues, British anthropologists Victor Turner and Mary Douglas further explored the topic of the social body and made it even more central to anthropological discussion (94). According to Bell, other areas of research interested in the social body included linguistics, philosophy, and psychoanalysis (95). Feminists and gender scholars soon joined in, re-discussing the importance of the social body to their respective fields of research, emphasizing the general importance of the body in scientific discourse.

> be jade. Large hazel eyes with long sweeping lashes looked out surprised from gold wire-rimmed glasses. (Piercy 32)

Connie is very taken with Mrs. Polcari's appearance, admiring her pretty eyes and large, mature mouth that “opened to a glitter of good regular white teeth“ (ibid.). To Connie she looks very girly and fashionable, which helps to make her look like a young college student. The way Connie describes Mrs. Polcari's appearance suggests that she is envious of the woman's youthful appearance, thinking that Mrs. Polcari does not seem to be subject to the “same physical laws, the same decay, the same grinding down under the scouring of time“ (33).

In order to better understand Connie's envy on a sociological and anthropological level, it is necessary to examine the significance of a person's appearance and how it conforms to socially expected gender performances. The additions to the body (i.e. clothing) and the slight modifications to the body, as Connie describes them, function as a means of communication within a particular social circle, as Eicher and Roach-Higgins note (10), which makes them so important in everyday life and also explains Connie's jealousy. The additions and modifications act as “alterants of body processes as they serve simultaneously as microphysical environment and as interface between body and the macrophysical environment“ (11). This function of dress implies that clothing interacts with the body and also influences how the body is perceived by the outside world. The microphysical environment describes the immediate clothing that has an impact on the body, such as a hat that regulates body temperature. The macrophysical environment, on the other hand, “increase[s] the body’s capabilities as a mechanism for grasping intractable objects“, such as gloves, shoes, and eyeglasses (ibid.), and generally serves to enhance the experience of the immediate environment. Thus, both the micro- and macro-environments are part of the overall effect that clothing has on how one is perceived by others. They are both important factors in the conceptualization of the body and its identity, which, Eicher and Roach-Higgins argue, is mediated in part by clothing and announces the social position of the wearer to both the wearer and observers within a given interaction situation (12). Applying this theory to Connie's observations and the social circumstances of her time, it becomes clear that Connie associates a certain style of dress and appearance with a meaningful social status that she herself will

never attain. Given Mrs. Polcari's looks and appearance, Connie considers her to be still a very young woman, while later realizing that both of them are about the same age. Connie sees this as an unfair advantage for white women who have “clean jobs“, marry professional men, and live in houses “filled with machines and lapped by grass“ (Piercy 33). She believes that these social factors ensure that these women stay young and do not wear out as quickly as Connie describes the condition of her own body. The fact that she feels and looks much older than her physical age pains Connie and makes her feel like “second-class goods“ (ibid.). She feels ashamed and cheated out of a respectable life by a society that is too narrow-minded and racist to allow other kinds of beauty and success.

All of the physical descriptions of people in the book follow the same pattern, with Connie categorizing them as attractive or not attractive, socially valuable or not valuable, and thus unconsciously evaluating the success of their gender performances. The way Connie does this has ritualistic overtones itself, as she repeatedly and almost obsessively judges and categorizes people based solely on their appearance. Connie thus compares her own failed gender performance to that of the people she meets and sees. She envies their success, which gives them access to a wide range of social participation opportunities from which she herself is excluded. The “reproduction of the category of gender is enacted on a large political scale“ (J. Butler 524) and therefore gains prominence in legal and/or political discourse (ibid.). Gender performance serves as a marker of social status as well as social and economic success, as Connie's observations show. A particular performance of gender identity can result in retaining or losing one's place in society, and at the same time, it can also define and manifest social status. This is especially the case when considering the meaning and interplay of gender and dress. In the novel, Connie's niece Dolly is another example of how gender expresses a person's social status, but in Dolly's case, not to her advantage.

Dolly, like Geraldo and Connie, is of Mexican descent and has therefore already been assigned a certain lower position in society. She works as a prostitute for her violent and aggressive boyfriend Geraldo, who regularly beats her and supplies her with drugs. Dolly's social status and membership to a specific social group is evident from her clothing; she wears a blue winter coat with a fur trim, paired with tight pink pants. Under the coat, she wears a dotted satin shirt and a “black satin brassiere with the nipples cut out“ (Piercy 5). If a certain style of dress

serves as a marker of belonging to a certain social group, in Dolly's case her garishly colored clothes and provocative choice of underwear, as well as often her normal everyday clothes, clearly show that she belongs to the lower social classes. In this way, Dolly uses the open display of her female gender performance to attract men and earn a living. However, her openly displayed body in connection with her sexuality is perceived as vulgar by the rest of society, which puts her even more in the position of a social outcast. Throughout the novel, Dolly is usually described as heavily made up, with made-up hair, and wearing tight, colorful clothing; all subtle references to the social class that she belongs to. She wears red belts and expensive-looking blouses (19), attempting to mimic a respectable female gender performance that will never be convincing to the rest of society. In contrast to Dolly’s, Connie's clothing reflects her low income and social status in a more direct manner, as she wears clothes that are obviously worn and old. She wears an old green coat that is already missing its lining and a battered plastic bag that is long past its best days (35-36). However, that Connie’s impervious capitalist social structure can be changed becomes clear when one considers the communist utopian vision in the book. Luciente's futuristic world serves as an example of how the ritualistic conceptions of gender can be penetrated to allow for more equality between people.

8.2 Performance of Gender Fluidity

Although both Geraldo and Dolly attempt to disguise their actual social position by striving for a gender performance reserved for the successful white middle class, they both fail in this goal. This social failure manifests itself in interpersonal violence and the committing of crimes. It is further evidence that despite their ambitious goals, they are held back by society's specific ideas of impeccable gendered performances. This emphasizes the fact that the gender types described in Connie's immediate environment are static and fixed. It is impossible to break out of one's gendered role because it is prescribed and fixed by societal rules. This contributes to the sense of claustrophobia and powerlessness Connie experiences in her everyday life. The ritual of gendered performance is repetitive not only in that it is repeated daily, but also because it is

the exact same performance every day, with no room for a different gendered interpretation. In Mattapoisett, the fictional utopian village from which Luciente visits Connie, the gender stereotypes prevalent in Connie's time are nowhere to be found. In Luciente's utopian society, the concept of fixed gender roles has been abandoned and replaced by a system of pure gender fluidity. This convergence of gender models leads almost to the complete elimination of them, making room for a new form of ritual gender performance. Accordingly, the contrast between the two social systems could not be greater.

