Utopias of/f Language in Contemporary Feminist Literary Dystopias*

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"... language is power, life, and the instrument of culture, the instrument of domination and liberation."
—Carter, 77.

I. Introduction:
FUTURISTIC DYSTOPIAS ARE STORIES ABOUT LANGUAGE. This is true, firstly, in the sense that ultimately all fictional works are narcissistic and metafictional, i.e., besides telling a 'surface' tale, they also tell the story of their own existence (their possibility and limitations) as cultural artefacts concretized via the specific medium of language. Secondly, because all speculative fictions are characterized by a special type of metafictionality, being 'more' metafictional than other (realistic, or mimetic) literary forms. They overtly expose their metafictional quality by having a distinct relationship with language itself and with their 'non-existent' referents. Thirdly, this century's (male) canonical dystopias thematize issues related to language, which often functions as a source of conflict in the narrative. Linguistic control and the enforcement of strict linguistic normativity symbolically stand in for other forms of social (ideological, political, institutional) control.

Contemporary feminist dystopias overtly thematize the linguistic construction of gender domination by telling stories about language as instrument of both (men's) domination and (women's) liberation. The silencing of women by men has surfaced in a number of ways: strongly regulated forms of address and turn-taking; enforced use of formulaic or contrived speech (sometimes reaching the extreme circumstance in which the female protagonist has to communicate by following a script); prohibition of access to public speech, reading and/or writing, specially creative writing; denial of representation in political forums; or, more effectively, the cutting out of women's tongues. All these expose the interweaving of linguistic manipulation and dominant patriarchal ideologies in the dystopic spaces, while at the same time giving the texts their feminist ideological hues, as these elements can be interpreted as (sometimes crude and straightforward) metaphors for the historical silencing of women.

Besides featuring as an instrument enforcing a dystopic male order, language has a liberating potential in the feminist dystopias. I am referring to
the utopian response to the imposed (male) norm, evidenced by the women characters’ dissatisfaction with their status in relation to language. In a counter move to restrictive practices, they engage in a series of subversive actions of resistance that range from the strategic “masquerading” of their femininity by means of appropriate ‘feminine’ speech to camouflaged singing and message-networking, from the process of re-naming to storytelling and creative writing, from the reinvestment of a sign with a new meaning to the creation of a whole alternative system of meanings. In an extremist response, one of the utopian strategies observed in the texts consists in the radical escape from (verbal) language itself, a move which is paradoxically rendered by means of storytelling, i.e., of verbal language. Women’s resistance is observed in these fictions in terms of the strategies they develop to evade a dystopic linguistic order by means of the construction of what I have termed utopias of and off language (Cavalcanti, 1999).

My main argument is that in the feminist dystopias, dystopic and utopic dispositions (represented by male and female principles) confront each other, and that this confrontation is often enacted by means of linguistic struggle. I will investigate different, at times contradictory, facets of (a-)linguistic utopianisms in four narratives published in the 1980’s: Lisa Tuttle’s “The Cure” (1984), Suzette Elgin’s Native Tongue (1984) and its sequel The Judas Rose (1987),⁵ and Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale (1985).⁶ Before proceeding to the analysis of each of the texts, I will explain the theoretical approach that will help to guide my readings.

Linguistic innovations in speculative feminist fictions have previously attracted the interest of commentators from the areas of linguistics and literary criticism. Speaking from within the realm of academic linguistics, Deborah Cameron discusses their role in terms of a critique of and discontent with language: “It is interesting to note that in feminist utopias . . . there is often some attempt at a modified language. A female utopia could not be content with what we have now” (1990, 13). And explaining the principles orienting the compilation of a feminist dictionary, Cheris Kramarae and Paula Treichler state that it “draws words and definitions from such utopian works as Monique Wittig’s and Sande Zieg’s Lesbian Peoples: Material for a Dictionary (1976), Sally Miller Gearhart’s Wanderground and Suzette Haden Elgin’s Native Tongue (1984), thereby suggesting not only what is or has been but what might be” (4–5).⁷ From the perspective of feminist linguists, thus, the stories contribute to a critique of “what we have now”, as well as projecting a utopian “what might be”. In the feminist dystopias, the critique of the present is manifested in the stylization and exaggeration of “what we have now”, and the women’s move against the status quo is enacted as a utopian counterpart. Because they portray a misogynist society, they incorporate the linguistic struggles, rather than showing ‘ready-made’ (re)constructed language (as is usually the case in the eutopian modes), a factor which makes the subgenre specially relevant for feminist readers/readings.

