The Mune: a speculative feminist utopia beyond the gender binary

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Impact of Covid-19

With many institutions and libraries closed and with restricted access to the public during Covid-19, I was unable to trawl through library archives for unique primary source material: pamphlets, advertisements, ship's logs, artwork and other documentation from the mid-nineteenth century, which would have assisted me in creating the largely unheard-of voice of the nineteenth-century working-class woman.

In addition, Covid-19 presented me with other problems: of having to home-school children as well as shield vulnerable family members. This meant that even when institutions reopened on a limited basis, it was not possible for me to travel and put my loved ones at risk. Therefore, I have relied largely on online and secondary sources to evidence both my creative choices and historical accuracy.

Acknowledgements

Thanks firstly to my supervisor, Matthew De Abaitua, for believing in this project in the first place, embracing the experiment, and supporting me through to its conclusion. Thanks also to my panel in LiFTs, Professor Katharine Cockin and Dr Sean Seeger, for their expertise and support, and my examiners Dr Una McCormack and Dr Chris Bundock for a sensitive but stimulating viva experience, and their in-depth analysis of my thesis.

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And lastly, and most importantly, thanks to my family for never questioning my sanity for wanting to do a PhD later in life, doing their very best to feign interest in my quirky ideas, and just going with it (random dinners, tight budgets, and all). Mustn't forget the dog who forced me on those morning walks which turned out to be the best space to solve writing problems, even if I did have to dig him out of rabbit holes.

Abstract

‘The Mune: a speculative feminist utopia beyond the gender binary’ comprises a speculative work of my own creation, *The Mune,* alongside a critical commentary that reflects on my creative process and aims to contextualise my work within the genre of Speculative Fiction.

The Mune is a multi-generational narrative which charts the experience of a group of ‘surplus’ Victorian mothers and their children, who are shipwrecked on a mysterious island in a parallel universe. Told by multiple narrators, the novel imagines an alternative history: one free of patriarchy, which affords the characters a chance to redefine their gender roles and those of their children, whilst speculating on the conditions necessary for them to evolve.

The thesis considers aspects of the process of composition, covering some of the personal experiences that inspired and informed the development of my novum, the theory and literature that informed my creative choices and new scientific and theoretical developments which have impacted on the narrative.

[158 words]

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CREATIVE COMPONENT

THE MUNE

'It comes to this, that unless Heaven should send a new planet alongside for us to export our superfluous women to, we must make up our minds to keep them at home.'

Jessie Boucherett,1868.

CRITICAL COMPONENT

INTRODUCTION - The Personal in the Project

[1]

Figure i: Leoni - Chief of Ba

My middle name, ‘Laisa’, was given to me by the chief of Ba (Figure i). Ba is a village on one of the Yasawa islands: a remote and undeveloped Fijian island off the coast of Viti Levu. The chief’s eldest daughter was named Laisa, and despite being the second born twin, I was considered the eldest child. In Fijian culture, they believe the eldest twin pushes the youngest out to see what the world is like before entering it. It is the only time I have been able to lord it over my sister.

My family were based in Suva, the capital of Viti Levu, at the University of the South Pacific. The first few years of my childhood were spent outside in the sun, chasing frogs with sticks, eating cassava and playing with coconut cups. There was a sense of freedom not limited by Western tradition, and there was no ‘social signalling of sex differences,’[2] through gendered colours and toys.

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[1] Susannah Dawes, *Leoni - Chief of Ba*, 1993, photograph, Yasawa Islands, Fiji.
[2] Gina Rippon, *The Gendered Brain: The New Neuroscience That Shatters the Myth of the Female Brain* (London: The Bodley Head, 2019), 220.

[3]

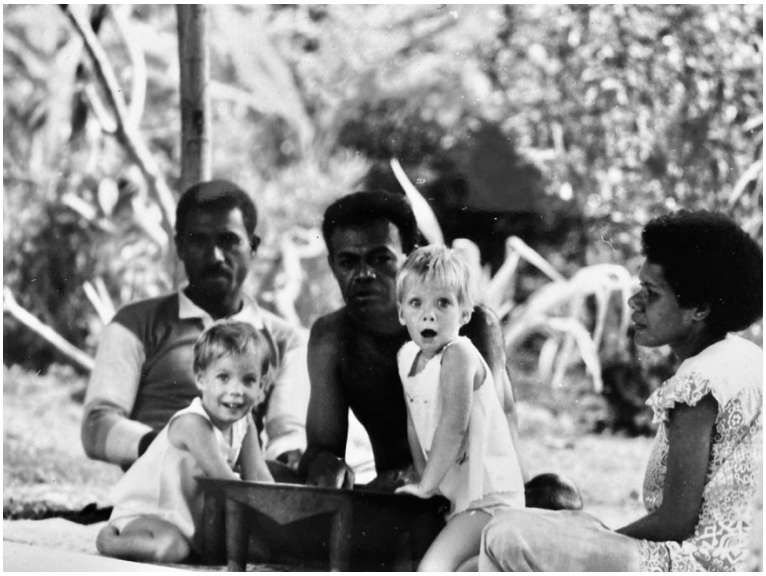

Figure ii: Ba Village

On our return to England in 1974, when I was three, I experienced a culture shock, one still keenly felt. Not only did my sister and I lose our community of carers, some of whom are seen with us in Figure ii, the extended family of the island who had adopted us, and the freedom to roam unhindered in the heat, but we were forced to view ourselves in a different way: as a subset. In England we were girls, rather than children, which we came to learn meant we were not supposed to get dirty or chase wildlife half-naked.

When in company, my mother used to tell a story of an incident that happened shortly after we arrived in Essex. A shopkeeper asked whether we were 'boys or girls' because we had short, sun-kissed hair and neutral clothing. We answered 'boys' because we didn't yet realise there was a marked difference. Sadly, it wasn't long before we were wearing dresses and boxed in by gender conventions.

This feeling of loss, of a freer lifestyle, has shaped my creative work, contributing to the sense of place on my fictional island, where I imagine a space

[3] Derek Dawes, *Alyson and Susannah Dawes in Ba Village*, 1973, photograph, Yasawa Islands, Fiji.

where children's behaviour is not gendered or limited by their mother's experience or cultural expectation, but only by their lack of imagination.

Motherhood plays a central role in my novel as it has done in much of my past writing. In 2012, my short story 'Mind the Gap,' was published in Mslexia, a woman's literary magazine. The judge described the story as 'brave' because it tackled the taboo of the empty nest syndrome. The story was told in the voice of a mother, who had been liberated from the selflessness of raising three boys.

> I will have no problem filling my time. The garden is long overdue for some TLC, and the inside of my cupboards have a film of grease on that could be used for a swim across the channel. Then there's the book club and my creative writing course. I am sure my writing will improve when I have more time to think. I realise not everyone thinks infanticide is an appropriate subject for short stories.[4]

When I wrote this story nearly ten years ago, exploring the darker side of motherhood, stillbirth, miscarriage, and mental health problems were often topics to be avoided. Menopause was a word that elicited a look of horror. These were the things we, as women, were expected to put up with, and without complaint.

Motherhood often begins with a loss of identity, a body ravaged by childbirth (in my case this involved a long stay in hospital and an emergency caesarean) and the agony of mastitis. Then of course comes a lifetime of juggling work with caring for your children, ageing parents and, more often than not, incontinence. And then we reach the menopause and deal with hot flushes, osteoporosis and at least thirty other physical side-effects, barely registered by our health service. My own experience of asking for help led to the offer of anti-depressants. What should be seen as a release from the bane of bleeding and selflessness, menstruation and our role as carers, is

[4] Susannah Dawes, "Mind the Gap," *Mslexia*, January 2012, 29.

instead imagined as loss. At the same time, our physical symptoms are not taken seriously, despite the fact they can be crippling.

In my creative work I wanted to explore the rawness of birth, menstruation, and gender freedom, by stripping away gendered bodily taboos and traditions. Like Ursula Le Guin and other writers of feminist utopian fiction, I sought to provide 'a critical response to an unsatisfactory present condition, […] imagining some kind of place where these problems are solved, or conditions at least improved.'[5]

To avoid falling into dystopian writing, which would be easy to do given our current climate change crisis, the Covid19 pandemic, immigration policies and the rise of the far-right, I decided to set the story in the Victorian past, imagining an alternative history. This would provide me with a cast of female characters who, constrained by patriarchy, would be desperate for change. I wanted to afford these characters the agency to build their children a utopia, a better life, free from the restrictions they experienced.

I hoped the process of speculating about childhood freedoms and motherhood, whilst researching contemporary queer and scientific theory and defining the structural elements required of a speculative utopia, would lead me to imagine new routes to equality and inclusion.

[5] William Marcellino, "Shadows to Walk: Ursula Le Guin's Transgressions in Utopia," *The American Journal of Culture,* 32 (9 September 2009), 203, doi 10.1111/j.1542-734X.2009.00711.x.

CHAPTER 1 - Updating the Feminist Utopia

Science Fiction and the Utopian Blueprint

The first step in creating any work of genre fiction is to understand the elements of its construction, the tropes and formal conventions that already exist. *The Mune* falls under the umbrella of both science fiction (SF) and utopian fiction, so I needed to consider *The Mune* in the context of this intersection, with particular emphasis on static and dynamic utopian fiction.

For Darko Suvin, 'SF is distinguished by the narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional "novum" (novelty, innovation) validated by cognitive logic.'[6] According to Suvin's theory, a work of SF must contain at least one fictional element that is unlike our real world; secondly, this otherness (or novum) must be logical within the context of the created world and empirically observed. Suvin argues the key to SF is 'cognitive estrangement'[7] which, in its simplest form, is the 'factual reporting of fictions.'[8] It is the imagined elements of the world used plausibly, the act of describing unfamiliar things as if they were familiar. This literary device is used in SF to alienate us from our assumptions about what constitutes our accepted normality and forces us to question our reality. SF is committed to asking fundamental questions about our world using social commentary and critique and is the perfect vehicle to explore change or imagine 'otherness'.[9]

Suvin argues that the novum, which characterises the genre, does not have to be limited to hard scientific or technological advances or material objects such as time

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[6] Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, ed. Gerry Canavan (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2016), 79.
[7] Suvin*, Metamorphoses*, 15.
[8] Perry Nodelman, "The Cognitive Estrangement of Darko Suvin," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (1981), 24, https://doi.org/10.1353/chq.0.1851.
[9] Raymond Williams, "Utopia and Science Fiction," *Science Fiction Studies,* 5 (November 1978), https://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/16/williams16art.htm.

machines or robots—it can also be conceptual, such as in Ursula Le Guin's novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (hereafter referred to as *TLHoD*), published in 1969, which reimagines gender. Here the 'new' element is the ambisexual characters, the Gethen, and the impact their non-binary gender has on the language and culture which is central to the plot. This estrangement of binary categories, both in the physical manifestation of androgyny and the diction, causes the reader to question the nature of sex and gender. Similarly, in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003), the novum, which are genetically engineered Crakers[10] designed to be less human, make us consider where the misuse of bioengineering might lead us.

So where does *The Mune* fit within Suvin's definition of SF? The novum in *The Mune* (that which estranges) is the setting, an island in a parallel universe. It is this setting which makes the speculative experiment possible—to imagine new ways to live. Without the uninhabited island, the flora and fauna, the use of wells as portals to other time-zones, and the advanced evolution, the women in *The Mune* would be colonised by pre-existing power structures and unable to redefine their society.

In contrast to Suvin, in her book, *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep* (2010), Seo-Young Chu argues that whilst there must be cognitive estrangement in SF, rather than imagining people and places that don't exist, SF uses what she terms as 'high intensity realism', imitating and reflecting the author's existing world.

> My reconceptualization of science fiction can be understood, more specifically, as Suvin's definition turned inside out. Instead of conceptualizing science fiction as a nonmimetic discourse that achieves the effect of cognitive estrangement through "an imaginative framework," I conceptualize science fiction as a mimetic discourse whose objects of representation are nonimaginary yet cognitively estranging.[11]

[10] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003).
[11] Seo-Young Chu, *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?: A Science-Fictional Theory of Representation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 3.

Seo-Young Chu suggests that science fiction uses metaphors literally, to mimic reality, explained by Samuel Gerald Collins as expanding the role of SF to 'something ultimately anthropological—descriptions not of an impossible future, but of an impossible (and yet very real) present.'[12]

Like Seo-Young Chu, in his blog *The Pinocchio Theory,* Steven Shaviro argues that 'SF is primarily a literature of extrapolation, and cognitive estrangement is only a minor variant of extrapolation. For me, this is because SF is about, not the actual future, but rather futurity insofar as it really (but inactually) exists in the present.'[13] Shaviro believes the types of philosophical questions within SF 'probe the Beyond that science has not yet reached, and never will,'[14] and that, 'the purpose of science fiction is not to predict the future, but rather to depict, or to represent, a future that is NOT predictable.'[15] SF is about 'potentialities: it depicts tendencies and possibilities that are implicit in our current world situation, whether or not they ever actually come to fruition.'[16]

The experiment in *The Mune,* like *TLHoD,* is that of gender transformation but, rather than a bodily manifestation of androgyny, I set out to create a new, unpredictable set of social norms which dramatically alter the characters' lives. Despite depicting an alternative past, which gives rise to a different historical track, the transformed social norms, in-line with both Shaviro and Seo-Young Chu's theories, imagine a conceivable (but unlikely) future.

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[12] Samuel Gerald Collins, *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 23, no. 2 (85), 2012, 302. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24352941.
[13] Steven Shaviro, "Freedman on Mieville," *The Pinocchio Theory* (blog), November 10, 2015, http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=1334.
[14] Steven Shaviro, "Guy Lardreau, Fictions philosophiques et Science-fiction (1988)," *The Pinocchio Theory* (blog), February 14, 2022, http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?s=guy+lardreau.
[15] "Interview with Steven Shaviro," *Big Echo: critical SF*, no:17, (October 2020), http://www.bigecho.org/steven-shaviro-interview.
[16] Steven Shaviro, "Extrapolation, speculation and fabulation," October 18, 2021, video, https://youtu.be/mbu4hBe2GA4.

The Mune sits comfortably within the definition of SF, but does it also fit within utopian fiction, which has its own set of conditions which must be met? Darko Suvin believes that 'all Utopias involve people who radically suffer of the existing system and radically desire to change it,'[17] and this is particularly relevant to *The Mune,* which is written from the desire to imagine a more inclusive alternative to binary gender assignment.

From Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) to more dynamic utopias such as Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars Trilogy* (1992 - 1996), not only is there a critique of reality within the pages but also an imagined solution to it. For More that meant offering a solution to a problem of his time, the huge divide between rich and poor. More created a societal blueprint that removed financial and material incentives, which he believed might lead to economic equality and the end of poverty. He argued within the text that: 'Yea, poverty itself, which only seemed to lack money if money were gone, it also would decrease and vanish away.'[18] For Robinson, in his *Mars Trilogy*, the solution to climate change and problems of inequality involves imagining better and more sustainable ways of living within our environment.

Eckstein and Caruth in their paper, 'From Eden to Utopia'*,* describe utopia in more literary and practical terms beyond its motivations and end purpose: 'Utopia, like the myth and the fairy tale, fulfils the psychic function of allowing the working through of a conflict in order to achieve a resolution.'[19] Utopias, like fairy tales, have a moral issue at their heart and seek to provide a 'happy ending'. Psychic function (or a thought experiment) enables writers of utopian fiction the opportunity to test solutions to

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[17] Darko Suvin, *Defined by a Hollow: Essays on Utopia, Science Fiction and Political Epistemology* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), 30.
[18] Thomas More and John Warrington, *More's Utopia & A Dialogue of Comfort* (New York: Dutton, 1965), 133.
[19] Rudolf Eckstein and Elaine Caruth, "From Eden to Utopia," *American Imago,* vol. 22, no. 1/2 (1965),139, http://www.jstor.org/stable/26302293.

problems and create blueprints for alternative societies without the ethical, design or practice limitations which might create boundaries such as those encountered in a laboratory, or field experiment. For Thomas More this meant testing his socialist theory of a non-monetary economy; and for Ursula Le Guin, in *The Dispossessed* (1974), it meant the exploration and comparison of diverse political systems. For *The Mune,* it means the opportunity to strip back patriarchal constructs of sex and gender in order to find new ways of living.

Fredric Jameson expands on this idea of psychic function, arguing that a modern utopia should do more than concern itself with creating a blueprint for change, it should instead be 'the story of all arguments about how Utopia should be constructed in the first place.'[20] Jameson argues that utopias should be dynamic, rather than static and prescribed, and able to keep pace with change. HG Wells was one of the first to observe the need for dynamic utopias that changed with scientific progress, which is itself ever changing. 'Wells's rejection of a static utopianism is one of the premises of 'A Modern Utopia', and he repeated it throughout his life: in the words of chapter seven of The Open Conspiracy (1928), 'No Stable Utopia is Contemplated'.'[21]

Like Wells and Jameson, Robert Nozick believes that a modern utopia should be energetic and full of new ideas, consisting 'of many different and divergent communities in which people lead different kinds of lives under different institutions.'[22] Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars Trilogy* is an example of how this new style of utopia, in which *The Mune* also fits, has moved away from a static blueprint, and focuses instead on the nature of utopia and how it might be constructed. Jameson suggests that

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[20] Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2007), 217.
[21] Patrick Parrinder, "Utopia and Meta-Utopia in H. G. Wells," *Utopian Studies*, no. 1 (1987), 81, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20718887.
[22] Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 217.

'Utopia now begins to include all those bitter disputes around alternative diagnoses of social miseries and the solutions proposed to overcome them.'[23] *The Mune* certainly contains conflicts and resolutions which are worked through in the narrative, from the smallest disagreement about naming the children in the community, to the larger conflicts regarding how to survive.

According to Raymond Williams, utopian science fiction (the intersection between SF and Utopia) can be subdivided into four subcategories (a-d).

> (a) *the paradise*, in which a happier life is described as simply existing elsewhere; (b) *the externally altered world*, in which a new kind of life has been made possible by an unlooked-for natural event; (c) *the willed transformation,* in which a new kind of life has been achieved by human effort; (d) *the technological transformation*, in which a new kind of life has been made possible by a technical discovery.[24]

'Paradise' (also referred to as the garden of Eden in some traditions), is reflected in works such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915) and tends to focus on 'place', often biblical in nature. The 'externally altered world', in contrast, is focused on the impact of an unexpected event, such as a virus, instrumental in effecting (or forcing) change. This is evidenced in novels such as Nicola Griffith's *Ammonite* (1992), where a deadly virus kills all men on the planet Jeep. The 'willed transformation' focuses specifically on social change, such as the reintroduction or introduction of new social orders created from the inside. Lastly, 'technological transformation' tends to hold a forewarning, where the consequence of advanced technology, such as AI, has contributed to a less positive world. William Gibson's *Agency* (2020) is a good example of this.

My own novel, *The Mune,* sits primarily in the category of 'willed transformation' due to the changes which occur from inside the community: 'a new kind of life has

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[23] Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future,* 216.
[24] Raymond Williams, "Utopia and Science Fiction".

been achieved by human effort,'[25] with the characters having the agency to improve their own lives. It is, to quote Suvin, an 'imaginary community in which human relations are organized more perfectly than in the author's community.'[26] Unlike utopias in the category which Williams describes as 'Paradise' (or its diametrically opposed 'Hell'), such as Perkin Gilman's *Herland* and More's *Utopia,* which are static and unchanging when viewed from the outside, *The Mune* evolves through the voices of the characters and the changing landscape.

As well as categories that explain the narrative framing of utopias as static or dynamic, there is also the 'gaze' to consider. Srđan Tunić, in his essay 'Science Fiction between Utopia and Critique', proposes three distinct gazes 'as structuring how SF worlds relate to the present.'[27] The first gaze looks forwards from the present to imagine a more positive future, such as seen in Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888),[28] where the protagonist, Julian West, wakes from a coma to find America has transformed into a socialist utopia. The second looks from the future retrospectively, usually to criticise the past. This is exemplified in the film *WALL-E* (2008) set in 2805, where humans have already destroyed the planet. *The Mune* sits in the third category, that of 'uchronia', explained by Tunić as, "(in) no time" and presenting a hypothetical parallel to our world and time. It corresponds to alternative histories. This perspective is based on "what if" assumptions from a certain point in time in the past.[29] Uchronia tends to be represented as alternative history, such as Philip K Dick's *Man in High Castle* (1962), which asks the question: what if the Axis Powers won WWII? *The Mune* asks two fundamental questions: firstly, what if Victorian women were free from

[25] Raymond Williams.
[26] Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 63.
[27] Srđan Tunić, "Science Fiction between Utopia and Critique," *Uneven Earth* (blog), 11 June 2018, http://unevenearth.org/2018/06/science-fiction-between-utopia-and-critique.
[28] Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1996).
[29] Srđan Tunić.

patriarchy, and secondly, what if children were raised free of binary sex and gender categories?

A utopia, however it is framed, will never be experienced by every character in exactly the same way. Unlike More in his idealised *Utopia*, I have tried to avoid forced exile in *The Mune,* for example, giving my character, Betty, who does not desire to be part of the community, the agency to decide her future—the exile being on her terms. Margaret Atwood argues that within a utopia there is always an alternative place for rebels and dissenters, those who do not agree with the utopian order, which include 'prison, enslavement, exile, exclusion or execution.'[30] Ursula Le Guin explores this idea in her short fiction, *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* (1973), set in a seemingly utopian, almost fairy-tale-like state, but whose peace and prosperity is dependent on a single child's imprisonment and misery. The few citizens of Omelas unable to reconcile the 'cost' of their happiness, walk 'ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back.'[31]

The growth of dissent and disagreement is inevitable anywhere, not only when there is suffering, but first there must be an attempt to make an ideal place, and, in my novel, that is a feminist utopia.

As well as the essential 'novum' and cognitive estrangement which help to define SF, and the paradisical qualities of a setting or society that define a utopia, it is important to identify specific tropes which categorise the subcategories of the feminist speculative utopia. Traditionally, feminist utopias of the 1960s and 1970s followed static models, viewed from the outside, as mentioned above. According to William

[30] Margaret Atwood, *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination,* (London: Virago, 2012), 86.
[31] Ursula Le Guin, *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,* (Mankato, Minn: Creative Education, 1993), 32.

Marcellino in his paper, 'Shadows to Walk: Ursula Le Guin's Transgressions in Utopia': 'Feminist utopian works critique dominant male power and focus and offer some kind of imagined idealised society that is not characterized by male power and focus.'[32] Historically, Marcellino suggests, there have been two routes to achieving this matriarchal goal, 'separation and countercolonization.'[33] 'Separation' removes one gender from the equation, and this can be seen in Charlotte Perkin Gilman's *Herland* and Nicola Griffith's *Ammonite*. These 'separatist' utopias represent a single sex paradise: an Eden in which women can flourish, free from the shackles of men. What this means, in reality, is that the problem of patriarchy is never solved but removed or ignored, and there is no place for people who have a mix of chromosomes at birth, and/or who opt for gender reassignment.

'Countercolonization' is the act of switching male dominance for female dominance, and examples of this can be seen in Pamela Sergeant's *The Shore of Women* (1986) and, more recently, Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2016). Both texts focus on women gaining physical dominance over men and, in the case of *The Power,* the evolution of a weapon within the female body. The problem with countercolonization is that, in effect, it simply switches the oppressed to the oppressor. Marcellino equates this to 'patriarchy and colonialism "in drag".'[34]

Marcellino suggests that works of separation and countercolonialism offer:

> effective critiques of patriarchy but are not acceptable as theoretical bases for speculating on solutions to patriarchy. At their root level, separatist and counter colonial-feminist utopian theories valorize women and female centrality or singularity and demonize men.[35]

[32] William Marcellino, "Shadows to Walk: Ursula Le Guin's transgressions in Utopia," *The Journal of American Culture,* 32 (2009), 203, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1542-734X.2009.00711.x.
[33] Marcellino, "Shadows to walk: Ursula Le Guin's Transgressions in Utopia," 203.
[34] Marcellino, 212.
[35] Marcellino, 210.

Marcellino argues there is a third route, adopted by Ursula Le Guin in her novel *TLHoD,* one which does not prioritise men or women, but rather creates a balance:

> By privileging neither female or male norms, by diagramming in her narrative differing but interdependent female and male strengths, and by criticizing and praising (nuances criticism) both male and female political approaches, Le Guin stakes out a third feminist utopian approach, distinct from separatists and countercolonist approaches.[36]

It is this approach that is closest to my own utopian fiction, and, like Le Guin, I wanted to remove all gendered ideals and constraints and create balance between the sexes. I considered it might be necessary to remove men from the beginning of the novel, to strip back patriarchal norms and allow my female characters the freedom to mould their own society without restriction, but I did not want 'separation' per se, because I wanted my utopia to both mirror our current society and make it possible to imagine what a world without gender assignment might look like. I also wanted to avoid the gender dominance which comes with 'countercolonisation', either physically or politically, which would only serve to re-establish the gender oppression I sought to remove.

When discussing the feminist utopia, it is necessary to include an alternative theory of Utopia proposed by Margaret Atwood. Atwood uses the word 'Ustopia*'* to explain the worlds she imagined in several of her novels including *Oryx and Crake*. She explains that: '*Ustopia* is a word I made up by combining utopia and dystopia—the imagined perfect society and its opposite—because, in my view, each contains a latent version of the other.'[37] As such, Atwood describes Utopia as having a concealed dystopia and vice versa. In *Oryx and Crake*, set in a post-apocalyptic world, she defines the utopian element as existing inside the characters she calls 'Crakers',

[36] Marcellino, "Shadows to Walk: Ursula Le Guin's Transgressions in Utopia," 204.
[37] Atwood, *In Other Worlds*, 66.

described as ‘a group of quasi-humans who have been genetically engineered so that they will never suffer from the ills that plague *Homo sapiens*.’[38] Atwood’s terminology reminds us that the utopia is more complex than imagining a perfect place; it is also a state of mind, influenced both by the past and what the future might hold. Characters in utopias have backstories (or in Atwood’s case, programming) which can be both traumatic and hopeful. These details impact on characters’ motivation and their behaviour, directly influencing the narrative. What might be utopian for one character equipped with certain skills, might be dystopian for another who does not possess them.

Although I have given agency (decision making and practical skills) to the women in my novel, which they lack in their world of the mid-nineteenth century, there is an element of dystopia on the island—it is not a paradise in terms of its ability to physically sustain the community and there are ‘beasts’ which serve to limit their movements. There is also an element of ‘utopia’ in the Victorian period the women have left, at least for Betty, who is not served by the same desires as most of the other women, and certainly, when the women return to their original timeline, they bring with them a utopian element: a new understanding of their worth.

The Mune can therefore be seen to fit both the criteria for science fiction and utopian fiction but, like Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Mars Trilogy,* it focuses more on the evolution and dynamics of the community. It is neither static nor a sociological blueprint, but instead follows the changes observed in any new society, based on the characters’ action, psychology and needs. In terms of its feminist content, *The Mune* differs from its 1970s counterparts in that it aims to look at gender more widely,

[38] Atwood, *In Other Worlds*, 91.

reflecting a modern feminist approach, utilising new theories of cultural and biological inheritance.

The Cultural and Biological Inheritance of Sex and Gender

The speculative utopia has always been informed by scientific advances, whether depicted by control of the environment, reproduction, language, or the eradication of disease. Both science and any utopia seek to 'improve the human condition, to render the universe comprehensible, and to provide a sense of order.'[39] To update the feminist utopia, as well as understanding the genre requirements for the speculative utopia, I needed to be conscious of, and utilise, new scientific discovery into DNA, neuroscience and theories of gender, and build on Le Guin's ground-breaking works from the mid-twentieth century which analysed what it meant to be male or female.

When imagining fictional utopias, writers of feminist speculative fiction have largely focused on finding ways to evoke a sense of equality by reducing the cultural transmission of gender norms found in existing societies. To achieve this, authors such as Ursula Le Guin, Marge Piercy and Charlotte Perkins Gilman used techniques such as removing binary genders from reproductive acts, obliterating the nuclear family and transforming gendered language. These speculative frameworks allowed the authors to create alternative and 'better' spaces for women, which reacted against the repressive ideologies and gender inequalities of their day.

At the time of writing, Le Guin, Piercy, and Russ focused on cultural determiners of gender: the use of gender-specific pronouns, and the traditional roles of women within the community. They utilised science to focus on removing motherhood from

[39] Andrew G. Christensen, "Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Herland and the Tradition of the Scientific Utopia," *Utopian Studies* 28, no. 2 (2017), 288**,** https://doi.org/doi:10.5325/utopianstudies.28.2.0286.

the realm of women, using alternative methods of reproduction, such as 'breeders'[40] and parthenogenetic reproduction. For example, Le Guin wrote in *TLHoD*: 'I suppose the most important thing, the heaviest single factor in one's life, is whether one's born male or female. In most societies it determines one's expectations, activities, outlook, ethics, manners—almost everything.'[41] In this novel, Le Guin presents us with a gender thought experiment. By creating an androgynous race called the Gethenians, she explores what it might mean to live without patriarchy and the social prescription of being male or female. Le Guin uses fictional field notes written by an investigator from the first landing party on Gethen, a planet in her Hainish universe, to consider the effect of gender neutrality on Gethenian relationships. Genly Ai writes: 'there is no division of humanity into strong and weak halves, protective/protected, dominant/submissive, owner/chattel, active/passive.'[42] Le Guin's use of androgony in *TLHoD* removes the gendered characteristics normally tied to reproduction. This appears to result in equality within Gethenian relationships and also in the broader Gethenian society—Gethenians are not forced to behave in prescriptive ways because of how their body looks or functions. They are not 'born' to anything.

However, despite being androgynous, the Gethenians do take on temporary sexual characteristics—either male or female—during the act of reproduction, a period Le Guin terms 'Kemmer'. Gethenians do not choose the sex they become; it is an involuntary hormone response to the other partner: 'the partner, triggered by the change, takes on the other sexual role…'[43] The result of this is that, for Gethenians, gender and sex is involuntary, existing purely for the binary pairing.

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[40] Marge Piercy, *Woman on the edge of time* (London: The Woman's Press, 1997).
[41] Ursula K Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness,* (Great Britain: Gollancz, 2017), 234.
[42] Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, 94.
[43] Le Guin, 90.