To understand the theoretical sociological basis of the utopian society depicted in Piercy's novel requires a brief explanation of how the binary gender model was constructed and how sociologists have begun to dismantle these man-made assumptions about gender categories. The basis for the egalitarian gender performance in Luciente's reality is found in the academic upheaval of the late twentieth century, now known as the "cultural turn" (Richardson 458). During this period, Richardson explains, the formerly fixed binary interpretation of gender and sex dissolved, giving way to a new view of these categories as plural, provisional, and situated (ibid.). Richardson argues that the strict binary categorization of sex and gender established by social scientists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is not a natural order of things, but rather a human invention constructed and heavily influenced by the social sciences (459). She points out how “sociology both drew on and contributed to the construction of modernist understandings of sex, gender and sexuality as binary categories ordained by nature“ (ibid.). This dualism and binary understanding was seen as the natural order, which Richardson believes divided people into strict categories based on their gender and sexuality, i.e., male vs. female and heterosexual vs. homosexual (460). It was assumed, Richardson states, that sex, gender, and sexuality have a hierarchical, congruent, and coherent relationship with each other, and that a disruption of expectations of one of these elements means a disruption of the other two elements (ibid.). This principle assumes the naturalization of heterosexuality and has historically led to the relationship between sexuality and gender being studied mostly in terms of non-normative genders and sexualities, Richardson notes (ibid.). The theoretically assumed natural connection between gender and sexuality has not been challenged by scholars in the past, resulting in a constant reproduction of “stereotypical binarity“ [sic.] (ibid.). As a result, all sexual

orientations and relationships outside the heteronormative rule were stigmatized and considered unnatural and inappropriate (ibid.). Within this framework, there is an assumption of a “pregiven [sic.] gender" that correlates with the gendered/sexed body and does not allow for any deviations (ibid.).

The common supposition that gender takes precedence over sexuality was primarily criticized and challenged by feminist theorists who viewed gender as a social product and the “outcome of a hierarchy where one class of people (men) have systematic and institutionalized power and privilege over another class of people (women)“ (Richardson 461). Although gender has an immense impact on a person's sexual system and this system itself has gendered manifestations, Richardson says that sex and gender are by no means the same, but rather form the basis for two very different social practices (463). This approach makes it possible to interpret gender performance as a non-static, everyday human ritual that offers some room for temporary modification throughout a person’s life. Although proponents of this theory acknowledge the interrelationship between sex and gender, they deny an internal dependence of sexuality on the constitution of gender and vice versa. The freedom and variations in gender choice(s) allowed by this theory have been applied to the utopian world of Piercy's novel, in which people often change not only their names but also their gender and personality in accordance with processes of character development and personal growth.

The first character introduced from this world is Luciente. She is the most prominent character in this utopian society, which Piercy has conceived of as being "profoundly anarchistic and aimed at reintegrating people into the natural world and eliminating power relations" (Piercy, author introduction ix). In her utopia, the idea of the nuclear family was abolished and childbearing was outsourced to a so-called Brooder: a machine that mimics the female womb and grows children, freeing people of the female sex from the burden of pregnancy and child birth (ix). Through the use of the brooder, the definition of "mother" and the role of motherhood are completely reconfigured. The “historical role or character - “mother“ - is maintained and at the same time multiplied“ (Orr 62). Thus, Elaine Orr argues, mothering itself is reproduced and becomes an amalgamation of caregiving activities performed by different members of the community (ibid.). By replacing women's biological reproduction with technological birth, Piercy maximizes mothering “through

narrative constructions of multiple, extra-uterine bonds“ (ibid.) rather than minimizing it.[160] The novel shows a society where there is no

> slut-shaming [and] in which sex was available, accepted, and nonhierarchical - and totally divorced from income, social status, power. No trophy wives, no closeting, no punishment or ostracism for preferring one kind of lover to another. (Piercy, author introduction ix-x)

These factors, characteristic of the twentieth-century American feminist utopia, form the basis for new conceptions of gender that are independent of physical sex and need not adhere to narrowly defined social statutes. This egalitarian social construct is also why Connie initially has trouble identifying Luciente as male or female. Luciente does not conform to the gender norms Connie is familiar with, which results in her being confused about Luciente's gender at first glance. As a result, Connie interprets Luciente's appearance and demeanor as masculine and thinks of Luciente as a man when she is actually a woman.

The first indication of the gender bias and restricted gender role rituals Connie has grown up with is Connie's habituation to male appearance. Believing Luciente to be a man, she is confused when the first time Luciente stands face to face with her, she realizes that Luciente is not much taller than she is. The men Connie has had contact with in her life have all been much taller than her in terms of physical appearance. This contradiction in Connie's perception is well described in the novel. Luciente's face is described by Connie as round and soft, “a moon face, [with] black turtle bean eyes“ (Piercy 38) and a gentle smile. She concludes that Luciente has a very girlish appearance and thinks that it is quite possible that he could be a “mariquita“ (38).[161] Luciente's appearance and demeanor can be

[160] Elaine Orr has devoted an entire article to aspects of mothering in Piercy's novel, pointing out that the novel shows how the "contemporary world," the 1990s, continues to insist on automatically associating "female" with "mother" (ibid.). In other words, women are condemned and reduced to the role of mother simply because they are capable of it. As a result, Orr continues, women in Piercy's dystopian world are subjected to rape, forced abortion, unwanted hysterectomy, and their political equivalents: silence and invisibility (ibid.). Piercy broke with the tradition that reduced women to their ability to bear children and allowed men to have the same experiences. Whereas Octavia Butler discusses male pregnancies and childbearing in a violent context of necessity and excludes the subsequent maternal role, Piercy allows the male residents of Mattapoisett to experience motherhood and raising a child without the necessity of experiencing a potentially life-threatening pregnancy and birth.