The response from literary commentators has been less welcoming. And while they stress the important role played by linguistic innovation in
contemporary feminist speculative writings, they also show a degree of frustration with what is actually achieved. These critics do not find, in the fictional works, the ‘women’s language’ they expect. Penny Florence shows disappointment with the fact that the narratives incorporate language thematically, but not structurally, being “formally and linguistically conventional” (Anderson, ed., 81–2). Similarly, Lucie Armit expresses the general frustration felt by readers and critics of feminist science fiction: “It is not enough merely to challenge surface manifestations (with revisions of words such as ‘chairman’, ‘mastery’, ‘authorress’ and so on, important though such revisions are), but we must also analyse and subvert the deep structural principles of language” (123). Elgin’s Native Tongue, which I discuss in section III below, has been specially targeted by this type of criticism.

The “not-formally-innovative-and-radical-enough” tendency is extremely problematic in that it reveals a highly prescriptive way of looking at literary texts and relies on shaky assumptions concerning language, fictions, and ideologies of gender. In fact, these readings imply that for the novels to be effectively oppositional, they must be formally unconventional and subvert “the deep structural principles of language” (understood here in terms of syntax, as opposed to the “surface” lexical manifestations). The two underlying suggestions are, firstly, that avant-garde fictions are more revolutionary, as if a feminist oppositional element were inherent in the avant-garde or experimental forms; and, consequently, that effective feminist ideologies depend on unconventional narrative structures. Both assumptions are equally difficult to hold as they ultimately lead to the simplistic notion of linguistic and narrative structures as being inherently patriarchal and oppressive (or of linguistic innovations and formally complex literary works as inherently feminist).

I have chosen a way of approaching the feminist dystopia that deliberately avoids the trend described above. For this, I borrow the concept of “verbal hygiene” from sociolinguistics. Developed by feminist linguist Deborah Cameron, the notion of “verbal hygiene” is theorized as a fundamental cultural trace and defined in relation to “practices . . . born of an urge to improve or ‘clean up’ language”, a “general impulse to regulate language, control it, make it ‘better’” (1995, 1, 9). The concept is applicable to a vast range of linguistic practices. Although not all of these relate to gender power struggles, gender appears as one of the terrains in which verbal hygiene tensions and contestations occur. I will turn now to a more detailed description of the concept and of the advantages of using this paradigm in the present reading.

Verbal hygiene is basic to the use of language in the sense that human beings not only use language, but comment on the language they use, either in order to maintain certain habits or to transform them. It is a general phenomenon in our linguistic behaviour, Cameron argues, and ranges from the ordinary practices of everyday interactions to highly institutionalized forms, with an important critical component in its manifestations: “Verbal hygiene comes into being whenever people reflect on language in a critical (in the
sense of ‘evaluative’) way. The potential for it is latent in every communicative act, and the impulse behind it pervades our habits of thought and behaviour” (9). This pervasive, critical attitude towards language followed by “the urge to improve” it are crucial factors, as they provide the link with the understanding of utopianism I want to favour here, as such a critical and transformative disposition parallels the basic orientation of the utopian subjectivity.

Cameron’s conceptualization of verbal hygiene responds to what has been referred to in linguistic theories as “prescriptivism”, usually contextualized in a binary opposition to “descriptivism”. Linguists generally think of themselves as being descriptive, holding prescriptivism as their ‘other’. Being prescriptive implies making subjective value judgements, as opposed to the linguistic concern with ‘objective facts’. Cameron questions this binary distinction. She finds it appropriate to coin a new expression because, in its association with unscientific and ideological practices (as opposed to ‘objective’, ‘value-free’ description), linguistic prescriptivism has strongly negative connotations. Verbal hygiene, in turn, offers a more flexible perspective: “This impulse takes innumerable forms, not all of which are conservative, authoritarian or (arguably) deplorable” (9). Indeed, the concept partially results from Cameron’s desire, informed by feminist and other critical theories, “to find an alternative way of theorising normative practices.”