Since the second half of the twentieth century, long after Le Guin was penning *TLHoD,* new technologies in DNA sequencing and cell biology have revealed that sex and gender is no longer a question of the binary, such as Le Guin imagined, with distinct female and male parts (albeit temporary). Almost everyone has a patchwork of cells, some with a sex (or chromosome) that might not match the rest of their body.[44] This cellular evidence that we have a spectrum of sex cells supports Judith Butler's belief that we should not only be concerned with gender labels but also the binary division of sex. Butler argues that:

> When the body is conceived as a cultural locus of gender meanings, it becomes unclear what aspects of the body are natural and free of cultural imprint. Indeed, how are we to find the body that preexists its cultural interpretation? If gender is the corporealization of choice, and the acculturation of the corporeal, then what is left of nature, and what has become of sex? If gender is determined in the dialectic between culture and choice, then what role does 'sex' serve, and ought we to conclude that the very distinction between sex and gender is anachronistic?[45]

Butler believes that 'sexual difference is created when it is restricted to certain body parts that are pronounced and identified at birth,'[46] and can therefore be seen as performative, much like gender roles, limited by the binary label society places on parts of the anatomy, which is no longer representative of our 'biology'. Underpinning this idea on the Stonewall[47] website is a glossary of more than 50 terms to aid our understanding of these new sex and gender categories. This suggests that a deeper understanding of biology will create new opportunities for imagining what a modern feminist utopia might be—more than to 'inquire […] how women might become more

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[44] Claire Ainsworth, "Sex redefined," *Nature* 518, no. 7539 (2015), https://www.nature.com/news/sex-redefined-1.16943.
[45] Judith Butler, *The Judith Butler Reader*, ed. Sara Salih (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2003), 23.
[46] Butler, *The Judith Butler Reader*, 22.
[47] "List of LGBTQ+ Terms," Stonewall, accessed 28 May 2020. https://www.stonewall.org.uk/help-advice/faqs-and-glossary/list-lgbtq-terms.

fully represented in language and politics'[48] but rather to redefine what sex and gender is.

So how would I move away from the binary of sex and gender in fiction, to reflect my current understanding of queer theory and biology? Judith Butler, in her recent interview on the culture wars and Trans rights, suggests that: 'we have to renew the feminist commitment to gender equality and gender freedom in order to affirm the complexity of gendered lives as they are currently being lived.'[49] Butler views gender as a flexible concept, in an ever-changing landscape:

> Feminism has always been committed to the proposition that the social meanings of what it is to be a man or a woman are not yet settled. We tell histories about what it meant to be a woman at a certain time and place, and we track the transformation of those categories over time.[50]

Even though feminism, and therefore the very definition of gender, is not static, it still, in modern parlance, focuses on how our bodies are perceived by others, and behaviour or anatomy outside of prescribed gendered categories is often viewed negatively by society as 'abnormal'. For women this might be something as simple as opting for a short hairstyle and for men, an overt display of emotion. The experience is far worse for people Butler describes as having an 'anatomically anomalous body,'[51] in other words, those individuals trapped in a body that does not fit either their idea of themselves, how they want to live, or their chromosomal make-up.

One option, to incorporate this new understanding of sex and gender, was to consider 'Gender abolitionism' identified in *The Xenofeminist Manifesto* (2018), as:

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[48] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 3.
[49] Alona Ferber, "Judith Butler on the culture wars, JK Rowling and living in "anti-intellectual times"," *New Statesman*, 22 September 2020. https://www.newstatesman.com/international/2020/09/judith-butler-culture-wars-jk-rowling-and-living-anti-intellectual-timess pass as public argument is itself cause for worry.
[50] Ferber, "Judith Butler on the culture wars."
[51] Judith Butler, preface to: *Gender Trouble*: *Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 10th anniversary ed. (London: Routledge, 1999),10.

'shorthand for the ambition to construct a society where traits currently assembled under the rubric of gender, no longer furnish a grid for the asymmetric operation of power.'[52] The *Xenofeminist Manifesto*, created by the international collective Laboria Cubonicks, argues against biological determinism and seeks to find a solution, an inclusive feminism suitable for the twentieth century, which does not aim to eradicate gendered traits but dismantle gender categories and represent the diversity that already exists. It attempts to build on our current society rather than razing it to the ground. To achieve this, at the most basic level, it would be necessary to transform binary language—to aim for gender neutrality.

Communicating Gender

Using pronouns as a narrative tool to subvert the traditional binary gender distinction has long been utilised by feminist writers of speculative fiction. It allows writers the opportunity to envisage how a society, free of gendered speech, might look and function, and the impact it might have on the individual, particularly those who don't fit neatly into binary categories. Part of my research, in writing a non-binary utopia, was to assess narrative techniques used by writers in the past to remove gendered communication, and their motives for doing so, as well as utilising contemporary gender theories to find solutions that would fit my own creative work. This meant close readings of texts such as Ursula Le Guin's *TLHoD*, Gwyneth Jones's *The Aleutian Trilogy,* as well as more modern authors such as Ann Leckie and Becky Chambers, to evaluate how they present gender neutrality both in dialogue and within descriptive prose.

[52] Laboria Cuboniks (Collective), *The Xenofeminist Manifesto: A Politics for Alienation* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2018), 55.

In Ursula Le Guin's ground-breaking novel, *TLHoD*, she chose to use the pronoun *he* to refer to all her androgynous characters on the planet Gethen. She presented androgyny through the male gaze of her protagonist, Genly Ai. He describes the society in the following way:

> When you meet a Gethenian you cannot and must not do what a bisexual naturally does, which is to cast him in the role of Man or Woman, while adopting towards him a corresponding role dependent on your expectations of the patterned or possible interactions between persons of the same or opposite sex. Our entire pattern of sociosexual interaction is nonexistent here [….] They do not see one another as men or women. This is almost impossible for our imaginations to accept [….] Yet you cannot think of a Gethenian as 'it'. They are not neuters. They are potentials or integrals.[53]

Her protagonist rationalises the use of *he* to refer to the Gethenians, as being 'less defined, less specific, than the neuter or the feminine,'[54] but feminist critics argued that Le Guin was guilty of the trends of her time, of presenting men as being the default. This is evidenced in the passage when Genly Ai is trying to understand the society in relation to his own bias: 'the very use of the pronoun [he] in my thoughts leads me to continually forget that the Karhider I am with is not a man, but a manwoman.'[55]

To challenge this argument, Le Guin explained her thought process for her pronoun choice in an afterword to the 1994 edition of *TLHoD*:

> Unromantic English pronouns must correspond to the actual gender or genderlessness of their referent […]. A sexless or genderless referent has a neuter pronoun, "it." This neuter may be used for an animal but cannot be used for a human being (except occasionally for a baby, by people who do not like babies). English has a truly ungendered pronoun only in the plural. He, she, and it are gendered, they is not.[56]

Le Guin makes no apology for her choices, which was a solution she felt suited the world she created at the time it was written, but she does concede that there are

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[53] Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness,* 94.
[54] Le Guin, 94.
[55] Le Guin, 94.
[56] Ursula K. Le Guin, 'Afterword to Left Hand of Darkness, Le Guin 1994,' Literary Link. http://theliterarylink.com/afterword.html.

certain gendered words she uses that are unnecessary and could be replaced with terms such as: 'sib, wombchild, rather than the masculinized brother, son.'[57]

Gwyneth Jones's *The Aleutian Trilogy* (1991 - 1997), written some twenty years later, revisits some of the tropes in *TLHoD*, imagining a humanoid, non-verbal, sexless, alien race completely removed from binary sex categories, which Jones refers to as 'born-again hermaphrodites.'[58] Unlike the Gethenians, the Aleutians self-reproduce rather than take on temporary male/female traits, with pregnancy triggered by an 'untraceable complex of environmental and emotional factors.'[59] The new baby created 'prove[s] to be one of the three million or so genetically differentiated individuals in a reproductive group known as the 'brood'.'[60] Wendy Gay Pearson suggests in her paper "Postcolonialism/s, Gender/s, Sexuality/ies and the Legacy of 'The Left Hand of Darkness': Gwyneth Jones's Aleutians Talk Back," that Jones's novel, like Le Guin's *TLHoD*, 'debunk[s] the very notion of binary division. Both works can thus be read as interrogations of our current sex/gender system and its implications for the relations between men and women.'[61] Much like today, the male and female traits attributed to Jones's alien species by the human characters are interpreted through their cultural bias—an assumed gendered performance—rather than the alien's reproductive organs or lived experience.

White Queen (1991), the first in *The Aleutian Trilogy*, focuses on first contact and deals primarily with the cultural misunderstandings that occur between the humans and Aleutians when attempts are made to communicate, particularly around

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[57] Le Guin. Afterword.
[58] Jones, G, 'Aliens in the Fourth Dimension,' in A. Sawyer & D. Seed (Eds.), *Speaking Science Fiction: Dialogues and Interpretations,* (Liverpool University Press, 2000), 205.
[59] Jones, G, 'Aliens in the Fourth Dimension,' 205.
[60] Jones, G, 205.
[61] Pearson, Wendy Gay, "Postcolonialism/s, Gender/s, Sexuality/Ies and the Legacy of 'The Left Hand of Darkness': Gwyneth Jones's Aleutians Talk Back," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 37, no. 2 (2007),184, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20479309.

the subjects of sex and gender. Like Le Guin, Jones uses *he* as a default pronoun by which the Aleutians refer to themselves, and also use within their telepathic speech. Rather than the single male gaze of Genly Ai, Jones uses multiple narrators to describe the interactions between human and alien, which leads to pronoun confusion. For example, Johnny Guglioli, an engineer-journalist (eejay) and one of the protagonists in *White Queen*, views 'Agnès' (the alien he interacts with) as a *she,* because they appear to have traditionally feminine qualities, such as being shy, slight and pretty. Conversely, Braemar Wilson, a female tabloid journalist, views Agnès differently: 'It had taken very few frames to convince her [Braemar] this certainly was no woman. "She" [Agnès] had not been aware that the name "she" borrowed was a girl's name.'[62] These gender miscommunications are never corrected by the aliens who appear to view gender as both irrelevant and fluid, a concept the humans, such as Johnny, find impossible to understand. This fluidity is clearly laid out in *North Wind* (1994), the second book in Jones's trilogy:

> The Aleutians recognized among themselves a spectrum of personality traits, which seemed to match quite closely what humans regarded as "masculine" and "feminine" qualities ... though to Aleutian perception many human males were feminine and many females were masculine; and of course either could be on the Men's side or on the Women's. All very confusing! But in Aleutia worrying if you were "masculine" or "feminine" was the sign of a trivial mind.[63]

Jones further explains in 'Aliens in the Fourth Dimension', a chapter in *Speaking Science Fiction: Dialogues and Interpretations* (2000), that: 'In Aleutia you wouldn't ask of a newborn baby, "is it a boy or a girl?" You'd ask, "who is it?"'[64]

In the same chapter, Jones describes the motivation behind her narrative choices:

> In line with my model of Aleutians as 'women', and 'native peoples' it was right for them to be wary and rather contemptuous of spoken language. I wanted

[62] Jones, G, *White Queen*, (Gateway, 2021), eBook, 48.
[63] Jones, G, *North Wind* (New York: Tor, 1994), 27-28.
[64] Jones, G, 'Aliens in the Fourth Dimension,' 205.

> them to be silent like the processes of cell-biology, like social insects exchanging pheromone signals: like larger animals conversing through grooming, nuzzling, eye contact and gesture. […] But I didn't want to do away with spoken language altogether. Words are separation. Words divide. That is the work they do.[65]

Jones uses words to show how powerful spoken language can be as a tool to categorise and exclude (or separate) others, as well as to retain identity. This language and communication barrier Jones creates between the Aleutians and humans serves to remind the reader the impact our cultural bias has when trying to understand alternative ways of living.

Like the Aleutians, the Radachai in Ann Leckie's recent trilogy, *Imperial Radch* (2013 – 2015) do not have a gendered culture but must navigate societies that make binary distinctions. In contrast to Le Guin and Jones, Ann Leckie, in her novel, *Ancillary Justice* (2013), uses *she* as the default pronoun, seen through the gaze of her first-person narrator, Breq. Breq is an AI soldier who 'speaks a language that doesn't make gender distinctions.'[66] The following passage from the novel demonstrates this:

> She was probably male, to judge from the angular mazelike patterns quilting her shirt. I wasn't entirely certain. It wouldn't have mattered, if I had been in Radch space. Radchaai don't care much about gender, and the language they speak—my own first language—doesn't mark gender in any way. The language we were speaking now did, and I could make trouble for myself if I used the wrong forms. It didn't help that the cues meant to distinguish gender changed from place to place, sometimes radically, and rarely made much sense to me.[67]

Like Le Guin, by using a single pronoun Leckie allows the reader to imagine the difficulty faced by an outsider entering these uniquely structured worlds, whilst carrying with them the gender stereotypes from their own worlds. Unlike Le Guin's Genly Ai, the characters Breq meets, although labelled as female, are sometimes revealed to

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[65] Jones, G, 209.
[66] Gretchen McCulloch, "What Does "She" in Science Fiction Tell Us About Language on Earth?" *Slate Magazine*, 22 May 2014, https://slate.com/human-interest/2014/05/ancillary-justice-gender-pronouns-comparing-sci-fi-and-natural-language-in-ann-leckie-s-nebula-winner.html.
[67] Ann Leckie, *Ancillary Justice* (London: Orbit, 2014), 3.

be male later in the novel. Genly Ai, in contrast, only meets androgynous people on Gethen, so the distinction is never refined—they are all *he*. Leckie says of her choices in a blog post for *Orbit Books,* entitled 'He said, She said': 'At first I tried just asserting that Radchaai didn't care about gender, and then using gendered pronouns throughout […]. In the end I decided to pick one pronoun (at least for the sections where, presumably, my narrator is speaking Radchaai) and stick with it in all cases.'[68]

Leckie's decision to use *she* as a blanket pronoun was problematic in several ways:

> my solution didn't only fix my mechanical problem, it suddenly made the fact that there was a default visible. The thing about defaults is, they're automatic [….] Using an unusual default, particularly one that's close to but not exactly like the usual one, really highlights the fact that there's a default there to begin with. And suddenly neither my solution nor my initial problem seemed simple at all.[69]

Both Le Guin and Leckie chose a similar solution, one which plays with the reader's expectations, the gendered assumptions the reader brings with them. Yet, both uses of language are a way of making singular gender a binary issue, assigning everyone a specific gender and then 'revealing' those who didn't fit according to the writer's own cultural rules. In contrast, Jones, in *White Queen* uses the cultural rules of both humans and aliens to expose this bias.

Like Jones's *The Aleutian Trilogy,* Pamela Sargent's *The Shore of Women* (1986) appears to achieve a balance. Her all-woman utopia, formed after a nuclear holocaust where women have seized power, shows women controlling men in order to maintain dominance. This narrative device is also used in *The Power* by Naomi Alderman and in both these novels, female experience is viewed as a privilege, which is unusual in science fiction. In *The Shore of Women,* Sargent switches some of the

[68] Ann Leckie, "He Said, She Said," *Orbit Books* (blog), 1 October 2013, https://www.orbitbooks.net/2013/10/01/said-said/.
[69] Ann Leckie, 'He Said, She Said.'

gender stereotypes of men and women. Describing men, one of the Matriarchs of the council declares that:

> they aren't like us. Their feelings are shallower and more violent; they cannot give life and so must deal in death; their minds are narrow and incapable of higher intellectual functions. They seem most like us when they're children, but their true nature is revealed when they grow older.[70]

Sargent uses phrases such as 'higher intellectual function' that have historically been used to describe men and links them to reproduction function, which works to give childbearing higher value. The women in the novel control the whole birth process, taking sperm from the men when required, but they rule by cruelty, and men are considered lesser. Sargent uses the pronouns *he* and *she* to highlight and maintain these gender differences in speech and to give basis to why the women rule as they do, banishing young boys from their safe enclaves to the wilderness, to live as men. Even with these stark gender stereotypes—men as violent and women as nurturing—by the end of the story, the reader concludes that whatever the hierarchy, whether it be men or women in control, not all men and women are alike, and that a spectrum exists, despite sex differences. I was keen to focus on that spectrum and consider including characters in my novel who did not fit a rigid binary stereotype.

Judith Butler argues that paying attention to pronouns 'acknowledges and takes very, very seriously the idea that language matters.'[71] I needed to explore a way of representing gender which did not provide an either/or choice to better embody the spectrum of genders currently being lived. Rather than focusing on the gendered pronouns *he/she*, I would need to search for a different way to tackle the limitations.

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[70] Pamela Sargent, *The Shore of Women* (London: Pan, 1988),17.
[71] Molly Fischer, "Think Gender Is Performance? You Have Judith Butler to Thank for That," *The Cut*, 21 June 2016, http://www.thecut.com/2016/06/judith-butler-c-v-r.html.

As well as Gwyneth Jones, who uses *s/he* and *hir*[72] for a minor non-binary character in *White Queen,* another author who takes a modern inclusive approach to gendered communication is Becky Chambers in her series, *The Wayfarers* (2014 – 2021). Chambers uses the neopronoun *xe* in dialogue when her characters are interacting with aliens. In *The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet* (2014) her protagonist Rosemary, unsure of a species' gender, plays it safe:

> Rosemary registered the name. 'Right, Sissix said xe's nocturnal,' she said, choosing a neutral pronoun. It was the only polite thing to do when no gender signifiers had been given.
> Ashby smiled and shook his head. '*They*. Ohan's a Sianat Pair. Male but we still say "they".'[73]

Chambers explains her narrative choices in a podcast interview with Eric Molinsky:

> Neutral pronouns are something we just need in language [….] I wanted to make it very clear that there is no default expectation with gender, it is something deeply tied to your cultural experience [….] When you start bringing aliens into it, and someone walks up to you, like some big lobster person in they are bright blue and they don't wear clothes, you can't put any assumption of gender onto that – you have no idea what their concept of gender is so, it just struck me as obvious that it would be polite to not use gendered pronouns if you don't know what they are.[74]

As Chambers' novels show, neutral pronouns such as *xe,* and *xyr* which are closer to the form *they* or *their* rather than the binary *he* or *she*, work well in narratives which are otherworldly or set in a future where they are already embedded firmly in language. However, my novel is set in the 1800s when equality was focused on practical things, such as the right of women to vote, rather than linguistic changes. Still, Chambers' point about manners, of labelling people using your own cultural standards rather than simply being polite and not assuming gender, really struck home.

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[72] Jones, G, *White Queen*, 150.
[73] Becky Chambers, *The Long Way to a Small, Angry Planet* (London: Hodder, 2015), 43.
[74] Eric Molinsky, host, "Becky Chambers Goes Wayfaring," Imaginary Worlds (podcast), episode 170, accessed 29 April 2021, https://www.imaginaryworldspodcast.org/episodes/becky-chambers-goes-wayfaring.

The aim of speculative fiction is to hold a mirror up to contemporary society, so, despite the period my characters inhabited, in order to incorporate our current spectrum of genders and sexes, it appeared it would be necessary to widen the scope of the English language within my work. I discovered that in 2012, Sweden did just that, integrating the gender-neutral pronoun *hen* into their vocabulary, alongside the gendered *hon* (she) and *han* (he). Seven years later, Swedish adults were invited to participate in an experiment.

Margit Tavits and Efrén O. Pérez's paper 'Language influences mass opinion toward gender and LGBT equality' describes how the experiment used balloon-type illustrations (Figure iii) as well as political and social questions, to test subjects for bias in favour of using traditional genders.

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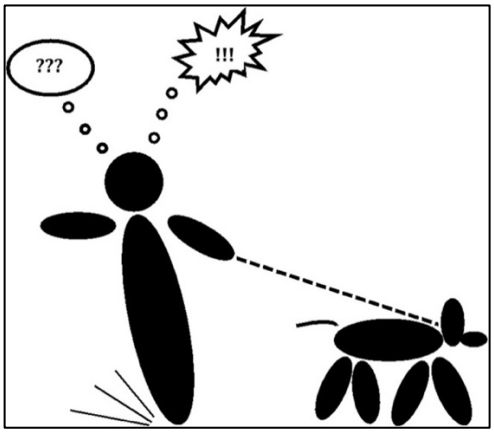

Figure iii: Balloon-type figures used in experiment.

Participants were asked to describe the figures in the illustrations and categorise them as 'clearly male, clearly female', or non-binary (somewhere between the two genders). The study hoped to assess whether 'pronouns prime specific gender categories in memory, which then affect people's opinions about gender roles,' and secondly,

[75] Tavits and Pérez, *Image used in experimental conditions*, April 2018, diagram, Sweden.

whether 'this pathway implies a mediated chain from pronouns to long-term memory, and then to attitudes and beliefs.'[76] The results of the experiments suggested that:

> language is meaningfully associated with the construction and maintenance of attitudes toward gender roles and categories. Compared with masculine pronouns, gender-neutral ones decrease individuals' mental bias in favor of men, and enhance the salience of women and other heterodox gender groups in speakers' minds. This effect has significant downstream consequences, as it is associated with individuals expressing political opinions that are more gender equal and tolerant of LGBT individuals. Comparable results also emerge for feminine pronouns.[77]

This suggests that introducing a universal pronoun on an institutional level—rather than by self advocation—doesn't just allow people to choose how to identify themselves but has a significant effect on the way others view and accept their non-binary status.

When discussing inequality, critically, the results indicated that the effects of language on cognition are as important as culture. It appeared that the best way to modernise an existing, heavily gendered language such as English, and make it more inclusive, might be to create a single additional pronoun to encompass non-binary gender. Tavits and Pérez concluded that:

> When speakers who use gender-neutral pronouns think about public affairs, they should be less inclined to consider this a strictly male domain, thereby normalizing other groups' presence. Speakers employing gender-neutral pronouns should also be less supportive of traditional gender roles that privilege males in civic life.[78]

Gender neutral pronouns, or neopronouns,[79] such as *hen* and *xe* allow an individual to express their gender in ways that support how they feel, yet according to Professor

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[76] Margit Tavits, and Efrén O. Pérez, "Language influences mass opinion toward gender and LGBT equality," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences,* 116, no. 34 (2019), 16784, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1908156116.
[77] Tavits and Pérez, "Language influences mass opinion toward gender and LGBT equality," 16785.
[78] Tavits and Pérez, 16781.
[79] Ezra Marcus, 'A Guide to Neopronouns,' *The New York Times*, 8 April 2021, sec. Style, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/08/style/neopronouns-nonbinary-explainer.html.

Dennis Baron of the University of Illinois,[80] despite more than 200 attempts to include additional pronouns into the English language including *thon* and *en* (some of which date back as far back as the 1780s), unlike in Sweden, none of these alternatives have been adopted. Baron suggests this is because new words need to evolve naturally, rather than be engineered, but perhaps it is more to do with state support, which gives it cultural credence. Either way, it would be crucial that any evolution of language in my creative piece would need to have a natural linguistic progression, rather than be imposed from the outside.

As well as adopting singular pronouns and neopronouns, writers of speculative fiction have sought other ways to represent gender in dialogue and one of these is to repurpose existing nouns. Whilst Ursula Le Guin was dismissing the idea of inventing pronouns in *Dreams Must Explain Themselves* (1975), stating that it was no reason to 'mangle English,'[81] Marge Piercy was creating her own pronouns for her imagined, gender-fluid community of Mattapoisett. In *Women on the Edge of Time* (1976), Piercy used the word 'person' shortened to 'per' to refer to all characters in the text, which was her solution to expressing their non-binary gender. The example shown here is where Luciente, Connie's visitor from the future, is answering Connie's questions about childcare in Mattapoisett:

> If person didn't want to be there, person might be careless and you might suffer. If person didn't want to mother and you were a baby, you might not be loved enough to grow up loving and strong. Person must not do what person cannot do.[82]

By using 'per' or 'person', repurposing an existing ungendered word, rather than using the binary *he/she*, Piercy successfully blurs the distinction between male and female,

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[80] Dennis Baron, "The Gender-Neutral Pronoun: 150 Years Later, Still an Epic Fail," *OUP* (blog), 26 August 2010, https://blog.oup.com/2010/08/gender-neutral-pronoun/.
[81] Ursula K. Le Guin, *Dreams Must Explain Themselves and Other Essays: 1972-2004* (London: Gollancz, 2018), 43.
[82] Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, 101.

thus allowing the male characters to value their feminine qualities, which reduces sex stereotypes within her fictional community. Donna Fancourt in her paper, 'Accessing Utopia through Altered States of Consciousness: Three Feminist Utopian Novels', suggests Piercy creates: 'a feminist utopian vision which embraces both men and women in societies that have moved beyond gender, or at least to a place where gender no longer remains significant in structuring social relations or individual psyches.'[83]

Repurposing an existing word makes it easy for the reader to accept, because the word's meaning hasn't changed, just its linguistic usage. However, repurposing a word might also draw unintended meanings. For example, the plural of 'per', which is 'pers', is very similar to the gendered 'hers'. Perhaps then, the solution to removing gendered communication is to look at existing languages that do not have gendered pronouns, thereby removing the historical binary distinction altogether.

In chapter 31 of *The World Atlas of Language Structures Online*, Greville Corbett writes that there are many linguistic systems that are not linked to biological sex. In fact, out of the 257 languages surveyed, only 84 had 'grammatical gender'[84] with biological sex as the semantic core. The Fijian language is one example of a language where 'nouns are absolutely without inflexion (or change of any kind) for either gender,'[85] and both Swahili[86] and Creole use 'a pronominal system in which

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[83] Donna Fancourt, "Accessing Utopia through Altered States of Consciousness: Three Feminist Utopian Novels," *Utopian Studies: Journal of the Society for Utopian Studies* ,13, no. 1 (2002),109. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20718411.

[84] Greville G. Corbett, "Sex-based and Non-sex-based Gender Systems," *The World Atlas of Language Structures Online,* ed. Matthew S. Dryer and Martin Haspelmath (Leipzig: Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology 2013), chap. 31, http://wals.info/chapter/31.

[85] Albert J. Schütz, *The Fijian Language* (University of Hawaii Press, 2019), ePub, https://www.hawaiiopen.org/product/the-fijian-language/.

[86] Beverly E. Coleman, "A History of Swahili," *The Black Scholar* 2, no. 6 (1971), 15, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41163481.

there is no distinction between genders.'[87] The pronoun *yeye* in Swahilli and *e* in Creole signal 'both males and females in both nominative and genitive cases.'[88]

A single word for all genders such as the Swahili *yeye,* Creole *e* and Piercy's 'per' seemed like a potential solution, but I felt, as Baron's research suggests, that it would be unfeasible to implement this type of change outside the scope of fiction. I wanted the non-binary language of my utopia to be potentially utilised outside the island microcosm I created. Still, it might be possible to use a combination of pronouns within the narrative text to achieve this. My character Tattio, for example, whose grandmother escaped the Unity slave ship, might have access to Creole, unlike the rest of the community who were unlikely to be influenced by languages other than their own.

I turned to look at the universal pronoun *they*, used by many notable authors from Chaucer onwards without issue. In a discussion on the blog *Language Log,* Geoffrey Pullman uses evidence from Shakespeare's: *A Comedy of Errors*, Act IV, Scene 3, when Antipholus of Syracuse says: 'There's not a man I meet but doth salute me / As if I were their well-acquainted friend,' to highlight the use of the singular pronoun *they*, despite the fact the character knows the sex of the person to whom they are referring.[89] Using *they* in this way would be period-appropriate to my cast of Victorian characters, even though there is some dispute about the modern usage of *they* to refer to the singular.

In *The Economist's* Grammar blog, Robert Land Greene argues that: 'not only is the usage "very unlikely" to produce confusion, but also, it's "nearly literally

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[87] Noura F Abdou, "A Study in Gullah as a Creole Language, Supported with a Text Analysis," *Linguistics and Literature Studies*, 2 (2014), 62, DOI: 10.13189/lls.2014.020203, https://www.hrpub.org/download/20140105/LLS3-19301860.pdf.
[88] Noura F Abdou, 62.
[89] Geoffrey Pullman, "Shakespeare used *they* with singular antecedents so there," *Language Log* (blog), January 5, 2006. http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/002748.html.

impossible for singular *they* to be confusing in an actual conversation or in a longer piece of writing" concluding, that the singular *they* is "the most convenient solution" to all of our pronoun trouble.'[90] In addition to this argument, both the Associated Press and the Chicago Manual of Style have recognised the usage of *they* as a pronoun, stating:

> A writer (or speaker) may also use *they* to refer to a specific, known person who does not identify with a gender-specific pronoun such as *he* or *she*. (*They* used in this way was the American Dialect Society's 2015 Word of the Year.) *CMOS* 17 will advise that "a person's stated preference for a specific pronoun should be respected." This usage is still not widespread either in speech or in writing, but Chicago accepts it even in formal writing.[91]

Using 'they' within a narrative to refer to characters who are non-binary, although unusual, would therefore not be contrary to linguistic rules.

However, the easiest option is not necessarily the best one, and using singular *they* with a third person viewpoint, in an extended piece of writing, could prove confusing and work against readers' deeply held feelings about how language works. I was concerned that removing all gendered pronouns, with a large cast of characters, and no visual clues as to the direction of speech, might cause readers to struggle to understand which characters were involved in any given interaction. Using *they* might also prove clunky and involve a lot of reworking to ensure that the characters were defined in other ways, such as height or build, which might also unintentionally produce gendered stereotypes. Also, as Travits and Pérez argue in their paper, 'Language influences mass opinion toward gender and LGBT equality', 'in English, *they* is promoted as a gender-neutral pronoun, yet some claim that people still associate *they* with males and do the same

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[90] Robert Land Greene, "Singular "They": Everyone Has Their Own Opinion," *The Economist*, 16 January 2013, https://www.economist.com/johnson/2013/01/16/singular-they-everyone-has-their-own-opinion.

[91] Chicago Manual of Style, "Chicago Style for the Singular They," *CMOS Shop Talk* (blog), 3 April 2017, http://cmosshoptalk.com/2017/04/03/chicago-style-for-the-singular-they/.

with generics such as *person* or *human*.'[92] Once again, this might lead to a reader's assumption about a character's gender, which could lead to feelings of betrayal when it is later revealed they are mistaken.

Part of the problem of using *they* might stem from the idea that gender-neutral pronouns have tended to be used to describe others rather than the self. This is certainly reflected in speculative fiction, where new or repurposed pronouns are used to describe communities visited by explorers, whether that be Mattapoisett, or an alien planet, rather than a term the explorers ask others to refer to them by.