[161] The term *mariquita* is an offensive slang word in the Spanish language that refers to a homosexual man (“Mariquita“). Connie's use of this term for Luciente speaks to her socialization and the resulting view that homosexuality is something to be looked down upon. It is further proof that deviations from stereotypical gender performances are not approved of in Connie's society.

described as gender neutral, which affects Connie's perception of her persona and makes it difficult for her to place Luciente in a category she is familiar with. Connie notices many small details about Luciente and her body, such as her muscular arms, which she can feel through the leather jacket Luciente wears. The way Luciente walks adds to Connie's confusion because she does not walk in a “swishy manner“, but with a “casual springy step“, “surefooted catlike grace“, and, at the same time, a certain degree of authority (39). The clothes Luciente wears are neither old and worn, nor shiny and brand new. She wears “big heavy boots […], black pants cut something like jeans, a red shirt […], a worn but handsome leather jacket with no insignia of gang or social club but instead a pattern in beads and shells in the sleeves“ (ibid.). Clothing as part of the ritual gender performance plays an important role in the expression of a person's gender, as detailed previously. Luciente's clothing does not exude an aura that would be considered particularly *feminine* according to Connie's experience and understanding of gender stereotypes in her own time. Whenever Connie encounters Luciente, her style and appearance change, sometimes appearing more like a man and sometimes more like a woman.[162]

When Connie meets Luciente for the third time, she, Luciente, wears a blue stone ring on her finger; a piece of jewelry that Connie is used to seeing primarily on the hands of women and therefore thinks it strange, as she still thinks Luciente is a man. In 1970s America, during the second wave of feminism, Luther Hillmann notes that feminine behavior often meant a woman's submission to male power in accordance with a feminine style of dress, such as wearing makeup, high heels, skirts, dresses, and long hair (155). Women who did not follow the dominant female gender performance by wearing male-associated clothing or cutting their hair short were not considered "attractive females" (ibid.). In fact, wearing short hair as a woman during this time was already seen as challenging the common notion that

[162] Connie finds out later that the inhabitants of Mattapoisett's utopian society change their style of dress, their names, and their gender performance whenever they feel that they have changed so much in character that they must assume a new social role. Connie's narrow conceptions of gender exemplify what Veronica Hollinger (1999) laments as the “almost completely totalizing ideological hold heterosexuality has on our culture’s ability to imagine itself otherwise“ (24). Luciente's persona is a queer one that points to a wide range of gendered behaviors, human sexual practices “and questions of sexual difference in general“ (25). While Hollinger argues that science fiction too often follows an “overwhelmingly *straight* discourse“ (24), Piercy actively wrote against this manifestation by portraying Luciente and her entire society as gender fluid and liberated from heteronormative gender stereotypes.

“men and women were as different as socially constructed roles of gender made them out to be“ (ibid.). Although challenging the strict ideas of gender roles was a social issue that divided minds in the 1960s and 70s, Luther Hillmann points out that it was still seen as rebellious and not conforming to the social norm (156). Connie's reaction to Luciente's gender-neutral clothing proves how uncommon “[f]ashion trends such as long hair on men, jeans and pants on women, and unisex clothing“ (ibid.) were at the time. At the time of the novel's publication, disputes arose between feminist and anti-feminist activists over the change in gendered dress. Anti-feminists considered the distinction between the sexes an important and elemental part of social coexistence and argued that ““unfeminine“ self-presentation styles […] prove[d] that feminists sought to destroy gender distinctions“ (ibid.). At the core of this fear, so Luther Hillmann, was the assumption that feminists would destroy womanhood and gender differences altogether if they did not look like traditional women (ibid.). From this point of view, it is not surprising that Connie was skeptical of Luciente's overall appearance and dress, as she did not dress in a gender-conforming manner.

It is only when Luciente first tries to take Connie to Mattapoisett via a telepathic link between the two that she learns that Luciente is actually female, not male. In order for the transfer of Connie's mind into Luciente's world to succeed, Luciente presses Connie's body against her own, whereupon Connie feels breasts under Luciente's shirt. Connie's initial shock leads her to think Luciente has had “one of those sex-change operations“ (Piercy 67), which leads Luciente to feel insulted by Connie's apparent ignorance of her true biological sex. Only after finding out for herself that Luciente is in fact female does Connie begin to “see him/her as a woman. Smooth hairless cheeks, shoulder-length thick black hair, and the same gentle Indian face“ (67-68). As Judith Butler describes it, Luciente does not bring her body to become the cultural sign expected of her in Connie's world (522). Feminist research has often focused on understanding the extent to which “systemic or pervasive political and cultural structures are enacted and reproduced through individual acts and practices“ (ibid.), which manifests in gender performance. This highlights the assertion that the ways in which gender is performed are very much related to and dependent upon an individual's social environment and cultural background. Thus, gender is not a biologically

predetermined behavior, but a cultural appropriation that changes over time depending on culture and society.

Nevertheless, Connie feels insulted and betrayed by Luciente's appearance and physical posture, and so her first instinctive conclusion is that Luciente must be a “dyke“.[163] Connie believes that Luciente belongs to a group of "Chicana dykes" (Piercy 68) based on her appearance alone and associates her with negative connotations such as hanging out in seedy bars, playing pool, cursing like a man, and making comments about women who walk by (ibid.). For Connie, it seems incomprehensible that someone of the female gender would not adhere to one of the strict gender roles reserved for both women and men in her society. Luciente's ritual body performance is so foreign to Connie that her first reaction is a sense of hostility toward her. The dynamics of ritual power expressed in the ritual body in the form of gender performance are coded in such a way that Connie is unaware of Luciente's biological sex. However, since understanding the concept of the body as a ritual entity is needed for further analysis of the novel, a closer look at the theory behind this assumption is required.

8.2.1 Theory of the Social Body as Ritual Entity

Over the course of the twentieth century, sociologists began to argue their concept of the social body in terms of ritual, assuming that the psychophysical entity is socialized and thereby empowered as a social presence and actor, Bell explains ((1990) 300-301). Their theories are based on the assumption that the body, ritual, and power are inseparable and were therefore “linking the distinctive power of ritual action to the construction of the social body“ (301). Pierre Bourdieu, according to Bell, was an important theoretician in this area and believed that “through a series of physical movements ritual practices construct an environment structured by practical schemes of privileged contrast“ (305). According to his theory, ritualization is a strategic mode of production to dominate a constructed contrast in a certain manner: “It is concerned to alter the current state of the sociocultural taxonomy, causing shifts in dominance among various symbolic

[163] In the 1970s, the word *dyke* was used as an offensive slur to denigrate lesbians ("dyke").

schemes while simultaneously licensing such alterations“ (304). More importantly, the

> ritualized body is a body aware of a privileged contrast with respect to other bodies, that is, a body invested with schemes the deployment of which can shift a variety of sociocultural situations into ones that the ritualized body can dominate in some way. (ibid.)