Major implications for my purposes are that this alternative concept allows an increased awareness of the politics underlying linguistic practices, and a more nuanced outlook of the dystopic/utopic spectrum.

Making use of verbal hygiene as a starting point to talk about the feminist dystopias is not without problems, as the transfer of a category from one discipline into another (in this case, from sociolinguistics to literary studies) never occurs smoothly. While Cameron talks about verbal hygiene at work ‘out there’ in the ‘real’ world, I will be dealing with its representation in narrative. Although this may sound obvious, it raises some important issues. Among these is the fact that verbal hygiene portrayed in literature is more removed and mediated when compared to the practices examined by Cameron. A related point which I shall address is that, at times, verbal hygiene acts portrayed in speculative fictions find no ‘real’ life equivalents, thus being better understood in symbolic, rather than allegorical, terms. Whatever the case, observing the literary manifestations of verbal hygiene offers insights into one of the intersections between linguistics and literature, and enables a consideration of the relationship between speculative fictions and their extra-textuality (i.e., the question of their referents and continuities with the ‘real’ world ‘out there’).

Another issue refers to the belief, evoked by the “hygiene” metaphor, in a state of linguistic purity and cleanliness. This is represented in the dystopias by the regulatory practices, against which a heretic, or blasphemous, strand can be identified (which is in itself, of course, another manifestation of verbal hygiene, also liable to become dogma). Heresy and blasphemy appear to be particularly useful in this context, as they suggest an opinion contrary to orthodoxy and profane (ritually unclean) utterances. Moreover
both are charged with utopianism to the extent that they imply a critique of an order, system or situation. Indeed, the utopianism of heretical (religious) movements has had a major role in shaping modern utopian thought (Mannheim; Bloch; Berrini). As we will see, Atwood’s and Elgin’s texts draw heavily upon the metaphors of heresy and blasphemy in the constructions of feminist utopianisms.

In a discussion of verbal hygiene for women, Cameron mentions George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion* as exemplary of “one of the great verbal hygiene stories of modern English literature” (166). I suggest that the dystopias could be viewed as the verbal hygiene literary genre *par excellence*, due to the pervasiveness of their representations of verbal hygiene practices (and counter-practices). Within this generic ground, feminist dystopias are verbal hygiene stories in which the gender struggle is at its most perceptible. I pursue the instances of verbal hygiene at work in the fictions by resorting to three topics mentioned by Cameron when discussing the politics of linguistic practices: identity, agency, and authority. Besides occupying a crucial space in contemporary feminist debates, these categories offer suitable entrances for such distinct narratives as Tuttle’s, Atwood’s and Elgin’s.

II. A utopia off language: “The Cure”

In Lisa Tuttle’s “The Cure” verbal hygiene surfaces in an extreme circumstance. The main impulse motivating the characters is not to “improve or ‘clean up’ language”, but to perform a thorough act of verbal hygiene by moving away from verbal language itself. Language is depicted as a limiting, dystopic structure in this story, whose utopian feminist “elsewhere” is located outside the linguistic realm, a state described as happy and unrestrained, a *utopia off language*. I will address the issue of identity in this short story by examining the characters’ transgression of expected linguistic behaviour (by rejecting verbal expression), and explore the implications of this form of ‘a-linguistic utopianism’ for feminist politics. I will also argue that the text reveals the feminist tension regarding the utopic and dystopic nature of language.

In “The Cure”, language is a disease outside which alternative intersubjective links will be fostered. It is the story of two women drawn together by language, who have a stable relationship spanning years and later find themselves experiencing a moment of crisis with the realization that they are perceiving reality in radically different ways. “You are in another world. A world beyond words” (C 123), states the nameless first-person narrator, referring to the fact that her lover has chosen to move away from language, to “cure” herself from language as the ambiguous title suggests.