An alternative to creating or limiting pronoun use is, of course, to dispense with them altogether. If no sense of 'self' exists, this might negate the need for gendered pronouns at all. Samuel R Delany, in *Babel -17* (1966), a classic space opera, created a culture which dispensed with the pronouns *I* and *you* and was one of the earliest speculative works with casual queer inclusion. The novel follows the experience of Ryda Wong, a linguist, poet, telepath and bisexual woman, whose goal is to understand the alien language, thereby neutralising an alien threat. It transpires that the language itself is a weapon, able to alter thought and turn people into traitors. The novel explores the impact of language on cognition, and how language influences thoughts about the self, known as the Sapir Whorf Hypothesis. In his 1940 essay, *Science and Linguistics*, Benjamin Lee Whorf describes the 'Sapir-Whorf hypothesis' theory as 'a new principle of relativity, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated.'[93] His research highlighted

[92] Tavits and Pérez, "Language influences mass opinion toward gender and LGBT equality," 16781.
[93] Benjamin Lee Whorf, "Science and Linguistics," *Technology Review*, no. 6 (April 1940), 5, https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/p15999coll16/id/104389/.

the fact that speakers of different kinds of language were cognitively different from one another, unable to imagine realities for which they had no relevant words.

> For instance, if a race of people had the physiological defect of being able to see only the color blue, they would hardly be able to formulate the rule that they saw only blue. The term blue would convey no meaning to them, their language would lack color terms, and their words denoting their various sensations of blue would answer to, and translate, our words "light, dark, white, black," and so on, not our word "blue."[94]

As Ryda herself says in *Babel 17*, 'Language is thought.'[95] Delany continues the debate through his protagonist later in the novel when Ryda says: 'there are certain ideas which have words for them. If you don't have the words, you can't know the ideas. And if you don't have the idea, you don't have the answer.'[96]

The solution for Ryda is to introduce pronouns into the alien language, creating a new version of the language, 'Babel-18', which allows her to converse with the enemy and create a concept of 'self' that was missing before. Interestingly, when incorporating pronouns into Babel 17, Ryda only uses the words *I* and *You*, rather than gendered versions.

Kristina Musholt, in her paper 'Self-Consciousness and Nonconceptual Consent', argues:

> "I"-thoughts are thoughts with first-person content that non-accidentally refer to oneself. In other words when entertaining these thoughts, the subject is (necessarily) aware of the self-reflecting nature of the thought: it is not possible to entertain an "I" thought without knowing it refers to oneself.[97]

In the same way, it is not possible to use either *he/she* as a dominant pronoun without the cultural knowledge and gendered images attached to it. What makes *Babel-17* thought-provoking, is the idea that a language without gendered pronouns would

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[94] Whorf, 4.
[95] Samuel R Delany, *Babel-17* (Great Britain: Millennium, 1999), 21.
[96] Delany,132.
[97] Kristina Musholt, "Self-Consciousness and Nonconceptual Content," *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition,* 163, no. 3 (2013), 650, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41932694.

remove not only binary sex categories but would make the concept of gender redundant.

Like Delany, Ted Chiang in his short story 'Story of your Life' (1998), also uses a linguist to try to decipher an alien language, which he describes as sounding akin to a 'wet dog.'[98] The aliens which arrive on earth are termed Heptapods due to their physical appearance—symmetrical, seemingly genderless and with seven limbs. Dr Banks's job is complicated, the heptapods have two languages, written and spoken, which are unrelated. Not only that, the heptapods experience time differently from humans. Rather than experience events sequentially, their future is already known, and this is reflected in the way they communicate, and raises the question of free-will. It is noted that: 'For the heptapods, all language was performative. Instead of using language to inform, they used language to actualize. Sure, heptapods already knew what would be said in any conversation but in order for their knowledge to be true, the conversation would have to take place.'[99] The performance in the heptapod language involves gesture—social performance. Once Dr Banks learns the alien language, she is not only able to 'read' the future but to understand how they think. This mirrors Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which she describes in the introduction to *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* as, 'that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names.'[100]

Similar to Becky Chambers' *Wayfarers* series, Chiang's short story is interesting in the way the protagonist deals with a species it does not recognise, initially cannot communicate with, and therefore cannot impose sex and gender categories

[98] Ted Chiang, *Stories of Your Life and Others* (UK: Picador, 2020),113.
[99] Chiang, 164.
[100] Judith Butler, Introduction to: *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), xxi.

onto. It became clear that it would not be sufficient to alter the behaviour of my islanders in regard to their gendered 'performance.' I would also need to radically alter their language, whilst reflecting the historical period from which my characters originated, the asylums of mid-nineteenth-century Victorian England. However, unlike Delany, Le Guin and Leckie's universes, my novel is inhabited by recognisable human characters from a fixed historic period. My goal, to remove binary gender and perhaps move beyond gender (like Piercy's Mattapoisett community) to a space where male and female traits are interchangeable, had to be reflected in speech but would be limited by the dialect and diction of the period. Inventing and changing pronouns works well if an author is creating a new species or setting the story in a distant time or planet, where new words have had time to embed into the language used. I would not have that luxury, given my linear narrative occurs in real time, albeit set in the past. I would not be able to invent a new language to suit the situation.

I decided after many drafts, to use *she* to refer to the Elder generation as I felt their speech would not change, and they would think of themselves as women. In contrast, I would use a combination of neutral pronouns to refer to the second generation. I would utilise the Creole *e*, which would appear in Tattio's speech as a singular pronoun, to replace *he/she* in the dialogue of certain second-generation characters and use their gender-neutral names where possible to provide clarity for the reader. I would also use *they/them* as a singular pronoun but work hard to reduce the need for any pronouns in the sentence structure at all.

I found restructuring paragraphs to remove binary pronouns, whilst maintaining the narrative flow, very complex, especially during action scenes. An example which highlights the problems I encountered, is a passage where Star (a second-generation

character) is travelling to the future, trying to make sense of the decontamination process. The original draft was clunky to read:

> Star barely has enough time to look around them before something like water but thicker and hot, starts to attack. They close their eyes and hug their knees for protection but cannot escape the burning or the bitterness as the floor shifts them upwards.[101]

I redrafted these two sentences to make the reference to Star's genderless body less obvious to the reader and potentially, less jarring.

> Star barely has enough time to look around before something like water but thicker and hot, starts to attack. Eyes closed, Star hugs their knees tight, feeling sicker with every shift of the floor as it travels upwards.[102]

Finally, I would attempt to de-gender internal and external sex organs by making them neutral, giving my second generation their own diction based on the island environs and words borrowed from their forebears. One example of this is the use of the word 'cave' to represent the vagina. It would infer a space that held something sacred but was not a permanent state. Birth would not define the carrier or make them a 'mother' and the 'cave' would be somewhere a child would inhabit for a short time, almost an internal 'breeder'.[103] I would need to put faith in my reader to understand the hybrid language I would create and hope the combination of these changes would not distract them from the story.

As the Swedish study indicates, current investigations into the effect of de-gendered languages have largely found that the populations which use these languages tend to be more liberal minded in their gender attitudes, suggesting 'opinions about gender equality are constructed with the help of the language, rather than being inflexibly determined by it.'[104] This was what I wanted to bring to my fictional

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[101] Susannah Dawes, "The Mune" (First draft of unpublished manuscript, 2020).
[102] Susannah Dawes, "The Mune" (First re-draft of unpublished manuscript, 2021).
[103] Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*.
[104] Tavits and Pérez, "Language Influences Public Attitudes toward Gender Equality," *The Journal of Politics,* 81, no. 1 (3 October 2018), 89, https://doi.org/10.1086/700004.

world, a space where gender could be deconstructed and supported through language.

Beyond Gender

As well as marking gender, language plays an important part in world building in other ways, and experimenting with form, and disrupting language, gives the reader an immediate awareness of cultural and geographical difference in addition to sex differences. Ursula Le Guin used fictional language to populate her novel the *TLHoD*, focusing on minute physical details and emotional shifts that help the reader to understand the unique society she created, exemplified in the following poem which Estraven recites to Genly Ai during their journey on the ice: 'Light is the left hand of darkness / and darkness the right hand of light. / Two are one, life and death, lying / together like lovers in kemmer, / like hands joined together, / like the end and the way.'[105] As I have previously explained, Kemmer is the term Le Guin used to describe the month of sexual coupling practised by her androgynous Gethenians. Here she uses it as a simile to explain the wider concept of life and death in Gethenian society. These new words not only add credence to new cultural imaginings but allow the reader to fully immerse themselves in the novel world. I would need to use language in a similar way to Le Guin to expose the structure and beliefs of my community, which would evolve over time. For example, I felt it was plausible that my island community might structure their new society in terms of age hierarchy, rather than class or education, to maintain equality. I could use the word *Elder* to refer to the original mothers, a genderless word which would denote authority and wisdom and their position in society.

[105] Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, 233.

Changing the language of the story to something unfamiliar gives the reader a disconnect at the heart of the story, essential for any work of speculative fiction. I did not have time to invent an entire language like Russell Hoban, who famously took in excess of five years to complete *Riddley Walker* (1980), but I could use some of the techniques. The language in *Riddley Walker* mirrors the world Hoban created which has been reduced after a nuclear event 2000 years earlier, which his protagonist refers to as the '1 big 1'. It is described by guest Una McCormac in the *Backlisted* podcast (2019) as a 'futuristic iron age civilisation that talks in a rubbed down English.'[106]

Riddley, the protagonist, a twelve-year-old boy, says of his quest to pursue lost knowledge:

> The worl is full of things waiting to happen. You myt think you can jus go here and there doing nothing. Happening nothing. You cant tho you bleeding cant. You put your self on any road and some thing will sow its self to you. Wanting to happen. Waiting to happen. You myt say, 'I don't want to know.' But 1ce its showt its self to you you *wil* know wont you. You cant not know no mor. There it is and working in you.[107]

Riddley wants to discover the truth about the old world and the meaning of the new world he inhabits. In a similar way, my character Star seeks the truth about the Elder's world, but unlike Riddley, it is not lost, but concealed. Whist Star finds meaning through Zen poetry, Riddley achieves it through myths and stories which both inflict harm and create order. The language used in *Riddley Walker* allows the reader to understand Riddley's thoughts as he processes them, to witness how meanings have been lost over time, with the loss of cultural and scientific knowledge, and to understand the imbalance of power that exists.

My characters, like Riddley Walker, have their language derived from English, in my case Victorian English, peppered with slang terms from the period. Although not

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[106] John Mitchison and Andy Miller, hosts, "Russell Hoban – Riddley Walker," Backlisted (podcast), August 5, 2019, https://www.backlisted.fm/episodes/9-russell-hoban-riddley-walker.
[107] Russell Hoban, *Riddley Walker* (Great Britain: Pan Books Ltd, 1982),149.

as much time will have passed by the second generation for the language to have devolved quite so much as Riddley's, there will be certain terms which will have changed, and some words will be misused, their understanding lost, if they were ever understood to begin with.

Joan Slonczewski, in her utopian, ecological science fiction novel, *A Door into Ocean* (1986), uses new and hybrid word pairings to highlight the social structure and beliefs of her all-female, water-inhabiting, Shoran society. 'Word-sharing' is a concept which obliterates the need for subject/object differentiation and allows the reader to begin to understand a world in which all actions have consequences. Spinel, a male traveller from another planet, finds the concept hard to understand: 'Spinel thought over the list of 'share forms': learnsharing, wordsharing, lovesharing. 'Do you say 'hitsharing' too? If I hit a rock with a chisel, does the rock hit me?'[108] Because the Shoran language does not separate object and subject, it assumes that the perpetrator (in this case Spinel with a chisel) experiences pain when he hits the rock. Merwen, who is helping Spinel understand the language, replies: 'Don't you feel it in your arm?' [109] It is this belief, embedded in the language, that protects the society, allowing them to resist invaders through non-cooperation.

In the same way that Le Guin utilises Genly Ai's gaze and internal monologue to understand Gethenian society, Slonczewski also uses an outsider's perspective, Spinel, to explore her complex linguistic ideas and present them to the reader. There are numerous examples of this trope in speculative fiction, primarily because an outsider perceives the strangeness (or otherness) in a culture with fresh eyes. Nicola Griffith in her feminist novel *Ammonite* uses an outsider, Marghe, a colonist and a

[108] Joan Slonczewski, *A Door into Ocean* (London: Women's Press, 1987), 36.
[109] Joan Slonczewski, 37.

xeno-anthropologist, to explain the linguistic and cultural difference of the planet Jeep. Like many other speculative explorer-protagonists, Marghe becomes immersed in the culture, experiencing it first-hand. The 'natives' of Jeep originate from Earth and communicate in a combination of different Earth languages. As Marghe learns early on in the narrative: 'The population of Jeep was small, estimated at under one million, and its people lived in small groups, each with its own richly varied dialect.'[110] As an anthropologist, Marghe, like Rydra Wong, in *Babel-17*, is well placed to observe and overcome any linguistic challenges she might encounter.

In contrast to these educated explorers, my protagonists, like Riddley Walker, would narrate the story in a language that represents the period they inhabit, accessible to the reader without interpretation from an outsider. The coined words and terms I imagined, which would add to the world building, needed to be plausible: either an exact description of what they saw, such as 'red nut' and 'rainbow bird' or words borrowed from the existing language spoken on the island. The fact that there would be no written word on the island, except perhaps the letters 'Y' and 'N', which some of the characters would need to learn, would change the dynamic because words not spoken aloud are often lost.

In societies where there is no written word, such as my imagined island in *The Mune*, communication often takes other forms: ideas are passed though myths and story, and information tends to be gleaned more heavily from the environment. Whilst researching my PhD, I became involved in a project at Cardiff University whose linguistic department were looking at ways to reimagine how language evolves through a speculative short story competition. During the seminars, organised to inspire writers, I became interested in Olfactory communication and felt that I could utilise the

[110] Nicola Griffith, *Ammonite* (Great Britain: Gollancz, 2012),18.

information I researched both in a short story (see appendix I) and in my novel. With the faster than average evolution on the island in *The Mune*, it might be possible for one or more of my second generations characters to have developed more sensitive olfactory receptors (see Figure iv & Figure v) than their forbears.

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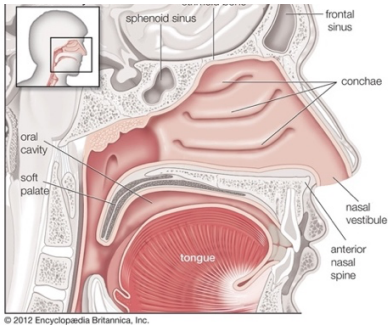

Figure iv: Nasal cavity

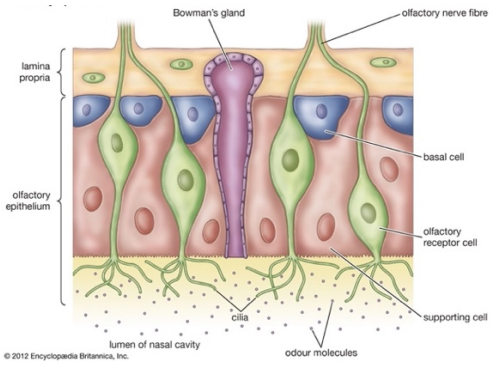

Figure v: Olfactory epithelium

In their paper, 'Revisiting the Limits of Language: The Odor Lexicon of Maniq,' Ewelina Wnuk and Asifa Majid look at how the Maniq tribe utilise scent in communication. They conclude that:

> Smell is particularly important in the lives of the Maniq and lies at the core of the indigenous ideology. The Maniq surround themselves with odors believed to be beneficial for health and that repel danger. They stay constantly alert for potentially harmful odors.[112]

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[111] *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "Olfactory-system," October 11, 2019, https://www.britannica.com/science/olfactory-system/Nervous-pathways-of-smell#/media/1/2124075/70985.

[112] Ewelina Wnuk and Asifa Majid, "Revisiting the Limits of Language: The Odor Lexicon of Maniq," *Cognition,* 131, no. 1 (1 April 2014), 135, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2013.12.008.

Identifying the scent of something as medicine or poison would be vital for my community, when faced with flora and fauna that bears only a passing resemblance to the ecology of Victorian England. Combined with the idea that my second-generation characters might experience traumatic epigenetic changes, detailed later in this chapter, due to the nature of their birth and their mothers' pregnancies, I wondered if these new ways of communication might equip them to survive.

I decided to give my character Rainbow the gift of olfactory perception far beyond that of their peers. Rainbow would communicate with the island through contact with the trees, giving the island itself a voice. Trees and plants are known to have root systems which feed information, so it would not be an unimaginable trait and would certainly fit Suvin's notion of cognitive logic. I had also read Sue Burke's novel, *Semiosis* (2018), in which there is an entirely plausible sentient bamboo, Stevland. In an article in *Locus* magazine, Burke explains why she chose a plant as one of the narrators:

> I was watering my plants and realized that one of my houseplants had killed another plant. It was a pothos vine, and it had wrapped itself around the other plant, starved it for light, and killed it. At the time I felt like it was my fault, because I should have been paying more attention. Less than a month later, a different plant tried to kill another plant, and I thought that was suspicious. I began to do some research and discovered that plants are actually very aggressive – they fight to the death over sunlight in all sorts of different ways.
> The more research I did, the more I realized I had a lifeform so different from us living in my house, and it needed to be put into a story. Then it was just a question of figuring out the story, and learning more about plants: the horrible things they do to animals, as well as to each other, and the way they relate to different aspects of the world around them. Plants are very aware of their environments. They are not merely assertive, they are aggressive. They will murder you if they have to, but they will try to bribe you first, because that works better.[113]

[113] Sue Burke, 'Aliens Among Us,' *Locus*, March 30, 2020, https://locusmag.com/2020/03/sue-burke-aliens-among-us/.

It is difficult, in *Semiosis,* to judge exactly who colonises whom: whether Stevland is manipulating the settlers or vice versa. I wanted to take Burke's idea of symbiosis, the idea of cooperation with nature, but rather than create conflict in a game of dominance, I wanted the communication to feel hopeful and based on kindness and to help create the utopia rather than to destroy it.

The Myth of the Gendered Brain

Theories of gendered language are one of many aspects which have changed our understanding of what it means to be human since the last wave of feminist utopias. Another important revision is new theories of the brain. Although writers like Le Guin recognised the myth of the 'gendered brain,' a concept which leads to sexual stereotyping and binary coding, this was based on cultural rather than scientific evidence.

Until recently, neuroscience research has been grounded in the belief that men and women's brains are inherently different and therefore function differently. The early focus was on the size of the brain, or 'skull capacity,'[114] which it was believed had a direct correlation with intelligence. With no access to actual brains to measure, other than from cadavers, scientists in the nineteenth century relied on head measurements. Women's heads were smaller, and therefore it was concluded that their brains were inferior. Gustave Le Bon wrote in 1879: 'Without a doubt there exist some distinguished women, very superior to the average man but they are as exceptional as the birth of any monstrosity, as, for example, of a gorilla with two heads: consequently, we may neglect them entirely.'[115] This inferred inferiority, based on size,

[114] Gina Rippon, *The Gendered Brain: The New Neuroscience That Shatters the Myth of the Female Brain* (London: The Bodley Head, 2019), 6.
[115] Rippon, 6.

was used as the rationale behind women concerning themselves with reproduction and the home, and leaving intellectual endeavours, such as politics, education, and science to men. It is this period that my characters in *The Mune* inhabit and they would have been indoctrinated in the belief that the circumference of the head and height of the forehead was proof of a greater intelligence.

This 'size matters' argument has continued but, rather than studying the brain in isolation, proponents have argued that because men's physiology is different, for example, they 'run' faster and are 'taller', their brain biology must also be different[116] and therefore better at functioning. Nina Rippon argues that a difference in size correlates to all organs, which are naturally larger in males, and a larger brain doesn't function differently, any more than a liver or heart, it is simply housed in a bigger body.[117]

Traditionally, brains have been measured and tested in order to prove and maintain difference, rather than question whether our motivation for research is producing the answers we expect. And it is not just the size of women's brains that have been scrutinised and found wanting. In 1871, Darwin wrote in his book *The Descent of Man*: 'The chief distinction in the intellectual powers of the two sexes is shewn by man attaining to a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than woman can attain—whether requiring deep thought, reason, or imagination, or merely the use of the senses and hands.'[118] Darwin's theories, based on men's attainment, take no

[116] Anne Moir and Bill Moir, *Why Men Don't Iron: The New Reality of Gender Differences* (London: HarperCollins, 1999).
[117] Simon Baren-Cohen and Gina Rippon, "Is the Brain Gendered?: The Debate," *How to Academy Science* video, 1:19:49, March 14, 2019, https://youtu.be/kxfaE-gWZ9I.
[118] Charles Darwin, "Darwin in Public and Private," Darwin Correspondence Project, University of Cambridge, 7 February 2016, https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/learning/universities/women-and-science/darwin-public-and-private.

account of privilege or the gender roles that served to keep women from gaining the skills and knowledge in order to be able to compete.

Scientists such as Simon Baron-Cohen still argue from this standpoint, despite acknowledging nurture has an impact on brain development. Using a continuation of Darwin's theory of natural selection, Baron-Cohen proposes that the average man is more 'systemising' and the average woman 'empathising', having evolved to fit their roles.

> My theory is that the female brain is predominantly hard-wired for empathy, and that the male brain is predominantly hard-wired for understanding and building systems. I call it the empathising-systemising (E-S) theory.
>
> Empathising is the drive to identify another person's emotions and thoughts, and to respond to these with an appropriate emotion. The empathiser intuitively figures out how people are feeling, and how to treat people with care and sensitivity. Systemising is the drive to analyse and explore a system, to extract underlying rules that govern the behaviour of a system; and the drive to construct systems. The systemiser intuitively figures out how things work, or what the underlying rules are controlling a system. Systems can be as varied as a pond, a vehicle, a computer, a maths equation, or even an army unit. They all operate on inputs and deliver outputs, using rules.[119]

Baren-Cohen's use of the term 'hard-wiring' suggests there is no potential for change—that women will always be primarily 'empathising' by nature. This, like Darwin's theory, leads to expectations that women's role is as 'carer' regardless of their skill set. Being 'caring' or 'empathising' equates not only to meeting the needs of others, but also to putting other people's needs before your own. This goes someway to explaining how ambitious women are often viewed as lacking in emotion—less like women as they become 'systemising' like men. Baren-Cohen, like many of his peers, explains that this hard-wiring in brain function is due to hormones, specifically the levels of testosterone exposure in the womb, which directly affects behaviour and

[119] Simon Baron-Cohen, "They Just Can't Help It," *The Guardian*, 17 April 2003, sec. Education, https://www.theguardian.com/education/2003/apr/17/research.highereducation.

cognitive ability. In a debate with Gina Rippon,[120] Cohen cites a paper by Gilmore et al which describes differences in MRI results in new-born babies when studying white and grey matter in the brain.

> Male neonate brains are about 6% larger than female brains at birth, and even at this stage there are already several areas that evidence local sexual dimorphism. For example, the medial temporal cortex and rolandic operculum are larger in males, whereas the dorsolateral prefrontal, motor, and visual cortices are larger in females.[121]

Baren-Cohen uses this data to conclude these biological differences indicate there are two distinct types of brain: male and female. The medial temporal cortex, which is larger in males is believed to relate to sensory and spatial cognition, and the dorsolateral prefrontal cortices are believed to be connected to self-control, thus perpetuating the gendered myth.

Despite Baren-Cohen acknowledging a male-sexed baby can possess a female brain and that 'differences' are not deficiencies, the language is problematic in its binary assumptions, and has downstream consequences. Nina Rippon calls this argument 'neurosexism' explained as:

> the practice of claiming that there are fixed differences between female and male brains, which can explain women's inferiority or unsuitability for certain roles. By spotting sex-dependent activity in certain brain regions – such as those associated with empathising, learning languages or spatial processing – neurosexist studies have allowed an established "go-to list" of sex differences to flourish. This includes things such as men being more logical and women being better at languages or nurturing.[122]

Rippon argues that our understanding of the brain and the science we have utilised to study brain differences has historically reinforced binary stereotypes. She claims that

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[120] "Is the Brain Gendered?: The Debate."
[121] John Gilmore, Rebecca Knickmeyer and Wei Gao, "Imaging structural and functional brain development in early childhood," *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*,19 (February 2018), 131, https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn.2018.1.
[122] Gina Rippon, "How "neurosexism" is holding back gender equality – and science Itself," *The Conversation*, October 27, 2016, http://theconversation.com/how-neurosexism-is-holding-back-gender-equality-and-science-itself-67597.

the brain is not in fact male or female by design, and certainly not static, shaped only in childhood.[123] Daphne Joel goes further, arguing that studies show that men and women have a complex mosaic of different features in their brains, which are highly variable and therefore do not fit neatly into binary categories. She states that: 'neuroanatomical data reveal that sex interacts with other factors *in utero* and throughout life to determine the structure of the brain, and that because these interactions are complex, the result is a multi-morphic, rather than a dimorphic, brain.'[124] The brain is therefore better described as 'intersex' rather than male or female, with no trait 'hard-wired' into any gender. Joel concludes that 'variability is created by the interaction of genes (on sex chromosomes and on autosomal chromosomes), hormones (gonadal and others) and environment, *in utero* and throughout life.'[125] Whilst there are emerging studies of the transgender and non-binary brain, currently the small size of samples and scope of studies are problematic.[126] However, Joel notes that 'sexual differentiation may progress independently in different brain tissues thus enabling genetically and environmentally induced variation in sexual differentiation of different tissues within a single brain.'[127] Once again, research suggests that our brains are not 'hard-wired' but adapt to both environmental and hormonal changes throughout life.

So, it seems women are not from Venus, but merely limited by their opportunity to learn and develop the pathways in the brain necessary to store information, and the brain is not static but plastic and flexible, influenced both by nature and by the

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[123] "Is the Brain Gendered?: The Debate."
[124] Daphne Joel, "Male or Female? Brains Are Intersex," *Frontiers in Integrative Neuroscience,* 5, no.57 (20 September 2011), https://doi.org/doi: 10.3389/fnint.2011.00057.
[125] Joel, "Male or Female? Brains Are Intersex."
[126] Hilary B Nguyen, et al., "What Has Sex Got to Do with It? The Role of Hormones in the Transgender Brain," *Neuropsychopharmacol*, 44 (2019), https://doi.org/10.1038/s41386-018-0140-7.
[127] Joel, "Male or Female? Brains Are Intersex."

environment. As Rippon suggests in her book *The Gendered Brain: The New Neuroscience That Shatters the Myth of the Female Brain* (2019), 'something that is 'written in our genes' may come to express itself differently in different contexts.'[128]

Of course, utopian writers like Le Guin, Piercy and Russ have always believed there is no difference in intellect between the sexes. Joanna Russ, in her novel *The Female Man* (1975), wrote: 'I didn't and don't want to be a 'feminine' version or a diluted version or a special version or a subsidiary version or an ancillary version, or an adapted version of the heroes I admire. I want to be the heroes themselves.'[129]

As Rippon succinctly concludes: 'a gendered world will produce a gendered brain.'[130] Perhaps then, by arguing that every brain is unique, with no sex differences, I could begin to imagine that the brain, like gender, has a spectrum of capability and allow my characters to develop their unique intellect, regardless of gender.

Epigenetic Inheritance of Gender

We are now aware of many more conditions which affect the development and gendering of the brain and Epigenetics is an important new area of scientific understanding that might influence the narrative of a modern utopia. Epigenetics studies the way in which DNA expression is influenced by social and environmental factors that might previously have been deemed 'insignificant to genetic processes,'[131] but in fact have significant effects on our brain behaviour. Epigenetics is the study of heritable changes in gene expression, changes which do not involve alterations in

[128] Rippon, Introduction to *The Gendered Brain,* xix.
[129] Joanna Russ, *The Female Man* (London: Women's Press, 1994), 206.
[130] Rippon, Introduction to *The Gendered Brain*, xix.
[131] Janelle Lamoreaux, "What if the Environment is a Person? Lineages of Epigenetic Science in a Toxic China," *Cultural Anthropology*, 31, no. 2 (May 01, 2016), https://doi.org/10.14506/ca31.2.03.

DNA sequences but which affect how our cells read genes. Epigenetic changes are rooted in the mechanisms that turn genes off and on (Figure vi).

[132]

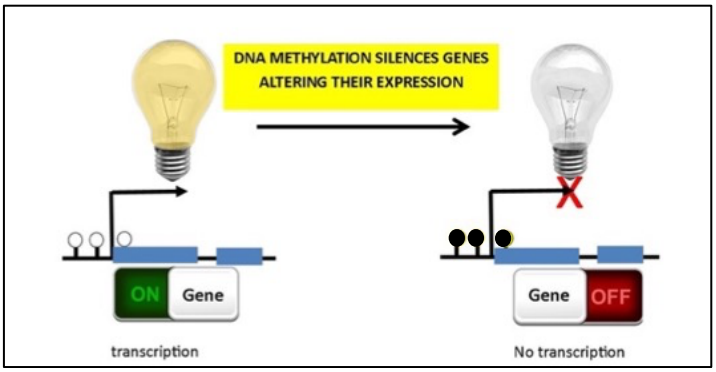

Figure vi: Gene promoter silencing caused by the epigenetic mechanism DNA methylation.

Research by L.H. Lumey, an epidemiologist at Columbia University, who based his studies on the Dutch Hongerwinter[133] (a famine in German occupied Netherlands near the end of WW2) discovered that starvation caused certain genes to deactivate in children in utero at the time of the event. Effectively, the trauma caused genes in these unborn children to be silenced. The study found that these genetic changes, occurring by a process called methylation, led to long-term conditions including diabetes, obesity, schizophrenia, and an increased mortality rate. The trauma mothers suffered during periods of starvation left a lasting genetic imprint on their children which, it is believed, continued several generations on. In addition to epigenetic changes occurring in utero, there is growing evidence that sperm plays a significant

[132] Image based on diagram by Karina Zillner, *Gene promoter silencing caused by the epigenetic mechanism DNA methylation,* Accessed 29 October 2020, https://www.epigencare.com/epigenetics-and-skincare.
[133] Bastiaan T. Heijmans et al., "Persistent Epigenetic Differences Associated with Prenatal Exposure to Famine in Humans," *PNAS* 105, no. 44 (Nov 04 2008), https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0806560105.

part in epigenetic inheritance, influencing both the health and development of offspring[134] and that these changes can occur over a lifetime.[135]

Historically, feminist utopian fiction has used catastrophic events such as war and pandemics to provide plausible breaks from the known world, and gateways into representations of utopian worlds. In *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the Herlanders fought a long war, and were enslaved, before creating their own Utopia. In Joanna Russ, Octavia Butler and Marge Piercy's novels, we see an ongoing environmental war. In Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, we witness a starving community trying to survive on an uninhabitable moon.