An example of this theoretical approach is Geraldo's expression of hyper-masculinity through the use of often extreme violence in his interactions with other people and women in particular. However, he also manages to manipulate those around him to his advantage by carefully constructing a very different personality and thus taking on a different gender role. While he still extensively beats Connie up in the car on the way to the mental hospital where he wants to submit her against her will, Geraldo plays a completely different role when he arrives at the hospital. In front of the doctor of the mental hospital, Geraldo pretends that Connie attacked him and Dolly because of her mental instability. He lies about the true circumstances of the quarrel, in which Connie tried to protect her niece to save her from a forced abortion. Geraldo not only forces Dolly to lie to the authorities, he is even “almost demure“ (Piercy 14) while talking to the doctor: “He had a good manner with authority, as any proper pimp should, respectful but confident. Man to man, pimp and doctor discussed her condition, while Dolly sobbed“ (ibid.). This situation portrays the social roles and gender biases that prevail in Connie’s society. In this case, a woman's fate is completely determined and made dependent on the opinion of two men who are neither related to her nor concerned about her basic human rights. Geraldo is well trained in the mastery of his various gender-specific performances so that the system, which is already designed by and for men, works entirely in his favor. It is an example of “a culture in which the false universal of “man“ has for the most part been presupposed as coextensive with humanness itself“ (J. Butler 523), thus rendering the existence of women nearly invisible and meaningless. The male gender, in the form of a ritualized body, uses its power and the power it generates to dominate not only its immediate environment, but, Bell believes, also society as a whole ((1990) 304).

In contrast to this misogynistic and male-dominated world is the futuristic utopian society from which Luciente telepathically contacts Connie. In Luciente's

time, gender discrimination no longer exists; the rigid binary boundaries between the male and female gender have dissolved into a state of fluid and ever-changing ideas based solely on a person's individual identity. For Luciente, it is natural to have a muscular body and short hair and still consider herself a woman. Connie, on the other hand, is irritated by her appearance and by how Luciente

> moved with that air of brisk unselfconscious authority Connie associated with men. Luciente sat down, taking up more space than women ever did. She squatted, she sprawled, she strolled, never thinking about how her body was displayed. (Piercy 68)

Here, Connie is describing behavior that in her own society is reserved for men. It is a behavior that has nothing to do with the mannerisms of women. Luciente's body, with its gender-neutral appearance and performance, is the "medium for the internalization and reproduction of social values and for the simultaneous constitution of both the self and the world of social relations" (Comaroff 124, cited in Bell (1990) 301). Compared to the ways in which Luciente displays and performs her gender, however, the performances of the male and female gender in Connie's time bear a much closer resemblance to traditional ritualization and ritual practices. Each time a woman or man leaves the house to participate in social activities, their style, dress, and mannerisms are sometimes more and sometimes less carefully considered. The way Connie describes the appearance of her social worker Mrs. Polcari makes it clear that the two women obviously belong to two very different social classes and that each of them lives out her gender role as expected of a woman of her class. Mrs. Polcari's style of dress and manner of speaking closely resemble ritualization in the form of careful selection of her words, dress, and gestures. Her manners are the result of years of reenactment, giving the impression of a rehearsed and contrived female gender performance. Connie, on the other hand, while desperately trying to maintain the appearance of a more or less successful female gender performance, performs with less self-confidence and self-assurance, knowing that she does not belong to the same privileged class as her social worker. Privileged white women tend to perform their gender roles with greater ease and are therefore more valued and accepted in their social environment. Their social status is higher than that of non-white women, but they

are nevertheless still seen as inferior to men who perform successful male gender roles.

The body as a socialized and ritualized entity is omnipresent in Piercy's novel, both in Connie's and in Luciente's reality. The deployment and active use of the ritualized body has a direct impact on various sociocultural situations and is usually manipulated in a way that is profitable for the ritualized body itself. While this last subchapter has mainly dealt with the rather static stereotypical gender performances in Connie's reality, the next and last part of this chapter will discuss aspects of rituals in Luciente's society, while analyzing to what extent the concept of gender plays a role in these rituals. In Luciente’s world, ceremonial rites of passage are used as a means to express a person's changed conception of their own gender and serve as an introduction of a new facet of their character.

8.3 Social Rituals and Gendered Performances in the Gender-Merged Feminist Utopia

The change of scenery depicted in the novel as the home of Luciente, her family, and her friends offers a very different picture of social coexistence than that of Connie's urban city life in New York City in 1970s America. It shows a rural society divided into small communities where people live together peacefully and are free to choose where and how they want to live. The big cities of Connie's time have been abandoned and a "simple" lifestyle has been established that stands in harmony with nature and does no harm to the environment, people or communities. At first glance, Luciente's world appears less modern and civilized, as there is no obvious technological progress. Mattapoisett, Luciente's futuristic community, is the exact opposite of Connie’s polluted and crowded society that is so insistent on its system of social classifications and social segregation. One of the most noticeable changes, apart from the obvious transformations in the appearance and structure of Luciente's world, is the absence of a gender reference when addressing a person. The pronouns "he" and "she" are no longer used; instead, only the neutral form of a "person" is spoken of. When Connie is introduced to Luciente's friends and family, she introduces Connie as “[p]er name is Connie“

(Piercy 196), which is shorthand for the word person.[164] In addition, gendered names are no longer common, as people choose their own names after a rite of passage in their teens, when they are free to choose a name they feel best suits them. Accordingly, the people in Luciente's immediate environment have names that seem rather strange and unusual to Connie, as her friends are named Bee, Dawn, Jackrabbit, and White Oak.[165]

The prevalence of non-gender-specific names is indicative of the general character of Luciente's society. In the Western tradition, the ritual of naming a child at birth is dominated by the belief that the child's name should be a reflection of the child's sex and gender. In Luciente's society, this strict gendered narrative has been abandoned in favor of individualized name choices for mothers and their children according to the naming ritual. This detachment from gendered naming is a sign of the feminist utopia because it breaks down the gender norms that hold down and oppress women in Connie's society. More generally, the sections of the novel describing Luciente's world lack almost all of the rituals found not only in Connie's society but also in the other dystopian and utopian fictions discussed in this dissertation. Typical human rituals, such as the birthing ritual, have become obsolete because instead there are “brooders“ to equalize men and women and take away an instrument that was used in the past to oppress women. Luciente calls this the result of “women’s long revolution“, a time when society broke with old hierarchies to make people more equal (Piercy 110). However, this transitioning society considered the ability to give birth, what they called "the original production," as the only real power women ever possessed. Abandoning this power was a means of breaking the biological bonds that held the two sexes steadfastly in their places and would eventually lead to complete equality between them. This decision was made under the assumption that otherwise “males never would be humanized to be loving and tender. So we all became mothers. Every

[164] This world depicts a gender-merged utopian society that differs in this respect from Gilman's mono-gendered utopia, which is also significantly more feminist in orientation than Piercy's. Piercy's intention seems to be to portray a completely egalitarian society in which gender roles are of no importance. Gilman, on the other hand, in an exaggerated way tried to prove female superiority over male inferiority.