I have identified three levels of meaning for “the cure”. Firstly, the story title suggests a desired/desirable state of well-being, conveying in itself utopian connotations. Secondly, it refers to a treatment taken by the women to stimulate the body’s defences. It works in the prevention of all diseases known to humanity, and has the unexpected side-effect of causing
the emergence of speechless children, “The Silent Generation” (C 127), among whom is the narrator’s lover’s child. The third meaning for “the cure” surfaces with the narrator’s partner’s understanding that language is itself a virus which has infiltrated humans, infecting genes and spreading by human interaction. The story suggests that people’s awareness of ‘the language disease’ triggers this form of cure, as happens to one woman protagonist: “You saw it that way when you decided that you were the crippled one. When you recognised the cool, golden web of words as a trap and an affliction. When you used the Cure to turn your own defences against the very thing that made you your self” (C 134, emphases added). This character deliberately decides to cleanse herself of language, the virus. And a similar cure is the narrator’s own, suggested in the last paragraphs of the story, as she chooses to follow her lover. This (last) cure is left in suspension, as the text is open-ended.

Besides the centrality of (the loss of verbal) language for the plot, language-related symbolism is pervasive in the story. In the very first line, we learn that the narrator is a writer presently surrounded by the objects of her craft (books by other writers, her own writings, a typewriter): “I sit here, day by day, turning my life into language” (C 123). As the narration proceeds, readers find out that her lover also used to be a writer before the transformation. “Words brought us together in the first place” (C 123), remarks the narrator in the first of a series of references to the crucial role of words to their relationship.  

Also from the beginning of the story, language is associated with confining, dystopic structures, as opposed to the freedom and happiness of the narrator’s lover’s ‘outside’ world, evocative of utopian plenitude. Against this silent idyllic background, glimpses of which are scattered throughout the text, the narrator’s anxiety grows more and more salient. In her study-room, language infects the atmosphere: “the air . . . is murky with words”; and writing becomes an “attempt to pin you [her lover] to the page” (C 123). Language is charged with negative connotations, as expressed in passages like the following, in which the narrator attempts to reach her lover by means of speech:

You back away from me, frowning, and I gaze at you through the bars of words until, finally, they falter and fail, and I fall with relief into silence.

I’m shaking, I can’t even look at you now. What was I saying, what was I trying to say? The words seemed to come out independent of my mind, and the only meaning in them was my desire to touch you, to catch you, to draw you to me in a net of words. (C 132, emphases added)

The lexical choice here sums up the essential quality associated with verbal language in “The Cure”: its oppressive, “colonising ability” (C 134). Hence my argument that the utopian element (desired/desirable otherness) in the story is located off language. Not unusual in contemporary narratives, this form of utopianism raises intriguing issues for a feminist reading. I firstly locate “The Cure” within a broader cultural context and then address the women’s construction of the ‘silent’ alternative identity that figures in the story.
This story belongs to a distinct feminist tradition which focuses on the representation of women's cultural silence. Not necessarily represented by speculative fictions, this tradition is characterized by an approach to language as an imperfect, oppressive, or superfluous instrument functioning as a barrier to interpersonal communication and exchange, as well as a hindrance to happiness. Contemporary culture is full of images of women experiencing moments of utopian fulfilment outside verbal language. These are recurrent in filmic narrative and stage performances (e.g. Nell, The Piano, and Children of a Lesser God). In literature, one thinks of allegorical texts, like Isak Dinesen's "The Blank Page" (1957), as well as more recent futuristic fictions, where language is often experienced "as a block to communication, expression, pleasure" (Florence, in Anderson ed., 73). Indeed, an easily identifiable trend in feminist speculative fictions explores the possibilities of non-verbal modes of communication and interaction, and while "The Cure" clearly integrates this generic trend, it also appears to be close to the parable of "The Blank Page" in its formal elaborations and thematic exploration of the trope of the blank page.

In a passage from "The Cure" mentioned above, we read that the silent protagonist "turn[ed] [her] own defences against the very thing that made [her] self" (C 134), and this "thing" is language. Here the narrative hints at the relationship between language and identity. By identity I understand an individual's sense of self and of belonging to (and helping shape) social groups representing gender, sexual preference, class, race, professional status and other particular categories. Discussing the importance of the issue of identity in the process of verbal hygiene, Cameron explains that earlier sociolinguistic accounts evidence two main positions: language is understood either to 'reflect' or to 'mark' social identity. She proceeds: "in both accounts, it is implicitly assumed that the relevant categories and identities exist prior to language, and are simply 'marked' or 'reflected' when people come to use it". Differently, in recent critical accounts identity is taken to be an unstable construct. "The critical account suggests language is one of the things that constitutes my identity as a particular kind of subject" (Cameron 1995, 15–16, emphasis in the original). The question posed by "The Cure" is: what form(s) of (alternative) identity does a female subject who moves away from language, understood as one of the elements which constructs her identity, offer?