These traumatic events make generational Epigenetic transmission an interesting concept for modern writers of utopian fiction to hypothesise, and with this in mind, I felt I needed to move away from imagining a blank slate utopia, a perfect world such as *Herland*, where Jane Donawerth describes: 'genetics is applied not through traditionally masculine values of hunting, competition, and individuality, but through traditional feminine values of nurturing and more, generally, creating an environment where no one will be hurt.'[136] I would need to build a multigenerational society who would not be reduced to relying on gendered traits to improve their situation.

Different genders have different experiences and exposures to early life stress, which means epigenetic changes can also be considered a gendered experience. An example of this can be seen in a recent study of the effect of BPA in utero, where it

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[134] Kiyomi.R. Kaneshiro, A. Rechtsteiner and S. Strome, "Sperm-inherited H3K27me3 impacts offspring transcription and development in *C. elegans*," *Nature Communications* 10, no. 1271 (March 2019), https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-019-09141-w.
[135] Bob Weinhold, "Epigenetics: The Science of Change," *Environmental Health Perpectives,* 114, no. 3 (March 2006), https://doi.org/10.1289/ehp.114-a160.
[136] Jane Donawerth, *Frankenstein's Daughters: Women Writing Science Fiction* (Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 28.

was discovered that women had far higher levels of parabens in their urine than men, due to their use of cosmetics. Animal studies have shown that parabens have an effect on 'brain function and behavior, especially regarding sexually dimorphic phenotypes.'[137] In other words, it's possible that these epigenetic changes in utero, caused by the plastics in cosmetics, might contribute to deviations in the appearance of male and female bodies.

Obviously, it is very difficult to replicate the findings of epigenetic studies due to ethical considerations: we cannot remove a child from their parent to study the effects of separation; nor can we put a mother under stress, maltreat a child, or remove sections of its brain to understand how they have been epigenetically affected. What we do know is that the biology of the child is influenced by the hormonal environment of the womb, and the experiences of their forebearers, which might, epigenetically speaking, create a range of sex identities that do not fit neatly into binary categories.

Epigenetic changes caused by the environment, displaying in subsequent generations, are not easily controlled, though there is evidence the changes are reversible.[138] A speculative creative project provides the space to map out this potential territory and provide a model for consideration. As Aldous Huxley notes in his utopia, *Island*: 'Wisdom takes science in its stride and goes a stage further.'[139]

It would be interesting to consider how the trauma my first-generation characters suffered on their voyage—the lack of medical equipment and scarcity of food—might transform both their children's behaviour and their bodies, and what impact this might have on the society they later create.

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[137] Marija Kundakovic, et al., "Sex-specific epigenetic disruption and behavioral changes following low-dose in utero bisphenol A exposure," *Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A* . 110, no. 24 (2013), https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23716699.
[138] Bob Weinhold, "Epigenetics: The Science of Change."
[139] Aldous Huxley, *Island* (London: Chattus & Windus, 1975), 213, Kindle.

Conclusion

Modern and emerging theories of neuroscience, gender, and epigenetics as a means of biological transmission meant I needed to move away from the idea of creating a blueprint for a blank slate world, cut off and separated from any civilisation my characters sought to escape.

When constructing my utopia, I had to acknowledge that information is not carried only in the mind, in language and institutions, but also by the body.

In terms of critical practice, I needed to create an authentic world that reflected both my cultural and physical present. Where Le Guin used science to imagine equality of gender, a knowledge of epigenetics, neuroscience and queer theory would allow me to start from a point of neutrality, with no sex difference in brain capacity and where I could imagine sex and gender as a spectrum rather than in binary categories.

Despite current scientific knowledge struggling to ascertain with certainty the impact of epigenetics on gender, there is a need for understanding how it might shape fictional characters, irrespective of culture and tradition. The Utopia has always imagined scientific advances to open the doors to cultural and biological transformation and a modern feminist utopia is the perfect platform to consider the impact of this new information: how it will define both my characters' experience and their place in the world I created.

Using the latest research available I would build a kinetic utopian world, which allowed individuals to define their own sex and gender using a spectrum rather than a dichotomy. In other words, I needed to re-think the most rudimentary categories of human identity, whilst considering the plausibility of any change when applied to characters relocated from Victorian Britain.

CHAPTER 2 - Embodying the Victorian Mother

The aim of any speculative fiction is to hold a mirror up to society, and the feminist utopia reflects, amongst other things, perceptions of gender equality. Tellingly, much feminist utopian fiction still dedicates itself to imagining improvements in the experience of women, releasing them from domesticity and motherhood, and giving them agency.

That this is an ongoing theme highlights that these issues are problems yet to be solved in any modern society. Judith Butler in her paper, 'Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig, Foucault' (1987), explains why the practice of keeping women chained to maternal roles might persist:

> The effort to interpret maternal feelings as organic necessities discloses a desire to disguise motherhood as an optional practice. If motherhood becomes a choice, then what else is possible? This kind of questioning often engenders vertigo and terror over the possibility of losing social sanctions, of leaving a solid social station and place. That this terror is so well known gives the most credence to the notion that gender identity rests on the unstable bedrock of human invention.[140]

These social sanctions, which have kept women firmly in their place as mothers and nurturers, and men as material providers, are closely linked to evangelism in the eighteenth century.

Leonore Davidoff, in her book *Family fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (1987), describes the most prevalent religious doctrine at the time.

> If a man's ability to support and order his family and household lay at the heart of masculinity, then a woman's femininity was best expressed in her dependence. Dependence was at the core of the evangelical Christian view of womanhood, and the new female subject, constructed in real religious terms, was the godly wife and mother.[141]

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[140] Butler, *The Judith Butler Reader*, 27.
[141] Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* (London: Routledge, 2002), 114, ProQuest eBook Central.

By the mid-nineteenth century, this religious construction of woman as both dependant and nurturer, had become secularised. Anthony Fletcher suggests in his book *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England 1500-1800* (1995), that the scientific revolution in the eighteenth century meant religious views that underpinned domestic ideology created 'a doctrine of subordination based upon medical evidence [which] was entirely consonant with the central theological tenets of women's inferiority.'[142] Davidoff argues that this concept of women as the frailer sex was normalised by the nineteenth century and 'Masculine identity was equated with an emerging concept of 'occupation', while women remained [safely] within a familial frame.'[143] Motherhood was promoted as a married woman's most important function.

Any discussion, therefore, that rejected a woman's role within the home or her moral obligation to produce a child within the confines of marriage, was seen as a weakness: a symptom of illness to be purged. Lucy Bland in her book, *Banishing the Beast*: *English Feminism and Sexual Morality 1885-1914* (1995), argues that: 'Women were ruled by their bodies; their reproductive physiology guiding their every move. Until the late nineteenth century, the uterus was held as a woman's central controlling organ, closely connected to the nervous system.'[144] There was no alternative to reproductive function, it had become a woman's occupation.

If being defined by your sexual organs was not constrictive enough for women in the nineteenth century, those who married but were unable to conceive were still expected to fulfil a mothering role. '[O]pportunities for mothering the children of relatives and friends were legion and childless women would be expected to be

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[142] Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England 1500-1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press,1995), 61, ProQuest eBook Central.
[143] Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes,* 30.
[144] Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: English Feminism and Sexual Morality 1885-1914* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 63.

available for childcare.'[145] It seems even if a woman was infertile, there was no escaping the occupation or responsibility of motherhood.

Without children, or access to children and therefore the ability to fulfil the expected female role, it was believed that women would have nothing healthy to occupy them. Even worse were women who did not marry at all and had no husband to supervise them. Lynn Abrams explains on the BBC Website that, 'Motherhood was expected of a married woman and the childless single woman was a figure to be pitied. She was often encouraged to find work caring for children—as a governess or a nursery maid—presumably to compensate her for her loss.'[146] Childlessness inside and outside of the marriage contract was seen as undesirable—a problem to be fixed.

The links between a woman's body and poor mental and moral health applied no matter what choices women made, but to fulfil these ideals, women first had to face the physical demands of childbearing. Hilary Marland writes in her book *Dangerous Motherhood: Insanity and Childbirth in Victorian Britain* (2004)*:*

> During the first half of the nineteenth century women's bodies and minds came under closer scrutiny from doctors […]. Considerable energy would be devoted to describing and discussing female disorders [….] Motherhood would be the experience of most nineteenth century women and dominate much of their adult life [….] For many women this was an experience marked by the dread of being harmed by the birth, or even the death in childbirth of themselves or their offspring.[147]

Figures show that, for example, in the year 1874, in England and Wales, out of 854,956 births, 3108 women died of puerperal fever, and 2819 of accidents of childbirth.[148] There were likely some hidden maternal deaths—those from illegal abortions and

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[145] Davidoff and Hall, 338.
[146] Lynn Abrams, "Ideals of Womanhood in Victorian Britain," BBC History Trails, 09 August 2001, https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/victorian_britain/women_home/ideals_womanhood_06.shtml.
[147] Hilary Marland, *Dangerous Motherhood: Insanity and Childbirth in Victorian Britain* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004),16.
[148] Irvine Loudon, "Problems of Measuring Maternal Mortality*,"* in *Death in Childbirth: An International Study of Maternal Care and Maternal Mortality 1800-1950* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

misreporting, the physician simply writing ‘haemorrhage’ on the certificate rather than postpartum haemorrhage. Puerperal fever was by far the biggest threat to pregnant women, caused by an infection of the uterus during and after delivery.

Charles White, surgeon to the Manchester Infirmary in 1773, wrote of puerperal fever:

> It was caused by the carriage of putrid matter from the lower intestines to the womb. During pregnancy ‘tight stays and petticoat bindings press the womb…against the lower intestines…’ leading to costiveness and the passage of excrementitious matter into the circulation and the womb. Thus the cause of puerperal fever lay partly within the woman herself, and partly in the atmosphere she breathed, for it was customary for the patient to be attended by a crowd of women in a room with a large fire and every door and window closed to ensure she did not ‘catch cold’. Curtains were drawn round the bed and pinned together. Every crevice, ‘not excepting the key hole’ was ‘stopped close’ creating putrid air and throwing the women into profuse sweats.[149]

White, like most physicians of the time, found a way to blame women for their own deaths despite the fact the ‘tight stays and petticoat bindings’ were demanded by feminine fashion. With no machinery to diagnose difficulties, any medical intervention was left to the physician’s judgment, which was rooted in misunderstanding and a lack of interest. In most part, physicians of the period agreed that childbirth made women weak and susceptible to numerous disorders, often unrelated to the physical aspects of childbirth such as tearing of the perineum, the baby appearing in the breech position or puerperal fever.

The clinical management of childbirth by men, for the benefit of men, continued until the end of the nineteenth century with little change, except for the introduction of anaesthesia. Even the position women were placed in during the birthing was for the male doctor’s benefit. For example, William Potts Dewees wrote in his book *A Compendious System of Midwifery* (1828):

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[149] Irvine Loudon, *Death in Childbirth: An International Study of Maternal Care and Maternal Mortality 1800-1950* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 58.

> The British practitioner almost invariably directs the patient to be placed upon her side . . . while the Continental accoucheur has her placed on her back ... the woman should be placed so as to give the least possible hinderance to the operations of the accoucheur—this is agreed upon by all; but there exist a diversity of opinion, what that position is. Some recommended the side; others the knees, and others the back. I coincide with the latter....Therefore, when practicable, I would recommend she should be placed upon her back, both for convenience and safety.[150]

The biggest problem for the mortality rates was not the positioning of the woman but man-midwifery,[151] men who often attended births who were not adequately trained. In his book *Death in Childbirth: An International Study of Maternal Care and Maternal Mortality 1800-1950* (1992)*,* Irvine Loudon mentions a private survey carried out by Dr Edward Harrison in 1806, which reported that men in occupations 'such as blacksmiths […] took man-midwifery on as a side-line.'[152] This indicates how little emphasis was placed on women's health, despite childbirth being their primary social function.

A license in midwifery, based on an oral examination, appeared in 1852, but was discontinued over the problem of women who wished to be admitted, namely two pioneering doctors: Elizabeth Garratt Anderson and Sophia Jex-Blake.[153] In her pamphlet *Medical Women, Two Essays,*[154] written in 1872, Sophia Jex-Blake remarks how far behind England is in admitting women to medicine. The withdrawal of licenses demonstrates how far men were prepared to go to keep women in the home and out of masculine occupations, even those with little social standing.

As well as man-midwifery problems, Irvine notes that in the mid-nineteenth century there was an 'increasing tendency from about 1870 for general practitioners

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[150] Lauren Dundes, "The Evolution of Maternal Birthing Position," *The American Journal of Public Health: Then and Now* 77, no. 5 (1987), 6, https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/pdf/10.2105/AJPH.77.5.636.
[151] Irvine Loudon, "General Practitioners and Obstetrics: A Brief History," *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 101, no. 11 (November 2008), https://doi.org/10.1258/jrsm.2008.080264.
[152] Loudon, *Death in Childbirth: An International Study of Maternal Care and Maternal Mortality 1800-1950,* 176.
[153] Loudon, *Death in Childbirth*, 190.
[154] Sophia Jex-Blake, *Medical Women: Two Essays* (London: Hamilton Adams & Co, 1872), retrieved from: https://www.gutenberg.org/files/52297/52297-h/52297-h.htm.

to intervene with their forceps to get a midwifery case over and done with as quickly as possible,'[155] due to childbirth being time-consuming and poorly paid. According to Sir Henry Halford, in a report of the select committee on Medical Education: 'Delivering babies was "contrary to decency and common sense".'[156]

Obstetrics remained a branch of general practice and did not become a specialism until the twentieth century with the emergence of gynaecology which offered a surgical route and commanded high fees.

Surviving childbirth was just the start of men's management of women in the nineteenth century. Women needed to be watched, shepherded towards health and good sense. There were two extreme versions of this management: locking women up in an asylum and sending them away.

In the mid-nineteenth century, far from diagnosing disorders, the physician's role was to re-establish order in the home: 'Domestic ideology seems to have been the new religion.'[157] This ideology shaped medical practice and Robert Gooch, an obstetric physician in London in 1820, and an authority on childbirth and mental disturbance at this time, wrote: 'The female constitution was so weakened by labour and the nervous system so overwrought, that diseases of the mind easily supervened.'[158] Women of the early nineteenth century were portrayed as victims of their bodies, which were seen both to be delicate and uncontrollable, which made a woman 'likely to have difficulty in performing her most important function of giving birth.'[159] This was even more so the case for unmarried mothers who were deemed

[155] Loudon, *Death in Childbirth*, 179.
[156] Irvine Loudon, "General Practitioners and Obstetrics: A Brief History," 531.
[157] Hilary Marland, *Dangerous Motherhood: Insanity and Childbirth in Victorian Britain*, 93.
[158] Marland, *Dangerous Motherhood*, 41.
[159] Marland, 6.

especially vulnerable to hormonal manias, lacking the moral stability of a husband. Women's physical and mental health were inextricably linked.

No aspect of a Victorian woman's menstrual health was seen to be separate from their mental fragility—the onset of menstruation, birth and menopause—all were believed to make women very vulnerable to mental disruption. Gooch compared labour to 'the hysteric affections of puberty' and 'the nervous susceptibility which occurs during every menstrual period.'[160] Any display of unfeminine behaviour which linked to hormonal activity was seen to be a symptom of poor mental health—one to be solved for the good of men.

> They contravened their vows of matrimony; far from loving, honouring and obeying, women turned against their husbands, neglected themselves and the household, bullied their servants, broke the china, tore their clothes, roamed the streets and displayed an overt sexuality, making vulgar and suggestive comments to complete strangers. Yet so common was this disorder claimed to be by medical men that it came to be an almost anticipated accompaniment of the process of giving birth.[161]

The mental disorders, seemingly deriving from hormones, which threatened the status quo of patriarchal Victorian society, were termed by Gooch 'Perpetual Insanity.' It was believed that Perpetual Insanity struck when women were physically weak and morally susceptible, shortly after childbirth. The disease 'challenged notions of domesticity and femininity and flouted ideals of maternal conduct and feeling.'[162] This medical diagnosis performed the social sanctions necessary to keep women in check.

The treatment, which ranged from diet to narcotics and purging, was described by Gooch as being 'of essential service with the view of fully clearing the bowels […]. In such, the matters expelled have been in excessive quantity, most unhealthy and offensive, and were evidently the exciting causes of the derangement.'[163] However,

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[160] Marland, *Dangerous Motherhood,* 41.
[161] Marland, 5.
[162] Marland, 5.
[163] Marland, 46.

the cures were often worse than the illness and women who refused them were taken to the asylum. ‘Women tended to be removed to the Asylum when they became too violent, inconvenient or embarrassing to treat at home.’[164] It didn’t take much, and the decision was always made by the patriarch of the family. Lisa Appignanesi writes in her book *Mad, Bad and Sad: A History of Women and the Mind Doctors from 1800 to the Present* (2007), that ‘Corruption—in the form of medical collusion with strict or cheating or abusive fathers and husbands—could also ensure confinement well beyond need, even if in the first instance this might have seemed necessary.[165] It’s clear that women’s health and wellbeing was secondary to men’s desire for domestic harmony.

Case notes and photographs on the Wellcome Trust website, of women admitted to the West Riding Lunatic Asylum in the mid-nineteenth century, appear to back this theory up.

166

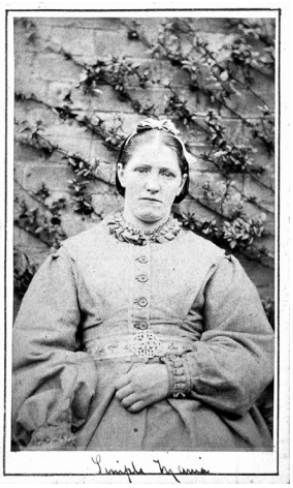

Figure vii: Mary Shaw

[164] Marland, 78.
[165] Lisa Appignanesi, *Mad, Bad and Sad: A History of Women and the Mind Doctors from 1800 to the Present* (London: Virago, 2009), 96.
[166] James Crichton-Browne, *Mary Shaw, a Patient at the West Riding Lunatic Asylum, Wakefield, Yorkshire,*1871, photograph, Wakefield, https://wellcomecollection.org/works/eham884y.

According to notes accompanying the photograph, attributed to James Crichton-Browne, the medical superintendent at West Riding Asylum (1866-1876), Mary Shaw, 35 (Figure vii), was admitted to Leeds Asylum in November 1870 due to the following:

> During her six years of marriage she had given birth to four children. Three had died at the age of two years. Six weeks earlier her new-born baby had died aged just one week old. Mary had said she would "send her husband to gaol then get a velvet dress and have a second husband", probably as a result of the black eye he had given her.[167]

Mary was probably suffering from what we would term now as post-natal depression, she had lost four children and her verbal ‘outburst’ was likely a reaction to her husband’s violent behaviour and her grief. It seems that the black eye mentioned in the notes was an acceptable way for her husband to manage her inappropriate behaviour, given that she, rather than he, was considered unstable. It appears Mary was incarcerated for almost a year before being released.

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Figure viii: Ellen Sutcliffe

Another patient, Ellen Sutcliffe, 26 (Figure viii), was committed to West Riding Lunatic Asylum in April 1865, and her behaviour is described as follows:

> That she is whining and crying out 'Oh dear'. That she fails to reply to my enquiries, that she is desponding and now crying out loudly for her father. That

[167] James Crichton-Browne, *Mary Shaw, a Patient at the West Riding Lunatic Asylum*.
[168] James Crichton-Browne, *Ellen Sutcliffe, a Patient at West Riding Lunatic Asylum, Wakefield, Yorkshire,* 1873, photograph, Wakefield, https://wellcomecollection.org/works/bxjmyg2v.

> Mrs Haigh tells me she has been obliged to confine her in the padded room at the Workhouse, that she attempted to throw herself and infant out of the window a week ago.[169]

According to the notes, Ellen died in July 1884 from a seizure, whilst still in the Asylum. These brief case notes accompanying the photograph, which record her attempting to jump from a window with her infant in tow, suggest she was possibly suffering from what we now understand as postnatal depression. The infant mentioned was not her only child.

Childbirth, then, was not only a dangerous occupation in terms of mortality but the effects of the 'care' might result in institutionalisation and, in the case of Ellen Sutcliffe, death in the asylum. It is further evidence of how little agency women had during the nineteenth century and how changing the narrative by allowing them to escape the confines of domesticity and the 'home' might produce interesting results.

Not only was there a high mortality rate both in childbirth and the asylum, but a lack of contraception, coupled with dire economic conditions, meant that some women could not afford to care for their child. As with most Victorian society, this led to a binary option: infanticide, or give your child up to the foundling hospital.

In Victorian times, infanticide was at its peak, particularly in London. According to Ann Higginbotham, in her paper '"Sin of the Age": Infanticide and Illegitimacy in Victorian London,' during the mid-nineteenth century, the coroner for Central Middlesex, Edwin Lankester, 'claimed that some 12,000 London mothers had murdered their infants without detection.'[170] Although this is likely an exaggeration, reports in the *Lancet*, *The Times* and *Parliamentary Papers* suggest that in England

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[169] James Crichton-Browne, *Ellen Sutcliffe, a Patient at West Riding Lunatic Asylum*.
[170] Ann R. Higginbotham, ""Sin of the Age": Infanticide and Illegitimacy in Victorian London," *Victorian Studies* 32, no. 3 (1989), 319, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3828495.

and Wales, the number of infants under the age of one declared as 'murdered' rose from an average of 78 (during the period 1852-1856) to 203 in a single year (1864).[171] Despite these figures, it was accepted that the true representation of infanticide was likely ten times the official figure, due, in part, to omissions on death certificates. This rise in child murder was believed to be linked to illegitimacy and it was widely acknowledged that, 'those who have erred are almost necessarily driven by the pressure of want to rid themselves of children they cannot feed.'[172] Such pressures were exacerbated by the fact that not only did England lack a comprehensive foundling system to support unmarried mothers but it was believed that the stigma attached to an illegitimate child, evidence of the mother's sin, was reason enough for a mother to want to dispose of her child. After all, as we have already learned, they believed pregnancy led to a loss of character and the tendency to madness.

> The agitation over infanticide also revealed some basic assumptions about women, particularly fallen women. The murdering mother's wild and emotional response to an unwanted birth reinforced assumptions about the irrationality of all women.[173]

It was easier to ignore the individual circumstances of each case and to blame women's mental health, than rethink the role of the state: the lack of available childcare, poor wages, inadequate nutrition, and social care.

Even though there was no statutory foundling system to support new mothers in this period, there was a single Foundling hospital, or as it was originally known, 'The Hospital for the Education and Maintenance of Exposed and Deserted Young Children.'[174] Set up in London in 1741 by philanthropist Thomas Coram, this offered a

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[171] R Sauer, "Infanticide and Abortion in Nineteenth-Century Britain," *Population Studies* 32:1 (1978), 86. https://doi.org/10.1080/00324728.1978.10412793.
[172] Higginbotham, "Sin of the Age," 321.
[173] Higginbotham, 337.
[174] Janette Bright and Gillian Clark, *An Introduction to the Tokens at the Foundling Museum,* (Lamport Gilbert Ltd, 2014),3.

modicum of hope to impoverished women. Initially, children were admitted on a first come, first served basis, but due to increasing numbers, by the nineteenth century a lottery system was introduced.[175] Like all lotteries, the chance of winning a place for your child was very slim.

If a mother were lucky enough to choose a white ball from the bag, providing the child passed a medical exam, they were admitted to the hospital. A billet was completed for the 'abandoned' child recording basic information about the child's sex, a rough date of birth and their age.[176] These basic documents were serialised and dated but it was the identifier or 'token' that was attached to the billet that would be crucial. This 'identifier' was key in cases where the mother's circumstances changed, and they returned to claim their child. By 1858, just prior to the date *The Mune* is set, the use of tokens was discontinued as a means of claiming back the children. Existing tokens were separated from the billets and put on display. This unfortunately severed any links the child might have to their origins.

I thought it was possible, during this period of transition, when tokens were phased out, and the 'proof' of relationship severed, that some of my characters might be unable to claim previously abandoned children. This might lead to the women, who boarded the ship in *The Mune*, to fashion a keepsake, hoping that if their child were lost on the journey to The New World, it would allow them to be reunited.

Foundling children have inspired many stories, including Charles Dickens' character Tatty Coram in *Little Dorritt* [177] but it was the tokens, a selection of which are exhibited in the Foundling Museum, that inspired part of the storyline in *The Mune.* For

[175] Bright and Clark, *An Introduction to the Tokens at the Foundling Museum*, 4.
[176] Bright and Clark, 5.
[177] Leslie Wilson, "The History Girls: Two Reflections on Dickens's Little Dorrit, by Leslie Wilson," *The History Girls* (blog), 23 November 2017, http://the-history-girls.blogspot.com/2017/11/two-reflections-on-dickenss-little.html.

example, Betty's token, which finds its way from the folds of her baby's shroud and into the beast's skin, is based on one of the keepsakes in the Foundling Museum exhibition. I chose a small red gem, which I imagined might originate from Master's house, but there were many types of identifiers to choose from including coins, buttons and thimbles, many of which had initials scratched into them.

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Figure ix: Tokens on display at The Foundling Museum

These tokens, a selection of which can be seen in Figure ix, photographed when I visited the Museum, were the only connection mothers had to their lost children.

Given the options open to mothers in poverty during the mid-nineteenth century, to abandon your child to an institution, if you were lucky enough, or to dispose of them in other ways, perhaps it would not be a stretch to imagine a group of women choosing to board a ship rather than lose both their freedom and their child.

[178] Susannah Dawes, *Tokens on display at the Foundling Museum*, 2022, Photograph. Foundling Museum, London.

Finding the Voice of the Working-Class Victorian Woman

Even though I had undertaken a good deal of research about the history of medicine and the practice of childbirth, I still faced the challenge of creating an authentic voice for my shipwrecked characters. I wanted to give life to this group of child-bearing women whose treatment, as we have seen, was based on their hormonal activity and often reduced to a few lines in an asylum ledger.

My investigations in the British Library and online revealed that there is very little primary source information on working class women in the early to mid-nineteenth century. The Old Bailey records of cases held in the 1860s were useful, but even they recorded few female voices. Often the cases where women were involved were decided by police statements and, more often than not, the male victim. Even in the dock, these women appeared to be silent. For example, at the trial of Mary Donovan in 1863, who stood accused of theft, the only words recorded were a brief statement from her at the end of the hearing where she states: 'I had been out selling oranges, and the money was my own; there was a lot of coppers in it, farthings I had the clock given me to pledge. I did not know it was stolen.'[179]

The same occurred in the trial of Elizabeth Evans (27) who stood accused of stealing a watch in 1864.

> I met the prosecutor, and he asked me to go down this turning, and he would give me half a crown; he went away without paying me, and then he said he would give me his watch, and I took it to pledge it for the half-crown.[180]

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[179] "Mary Donovan, Theft: theft from a specified place," *Old Bailey on-line,* 8th June 1863*:* no. t18630608-797, https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?id=def1-797-18630608&div=t18630608-797.

[180] "Elizabeth Evans, Theft: pocketpicking," *Old Bailey on-line,* 19 September 1864*:* no.t18640919-836, https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?foo=bar&path=sessionsPapers/18640919.xml&div=t18640919-836.

In both cases, the women were given custodial sentences, and it appears this was largely due to the fact they had appeared before the court on previous occasions, and their social station rather than any statements they made during their trials.

These excerpts, although brief, do give a sense of the language of the times, though it must be recognised that as defendants, they would be on their best behaviour and likely hold their tongues.

The newspaper reports I unearthed, which largely contained political speeches, war reports, court reports and adverts for popular goods, were considered 'the organ of the middle classes'[181] and were similar in tone to the court reports, largely filtered through the gaze of men, but they provided some social history. Leonore Davidoff explains this bias in her paper, "Class and Gender in Victorian England: The Diaries of Arthur J. Munby and Hannah Cullwick" (1979), using information extrapolated from diaries of the period. 'The world view of Victorian society which has been handed down to us was mostly the creation of those persons in positions of power who had the resources as well as the need to propagate their central position.'[182] It would be challenging then, given the limited primary source material available, the samples of which are already biased by patriarchy, to create an authentic voice.

I switched my attention to fiction written by women in the early nineteenth century, expecting it to better represent the gender, the 'voice' of women of the period. In *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), Gilbert and Gubar look at nineteenth-century novels written by female authors, including Mary Shelley, Emily Brontë and Jane Austen. They conclude that even women writers stereotyped their female characters.

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[181] Ed King, "British Newspapers 1860-1900," *British Library Newspapers*, Detroit: Gale, 2007, https://www.gale.com/intl/essays/ed-king-british-newspapers-1860-1900.
[182] Leonore Davidoff, "Class and Gender in Victorian England: The Diaries of Arthur J. Munby and Hannah Cullwick," *Feminist Studies* 5, no. 1 (1979), 88, https://doi.org/10.2307/3177552.

> Whether she is a passive angel or an active monster, in other words, the woman writer feels herself to be literally or figuratively crippled by the debilitating alternatives her culture offers her, and the crippling effects of her conditioning sometimes seem to 'breed' like sentences of death in the bloody shoes she inherits from her literary foremothers.[183]

According to Gilbert and Gubar, nineteenth-century female writers carried a lot of anger and frustration about the misogynistic world they lived in, and this influenced their creative work. Their fury, they argue, was represented by the character of the mad woman and, rather than it being an accurate representation of women of the period, they were inhibited by their own view of a woman's position, a lifetime of self-policing and inhibition, a dichotomy heavily influenced by patriarchy. It would be necessary to reflect this dichotomy in *The Mune* as it would affect characters' decision making. They might initially try to emulate men, seeing the female role as a lesser one.

Elaine Showalter in her essay, 'The Female Tradition,' describes the situation of Victorian female novelists as

> a double bind. They felt humiliated by the condescension of male critics and spoke intensely of their desire to avoid special treatment and achieve genuine excellence, but they were deeply anxious about the possibility of appearing unwomanly. Part of the conflict came from the fact that, rather than confronting the values of their society, these women novelists were competing for its rewards. For women, as for other subcultures, literature became a symbol of achievement.[184]

Ignoring the motivation behind their writing, at the time these novels were created, they were considered realistic – an exploration of the daily lives of women, and I could assume some of the speech was overheard by the authors, based on truth rather than wholly invented.

