Retrotopian feminism: the feminist 1970s, the literary utopia and Sarah Hall’s *The Carhullan Army*

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**Abstract**
In recent years, there has been increasing discontent with feminism’s understanding of its own history and, more specifically, the place of the feminist 1970s. Feminist scholars – most prominently, Elizabeth Freeman, Victoria Hesford, Kate Eichhorn and Kathi Weeks – have sought to move beyond the feelings of progress and nostalgia that the feminist 1970s often inspires. There is a need to mediate between the urge to leave the past behind and the desire to return to it, with feminists adopting positions that ricochet between progress and nostalgia. In this article, I argue that the feminist literary utopia offers a particularly productive means by which to represent this ambivalent, paradoxical temporal understanding. The classic feminist utopias of the 1970s have become the object of critical contention in more recent speculative texts, which destabilise both progress and nostalgia in their evocation of second-wave separatism. To elaborate this claim, I turn to Sarah Hall’s *The Carhullan Army*, which critically assesses the feminist 1970s via an account of a separatist feminist enclave in a near-future Britain. The community of women is a homage to the feminist 1970s, displaying both the potentialities of the movements of this time as well as their sometimes violent limitations. The dreams of the 1970s emerge in the text as an unsettling presence in the world, a force that can neither be left behind nor fully embraced.

**Keywords**
Feminist 1970s, nostalgia, progress, Sarah Hall, utopia

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The much-hyped publication of Margaret Atwood’s *The Testaments* in 2019, a sequel to her iconic *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), capped off a decade in which the feminist dystopia has found renewed acclaim in Europe and North America. Whether it be Hulu’s television adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale* (2017–present) or novels such as Lidia Yuknavitch’s *The Book of Joan* (2017) and Leni Zumas’s *Red Clocks* (2018), visions of gender relations gone wrong have become commonplace in contemporary culture. The feeling inaugurated by these texts, that the future will bring nothing more than entrenched oppression and extreme suffering, prompts a question: What has happened to the feminist utopia? Imaginative attempts to construct social orders defined by liberation and freedom have been overshadowed in the last decade by tales of horror, feminist horizons of expectation filled not with fundamentally better worlds but instead the intensification of the worst tendencies of the present. The increased prominence of dystopian narratives has not entirely crowded out utopian visions. Take, for instance, Ryka Aoki’s ‘The Gift’ (2017), a quietly utopian tale which elaborates a world of gender freedom where trans identities are accepted without question, or Rivers Solomon’s novella *The Deep* (2019), which imagines an underwater community in the Atlantic Ocean formed by black women thrown overboard by slavers during the Middle Passage. These flashes of utopian possibility, however, cut against the grain, defying the dystopian trend but not reversing it.

The relative dearth of feminist utopianising in the contemporary moment is nothing new. When we think of feminist utopian fiction, a number of texts immediately spring to mind, including Joanna Russ’s *The Female Man* ([1975] 2010), Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) and Sally Miller Gearhart’s *The Wanderground* (1979). The fact that these texts were all published in the 1970s is telling. The heyday of second-wave feminism was accompanied by what Russ calls a ‘mini-boom of feminist utopias’ (1995: 133), the rise of the women’s liberation movement triggering bold imaginative attempts to negate and rework the patriarchal contours of actually existing society. Yet, the drive towards utopia in the 1970s was quickly checked, a ‘fictional retreat from utopian feminism’ beginning in the 1980s that has, with some ebbs and flows, continued to the present day (Kitch, 2014: 510). The canonical examples of feminist science fiction in recent decades – from Atwood’s aforementioned *The Handmaid’s Tale* to Marge Piercy’s *He, She and It* (1991) and Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998) – have veered towards the dystopian rather than utopian. Care should be taken not to flatten these dystopian narratives. Many contain fragments of utopian hope, moments when the corruptions of the society imagined appear vulnerable to overturning (Moylan, 2000; Wagner-Lawlor, 2013; Kitch, 2014). Nevertheless, a direction of travel is clear, with the end of the 1970s accompanied by the confounding of utopian desire.

The association between feminist utopian fiction and the 1970s has an important consequence. Feminist utopianising, in the aftermath of the boom of this decade, is accompanied by a certain sense of anachronism; the conjunction of feminism and the future is mediated by what Zygmunt Bauman calls ‘retrotopian
sentiments and practices’ (2017: 12). There is a strange coming together of the future and the past, with the feminist utopia connoting both radical visions of a new society and a particular moment in feminism’s own history. It is striking that Helen Hester’s *Xenofeminism* (2018) and Sophie Lewis’s *Full Surrogacy Now* (2019), two of the most strident attempts to restate feminist utopianism in recent years, return to Shulamith Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) and Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* as a means by which to rejuvenate the impulse for liberation. Feminist utopianising looks in two directions at once. On the one hand, it articulates the desires of feminism for a liberated world but, on the other, it carries with it the shadow of the feminism of the 1970s. Now, there is a sense that utopianism is tainted through its association with the feminist 1970s. The utopian form seems to have an eerie affinity with a certain stereotypical image of second-wave feminism, with the supposed dogmatism and essentialism of the 1970s aligning comfortably with the latent totalitarianism of the utopian impulse. However, in this article, I explore an alternative potentiality of the feminist utopia. The residue of the 1970s that resides within the utopian form allows for the articulation of a critical account of feminism’s own history. The utopian imaginary is a lens by which to explore the legacy of past feminisms in the world of today.

