“My Body Isn’t Yours to Own”: Body Politics and Narratives of Reproduction in Three Feminist Dystopias

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Dedications

This thesis would not have existed without the loyal support of my family and friends. To my mother, thank you for your endless messages of support and telling me that I can do this. To my boyfriend, who patiently listened to every complaint and every moment of stress – I really appreciate everything that you did to support me. To my friends; thank you for being patient with me and editing my work and pointing out the mistakes I had looked over.

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This one is shared.

Preface

In explaining body politics in any cultural item, whether it is a literary text, an artwork, a protest movement or a song, there are specific historical and cultural forces that must be considered. Bordo points out that the concept of body politics was coined by the feminist movement (21). In this context, body politics reflects on the longevity with which women have been "subjugated primarily through their bodies, and how gender ideologies and sexist reasoning stem from perceived biological differences between the sexes" (King 31). These approach to gender ideology was supported by patriarchal institutions. From Aristotle seeing the female as "being afflicted with natural defectiveness" (29) to author Thomas More considering a society in which women are shown naked to their suitors to prevent physical deformities as utopian, women have always been a step behind men.

Judith Butler sees women's inferiority as something that has been constructed through political institutions and juridical notions of power (2). In agreement with Michel Foucault, she argues that "juridical systems of power produce the subjects they come to represent" (2). The subjects are formed through these structures and are defined according to the requirements of their structures. This instigates a continuous cycle of submission to the political and juridical system. It is an exclusionary chain of events, which is the cause for gender to become structured within a certain spectrum. She furthermore states that the terms 'woman' and 'female' have become unstable, much like gender identity. Butler relates this to the notion of performativity, in which gender acts create gender identity. By repeating certain acts, we perform gender and that is how we identify. In the case of body politics, Butler argues that there does not need to be a stable identity for political interest to exist (142), yet societal-structured understandings of identity and body politics are the result of a "regulated process of repetition that both conceals itself and enforced its rules" (145). Agency, she states, can only be located when theory and practice deviates from this cycle of repetition and instead

seeks out “new possibilities for gender that contest the rigid codes of hierarchical binarism” (145).

Feminist dystopian fiction, the focus of this thesis and a relatively new development within literary theory, aims to continue what Butler calls for – deviating from the cycle of repetition and normativism. The genre is a side-branch of dystopian fiction and focuses on the female struggle in contemporary times. By creating an alternative reality in which women’s rights are either severely restricted or on the verge of becoming so, feminist dystopian authors seek to be critical of current social and political issues. They create their narratives around the political female body as they experience it. By presenting alternative and more disastrous realities, these authors hope to awaken critical thinking among their readers regarding discriminatory affairs in their political and social realities. The three novels that are the focus point of this thesis, *Vox*, *Gather the Daughters*, and *Red Clocks*, belong to the feminist dystopian genre and have been published between 2016 and 2018.

As feminist dystopian authors rely on their own realities to motivate their alternative dystopian realities, the novels cannot only be studied in their theoretical frameworks of gender and body politics. The current political and social frameworks are of equal importance when analyzing the role of new publications in the feminist dystopian genre. These new publications are indirectly as well as directly critical of current events that have been taking place over the last two years, since Donald Trump was appointed President of the United States in 2016. Their popularity is rising fast, as the novels’ contexts are a source of power in protest movements against laws that seek to restrict reproductive rights as well as movements like #MeToo. It is because of this and the resonance I noticed between the United States and political and social events happening in the Netherlands that first sparked the interest for this thesis. As these feminist dystopian novels use literature to react to social issues that continue to affect women across the United States, the novels play an important role in understanding

the scope of such social and political issues. They furthermore provide a more emotional and humane side to the effects certain laws can have on women. In this preface, the laws that are drastically changing the availability of safe abortions and access to reproductive health care across the United States will be highlighted. The different organizations as well as individuals who are directly influencing these laws, both negatively as well as positively will also be reflected upon. This thesis seeks to place the novels within the framework of American politics regarding reproductive healthcare, as well as in the larger picture of the institutionalization of the female body and the historiography of gender-based discrimination.

The popularity of publications such as *Red Clocks*, *Vox*, and *Gather the Daughters* is directly linked to the economic and social status of women world-wide. Kum-Kum Bhavnani and John Foran argue that the "feminization of poverty" (320) is one of the leading causes as to why extreme narratives such as feminist dystopias are still finding common ground. As men continue to dominate the political and economic fields, specifically in less-developed countries, women are often at a larger risk of being affected by inequality and globalization. As globalization "intensifies some of the existing inequalities and insecurities to which poor women are subject" (320), polarization grows between women of different social classes as well as between women and men. Because the world is becoming more dangerous for women's independent rights, speculative fiction is growing into a popular outlet for critical academics as well as authors (320). By approaching the future through qualitative trend analysis, scholars and authors can look for forces, either political, economic, or social, that will shape the societies of the future (320).

One way of doing so is by studying certain trends and affairs that are affecting concentrated areas and communities as well as nation-wide institutions and healthcare providers. The autonomy over the female body often remains the focus of controversial

discussions. American politics of the last few years has become known for the image of a room full of white men deciding over the features and rights of women's bodies. Women's struggle with having the freedom of choice to decide what happens to their bodies is often directly related to current politics. It ranges from accessibility to birth control, to provided health care, to abortion laws to mechanic wombs. In this year alone, eight states in the United States have voted for stricter abortion laws. As these laws, which are being referred to as heartbeat bills, are still being introduced while this research is being conducted, high-profile news outlets will form the basis for knowledge on this topic.

An article written by Anna North and Catherine Kim for Vox News states that the heartbeat bills are based on "model legislation written by Faith2Action" which is a nation-wide action group focusing on pro-life advocating (F2A 2019). On their website's FAQ, Faith2Action explain that the heartbeat is an indicator of life and should therefore be protected. They state that "viability is merely a determination of our technology, our ability to sustain life outside the womb" (2019) They furthermore express that victims of rape, incest or other forms of sexual abuse should not be an exception to the bill, as "none of us chose the manner in which we were conceived; it does not change our humanity" (2019). They continue by presenting an example of a Pastor who was conceived through rape but is now helping "feed over 500.000 children each week throughout Africa" (FAQ F2A). The way they construct their reasoning is concerning, as it suggests that women having an abortion after being sexually assaulted might deny the world a child who will become a holy-like character. Being forgiving towards people who have gone through traumatic experiences such as rape is not a part of their approach to abortion laws, as they talk about how to handle rape as though it were a simple thing to deal with. They assume that all women who have been raped should file a police report, even though it is widely known that only twenty-three percent of victims report their assault (BJS 2017). The states of Georgia, Missouri, Ohio, Mississippi and

Kentucky have introduced these heartbeat bills, and the governor of Alabama has signed an even more restrictive abortion bill, banning abortions at every stage of pregnancy. Alabama's bill has not yet been signed by its governor, whereas the governors of the other states have already signed and accepted the heartbeat bills. As of present, none of the bills have gone into effect yet, but the first is set to be in Ohio, where the bill should take effect on July 10. However, according to an article by Ryan Prior for CNN, Planned Parenthood as well as the ACLU of Ohio have sued the state of Ohio to prevent this new law from happening (2019).

The increase in the numbers of heartbeat bills across the United States is fueled by a several significant changes in the political and juridical system of the United States. President Trump is known to be a pro-life advocate, which has been his motivation for changes he began to make from the moment he took office in 2016. On May 15 2017, Trump expanded the gag rule policy. This policy handles federal funding for large-scale organizations. The expansion on the rule decided that these organizations may no longer use their own funds to pay for abortion-related programs. Were they to continue funding such programs, losing federal funding would be the consequence. This could possibly be detrimental to the survival of their companies. Planned Parenthood as well as other abortion clinics lost financial support, resulting in even more difficulties considering remaining in operation and being accessible to women. Additionally, the state of Missouri is already experiencing the consequences of this. In May of this year, the only Planned Parenthood and abortion-providing clinic in Missouri was in danger of closing its doors. The state, led by Governor Mike Parson, had said that it would close it over several health concerns within the clinic. The Planned Parenthood clinic stated that the threat of closure had nothing to do with health concerns and instead was a case of political extortion (NYT 2019). Had the clinic been closed, Missouri would have become the first state in the United States to be without in-state access to safe abortion health care since 1974, the year after the Roe v. Wade decision.

Additionally, there is the Pain Capable Unborn Child Protection Act, a bill introduced as early as 2013 and which passed the House of Representatives three times but has then been thwarted by the Senate every time. This bill is also known as Micah's Law and if this bill were to pass the Senate, abortions after the twentieth week of gestation would be banned nationwide, with an exception to victims of rape, incest or sexual intimidation. This bill is based on the idea that after twenty weeks of gestation, a baby could feel pain. They have, however, failed to provide scientific evidence for this claim. Jennifer Conti, a clinical professor at Stanford University states that a baby's neurological structures do not function until much later in the pregnancy (Megas 2017) The danger of this bill is that states must no longer fight individually for abortion-restrictive bills, even if it these bills were to focus on the twenty-week gestation mark. Access to abortion healthcare would thus become much more challenging nation-wide, which consequently would result in a higher maternal mortality.

A second crucial change in the juridical system of the United States in the past three years has been the appointment of Judge Brett Kavanaugh to the U.S. Supreme Court. During his electoral campaigning, President Trump vowed to elect more pro-life judges into the Supreme Court. This would eventually help him enforce the overturning of Roe vs. Wade. This law was installed nationwide in 1973 and ensured safe abortions for all women. Faith2Action state in their FAQ that with the nomination and acceptance of Brett Kavanaugh into the Supreme Court, they now have enough votes in the Supreme Court to officially overturn Roe vs. Wade. This could be incredibly concerning, as it would mean that women's freedom of choice and overall health would be at stake.

The Guardian reports that Kavanaugh wrote a dissent in favor of a bill in Louisiana called 'Unsafe Abortion Protection Act' (Mahdawi). This bill would require doctors who provide abortions to have active admitting privileges at hospitals within thirty miles. Would this law be implemented, access for women to legal and safe abortions would be severely

restricted plus legal abortions would become much more expensive due to the restrictions placed on the doctor. Now that the Supreme Court has a majority in pro-life senators and Roe v. Wade could be overturned, the urgency in raising voices against this severe limitation on reproductive rights is highlighted. Roe v. Wade has become a cornerstone for women and their pursuit for secure health services, including abortions. Briggs and Gutiérrez state that Roe v. Wade has increased the availability of reproductive health services, but that the true impact of the law, i.e. easy access to abortion clinics, has nevertheless still been limited (105). New laws, introduced after Roe v. Wade, focus on limiting public funding for clinics. This has resulted in higher costs for women in trying to have an abortion as they would have to travel farther to find an available clinic. Briggs and Gutiérrex pose that the financial situation of abortion clinics, both in public as well as private funding, remains a significant issue as it directly affects women of lower income households in safeguarding their maternal health (107).