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[183] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 57, EBSCOhost, https://search-ebscohost-com.uniessexlib.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=538706&site=ehost-live.
[184] Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (London: Virago, 1999), 21.

In chapter ten of her book *Master and Servant: Love and Labour in the English Industrial Age* (2007), Catherine Steedman argues that there is fact in fiction:

> To recognise that characters in books, and plot structures and literary devices have historical existence, and can be made to do the work of historical analysis, is not to blur the boundaries between fiction and fact, and it is not a denial of 'history' – whatever that denial might be. The past *was* there, whilst history *is* here.[185]

Steedman suggests that *Wuthering Heights* (1847), for example, can be read like a history book and that the character, Nelly Dean, gives a nineteenth-century servant's perspective.

> Emily Brontë's novel is part of a history of narrative forms, and thus of the ways of thinking and feeling attendant on them. Of course, among all the things *Wuthering Heights* is, and probably the least of them, is a social history of service and a psychology of servitude; but that is what I must take from it, compelled to do so by the rank and status of its principal narrator, its historical setting and its date structure.[186]

Despite the fact that we never discover Nelly Dean's origins in the novel, just that she grew up with the Earnshaws, Steedman believes that her character encompasses 'real historical processes experienced in actual social circumstances and in already-mapped terrains and topographies.'[187] These moments, captured by female authors in the period my characters inhabit, would certainly be of use to me in creating background stories and costume for my characters, particularly the hierarchy of servants in Master's house and the dialect.

The Problem of Surplus Women

Not only did I need to find an authentic voice for my mid-nineteenth-century working-class woman, but I also needed a trigger—a motivation: a historical event that would

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[185] Carolyn Steedman, *Master and Servant: Love and Labour in the English Industrial Age*, Cambridge Social and Cultural Histories (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007),196.
[186] Steedman, *Master and Servant: Love and Labour in the English Industrial Age*, 195.
[187] Steedman, 200.

cause my cast of women to willingly board a ship bound for another land. Even though my characters had little to lose, coming from asylums, the street or low-down in-service, it didn't mean they would risk their lives for the unknown. I needed to ground the novel in accurate historical fact. A suggestion from Professor Katharine Cockin, in one of my Panel meetings, led me to investigate the problem of surplus women.

The issue of Surplus Women first arose in 1851, more than ten years before my novel was due to be set, when information from the British census about marital status 'sparked concern about the decline of the family as the moral and reproductive basis of British society.'[188] The census revealed that 'out of a national population of twenty million, there were 500,000 more women than men, and there were two and a half million unmarried women.'[189] This imbalance, largely due to loss of life in war, led to the belief that single women, who would neither fit the role of wife or mother, were surplus to requirements. They were a burden on society, unproductive, having failed to fulfil their rightful role as wives and mothers, and more than that, were downright dangerous.

William Rathbone Greg published his book on the subject of redundant women in 1869. He believed the only remedy to the 'problem' of these women, was large scale emigration, specifically to British Colonies such as Australia and Canada, where women were not in excess. He saw emigration as a solution, not just to occupy women but to eliminate prostitution, another of society's evils. In his book he stated that: 'When female emigration has done its work and drained away the excess…men will have to bid higher for the possession of them, and will find it necessary, to make them wives

[188] Kathrin Levitan, 'Redundancy, the "Surplus Woman" Problem, and the British Census, 1851–1861', *Women's History Review* 17, no. 3 (July 2008), 359, https://doi.org/10.1080/09612020801924449.
[189] Levitan, "Redundancy, the "Surplus Woman" Problem, and the British Census, 1851–1861," 363.

instead of mistresses.'[190] Greg, like others of his generation, sought to solve societal problems by removing women rather than attending to the behaviour of men.

Emigration as population control was not a new idea and had been debated in the 1830s as a solution to reducing the numbers of the working classes, but in the 1860s, Greg's focus fell firmly on women. Greg was actively opposed to the feminist movement, and favoured emigration as a short-term solution but argued there was a pressing need for social reform for the longer-term. Feminists were largely of the opinion that the solution lay in opening up opportunities for women, rather than shifting the problem to another continent. Frances Power Cobb wrote in response to Greg that society was forcing women to choose between 'transportation or starvation'[191] and the problem lay in men's refusal to marry, which was not in the power of women to change.

Jessie Boucherett, also writing of Surplus (or superfluous) Women at the time, said:

> Their departure would be an immense relief to the women remaining at home, but unfortunately there is nowhere to send them, for nobody wants them, either in the Old world or the New. It comes to this, that unless Heaven should send a new planet alongside for us to export our superfluous women to, we must make up our minds to keep them at home.[192]

This passage became central to my novel. What if there were somewhere these women could be sent to, a 'heaven' of sorts—a place where they could transform themselves?

Statistics supported my idea of shipping a group of working-class women to the colonies. It was estimated that just fifteen percent of migrants were women, and these

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[190] William Rathbone Greg, *Why Are Women Redundant?* (London: Trübner, 1869), 28, retrieved from: https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Why_are_Women_Redundant/R0aQ36xR1sAC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=why+are+women+redundant&printsec=frontcover.

[191] Levitan, "Redundancy, the "Surplus Woman" Problem, and the British Census, 1851–1861," 369.

[192] Jessie Boucherett, *"*How to Provide for Superfluous Women" in *Woman's Work and Woman's Culture: A Series of Essays*, ed. Josephine Butler (London: MacMillan And Co, 1869; New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010), 31. Citations refer to Cambridge University Press edition.

were largely made up of the lower-classes.[193] Middle-class women were less likely to take up the offer, due to cutting ties with their families and the idea they may have to do hard physical work on arrival. Working-class women had less to lose, and the class system was less rigid in the colonies, presenting the potential for an improvement in their lives.

The Surplus Women Act gave me a starting point for my cast of shipwrecked characters, but I also had a personal interest in this idea. In 1925, my Great Aunt Emeline (known as Maidie by the family) migrated to Australia, advertised at the time as the 'the land of opportunity'. She took a subsidised passage under the Empire Settlements Act of 1922 at a cost of 19d. Maidie wrote home about her experiences and her letters survived, largely because my Great Aunt Grace, one of the recipients, was a hoarder and, later, my father kept the aerogrammes for the stamps. With so little primary evidence available, I wondered whether Maidie's letters might prove useful. They might, at the very least, provide context.

The collection of handwritten letters, some 74 in total (a selection of which can be found in appendix II), was loaned to Stephen Constantine, who wrote a paper called 'Dear Grace…Love Maidie: interpreting a migrant's letters from Australia, 1926-67.' He called them: 'the private voice of a twentieth-century English Migrant woman.'[194] Constantine also wrote: 'With the exception of letters—usually of complaint—in official files, only a few collections dating to the twentieth century are yet publicly available and fewest of all from English migrants; and few indeed from women.'[195] Thus Maidie's letters, despite being written 60 years after the first Surplus Women Act, might provide

[193] Levitan, "Redundancy, the "Surplus Woman" Problem, and the British Census, 1851–1861."
[194] Stephen Constantine, '"Dear Grace...Love Maidie": Interpreting a Migrant's Letters from Australia, 1926-67,' in *Empire, migration and identity in the British world*, ed. Kent Fedorowich and Andrew S. Thompson, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 194.
[195] Stephen Constantine, "Dear Grace...Love Maidie,"193.

me with some clues to character: the women's reaction to arriving in a new land, the language alteration over time and the notion of home—the elements that make up voice.

In Maidie's letters you see a gradual change in her attitude to Australia, particularly the language. She begins by acknowledging changes in her diction:

> I find myself slipping into slovenly Australian mode of speech, not in speaking but writing. They leave out such words as 'in' and 'on'. 'I'm going Thursday' instead of 'on Thursday. It sounds horrid and I'm fighting all I can to prevent the habit getting hold.[196]

But later she uses the terms: 'pretty crook', and 'chooks'—words she is surrounded by as a farm worker. It seems they become part of her diction, as does the word 'blast' which her brother, my grandfather Jim (a staunch Quaker) points out to her on more than one occasion and to which she responds: 'Just be glad I don't use the Great Australian adjective "bloody" or the equally infamous "bastard." They're used here in ordinary conversation.'[197] This suggests that Maidie has some control over how much influence she allowed the Australian culture to have on her language. This would be an interesting element to consider when choosing words from the dialogue of the shipwrecked mothers, in order to form the diction of second-generation characters.

Throughout her letters (from 1926-1967), Maidie seems to constantly attempt to imitate home, asking her family to ship her seeds from English plants and flowers, which are rarely successful in the diverse Australian climate. She seems to use 'Englishness' as the ideal from which to view the Australian landscape. 'When we were in Melbourne last week, we sat in the public gardens […]. The flowers were gorgeous. Of course being near the river they are all kept well watered and so look equal to the English flowers.'[198] Even by 1940, nearly fifteen years after arriving in the colonies,

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[196] Maidie Viccars, 'Maidie's Letters Home,' 30 March 1927.
[197] Maidie Viccars, 'Maidie's Letters Home,' 22 February 1946.
[198] Maidie Viccars, 'Maidie's Letters Home,' 18 April 1926.

she still thinks of England as her home. This idea of home is an interesting one to consider for the women on my island, particularly those with no kin. It would certainly cause conflict amongst them. The language development would also need to be considered.

As well as the Surplus Women Act, there are other laws listed on the UK Parliament website that would have affected my characters. *The Contagious Disease Acts* [199] passed in 1864, allowed police (often inexpertly) to check women's genitals if they were considered to be unclean. Diagnosis led to hospitalisation, and refusal to acquiesce to this painful humiliation led to imprisonment. As with most Acts in mid-nineteenth century England, the law was biased, favouring men and laying the blame for the spread of sexually transmitted disease squarely on women, ignoring the men who visited them. In every aspect of life, women were seen as a problem that needed to be solved, with men in the role of saviour.

The age of consent for girls during the mid-nineteenth century remained at 12 and was not regulated until 1885, when the age was raised to 16. I would need to consider this when casting my characters—many would be just over that age, considered a woman able to bear children.

It wasn't until 1886 in the *Guardian of Infants Act*[200] that women gained the right to be sole guardian of their children if their husband died. Largely unmarried, my cast of characters would have had no legal protection. Their children likely would have been removed from them into the care of a workhouse or another more 'suitable' childless

[199] 'Regulating sexual behaviour: the 19th century,' UK Parliament, n.d., accessed 22.04.2021, https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/relationships/overview/sexualbehaviour19thcentury/.
[200] 'Custody rights and domestic violence,' U.K Parliament, n.d., accessed 22.04.2021, https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/relationships/overview/custodyrights/.

family. This might be the only motivation they needed to board a ship for another land, since a woman's sole purpose for existing—that of producing children—was also wholly dependent on social status.

Bridging the Gap between Historical Fact and Speculative Fiction

It was not only existing laws, the treatment of women during pregnancy, birth and beyond, that would shape my characters and their choices, but the wider social and political climate of the period. It was important to reflect the beliefs and aspirations of the time, aspects of which might influence my characters' view of their world and perhaps provide ideas for change. Literature has always provided a route to knowledge and in the nineteenth century, for those that could read, pamphlets, newspapers and fiction was often the only avenue open to garner facts about the wider world.

I decided to focus on science fiction texts written in the period, relating to utopias, whose focus was on equality or change of another sort, because SF not only reflects existing society, but showcases social and political ambitions and the methods imagined to achieve them. It would provide a bridge between accurate historical fact and narratives of the time, which imagined a more compassionate future. I felt understanding and including these speculative texts from the period my characters inhabited would not only help present a wider social and cultural picture but would give me additional material for matters of dialect and diction, informing the actions of my characters – how they feel and react when they discover they are in an unknown place.

The first story I decided to use was *Pyrna: a Commune,* also entitled: *Under the Ice* (1875)*,* a Utopian novel written by Ellis James Davis. The story, which charts the adventures of the narrator into a strange world under a mountain, contains the

prevalent nineteenth-century beliefs of evolution, eugenics and euthanasia. In Davis's novel, Pyrna is a beautiful, geometric ice world, a city beneath a glacier. It has neither disease nor materialism (the arts and science complement each other) and there is equality between the sexes. In Davis's imaginary world, children who are born deformed are sacrificed for the good of the community and older people, or those with terminal illness, can choose to die (which is encouraged) rather than burden society.

> All the men seemed made upon the same type—very tall, with large chests and small in the lower part of the frame; thin but powerful legs and arms and little hair on their faces and heads and that generally light in colour. All had the same light eyes blue or grey, with large foreheads over them and all the same clear icy complexion. I neither saw a lame nor a blind man nor any one with a physical deformity of any sort, though I looked particularly through the crowd for anything of the kind.[201]

Davis imagined a world where his beliefs regarding eugenics and euthanasia could be played out, and he used population control to achieve this. In Pyrna, marriage is sanctioned by the state, and citizens must apply to a board for permission to marry, with a requirement to pass a physical test. All children born within these sanctioned marriages were removed from their mothers at a month old and raised by the state. Criminality was punished either by death or eviction.

Davis was trying to find a solution to perceived problems such as overpopulation, including surplus women, and what eugenicists like Francis Galton, believed was the 'degradation of human nature.'[202] For instance, in Galton's preface to the second edition of *Hereditary Genius* (1892), he wrote:

> A man's natural abilities are derived by inheritance, under exactly the same limitations as are the form and physical features of the whole organic world. Consequently, as it is easy, notwithstanding those limitations, to obtain by careful selection: a permanent breed of dogs or horses gifted with peculiar powers of running, or of doing anything else, so it would be quite practicable to

[201] Ellis James Davis, *Pyrna: A Commune or Under the Ice* (London: Bickers and sons, 1875), 32, retrieved from: https://www.europeana.eu/en/item/9200143/BibliographicResource_2000069429418.
[202] Francis Galton, preface to *Hereditary Genius: An Insight into Its Laws and Consequences* (London: Macmillan, 1892), retrieved from: https://galton.org/books/hereditary-genius.

> produce a highly-gifted race of men by judicious marriages during several consecutive generations.[203]

These ideas, which originated from wealthy evolutionists, and justified maintaining the patriarchal system, would be another barrier for my characters to deal with in their original time, because they were women, predominantly born to the lower classes, representing the problems Galton referred to as the dilution of the human race.

The second story I considered, *New Amazonia* (1889) by Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett, is considered to be one of the first feminist utopias. Like *Pyrna,* the novel imagines a broadly socialist utopian world, but one created after war in Ireland and where a breed of giant, superhuman women dominate political office. These superhuman qualities (they are seven feet tall and live forever) are imagined through a practice called 'nerve-rejuvenation'[204] which is explained as a process which transfers a dog's nerve force to a human and keeps the women young and, subsequently, in power. Mesmerism—the medical cure of 'manipulating the invisible flows of "animal magnetism" that passed through and between bodies'[205] was one of many occult beliefs of the period. The occult played an important part in the mid-nineteenth century, offering explanations for things that were not easily described by other means.

New Amazonia shares many of the same themes as *Pyrna*: the population is well-educated, the state is involved in raising children, physical education is paramount, and euthanasia is an acceptable method of population control.

> Sometimes very painful scenes were witnessed, for each new-born child was subjected to examination, and no crippled or malformed infants were permitted to live […]. There was, however, a determination on the part of the Government

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[203] Galton, *Hereditary Genius: An Insight into Its Laws and Consequences*.
[204] George Corbett, *New Amazonia: A Foretaste of the Future (*London: Tower Publishing Company, 1889), chap. XI, retrieved from: https://www.gutenberg.org/files/56876/56876-h/56876-h.htm.
[205] Roger Luckhurst, "The Victorian Supernatural," The British Library, 15 May 2014, https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-victorian-supernatural.

> to guard against the evils of over-population in the future, and Malthusian doctrines were stringently enforced.[206]

The mention of Malthusian policy in *New Amazonia* is a reminder of how economic theories impacted on speculative narratives. In *Principle of Populations,* Malthus concluded that a population will always outgrow food production, but would be checked by natural disasters and war, and that poverty was an unavoidable consequence.[207] Even though overpopulation was an illusion, used to justify keeping the underclasses confined to overcrowded spaces, writers like Corbett responded to the theory, finding creative ways to reduce numbers, rather than seeing it for what it was: another way for the rich to retain power. It explains, in part, how the agenda for the removal of 'surplus' women was so readily accepted.

As well as the murder of children, in *New Amazonia* routes to restricting population also included the criminalisation of 'recklessness' (parents bearing more than four children), punished by depriving parents of their civil rights. Much like *Pyrna*, there is also the option of taking a medicine, in this case 'Schlafstrank' (a deadly mineral extract) if health failed: 'New Amazonians are inclined to discard the body before it is needful or expedient to do so.'[208] It is interesting to note that this idea of death as a solution to illness, disability and population control, is tackled quite callously, and appears to deliberately deny human emotion. Even in *Pyrna* when the narrator is told by his host that if a child is not 'perfectly sound and healthy, or if it was monstrous or deformed in any way, it was at once put out of the world'[209] he quickly recovers from his initial horror to conclude it is an acceptable solution, and subsequently marvels at how rich the health of the population is. This idea mirrors

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[206] Corbett, *New Amazonia,* chap. VI.
[207] "Thomas Malthus (1766 – 1864)," UC Museum of Paleontology, 10 April 1995, https://ucmp.berkeley.edu/history/malthus.html.
[208] Corbett, *New Amazonia*, chap. X.
[209] Davis, *Pyrna: A Commune or Under the Ice*, 105.

Darwin's theories of natural selection and, in *Pyrna*, Davis actually comes close to quoting Darwin's work directly.

> Nature knows no other rule, and these gigantic struggles for existence which pass before your eyes from day to day, equally in the highest or lowest art of creation, are simply the efforts of nature in accordance with it. Cruel you may say is this law, but if the result of the sacrifice of the few is the good of the many, the cruelty is justified.[210]

Writers who tried to imagine solutions to theoretical problems appeared to do so scientifically, without considering the concept of self or the trauma such a solution would have on the population. These key nineteenth-century ideas would be paramount in *The Mune,* where resources are limited, survival is key and the beasts evolve to present a danger to the community.

With the lack of medicine and surgical knowledge, the shipwrecked women would need to find a response to problems of injury, illness and, of course, madness. Unlike Davis and Corbett, I am writing from a contemporary standpoint, with an understanding of the psychology and biological effects of trauma, so would need to consider the emotional consequences of any solution I might imagine. It is interesting to note that given women's treatment in asylums at the time, even Corbett's handling of the insane in *New Amazonia* is unemotional.

> 'When, unfortunately, physical influences work upon the mind in such a manner as to produce the phenomenon called insanity, the Mother at once relieves the spirit of the ties which would effectually prevent the slightest advancement, towards the great goal.'
> 'Kills all insane persons, in fact?'
> 'Yes; in mercy and justice to themselves.'[211]

Although Corbett imagines insanity to be rare in *New Amazonia*, due to equality, diet, and social care, the only treatment offered is euthanasia, which she also suggests reduces criminality due to crime being 'an indication of a diseased brain.' It would be

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[210] Davis,106.
[211] Corbett, *New Amazonia,* chap. X.

an interesting task to consider these beliefs in conjunction with my characters' imagined experience, who all come from backgrounds where they have been accused of madness.

As well as developments in evolutionary theory, the Victorian era was noted for its scientific and technological advances, which led to often fantastical narratives.

> Every scientific and technological advance encouraged a kind of magical thinking and was accompanied by a shadow discourse of the occult. For every disenchantment there was an active re-enchantment of the world. Because the advances in science were so rapid, the natural and the supernatural often became blurred in popular thinking, at least for a time. And no area of the literary culture of the Victorians was left untouched by this interplay of science and magic.[212]

It felt necessary to also include a story to represent this shift in belief, as my cast of characters in *The Mune* would seek ways to understand technologically advanced items, brought back from the future. Like Mary Shelley's gothic novel, *Frankenstein* (1818), which married the fantastical with the rational, a fear of new technology might give my characters reason to invent supernatural meanings for events outside of their experience.

The third story chosen, therefore, was *The Phantom Coach* by Amelia Edwards (1864), who was acknowledged to be one of the best Victorian ghost story writers of the period. Edwards' story incorporates a character who marries this blurring of the scientific and the supernatural—an exiled academic ridiculed for his belief in metaphysical speculations. Set in a bleak Northern landscape, a lone man, Murray, who is grouse hunting, discovers he is lost. He happens upon a manservant, Jacob, who unwillingly takes him to his master, a reclusive academic living in an isolated house. There, Murray learns that his eccentric host is a hermit, having been ridiculed for his belief in metaphysical speculations by his peers.

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[212] Roger Luckhurst, 'The Victorian Supernatural.'

> The world […] grows hourly more and more sceptical of all that lies beyond its own narrow radius; and our men of science foster the fatal tendency. They condemn as fable all that resists experiment. They reject as false all that cannot be brought to the test of the laboratory or the dissecting-room. Against what superstition have they waged so long and obstinate a war, as against the belief in apparitions? And yet what superstition has maintained its hold upon the minds of men so long and so firmly? Show me any fact in physics, in history, in archæology, which is supported by testimony so wide and so various.[213]

After listening to various lectures from his earnest host, and on his host's suggestion, Murray leaves the dwelling to catch the passing night mail coach, which will take him to the local inn. On the journey to the pick-up-point, Jacob regales Murray with a tale of a fateful accident that happened nine years ago, when a mail coach overturned, killing all passengers.

Murray boards what he thinks is the night mail coach, but is in fact a phantom coach, described as 'strangely lofty,' comprising mute passengers and 'pervaded by a singularly damp and disagreeable smell.'[214] Murray awakes, saved from the bottom of a ravine by passing shepherds, after experiencing a repeat of the accident. His story about the coach is dismissed as fanciful by the doctor who treats him, due to his head injury, but Murray knows the truth. The 'Phantom Coach', like many horror stories of the period, filled the gap between science and religion, leaving it up to the reader to decide whether Murray was suffering from hallucinations or whether the supernatural risk he experienced was real.

'Forgetting' and 'hallucinating' were common narrative devices used in the Victorian period and the fourth story chosen, 'The Automaton Ear' by Florence McLanburgh (1873) also utilises this technique. Florence McLanburgh was an early writer of SF, and my decision to include her story was primarily for its inventive nature, the novum being a mechanical device. McLanburgh takes an existing object of the

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[213] Amelia B Edwards, 'The Phantom Coach,' in *The Big Book of the Masters of Horror* (KTHTK, 2021), Kindle.
[214] Edwards, "The Phantom Coach."

period, an ear trumpet, and imagines an alternative use for it: a device to capture and store sound. I felt this might prove a useful link to unexplained objects my characters might encounter on the island.

The professor, the protagonist of the story, explains his thought process behind his experiments:

> As a particle of the atmosphere is never lost, so sound is never lost. A strain of music or a simple tone will vibrate in the air forever and ever, decreasing according to a fixed ratio. The diffusion of the agitation extends in all directions, like the waves in a pool, but the ear is unable to detect it beyond a certain point. It is well known that some individuals can distinguish sounds which to others under precisely similar circumstances are wholly lost. Thus the fault is not in the sound itself, but in our organ of hearing, and a tone once in existence is always in existence.[215]

The obsessed professor, intent on capturing sound that is unsullied by contaminants, ends up testing his prosthetic ear on a deaf-mute woman, 'Mother Flinse', who is described as having 'shrivelled features.'[216] Mother Flinse undergoes a transformation when encountering the machine. Not only does she begin to hear but her ageing process is reversed. When she refuses to give up the instrument, the professor, who places more value on the instrument than human life, strangles her and conceals her body.

Despite the reader discovering that the professor hallucinates the murder of Mother Flinse, McLanburg's story reflects Victorian anxieties surrounding the potential autonomy of machinery and provides metaphors in which to understand these new technologies. Similarly, the final story chosen, 'The Crystal Egg' by H G Wells (1897) uses a device to view a parallel universe, once again exploring the fear and knowledge that technology brings. The protagonist, Mr Cave, runs an antique shop and happens upon a crystal egg, which appears to contain an unexplained light.

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[215] Florence McLanburg, "The Automaton Ear," in *The Feminine Future: Early Science Fiction by Women Writers*, ed. Michael Ashley (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications Inc, 2015), 25.
[216] Florence McLanburg, 38.

> It occurred to Mr. Cave that this was not in accordance with the laws of optics as he had known them in his younger days. He could understand the rays being refracted by the crystal and coming to a focus in its interior, but this diffusion jarred with his physical conceptions. He approached the crystal nearly, peering into it and round it, with a transient revival of the scientific curiosity that in his youth had determined his choice of a calling. He was surprised to find the light not steady, but writhing within the substance of the egg, as though that object was a hollow sphere of some luminous vapour. In moving about to get different points of view, he suddenly found that he had come between it and the ray, and that the crystal none the less remained luminous.[217]

The story follows his exhaustive and obsessive search for the meaning of the light, and we learn that the egg appears to have a counterpart in another place where it originated from (Mars). Mr Cave has an uncanny ability to see this alternative reality through the glass and the egg is described as a communication device through which to see another world. '[I]t gave him the impression that the object had for a moment opened to him the view of a wide and spacious and strange country.'[218] Mr Cave has a troubled family life and, in part, the search for knowledge is an escape from his familial reality and responsibilities. With little sleep, it is hard to know what is real and what are hallucinations. Unfortunately, before proof can be amassed of the importance of the egg by his friend Jacoby Wace (a scientist), Mr Cave dies and the egg and any knowledge it might have contained is lost.

The ideas in this final story, which explores lost knowledge and how humans, by default, ridicule the 'new', could be used to differentiate between the two generations on my island. The first generation (the Elders) would struggle to accept anything outside of their experience and beliefs and any attempt at understanding would be in reference to their Victorian past. My second generation of characters (the children) might be curious rather than fearful and look for new meanings in objects. I

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[217] HG Wells, "The Crystal Egg," in *Tales of Time and Space* (London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1900),14, retrieved from: https://www.gutenberg.org/files/27365/27365-0.txt.
[218] HG Wells, "The Crystal Egg", 20.

hoped including these stories in some way would provide a bridge between the narrative of *The Mune*, historical fact and literary tradition of the time.

Conclusion

Having researched the treatment of "working-class" women, motherhood and childbirth, the economic policies of the period, and the potential for contemporary speculative literature to play a role within the novel, I felt ready to think about the narrative structure of *The Mune*.

The novel would start from an idea rooted in the period, from the quote by Jessie Boucherett that, 'Heaven should send a new planet alongside for us to export our superfluous women to,'[219] and chart the experiences of a group of surplus mothers, who, informed by my research, find ways to survive on an inhospitable island in a parallel universe.

The characters of the mothers would be shaped both by their experience in asylums and of living under patriarchal rule. They would be imperfectly human, bound to make mistakes due to their limited education, and their experience of being shepherded by men.

Despite these barriers to their advancement, I hoped I could find a way for my characters to break the chains that had bound them, rooted in their shared history. I might use language evolution, transforming the slang of the period discovered in newspapers, court reports and dictionaries, to something more inclusive, providing different conditions for their children to flourish outside of their own restrictive experiences. Like the utopias of the time, there would need to be an element of

[219] Jessie Boucherett, "How to Provide for Superfluous Women," 31.

socialism—cooperation, for the simple purpose of navigating the harsh island conditions.

Including Victorian speculative stories within the narrative of *The Mune*, in the form of an imaginary book, would provide the bridge between historical fact and speculative fiction and help to situate my potential utopia in the past. Not only would the external stories influence my characters diagetically, shaping their narratives, but they would provide the reader with extra-diagetical historical content, thereby reducing the need for exposition.

The narrative techniques I would use to manage this balance between my historical research, current scientific advances in epigenetics, and neuroscience, and the inclusion of contemporary fiction, is covered in the final chapter.

CHAPTER 3 - Speculative Choices and Altered Histories

Alternative history is a subgenre of speculative fiction, an exploration of the consequences that a small change in the past can cause, allowing history to diverge from its accepted course. By using known historical facts as a starting point, an alternative history builds new and thought-provoking futures, and 'unmoors the historical imagination from its evidentiary anchors.'[220] It asks the question at the heart of all narratives: 'what if?' It also puts language, written and spoken, at the forefront of the narrative. What if the things we 'know' aren't true? What if there is a better way?

Philip K Dick's *Man in the High Castle* (1962) asks: What if the Axis powers won WWII? Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Years of Rice and Salt* (2002) asks*:* What if the black death killed almost all of Europe? Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) asks: What if women's fertility was controlled by the state? Despite being set in different times, the past and near-future, all these texts consider the socio-economic and socio-political impact caused by the deviation from recorded history. In the same way, *The Mune* uses an alternative history of the Victorian British past to speculate on a non-binary future and the impact it might have on the individuals who experience it. It asks the fundamental question: What if patriarchy was removed?

Diverging from a fixed point in Victorian history and creating an alternative timeline enabled me to create a community that reacted, adapted, and evolved naturally, unconcerned about the psychology or impact of their individual behaviour. As detailed in chapter two, Victorian working-class women were not worried by how their actions impacted their children's mental health; they were just trying to survive in

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[220] Carl Abbott, "The Past, Conditionally: Alternative History in Speculative Fiction," *American Historical Association*, 1 January 2016, https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/january-2016/the-past-conditionally-alternative-history-in-speculative-fiction.

a society which didn't focus on their needs, and this would become more heightened once they became stranded on an unknown island in a seemingly different world. Choosing a period from the past allowed me to strip back patriarchy in a way I would not be able to do in the present, where debates about gender trend on Twitter and make headline news. Altering history, and the language which frames our discussion of it, allowed me to consider what changes might be implemented to transform the restrictions of binary gender on a person's actions and potential and, by doing so, envision a more equal present.

Like all alternative histories, *The Mune* begins by diverging from a point in history, in this case 1883, when my cast of characters board the ship and set sail for the New World. Although it is a fictional journey, as there was no such thing as a ship for surplus mothers, there were clipper ships, such as the Cutty Sark,[221] transporting cargo between Australia and Britain and there was, of course, the discussion about re-homing surplus women. Henry Turtledove, quoted in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, suggests that:

> Establishing the historical breakpoint is only half the game of writing alternative history. The other half, and to me the more interesting one, is imagining what would spring from the proposed change. It is in that second half of the game that science fiction and alternative history come together. Both seek to extrapolate logically a change in the world as we know it.[222]

Establishing the date provided me with the historical backdrop prior to the moment of change, but the real work began in deciding what affect this change would have on the characters and their alternative lives.