To make this argument, I begin by offering a more substantiated definition of the feminist utopia, focusing on its form, content and function. The article then turns away from utopia to consider recent debates on feminist temporality, particularly with reference to the problem of the feminist 1970s. It is argued that feminists have increasingly adopted a position in the grey zone between progress and nostalgia, with scholars attempting to mediate between the urge to leave the past behind and the desire to return to it. The utopian genre, I then suggest, offers a particularly productive means by which to represent the ambivalent, paradoxical temporal consciousness of feminism. Drawing on both classic utopias of the 1970s, including Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and more recent works, such as Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* (1997) and Doris Lessing’s *The Cleft* (2007), I argue that utopian fiction allows for a form of temporal play, or the bringing together of the past, present and future in new and unexpected ways. The final section offers a sustained analysis of Sarah Hall’s *The Carhullan Army* (2007), which critically returns to the resonant themes of the 1970s feminist utopia in order to both demonstrate its continuing value and highlight its limitations. Hall meditates on the unsettling presence of old feminist dreams, with *The Carhullan Army* suggesting that they can neither be fully embraced nor entirely ignored. Instead, the 1970s feminist utopia offers a flawed yet powerful resource for dreamers. While the visions of the past cannot be simply transplanted into the present, the disappointed hopes and quashed dreams of the 1970s can pique feminism to move beyond itself.

The feminist literary utopia

Before moving to this argument, it is first worth clarifying exactly what is meant by the feminist utopia in this piece. Following Lucy Sargisson (1996), we can think
about feminist utopia along three axes: form, content and function. Formally speaking, a distinction should be made between utopianism and the literary utopia. The former refers to the ‘desire for a better way of being’ that cuts across feminist social theory and political action, the diffuse feeling that a world of liberated gender relations is both possible and necessary (Levitas, 2010: 9). The latter, by contrast, refers to the specific textual expression of utopianism, involving the detailed description of a non-existent social order ‘more perfect’ than that experienced by the author, and contrasted to other literary genres, such as dystopia (Suvin, 1979: 49). As the opening of this article suggests, the primary concern here is with the literary utopia. However, utopianism and the literary utopia are closely entwined; they tend to rise and fall together, such that the story of one cannot be told without touching on the other.

In terms of content, the focus here is on one of the resonant themes of feminist utopias in the 1970s: separatism. Not all feminist utopian texts rely on separatism; some imagine reforms to actually existing society or its satiric inversion, as in Mary Griffith’s ‘Three Hundred Years Hence’ (1836) and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s ‘Sultana’s Dream’ ([1905] 2007) respectively (Mellor, 1982). However, separatism has offered a central imaginative means by which feminists have imagined new worlds, the splitting of the genders suspending patriarchal relations and providing the conditions for women’s freedom and development. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Herland ([1915] 1979) is a particularly famous example of the separatist utopia, while a number of the canonical texts of the 1970s, including those of Russ and Gearhart, utilised the separatist paradigm, something that reflected its broader power within the feminist culture of the time (Shugar, 1995). Yet, separatism has also proved to be one of the most troubling legacies of the feminist boom of utopias, with later authors returning to it to both affirm and question its liberatory qualities.

Finally, the feminist utopia, in terms of functionality, has generally veered away from the presentation of blueprints for a new world, or exact plans for a liberated society that can be implemented in the here-and-now, instead focusing on the critique of contemporary gender relations, offering partial critiques to alternative modes of life, and articulating new concepts for thinking about the world (Bammer, 1991; Sargisson, 1996; Johns, 2010). This article is concerned with two functions of the literary utopia, each of which is elaborated further below. First, the literary utopia has the capacity to rethink the temporal concepts of modern society, such as progress and nostalgia, and elaborate more complex, paradoxical understandings of historical movement (Pearson, 1984; McBean, 2016). Second, the utopian form effects reflexivity. New waves of utopian fiction enter into dialogue with previous moments of utopianising, exhibiting a ‘tendency toward self-criticism, or rather an internal critique of feminism (from within)’ (Sargisson, 2012: 65; see also: Moylan, 2000).

These three axes of form, content and function work together, each informing and changing the others. In particular, the literary form of the utopia and its ability to rethink temporality are closely tied. The utopias of the early modern
period were primarily spatial in form, their accounts of new social orders located elsewhere in the world, whether it be the vision of an isolated island in Thomas More’s *Utopia* ([1516] 2002) or a society somewhere beyond the North Pole in Margaret Cavendish’s *The Blazing World* ([1666] 1994). However, from the ‘shift to anticipation’ in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the utopian form has been entangled with the temporal imagination, the attempt to formulate a better world necessitating an engagement with historical time (Suvin, 1979: 89; see also: Koselleck, 2002). The future has become a privileged location for utopian fiction, as represented by Louis-Sébastien Mercier’s Paris of the twenty-fifth century in *L’An deux mille quatre cent quarante* ([1771] 1971) and Edward Bellamy’s Boston of the twenty-first century in *Looking Backward* (1888). This formal shift in the literary utopia has an important consequence in terms of its functionality. Utopias, when they ceased to be focused on temporally coeval societies located elsewhere in space and came to be oriented towards the future, began to think history otherwise, proposing a speculative understanding of temporality that departs from and contests dominant conceptions of historical development. As we will see, the utopian form’s capacity for temporal play – alongside the spatial play identified by Louis Marin (1984) in his famous reading of More’s *Utopia* – is something that becomes particularly important in the feminist tradition of utopianising.