[165] In the novel, it is stated that the members of Luciente’s community are descendants of the Wamponaug Indians from before the conquest of the North American continent by European settlers (Piercy 104). Although this is not clearly explained, it is evident that this futuristic society has adopted some of the rituals and lifestyles of their ancestors as they consider them superior to the various rituals common in Connie’s time.

child has three. To break the nuclear bonding“ (ibid.). In this sense, although children are primarily raised by their three mothers, they are seen as the responsibility of the entire community into which they were born.

This outsourcing of the aspects of conception and pregnancy is not common in feminist utopias, as most of them in fact emphasize women's strength and abilities in relation to their natural bodily functions. Since the industrial era, Cheyney remarks, modern medicine and the patriarchal social structures in industrialized countries have contributed significantly to the image of the female body as always flawed and in need of improvement (520). The ritual of childbirth as it has been performed in Western societies since the Industrial Revolution has been dominated by "excessively expensive, socially alienating, potentially dangerous and often unnecessarily intrusive technologies in the birth centre" (ibid.). This fact, Cheyney argues, has led to an increasing number of midwives and medical professionals calling for a re-naturalization of the birth ritual, a return of the home birth and an acknowledgement of the natural capacities and capabilities of the female body (ibid.). In *Herland*, Gilman invokes the powers of the female sex, which she sees as the better and more peaceful alternative to destructive and oppressive patriarchal structures and their associated technologies. Piercy, however, does not eliminate technology from her utopia, but modifies it to fit her vision of a more female-friendly society. In Mattapoisett, babies are conceived in "brooders" and delivered in "birthing chambers" (Piercy 110). Thus, all children born this way are wanted, Rudy states, eliminating the need for abortions and the construct of the destitute single mother in capitalist societies (27). Rudy goes on to say that this ectogenesis is a method of reproduction that does not depend on heterosexual intercourse and frees both men and women from unwanted obligations (27).[166] The elimination of female rituals associated with pregnancy and live birth demonstrates that “gender roles are often dependent on associating women with live birth, and consequently that many of our current stereotypes could be altered“ if these rituals were removed from the equation (28). Because womanhood is often “intricately associated with biological motherhood“,

[166] Regarding the use of birth technology in Piercy's novel, Kathy Rudy argues that *Woman on the Edge of Time* can be interpreted as a feminist and utopian rewriting of Aldus Huxley's dystopian novel *Brave New World* (1932), which also experimented with new ways of reproductive technology (28).

eliminating this factor through the use of reproductive technology opens up new alternatives for constructing womanhood and the role of women in society (ibid.). This aspect, coupled with the reconfiguration of gender roles, constructs a comprehensive alternative family: a non-gendered world in terms of tasks, functions, and behavior, but still a world of people who are biologically male and female. Instead of eliminating the technological process beset with patriarchal oppression, Piercy uses it to liberate women from the constraints of the rituals associated with the female gender and gives them back autonomy over their bodies.

The effect of this type of external reproduction combined with the established system of motherhood available to both sexes results in the elimination of fatherhood, Rudy concludes (29). Piercy thus eliminates a cornerstone of the "patriarchal sex-gender system with its overdetermined concern for paternity" (Bartkowski 77). The strict assignment of gender roles is dissolved, which also renders classical notions of gender obsolete. The patriarchal obsession with legitimate fatherhood and continuation of one's bloodline is no longer relevant, giving people in Mattapoisett the freedom to evolve in their relationships with one another.

8.4 The Naming Ritual - Social Puberty as Rite of Passage

With the exception of conception and birth rituals, the rituals described in Piercy's utopian future are primarily rituals that connect humans with nature and emphasize the strong connection between them. The naming ritual in Mattapoisett also fulfills this function. A naming ritual is a typical rite of passage often used when a "change in a person's life involves actions and reactions between sacred and profane" (van Gennep 3). In this context, the ritual of naming can be categorized as what van Gennep refers to as the ritual of enforcing social puberty, as he distinguishes between social puberty and physiological puberty.[167] In this rite of passage, the social aspect of puberty is important, as it was in Tris's rite of passage in *Divergent*.

[167] See explanation of social and physiological puberty in Chapter III, 6.2 "The Nature of Dauntless Initiation Rituals".

In the novel, Bee, a close friend of Luciente, and his two co-mothers Otter and Luxembourg say goodbye to their daughter Innocente, who is the main participant in the naming ritual. Luciente explains to Connie that the purpose of the ritual is to mark the transition from the social status of “child“ to a “full member“ of the community (Piercy 122). To this end, the child Innocente, who is twelve and a half years old, is abandoned in one of the wilderness areas that their community uses as part of their territory. The ritual begins with Innocente's three mothers gathering at a place outside their village where a floater, a small plain, can safely launch and transport the child into the wilderness. This launching point marks a moment in the child's life known as the “end-of-mothering“ (120). Innocente is flown into the woods, where she must survive on her own for a week before being picked up by specific members of the community who are called aunts.[168] In the years that follow, the aunts serve as new advisors to the adolescent who successfully completes the ritual, while the former mothers are forbidden to speak to their child for three full months after the ritual is completed. During these three months, the bond between the mothers and their child is supposed to dissolve, allowing the new full member of the community to develop a sense of self and lose the old habits of relying on others for survival. To Connie, this kind of rite of passage seems irresponsible and heartless, as the mothers knowingly accept that the child could be seriously injured or even die during the ritual. Innocente is provided with only a small survival kit containing a knife, a bottle of water, and a bow and arrow. For the people of Luciente’s society, a true rite of passage must involve some degree of danger, otherwise the child will never learn to care for him- or herself or develop a sense of self-confidence (122). In the end, the successful completion of the ritual means that the new member of their society has honestly earned their name and their right to actively participate in society.