Originally, *The Mune* opened with a description of the journey, detailing the hold of the ship, which was based on research of slave ships, the types of food that might

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[221] "History of Cutty Sark," Royal Museums Greenwich, Accessed 23 June 2022, https://www.rmg.co.uk/cutty-sark/history.
[222] Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 211.

have been provided, and birthing techniques (or lack of them). This chapter, which can be found in appendix III, was removed, in favour of starting the novel as the 'event' occurred, dramatising the moment of change, before moving on to focus on the impact of the altered world and the 'daily strivings of individual human beings.'[223]

As well as the event, which throws my cast of characters into a parallel universe and allows them to shape their future outside the patriarchy they have grown up with, *The Mune* draws on other techniques used by writers of altered history: pastiches of real people and known fictional characters, new technologies and historical artefacts. For instance, in the Steampunk tradition, Alan Moore, in his graphic work, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999), also sets his work in Victorian England and pastiches characters from different works of Victorian fiction to populate it. Not only do these characters bring with them technological advances not applicable to the period, such as The Nautilus, a submarine originally imagined by Jules Verne, but the reader knows the origin stories of the characters, and their psychology. This means Moore does not need to explain either their power or their past to the reader and allows him to break away from the traditional realms of the superhero comic, adding layers of interest without the need for lengthy exposition.

The characters include Dr Jekyll, who is a repressed alter ego from the book *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Wilhelmina Murray, referred to as Mina in the text, who was formerly Mina Harker in *Dracula*, Captain Nemo, and Hawley Griffith otherwise known as the Invisible Man. What makes these characters even more interesting is that they were largely created during the nineteenth century and Moore uses them to combine factual period information with modern sensibility. Mina, for example, is outspoken and a leader, far from the submissive, feminine middle-class stereotype of the mid-

[223] James and Mendlesohn, *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction,* 217.

nineteenth-century Victorian period and her original character in Dracula, who embodies all the stereotypical virtues of the Victorian woman. In one of the graphics, Mina is described as having a 'waspish tongue […] one of the many unattractive features of the modern suffragette,'[224] which reveals the historical attitude to women of the time. Taking elements of a shared cultural knowledge makes Moore's unknown world immediately more familiar and he uses it to subvert the characters in order to play with the stereotypes of Victorian culture at a time when the empire was at its financial peak.

Where Moore uses fictional characters, borrowed from authors of multiple speculative texts, Philip K Dick uses real historical people and places them within his alternative history. *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) is set in a parallel universe, where the Axis powers have won the Second World War. Characters like Hitler and Goebbels exist within the text, but they play different roles to those in our history books because they have succeeded and survived. Their characters are subverted in subtle but realistic ways; within the novel Hitler is seriously ill with syphilis. Using real people as characters gives an authenticity to Dick's alternative history.

In *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* and *The Man in the High Castle,* characters borrowed from other sources are embedded in a further layer of fiction to create a new world and text. Quoting my supervisor, Matthew De Abaitua, their function is to 'create an imagined world in which the boundaries between the real and the imaginary collapse.'[225] In a similar vein, I decided to incorporate three pioneering Victorian women into the narrative of *The Mune*—Hertha Ayrton, Jessie Boucherett and Sophia Jex-Blake—feminists of the Victorian period which my characters originally

[224] Moore and O'Neill, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen Volume One.*
[225] Matthew De Abaitua, "Notes on Draft of Thesis Chapter," (unpublished manuscript, 12 May 2022).

inhabited. These women were trying to bring about change. Hertha Ayrton was a suffragette, inventor, mathematician and physicist[226] at a time where few women had access to science and technology. Ayrton studied electricity and physics at Finsbury Technical College in London, and her knowledge would be essential to help my Victorian women recreate the scanning technology given to them to transport back to the past. Jessie Boucherett was a suffragette who dedicated her life to the cause of female emancipation. She published an essay in 1869 on 'How to Provide for Superfluous Women,'[227] and it is her words which frame the front page of my novel, as I explained in chapter two. Sophia Jex-Blake was the first practicing female doctor in Scotland and in 1874 helped to set up the London School of Medicine for Women.[228] Between them, these three women would possess the right determination and skills to help my islanders, on their return to Victorian Britain, to achieve the aims set out in the documentation brought with them from the future. I also decided to give the members of the Mune an advantage, by introducing technology not invented during the Victorian period, a scanner brought back from Star's visit to the future that would significantly reduce maternal deaths and give women agency that was lacking in matters of childbirth.

Master's Book of Scientific Stories

The Mune is not simply an alternative history which focuses on a past event to speculate on a different and more inclusive present, affording the characters an agency they would not possess in their real time. It also predicts a possible future—

[226] Elizabeth Bruton, "The Life and Material Culture of Hertha Ayrton," *Science Museum Group Journal* 10, no. 10 (2018), https://doi.org/10.15180/181002.
[227] Samantha Ann Rose Brinded, "The Superfluous Woman: Lincolnshire's Lost Suffragist," *University of Lincoln, School of History & Heritage* (blog), 7 November 2018, https://history.blogs.lincoln.ac.uk/2018/11/07/the-superfluous-woman-lincolnshires-lost-suffragist/.
[228] "Sophia Jex-Blake", The University of Edinburgh, 1 June 2018, https://www.ed.ac.uk/equality-diversity/celebrating-diversity/inspiring-women/women-in-history/sophia-jex-blake.

one which is told within the science stories contained within the main narrative, as well as transforming the language of the community to enable its non-binary status.

Imaginary books, such as *Master's Book of Scientific Stories,* which is scattered through the narrative of *The Mune*, and consists of pastiches of the Victorian stories described in chapter two, play an important role in works of speculative fiction. In Philip K Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, an imaginary book, *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*,[229] serves to introduce the idea of multiple universes. *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy* is a second layer of alternative history which has been written by a fictional character, Anderson, and it is referred to and quoted throughout the main body of the novel. In *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*, the Allies win the war, a fact which is closer to our own historical timeline, but the British Empire conquers the U.S and becomes a superpower. *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy* is a dangerous and subversive text, banned by the Germans, and plays a central role for the resistance in the story. The job of protecting it and spreading the idea behind the narrative allows Juliana, the protagonist, agency to imagine a better life and offers the characters trapped in the Japanese-held territory, such as Juliana, a 'creative salvation'[230]: a utopian vision.

An embedded text is also a central element in the world building in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993), the title of which is taken from Matthew 13. *Earthseed: The Book of the Living* is a collection of the thoughts of the protagonist, Lauren, as she tries to navigate her chaotic world, which has collapsed due to a combination of the loss of her family, climate change and corporate greed. The book of her thoughts allows her to plan her own utopian dream. Quoting the text within chapters serves as an inner monologue, and through it the reader starts to understand

[229] Philip K Dick, *The Man in the High Castle* (United Kingdom: Penguin Books, 2015).
[230] Patricia Warrick, "The Encounter of Taoism and Fascism in Philip K. Dick's 'The Man in the High Castle'," *Science Fiction Studies* 7, no. 2 (1980): 187, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4239329.

the protagonist's beliefs, how much her preacher father influenced her, and what drives her to begin her journey to create a new future for herself. Brief excerpts such as: 'To get along with God, / Consider the consequences of your behavior'[231] allow Butler to dispense with the need to explain, in detail, the moral and cultural code of the community Lauren ends up leading. Like Lauren in *The Parable of the Sower*, many of the characters in *The Mune* would be heavily influenced by both religious texts and services. Religion pervaded social and political life to an extent almost unimaginable today.[232]

In addition to expanding universes, and giving characters an inner voice, I could use a fictional book within my novel to create conflict and mystery outside of the main narrative. For example, in the short story, 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' by Jorge Luis Borges (1962), a fictional text presents us with a dilemma. Uqbar, a country vaguely located in Asia, is identified only as existing in a specific reprint of the *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*.[233] The text provides a mystery to be solved within the world of the story, but the framing of the text as an encyclopedia gives it scientific authority.

Borges's short story initially appears to be a quest for the information contained in the encyclopedia, which is unobtainable until he inherits another book, *A First Encyclopaedia of Tlön,* from his uncle. This book contains references to this unknown land on Tlön, which we discover has no concept of time, or cause and effect, and, subsequently, whose two languages are devoid of 'nouns'. Hence, '"Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" is a thought experiment about a thought experiment, a map that becomes the territory. It is also a warning that confusion between map and territory is where the

[231] Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, (New York: Warner Books, 2000), 86.
[232] Professor Sir Richard Evans, 'The Victorians: Religion and Science,' (Gresham College Lectures, 14 March 2011), https://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/the-victorians-religion-and-science.
[233] Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths* (London: Penguin, 2000).

terror lies.'[234] This gap between map (representation) and territory (lived experience) is shaped by what is condensed, omitted, or placed outside the narrative. Distortions of scale of this kind can be used to create fantastical effects and I felt I might be able to utilise this concept in my novel, with reference to what lies beyond the island—the sea and different time zones—even when not precisely mapped out. Like Borges, I could consider using artefacts, texts, and language from 'outside' and have them appear in my islanders' reality. I could also incorporate reference to existing intellectual figures to distract the reader from the truth. In 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' the truth, once revealed, is that Tlön is a universe designed and inserted into reality by a group of intellectuals over a long period of time and does not actually exist physically. This provides evidence that not only does introducing imaginary texts create experiential layers but can also be used to drive the plot.

Master's Book of Scientific Stories is an imaginary book such as that utilised by Dick, Butler and Borges, to widen the scope of the world which I created, and to provide a layer of experience for the reader which would allow them to access the unfamiliar world more easily. Including scientific-style stories from the period my characters inhabited and tailoring them to my main narrative would work in several ways. Firstly, the reader would be alerted to cultural changes that were occurring in England in the mid-nineteenth century and the beliefs and aspirations of the time; secondly, they would provide clues as to the mystery of the island; and thirdly, they would serve as a foretelling of events, suggesting what the future after an altered history might look like.

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[234] Paul Kincaid, "Reprint: Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius by Jorge Luis Borges," *Through the Dark Labyrinth* (blog), 17 January 2018, https://ttdlabyrinth.wordpress.com/2018/01/17/reprint-tlon-uqbar-orbis-tertius/.

I took the first text, *Pyrna*, and, like Moore in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen,* thought about ways in which I could change the narrative whilst still maintaining the central premise: of a stranger happening upon a utopian world, and the authorial voice, one of privilege, which Josephine Guy describes in the introduction to *The Victorian Age: An Anthology of Sources and Documents* (1998) as representing an 'intellectual culture which was defined and controlled by an educated, mainly metropolitan middle-and upper middle-class male elite.'[235] Using a gentleman protagonist, instead of a world under the ice, I decided to set my story in a cave, using the shipwreck and the 'grey rock' found in *The Mune* as characteristics.

> The original passage in *Pyrna* is as follows:
>
> > The buildings were of a material that looked like polished alabaster, and were most beautifully carved with flowers and festoons of leaves from top to bottom [...]. I could see colours of the most brilliant hue, and flowers of immense size the perfume of which, at times saluted my nostrils.[236]

In comparison, my version: 'Lagoon Island: A commune under the sea', whilst retaining some of the words and phrasing, is as follows:

> > Inside the tunnel the walls were certainly worthy of attention, executed with marvellous nicety, smooth almost marble in surface, and festooned with something like diamonds, twinkling like many hundred stars and of a spiritual quality. It appeared to my untrained eye that they were nature's own designs.[237]

I made these changes to better mirror the island landscape in my main narrative and suggest that the cave might have a spiritual quality to it: the voices Clay hears through the well, Betty's disappearance and the adventures through the waters. The women would not understand the idea of 'portals' but might, instead, equate it with magic or trickery.

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[235] Josephine M. Guy, Introduction to *The Victorian Age: An Anthology of Sources and Documents* (London: New York: Routledge, 1998), 6.
[236] Davis, *Pyrna: A Commune or Under the Ice*, 15.
[237] Susannah Dawes, "The Mune" (unpublished manuscript, September 2022), 27.

Another change I felt was important to make in this first story was that of gender and sex categories. Despite the sexes appearing more equal in intellect in *Pyrna*, not unexpectedly, Davis differentiates them using gendered traits:

> The women were smaller than the men, as is usually the case, and had no hair on their faces, and but little on their heads; and what they had was worn in curls, and varied from gold to almost white. I never saw lovelier hair, though it lacked the luxuriance of growth. Their complexions were the same as those of the men, but they looked a little purer, clearer and almost transparent [...]. The costume of these people consisted of a long, loose robe reaching to the knee [...]. The men wore dark colours, the women light blues and pinks.[238]

In 'Lagoon Island' I wanted to hint at an alternative to binary gender, androgyny of some sort, such as found in Ursula Le Guin's *TLHoD*, whilst still retaining the Victorian male gaze used in Davis's original story. To achieve this, I kept a male narrator but changed the appearance of the community he meets. The first step was to blur traditional gender indicators. For example,

> He was a tall man, much taller than me, lithe and with large hands. […] The man's hair was white and scanty but the length of it was that of a woman [….] The children, of all sizes, from baby to almost-man wore the same thin skin-like tunic and their appearance was identical, with broad chests and the same silver-grey eyes.[239]

I stuck closely to Davis's idea of universal parenting and natural selection, and it is these themes that my character Betty remembers from the story and refers to within the main narrative. The first occurs when the baptism of the children is organised.

> Betty nods, her face serious. 'We must bring the children up as one,' she says.
> 'One?' Molly asks.
> 'With one universal parent. So, they are created equally in God's eyes as man was.'
> Molly frowns. 'Universal? I don't remember that in the scriptures?'
> Betty sighs, not sure why it's so hard to understand. She thinks about the underwater men in Master Henry's story, how different it would have been for her if she'd been in a place like that when her ma died of consumption.[240]

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[238] Davis, *Pyrna: A Commune or Under the Ice*, 20.
[239] Dawes, "The Mune," 26.
[240] Dawes, 47- 48.

Betty's recollection of 'Lagoon Island', coupled with the experience of losing her mother so young, directly impacts both the way she views the island and her desire to influence how the community raise the children. Later, when Clay has an accident which leaves them disabled, and the beasts draw close, seeming to want to attack, Betty once again draws on the themes of 'Lagoon Island', suggesting they sacrifice the children that she feels are damaged.

> It's a simple solution: a sacrifice for the greater good. Clay cannot run since falling, with a leg twisted like the ribbons on a Maypole, and Sun is slow witted, barely knows their own name. Master often said that weaker, smaller animals had an important part to play in keeping others strong.[241]

In this passage I drew euthanasic elements from *Pyrna* and blended them into the main narrative, giving Betty motivation and self-justification for her later actions against Clay, as well as keeping Master's influence on Betty in the foreground.

The second story, entitled 'The Glass Pipe', is much closer to H.G Wells's original structure of 'The Crystal Egg', than 'Lagoon Island' is to *Pyrna*. It follows a shop keeper's discovery of an artefact, which he believes allows him to view an alternate universe. In 'The Crystal Egg', the alien race, viewed through the lens by Mr Cave, has a bat-like appearance but with human qualities. In contrast, Mr Smyth, in my story 'The Glass Pipe', sees a very different species, which foretells the beasts 'finding their legs':

> Some weeks later, Mr Smyth witnessed creatures in the glass he could only describe as large fish with legs, not having seen the like before, Mr Smyth's full attention turned to the sea-beasts. They had curious tails, flat at the end like spades and feet that splayed out as if hands. Their eyes were small, situated on the side of large leathery heads, triangular in shape. They were fast in the water but lumbering on the land, as if they didn't belong. Or like a young child, were taking their first steps.[242]

[241] Dawes, "The Mune," 87.
[242] Dawes, 98.

I utilised this passage to hint that the beasts have a connection to the babies that died during the voyage, before the novel begins and the women were shipwrecked on the island. I have also, like Philip K Dick in *The Man in the High Castle,* blurred the lines between the main narrative and the book contained within, by having Newt find a section of the glass pipe on the island itself.

I used the third story *The Phantom Boat,* which is based on *The Phantom Coach* by Amelia Edwards*,* to hint at Master's fate, as well as highlighting the Victorian obsession with all things of a spiritual nature. When my protagonist seeks refuge from a storm in an isolated house, which mirrors the original story, instead of a barn-type dwelling, storing all manner of things associated with a recluse, my protagonist discovers artefacts relating to the island.

> There was much to witness in the room: jars of chemicals, some peculiar painted wall hangings of a paper-like fabric, tattered maps, an array of specimen rocks, which looked volcanic in nature and some kind of grey animal skin stretched across a wooden frame. So strange a room I had never witnessed before. Who was this man before me?[243]

I wanted the reader to wonder if, after the portal closes, Master finds a way back to Victorian England, but has learned so much that he appears quite mad, and no longer has the reputation that motivated the journey in the first instance. This felt a just end for someone who sent their wife to an asylum and raped their scullery maid.

I used the fourth story, based on Florence McLandburgh's 'The Automaton Ear,' to explore new ways that my second generation of characters, particularly Rainbow, might communicate with the island. Instead of inventing an automaton ear to hear the music of the world, my protagonist invents a nosegay which allows them to understand the history of scent.

> It was several days after when I raised the completed instrument to my nose and lodged it high in my nasal passage. I decided on oil of violet root for my first

[243] Dawes, "The Mune"*,* 67.

> endeavour. I could smell it! Not just the pungent woody aroma of violet rhizomes but something else. I could smell the cool air in the dry cupboard where it was stored; the grains of earth which clung to the shafts before it was crushed and the sharp bitter leaves that once graced it. It was as if it was communicating with me.[244]

I also wanted to showcase the length someone like Master, who considers himself a scientist and explorer, might go to discover and catalogue new species. By using a 'woman of disrepute' as the protagonist's victim in the story, I also sought to remind the reader how dispensable women in that period were, blurring actual historical fact within rewritten speculative fiction.

The fifth and final story, based on *New Amazonia,* I entitled *New Cambry,* as a nod to the influence Russell Hoban's, *Riddley Walker* had on my treatment of the language in *The Mune*. Hoban used the word Cambry as a pared-down version of Canterbury, one of the settings in the novel. I used the story to provide hints about the 'future' which is not explored in the main narrative: the ways a society might adapt to climate change, such as using micro hydroponics, and living in high rise buildings to avoid the floods. I also used the story to describe the doctors that Star meets, their clothes and their superior physique, prior to their introduction which occurs much later in the main narrative.

> [I] found myself on a glass-like platform in a strange landscape, grey but with gay-hued markings set upon tall buildings, and walls embellished with brass keys, ribbons and trinkets.
> My focus was fixed on the looking-glass windows that towered above me and the sea appearing to swirl beneath my slippered feet […].
>
> [A] specimen of a race, the like never seen before, appeared to glide before us.
> 'A goddess,' the fellow declared.
> I deduced she was close upon seven feet in height and of magnificent build. A giant Venus with a most poetic motion. She wore a very peculiar dress, a modification of the divided skirt, like hosiery and in a silvery hue, which served to heighten her beautiful, symmetrical limbs. There was an accompaniment of a silvery bonnet, snug against her crown.[245]

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[244] Dawes, "The Mune," 138.
[245] Dawes, 206.

In addition to providing clues to the future, such as the items adorning the walls, a modern way of remembering and acknowledging missing persons and the dead, I wanted to use this pastiche to underline men's views of women in the Victorian period, even when placed in a future setting—how condescending they were to any female achievements. I also wanted to remind the reader that some women were not in favour of women's rights, once again marrying historical fact to the alternate world I had built within the story. In the prologue of *New Amazonia,* Corbett describes an article against women's suffrage as: 'the most despicable piece of treachery ever perpetrated towards woman by women.'[246] In *New Cambry,* I allude to a similar treachery in the form of Mrs Humphrey Ward, who was a member of the Women's National Anti-Suffrage League,[247] and whose imagined letter of anti-suffrage causes my protagonist to suffer an indescribable rage, wander her garden and be transported to New Cambry. Once again, I weaved historical fact into an alternative speculative history.

To complete the story and better locate it, I used the symbolism of a well, such as the one Betty travelled through to return to the Victorian past, rather than having my erstwhile traveller awake in their study, after a short drug-induced nap, which is how her travels were explained in the original story, and how many of the authors of the scientific stories of the Victorian period ended their narratives. Of course, as a modern author, I knew to avoid the 'it was just a dream' conclusion, which has become a cliché and tends to cheapen any emotion the reader has invested in the characters. This is not to say that all works which use 'dreams' to frame their stories are unsuccessful;

[246] Corbett, *New Amazonia*.
[247] John Sutherland, "The Suffragettes' Unlikeliest Enemy," *The Guardian,* 4 June 2013, sec. Opinion, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jun/04/suffragettes-mary-ward.

rather they are a product of their time, such as the final pages of *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.

> "Oh, I've had such a curious dream!" said Alice, and she told her sister, as well as she could remember them, all these strange Adventures of hers that you have just been reading about; and when she had finished, her sister kissed her, and said, "It *was* a curious dream, dear, certainly: but now run in to your tea; it's getting late." So Alice got up and ran off, thinking while she ran, as well she might, what a wonderful dream it had been.[248]

In *Alice in Wonderland*, Una Richards comments that the 'disruption between the confines that differentiate these two states is prevalent, the lines are continuously blurred, with the implication that dream becomes an alternative reality.'[249] However, to be successful, the dream ending must not be a sudden revelation but hinted at throughout the narrative, so the reader doesn't feel cheated. This did not feel the case in my re-telling of *New Amazonia.*

When redrafting my novel, as well as changing the ending of some of the stories, I decided to exclude two of the pastiches I had written. The first was based on Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* (1666)*,* one of the first recorded utopian works to be written by a woman. Initially I wanted to use it to explore spirituality, gender and the acquisition of knowledge from the future, which would prepare the women for an alternate past, but felt once written that it did not fit, having been penned nearly two centuries earlier. Despite having themes of otherworldly travel and adventure, it was more fantastical than the other stories and less grounded in place, and the technologies Cavendish imagined such as telescopes, which she dismissed as being

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[248] Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2010),117.
[249] Una Richards, "Dreams and Nonsense: The Interchangeable Nature of 'Dream' and 'Reality'," *Literature and Nonsense* (blog), 29 January 2016, https://literatureandnonsense.wordpress.com/2016/01/29/dreams-and-nonsense-the-interchangeable-nature-of-dream-and-reality/.

inferior to nature, describing them as 'false informers'[250] were already dated by the nineteenth century.

The second story, based on *Three Hundred Years Hence* by Mary Griffith (1836), was the first known utopian novel written by an American woman. The narrative relies heavily on letters and observation, following the experience of the protagonist, Hastings, who wakes having been buried for centuries. I didn't feel I could shape the landscape in the story to mirror the island, or the future I imagined, whilst retaining the implied authoritative voice of the author, found in most Victorian texts. I have included both stories in appendix III.

I hoped by including *Master's Book of Scientific Stories* within the novel, the reader would be better able to understand the origins of my characters—the history, culture and science fiction which existed at the time—and give them additional explanatory information in a creative way, reducing the need for lengthy exposition.

Star's Senryu

Taking inspiration from Octavia Butler, I decided, in addition to including a mysterious book within the main narrative, to embellish one of my second-generation character's actions with a type of Zen poetry, so that the reader might understand how the second-generation islanders viewed their world, whilst they inhabited it, and also to showcase their non-binary language.

I felt I could use a version of Zen poetry to communicate the internal monologue of Star, and explore how they felt about the island, which would be very different from the Elders. I could inhabit and shape their thoughts by relating them to their environment, thereby not only giving emotional layers to the character but also

[250] Margaret Cavendish, *The Blazing World and Other Writings*, ed. Kate Lilley (London: Penguin, 1994), 141, Kindle.

showing how the second generation of the Mune's beliefs differed from their mothers and include Star's unspoken aspirations. Like Lauren in the *Parable of the Sower,* Star thinks differently from their peers and this difference causes Star to eventually choose a different life path.

Zen poetry is a meditation, a focus on a single moment or object, sometimes referred to as 'mind pointing,'[251] looking not just at that object and describing it, but 'as the sixth Patriarch Hui-neng maintained essential, *as* it.'[252] Whilst familiarising myself with Zen poetry, I discovered Basho (1644 – 1694) within the pages of the *Penguin Book of Zen Poetry* (1977), thought to have been one of the finest Japanese haiku poets. His work not only expressed his ideals and observations, but often exposed the meaning in the mundane. Basho, like other Masters, did not believe in the boundary of 7-5-7 syllables, as is often taught to beginners in haiku, but instead used the fewest words possible for expression.

The following three of Basho's haiku exemplify both the rhythm and brevity of the single observed moment: 'June rain / hollyhocks turning / where sun should be.'[253] 'Withered grass / under piling / heat waves.' 'Autumn - / even the birds / and clouds look old.'[254] Basho's poetry often focuses on the absence of things, such as the sun, and the wider impact this has. The absence of weather, for example, could be a powerful tool to help the reader understand how the two generations on the island differ when viewing their environment. What might be a blessing for the elders, for example, the heat, which affords them freedom from restrictive clothes, might be the

[251] Lucien Stryk and Takashi Ikemoto, eds, *The Penguin Book of Zen Poetry* (London: Allen Lane, 1977), 23.
[252] Stryk and Ikemoto, *The Penguin Book of Zen Poetry,* 23.
[253] Stryk and Ikemoto, *The Penguin Book of Zen Poetry,* 88.
[254] Stryk and Ikemoto, 91.

very thing that motivates the children to leave—a desire to experience something 'other'.

As well as reading all manner of haiku in order to write Star's poetics effectively, I began practising haibun, a hybrid form, which marries prose with haiku, and represents a journey. Haibun reflects both the internal thoughts of the traveller alongside images of the external environment experienced. I collaborated with Dr Tim Gardiner, who has won several awards for his Japanese-style poetry, and the following haibun was published in CHO (2021):

> Buried in Meaning
>
> I take her hand: paper-thin skin, mushrooming with liver-spots. The last few years have brought drought to her words, her movements wooden, constricted by hoists and straps. My name is as hard to catch as falling acorns.
>
> The seasons pass, but I'm not ready to let go. Even when the rain darkens the earth where she has finally found peace, I still search for her.
>
> fairy ring
> I count the centuries
> on the oak's limbs[255]

I decided, in a similar vein, to present Star's thoughts by using a passage of description, primarily focused on a journey or action, and either precede or follow it with a thought in the Zen style, that looked beyond the physical world. I would limit myself to references and metaphors connected to the island, as Basho did to his meditative state.

I began to pen senryu to fit my character, Star, whose strength lies in their reflective thoughts, a trait not always valued in situations where survival is key. Senryu shares many of the constraints of haiku but has more focus on human peculiarities rather than nature. The following senryu is one of many within the text, which

[255] Susannah Dawes and Tim Gardiner, "Buried in Meaning," *CHO*, August 2021, https://contemporaryhaibunonline.com/cho-17-2-table-of-contents/sue-dawes-buried-in-meaning/.

accompanies a passage where Star is looking out over the sand and thinking about how trapped they are on the island: 'Nowhere to run - / sea waits. / Voice pressed into sand.'[256] In short sections such as this, I could begin to convey how claustrophobic the island felt for Star, as opposed to the Elders for whom it was an escape. I could also use the senryu to describe how Star felt about the community, and where their motivation for action lay. The following senryu: 'Different huts / must be built / to house beginnings.'[257] explores Star's internal struggle to process 'new' information they discover, whilst placing it within the familiar context of the island environment. Limiting the language used in the senryu to words, ceremonial and religious customs and actions known on the island, would allow me to explore how limiting life might feel for Star who is, at heart, a poet.

Much like Russell Hoban's narrator in *Riddley Walker*, Star's journey is a quest, shaped by artefacts from the past, which hold alternate meanings than that of Star's forebears. In the case of *Riddley Walker*, it is a painting which shapes both the language and the meanings the community give to the new world they inhabit.

[256] Dawes, "The Mune," 183.
[257] Dawes, 226.

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Figure x: The legend of St Eustace

Figure xi: Close-up of the Crucifixion

The painting, *The Legend of St Eustace* (Figure x) depicts St Eustace's vision of Christ, crucified between the antlers of a stag (Figure xi). Hoban uses the parable behind the painting as a thread throughout the story, which Riddley's community believe explains the devastation that has occurred to humankind. This is clearly shown by Godparly the 'Pry Mincer' (Prime Minister) when he tries to interpret the words which accompany the painting, in terms that represent their damaged world:

> *St Eustace is seen on his knees before his quarry*.' Which a *quarry* is a kind of digging. Whys he on his knees? What brung him down what Knockt him off his ffet? What come out of that digging? A *stag.* Well that's our Hart of the Wud innit we know him wel a nuff. What's he got twean his antlers its '*a cross*

[258] E W Tristram, The Legend of St Eustace, c.1480, source and copyright: CHAS (Canterbury Historical and Archaeological Society) web site.

> *of radiant light.'* Which is the same thing as radiating lite or radiation which may be you've heard of?[259]

In the same way that both Riddley and the Pry Mincer, attempt to find meaning in the relic, my second generation of characters would attach different meanings than the Elders do, to the rotting ship in the sea, the beasts and offspring (which they call childs). Like the painting in *Riddley Walker*, even the language used to communicate its meaning would be transformed, representing a past the Elders try to conceal, and the children want to understand.

Island Inspiration

In addition to creating new ways to communicate, I also needed to think about the sense of place in the novel. Islands and other remote lands are regularly used as literary devices, utilising natural boundaries to help form and contain narratives. In speculative fiction they tend to be presented either as lost paradises, such as Aldous Huxley's *Island* (1962), or isolated places where morality and survival is tested, such as H G Wells' *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896) and Jules Verne's *The Mysterious Island* (1875). The island setting, often inaccessible to outsiders, provides the perfect space to either contain danger or, in utopias such as Thomas More's, provide a gateway to build something novel:

> The island of Utopia containeth in breadth in the middle part of it (for there it is broadest) 200 miles. Which breadth continueth through the most part of the land, saving that little by little it cometh in and waxeth narrower towards both the ends […]. The forefronts or frontiers of the two corners, what with fords and shelves and what with rocks, be very jeopardous and dangerous.[260]

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[259] Russell Hoban, *Riddley Walker,* 122.
[260] Thomas More, *More's Utopia and A Dialogue of Comfort*, 55.

Thomas More's *Utopia* is a safe space, difficult to access for outsiders and therefore protected from external influences and threats, allowing More to create a self-sufficient community, vastly different from his own.