**The feminist 1970s: beyond progress and nostalgia**

Feminist utopia, as indicated above, is closely associated with the movements of the 1970s. The classic literary utopias of Piercy, Russ, Gearhart and others were the fruit of ‘the strong sense that almost everything was possible’ that animated second-wave feminism (Bammer, 1991: 55; Bartkowski, 1989). Given the close connection between literary utopianism and feminist politics, it is worth reflecting on the place of the feminist 1970s in the memory of the movement. Talk of second-wave feminism triggers a familiar set of associations: an essentialist philosophy predicated on the unquestioned oneness of woman; a politics focused on gender inequality alone that is wilfully ignorant of intersectional questions, especially regarding race and class; a dogmatic style that imposes a strict set of moral requirements on women; an angry affective tenor, defined by the stony-faced pursuit of impossible goals (Freeman, 2010; Hesford, 2013; Weeks, 2015). Although rarely explicitly endorsed by feminist scholars, this image of the 1970s has circulated widely in both feminist movements in recent decades and the cultural imaginary more generally. The stuffy rigidity, implicit racism and excessive resoluteness of the past are that which must be overcome; a counterpoint to the feminist politics of the contemporary moment, not a model to follow. As Clare Hemmings suggests, the movement from the ‘unity or essentialism’ of the feminist 1970s to the emphasis on ‘difference within the category “woman”, and within feminisms’ is understood as a tale of progress, with the act of leaving behind the 1970s consubstantial with improvement in feminism (2011: 3–4). The repression of the 1970s is one of the conditions of possibility for feminism today, with part of its power deriving from
the act of separating itself from the past (Henry, 2004). The second wave is figured as a closed phenomenon; it lacks any hold on the present and is of interest only for anachronists.

The affirmation of progress here, however, sparks a concern. Feminists, in their wider considerations on historical time, have not had an affinity with the notion of progress, opposing the reductive nature of the ‘universalizing categories and temporal schemas’ that underpin claims to the linear and ameliorative movement of history (Browne, 2014: 11). Part of the project of feminist history is disturbing linear narratives of progressive development, working to ‘brush history against the grain’ to bring forth the diverse tales of oppression, resistance and struggle that puncture simplistic accounts of historical improvement (Benjamin, 2003: 392). This suspicion of progress is, however, seemingly lost when feminists turn to the history of the feminist movement itself, or as Griselda Pollock puts it, ‘feminist memory is not yet sufficiently feminist’ (2016: 40) (emphasis in the original). By positing a linear process of betterment, or a straightforward movement from a benighted 1970s to an enlightened present, the ‘complex, contradictory, heterogenous mess’ of feminisms old and new is lost (Hesford, 2013: 12). On the one hand, the stereotypes of the past crowd out other stories from this historical moment, rendering the second wave a homogenous mass, thus ignoring the antiracist and socialist currents within feminist movements of the 1970s. On the other hand, the tale of progress operates as ‘an instrument of self-congratulation’ (Larmore, 2004: 47). The denigration of old feminisms prevents them from posing a challenge; the past, reduced to a series of caricatures, does not disturb the present.

The task is to return to the archive of feminism with a new open disposition; to mediate between the singularity of the artefacts bequeathed to us from the second wave and the distinctive contours of post-1970s feminist politics. The backwards glance to a lost feminism offers an ‘essential way of understanding and imagining other ways to live in the present’, with the untimely politics of the past nudging us to look beyond the dominant horizons of the contemporary moment (Eichhorn, 2013: 9). Such a perspective is reliant on the wager that there is an ‘undetonated energy’ residing within the feminist 1970s, a novum that exceeds both the stereotypical image of this moment within the cultural imaginary and the coordinates of feminism as it currently exists (Freeman, 2010: xvi). The return to the feminist 1970s is driven not only by a yearning to do justice to a degraded historical moment but also by a desire to strengthen feminism today; a multitemporal feminism, which refuses to limit its jurisdiction to a single context, is able to draw power from a variety of historical situations, each enriching the movement in unexpected and unpredictable ways. Kathi Weeks, in her reappraisal of The Dialectic of Sex, thus posits that the text acts as a ‘potential archive of now timely political demands’ (2015: 750), with Firestone’s call for feminist revolution functioning as a cypher for the desires of the present: the new breaks out of the old.