On the other hand, there is a counter voice. In January of 2019, the state of New York passed the Reproductive Health Act. This act allows abortions after twenty-four weeks of gestation if the fetus is not viable or if the mother's health is in danger. There was much controversy surrounding this bill. President Trump commented that "this law would allow a baby to be ripped out of the womb moments before birth" (Singman 2019). According to Planned Parenthood, these claims are false and misleading, and his comments endanger the safety of women seeking abortions (North 2019). This counter voice, however, seems to be on the losing sides, as states such as Georgia and Alabama, but also Mississippi and Ohio are supported by a pro-life President and Congress.

Additionally, there is resistance to be found in popular media, protest movements and imagery of feminist novels that are leading the counter voice. Protestors nationwide are

dressing up as handmaids from Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, mirroring the tangibility of the novel's depiction of handmaids and lack of women's rights. The visibility of a work of speculative fiction in these protests against a political affair that will directly affect the safety of women's bodies and reproductive rights indicates the importance of fiction in spreading awareness. Christina Dalcher hints towards this in the opening pages of *Vox*. Through the character of Jackie Juarez, she voices what seems like a warning. "You have no idea, ladies. No goddamned idea. We're on the slippery side to prehistory, girls. Think about it. Think about where you'll be – where your daughters will be – when the courts turn back the clock" (10). Through this approach, a critical and warning voice, this thesis will analyze the three novels and their positions within the political and gender framework based on current events and issues in the United States. In order to achieve this, a short summary of each novel to establish its context and highlight its most important features will follow. After that, a close reading of the novels will follow, structured through three main themes and thus divided over three chapters respectively.

Main Sources

The appearance of *The Handmaid's Tale* as an established Netflix Original series in 2017 was unexpected, as suddenly people who did not read nor were enthusiastic about the dystopian literary genre in general suddenly became aware of its existence. The novel experienced a renewed interest and its terrifying display of a possible future significantly enlarged social anxieties about women's health and reproductive rights. New novels were appearing in the New York Times being referred to as '*the Handmaid's Tale* of our generation'. Lines were drawn between *The Handmaid's Tale* and *1984* and these new publications, despite the 30-year gap between them. Popular newspapers such as The New York Times, BBC and VICE picked up on the trend of the feminist dystopian genre and the increase in articles and reviews written on these books made it clear that the genre was finding common ground among its readers. The question thus arose if there was a similar significant change, either economic, social, or political, that has motivated this new surge in dystopian fiction, since the switch from utopian to dystopian fiction in the late twentieth century was encouraged by the capitalist culture and industrialization. This will be further discussed in the first chapter on genre and narrative, in which will reflect on the reasons why, as provided by theorists as well as my own insights, the feminist dystopian novel renewed interest. The three primary sources through which the rise of the feminist dystopian novel will be analyzed are *Vox* by Christina Dalcher, *Red Clocks* by Leni Zumas and *Gather the Daughters* by Jennie Melamed. These three texts were selected based on the fact that they are all rooted in the United States, were written by American women, have been published between 2016 and 2018, and revolve around topics that are closely related to abortion, reproductive rights and the female body.

I. *Vox* by Christina Dalcher

The fear of women whose voices have entirely been taken away is realized in Christina Dalcher's *Vox*. The main dystopian aspect of this novel is the wrist counter that all women have been fitted with: they have a word limit of a hundred a day and if that number is surpassed, they will receive electric shocks that can ultimately be deathly. The novel's main character, Jean, is a researcher in aphasia and the Wernicke area, which indicates her close ties with language since aphasia involves the workings of language in the human brain. The fight for control over language is one of several important themes that characterize it as a feminist dystopian novel as well as places it amid contemporary discourses on narratives of resistance.

Jean has four children, the oldest being a teenage boy called Steven. His character displays how narratives of resistance intertwine with narratives of control, focusing on the sensitivity of children in their teenage years and the usefulness of peer pressure in enforcing a certain train of thought. Jean's twin boys fulfill a much smaller role in the novel and often exist only in the background of conversations. Jean's fourth child, a six-year-old girl called Sonia, also has a wrist counter and her relationship with her mother highlights the looming danger for the next generation and the importance of organizing resistance. The novel plays with the function of language as a powerful tool in enforcing control as well as how language and speech are the only ways to build resistance. This will be further explored in the second chapter on the value of language in dystopian narratives. *Vox* can furthermore find its place amid popular speculative fiction in its discussion of human dependency on technology, as the wrist counters she describes are developed versions of the Apple Watch. The literary space given to fears of technology and enlarging governmental control will be further explored in the third chapter.

II. *Red Clocks* by Leni Zumas

The second novel is *Red Clocks* by Leni Zumas. This novel concerns a reproductive dystopia, as its alternative reality presents modern-day United States in which abortion has been banned nationwide. It explores the narratives of four different women and their struggle with the loss of reproductive rights and motherhood. Ro is a biographer and attempts to voice her struggle of adoption through her obsession with telling the story of polar explorer Eivør Mínervudottír. Ro is affected by new laws that prohibit single mothers or queer couples to adopt a child under the motto that "every child needs two", referring to a mother and a father. This approach to familiar structures provides an interesting and challenging take on orphans and gender discrimination. Mattie is a fifteen-year-old teenager who becomes pregnant and wishes for an abortion to be performed on her, yet the new laws cause her to endanger her own life in an attempt to terminate her pregnancy. Susan, a mother of three who is experiencing depression, but the expectations of society do not allow her to voice her depression, file for divorce or seek mental help. Her depression causes her to consider suicide, even if it will affect the lives of her children. The last of the four female main characters is Gin, a mender and a victim of discrimination based on occupation. Despite the laws, Gin helps with abortions through herbs and therefore embodies an important role in the persistence of hope. Due to the novels depiction of women in different stages of motherhood and its portrayal of a society in which reproductive rights have become regulated by the government, *Red Clocks* is a reproductive dystopian narrative.

III. *Gather the Daughters* by Jennie Melamed

The third and last novel of this study is *Gather the Daughters* by Jennie Melamed. This novel is classic dystopian in that its alternative reality is set on an island off the coast of 'the Wastelands', presumably the United States. Girls enter their summer of fruition after they have gotten their first period, and by the end of this summer they are expected to marry and give birth to two healthy children. The novel follows four girls through their summer of fruition: Vanessa, Amanda, Janey and Caitlin. Vanessa is the daughter of a wanderer and therefore in a more privileged situation than the other girls of her age. Amanda is a seventeen-year-old girl, married to Andrew and pregnant of their first child in the first year after her summer of fruition. She struggles with adapting to the expectations set out for her and questions if there should not be more to life than the reproductive machine others require her to be. Janey, then, has postponed getting her period by strategically starving herself so that she is too thin to menstruate. She starts the resistance with her body, which is the one thing she can take back control over. Caitlin comes from an abusive household and her development is severely affected by the institutionalized abuse towards younger girls. Furthermore, mothers of defectives, children with a genetic abnormality, must step aside for a second wife and grandparents drink their final draft around the age of forty to make place for the new generation. *Gather the Daughters* is an intriguing addition to the feminist dystopian genre due to its portrayal of female rights at a young age, as the three main characters are girls between the ages of thirteen to seventeen. Their loss of freedom, the abuse of their bodies by authoritative male figures and images of resistance through hunger strikes challenges notions of where the autonomy of a female body starts and ends.

The main goal of this thesis will therefore be to analyze the productivity of these novels and delve more into how and if their critical approach to reproductive rights and women's health

and safety finds common ground among its readers. This thesis aims to provide answers to several main questions: Through reading these novels and studying its alternative futures, are we able to change or prevent bills that severely limit reproductive rights? What do these novels contribute to an overall understanding of the female struggle and the political reproductive framework? Is it useful to continue reading and analyzing these new publications, or are the dystopian futures too imaginary? These questions will be answered through an analysis of three main concepts: genre, language, and technology and the boundaries of the female body.

The first chapter "Genre and the Feminist Narrative" will dive deeper into the meaning of genre and the way it is directly influenced by contemporary social and political issues. From utopian fiction to dystopian fiction to feminist reproductive rights; I will analyze how exactly the feminist dystopian genre came into existence and relay the reasons as to why the genre remains popular.

The second chapter, "The Value of Language", builds on the function of language and speech in enforcing gendered institutions as well as dystopian world-building. Existing theories on the role of language in utopian and dystopian fiction will be explored as well as how language contributes significantly to the power of feminist dystopian fiction in contemporary times. Theorists such as David Sisk, Mohr, Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Molan will be mostly relied on.

The third and final chapter, "Technology, Physical Boundaries and Body Politics" will discuss the role of technology in creating gender-based boundaries in dystopian worlds and how it affects the feminist dystopian genre.

1. Genre and the Feminist Narrative

Genre awakens consciousness regarding practices of representation in texts as well as the gaze it elicits. Genre constitutes and can help explain ways of societal organization as well as our subjectivity to the relationship between politics and literature (Crawley 334). Baccolini recounts that genres are overflowing with ideologies, and that analyzing a single work within its genre "also allows us to understand that work as a product of the historical and literary times in which it was written" (519). Genre can provide insight into the bigger picture, i.e. that of relations between the past and the present. It can also present a broader question which challenges how we read, and therefore how the reader interprets, receives and refuses different concepts of a novel (Antaki 978). It is thus able to reflect on different stages of social and political turmoil, and the development of a specific genre informs the reader about the current public issues. By having different genres, different folders as it were into which (non-)fiction texts can be placed, it becomes easier to classify a certain movement. Characteristics are attributed to a genre and it develops a canon, a collection of authors and texts for which the genre is best known. It becomes culturally structured and organized. By mapping out a genre this stylistically and formally, it seems to be addressed to a specific group of readers and authors. Does that group then own that genre? And what does that say about the boundaries of that genre? Additionally, how does placing a literary text within a certain genre-framework limit its possibilities? As Chandler poses, there are issues with generic labels placed on genres as well as texts (3). These issues reflect on the limitations of labels as they perform in society and how its texts are perceived among the public.