Like More's *Utopia,* Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, Jules Verne's *Lincoln Island* and Aldous Huxley's *Pala* are also largely inaccessible places, closed off to outsiders by design or nature, accessed by chance. Herland is cut off from the mainland by mountains and, despite not being an island per se, it functions in a similar way as a narrative device. This inaccessibility creates an interdependence within its inhabitants and requires its members to put community first in order to flourish. Van, one of the male travellers, observes of the Herlanders: 'All the surrendering devotion our women have put into their private families, these women put into their country and race.'[261] The Herlanders put emphasis on the health and well-being of the whole community, which is in stark contrast to the protagonist's capitalist, patriarchal America.

Island utopias are often socialist, communist and even anarchist in nature because of the community's need to survive extreme circumstances, and of course, the author's wish to create alternatives to their own reality. This is most prevalent in Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, which is set on Annares, an inhospitable moon. In the book of Odo, the basis of Odonian Anarchism on which the community of Annares was built, it states:

> A child free from the guilt of ownership and the burden of economic competition will grow up with the will to do what needs doing and the capacity for joy in doing it. It is useless work that darkens the heart. The delight of the nursing mother, of the scholar, of the successful hunter, of the good cook, of the skilful maker, of anyone doing needed work and doing it well – this durable joy is perhaps the deepest source of human affection and of sociability as a whole.[262]

[261] Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland*, Vintage Classics (London: Penguin Random House, 2015), 126.
[262] Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (London: Gollancz, 2002), 205.

On Annares emphasis is placed on utility rather than profit, and nature also has an important role to play.

Communities in remote locations are forced to rely on their environment to sustain them, however barren that landscape is, and are therefore more likely to utilise their resources with care. In chapter four of Huxley's *Island,* Will Farnaby observes:

> There were daisies in the grass and dandelions, and across the water towered up the huge church, challenging the wildness of those soft April clouds with its austere geometry. Challenging the wildness, and at the same time complementing it, coming to terms with it in perfect reconciliation.[263]

Similarly in Jules Verne's *The Mysterious Island,* the omniscient narrator comments:

> There was no want of meat, nor of vegetable products; those ligneous roots which they had found, when subjected to fermentation, gave them an acid drink, which was preferable to cold water; they also made sugar, without canes or beet-roots, by collecting the liquor which distils from the "acer saceharinum," a son of maple-tree, which flourishes in all the temperate zones, and of which the island possessed a great number; they made a very agreeable tea by employing the herbs brought from the warren; lastly, they had an abundance of salt, the only mineral which is used in food.[264]

An abundance of natural resources, carefully consumed, coupled in the case of *The Mysterious Island,* with engineer Cyrus Harding's almost photographic memory for facts pertaining to all sciences—biology, chemistry, physics and engineering—ensured the community's survival.

In each speculative novel, grounding the story in a remote place creates intrigue, and a sense of defamiliarisation. I wanted to draw on these utopian texts and ground my novel in an inhospitable place which, like *Herland*, and *The Mysterious Island* is still able to sustain and be utilised by the community. Like More, Verne and Huxley, I decided to use an island, rather than a remote location, in order to separate the real world from the one I imagined. An island provides a barrier between known

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[263] Aldous Huxley, *Island*, 30.
[264] Jules Verne, "The Mysterious Island" in *The Complete Novels* (Beelzebub Classics, 7th 2019),146, Kindle.

and unknown worlds which allows for new fauna and flora as well as uncertainty, danger and ultimately, freedom. I hoped to incorporate some of the traditions of Fijian life I experienced both as a young child, and later when I went back to visit. Like Pala, the village of Ba on the Yasawa islands is not accessible to tourists, and visitors must gain permission from the chief in order to stay. Its community is fiercely protected from outsiders, managing to retain its tradition of spear fishing and building. It is also kinetic, utilising some modern technologies, such as underwater torches, but only when they do not impact upon the culture.

A sense of place is not evoked solely from landscape, but also involves the cultural traditions, and structure of living spaces. In building my utopian island, I would need to imagine how the island's nature and its remote position might influence my communities' way of life. For this I could draw on the traditions of my birthplace, Fiji.

Kava, Kava

[265]

Figure xii: Kava Ceremony Ba Village

[265] Susannah Dawes, *Kava Ceremony,*1992, photograph, Ba Village, Yasawa Island.

Traditionally, Fijians use the root of the Kava shrub as a ceremonial drink, which is passed around in a coconut cup. Kava Kava (also referred to as Yakona or Grog) is a cloudy drink made from the pulverised root of the plant, sieved with water, and which to my palate tasted like grit and mustard. The Kava ceremony is used both to welcome visitors and to resolve disagreements within the community and there are strict ceremonial rules, which must be adhered to when drinking it, including clapping once when presented with the cup and shouting 'Bula' (Fijian for hello). Kava is a depressant which slows down neural messages and I certainly struggled to coordinate my body after drinking it (Figure xii), unable to feel my tongue or my legs.

In Huxley's utopia, *Island*, there is a drug called 'moshka-medicine,', described by the protagonist as taking 'you to the same place as you get to in meditation.'[266] According to Jerome Meckier, 'moshka-medicine' was apparently modelled on 'Huxley's experiments with Mescalin and LSD.'[267] So, it would not be an unusual narrative device to use something like Kava to allow my characters space from their trauma—to give them a chance to escape, and be more agreeable when they started to organise their community.

[266] Huxley, *Island*, 203.
[267] Jerome Meckier, "Conradian Reminders in Aldous Huxley's 'Island': Will Farnaby's 'Moksha' - Medicine Experience and 'The Essential Horror'," *Studies in the Novel* 35, no. 1 (2003), 44, https://www.jstor.org/stable/29533548.

Bures

[268]

Figure xiii: *Building a Fijian Bure.*

Residences are a key element to any settled society, and any building is determined by the materials available, especially in a remote land. Traditionally, Fijian islanders have always lived in Bures (Figure xiii), built by the community using raw materials found nearby, usually straw and wood. Part of the practicality of these Bures is that they can be easily rebuilt after a hurricane and the detritus caused by high winds is minimal, rotting back into the earth. On a remote island, my cast of characters would need to be able to build their own shelters, or at least to maintain the shelters already there. This would protect them from the elements and wildlife, creating a safe space for the community to grow.

If I aimed to be historically accurate and give my characters the true voice and experience of mid-nineteenth-century working-class women, I would need to limit their knowledge of science and architecture. They would not be able to utilise new technologies, like those in utopias such as Kim Stanley Robinson's '*Mars Trilogy*',

[268] Susannah Dawes, *Building a Fijian Bure,* 1992, photograph, Ba Village, Yasawa Islands.

which imagines the transportation of building materials from the future. Neither would they be sophisticated enough to build the structures in Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, a planet which lacks resources and utilises communal living, but has a much more sophisticated scientific, political and social structure.

I would need to provide the community with shelter, which they could learn to build themselves with the materials at hand, and a version of the Bure, made with bark and earth sourced on the island, seemed a solution.

Tapa

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Figure xiv: Ceremonial Tapa

With limited resources, and on small remote islands, the Fijians islanders have historically sourced all their materials from nature, not just for building houses but also for body coverings. Tapa, also known as Masi, is a fibrous cloth originally made from the dye-fig tree (Ficus tinctoria) but is more commonly now made from the bark of the

[269] Derek Dawes, *Susannah Dawes wearing Ceremonial Tapa,* 1973, photograph, Suva, Fiji.

Paper Mulberry tree. Tapa, usually decorated with plant dyes, is used to make clothes in the form of a decorated tunic. It is a lengthy process, which involves stripping and drying the inner bark of the tree in the sun and then beating it until it is thin.[270] These thin strips are then beaten together to form a larger piece of cloth and fashioned into a garment. Although the fabric is labour intensive, disintegrates when wet and is a little stiff to wear, it is cool against the skin and more than adequate as a covering.

An alternative to Tapa was for my islanders to utilise the skins of animals, or 'found' materials such as in Verne's *The Mysterious Island,* where they use the expired balloon canopy to fashion shirts and there would be the sail from the wrecked ship available to them. I decided to utilise the ship's sail to clothe the children when toddlers and later for Lightning's birthing tunic, but I decided against the use of animal skins as this would require large mammals to be present on the island. I did not want the community to encounter additional risk to life on arrival.

Primarily, I wanted my characters to shake off their past, and part of that would involve discarding the thick woollen dresses and various undergarments Victorian women were expected to wear. These not only constricted their movements but were designed to maintain their modesty. However, the social conditioning of women from this period might mean that some would be disinclined to free themselves from these constraints, despite them serving no positive function. Setting the novel on an island, with limited resources, would ultimately force this change.

[270] "Kapa", *Handmade in the Pacific* (BBC Four, 1 October 2018), https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0bm6pjv.

The Garden of Eden

Utilising and cultivating nature, in the form of gardens, is an essential element of many island utopias. While the island represents disconnection from the present, often from war and violence, and provides distance from everyday life, the garden is a space which symbolises the human desire to shape the natural world into a perfect place, commonly presented as a paradise.

Utopian gardens are largely Edenic in nature, beautiful to observe, with an abundance of food and the peaceful coexistence of nature and human. This is certainly true of More's *Utopia* which rejects the inequalities and corruption of his time and restores a much more nostalgic version of paradise from the past: a moneyless society, and the establishment of communal property. More's island of Utopia is set off the coast of the Americas, believed by scholars at the time to be an uncultivated 'New World' of possibility and the original location of the Garden of Eden. However, despite the beautiful, and sometimes impenetrable, scenery that More imagines, he allows for agriculture, the manipulation of nature by people:

> They set great store by their gardens. In them they have vineyards, all manner of fruit, herbs, and flowers, so pleasant, so well furnished, and so finely kept, that I never saw thing more fruitful nor better trimmed in any place.[271]

During the fifteenth century, when More was writing, gardens were used more commonly as a metaphor, both in art and manuscripts, rather than a description of a real place.

[271] Thomas More, *More's Utopia and A Dialogue of Comfort*, 61.

[272]

Figure xv: Allegory of the Rule of Duke Albert V of Bavaria.

As shown in the painting above, with the two nymphs (Figure xv), often the gardens depicted were otherworldly, mythical, and bore little resemblance to the informal spaces—the extension of 'home' that we recognise today. The term 'garden' denoted walled-in, park-like spaces often attached to large estates, enjoyed only by the nobility.[273] In knocking down the walls and allowing his citizens a share of the outside space in his Utopia, More was bringing Eden closer to home.

A similar interconnection between plants and artificial husbandry, community gardens, can be seen in Charlotte Perkin's *Herland*, where the entire forest has been cultivated, but without the ugliness associated with industrialisation. Vandyck, one of the explorers, describes this as a 'system of intensive agriculture surpassing anything I ever heard of, with the very forests all reset with fruit- or nut-bearing trees.'[274] The

[272] Joris Hoefnagel, Allegory of the Rule of Duke Albert V of Bavaria, 1579. gouache on parchment, 23.5 × 18.0 cm. Berlin, kupferstichkabinett der staatlichen Museen Berlin, inv. no. kdz 4804. Image © kupferstichkabinett, staatliche Museen Berlin.
[273] Garrett Eckbo and Derek Plint Clifford, "Garden and Landscape Design - Western European," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, January 10, 2019, https://www.britannica.com/art/garden-and-landscape-design.
[274] Gilman, *Herland*, 90.

Victorian idea of the garden, from the period when Perkins Gilman was writing her utopia, was a highly cultivated, formal and symmetrical space, demonstrating power over the environment. While it evoked a Biblical Eden, being pleasing to the eye, it rejected nature in its raw state. The Herlanders were very much in control of their environment, cooperating with nature rather than dominating it, and this was seen initially by the travellers to Herland as a weakness. Nature for them was a challenge to be conquered.

In contrast, in Huxley's accidentally discovered island of Pala we are immediately greeted with exaggerated talking birds and oversized butterflies, 'improbably cerulean or velvet black, so extravagantly eyed and freckled,'[275] and a wild, lush green space. There is harmony between the species and the people are spiritual and peaceful despite being threatened by industrialisation, much more in keeping with the mythical ideas of a fifteenth-century metaphorical Eden.

Conversely, in Le Guin's utopia, *The Dispossessed*, the idea of the garden initially seems to be challenged, as their Eden is a barren and inhospitable moon. Yet the community is flourishing despite the scarce resources and, importantly, it is still described in terms of paradise:

> The Eden of Anarres proved to be dry, cold and windy and the rest of the planet was worse. Life there had not evolved higher than fish and flowerless plants. The air was thin, like Urras' air at a very high altitude. The sun burned, the wind froze, the dust choked.[276]

Le Guin uses Eden as a metaphor for a social rather than natural paradise, but still directly connects with the idea that a simpler past, in harmony with nature, is a preferable place to inhabit.

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[275] Huxley, *Island*, 8.
[276] Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 180.

Each of the novels with Edenic elements has a man, or men, discovering a new way of living on an island or a discovered land, separated from their world and holding a garden of promise. I wanted to utilise these connected concepts in my novel, *The Mune*, creating an alternative world that was both inhospitable enough to challenge my characters, presenting them with a new way of living, but which also yielded them enough resources to comfortably survive with their limited knowledge, and without adding to their trauma.

According to Eckstein and Caruth, 'the essence of the Myth of Eden is that there must come a moment when one will be driven out of this perfect land.'[277] Towards the end of Huxley's novel, *The Island,* the community are driven out of their Eden by progress and the embrace of industrialisation by their leaders. In *Herland*, the travellers must return to their own country in order to share their story, and in Le Guin's *Dispossessed*, Shevek must leave Anarres, his barren Eden, in order to truly appreciate its beauty. The temporary nature of the Edenic paradise is a vital part of the novels I have examined, stemming from the ejection in the original biblical iteration. I decided that if the island in my novel was a true paradise, this would also make it a place my characters would, ultimately, be forced to leave.

Conclusion

My narrative goal for *The Mune* was to create an authentic, alternative history by drawing on what is known about the Victorian period, using aspects of Fijian culture to inform the sense of place, and by thinking about language and how it changes.

The Victorian period informed the inclusion of *Master's Book of Scientific Stories* in the narrative, much like Philip K Dick utilised *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy,*

[277] Rudolf Eckstein and Elaine Caruth, "From Eden to Utopia," 134.

not only to provide another level of speculative history to the narrative but to help the reader to negotiate the differences between known and speculative history. Connected to this, borrowing fictional and non-fictional characters from the Victorian period, like Alan Moore in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, allowed me to populate my imaginary world with characters from the Victorian past, and remain faithful to voices, events, and literature from the period, reframing our understanding of the Victorian period as well as our assumptions about the people who inhabited it.

Language is foregrounded in two ways in *The Mune*. The Zen poetry, told through Star's thoughts, in a similar way to Octavia Butler's protagonist Lauren Oya Olamina, helps the reader to inhabit Star's non-binary character, and see the world as they do, which is different from our own and their peers. Finally, by changing the language of my second-generation characters, albeit to a lesser degree than Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker,* I could allow my island community to evolve into something new through the way they relate to themselves and each other. This would be further strengthened by using genderless pronouns and neutral nouns discussed in chapter one.

Language is shaped by society, and by diverging from a point in history and imagining an alternative path, once closely aligned with my experience of island traditions, I could tailor the language and environs of my community to create a possible non-binary future for them, one which might not be too far out of our reach.

CONCLUSION

I set out to create a non-binary utopia in the tradition of the feminist utopias of the 1970s which imagined what it was like to have equality of gender. Using current research into neuroscience, gender theory, and epigenetics, and with creative input from Matthew De Abaitua, and expertise from my panel comprising Dr Sean Seeger and Professor Katharine Cockin, I ended up writing *The Mune* from the viewpoint that sex and gender is a spectrum, rather than binary in nature.

It wasn't enough to create a blueprint for a blank slate world and use an intrepid explorer to happen upon it, because it was necessary to see the change in action. *The Mune* had to be a modern, energetic utopia, influenced by the characters that inhabited it, with all the flaws and conflict that brings, and with a focus on its construction.

I decided to use an alternative history, which diverged from a point in the Victorian period when unmarried women were considered surplus to requirements. This gave me a cast of characters so oppressed by patriarchy that change would not only be welcome but necessary for their survival. This allowed me to cast off aspects of language, taboos about childbirth and menstruation, and gendered performance that were ingrained in Victorian society. At times I used visceral description, which I felt accurately portrayed events in a community whose language was no longer policed by men.

My intention was not to remove half of the population, to rely on a women-only community as a vehicle for equality, or to create altered, or androgynous bodies for my characters to inhabit, but it was necessary in the first generation to remove men, to allow the women freedom to behave without the constraints imposed on them in their past lives—to give them agency. This allowed me to strip back patriarchy in

language, action and parenting roles, and create a community where the children were unconstrained by gender norms and traditions.

Much of the sense of place in the *The Mune* draws on my early experiences of a childhood spent in Fiji, where I was free to chase toads, half-dressed, and without criticism. Those informative years—the landscape, language and customs—have contributed to my island landscape: the huts, the tunics and the gender-neutral pronouns. The experience of being adopted by a small island community was instrumental in shaping my research, which questioned what it was about the Fijian culture that contributed to this gender freedom I experienced, and how I might replicate it on a wider scale.

As with all works of speculative fiction, *The Mune* holds a mirror up to our society, with characters who display neurodivergence, dysphoria, postnatal depression and have a range of sexualities. I hope I have shown that difference and sensitivity are strengths to be celebrated rather than suppressed, and that with a few changes to the way we communicate, we too could become a more inclusive and equal society.

[34,237]

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APPENDIX I - *Aroma Therapy*

I try to rely on visual cues—using the small glass eye in my door to assess Landlord, the man outside—but it lacks refinement. His toothy smile does not mask his agitation: he sheds tension, a musky scent which seeps from his sebaceous glands and pools onto the cracked linoleum beneath his slippered feet.

Pheromones never lie.

'Yes?' I ask, opening the door a fraction, not enough for him to properly see me, for I have not had time to prepare, despite sensing his malodorous approach long before he pressed the screaming device next to my doorframe.

Landlord shifts his weight onto one stocky leg that peeks out between the flaps of his silken gown. As he alters his position, arrogance leaks from him, a foul meaty scent that turns my stomach. I wish to communicate that his diet does nothing to help his secretions, but I have not yet learned how to offer him my suggestions with only sounds at my disposal.

I resist the impulse to shut the door.

'Rent's due,' he says, folding his arms. 'Do you understand?'

I force my lips to move again, forming sounds Landlord will understand, but the pressure feels alien in my throat, rudimentary. I need my vial of red-nut oil to lubricate my larynx, for we have not evolved solely to speak, and it is painful constantly using my breathing apparatus to produce voice.

'Yes,' I say, closing the door, content for now to let Landlord think I am a foreigner, here to learn the language. I add a stuttered 'thank you', a simple word pairing I have discovered seems to diffuse sentences that bubble with aggression, even though that anger remains as a bitter fog buried in the fine hairs of my scalp antennae.

I pick up the wad of paper notes which I have sealed into a plastic bag—the only thing that masks the scent of desperation in the fibres—because Landlord prefers cash. The suffering is overwhelming when the perfume is released: the angst of every transaction, every drop of sweat, the salt from tears shed with its parting. I am beginning to understand their economic transactions—the hierarchy they prefer that is so different from mine—but I fear I will never be able to understand their lack of cooperation. There is safety in being born to your role, being part of a commune with a shared perfume and knowing your destiny.

One thing I am certain is that Landlord has never taken the time to explore his head under his impossibly thin, chemically scented hair, which hides the ridges that once opened up his mind to sensory possibilities but that are now calcified with disuse. He has no concept of his chemical imprint, as unique as fingerprints and as complex as DNA.

I open the door again and pass the cash to him, careful not to brush his skin and capture any trace of him. The plants and man-made chemicals this species uses, to obliterate their true self, makes them as indecipherable to each other as smeared ink.

‘Don’t be late next month,’ he says, no longer smiling, but his secretion honeys to something sweeter. The allomone he emits suggests he is happier now the transaction is complete yet his words hold a threat, and I am uncertain how to categorise this contradiction in my notes.

I close the door and relocate myself with the purified air, the one luxury I have afforded: a white machine that sits obediently in the corner of the flat—a wafer to cleanse the palate before the next course. As I decontaminate, I think about Landlord, though the word makes no earthly sense, for he is neither a farmer nor a statesman.

Still, I am not here to re-educate his species, merely to learn, to add to our growing knowledge of their language and discover why they devolved so rapidly—their olfactory receptors almost obsolete now speech dominates.

I decide, once refreshed, to follow Landlord to learn the nature of his day, which seems to be erratic and without the order my kind are accustomed to. I have many gaps in my research which must be filled before I am allowed to return home, and I long for the icy air, the companionship of my cocoon and the gentle breeze that carries our messages. It is lonely when you are not understood.

My antennae twitch under the constrictive thick wool hat that conceals them, and I wrap a scarf around my neck for good measure, for this species will not understand my appearance, the secondary orifices on the back of my skull or my glands, permanently bloated with semiochemicals, which have no meaning here.

As I follow Landlord's trail, I find myself feeling sorry for him. He has lost the capacity to communicate scent and the connection to his kind. There is nothing as pungent as memory to bond us to our ancestors.

I take two steps to every one of Landlord's as I follow him through the city, confused at times by its complex cologne. There are no trees in this part of town, no seasonal scent to allow me to track time, nothing I can connect with, so there is no relief from the toxic fragrances that bombard me. This species appears to mask sadness with shiny leather handbags and glass vials of sugar-coated pills, rather than seeking solace in each other.

Landlord's aroma is abnormally pungent, and I think that in his rush to get here with the plastic sleeve of money, he most likely has forgotten to take nourishment. The mark he leaves every time he makes contact with a surface is dense, like morning urine.

He would not fare well in a game of seek.

I continue onwards, as attuned to Landlord's heady mix of hormones as I am to his appearance.

His scent diminishes in oily fingerprints on the handle of a smeared glass door belonging to a low building. The building is made of a grey material they call concrete, an unassuming colour which has an odour-less aroma, allowing my sense to remain sharp and reminding me once again of home.

There is a sign next to the glass door: St Ann's Hospice.

Landlord is inside, gesticulating near a counter not far from where I stand, but he is too agitated to notice me outside. I wait while he swats the air with his hands and raises his voice, which I know does not represent the true meaning of how he feels.

'I have the money for the extra care.'

He is not angry but frightened, and anxiety oozes from every pore. At home, he would be cleansed and would not have to suffer alone. We would manipulate his odour for cure.

Landlord has now left the counter, following a slight woman who smells of hot plastic-scented cloth, which carries the marks of others, and almost depletes her own novel perfume, which is faint but like the kiss of an icy breeze. I recognize that scent: she is a healer, a queen, one that demands loyalty–a mother of many.

The two humans disappear into the metal box they call a lift, and I enter the building. I am distracted from tracking Landlord by a novel scent, and I follow it down a long, bleached corridor that does little to mask the scent of sickness: the musty, fleshy aroma of diseased bodies. There is no relief from the biting, acrid scent that seeps under the doors as I pass, the recycled air only serving to condense it. Why do they enclose their kind in small rooms with little access to the outside, bar a small

opening in the concrete facade? There is a better way. They should be laid out by the open water, take heat from the sun and shade from nature, tended by their kind, not have to breathe in the scent of their own demise, which only adds to their sickness.

One of the doors to the side rooms is open and I take the opportunity to enter it. There is an elder, contained in a bed, seemingly asleep, yet there is something masking their vitality, making their odour stale, metallic and fragile.

I close the door and remove my hat to let my antennae roam unhindered and absorb it. The novel scent I detected in the corridor is at its strongest near the metal receptacle containing a yellow plastic bag. I open the lid to find small vials of a substance called morphine. I have read about this medicine, drawn from red flowers, healing, but yet holding none of the notes of nature.

I will add it to my inventory. It might be useful.

The elder's eyes flicker open before I have a chance to replace my hat.

'Angel?'

The elder is referring to one of the stories their species use to pass on their moral code, from a book they call the Bible. I do not know how to answer the question they pose. A creature born only on paper does not have a scent, therefore cannot exist.

'No,' I say.

There is nothing more I can add, since we have no name for our planet but instead evoke a perfume layered with meaning, which they are incapable of comprehending.

'Those....' The elder waves their hands at my bare scalp but then seems to struggle to find accurate sounds to say more. I absorb the bitter trace of frustration washing in waves from this elder's parched skin.

Olfactory communication would serve this species well when words begin to fail them. From what I have witnessed, their reliance on spoken language traps them in over-heated rooms and resigns them to beige spooned food. *No* is an easy scent to recognise: flat and as bitter as unripe nuts.

I wish I could transport this elder to my world, so they would not need to make up creatures or be scared by what will come to pass. If I have read their aroma correctly, which is difficult to do with the interference of the machine on the wall–which emits a puff of chemical lemon every three minutes–their essence is changing from the sweet oil of life to something earthier. They have come full circle.

They do not understand the honour of being returned to nature.

I move towards the bed. The elder does not fear me, does not secrete alarm, and I am surprised to find their scalp is free of hair and debris. They appear unencumbered except for the plastic tube that is drilled under the skin of their hand, filled with the novel scent.

For once I ignore our rules of engagement and let my antennae connect to the elder's scalp, running them over the ridges that were once open to communication. Perhaps it is not too late for this species to learn? We know that as babies they rely on their olfactory senses to find the nipple and sustenance; it is only when they speak that they regress. This elder is hungry for connection, trapped in their silent world. If my time here has taught me anything, it is that words are not enough.

'Aroma Therapy' is the winner of the Language Evolves speculative fiction competition, judged in the English category by Dr Mary Doria Russell https://correlation-machine.com/ languageevolves/competition/, and in the Welsh category by Gwyneth Lewis.

APPENDIX II - *Maidie's letters home*

17 Russell Street
Melbourne,
Vic -

18/4/26

Dear Grace,

We were very pleased to have your letter with details of birds &c, & to know that you are being kept busy with needlework & knitting. Mrs Vicars sent a few primroses & violets in the last letter, so we imagine Spring has returned with all her glories - and treacherous weather.

Jack & I went for a short walk this afternoon, about 4 miles, but the country is very flat & most uninteresting. The only wild flower we saw was a deep rich pink "field convolvulus, the little "lilies" that run all over the allotments, & cause much bad language.

When we were in Melbourne last week we sat for a few hours in the Public gardens. There are several of them, but those we visited were the "Treasury" & "Alexandra" gardens. The flowers were gorgeous. Of course being near the river they are kept well watered & so look equal to the English flowers.

2/ Some of them were Dahlias, Delphiniums ~~Snapdragon~~ can't spell that so we'll say snapdragons, Love Lies Bleeding, Heliotrope, sunflowers, Chrysanthemums, Carnations, roses, phlox, Pansies, begonias, geraniums (these will flourish in the dryest places), "Soldiers", "Gay-Ladies", Gladiolli, sweet peas, plumbago, Water iris, & periwinkle and we bought some violets, just a bunch of "the very first lady".

By the way, occasional is spelt with an "s" not a "t".

Yes, we saw & smelt the smoke from the Fremantle bush fires; they were having a heat wave when we were there 105.7 in the Shade that day, the air was terrible to breath.

The "learners" as you call them are very insulted — they wish to inform you that they are Trainees! Don't forget.

Jack is going to Melbourne again tomorrow about another job; this sounds more suitable than last weeks, is near Shepparton. I have marked that & Lara, on the map sent to mother. If

3. gives all details, ~~the~~ places are easy to find. We have a map pinned to the living room wall, Jack is constantly scribbling on it.

When in Melbourne, we stayed the night with the Dickson family at their home in the Suburbs. I think I mentioned them to Mother some weeks ago. We had a very jolly time.

I wondered if you would like the crochet pattern & Sunday items enclosed; being a square centre it struck me as being unusual. You can make one one if you like!

Our kitten grows more "Tabby" wicked every day - he is mischievous into every thing, including the Coleardie food dish yesterday, when my back was turned. He is playing with my precious silk stockings as I write this.

H. I think this is all the news at present. I suppose by the time you receive this you will have had the cable. I hope it won't give you all too much of a jolt. Please let Mrs Viccars know, also Christine. Another has her address. We have not heard from Walter yet, inspite of his ½-promise to write every month!

Best love to all,

From Maidie & Jack.

× ×

18/4/26

c/o. Friends Meeting House
20, Russell Street.
Melbourne.
30/3/27.

Dear Grace.

Thanks for yours dated 23/2/27. It came yesterday — not bad travelling this time — they don't get hung up coming to this address.

I'm sending you a few odds & ends of Australian papers by this mail. Duke & Duchess who are due in Melbourne on 21/4/27, Aussie scenery etc. If you don't want to keep them, will you send on to Mr. J. Callister, Lark Hill Cottage, Abbey Lands, Onchan, Isle of Man, Please.

The dolichos seedlings will want planting out, as they are a creeper. They'll make a good covering for an ugly fence, or summer house.

You can send on the seeds if you like. Jacks mother sent homeboy small packets in the Christmas parcel, which I've got stowed away.

2.

The weather is much cooler this last few weeks. Cold at night, but gorgeous bright warm days — still summer frock weather at times, but a fur coat at night. Have had two good days rain, for which people are truly thankful — the first since early October last year.

I'm owing mother another money order, so will put on a little extra for crochet cotton. Shall soon want that table cover finish. Am going to see his wife or his watch dog tomorrow, if they still obey and won't be ready, shall ask Jack & come down & we'll go somewhere else. Don't join the patterns.

I find myself adopting into the slovenly Australian mode of speech not in speaking but in writing. They leave out such words as "to" "on". "I'm going Thursday" instead of "on Thursday". It sounds horrid & I'm fighting all I can & prevent the habit getting a hold. A girl in the hairdressers the other day said she knew I was a "new chum" but

3-

couldn't trace my accent. I "sounded like a well-educated, travelled Australian" apparently the highest compliment she should pay! I replied that I was a normally well-educated English woman, & hoped & remain so.

And still the blessed letters remain unanswered. I've cleared off some, but there are still half a dozen "duty" ones (mostly to Jacks Aunts & uncles let me whisper) still hanging around. Ugh!

1931, not 1930— we didn't arrive here until 1926!