Yet, the multitemporal rebuke to the progress narrative confronts a problem: the spectre of nostalgia. The ‘taboo subject’ of nostalgia controls the longing to recuperate the feminist past, preventing the cultivation of an affinity between past
and present slipping into an *identity* (Eichhorn, 2015: 255). It is easy to see why, in these accounts, nostalgia is positioned as a critical check on the historical gaze. If each historical moment of feminism is, at least in part, the result of ‘spontaneous generation’ – that is to say, brought into being by the concrete experience of oppression in particular social contexts – then there is no guarantee that old demands will have any hold on the present (Roof, 1997: 70). The past of feminism is not necessarily adequate to the conditions of the present; there is something temporally autonomous about the latter. Furthermore, the recuperative desire also risks bringing into the present aspects of the feminist 1970s – namely, transphobia and racism – that should, quite rightly, be left in the past. There is a danger of simply reversing the tale of progress and embracing the old as inevitably better than the new.

To guard against these dangers, feminist scholars have adopted positions somewhere in the grey zone between progress and nostalgia. The focus on the ‘ghosts of women’s liberation’ that continue to haunt the present (Hesford, 2013: 215), the notion of an ‘archive of the future’ that brings together ‘the dead past of the archive’ and ‘the not yet of the future’ (Weeks, 2015: 750) and the appeal to a specifically feminist form of nostalgia in which one longs ‘for the conditions under which there was nothing for a feminist to be nostalgic about’ (Eichhorn, 2015: 259) all point to a desire to mediate between the need to move beyond feminism as it actually existed in the 1970s and the yearning to return to this moment to recuperate something for the present. Emblematic in this regard is Elizabeth Freeman’s (2010) well-known notion of temporal drag. Freeman plays with the double meaning of the term drag, which refers both to ‘retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past on the present’ and the ‘queenier kind [of drag] celebrated in an early 1990s queer studies’, to suggest that there is no straightforward return to the past (2010: 62). The past pulls the present backwards, forcing a constantly renewed engagement with the uncomfortable and unexpected moments of feminism’s history; returning to old feminisms disturbs and challenges the self-sufficiency of the present. Temporal drag refers to the unstable coming together of anachronism and novelty, ricocheting between ‘pure nostalgia’ and a ‘purely futural orientation’ to produce a feminism that lives simultaneously in the past, present and future (Freeman, 2010: xvi).

**Temporal play and the feminist utopia**

The return to the feminist 1970s is shrouded in a sense of ambivalence. A new dawn for the ‘twilight world of a “wrong” or “embarrassing” feminism’ is both impossible and undesirable but, at the same time, it refuses to fade into the night (Hesford, 2013: 24). To capture the unsettled nature of the feminist 1970s, the fact that it is neither quite alive nor completely dead, calls forth enigmatic temporal concepts, with temporal drag, archival futures and anti-nostalgic nostalgia emerging as a means to do justice to the spectral status of the second wave of feminist activism. However, it is not only the case that the feminist 1970s calls for new
concepts. There are also reasons to think that the complexity of the place of the feminist 1970s in the cultural imaginary has an affinity with certain modes of representation. That is to say, doing justice to the fuzziness of the feminist past requires both conceptual and formal innovation. By this I mean two things. First, there are pre-existing modes of writing that have an affinity with the sense of temporal complexity evoked by the grey zone between progress and nostalgia, with certain genres facilitating the coming together of past, present and future in a single representational space. Second, modes of feminist writing undergo a shift once they come into contact with non-linear conceptions of feminist time. There is increasing reflectivity in feminist writing, a form of ‘feminism beside itself’, such that post-1970s works are intertextually shaped by the ghosts of the past; the shadowy presence of modes of feminist writing pioneered in the 1970s – from the manifesto to the memoir – hangs over writers (Elam and Wiegman, 1995: 2).

One of the forms of writing that has a particular affinity with the complexity at play in feminist thinking on temporality is utopia.¹ As already noted, the ‘temporalization of utopia’ (Koselleck, 2002: 85) in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries introduced a historical element into the imagination of new worlds. Once utopias were located in the future rather than elsewhere in space, writers were forced to think about the movement of time. The classic feminist utopias of the 1970s were no exception, with texts such as Russ’s *The Female Man*, Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* and Gearhart’s *The Wanderground* all engaging in forms of temporal play via the utopian form (Pearson, 1984). For example, as Sam McBean has argued, the confrontation between the patriarchal past and the utopian future in *Woman on the Edge of Time* functions to rework linear conceptions of historical time, with Piercy’s text bringing ‘loss, mourning, and futurity into close contact with each other’ (2016: 51). The protagonist Connie’s attachment to the past, her refusal to work through the various losses that have structured her experience in 1970s New York, make her the ideal figure to travel into the utopian future, such that the act of looking backwards becomes, via the conceit of time travel, a precondition of imagining a better world. The implication, on Piercy’s understanding, is that feminist temporality is defined neither by nostalgia nor progress alone, but instead through the interplay between the two: the past reaches forward into the future and the future back into the past.