Additionally, by using labels for texts and other forms of expression, there is a stronger sense of either approval or refusal. It becomes much easier to say for a reader to dismiss a genre, and subsequently texts pertaining to that genre will be rejected immediately. White reflects on this sentiment of forced recognition by saying that "genre is one of those

things whose manifestation demands both recognition of what it is (pure or hybrid) and also acceptance of its value – positive or negative" (598). Milner states that there is a prejudice against the dystopian genre, "in the literal sense of pre-judgement prior to rational analysis" (831). He explains that dystopia at the often makes little rational sense due to its imaginative and extreme nature (831). He also contributes the prejudice to the open-end culture of dystopian texts which not only frustrates the reader but also denies a static placement, since even older dystopias are hybrid texts (832).

The feminist dystopian genre falls under this category of prejudice for several reasons. Firstly, the word feminist has many negative as well as positive connotations due to its appearance in popular media and controversy. It directly affects more conservative understandings of identity as well as familial structures and has a loud protest movement, which is not always positively received. Secondly, the feminist dystopian genre is very hybrid, as texts move between genres as well as places and many thematic aspects of feminist dystopian texts reflect on more than one public aspect, i.e. social, political, economic etc. Thirdly, feminist critical literature has moved away from generic understanding of what is normal and what is not, "as it consigns feminine practice to the pole of deviation and inferiority" (Baccolini 596). White suggests that some theorists as well as readers experience issues with the existence of genre itself, since its necessity in literature and art is difficult to prove theoretically as well as practically (598). How does the existence of genres affect the value of texts that are hybrid or fall outside of the accepted norm, and are genres even needed?

Chandler recognizes that it would be more useful to study how readers identify genres rather than how we separate genres by theoretical terms (3). In feminist dystopian terms, this would mean looking at how the genre functions both in and outside of its literary framework. As mentioned briefly in the introduction to this thesis, *The Handmaid's Tale* for example has

become extremely meaningful for not only showing the ability of the genre to change and adapt to processes of social and political change, but also for redefining how culture helps shape a genre. In 2016, HULU announced that they would start production on a televised series of *The Handmaid's Tale*. After its release in April 2017, the series went on to receive an Emmy Award and a Golden Globe. The series was received like most feminist dystopian books are; people were critical of its extreme portrayal of female suffering and argued over the definition of freedom in modern society. The series therefore also inspired a flux in protest movements in which women have been dressing as handmaids. It helped bring the textuality of the novel to the front of discussions about contemporary issues and shed light on its necessity. The costume of the handmaids plus the alternative reality first introduced by the novel fuel protests and have redesigned the image of pro-choice protesting across the United States.

The interaction between the feminist dystopian genre and popular media as seen with *The Handmaid's Tale* thus changes the genre and how it is socially as well as critically received and understood. The appearance of a popular television series empowers the novel, which consequently empowers the genre. Its intertextuality confirms the interchangeability of the genre and how a genre is not fixed by one or several specific texts. Instead, the genre is constantly challenged and changed by cultural events and therefore becomes a dynamic representation of the contemporary social and political environment. It allows for a much more powerful intersection between gender and genre, a popular topic in feminist research of recent years.

Consequently, genres are created by much more than simply a literary text; it is affected by cultural phenomena, popular media and the willingness of the reader to understand the multiple layers of the text s(he) is reading. However, it is nearly impossible to study literature and its effects culturally and socially without attributing it to a genre and

analyzing its characteristics. Especially in these concerning times, we need a space in which these narratives can be studied in their correct frameworks. This chapter will continue by analyzing how the feminist dystopian genre came to be by looking at its history. The starting point will be the coining of 'utopia' by Thomas More in 1516 and the chapter will build up to the twenty-first century feminist dystopian narrative. This chapter will end with an analysis of the emergence of reproductive narratives in the last few decades, as themes concerning reproductive healthcare have become pillars for feminist dystopian fiction of this century.

1.1 The Utopian Narrative

To establish the origins of the feminist dystopian genre, it is necessary to start in the sixteenth century with the rise of the utopian story. The utopia sphere is by theorists referred to as "an imagined, often idealized aspect of place as a part of ethos" and treated as "a function of human social thought and communication" (Portolano 114). Existing through the meaning of hope and mankind's imagination of the ideal community, utopian literature originated with Plato's *The Republic* in which he described his vision of the perfect state. The name of the utopian genre was coined by Thomas More in his work *Utopia*, which he published in 1516, almost two millenia after Plato's *Republic*. More's imaginary island of Nusquama as described in *Utopia* was rooted in Renaissance ideas and the period's emphasis on mankind's intellectual development.

According to Vieira, the Renaissance provided renewed faith in mankind's capacity to structure a state that would ensure peace and reestablish social order. She explains how More was inspired by letters from Columbus and Vespucci who were exploring sites and spaces of otherness in their discovery of new worlds (4). He used the space of otherness that these men had created with their explorations to build an imaginary space in which different and new forms of social order were the norm. His utopia, a non-space, had changed how desires for

change and improvement would be expressed in the coming eras. Lang states that More's coining of the word 'utopia' refers to both "eu-topos" and "ou-topos", meaning 'good place' and 'non-place' (209), which is similar to the paradox in which science fiction finds itself as a genre. Science fiction desired to convey a narrative that was grounded in scientific knowledge and simultaneously "designated unrestrained flights of fantasy and irreality" (209). Both utopian fiction and science fiction stories depart from their authors' reality to observe a different form of species or society. Though the authors often imagine a form of government or organization of society that is very different from their own, the imagined reality is considered utopian and therefore ideal.

France, England, Italy and the United States were among the first countries in which the utopian narrative flourished (Vieira 7). It soon became a popular way of telling stories due to its fantastical and speculative aspects: a man or woman would travel to an unknown place and would learn about new forms of social, religious and political organizations. The traveler would then take these examples back to his/her own country and initiate discourse on the reorganization of society. The popularity of the utopian speculative story also relied on its focus on humans, as the purpose of finding utopias was to improve the current forms of social organization. Utopias were thus often already critical of the nature of the human condition and utopian stories became characterized by a "rigid set of laws […] rules that force the individuals to repress their unreliable and unstable nature" (7). This is seen in More's *Utopia,* who describes that the civilians of Nusquama had to obey by certain laws instigated by their rules, Utopus. It was forbidden to neglect natural beauty and considered physical beauty to be "a supplement to the virtues of the mind" (More 72). Human life was centered around a certain understanding of nature's values and how they determine how people should live.

As utopian fiction is imaginative and sometimes fantastical in creating a duality between worlds, i.e. the author's social reality and the imagined reality, it does not always

adhere to formal literary structures. Regarding this, Aughterson says that utopian fiction is "a mode, a way of representing and arguing about political ideas that involves fictionality and possibilities, and a readerly and referential perspective in the present" (94). The relationship with reality is very important for utopian fiction and how the reader engages with the genre. As utopian fiction is often a travel narrative or at least partially so, the story will float between reality and fiction. This empowers its speculative and imaginative storylines, its dynamic narrative and its critical view of contemporary societies and political or economic issues. By presenting alternatives taken from different cultures and forms of social organization to the reader, the utopian author challenges the reader's perspective of his reality. It stimulates the reader to think about alternatives to their social reality, which eventually can lead to him/her taking action and creating change. As will be seen with feminist dystopian fiction, the reader is just as confronted with his notion of reality as (s)he would be through reading utopian fiction. The difference is the use of an idealized society in utopian fiction versus an undesirable future in dystopian fiction. It shows that criticism of social, political and economic organizations is inherent to both genres.

By deviating from formal literary structures, utopian as well as dystopian fiction "have come to represent a form of counternarrative to hegemonic discourse" (Baccolini 519-520), empowering its potential to be critical. It seeks out different characteristics from different genres, is more confrontational about controversial topics, is imaginative in creating alternative realities, and encourages the reader to think critically about its own reality. Technology is an example of this, exemplified by its continuous popularity as a thematic aspect in much dystopian fiction. From Orwell's *1984* to Christina Dalcher's *Vox*, technology is a way to indicate and talk about change, since the development of technology is directly linked to the development of humans. The use of technology in alternative realities, however, seems to be changing. Dystopian texts from the late twentieth-century, such as *We*, *Brave*

New World and even *The Handmaid's Tale* use technology for its surveillance abilities, enforcing government-control. Though some novels (e.g *Vox*) still reflect on this, feminist dystopian novels of recent years focus more on technology that affects the human body directly, i.e. electric shocks or technological reproduction. There seems to be a shift from a focus on surveillance and privacy towards an emphasis on human kind's growing dependency on technology and how it affecting our every-day lives. I will expand further on the topic of technology and the female body in the fourth chapter.

1.2 From Utopia to Dystopia

Up until the early twentieth century, male authors dominated the utopian genre and little space was available for female authors. The canon of utopian literature was led by titles such as *New Atlantis* by Francis Bacon, *Utopia* by Thomas More, *The Man in the Moone* by Domingo Godwin and *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift. They were considered to be "great exemplars" (Kumen 64) of creating new social orders. It was not until the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century that works written by female authors such as *Gloriana* by Lady Florence Dixie (1890) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915) became part of the literary utopian tradition. These novels immediately became controversial due to their portrayal of utopias led by women. In *Herland*, for example, a volcanic eruption has eliminated nearly all men from existence and reproduction is ensured via a scientific development called parthenogenesis. Its discussion of reproductive rights and the authoritative female body in its biological processes can be considered as a forebode for the rise of critical utopian fiction that rose during the late 1950s and the consequential downfall of the utopian genre in popular literature.

The end of the dominant utopian genre happened in the late twentieth century, when the modern world moved into a post-ideological state. Picturing hope and imagination in ideal

societies was overrun by bleak futures of consumerism and economic downfall. Utopian thinkers in the early 1960s were convinced that the utopian state was struggling to be born and would rise soon as a result of the speed with which technology was developed during the Industrial Revolution. The outcome of the Industrial Revolution, however, turned out to be fairly different. Baccolini and Moylan argue that by the 1980s, the rise of the utopian narrative ended abruptly due to "economic restructuring, right-wing politics, and a cultural milieu in formed by an intensifying fundamentalism and commodification" (3). The image of hope in developing technology soon made room for the realization that the industrial age increased poverty. Tom Moylan furthermore acknowledges the growing divide between the rich and the poor, elimination of industrial workforces and growing violence against non-privileged people (14) as reasons why utopian fiction traded places with dystopian fiction in the second half of the twentieth century.