The ritual of naming is a calculated risk that the community is willing to take to strengthen social cohesion. The initial phase of the ritual, the departure of the child from the village, is not marked by a ceremony, but initially takes place in a small family circle consisting of the three mothers, the ritual subject, and the

[168] Piercy, just like Atwood, also uses the term “aunt“ to refer to a female character who is expected to help young members of the community and guide them to integrate into society after their training (which usually involves rituals of various kinds) is complete. Unlike Atwood, however, aunts in Piercy's novel have positive connotations and are seen as caregivers, whereas Atwood distorts the term and twists the positive connotations of the word “aunt“ into negative ones.

mothers' closest friends. Later, just before the departure, people from all over the village come by to support the mothers in letting go of their child by hugging each of them individually (Piercy 124). Connie compares this situation to ritual situations with which she herself is familiar, imagining it as a “slightly formal but familial occasion, of a great big clan saying goodbye to someone going off to the army or getting married“ (ibid.). Unlike these occasions, however, no one but the child's mothers wear any kind of formal clothing. The mothers might wear some sort of ceremonial garb for the occasion, as Bee opted for a “long red and black robe covered with fine embroidery that stiffened it, with a softly rolled hood cast back on his broad shoulders“ (120). The ceremonial dress of Bee, as well as that of Otter and Luxembourg, is the only indication of the importance of the ritual to come. In this respect, it is remarkable how inconspicuous the performance of the ritual ceremony is. The dress of Otter and Luxemburg appears very celebratory to Connie, the one wearing “leggings of soft pale deerskin much worked with shell and quill appliqué“ (ibid.), the other “long filigree earrings and a flowing blue gown“ (ibid.). In contrast to the mothers' festive attire, Luciente's short pants and sleeveless shirt clearly show that she is not part of the family's inner circle. Connie observes the people in her surroundings with great attention, still applying gender-stereotypical thought patterns to their appearances. Innocente wears purely functional clothing that is required for the upcoming ritual. Her mothers, however, want to celebrate the ritual in ceremonial clothing to emphasize its significance to them.

The way in which the rite of passage is carried out in the forest can be taken as evidence of the community's confidence in their connection with nature. They are willing to leave their children alone in the hands of nature for a whole week, convinced that nature itself will not harm the child, but will protect it. Moreover, Innocente, like all other children her age, has undergone survival training and is by no means defenseless or helpless in her new environment. Although the place where the plane lands to drop off the child is marked by a large red cross and a beacon as safety measures, Innocente is completely on her own throughout the ritual phase. This belief is consistent with van Gennep's assumption that in societies with close ties to nature, such rites of passage serve as a bridge between humans and nature: “man’s life resembles nature, from which neither the individual nor the society stands independent“ (van Gennep 3). Van Gennep applies the

same observational viewpoint to the nature of rites of passage as Luciente's community in Piercy's novel. In his view, the universe is an all-encompassing entity, "a periodicity which has repercussions on human life, with stages and transitions, movements forward, and periods of relative inactivity" (ibid.). This reflects Luciente's opinion that humans can never control everything around them, so trying to do so is considered a waste of time (Piercy 122). As cruel and harsh as the ritual appears to Connie, to Luciente the end of motherhood is a tender process that children and mothers go through together in the safety of their community.

The phase of separation, however, the moments before Innocente enters the plane to be taken away, is marked by a multitude of emotions from the mothers and their closest friends. It is the moment when Innocente is lifted out of her familiar surroundings and the role she has occupied in her community up to that point. The naming ritual demonstrates a state of liminality that is characteristic of transitional ritual processes. The liminal persona, in this case Innocente, leaves her previous place in society to step into a new position. She will return to her social environment as a very different person and most likely under a new name. At this stage of liminality, the child is expected to embark on a journey of self-discovery, recognizing their true nature and eventually choosing a name that represents the person they have become. Turner pointed out that, particularly in rites of passage such as social puberty, the liminal persona is often represented as possessing nothing (Turner 95). The liminal persona is given only the bare minimum of what it needs to survive. This constitutes the belief that the adolescent must leave all of their possessions behind to end their attachment to their former place in society. Innocente, too, is given only the basic equipment with which to survive in the woods for a week. It is interesting to note, however, that Innocente, as the liminal persona, takes on the active part in the rite of passage, while her mothers and the rest of her community passively await her return. Usually, the liminal persona plays a passive role in their own rite of passage, while community members generally select an important and highly respected member of the community to actively perform the ritual. That this is not the case in the community of Mattapoisett speaks to its social organization, which is inspired by the principles of socialism and anarchism and therefore does not have a single leader (Piercy, author introduction ix).

After Innocente's departure, not much more is said about how she fared in the forest and what her mental or physical state was when she was picked up again. In fact, her return is not mentioned until much later, during another visit from Connie, when it becomes clear that a month or two has passed since the ritual was performed. Innocente is in the company of her former family, sitting next to her former mothers, who are still not allowed to speak directly to her because of the three-month rule. Innocente is now addressed as Hawk. As she sits between her former mothers and other members of her community to discuss an important issue concerning their community, she is treated by all as an equal member. She is allowed to participate in an "adult" conversation despite the enormous age difference between her and the other members. It does not matter that Hawk is not even thirteen yet, while the others are already in their thirties or older. Successful completion of the naming ritual gives Hawk permission to participate in all community activities and also to have a say in community decisions (Piercy 211). The ease with which Hawk now interacts with other members of the community indicates that her naming ritual was successful and that she has reached the stage of reintegration into society, while also occupying a new social position inside the community. The fact that Innocente chose Hawk as her new name also shows how she feels about herself now. The Spanish word "innocente" translates into English as "innocent" or „harmless“, and evokes associations of gentleness and tenderness, which are usually associated with women. A "hawk," on the other hand, is a predator and a skilled bird of prey that is associated with strength and danger, character traits typically associated in the Western cultural background with men.[169] Thus, the names chosen reflect how the mothers thought of their child and how the child now sees him- or herself after the naming ritual is completed. The name has adapted to the new personality of the ritual persona and can be adapted from now on whenever the person has undergone a character change.

[169] Research about gender stereotypes in Western culture are plentiful, for example Kate Wick's *Gender Through Time and Culture* (Western Washington University (WWU), Honors College Senior Projects, WWU Graduate and Undergraduate Scholarship, Spring 2022, online: https://cedar.wwu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1558&context=wwu_honors). Accessed online: 10 October 2024.

Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, different approaches to the analysis of ritual were shown, which is due to the diverse representations of ritual processes in the two novels discussed. Both Yuknavitch and Piercy portray societies in which the performance of gender is subject to social control and only possible in restricted ways. While Connie's experiences show how strict rules for performing gender in terms of social ritual lead to female oppression and violence against women, Mattapoisett's society focuses on showing the opposite. In Connie's world, people are trapped in the ritualistic performances they are expected to perform, which in turn further fuels social inequality and violence. Women and men of all social classes are bound by their gendered ideals if they are to avoid social exclusion and stigmatization. This society is contrasted with the utopian world of Luciente. Here, the free choice of the gender one desires is an important prerequisite for peaceful coexistence. This non-binary world opens up new possibilities for sexual and gender expression, which in turn lead to new rituals of gender representation. Through the depiction of Luciente's community, Piercy also shows how a society can use technological advancement as a tool to achieve social balance while reconnecting with nature and harnessing its powers in innovative ways. This feminist utopia works so well for its inhabitants because it forms a symbiotic relationship with nature and transitions to more ecological and sustainable social systems and technological use.

The idea of social equality is also reflected in Piercy's novel and is established through a series of rituals that help keep the peace in society. The naming ritual is an example of how personal freedom, character development, and a sense of belonging to the community produce a healthy society that lives in harmony with nature. Feminist and gender-neutral utopian communities use rituals that connect them to nature and create a healthy and safe symbiotic environment where both people and nature are protected and can flourish. However, this approach does not necessarily exclude the use of technologies, such as breeding machines in Piercy's novel, as a means of liberating humanity, especially women, from rituals that are perceived of as restrictive and unjust. This also applies to rituals such as

marriage, which is often seen in feminist utopia as a patriarchal construct for controlling women. Feminist utopias consider entrenched patriarchal structures and the rituals that accompany them as destructive and unworthy of humanity. Social and gender fluidity, equality, and freedom, on the other hand, are held in higher esteem and considered beneficial to communal development. Yuknavitch in particular exemplifies how gender rules influence people's thinking and believes even after gender differences and the general performance of gender has been abolished and made impossible. The heavy focus on problematic representations of gender roles in feminist speculative fiction is no accident. Feminist dystopias reflect the social problems of their time, and the debate about gender equality and violence against women in American society was as loud and active as ever at the time of the publication of Yuknavitch's novel.

Accordingly, Gilarek (2015) believes that feminist speculative fiction has the potential to highlight the injustice of patriarchal societies and the mechanisms of its perpetuation (34). In particular, she notes that when authors of feminist science fiction use the utopian and dystopian modes, they can enter into a dialogue with feminist philosophy to comment on the situation of women in contemporary society (ibid.). The feminist utopia and dystopia, Gilarek argues, are spaces that are simultaneously foreign and familiar to readers, while drawing their attention to problematic social issues and providing them with a new perspective (ibid.). In this way, literature also functions to educate the public about pressing social issues. The temporal and spacial displacement as used by Yuknavitch and Piercy, is generally a common feature in utopian and dystopian stories. It is, Gilarek believes, a literary device that shifts the aforementioned reader's perspective from the present to another temporal realm (35). The utopian or dystopian counterpart to the reader's own reality may be set either in the past or in the future, contrasting the reader's or characters' present. Through this process of re-contextualization and the consequent de-familiarization, feminist science fiction achieves its goal of raising awareness of problems and hopefully bringing about change (ibid.). In Piercy's case, this goal is evident in her work as she juxtaposes the two extremes of the feminist utopia and dystopia in her novel, showing her readers the potential good that society has to offer when lifestyles and attitudes are changed. The rituals portrayed in both societies reflect and reinforce the characteristics of both modes as they demonstrate the dangers and potential of both societies. Yuknavitch's

dystopia, on the other hand, does not work with the tendency, common in futuristic dystopias, to evoke a more pleasant and better past to contrast the present situation of the novel's characters. The rituals depicted are a grotesque and highly exaggerated form of what constituted human rituals before the apocalypse forced the remainder of humanity to live on a space station. Yuknavitch's novel shows that ritual acts change along with their society and can be seen as windows into the state of a society. They are thus indicators of social and community health, which is particularly interesting in the context of feminist utopias and dystopias.

Conclusion

Although the texts presented here differ in their narratives, their depictions of society and their narrative perspectives, the aspect of ritual performance is common to all these novels. Rituals, their use by state actors, but also their significance on a small, familial scale, are a factor that unites the novels. The analyzed works demonstrate how rituals function as narrative tools to explore feminist critiques of gender, social structures, and power dynamics within speculative fiction. Across the spectrum of feminist utopian and dystopian literature, rituals emerge as pivotal mechanisms that reflect societal values, challenge oppressive systems, and reimagine possibilities for gender and social equality. The treatment of rituals in these texts, ranging from reproductive practices to family and initiation ceremonies, underscores their dual role as instruments of control in patriarchal systems and as acts of liberation and transformation in feminist visions of the future. The immense significance of rituals thus transcends the boundaries of time and those between utopia and dystopia, presenting an element of mutual importance.

Rituals tied to fertility and reproduction serve as a focal point in works like *Herland*, "Bloodchild", and *The Handmaid s Tale*. While Gilman's utopian world portrays childbirth as a divine, autonomous process linked to women's empowerment, its underlying racial purity ideology complicates the feminist ideals it campaigns for. Conversely, Butler's "Bloodchild" subverts gender norms by situating men in the

role of child bearers, creating a metaphor for the alienation and exploitation of women's bodies, particularly in the context of racial and medical disparities. Atwood's *The Handmaid s Tale* reveals the distortion of such rituals in dystopian settings, where fertility and childbirth are weaponized to oppress women under the guise of religious and societal duty. These contrasting representations highlight how reproductive rituals can reflect both the liberatory potential of feminist reimagining and the destructive consequences of patriarchal control. Family and social rituals further expose how power operates in these narratives, particularly in dystopian works like *Vox*, *The Handmaid s Tale*, and *The Gate to Women s Country*. In these texts, rituals often serve as tools of social control, normalizing the subjugation of women and reinforcing hierarchical structures. In Gilead, for example, family rituals mask oppressive power dynamics under the guise of traditional values, while in *Vox*, the control of women's speech and actions is symbolized by the counters on their wrists. These rituals reveal the insidious ways patriarchal systems legitimize inequality through cultural practices. However, as seen in *The Gate to Women s Country*, rituals can also become subversive tools for women to reclaim agency, offering a reversal of power dynamics where rituals ostensibly designed to celebrate masculinity instead blind men to their own manipulation by women.