The anticipatory structure of the utopian form means that it offers a productive means by which to think about temporality. There is, however, a second point that should be stressed here: the affinity between utopianism and the feminist 1970s. One of the stereotypes of the second wave of feminist activism was its apparently impossibly utopian character, with the demands of the movement seeming to necessitate the complete overhaul of patriarchal society (Hesford, 2013; Weeks, 2015). This stereotype, in an opaque fashion, reflects one of the profoundest aspects of feminist activism of the time: its commitment to radically new worlds. The final chapter of Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex*, which proposes a vision for a new society predicated on feminist principles, was a pioneer in this regard. More particularly, the 1970s witnessed an upsurge in feminist utopian fiction. Alongside
the texts by Piercy, Russ and Gearhart listed above, this decade saw the publication of Mary Staton’s *From the Legend of Biel* (1975), Dorothy Bryant’s *The Kin of Ata Are Waiting for You* (1976), Alice Seldon’s (writing as James Tiptree, Jr) *Houston, Houston, Do You Read?* ([1976] 1989) and Suzy McKee Charnas’s *Motherlines* (1978), as well as the rediscovery and republication of Gilman’s iconic feminist utopia *Herland*, originally published in serialised form in 1915 (see: Gilman, [1915] 1979).

The utopias of the 1970s provide a key intertextual basis for subsequent feminist science fiction. Many speculative texts from the 1980s onwards have functioned as implicit commentaries on the utopian themes established in the 1970s (Fitting, 1992; Wolmark, 1993; Wagner-Lawlor, 2013). The confident embrace of feminist futures that defined the works of the 1970s gave way, from the 1980s onwards, to a more questioning attitude. The issue of separatism is of particular importance here. The separatist paradigm dominated the feminist utopia in the 1970s, providing a starting point for the utopias of Russ, Seldon, Gearhart and others. In general, these texts posit some speculative mechanism – a male-specific plague in *The Female Man*, space travel in *Houston, Houston, Do You Read?* and a kind of cosmic forcefield in *The Wanderground* – that suspends relations of patriarchal domination and opens the space to imagine what women could be in the absence of men. However, more recent feminist science fiction texts have problematised the separatist utopia. Pamela Sargent’s *The Shore of Women* (1986), Joan Slonczewski’s *A Door into Ocean* (1986) and Suniti Namjoshi’s *The Mothers of Maya Diip* (1989) address the ways in which the separatist paradigm risks reproducing the relations of domination, modes of control and acts of violence that define patriarchal society, something reinforced by more recent works including Naomi Alderman’s *The Power* (2016) and Virginia Bergin’s *Who Runs the World?* (2017) (Fitting, 1992; Wolmark, 1993). The event of the 1970s still inspires a critical form of fidelity, with writers turning to the resonant themes of the feminist utopia to explore the simultaneously inspiring and dangerous nature of the dreams of the past.

As this analysis suggests, utopianising since the 1980s traces the concerns of the feminist movement itself. If, as Carol Pearson notes, ‘the utopian future is an outgrowth of women’s actual situation’, the former changes with the latter (1981: 70). To borrow the terms of Gustav Landauer (2010), the feminist *utopia*, a vision of a new liberated world, is tied to the feminist *topia*, the particular interests and concerns of women in specific times and places. The feminist utopias of the 1970s were an attempt to provide a speculative elaboration of the central demands of the women’s liberation project, offering a means by which to explore the implications of the feminist movement (Teslenko, 2003). Quite explicitly, Russ positioned her utopia *The Female Man* as paying homage ‘at the shrines of Friedan, Millett, Greer, Firestone, and all the rest’ ([1975] 2010: 206). The more tentative attitude that has predominated since the 1980s, however, is reflective of the shifting concerns of feminism in this time. As the essentialist underpinnings of separatist politics have been questioned, the dream of women-only utopias as a
space of freedom and liberation has become more difficult to sustain. This does not mean that the texts published since the 1980s have entirely rejected the possibilities of the separatist paradigm. Instead, the separatist utopia has become an object of anxiety, evoking both the great hopes of the feminist 1970s and the disappointments of the decades that followed. The return to separatism from the 1980s onwards is evidence of the increased reflexivity of feminism, an attempt to both, on the one hand, articulate feminist desires and, on the other, return to past forms of feminism to dissect their potentials and limits.

At this point, it is worth briefly turning to Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* (1997) and Doris Lessing’s *The Cleft* (2007), two texts focused on the place of separatist utopian imaginaries after the collapse of the feminist 1970s (Wagner-Lawlor, 2013; Tabone, 2016). In *Paradise*, Morrison presents a clash between two utopian enclaves: Ruby, an all-black town established in the aftermath of the American Civil War, and the Convent, a house situated just outside Ruby that provides refuge for a multiracial group of women who have been victims of patriarchal violence. On the one hand, Morrison is careful to demonstrate the affinity between the struggles of African Americans and women; both groups experience violence and exploitation in American society and manage to achieve a fragile form of liberation in their respective separatist enclaves, escaping the worst effects of racism and patriarchy. However, on the other hand, the possibility for a coalition between the two groups is evoked but never realised in the world of the text, a fact demonstrated when the men of Ruby attack the Convent and drive the women from the town. Importantly, the text is set in the late 1960s and early 1970s, precisely at the moment when utopian hopes for both black and women’s liberation reached their height. In this way, Morrison is reflecting, via the contestation between two utopian enclaves, on the failures of the post-1968 moment: there was the potential for a coalition between feminism and antiracism but such an alliance failed to coalesce in actuality. *Paradise* thus evokes the separatist paradigm of 1970s utopianising in order to meditate on the missed opportunities of the past.