1.3 Rise of the Feminist Dystopias

The cultural manifestation of dystopian literature and its newfound place amid economic, political and social issues allowed for certain literary characteristics to grow and shape the genre of dystopian fiction. Firstly, dystopian texts are often set in a 'bad place', a future so terrible that it is shocking to the reader. The text is often built around narratives of power and resistance, in which the opposition between those two creates the largest source of anxiety in the book. The conflict between the narrative of power and the counter-narrative of resistance is central to the novel's development, and the ending is often between a resigning win for the authoritarian party or the creation of a resistant enclave (Moylan 8). According to Baccolini and Moylan, an additional characteristic of dystopian novels is to start its narrative start media-res. Dropping into a story half-way, however, does not equal immediate cognitive estrangement for the reader, since the location of the novel is often recognizable, since the

dystopian reality is often (partially) based on the author's reality (5). The shocking factor of dystopian factor is the recognizable fearful future, one not very different from for example the current reality of the United States.

Secondly, as soon as this new social reality is established, the dystopian narrative will most likely zoom into a specific individual. This will allow the reader to study the society's structure from the perspective of an individual as well as from the perspective of the overall operation (Moylan 8). As the narrative of this chosen protagonist develops side to side with the 'bad-place' of its social reality, the dystopian text allows for a negotiation between those two parties. Gottlieb describes how the dystopian main character's fate will be decided in a confrontation with the totalitarian dictator, head of the state religion, or totalitarian government, and the result of that confrontation is usually negative for the main character (4). In *Vox*, *Gather the Daughters*, a confrontation like this is certainly applicable, whereas in *Red Clocks*, a confrontation never happens. However, the transformation of all main characters happens through emancipation and empowerment rather than personal decay, as Gottlieb suggests happens in the canonized dystopian novels such as *1984* and *We*.

Lastly, dystopian fiction is often synonymous to critical fiction, as it tries to warn for an approaching evil that can still be stopped or diverted. David Sisk emphasizes that the political and moral missions of dystopian fiction are altruistic, as they will often reveal a type of attitude meant to provide the readers of the genre with handles as to how to prevent the grim future that these dystopian works have sketched out (6). This attitude of dystopian fiction in providing warnings extends through morality plays that interact with notions of gender, identity and the political body. Gottlieb argues that the underlying morality play of twentieth-century dystopian fiction is the prototype that literary theory now considers to be canon (4). This morality play focuses on how a modern man struggles "for his soul against a

Bad Angel; he struggles for dignity of the Spirit of Man against the dehumanizing forces of totalitarian dictatorship" (4), thus combining the notion of identity with the political body. The critical dystopian novel in the late twentieth century rose out of these characteristics of the modern dystopian work in combination with the effects of current-day social anxieties. A sense of hopelessness against economic and political issues threatening the survival of basic human rights motivated the change in authors' outlook on their societies. Alexandra Aldridge argues in her work *The Scientific World View in Dystopia* that the dystopian writer extrapolates from his own social reality to build a framework that is ultimately different but also inevitably futuristic (9). David Sisk adds to this by stating that the dystopian novel is built on current trends in the author's life and that (s)he will seek out the logical futuristic outcome of these trends (6). Sisk furthermore explains that satire is the "strongest strain of literary fiction leading to the development of dystopia" (6), as satire too is focused on pointing out social anxieties of contemporary times. These social anxieties and their translation into popular speculative fiction ultimately formed into a new consciousness in which human nature and the development of identity became the central focus.

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* was the most popular narrative of which its characteristics seemed to introduce a new direction within dystopian writing, namely creating "a new oppositional consciousness" (Moylan and Boccolini 3) that voiced fears regarding social and sexual structures in a postmodern world, simultaneously questioning the concept of identity. In his preface to *Scraps of the Untainted Sky,* Moylan elaborates on this. He states that compared to the early forms of dystopian fiction, i.e. Forster's *The Machine Stops* and Well's *The Time Machine* from the early twentieth century, contemporary dystopian fiction from the 1980s and onwards focuses more on the implications of a capitalist culture and economy rather than technology and the authoritarian state (7). Because of this, dystopian

fiction has been able to creep “into the nooks and crannies of everyday life” (8), enlarging the influence of dystopian fiction and its critical attitude towards social issues.

In this open and wide space of social and economic turmoil, dystopian fiction was able to develop in creative as well as feminist critical terms. Baccolini and Moylan name female authors such as Judith Butler, Marge Piercy and Pat Cadigan as the authors responsible for transforming the dystopian genre into a feminist critical one (7). According to them, the critical feminist dystopia is “a textual mutation that self-reflexively takes on the present system and offers not only astute critiques of the order of things but also explorations of the oppositional spaces and possibilities from which the next round of political activism can derive imaginative sustenance and inspiration” (Moylan 10). The space offered in critical dystopias, both stylistically as well as generic, became the preferred outlet for expressions of struggle and resistance (Baccolini 520). These narratives of resistance and struggle often embodied women and other “ex-centric subjects” (520) whose discourse did not fit into the discourse of the generic literary canon.

As the dystopian genre is known for its imaginary capabilities and few to non-existing genre boundaries, it can envision different worlds and opinions without seeming too radical. Critical dystopian fiction thus has the power to challenge the hegemonic discourse by bringing forward counternarratives that would otherwise be considered abnormal, thereby creating space specifically for the feminist discourse. A final important note on the emergence of the feminist dystopian genre is the use of open endings in these narratives. Baccolini states that open endings “allow reads and protagonists to hope: the ambiguous, open endings maintain the utopian impulse within the work” (520). The theme of hope and this indirect yet effective approach to being critical of society will prove to be important to the emergence of

the reproductive narrative as well as how people are currently receiving and understanding the role of literature in much larger discourses.

1.4 Reproductive Narratives

The twenty-first century is already marked by renewed aggressivity towards liberal abortion policies and a restriction on freedom of choice. Current political affairs through which a pro-life administration is trying to overturn Roe v. Wade proves that, as well as the increase in states which are individually passing restrictive abortion bills. There is a growing divide between pro-life and pro-choice and control ideology is focusing more and more on reproductive control.

New narratives that specifically highlight reproductive rights and healthcare in their texts are reminiscent of older narratives that used the same approach. Burdekin's *Swastika Night* was published in 1937 and describes an alternative reality that takes place after the Second World War has ended. The Hitlerian era has introduced a Reduction of Women. Following this law, women have become numb and entirely subjective to men and their bodies are purely used for breeding purposes. In many feminist dystopias that follow *Swastika Night*, such as *The Handmaid's Tale* or *The Water Cure*, intercourse between partners is no longer about pleasure or intimacy. Its function has entirely switched to reproduction, in which the female body is praised for its biological function.

Specchio argues that the struggle for differentiating between sexual pleasure and reproduction regarding the function of the female body first appeared in Japanese literature in the early 1960s (100). They failed to find the separation between the two as the feminist ideal of the female body supposedly found its power in the fact that it is a nurturing and child-raising body. Hence, the function of the female body remained with its reproductive abilities. The biological need for a uterus and the consequential limitation in the reproductive cycle

thus raised questions of how women could act like men without being limited to their natural cycles (100-101). This possible fate for women returns in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, but also Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* and Jennie Melamed's *Gather the Daughters*, meaning that the topic is still relevant throughout the years. Burdekin's novel furthermore connects the "continuity between male preoccupation with power in official political roles and male dominance in private life" (Patai 88), which is the main cause for her depiction of a society in which "the cult of masculinity has become the most fundamental principle" (88). The biological function of a female's body becomes the sole characteristic of their social identity. King states that the reproductive abilities of women immediately label them as inferior to men, as they are a receptacle for the desires of the male and incubator for his offspring; a creature driven by emotion and instinct; a slave to her reproductive organs/hormones" (31). This idea is also seen in Jennie Melamed's *Gather the Daughters* in which their sole purpose as an adult woman is to give birth to two healthy children and in Christina Dalcher's *Vox*, in which the suggestion lingers that women's identity should solely be determined by their domestic roles.

The disturbing social reality of *Gather the Daughters* and its reproductive system takes the concept of the male dominance in the private sphere a step further. To ensure that women do not reproduce more than two healthy children, the father of the family can only have intercourse with his daughter. It is only allowed after a certain age, but it is encouraged by the ancestors to ensure purity of breeding. Any form of birth control was forbidden by the ancestors when the society was established, yet they placed men's pleasure above the safety of young girls. Each young girl, after getting her first period, enters her summer of fruition after which she needs to find a husband with whom she can have children. Through this, the cycle of reproduction will continue to repeat itself.

Though the social reality of *Gather the Daughters* is by far the most imaginative of the three novels, the idea of enforcing purity of race and genetics is not new. Vanessa describes calmly how she gets ready for her father every night, knowing exactly what to expect and how he wants her to be when he steps into the room. These scenes are written implicitly, never going into detail about what is happening since that is not what matters. The implication of how these familiar relations has become the norm for these young girls is worrisome, similar to how Vanessa's society has normalized and encouraged male domination in the private sphere. This will be further explored in the third chapter on technology and body politics, in which I will refer to Butler's notion of conforming the female body to ensure a certain cultural or historical tradition.

Whereas *Gather the Daughters* finds power in approaching why governmentalization of reproduction is problematic, *Red Clocks* uses a much more hands-on approach to exemplify what the effects are on a young woman. Ro's IVF procedures are almost traumatic, as she describes how she "feels her vagina prodded with a wand that makes black pictures on a screen" (2). It reads like rape, or at least unwilling penetration, for which the government is partially to blame. IVF treatments for Ro have not only become nearly impossible to receive due to the new laws, it has also become a last chance for Ro to become pregnant somewhat naturally. Had the government not decided to change its reproductive laws, Ro would not have to go through IVF, she would be able to adopt. Additionally, Ro reflects repeatedly on the duality of society's expectations; on one hand every woman is expected to be a mother, on the other hand there is strong discrimination against every other form of parenting that is a result from IVF, adoption or sperm donors. The novel thus reflects on how reproductive rights has more sides than only abortion; a restriction of reproductive rights set by the government affects every other form of reproduction and fertilization. Here too, Ro's body is politicized, and her womanhood becomes fully entrenched in her biological wish to reproduce.

Red Clocks is set two years after the United States Congress passed a bill called 'the Personhood Amendment' in which constitutional rights of property, life and liberty have been given to a fertilized egg at the moment of conception (Melamed 30-31). Keeping in mind the statements of groups such as Faith2Action and of pro-life politicians, this scenario is not necessarily unlikely to happen in our reality. The position of Ro is one that might be in our futures, if society allows governments to further and further restrict women's rights and fight to take away completely the right of choice. As a history teacher, Ro makes an important statement that is detrimental to understanding the usefulness of feminist dystopian fiction and any other forms of expression that wish to ensure freedom and liberty of choice. Ro tells her students to remove all expressions that are similar to "history tells us" from their essays. She explains that saying things like that is stale rhetoric and that it does not mean anything (Zumas 34). It is not history that is talking to us, it is current issues that do. By only analyzing the past and not effectively trying to change the present, studying history is not going to have any effect whatsoever. Consequently, the only way reproductive narratives are going to be useful is by studying their didactic approach and relate them to contemporary issues. That is why continuing to read these new publications matter, and why bringing them into the public eye will eventually start discussions and therefore start change.