Hurrah for the holidays! I've got a couple of days off, & am going camping this week-end. 9 young friends are going & the amount of walking & carrying of bedding I believe I told you on my last letter. As my breeches are stored, I've had to make some more, using the drill I bought for the purpose just before we sailed. Much the same as before, but no pockets & only one placket. & although I say it as

XI. 7. 42.

Dear Jim, Many thanks for your letter of last June; taki.. your remarks via Grace as mild admonishment, you are hereby informed that one does not live in Australia, among country people, for 20 years without picking up some of their slang. Blast is a very ordinary word, especially when Jack asks me what the H----, and tells me to go there, quite without meaning any harm. Just be very glad I don't use the great Australian adjective"bloody"or the equally infamous"bastard". They're used here as ordinary conversation. I am returning your air-mail letter by surface mail, with a set of the new Peace stamps attached; they were available to-day for the first time. There is also Derek's letter with one new stamp on it, which I thought he might be glad to have, and four of Grace's letters which I promised to send her. The names are written on in pencil so that they will be easy to remove. Tell Derek I'll send the rest of the set later, if they are not enclosed with the others, just didn't have the cash to spare today when buying, as there was a food parcel for Jack's cousin to be paid for. Wish the postage wasn't such an item. Last week I sent a parcel each to Mother and Grace, this week to Mother and one for Annie, also one each to Will Viccars and the cousin, so am afraid you'll all have the wait a few more weeks for the next ones. I sent quite a lot of stamps of sorts round about Christmas time - perhaps they've arrived by now, also a set of used Gloucester stamps for you in the last parcel to home; it's in the wrapping and I pasted the paper down so that the tiny packet wouldn't slip out, so watch for it when untying. Have you ever heard of Osteopathy? It's a somewhat expensive form of treatment, but is just the thing for what you call the"Dawes" ill-health. It won't be easy to live on their vegetarian diet until food rationing is removed, but it's a marvelous rejuvenator and health restorer, and consists chiefly of manipulation of the nervous system as it rises in the spine, and common sense. I've been under them now for 9 years and it's indeniable that only [illegible]se of their treatment I've been able to do a man's work on [illegible]rm. I'll try to remember to ask my doctor for an address [illegible]r part of the London circle; I know there are one or two in [illegible]ity and in Essex. I reckon I'm going to live to 90! Hope [illegible]ou. If you can get started with them, give it a 3-months trial; perhaps medical expenses are deductable from income tax returns, they are here. Yes, I expect Mother does begin to show her age, she hasn't has an easy life by any means. As I told her in my letter last week, as soon as I feel there is sufficient cash saved I will book my passage, but it is taking something like 2 years to get the already booked passages away. If airway travel is cheap by then I may come that way and return by boat. I'm saying "when" I go to England, and Jack is saying "if" you go, which is what I myself was saying not so very long ago; he doesn't get told everything! It doesn't sound as if either of the boys is thinking of inheriting Uncle Jack's farm does it? It needs head and hands for the job, but it's a great life if you can stick it. Tell them to wait until they hear me talk black-feller; I can't but that doesn't matter. I hope by now you've got your own house back and the family with you again. Yes, it's very nice to have the worst of warfare finished, but oh! dear, what a mess to clear up in Europe and Asia. We spare what we can to help the food situation, but it's such a drop in the ocean when one thinks of all that is needed. Our thanks are very deep that all our kith and kin on both sides as far as we know, have pulled through safely. Jack had several young second cousins involved in airforce operations but they are all well. You'll have to excuse my typrwriter, it spells very badly today. Actually it's market and shopping day, which means on the go from ab-out 5.30 a.m. getting back round 3 p.m. and no afternoon rest; I'm using the time to write this, but shall have to go and give Jack a hand in a few minutes,after putting a meal on to cook. Our rationing of some things is much the same as yours.

2.

2-oz.tea, 8-oz. sugar, restored to 1-lb last week, 6-oz butter, no margarine available except some few shops in Melbourne, but not rationed; we see it about twice a year when one of us goes to the City. Lard and dripping in short supply but not rationed. Meat varies according to cut, 1½-lbs steak up to 2½ - 3-lbs cheapest cuts; veal and pork non-exsistent; sausages, tripe, liver, brains, tongues, trotters and cheeks, kidneys, all coupon free but in low supply; poultry and rabbits coupon free but very expensive although fairly plentiful, chicken - roasting- 2/3 per lb fixed price and turkeys 2/8 per lb. Black market in these is very active and costs much more, also meat is available on the black market, at a price. Fruit and vegetables are about 4 times the price, and more, that pre-war. but dried fruits are fairly plentiful at fixed prices, at least, raisins, currants and sultanas are, some dried apples, but no peaches, pears or apricots, and prunes only for children on a coupon basis. Condensed and powdered milk and tinned fruits are coming back slowly since Christmas, but all that, and also tinned tomatoes in all forms have been used exclusively for the services since 1941. What a lot about food, but it was just to show that even in this land of plenty we have had to do without quite a lot. Jack and I are lucky to have a flourishing orchard, lots of milk and all the eggs we need, and I'm very good with jams and fruit bottling, so that winter is as easy as summer to cater for. It's the folks who live in cities or flats that suffer so much, tho' they are much better off for clothing than country people. Most woolen underwear and some rayon undies are now coupon free, also all socks and stock- but range is very limited. Cotton goods heavily rationed and . Now I must stop. With love to you all from Maidie & Jack.

First Fold Here

BY AIR MAIL

If anything is enclosed, letter will be sent by ordinary mail.

AIRLETTER

Mr. James F. Dawes,
25, Coston's Avenue,
Greenford,
Middlesex,
ENGLAND.

22.2.1946. from Mrs. E.M.Viccars,
Sale, Victoria,
Australia.

Third Fold Here

Second Fold here

APPENDIX III - *Edits*

Opening of The Mune

1863

MOLLY

The oil lamps flicker, damp from the rain pressing through the splits in the hull. The storm rages outside, whipping the ship from side to side, drowning out the muttered prayers and the isolated cries of contractions.

Turning over in her wooden bunk, Molly sucks in a breath of salt air. It's hot and close in the hold with the doors bolted, and the stench of sickness hangs in the air like a shroud. Pulling her new-born tight to her chest, Molly tucks the coarse woollen blanket around them. The women have learnt to lie down when the wind lashes and the wood starts to creak. For those on the top bunks, there is barely a hand's breadth between their swollen stomachs and the underside of the splintered deck, but it makes it easier to anchor themselves when the ship rocks. Molly strokes her baby's head as it suckles, safe for now, pressed against her bosom. There is nothing she can do to help the labouring women until the storm subsides.

Finally, the rocking ceases, replaced by the heavy clunk of boots above and notes of the mandolin. The sea is calm, but the air is close and fetid.

The hold doors are unlocked, thrown wide open as if screaming. It's night-time, but the full moon brightens the black sky, backlighting the men on the deck like they are on a stage. They toss hessian sacks of food down the stairs to their audience, not caring when it spills out onto the dirty floor.

It's what Molly has come to expect: dried biscuit, salt meat and sauerkraut. The food is the same as when they began this voyage two months ago, but the men have changed. They now cover their faces with strips of sacking, are silent and look more

comfortable carrying whips than news. Perhaps it is the floor they fear; awash with afterbirth.

Once the doors are re-bolted, Molly throws off the blanket, winds tight the straps she has fashioned from another's stained cotton petticoat to secure the baby to her, and climbs down from her bunk. Her legs shake with the effort and the pain, where her baby split her, two days ago. Clutching on to the bed post for support, she tells herself it is a small price to pay. They are both alive and the bunks snug against the deck walls are better than the hammocks strung between them, which keep accord with the movements of the ship. Every inch of space in the hold has been filled and, even though there are fewer women than before, there's barely enough room to move.

Molly squeezes past the silent girl, who's doubled over and shivering. She sees discomfort in her angular face, her pain is coming in waves, washing over her tight expression, before receding again.

'Let me help you,' Molly says, clutching the girl's bony arm as she stumbles, tangled in the thick ropes that secure the hammocks.

She guides the girl to the bunk nearest the doors, kept free for labouring and lit by lamps. At least here, by the steps, it is free of piss and blood because anywhere the men tread, they flood first with sea water.

The girl looks down in horror as warm water rushes down her legs, pooling on to the floor. Her thin leather shoes, which have cut into her feet, are already salt-stained and now sticky with mucus.

'Breathe,' Molly says, helping the girl to lower herself onto the bottom level of the narrow bed. She avoids looking at the shackles, rusting and nailed to the boards behind the bunk. Molly's seen other evidence of people here before them; marks scratched into posts, wooden slats bowed and shiny from wear.

Time passes in gasped breaths as Molly watches the girl bite down hard on the rag she has folded, to stop her damaging her lips, but even then, she doesn't offer up a word. Molly has seen this before, in the Asylum - women who have forgotten how to speak.

When it's time, Molly plunges her hands into the bucket of icy-cold saltwater, the one allowance the men have made. She feels the girl stiffen as she raises her thick skirts.

'Baby's nearly here,' Molly encourages, worried by the girl's small size and the baby's head, which already fills its exit.

Molly needs towels, a razor, hot water, chloroform and Lysol, like they had in the lying-in room in the Asylum, but there's nothing here except buckets of sea and cotton rags harvested from the petticoats of dead women.

The baby is silent, like the girl, when it comes, bunched up as if it has been hiding. And then it stretches out its long dark limbs and Molly, tight with hope, relaxes as the baby screams. It's slippery and warm, snaking up the girl's chest as if it already knows what it needs from her.

'Lie flat for as long as you can,' Molly says, concerned, for the young girl is never still, always pacing.

She cuts the cord, separating mother and child with a serrated blade that the men have used to gut fish, and knots with deft hands.

There's no rest for Molly as she moves around the hold, her hands smoothing and shaping futures. Harriet, the other woman who helped deliver the babies, died in the first month of the voyage. Unable to stop vomiting, shrieking in demonic rage, her face

was sunken and grey, and salt-water only made it worse. Harriet lost her child in one blood-filled scream, and hours later jumped overboard.

That's when the men stopped them from taking exercise on the deck and locked the hold. Molly misses seeing the horizon, at least it felt like they were going somewhere, but she understood Harriet's predicament. There have been times when Molly has hailed death as her only chance for deliverance.

'Betty,' Molly calls.

Betty, barely more than a child herself, certainly no more than three-and-ten, is learning birthing from Molly but, now Betty's baby has dropped, she's struggling to bend, so there's little she can do to help. It's a messy job and it takes strength and certainty to deliver a child.

'Hold the lamp,' Molly directs, focusing back on Vera, and ignoring the pain in her own legs, which are swollen from standing for so long.

Vera's been in labour since the storm earlier and is past screaming now, white with exhaustion in the hammock. The canvas underneath her is saturated and Molly's hands are slippery with her blood, which is emptying out of Vera's body like water from a pump. She cannot feel the baby's head because the baby is sideways on, not in the right position to enter the world and Vera's pelvis is tight. Molly tries to twist the baby, but her movements are constricted by the hammock and the birth canal. It's all in vain.

Molly starts the difficult journey back to her bunk; her own baby is screaming, searching for sustenance. Betty refuses to move, spending what's left of the night standing by Vera's hammock, at her side, praying. Vera is dead before morning.

'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.'

'You must rest,' Molly tells Betty. Betty's voice is hoarse with pleading.

‘Leave the bit o’ jam be,’ a woman called Sarah snipes, as Molly passes her. ‘Who made yer queen?’

Women like Sarah are best ignored.

When the doors of the hold bang open again, a rush of sunlight follows two men in. Their heavy boots thud on the wooden stairs and they kick aside the metal buckets, which clatter and release the putrid scent of excrement. Molly has to prise Betty’s white fingers from the dead woman’s hands. There’s nothing the women can do but watch silently, as the men drag Vera’s body from the bunk: manhandling her, a carcass for the sharks. At the beginning of the voyage their tongues were loose, but they’ve learned, broken by the whip, that even in here they are in servitude.

There are no words of comfort offered, or liturgy. Just the lingering scent of death and a dull splash.

The door to the deck closes, smothering out the sunlight and it’s quiet again, except for the cries of the new-borns, and the agony of mothers bringing forth new life.

Molly is exhausted but cannot sleep. The small handful of rations is barely enough to keep her milk flowing and the babies in the hold scream red-faced and relentlessly. The storms are picking up again and as she lies on her bunk, Molly can feel the sea swelling up underneath, ready to toss them around at will. She has no control over what happens here, just like in the Asylum. The only difference is she chose this; it was her decision to board the ship and whatever happens is her fault. A surplus woman, she signed her own life away.

She puts the tip of her little finger in her baby’s mouth to calm it down. It suckles and is content until Betty starts screaming in the bunk beneath her.

Molly climbs down after strapping her baby to the bedpost, careful not to tread on Betty who's in the birthing position already, flat on her back. She should be nearer the hold doors.

'Let me look,' Molly says. 'While there's still enough light.'

'I can do it,' Betty says, grimacing.

Betty turns her head away as Molly feels for the baby. Something isn't right. She needs lard to grease the passage, help the baby out but she has nothing here to use. They were supposed to have already arrived in the New World.

'You must push,' she tells Betty.

'I can not.'

Molly will have to pull the baby out. She coats her hands in sea water and forces her hand up the birth canal. She can feel the baby and the cord wrapped around its neck. It's too late.

Pastiche of the Blazing World

MASTER'S SCIENTIFIC STORIES

Blazing Island

A foreign merchant fell hopelessly in love with a young woman and executed a design to steal her away. When she was gathering shells, as she oft did not far from her home, and her servants had turned away, the merchant forced her away in a small vessel, not unlike a packet-boat, manned with some few mariners. He had little hope of obtaining her by other means, so beneath her was he in wealth and birth.

Heaven, frowning at his theft of such a virtuous Lady, raised such a violent storm that the vessel was carried swift as an arrow to the tropics. In a short time they reached a sea of such a hue of green as never witnessed before, where with giant hands, the wind forced the vessel between great monuments of rock rising from the sea.

The men on the vessel were tossed overboard but the virtuous Lady, by the light of her beauty, the unsalted freshness of her youth and the protection of the gods, survived the tremulous journey, as if guided by a celestial pilot to a different world.

Stricken with fear, the Lady found herself in a strange place, washed up upon burning black sand of the sharpest quality. There beside her were beasts, as upright as men, speaking a language the Lady did not comprehend, like nothing uttered in the world from whence she came. The new world she had entered was unable to be perceived by ordinary optics, so far was it removed from our own.

The beasts exercised no cruelty but, instead, lifted the Lady in their flat, fin-like hands, showing her unexpected civility and kindness and transporting her to a spacious cave. They gave her victuals to consume but, seeing the Lady was not built

for such strange fare, or the burning climate, they resolved to carry her elsewhere, to a part of the island with a cooler, less smoky temper.

After much discourse, they transported the Lady in a fine underwater-carriage, with the intention of presenting her to their Emperor who resided on another part of the isle.

When they rose from the green depths, the Lady at first could perceive nothing but a high rock, greyish in tone, which seemed to touch the skies. Further on was a cove leading to the part of the island where the Emperor did indeed reside, with a milder temper and much shade. The interior appeared healthful; as rich and fruitful as nature could afford. The Emperor's residence was a curious building of grass and stone, the largest of several buildings of a similar material and of a round, regal size.

There were men-like creatures with beaks and feathers of myriad colours, and others with scales, their rumps carried beneath a tail, and some with six legs, their bodies black and glossy, but all were upright and appeared in perfect harmony. It was conferred that all species on the isle lived in peace and content; not acquainted with wars or home-bred rebellions.

On acquaintance, the Emperor conceived the Lady to be some goddess, such was her beauty and he offered to worship her. She confided that, even though she was not of this world, she was indeed mortal. The Emperor rejoiced by making her his wife and granting her absolute power to rule the island as she pleased.

The governors of the isle were all princes of imperial blood, made eunuchs for the purpose, and the ordinary men, not born of the imperial race, were easily distinguished, having skin of varying hues: not white but scarlet, orange and a deep blue.

The Empress soon discovered that each species (for it is not known exactly what the man-like, upright creatures on the island were) had their own profession, that which was just and proper for their innate talents. The beast-men studied the nature of the sea and all that dwelt within it, the bird-men were astronomers, the ant-men architects of the earth and the scaly-tailed-men faithful to the study of nature and philosophy.

But before all things, the Empress desired to be well informed about the island and she commanded her subjects to enlighten her, as befitted their duty.

The bird-men offered that the sun was a solid rock, of a vast yellowish bigness but the moon, of a whitish hue which although looked faint in the presence of the sun, was a shining body of equal celestial excellence. The Empress (our Lady) asked the bird-men why the sun and moon did often appear in different postures, sometimes waxing, sometimes waning. They explained that in equal measure, the two celestial bodies marked the passing of days.

Concerning the constant heat of the sun, the scaly-tailed-men explained that with fire being a destroyer of all things, the sun would, in a short time, consume itself. This was why ageing on Blazing Island appeared hastened, compared with the Empress's own world, moving at a fiery pace, with it being so near the burning face of the sun-stone itself. The Empress asked how it came to be, then, that the Emperor appeared so young, yet the population aged so fast?

The ant-men told of rocks which contained rare sands which after one hundred years transformed to a red oil. A small amount might be used for distempers but, when consumed in quantity, a spate of illness occurred, causing vomiting of phlegm and humours and, after several weeks, ended in purging by stool. After the loss of teeth, nails and hair, the body then broke out into a thick scab as if burned, which after four

months, split first along the back, peeling off in a single piece like shed skin and the Emperor was reborn.

The Empress had heard rumour of a famous chemist, in her own world, discovering a liquor reported to burn disease from the body and mind, but she had never heard of a medicine that renewed.

As for the Stars, the bird-men explained, they were not akin to the sun and moon, being not of a solid disposition but instead living gaseous creatures, who roamed the sky.

Lastly, the Empress enquired about the spring water, sourced only in the deepest recesses of caves. The beast-men explained that the heat within the bowels of the island distilled the deepest parts of the sea, which then bubbled to the surface in those rocks without obstruction, causing springs and fountains of the purest liquid.

When there was no talk of the divine truth in this great discourse, the Empress grew troubled. How could such a wise and knowing people have so many varying religious beliefs? She resolved to convert her new subjects to her own faith and discovered, in a short time, a very earnest and fervent following. It was only when both church and state was in a well-ordered and stable condition, that her thoughts returned upon the condition of the world from whence she came. She was desirous to witness it again but could not think of a way to do so except through the help of immaterial spirits. It was certainly the spirit world, that which clothed itself in air but for the most part could form any shape it pleased, that had steered her here.

The Empress made it her undertaking to discover whether any immaterial spirits had been perceived dwelling in this world; in the earth, the water or in the sky. After lengthy consultation it transpired that the bird-men perceived such creatures of

which she spoke, lodged in vehicles of the island air and considered it might be possible for the Empress to conference with them.

The spirits presented themselves to the Empress, and were made of the purest and finest degree of matter. During their discourse she learned that a soul can leave a living body and wander abroad to many more worlds than the two she had resided in.

The Empress would require a vehicle from her old world but it need not be a body, a gantlet of flesh, for vehicles were of several forms, figures and degrees of substances.

The Empress, under instruction, chose the Duchess of York, who though not the most eloquent, witty or ingenious of people was a plain and rational woman.

The soul of the Duchess was brought before the Empress who saluted her with a Spiritual kiss. The Duchess travelled for many months between the new world and her native world, bringing forth news of civil war and hunger, and such an intimate friendship flourished between them, they might be described as Platonick lovers.

During one visit, the Empress found her friend to be very melancholick. When conferring she discovered the Duchess had ambition to have Fame and Fortune, to be an Empress of a World. The Empress desired her new friend to have the opportune to reach her ambition.

The immaterial spirits conferred that this could not be achieved in the Terrestrial world but together the two souls, bound in friendship, might voyage, inventing, and building new celestial worlds to fit their desires, limited only by their imagination.

After much discovery and the invention of a world so well ordered and wisely governed, that it cannot possibly be expressed by words, the Duchess began to miss her husband.

The Empress grew bored with the perfection of Blazing Island where all people lived in peace and religion and governance was tranquil and uniform under her rule. She was desirous to see the old world and observe the deceiving policy and malicious factions at play of which the Duchess spoke.

The Empress requested a loyal spirit to inhabit her body in the absence of her soul, so the Emperor would not become wise to her journeying, and against all attempted diversion from the Duchess, the two journeyed to the old world, as light as thoughts, using air as their vehicle, unseen or heard by corporal beings.

After visiting the royal courts, they journeyed to Yorkshire, where the Duchess became saddened by the Duke's loss of fortune during the wars played out in her absence, his terribly melancholick demeanour and his inability to witness her presence at his side. Together both souls entered the Duke's vessel. The Duke, being a witty and contemplative soul, afforded delight and pleasure to both the Duchess and the Empress's souls residing within himself, until such a time as the Empress was visited by an immaterial spirit, reporting the Emperor had grown sad at her spiritual absence. The Emperor believed an illness of the mind had befallen the Empress, for the loyal spirit did not challenge the Emperor's curious nature, and he was bereft.

It was time for the Empress to return home, away from war and inequality, and reunite with her husband and her own body on Blazing Island. She had little doubt she would return to the old world presently, in what form she was as yet uncertain, for there was much to be conquered.

Pastiche of Three Hundred Years Hence

MASTER'S SCIENTIFIC STORIES

Three centuries beneath

Edmund Barrington was so stiff of body that he moved with difficulty when he awoke. He was still holding the fine cameo trinket betwixt his fingers, and his top hat was proud on the table next to him. On turning his head, Edmund was full of surprise to find a stranger standing looking at him with wonder and pity. Perhaps it was the coachman, relieved of his reins.

'Has my carriage departed?' said Edmund, confused and still with the heaviness of sleep. 'What o'clock is it?'

The gentleman in the unusually cut cloth jacket, hastened forth to steady Edmund and assist him to rise. This same gentleman led him to the door, where Edmund's perplexity of mind seemed to escalate rather than diminish. Absent was the valley that he remembered, sloping in grandeur outside the stone house, and the distant waters of the River Derwent seemed much narrower than he recalled. On the opposite shore, without the need for his horn-framed eyeglasses, he witnessed a populous town of towers illuminated by the diminishing rays of the sun.

'I am in a strange confusion. Is my intellect leaving me?' exclaimed Edmund.

'You are not dreaming sir: a strange fate is yours,' said the gentleman. 'You must come with me.'

'What is your name?' said the astonished Edmund, feeling chilled and not without fear.

'Henry Barrington,' said the gentleman, doffing his wide brimmed hat. 'I feel confident your family name is the same. We must ensure your comfort and fortitude forthwith, and then I will tell you of the strange events which have occurred.'

Edmund suffered himself to be helped from the house by the strange Master Henry Barrington. As he proceeded, he saw what appeared to be his own house buried by a mass of soil and other earthly debris. The rise on which his house had been built was flattened, covered now by oak trees of a gigantic size and which appeared aged, as if the house had never existed on top of it.

Henry Barrington led him to an imposing building, which was low in structure, one storey with windows of a roundish shape. There were no sweeping stairs, vestibule or main hall which one would expect but a large open space unencumbered by doors. After Edmund was persuaded to take refreshments, Henry began his story.

'Do not be dismayed when I tell you, Edmund, that instead of the 22th April 1834, it is now the 22th April 2034. Early this morning, several of us were at work, cutting a road through the land with our new machines when we discovered part of a roof beneath the hardened earth. There was a room, entombed by the debris and within it, a young man, yourself, asleep as if history and events had passed you by. It was with great shock when I perceived you open your eyes.'

'How was my flesh not wasted? How did I not expire with hunger?' Edmund exclaimed, unrestrained in his horror.

'It is rumoured,' Henry continued, 'that there was an earthquake, a trembling of the land in these parts, which resulted in several houses being buried. This is the first of such we have uncovered. There is little on record from those times, but I have observed a letter, in the "Book of Past Sorrows", directed to a William Barrington, about that time.

'My son?' Edmund declared a quiver in his legs.

Henry began to annunciate:

'*Fourth month, 26th, 1834. My dear son-*

On Saturday, but four days ago, your dear father, Edmund Barrington took a tender farewell of us, in such an earnest manner that one might say it was foretelling of evil. He exclaimed he wished to pack a few last items for his travels to London. Being romantic of character, he wanted to collect a cameo, so he might hold me close to his heart while we were parted. He was to proceed to London in a carriage to conduct the last of his business there.

It was the first time my dear husband and I had been parted and I recall standing silently, weeping, observing him walk purposefully towards our stone house, as if he had not a care in this world. I had not long been raised from my bed after lying-in with you, my dearest son.

At that moment there was a tremble of the earth so violent that I was thrown to the ground. You were in my arms, dear Henry, and I do not know how we survived that day except God must have been watching over us.

To my affrighted soul, the house, which had stood so proudly on the rise, seemed to disappear, swallowed like Jonah in the whale. When the shaking subsided, there was nothing of the house that had stood there before. The building and all its valuable contents lay buried deep below the immense mass of earth.

My beloved Edmund was gone to us. What did I care for prized parchment or the gold coins in his valise when your dear father had been taken?

I offered up prayers that Edmund might, by some miracle, be alive but only the body of his faithful hound, Archie has been uncovered.

Edmund was superior to many men, excellent in heart and spirit, and upright in his ways. I trust his spirit rests with God in his great house.

I hope this letter serves as a memory for you, my dear son, William, of a father you will never know.

Your mother,

LADY HARRIET BARRINGTON

It need not be said that Edmund was plunged into despondency on hearing these words, a profound grief so great that his whole body shook. He would never witness his family again.

'Proceed,' said he, after a few moments spent in bitter torment.

'Within this same "Book of Past Sorrows", is a passage which suggests the dear Lady Harriet fell into a hysteria of which she died, in an asylum, some years later. It appears she was of the belief that you sir, were buried alive.'

'I can listen no longer,' Edmund said, once more with a heavy heart.

'It is much to absorb,' Henry said, turning to stoke the fire. He made as if to depart.

'Wait,' said Edmund. 'My son, William, pray tell of him.'

'According to the "Book of Past Sorrows", he lived a long and prosperous life, cared for by your father. I am his great, great, great, great, great, great, grandson.

Thus, I feel a great sympathy for you and shall make it my business to assist you in forgetting your woes.'

We will ignore the passing of the next three months of our hero's existence, such was his sorrow and confusion after three hundred years underground, but Henry Barrington was a determined young man and devoted himself to the lifting of Edmund's spirits. Eventually there came a time when Henry felt it was necessary to divert Edmund's mind from his grief.

'You must feel a desire to see the changes man has accomplished over the last three hundred years?' said he to Edmund. 'Perhaps we could travel together for one week. We will take the car.'

The car was a strange vehicle, powered neither by air, steam, gas nor man but by some sort of internal mechanism which Edmund could not fathom.

'Are there no horses?' asked Edmund.

'We do not use animals for labour or for any other brutal pastime,' Henry explained.

'I have not seen any dogs,' said Edmund, thinking of his faithful hound, Archie, loyal until the last.

'There are no dogs. The "Book of Past Sorrow" records a terrible disease after the earthquake which killed them all. It is better that way. It is better in a lot of ways since women have been unshackled.'

'Unshackled?' Edmund was perplexed.

'Women are enlightened now, educated. They are our trustees. The "Book of Past Sorrows" has recorded no wars or any other barbarity since that time, certainly

no bloodthirsty savage murdering and no flogging of poor innocents in schools, and of course no drunkards since liquor was prohibited,' exclaimed Henry.

Edmund was not sure he was entirely in favour of all of these changes.

The passage in the vehicle was smooth, considerably faster than any carriage of Edmund's time and the roads were flat and wide. There was no danger in the journey, no cart to overturn and no men targeting them for their evil and avaricious ends. The fields looked lush and productive.

'Our new machinery does all the work in half the time,' exclaimed Edmund as they passed at some considerable speed. 'And you will not recognise the houses since the rebuilding after the great fires.'

They came upon a town called Stamford, of which Edmund was previously acquainted. Gone was the outside market and the women bawling through the streets, selling their wares. Instead, a large two-storied building, entirely proofed from fire, housed the many necessary items. Women dressed modestly, their hair under cloth caps, and helped only those who passed by and in soft tones. Gone were the uncouth, dirty, sluttish street sellers of Edmund's day, forcing their wares on you. There were no unpleasant sights in the market, no rotting vegetables, no bloodstained hands or slaughtered animals on makeshift wooden carts, or impure smells. And it was all sold at the same affordable price to all. Their regulations appeared excellent.

Henry purchased some fruit; ripe, red luscious strawberries of a consistency Edmund recognised from his own garden. At least nature never changes, he thought.

'Where does all the food come from?' Edmund asked, noting some unusual coloured specimens.

'India, China and France. All our trade is free, there is no hardship for anyone, and our boats are powered in the same way as our other vehicles, no masts or sails

of course. There are no monopolies of water or road.' Henry winked, a rather lewd gesture in Edmund's opinion. 'And it was all invented by a lady.'

In Edmund's day there was a great unwillingness to admit the claims of women and he could not fathom this change.

'What about the clergy?' Edmund asked remembering how hard the clergy had to work just to survive, begging for alms. They were moved from pasture to pasture and never properly recognised for their contribution.

'They are the centre of our community,' Henry explained. 'Women have taught us to revere religion. Every village has its own pastor and we strive to keep them comfortable and indulge them. They tend gardens and look after the poor.'

'How are funds raised to support them?' Edmund asked.

'There is a direct tax based on the value of a poor man's labour and a rich man's property,' Henry explained.

Edmund suffered a moment of incredulity. Such a thing would never have been allowed in his day.

'What happened to the coloureds?' Edmund asked, for he had not seen any men of colour on their travels.

'Not only do women and men have the same privileges now, there are no more slaves,' Henry explained. 'The whole thing was arranged satisfactorily with their relocation to the New World. They did not want to remain here as you might imagine and neither did they wish to disrupt their lineage by intermarrying. I understand they are a proud, prosperous and peaceful people, who trade all over the world.'

'I am ready to return now,' Edmund confessed.

Although this new world appeared superior to his own in many ways, his grief was returning; a heavy burden. He had lost not only his dear family but a way of life he understood.

Edmund was heavy of heart when they arrived back at Henry Harrington's one storey house. He felt an unrelenting desire to return to his own stone property, buried under the ground, if only to make sense of this new world he found himself in.

Settling back in his armchair, in his house, his top hat still proud on his table, he felt the weight of his tiredness bearing down. So much had changed: the Negro emancipation; the improved conditions of Clergymen; the equality of women; the end of the barbarity of war and the new machinery, which meant no man was in danger of injury.

Feeling feverish, Edmund turned to hear someone enter the room, he assumed at first it was Henry. The young man did worry so. Instead, a woman's voice called him.

'Edmund. Dearest Edmund. Your carriage is waiting.'

His wife, Harriet, stood before him, resplendent in her cotton dress and in her arms, dear little Henry swaddled in cloth.

Oh, dear God. Was it all a dream?