Something similar is at play in *The Cleft*. Lessing’s text begins from the speculation that the first humans were female and that men emerged only later, with *The Cleft* tracking the decline and fall of an all-female world after the birth of the first men. This account of the first days of humanity might initially seem like an affirmation of an essentialist gender binary: a community of inherently peaceful women is disrupted by inherently violent men. *The Cleft*, however, complicates this understanding. Significantly, Lessing positions her utopian community not in the future but at the origins of humanity. Lessing, to borrow the terms of Luce Irigaray (1985), opens an imaginative space in which to think what it would mean for the feminine, rather than the masculine, to be the universal, the neutral, the one. What if, in other words, women came first and men were a mere ‘cosmic afterthought’ (Lessing, 2007: vii)? Lessing is concerned with questioning the dominant fantasies of gender relations that govern the present and demonstrating the arbitrariness of the masculine universal. *The Cleft* reinterprets the separatist paradigm of the feminist 1970s. Separatism no longer names an ontology, implying a
basic difference between men and women, but instead a polemical process of disturbing and reversing prevailing gender norms.

Retro feminist futures: Sarah Hall’s The Carhullan Army

We can read both Paradise and The Cleft as reinterpretations of the feminist 1970s, taking up its central claims to demonstrate both its continuing value and its limitations. A particularly sustained example of this use of the utopian form to think the history of feminism anew is Sarah Hall’s The Carhullan Army (2007). As a number of commentators suggest, The Carhullan Army is suspended between utopia and dystopia, its vision of a near-future Britain caught between catastrophe and hope (Robinson, 2013; Lea, 2017; Walezak, 2019). Hall’s description of life in Britain in the text, where the confluence of climate change, foreign wars and political crisis has brought to power an authoritarian government, is certainly dystopian. The most egregious policy enacted by the new government is the compulsory imposition of the contraceptive coil to curtail population growth. This policy is accompanied by a reproductive lottery, in which some women are randomly chosen to be allowed to have children, and humiliating examinations by officials to ensure that women have the coil in place, with women ‘sometimes asked to display themselves to the monitors in the backs of cruisers’ (Hall, 2007: 27). Yet, The Carhullan Army also evokes the feminist utopian tradition of writing. The protagonist, who we know only as Sister, decides to escape the town of Rith for a feminist separatist community that has established itself in Carhullan, a farm in the mountains of the Lake District. She hopes that the group of women will be able to shelter her from the worst policies of the new government and prevent further violations of her reproductive autonomy.

The Carhullan Army brings together a number of different articulations of nostalgia. There is a pervading tone of nostalgia in Rith, particularly amongst older residents who remember the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. As Sister comments, ‘My father’s generation seemed to die out quickly, though their lives had been lived in prosperity […] It was as if, one by one, they made the decision that the present and the future were intolerable propositions’ (Hall, 2007: 37). The past is a relief from the inadequacies and failures of the present, a time of prosperity and freedom that is unlikely to return. As the death of this generation attests, the idealisation of the past is ultimately a disabling disposition; in yearning for the past, there is an inability to act in the present. For the people of Rith, the country has become unrecognisable: ‘This was not England, everyone said. This was some nightmarish version that we would wake from soon’ (Hall, 2007: 30). The hope that things will return to normal creates a sense that the authoritarian government is an interlude, preventing an engagement with the violent policies of the state, and producing passive subjects easily controlled by the government’s empty promises of renewal.

Nostalgia does not, however, only have a conservative effect in Hall’s text. Sister’s journey to the community at Carhullan is ‘motivated as much by nostalgia
as it is by a desire to escape’ (Lea, 2017: 173). The separatist community established itself during Sister’s childhood, before the rise of the authoritarian government. Sister became obsessed with the community at this moment, voraciously reading articles published about the women of Carhullan. After the rise of the new government, all information about the community of women is censored. Nevertheless, Sister retains press clippings about Carhullan in a personal archive: ‘Both picture cuttings were tucked into a metal box of possessions in my backpack, with my identification card and a few other personal effects. They were faded and creased, but I had kept them’ (Hall, 2007: 50). The images of the women of Carhullan point to an alternative to the dystopian present, providing a glimpse of a feminist future that comes out of the past. For Sister, this nostalgia for an old vision of the new bolsters her spirits in moments of pain. The fragments of the Carhullan community are, as Susan Buck-Morss comments of Walter Benjamin’s figure of the collector, ‘the loosened building blocks (both semantic and material) out of which a new order can be constructed’, Sister’s scrapbooking practices taking up the ‘rubble’ of the world and piecing it together to form an inspiring vision (1989: 212).