The struggle in reproductive justice does not end with safe access to abortion. The politics of abortion are active across a much broader range of issues, for example lack of contraceptive knowledge across minorities and communities of color, poverty across communities which affects women's access to clinics and other health services, environmental racism which can endanger the reproductive systems of women of color and indigenous women (103). Additionally, Dorothy Roberts in her article "Race, Gender, and Genetic Technologies: A New Reproductive Dystopia?" argues that there still is a growing divide between women of color and wealthier middle-class white women regarding access to

safe reproductive health care. She states that stereotyping of women of color and their irresponsibility regarding reproduction has created a much larger discriminatory regulation of their reproduction. The image of the poor black woman whose own carelessness has resulted in pregnancy has allowed welfare reform and law enforcement to justify a much harsher and more impactful control over their reproduction. Roberts explains how the stereotyping of use of crack among communities of colored has become a "primary explanation for high rates of black infant mortality" (785), even though this mortality was steadily growing long before the crack epidemic of the late twentieth century.

The novels central to this thesis do reflect this inequality. All three novels have been written by white women of seemingly middle-class American background. My analysis therefore focuses on the issues these women experience in their surroundings and it does not reflect correctly on the entirety of the discriminative reproductive issue in the United States. This analysis of three contemporary publications in the genre can only determine how these narratives can or cannot contribute to a better understanding of the reproductive issue in the United States. I would recommend future research to focus on narratives of women of color or under-privileged women who experience access to safe abortions and reproductive healthcare very differently to ensure a more inclusive study of how literature addresses reproductive healthcare.

Chapter 2: Language and Gender

The feminist dystopian genre provides a wide space in which the power of language can be explored through narrative, agency, memory and forms of resistance. Through Jean, the main character of *Vox,* the reader jumps right into a household where the powerplay over language and speech determines every effort of communication. The novel proposes an interesting paradox in language, exploring the scientific side as well as the totalitarian and personal sides to speech, authority over voices, and language. The well-being of Amanda, one of the girls in *Gather the Daughters*¸ fully depends on her resistance towards the partial loss of verbal language that girls and women experience on the island. Language is in all three novels associated with loss of agency and gender-related symbolism, which is the reason as to why language is such a crucial chapter in the feminist dystopian discourse. Cavalcanti argues that in most feminist dystopias, the linguistic practices and therefore also language as structural tools are "inextricably linked to the construction and maintenance of gender domination" (174). As this is found in *Red Clocks*, *Vox*, and *Gather the Daughters*, this chapter will explore the different roles of language in building narratives of resistance and social criticism. The three novels of this study have all been authored by women, so this thesis will also analyze how their presentation and use of language might affect the course of the feminist dystopian genre.

Elgin argues that in any language, there are perceptions that cannot be expressed as those perceptions would result in self-destruction (177). To explain this, she reflects on a statement made by Cheris Kramarae in her book *Women and Men Speaking*, namely that there is not a single human language capable of expressing the perceptions of women (177). According to Elgin, American English, the dialect of English in which most popular feminist fiction of contemporary times is written, would cease to exist if it would find a way to represent women's perceptions accurately (177-178). It would no longer be the English

language, instead a new language would be formed and take the place of English. According to her, language is an intrinsic part of dystopian fiction and unmistakably closely related to matters of gender and power (178). The idea of the English language not being able to express women's perceptions can be linked to the concept of verbal hygiene, introduced by feminist linguist Deborah Cameron. Verbal hygiene is defined, according to Cavalcanti, in relation to attempts to clean up and improve language by controlling it and making it as inclusive as possible (154). Cameron states that verbal hygiene is present when "people reflect on language in a critical way" (9), which bears potential in every form of communication since language "pervades out habits of thought and behavior" (9). The regulatory aspects of language in feminist dystopian fiction focus on eliminating unclean language, such as cussing or heresy. This is seen in *Vox,* as Jean receives a courtesy tracker which will punish her for using profanity. She also is forced to repeat affirmations, which revolve around enforcing wives' submission to their husbands and ensuring purity and obedience. The government is thus trying to change their language by cleaning it up and adapting it to their ideology. This shows an important side to language and how it can be used to enforce a certain culture of domination. Language is inextricably tied to matters of control and power ideology.

Cavalcanti agrees with this and states that because linguistic control often stands for other forms of social control, for example political or ideological, language is often at the center of dystopian fiction (152). Neither *Vox* nor *Red Clocks* nor *Gather the Daughters* uses a new language like some of the older dystopian works do, for example Newspeak in *1984* or the mathematical language in Zamyatin's *We*. Instead, these novels show totalitarian regimes trying to change their language to enforce control. Additionally, in all three novels censorship is at play, though on different levels. In *Red* Clocks, women are not allowed to talk about abortion or any negative references towards pregnancy and in *Gather the Daughters*, the island seems to have created a severely censored version of English in which young girls do

not know some of the most basic words of the English language. Cavalcanti argues for the difference between a feminist dystopia off language, meaning that it is ineffable, and a dystopia of language, meaning manifested by means of a woman's narrative. The three novels central to this thesis are in this sense all dystopias of language, as they are written by women for women and with the intention of informing people about different female narratives. Studying the forms of narration and the manifestation of language, specifically the denial of verbal language, in these feminist dystopias is crucial in understanding the relationship between feminist dystopias and language. It will furthermore contribute to our understanding of what the novels can mean in developing a more inclusive language in which the female struggle could potentially be understood.

Consequently, it will be important to analyze how American English in this case builds the dystopian social reality and what role it plays in enforcing the feminist narrative. In his book *Transformations of Language in Modern Dystopias*, David Sisk explains that language as the primary weapon in attempts of resistance versus the oppressive government's desire to control language is the focus of twentieth-century dystopian fiction (1). He also acknowledges that the study of language in dystopian fiction has not been the focus of scholarly work, as it was said that language did not play a central role in creating dystopian societies (10). He opposes this argument and acknowledges that matters of controlling language are part of almost every dystopian work and that overlooking language and its close relations to questions of power and freedom would produce useless readings of dystopian fiction (10).

Cavalcanti considers Sisk's approach to language in dystopian fiction as problematic, as seeing language as an intrinsic thematic structural element to dystopian fiction is not always present in every dystopian text (173). Instead, Cavalcanti argues that "language often, rather than always, surfaces in the literary dystopias as a key element in the construction of

narrative conflict" (173-174). Dystopias can exist without language being one of the structural elements. *Gather the Daughters*, for example, is not a dystopian narrative in which language is a crucial structural element; instead, reproduction is much more of a pillar on which the novel relies structurally. *Vox* on the other hand is mostly staged through the perception of language in conflicts between genders. The difference between the two novels however does not determine whether one is and the other is not a dystopian novel. Both constructions of dystopian societies are eligible.

Because of the many differences within language as a structural element in dystopian fiction, different sides to the use and representation of language in feminist dystopian fiction will be explored in this chapter. The first part will analyze the role of memory in language-forming and how it can help strengthen the resistance narrative. The second part of this chapter will show how language becomes a power tool in the dual narrative between oppressor and resistance and how this affects the course of the feminist dystopian novel. In the conclusion to this chapter I will answer the main questions related to this topic: How is language incorporated into the novels' narrative structures and what does it reveal about the feminist dystopian approach to using language in oppositional narratives? Does the linguistic set up of the novels aid in overthrowing gender domination or does it only enforce discriminatory constructions?

The narrative of resistance that is often at the center of any dystopian story starts with the different functions of language. Whether it is a verbal confrontation, restrictions on speech, creating a new language to overpower the old one, language is the leading source of power in propaganda and resistance. Taking control over representation and memory, both led by language and voicing, is an important weapon in the development of the dystopian narrative, which needs to move from consciousness to action (Baccolini and Moylan 6). Baccolini

argues that the recovery of memory, whether individual or collective, is an essential tool of resistance (520). As the dystopian narrative resists authoritarian rule and a hegemonic discourse that has drastically changed the narrative of the past in order to remove collective memory, individual memory grows as the first step to organizing collective resistance (521). Jean's narrative in *Vox* often switches between real-life events and memories of her past. These memories often reflect on her young self, her past with her lover Lorenzo or detrimental moments of the past two years in which Jean saw the development of the authoritarian government. When she is offered a deal to go back to work and her research, she reflects on the first time she heard her son Steven talk about the Pure Movement. She calls it "resurrecting a Victorian cult for domesticity and keeping women out of the public sphere" (Dalcher 50). It is an interesting play by Dalcher to switch so often between present and past language and to connect language to thought. It empowers the novel's message of taking action as soon as the first signs of human right violations are shown as well as the importance of using your voice.

Additionally, half an hour before her wrist counter will be taken off as part of a deal between her and the government, Jean muses over her lack of participation in political protests when President Myers was running for office. She acknowledges that she did not vote at all, despite her friend Jackie's encouragement (96). Sisk explains that the motif of a dystopian novel is to motivate, not horrify (6) and so memory is used as a tool in ensuring the motivation to take action. In Jean's case, the fact that she did not use her voice before President Myers was elected or joined any form of protest haunts her narrative for the rest of the novel. It is also partially the reason why she decides to resist the government's plans and tries to regain her autonomy. The repetition of Jean's mistake and the connection Dalcher emphasizes between language and power is what bears the critical message of *Vox*. Jean's

disposition confronts the government but also her own silence, which enables her to try and modify her own language, her own voice.

Melamed's *Gather the Daughters* sets itself apart regarding memory and language as memories of the Wastelands are completely erased. The wanderers, the island's most important controlling force, has forbidden all adults who have memories of the Wastelands to speak about it. By restricting their language, they restrict their thought-processes. In an interesting article on the relationship between language and thought, Biryandi and Sabah (2012) argue that many people "share the intuition that they think in language; as a result, the lack of language would, in its own right, be the nonexistence of thought" (50). The censored speech would thus result in an under-developed ability to think, as people do not have access to their full knowledge.