In feminist young adult literature, as exemplified by Veronica Roth's *Divergent*, rituals of initiation and rebellion illustrate how social control mechanisms can backfire, prompting resistance and the search for personal autonomy. The Choosing Ceremony, intended as a means of enforcing societal conformity, instead catalyzes the protagonist's rebellion against rigid social structures. This highlights how rites of passage, particularly for young women, can serve as a means of questioning and ultimately dismantling oppressive norms. By positioning teenage rebellion within ritualized frameworks, feminist young adult fiction mirrors broader struggles for self-definition and social transformation, using these rites to interrogate the boundaries between individual agency and collective expectation.

Finally, the examination of gender and identity rituals in *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Book of Joan* underlines the transformative potential of feminist speculative fiction in redefining the performance of gender. In Piercy's utopian vision, rituals are used to celebrate gender fluidity and community harmony, offering an alternative to the rigid gender roles enforced in dystopian societies.

Yuknavitch's dystopian vision, on the other hand, critiques the grotesque and dehumanizing effects of rituals rooted in patriarchal oppression, illustrating how such practices reflect the degradation of societal values. Together, these works show how rituals act as mirrors to their respective societies, reflecting either their potential for equality and harmony or their descent into violence and inequality.

Across all these texts, rituals emerge as indicators of societal health and as sites of negotiation for feminist values. Whether serving as tools of liberation, resistance, or oppression, rituals underscore the interplay between gender, power, and societal norms. The genre of feminist speculative fiction thus leverages the concept of ritual to highlight the fragility of patriarchal structures, critique their perpetuation, and envision alternative possibilities for social organization. By deconstructing rituals tied to fertility, family, initiation, and gender performance, these works offer a profound commentary on the ways in which societal systems both shape and are shaped by the rituals they create. Ultimately, they challenge readers to reconsider the validity of entrenched social practices and imagine new ways of being that prioritize equality, freedom, and collective well-being. However, it is not only social practices that are called into question in this way, but also the entire concept of what constitutes gender, especially the female gender. The typical gender characteristics assigned to the female sex are challenged in the novels and norms that are considered universal are questioned. Not only do Van Jennings and his two companions experience that their ideas of what a woman is lose their validity in a strange country, the warriors in Tepper's novel also make a fatal mistake by believing in what they see as the natural subordinate role of women in their society without questioning it. The novels exemplify the shift from an essentialist mode of thinking about gender as nature given to "social constructionist accounts of sexuality and gender" (Richardson 461). The dynamic between sex and gender, Richardson argues, "is not determinate or unidirectional, but complex, dynamic, contingent, fluid and unstable" (Richardson 464). Therefore, she argues that the relationship between sexuality and gender should be compared to a shoreline, a "boundary in motion" that is "informed by the hinterlands that shape and shift it" (470). The shoreline symbolizes the intersection between sex and gender, with Richardson interpreting the more unstable sea as sexuality, while gender, as the more solid part, represents the land (ibid.). This metaphor also takes into account the changes in the relationship between sex and gender based on

local, global and historical circumstances and represents parts of the findings of this dissertation. The interpretation and performance of sex and gender are dependent on time and place and are therefore constantly changing. Through the use of rituals, sex and gender are further integrated into the cultural context of a society and can become defining aspects. Richardson's article is thus symbolic of the message of this work, that the notions of what it means to be a woman have changed over the course of a century, as reflected in the two centuries' feminist literature.

Feminist speculative fiction has the potential to occupy a central position in critical social discourse, as became evident when women in the U.S. and many other countries began dressing up as Handmaids to protest anti-feminist laws planned by their governments.[170] Angelika Bammer finds that the literary genre of speculative fiction and the social movement of feminism exhibit a strong correlation in that they are both focused on the future but anchored in a present that they seek to change (57). In this regard, future studies could also further investigate this contemporary socio-political impact of feminist speculative fiction, particularly in relation to activism and feminist discourse. Many of the rituals and themes in feminist dystopian literature resonate with real-world struggles, such as reproductive rights, bodily autonomy, and state control over women's lives. Further research could explore how feminist speculative fiction has influenced feminist activism, legal debates, and public discourse on gender issues. Both feminism and speculative fiction, and in this regard utopianism in particular, are "simultaneously situated in the (historical) Now and the (utopian) Not-Yet" (ibid.). In turbulent times, literature can serve as an escape from reality while also presenting possible solutions to societal problems. The interplay between feminist speculative fiction and ritual performance is a fruitful symbiosis because both are relevant to people's lives.

[170] In 2018, women across the U.S. and in countries such as Canada, Ireland, and Argentina took to the streets in the novel's familiar red and white cloaks - a result of the success of the television adaptation of Atwood's novel - to demonstrate against laws they believed threatened their autonomy over their bodies and would partially strip them of their human rights. These protests were covered by various newspapers, such as the British newspaper *The Guardian*, in which Peter Beaumont and Amanda Holpuch reported on how the cloak became a symbol of feminist protest around the world, "in a subversive inversion of its association with the oppression of women" ("How The Handmaid's Tale Dressed Protests All Around The World.", *theguardian.com*, published: 3 August 2018. Accessed online: 16 January 2023).

The conclusions that can be drawn from the ritual analysis in this thesis are that rituals in the feminist utopia and dystopia emphasize social processes and highlight the progress or regression that a society can make through the use of certain rituals. Rituals underline the development and potential of utopian visions, but also emphasize the shortcomings of dystopian societies and the potential of rituals for manipulation and control. The research in this dissertation demonstrates the psychological and sociological implications of ritual in feminist speculative fiction. Rituals shape identity, reinforce social structures, and influence human behavior. A future and more in-depth interdisciplinary study drawing from psychology, anthropology, and feminist literary criticism could further analyze how rituals in speculative fiction reflect and critique real-world psychological and social dynamics. This could include further exploration of the role of ritual in constructing communal identity, reinforcing ideologies, and providing individuals with a sense of agency or control.

Rituals are fundamental to human coexistence, shaping social interactions and reinforcing collective identities. This analysis has demonstrated that rituals with biblical and medieval origins continue to hold cultural significance today, often serving as mechanisms of control that hinder feminist progress. These enduring traditions, rooted in patriarchal ideologies, perpetuate structures of misogyny and reinforce gender hierarchies that feminist movements have long sought to dismantle. By examining the representation of such rituals in feminist speculative fiction, particularly within utopian and dystopian narratives, it becomes clear how literature engages with and critiques these power dynamics. The exploration of ritual as a thematic and structural element in these texts not only deepens our understanding of the novels and their authors' worldviews but also offers a lens through which to analyze broader social transformations. As feminist speculative fiction continues to evolve, its engagement with ritual remains a vital means of questioning, resisting, and reimagining the structures that define gender and power in society.

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