It is in this context that Sister notes the strangely anachronistic quality of the Carhullan women, commenting that the two leaders of the group, Jackie and Veronique, are ‘two like minds, two retro feminists’ (Hall, 2007: 50). The term retro neatly encapsulates the significance of the Carhullan project for Sister. The utopian world of the farm is something that Sister longs for but which she can only access through artefacts salvaged from the past; ‘the imagined possibilities of this brand of retro-feminism’ offer a ‘way out of her oppressive present’ (McBean, 2016: 50). The retro nature of the feminists at Carhullan is not confined to the world of the text alone. There is a clear sense in The Carhullan Army that there is something antiquated about Jackie and Veronique’s project within the broader history of feminism, with the two leaders harking back to the separatist projects that once circulated in the feminist imaginary. It is not for nothing that one of the quotations from Jackie remembered by Sister seems to come straight from the second wave: “It’s still all about body and sexuality for us,” she was once quoted as saying. “We are controlled through those things; psychologically, financially, eternally. […] It’s time for a new society” (Hall, 2007: 51). The Carhullan women refuse to leave behind the second wave, remaining loyal to the foundational claims of its politics.

The community described in The Carhullan Army is an active homage to the past of feminism, attempting to make real the utopian dreams that surged in fictional form in the 1970s, such that Hall combines a ‘futuristic setting and retro-spective gender politics’ (Lea, 2017: 177). The text takes up the separatist concerns originally expressed in the utopias of the second-wave moment. As in these utopias, the women of Carhullan are protected from patriarchal power and allowed to pursue an autonomous path free from men. The remote location of the community in the Lake District, coupled with the government’s decision to declare all territory outside of the towns autonomous (a no-man’s land, in more than one sense of the
term), protects the women from the violence of the dystopian government. At the same time, however, Hall critically reflects on the value of such feminist memory. The kind of militant nostalgia cultivated by Sister, in which she remembers the past of feminism to forge a new future, is not entirely innocent. Instead, Sister’s nostalgia has a flattening effect, ignoring the complexities of the situation at Carhullan: ‘I’d imagined an immediate sense of unity [...] with everyone suddenly aware of the collaboration and trust involved. And there would be Jackie and Veronique, standing at the great oak doorway, just like they had in the photograph, as if that’s where they had always stood, and would always stand’ (Hall, 2007: 63). This is not, however, the reception that Sister receives upon her arrival at the farm. She is immediately imprisoned and interrogated by an armed group of women under the control of Jackie, an experience that haunts her for the rest of her time at the farm. Once Sister is admitted into the community, it quickly becomes clear that the charismatic and fanatic Jackie exercises an exorbitant degree of power. Furthermore, Sister is shocked to find out that boys born at the community, once they reach puberty, are sent away from their mothers to live with a handful of men in a ramshackle house a few miles from Carhullan. Sister’s original, nostalgia-tinged vision of Carhullan is thus revealed as an illusion. Importantly, the disappointment experienced by Sister is mediated by the distinctive contours of feminist history. In particular, as in Morrison’s *Paradise*, the problems of Carhullan are placed in the context of the relationship between second-wave feminism and black feminism. Veronique, ‘a tall black woman from the American South’ who is one of the co-founders of the Carhullan community, is of particular importance here (Hall, 2007: 48). Hall, in providing us with an image of black and white women united in struggle, gestures towards a half-forgotten antiracist tendency within second-wave feminism. The claim that the 1970s was a time when feminists were ignorant of race masks the alliances that emerged between black and antiracist white feminists in this era (Thompson, 2010). In placing Jackie and Veronique together, *The Carhullan Army* subtly complicates our understanding of the feminist past, nudging the reader to consider the multiple, often conflicting, tendencies that existed in this historical moment.

The alliance between Jackie and Veronique is not, however, to last. Sister, upon arriving in Carhullan, notices the absence of Veronique; talk of her is taboo and Sister’s questions are met with a stony silence. It eventually emerges that Veronique was diagnosed with cancer a few years before Sister arrived and, after begging to be put out of her misery, was killed by her lover Jackie. The traumatic fracturing of the bond between Veronique and Jackie points to a missed opportunity within the history of feminism: the possibility for an alliance between black feminists and white antiracist feminists emerged in the 1970s but was never fulfilled. As such, Hall brings forth an aspect of ‘the unharvested virtuality of feminism that is never exhausted or fully known’, with the old photograph of Veronique and Jackie allowing Sister to glimpse a lost possibility for a more vital feminism (Pollock, 2016: 29–30). The killing of Veronique marks the
beginning of the end for Carhullan, with Jackie’s tendency for violence and domination entrenched and intensified after Veronique’s death, eventually spiralling towards the complete destruction of the community by the end of the text. The failure of the articulation of black and white feminism in the 1970s has had a deleterious effect on feminism; the tacit racism of hegemonic feminism deprives the movement of its full force. Veronique’s symptomatic absence betokens what Chela Sandoval calls, in relation to black feminism more generally, a ‘differential form of consciousness’; her position ‘between and among’ white feminist women highlights the unstable position of black women within feminist movements, piquing the latter to move beyond themselves to a new form (2000: 57).

As this discussion of the violent exclusions and relations of domination at the farm suggests, there are affinities between *The Carhullan Army* and the critique of separatism articulated in speculative feminist fiction in the decades after the 1970s. Hall’s text, as Iain Robinson suggests, ‘in foregrounding the flaws and discords in the Carhullan community, seems self-reflexively critical of the possibility of achieving a utopia’ (2013: 202). Yet, Sister’s confrontation with the community at Carhullan does not result in disillusionment; her conclusion is not that her nostalgia for past feminist futures was entirely mistaken. A dialectic of hope and disappointment is at play, whereby her initial hope is made sharper as a result of her experience of disappointment. Sister’s critical hope, which contains the experience of the negative within it, means that she is able to lucidly pinpoint exactly what is of value in separatist politics. Ernst Bloch, in a different context, put this point as follows: ‘socialism may pay respect to the dreams of its youth, it sheds their illusion but it fulfils their promise’ (1991: 118). Something similar is at play in relation to feminism in Hall’s text, with the movement from hope to disappointment and back again producing a sense of both the illusions and the promises of the 1970s feminist moment.