This relationship between language and thought in *Gather the Daughters* is specifically explored in Vanessa's narrative. She knows she is missing knowledge about the Wastelands but that a culture of censorship has caused civilians of the island to censor themselves as well as others. When a new family called the Adams arrives on the island, Vanessa realizes that the censorship on their speech most likely has not completely set in yet, as the family is still adapting to the island's rules. She utilizes this space between languages to create a plan that would allow her to learn more about the Wastelands. Mrs. Adams, as a woman who experiences heavier levels of censorship than her husband, is not yet used to the censored topics. She reveals information about the Wastelands to Vanessa in a conversation without realizing it. It is only when Vanessa utters the word 'wastelands' that Mrs. Adams consciously tells her that she can not be asking her about that. As Biryandi and Sabah present it, language in this case serves as the expression of thought. It is necessary for Mrs. Adams thoughts to become censored in order for the control on language to work in verbal form.

Janey reflects on this duality between censorship on speech versus censorship on thoughts. She expresses that “they can’t stop us from thinking. They can force us to do anything they want, but they can’t stop us from thinking. And maybe if we think, we’ll think up a way to (leave)” (Melamed 216). Janey’s character emphasizes the relationship between thought and resistance. She also resorts to thought to modify the island’s language: by inserting thoughts of resistance into her way of thinking, she eventually might be able to voice them and thus change their language. This shows that it is not always the totalitarian party that is trying to change language, it is often also the resistance party. The acknowledgement of these young girls that they need to start using their thoughts to organize resistance is thus a major step in the characters’ relationship with non-verbal as well as verbal language.

A fifth narrative that intertwines the past with the present in *Red Clocks* is another intriguing way of using language as resistance, and one that is not too common in dystopian fiction. This fifth narrative might serve this purpose of resistance as in interrupts and challenges the normalcy with which the four main narratives are written. It concerns smaller parts from a diary that belonged to Eivør Mínervudottír. Ro, one of four main characters, is also known as ‘the biographer’. As a forty-two-year-old history teacher in a small coastal town in Oregon, her focus seems to be divided between her desire to have a child and her desire to finish and publish a biography on Nordic Polar explorer Eivør Mínervudottír. Pieces of Eivør’s diary are included in *Red Clocks* as interruptions between the regular narratives and its language challenges how the lives of the four main characters could be experienced. Leni Zumas explains in an interview between her and Rhianna Walton, an editor for Powell’s Books in the United States, that she wanted Eivør to act as a prism that could reflect on different characters of the novel in their different stages in life. Eivør, Ro, Susan, Mattie and Gin Percival are all women living under different circumstances, yet similarities can be drawn between their characters as well as their social and political roles. Zumas describes Eivør as a

female explorer whose work would have been noticed had she been a male, since gender-based discrimination indirectly allowed for her voice to be lost in the sea of male-dominated narratives. With *Red Clocks* being so explicitly dystopian regarding female reproductive rights and ownership over their bodies, the extra narrative of Eivør adds a sense of timelessness concerning the violation of women's rights and specifically the place of women in the larger social and political body.

As Ro wants to give back the space Eivør lost so many years ago, she dreams about finishing her book, seeing it on the shelves of a bookstore in Salem, feeling how through words "a woman long dead coming to life" (30). It is interesting how Ro feels empowered through creating this new narrative, though it is not entirely original since she allows her own personality to change some of the details of Eivør's life. This in-between narrative functioning as the fifth female main character is an interesting approach to showing how language can work on multiple levels. Abiding by both Cavalcanti and Sisk, language in *Red Clocks* thus emerges as the structure on which the feminist dystopia is built. Taking into account Zumas' remark on that the fifth narrative is meant to connect the four others, the feminist critical attitude serves itself through an additional narrative that seeks to create a new language that will help understand the struggle of the other four women's characters.

Following David Sisk's theory that "issues of controlling language inform nearly all dystopian fictions" (10), it is important to try and comprehend how questions of power and language are represented in feminist dystopias. As the concern of gender and identity is crucial to the structure of these novels, the feminist dystopian author sets up a narrative that refers to gender and power in relation to one another as well as language and thought. The connection between *Vox*'s main character Jean and language is a forward way of placing language at the center of the female struggle. Jean is a researcher in aphasia, which is brain

damage that affects the ability to comprehend or form language and speech. As one of the top researchers in the United States, Jean sets herself apart as a woman of high intellect. Jean describes how it was her colleague's idea to move on from Broca's aphasia to Wernicke's aphasia. The difference between the two is that with Broca's aphasia the patient is still partially able to produce language whereas with Wernicke, that ability has completely been lost. In brain damage to the Wernicke area, "language, for them, had become an inescapable labyrinth of non-meaning. I imagine it must feel like being lost at sea" (Dalcher 53). This sentence reads ambiguously, as it reflects on the patient's experience but also Jean's experience being a woman in her social reality. Her language, her speech, had lost all meaning in the period of time in which she was forced to wear her wrist counter. It is therefore an interesting play by Dalcher to choose a main character who is a female top researcher in neuroscience, focusing on mankind's capability to formulate language, and take her voice away.

Then there is also aphasia itself. Jean worked towards finding a cure, a serum that could help patients regain their ability to form words and express themselves. She acknowledges how the day before she received her wrist counter, she was giving a lecture to a packed room of students and staff who were listening to news on the latest breakthroughs regarding the research on Wernicke's area that Jean's research group was conducting. The opposition between how widely-heard her voice was in that lecture hall and how it changed within a single day creates an interesting duality in her narrative. The topic that created her academic fame and allowed her voice to grow in the sense of publicity on her work, it being the loss of language, is the same topic through which her loss of meaning is emphasized. Her public role thus severely deteriorates alongside her private role. Sisk argues that dystopia "forces us to wrestle for our own autonomy and control over language: not merely with the language itself but with those forces that will, if left unchallenged, seize control of language"

(12). In Jean's case, her only source through which she can build a resistance is going back to work and studying the loss of language. The removal of her wrist counter is the only viable way of using control over language against the totalitarian government.

Jean's sense of opposition grows as she reveals that the power the cure against aphasia would have could be used against them. She tells Patrick that with a cure, the government would be able to create an anti-cure, or a serum that would create aphasia. Jean would thus become a tool in enforcing and growing their power, reflecting on language as one of the most important power tools both for the resistance but especially for the totalitarian government. Both Sisk and Cavalcanti state that linguistic control is essentially the first and most powerful tool for totalitarian governments. Even ideological or political control starts with language, as humans need language to express certain ideals or enforce certain forms of government. Consequently, the suggestion of a totalitarian government taking full control over people's linguistic abilities warns the reader for the power of language.

Sisk mainly focuses on *Brave New World* in his analysis of the dystopian classic, but he addresses significant points about how language lives in a society and creates resistance. He states that the removal of all literature has severely affected the use of language in the World State and that cultural differences have been severely reduced (22). Both Melamed and Dalcher take this notion of literature and the written texts as a first step in reducing people's agency and development in communications. In *Gather the Daughters*, only Vanessa has access to books and written texts from the Wastelands since her father is a wanderer and collector of wasteland items. The rest of the island lives without books of reference or novels as leisure. Vanessa's interactions with the books are often short and of an unfamiliar nature, as she has no idea who Picasso is or what the Roman Empire looked like. She furthermore explains how her father "scratches out the publication dates of all his books, saying wasteland

years are meaningless, but he leaves in the names of the authors and everything else" (Melamed 16). Melamed even mentions Salman Rushdie in a list of authors of which all others seem to be fictive. It is a humorous pun in the context of censorship. The library at Vanessa's home is furthermore one of the places in which she crosses boundaries and asks a new citizen of the island about the wastelands, making the library a place in which language functions as resistance. Her tendency to ask questions is her most powerful characteristic.

In *Vox*'s social reality, language only lives in men's experience. Women are not allowed to read or write, and incoming mail is only delivered to the man of the household. Cavalcanti argues that contemporary 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" and that the silencing of women happens through for example "enforced use of formulaic or contrived speech, prohibition of access to public speech, reading and/or writing or denial of representation" (152). It thus seems that Dalcher's approach to language restrictions connected to the gender issue is not renewing or original, yet it still shows how linguistic manipulation and "dominant patriarchal ideologies" (152) are interweaved. Cavalcanti continues by stating that language also has a liberating potential, which is also what Sisk as well as Boccolini and Moylan argue for. In the case of *Vox,* the liberating potential of Jean's language lies with completing her research on aphasia, the loss of language. The totalitarian government's goal of silencing women is thus interrupted by their dependency on a woman studying the biological way of losing language. Dalcher clearly resorts to irony in finding new meaning as to how Jean can fight back. Her voice of opposition and the linguistic control enforced by the government come to a new high when Jean refuses to work for the President. The response from the government is a developed wrist counter. She is told that she needs to tap into her wrist counter once a day and recite a number of affirmations that not only degrade her even further as a woman, but also

emphasizes the little control she has left. One of these affirmations is as follows: “We are called as women to keep silence and to be under obedience. If we must learn, let us ask our husbands in the closeness of the home, for it is shameful that a woman question God-ordained male leadership” (Dalcher 83). In this case, the confrontation between man and woman is enacted by a linguistic struggle. Additionally, a courtesy tracker is added to her wrist counter, meaning that whenever she curses, her number goes up by ten. At schools around the country, girls of all ages are rewarded with candy and make-up if they have the lowest count of spoken words of all girls in their age group. As Jean puts it, “voices are traded for crap” (90).

David Sisk sees this play on communication as a characteristic of dystopian fiction, as the wrist counter introduces a counter suggestion to oppression (21). Besides the confrontation between human beings, there now also exists a language confrontation between a human being and a piece of propaganda. Resistance is thus often found through a re-appropriation of language, as can be seen in Vanessa’s struggle with re-learning things that she should already know but has no access to. In other cases like *Vox*, resistance is built through linguistic manipulation that is characteristic of feminist dystopian narratives. In both cases, critique on the present is voiced through an exaggeration of ‘what we have now’ (Cavalcanti 153). As these novels present a misogynist society, “they incorporate the linguistic struggle rather than showing ‘ready-made’ reconstructed language” (153). It shows the fight of breaking through an institution that has been established based on gendered discrimination and simultaneously displays the power of language in speculative yet critical fiction. Through this, the critical purpose of the feminist dystopian novel reaches a point where it establishes itself as a legitimate representation of the female struggle in the United States.