The sense that the community at Carhullan is spiralling towards collapse is punctuated by moments when the full promise of the feminist 1970s rises to the surface. The continuing power of past feminist movements becomes clear in Hall’s account of reproductive autonomy. The question of reproductive freedom is closely associated with second-wave feminism, where the movement for abortion rights ‘embodied and symbolized our fundamental demand – not merely formal equality for women but genuine self-determination’ (Willis, 1989: vii). It is no surprise then that the depiction of liberation in Hall’s speculative account centres on Sister’s achievement of reproductive autonomy in the face of violent attempts to control women’s bodies. Having arrived in Carhullan, Sister comes to see the coil as a great violation and indicative of a broader injustice, demanding that Lorry, the nurse at Carhullan, remove it: ‘Now, in Lorry’s company, the device felt exactly as it was: an alien implant, an invader in my body, something that had been rejected all but physically’ (Hall, 2007: 90). The coil, once removed, is passed around the women at Carhullan, a symbol of the repressive policies of the government and the fragile form of freedom achieved at the farm. For Lorry, the coil renews her faith in Carhullan, as she confesses to Sister that she ‘needed something to remind me of
why I came here too’ (Hall, 2007: 205). The ‘old passion’ of the feminist project is thus invigorated by Sister’s experience, such that a confrontation with the denial of reproductive freedom in the towns reveals the hidden power of life on the farm (Hall, 2007: 91).

In this scene, the temporal play at the heart of The Carhullan Army is evident. The future, Hall suggests, will not be exactly the same as the past. The repressive policies of the authoritarian government in the mid-twenty-first century are distinct from the controls on reproductive freedom that were the object of contention in the 1970s; the restriction of abortion rights and the enforced use of contraceptives cannot be elided. Nevertheless, in The Carhullan Army, the controls introduced by the government are ‘repetitions with a difference’ (Freeman, 2010: 62). They echo longer-standing traditions of controlling women’s bodies, albeit within the particular context of the economic, political and environmental crises of a near-future Britain. It is for this reason that the feminist 1970s retains a hold in the world of Hall’s text. To return to Landauer’s (2010) terms, there is an affinity, if not an identity, between the toopia of an authoritarian Britain imagined by Hall and the relations of control that confronted women in the 1970s. The utopian responses to this situation also require a detour through the past; only a multi-temporal feminism, that draws strength from all moments of the movement, has the power to confront the repressive attacks on reproductive freedom. The utopias of the feminist past are not, of course, entirely adequate to the new conditions imagined by Hall, but they provide a point of orientation and a flash of newness for the struggles of the future. The return of controls on reproductive freedom reveals both the unfinished nature of second-wave feminism, and its continuing, untimely hold on the feminist imaginary.

Hall’s ambivalent utopia recalls a remark made in Ursula K. Le Guin’s The Dispossessed, that great literary utopia of the 1970s: ‘You can go home again [...] so long as you understand that home is a place where you have never been’ ([1974] 1999: 48) (emphasis in the original). The paradoxical proposition of going backward to a place where you have never been before captures the play of past, present and future in The Carhullan Army, and the place of separatism in post-1970s feminist science fiction more generally. There is no desire to return to feminism as it actually existed but there is a yearning to fulfil the utopian hopes fleetingly raised, and very often quickly dashed, in this historical moment. Whether it involves the restaging of the fragile alliance of antiracist white feminists and black feminists or the desire for full bodily autonomy, the past of feminism acts as a storehouse of untimely dreams that disturb the dominant coordinates of the contemporary world. These dreams do not align directly with post-1970s movements for gender freedom, but they have a hidden potential that can be recuperated: the detritus of the past contains the power to reshape the present and future. What is needed is an ongoing process of negotiation of the type found in The Carhullan Army. The unstable coming together of past, present and future reforms feminist memory, forcing it beyond progress and nostalgia towards a feminism that is never at home. The homelessness of the feminist 1970s, the fact that it
belongs to nowhere in particular, means that it has an awkward and unsettling presence in the world, representing a dream that can neither be absorbed into the present nor left behind.

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**Notes**

1. Of course, I do not claim that utopia is the only mode of writing of value in this regard. For example, Nadine Muller (2017) persuasively argues that historiographic metafiction is a particularly appropriate genre by which to address the potentialities and dangers of generational thinking in contemporary feminism.

2. The fragmentary nature of Sister’s nostalgic approach to Carhullan is mirrored by the structure of the text, which is presented ‘as a series of records, some complete, some partly destroyed, in which Sister talks about her life’ (Bracke, 2019: 284). For both Sister and the reader, the experience of Carhullan is defined by gaps and absences.

**References**

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