A final point that I want to make regarding the relationship between language and the three dystopian novels as the focus point of this thesis relies on what Cavalcanti states to be the prescriptivism of feminist dystopian fiction and science fiction. She states that critics of contemporary feminist speculative fiction such as Penny Florence and Lucie Armitt focus too much on plucking away the surface levels of language to display "the deep structural principles of language" (154). In enforcing a critical attitude towards speculative fiction that always needs to uncover the deeper layers of language in, the experimental nature of speculative fiction is lost. Though her argument is not at all related to for example the use of biopower in feminist dystopian narratives, there is something to be said for her criticism on the dangers of making speculative fiction adhere to too many formal linguistic structures.

In *Vox*, a novel that specifically seeks out language as a structural element, there is a better balance between the power of language in feminist speculative fiction and the shock-worthy dystopian side of the novel, which is missing in *Red Clocks*. The suggestion of creating a serum that causes aphasia as a possible result of Jean's defeat is a careful play on biopower. It leans towards the use of biopower in enforcing and even greater loss of language, and one that might be lasting. By innovating a serum that allows for full linguistic control, the totalitarian government would have no issue enforcing any other form of power and control. Women would completely lose agency, and perhaps other communities that do not fit within the state's ideology as well. Though biopower in this case is only implied and therefore might seem too radical, Cavalcanti argues that dystopian narratives need to shake off prescriptive ways of looking at the use of language in enforcing ideologies of gender (154). Biopower does not seem to appear in much of contemporary feminist dystopias, instead it is more about the intrinsic structures of gendered discrimination and loss of language. Cavalcanti argues that feminist dystopias are going to be more effective when different manifestations of language are shown in narrative structures, thus in a more flexible speculative way. Dalcher's choice to

include a suggestion of biopower not only brings the novel to a deeper dystopian level, it also shows the playfulness with which feminist dystopian can and should be written. Though most of the morale of the novels is serious, the feminist dystopian genre will still be related to the power of the imaginary.

Overall, feminist dystopias challenge how much control we think we have over our language and how it relates to the forces that lead us, both socially and politically. By presenting realities in which language is directly related to female agency as well as power, the feminist dystopian novel emphasizes the vulnerability of language as a tool of power and how quickly it could be used against certain groups and communities. Another important note to take from the relationship between language and feminist dystopias is that not every feminist dystopia needs to have language as a cornerstone to its thematic structures: though it is an important feature, feminist dystopias engage with a much wider spectrum of topics that are just as crucial in explaining the female struggle in contemporary times.

Chapter 3: Technology, Physical Boundaries and Body Politics

Boundaries on female bodies are imposed through institutionalized discrimination as well as language. In different communities and different countries, women are either prohibited from the public sphere or the private sphere, sometimes even both. There always seems to be limits set as to what a woman can say, what she can do, where she can do it, and how she should do it. There exists a culture of restriction on the female body, originating historically from times in which women had no agency due to male domination domestically as well as publicly and biologically from their reproductive bodies as discussed in the first chapter.

For this chapter I want to reflect on several ways in which the three feminist dystopian novels display boundaries that are imposed upon the female body. The first one is technology, which happens through surveillance technology, a traditional characteristic carried over from late twentieth-century dystopian fiction. Technological boundaries are also imposed upon the female body through reproductive technologies. The latter one determines much of *Red Clocks*'s narrative, leaning on Ro's experience of going through IVF and seeing the possibilities and downsides of reproductive technicalities. Other boundaries that this chapter will reflect upon are restrictions imposed upon women motivated by a certain religion and ideology, as well as body politics.

The three novels handle imposed boundaries differently, and this is important in understanding how they use the political female body as part of their critical attitude towards society. In Zumas's *Red Clocks*, a Pink Wall between the United States and Canada directly affects the safety of women during and after pregnancies, as they are forced to seek out illegal and thus unsafe abortions or have their baby without perhaps the necessities needed to take care of them. In both *Vox* and *Red Clocks*, the wall between the United States and Mexico has long ago become reality. Though both novels state on the front flap that the text is entirely fictional and that any resemblance to real-life persons or events is entirely coincidental, the

reference to the wall undeniably links the novel to current-day United States. These are physical boundaries, of which Melamed takes it a step further by creating a non-place from which the civilians cannot physically leave due to lack of transportation and knowledge. Additionally, in this chapter I want to focus on the different sides of restricting the political female body. How do these novels set up the body in relation to reflect on the different forms of limitations imposed on the female body? How does body politics come into play and if so, how does it reflect on

Technology-based lifestyles have become the norm in modern society. Everything needs to be as fast as possible, from simply sending texts to ordering food to your door to traveling. The image of a phone always stuck to someone's hand has become the image of the twenty-first century, and so have discussions of safety, privacy and government control. In an age where phones can be unlocked through facial recognition and publicizing personal information on the internet has never been so normal, a dystopian world in which this technology would be used against us almost seems impossible. Nevertheless, after the move into a post-ideological state in which consumerism and the economic crisis changed the outlook on the hope for technology, it became a characteristic in much dystopian fiction of the twentieth century. Well's *The Time Machine* displays the negative effects of scientific-technological development to human beings (55) and George Orwell's *1984* shows a social reality in which human beings are fully controlled by spy technology and the degeneration of human beings is compared to the developed abilities of machinery and industrialism. In Huxley's *Brave New World*, technology is used to regulate breeding and therefore significantly affects the reproduction process of human beings. Drugs developed by technology keep people subordinate and happy, which leads to unchallenged submission to government control. Then in *The Handmaid's Tale*, technology regulates reproduction and the state has near-complete

control over women's bodies. The advancement of technology has become an inerasable part of human development, which is why it is receiving much criticism. Critique of technology simultaneously becomes critique of human kind.

The dystopian side of technology is therefore the reliance of modern society on technology to help us perform the most basic tasks day in and day out. Technology has begun to cross physical boundaries, for example the microchip implant that people have installed under their skin. It allows them to pay hands-free for their groceries or unlock their homes by a simple raise of the wrist. The analogue watch has in many cases given up its place to a smartwatch. Lights are turned on by a simple voice command and fingerprints are now able to unlock your phone and your online bank account. It is therefore not surprising that these developments find their way into dystopian fiction.

Both *Vox* and *Red Clocks* use surveillance cameras as a technological dystopian aspect. Jean states that "they're everywhere now, the cameras. In supermarkets and schools, hair salons and restaurants, waiting to catch any gesture that might be considered as sign language, even the most rudimentary form of nonverbal communication" (Dalcher 30). Ro acknowledges the spies of the American Intelligence services, who keep track of everyone who speaks or even hints at abortion. Additionally, *Vox* develops the smartwatches from the modern-day source of information and entertainment into an additional instrument of power with which the government can control women's voices.

Beauchamp argues that dystopian fiction is synonymous to the fear of technology (53), and that the dystopian image of the future is fully reliant on a totalitarian state that depends on technology to further its control. He poses the question whether or not technology can be considered as an autonomous force that "determines the values and thus shapes society in its own image – a force to which even the putative rulers are subservient (54). This idea is specifically persistent in Christina Dalcher's *Vox,* which is the novel that relies on technology

most out of all three. *Vox* approaches the restriction and near removal of women's rights in a very literal way by presenting an alternative reality in which speech-limitations directly affect women's physical resistance. As mentioned shortly before, Dalcher's novel plays with the idea of women receiving speech-limiting wrist counters, through which electric shocks are distributed when they surpass their limit of 100 words a day. Once the government implemented the wrist counters as obligatory, no woman or girl was given a period of time to acclimate to the counter. Jean reflects on this by way of her young daughter Sonia, to whom she gave rewards when she would use physical communication instead of verbal whenever she wanted something. She states that reproduction now became a fearful expectation of society, as no woman wanted to give birth to a baby girl and see their voices being taken away (Dalcher 52). Mothers were placed in an extremely difficult situation; they had to use the words they had to communicate only the absolute necessary while simultaneously protecting young girls from accidentally surpassing their word count. The fear of the electric shocks became a fearful thing on its own, without the government needing to enforce it.

These wrist counters furthermore directly affect the relationship between Jean and her husband in which the assigned male domination quickly results in tension between the two. The silencing of the women characterizes the differentiation between the male gender and female gender very superficially, as it is the assumed and standardized form of gender inequality. The novel opens with this tension, as Patrick forbids Jean to speak any more words as her counter is nearing 100. Despite the extreme restriction on her speech already existing, Patrick adds another layer. Though it might be out of concern for Jean since he does not want her to be shocked, Jean's speech is now restricted publicly as well as privately. This sets the stage for the rest of their relationship. Patrick comments how he wonders "if it was better when you didn't talk" (60), yet he continually wants Jean to explain to the children what is going on. There is thus a duality in submission to technology as desired by Patrick and

submission to him as a husband, since Jean speaks back to him. His narrative acknowledges that Jean's complete submission to technology, in this case the wrist counter, will simultaneously lead to submission to him. Without speech, she will no longer be able to object to him either.

Feenberg points out modern-day's "willful submission" to a force that is just as powerful as the economy, yet the relationship between mankind and economy sees a lot more resistance (4). The alternative reality of *Gather the Daughters* experiences a near-complete abandonment of technology, since the novel is set on an island on which life is simple and focused on pre-industrialization lifestyles. This is an interesting take on the relationship between mankind and technology, since these people had to surrender back to the power of nature instead of the power of technology. The suggestion lingers throughout the novel that the Wastelands experienced a destructive period and that the wanderers who now live on the island have salvaged what they could and started a new civilization on the island. The secrets of the wanderers, however, as well as the loss of knowledge among all civilians creates the idea that the Wastelands are still perfectly intact. After all, the wanderers go back to the Wastelands periodically and always bring back a new piece of technology. When they leave, they are not gone for long and return within a day. This suggests a continuing relationship with technology and enforces the idea that even in an attempt to escape, human kind will always rely on some form of technology in order to survive.

The utopia of the wanderers on the island on which *Gather the Daughters* is set turns into a dystopia for all when an unknown illness creates fatality after fatality. The girls argue that it is their punishment for disobedience (Melamed 337) and that "the pregnant women and babies are all dying" (335). Vanessa, the daughter of a wanderer, receives medication that her father brought back from the Wastelands. None of the wanderers' family members passed away, which suggests that the wanderers might have introduced the illness as a way to cleanse

the island from "generations of breeding with the same blood" (351). Again, the survival of the wanderers' utopia depends on medication from the Wastelands, which has been developed through technology and science. The return of technology as a source of dependency in even a civilization that has tried to abandon all forms of technology shows how ingrained technological and scientific developments have altered the course of human kind's existence.

Reproductive technology as a separate source of limitations as well as extensions of the female body is a defining thematic structure in recent feminist dystopias. *Future Home of the Living God*, for example, presents a dystopian reality in which human evolution has stopped and pregnant women who are carrying a healthy baby are hunted down. Then in Megan McCafferry's *Bumped*, a similar occurrence in which everyone past the age of eighteen is infertile causes the coercion of teenagers to provide children. Both novels resort to new forms of reproductive technology to invade the female body and discuss the option of mechanical wombs. Though *Red Clocks* as a reproductive dystopia reflects on loss of choice for women regarding their reproductive futures, the novel does not engage with any form of reproductive technology that can alter the female body or take its place. The appearance of novels that do engage with fearful alternatives to the biological womb thus refer to a growing fear of technology and how it could affect women's reproductive futures.

Reproductive technology furthermore engages with the balances between genders, as new pregnancies are no longer only between heterosexual couples. Developed technology and the options of IVF or donors increase access to reproduction for queer couples or single mothers. This would suggest that women's dependency on men would decrease, since these developments allow women to have children through different options, adoption also being one. However, Markens et al. state that current research on the impact of new reproductive technology have concluded that a growth in use of reproductive technology will most likely

result in the reinforcement of patriarchal (male) control (463). They argue that the development in reproductive technologies, i.e. IVF and surrogacy, will challenge "gendered norms about mothers, parenting, and families" (463), but that it can also reinforce them. Women's agency in determining if they want to use reproductive techniques would be "influenced and constrained by the gendered (and largely male-dominated) institutions, roles, and ideologies that shape their every-day lives" (463). An important point they make is that women use reproductive techniques to help increase the baby's father's involvement in the pregnancy, for example through ultrasounds and paternal testing. Empirical studies on matters like these, Martens et al. argue, shed light on an ongoing tension between the autonomy of women and their reproductive rights on one hand, and "the call for increased male responsibility for social involvement in reproductive activities on the other" (464).

This tension is reflected in Zumas's *Red Clocks*, as both Ro and Mattie attempt to address their reproductive health care on their own. Ro is without a partner and reflects on the many hours she spent on dating websites, dating apps and other forms of trying to find a partner. Her therapist attributes her romance-less life to emotional issues, as if the only explanation for being single is mental health problems. This drives Ro further away from society's expectation to have a partner, which ultimately enforces her will to become a single mother and prove everybody wrong. Mattie is too scared to tell her on-and-off boyfriend about their pregnancy. Both Ro and Mattie try to claim their autonomy over their bodies by refusing or denying male interference but are still subjected to male-dominated institutions that have decided for them what will happen. Ro for example is forced to take a medicine she does not know to support her IVF procedures, given to her by a male doctor who refuses to explain to her the exact workings of the medication. Since she has no other option, Ro is deemed choiceless. This is reminiscent of the argument stated earlier, namely that women's

agency in using any form of reproductive health care, whether it is an ultrasound or abortion, will most likely always depend at least partially on men.

Of course, these novels do not engage with the issues that queer couples for example experience in their reproductive rights. Though the twenty-first century has come far in creating more inclusive access to reproductive health care, it is important to note that the discourse on reproductive rights cannot only reflect on heterosexual couples. The struggle for reproductive rights moves beyond that, and it would be interesting as well as important to include queer narratives in studying the progress of reproductive rights in the United States.

Reproductive rights and its technologies also have a political side, to which the struggle for queer couples in gaining reproductive rights is also directly related. The political female reproductive body affects the discourse on the biological function of female bodies and the concept of body politics. Butler argues that the body is not self-identical but is instead given meaning by historical and social ideas. Its bears possibilities that are "necessarily constrained by available historical conventions" (521), and the body "*is* a historical situation and is a manner of doing, dramatizing, and reproducing a historical situation" (521). In other words, the way bodies are shaped and represented currently is like a vacuum for our times. In twenty or thirty years, the body will have changed and so the body as we treat it now functions as a vacuum of our current societal views. We can refer to historical times by studying the perception of the body. Butler furthermore reflects on Simone de Beauvoir, who in Butler's words claims that

> to be female is a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to a historical idea of 'woman', to induce the body to become a cultural sign (522).

By approaching the female body as something to own, the attempt to address gender as a historical and social construct fails. The title of *Red Clocks* for example refers to the fertility clock of women and their reproductive organs. Women's reproductive usefulness as human beings is often measured through their reproductive timeframe, as society has imposed an age-limit after which women are no longer fully suitable to have children. Though this age-limit is based on biological capabilities of the uterus and ovaries, it has also become synonymous with any other form of parenting. The boundaries that are imposed on female bodies by enforcing concept such as women's reproductive clock or the expectation of women to have children within that timeframe already drastically influences how society conforms the body into a specific ideal.

Conforming the female body into a certain cultural sign is most visible in Melamed's *Gather the Daughters*. As shortly reflected upon earlier, the reproductive system of the novel is set up in such a way that mothers are denied birth control and after giving birth to a second healthy child, the mother and father are no longer allowed to be intimate. Instead, the father is allowed by the rules of the island's governmental body to have intercourse with his daughter to satisfy his needs. Vanessa, one of the girls, is very innocent in her short moments of reflection on this fact. She states that she loves her father and he loves her, and that it is normal for every girl to lie under her father every night (Melamed 371). This form of abuse of young girls and the violation of their youth is in the case of *Gather the Daughters* a result of shame ideology. Vanessa acknowledges that nobody ever talks about it, which suggests that it is either taboo or a way to continue enforcing the culture of shame. Armstrong states:

> It is a false argument to assert that sexually invading your own child is seen or has ever been seen by males as so reprehensible, or so unjustifiable, as to be horrible behavior. The effect of this stereotype of "dread" has been to reinforce a widespread secondary belief that this sort of thing does not happen. Universal

> emphasis on that public belief kept those of us who had been exploited effectively isolated. […] Collective denial, cloaked in epic language, supported the continuation of a privately assumed male 'right' – a right that goes far back in history (20).

This is exactly what Melamed criticizes. The personal narrative of a young and innocent child like Vanessa emphasizes the culture of silence and how patriarchal structures can allow the abuse of children to be permitted and even presumed (20). In cases like these, a feminist dystopian novel like *Gather The Daughters* really shows its critical importance. In emphasizing how allowing patriarchal and sexualized structures to exist and govern societies can lead to unchallenged abuse of children, women and others, the novel challenges how we look at out direct environment.

Vanessa also realizes her unimportance as a young girl within this structure of patriarchal rule through analyzing the repetitiveness of their island's governmental structure and why it seems useless.

> People living to create more people and then dying when they're useless, to make room for even more new people. She's not sure why they keep making new people to replace themselves except – of course – that the ancestors said so. In a year or so some man will mount and marry her, and she'll push out two children, assuming she is fertile and doesn't have defectives. She'll raise them to be like her – obedient, if smarter than most – and eventually she'll take the final draft and die (Melamed 153).

Her life has been decided for her by the ancestors and her usefulness as a woman is limited to her reproductive abilities. She realizes her unimportance and how small she is, dreaming "of a world where she has something to do like a man does. She dreams she's a wanderer, importantly striding into the wastelands to search for goods and people and secrets" (154).

Vanessa's narrative as a young girl being aware of the role she has been assigned but most of all the agency she does not have is an interesting approach to addressing body politics. It raises questions of parenting and how children grow up in a world where gender equality is still not the norm. In most cases of feminist dystopian novels, the narrators are adult women. Authors might find it easier to identify with older women rather than children, since their worldview is still incomplete and underdeveloped, or argue that adult narratives will resonate better with discussions of gender and reproductive rights. In *Red Clocks* there are four narratives of which three are adults and one a teenager, in *Vox* it is only Jean, a middle-aged mother. To see *Gather the Daughters* written entirely from the perspective of teenagers is thus powerful in understanding the effects of gendered politics on cognitive development.

Conclusion

The genre of feminist dystopian novels is not a straight-forward one; with roots found in science fiction and its criticism ranging from political affairs to personal experiences with reproductive technologies, the genre has many layers. The issues that these novels bring to the surface, i.e. the effects of restrictive abortion laws on the overall safety of women, institutionalized abuse allowed through patriarchal structures and the problematic definition of women according to their reproductive abilities to name a few are incredibly important to acknowledge.

The authors of *Vox*, *Red Clocks* and *Gather the Daughters* succeed in using speculative fiction to explore thought experiments upon their readers by challenging accepted ideas of society. *Gather the Daughters* is powerful in its display of young teenagers' narrative and how their bodies are conformed by certain cultural and ideological signs. Its use of younger girls instead of female adults, which is more characteristic of contemporary feminist dystopias, awakens a more critical attitude towards how our youth is raised and where sexualized discrimination begins. The intriguing play between language and power as shown in *Vox* confronts the reader with modern-day understandings of how women should and should not use their voices. It also addresses resistance in thought and thereby emphasizes that you do not have to be the loudest screamer to help make change when something is not right. Lastly, the personal memoirs of specifically Ro and Mattie in their fight against restrictive abortion laws shows how body politics and discriminatory reproductive politics endanger their mental and physical health. *Red Clocks* helps to highlight what could happen when exclusive political institutions try and succeed in taking decisions about someone else's body.

To answer the questions that were introduced in the preface to this thesis: yes, it is extremely useful to continue reading and studying new publications in the feminist dystopian genre. The rapid speed with which novels such as *Gather the Daughters*, *Vox*, and

Red Clocks have been appearing shows the urgency of discourse on social issues. Their authors experience social anxieties that are either affecting them or loved ones around them, meaning that topics introduced in these novels are applicable to every-day women in the United States. By studying the discourse on reproductive rights and the political female body as presented in these novels, we can create change before severe restrictions on matters of freedom and choice are implemented. It is crucial to remain critical of our surroundings, and feminist dystopias and other forms of speculative fiction can help their readers do so.

I have hoped to have shown that the rise of the feminist dystopian novel reflects on social and political issues that affect the safety of certain groups and communities. Though the critical attitude towards the position of women is the largest sounding one, feminist dystopias do and should also pinpoint towards issues forming in smaller communities within the larger female discourse. It is important to acknowledge the influence feminist dystopian literature can have on understanding personal and communal suffering when certain rights become restricted by political decisions.

As stated in the introduction, these novels were chosen based on the author's American background and their connection to American politics. For future research on the topic of feminist dystopian fiction, I recommend broadening the search and looking at reproductive narratives that are appearing in countries such as India or Nigeria. The female struggle in these countries is very different from the female struggle in the United States, as most do not have access to internet, information and even basic sanitary and health care. Regarding a more inclusive study of reproductive rights and politicized bodies within the United States, I recommend further analysis on queer couples in their fight for reproductive rights and childcare.

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