"The Cure" elicits two responses, each with different implications for a feminist perspective and politics. The work of Julia Kristeva offers an interesting interpretative key to the short story. Her psychoanalytical theorization of a subject's entrance into the symbolic contract (enacted by an individual's separation from the maternal semiotic, pre-linguistic chora, as well as his/her acquisition of language and engagement with the Oedipal role) places women in the 'privileged' position of retaining a special relationship with the pre-Oedipal chora. According to this theory, a woman's subjectivity is more unstable due to her (bodily) proximity to the chora, whose irruptions endanger the stability of the law of the Father. The latter's main manifestation, it should be remembered, is linguistic. Kristeva concep-
tualizes the semiotic chora as that disposition in language which breaches the stability of monolithic signification systems, which, in turn, crucially support the symbolic contract. The semiotic irruptions/disruptions pose the ‘danger’ of heterogeneousness and are manifested in “poetic language”.²⁰ Although Kristeva’s theory has been the target of feminist critics who see in it a way of confining women to an unfavourable position in their relationship to systems of signification, it can still inspire a utopian hermeneutics. Indeed, and despite their differences, Ernst Bloch’s and Julia Kristeva’s ways of reading can be compared. Both thinkers have appropriated and revised psychoanalytical thought, besides elaborating on a distinctive disposition in literature: Bloch’s “anticipatory consciousness”, or the Not-Yet, and Kristeva’s “semiotic”, which may either refer to that which “does not yet refer” or to that which “no longer refers”.²¹ My responses to the “The Cure” can be aligned with each of these two temporal dispositions, allowing the perception of drastically different forms of utopian consciousness: one regressive and nostalgic, the other anticipatory.

The retreat into the a-linguistic realm envisioned in “The Cure” provides an interesting metaphorical figuration of Kristeva’s theory of women’s special relationship with the semiotic chora, and uneasy relationship with the symbolic order of language. Many elements in the story support this reading, most obviously one character’s very act of withdrawal into a wordless world, evocative of a child’s pre-Oedipal relationship with her mother. To a similar effect are syntactic and metaphorical associations between this woman and animals (the latter naturally outside the linguistic contract).²² Also relevant is the fact that this woman character is the one who mothers a “silent” child, and her ‘pre-linguistic’ relationship with this child motivates her retreat. We follow the disintegration of her identity as a middle-class lesbian writer, lover, and mother of a child, into a subject position which is very literally outside the contract and the symbolic order. Significantly, the anxious first-person narration is disrupted by (semiotic?) glimpses of the other woman’s silent happiness. As remarked above, the story culminates with the suggestion that the narrator will follow a similar impulse and trespass from a relatively stable identity into the wordless, meaningless space of female jouissance, or bliss, a territory occupied by women, children, and animals. Being located outside language, the character’s identity is transformed into a non-identity, to the extent that a retreat from language implies a retreat from subjectivity itself. In this perspective, the short story suggests that women’s subjectivity is marked by difference in their relationship to the symbolic contract, to language and meaning, and, consequently, to power; and can only be ‘asserted’ outside that order. This feminist “elsewhere” is problematic though because of its simplistic equation of language (and the contract it represents) with dystopic structures and masculine values and because of the political paralysis implicit in this form of compensatory utopian space.²³

Another interpretative possibility is premised upon an understanding of the interplay between the “semiotic” and the “symbolic” in “The Cure” in
its anticipatory quality. Thus envisioned, the story metaphorizes the search for renewed, radically transformed identities, a search which avoids approaching language as the central constitutive element. Total verbal hygiene metaphorically liberates the self from the constraints of an identity defined (and fixed) solely by language, while serving as a critique of the language-centredness which characterizes contemporary theorizations of identity. Significantly, three populations with distinct relationships to language coexist by the end of the story: those who retain speech, the ‘pre-linguistic’ “silent generation”, and at least one ‘post-linguistic’ subject. This variety requires that other (so far non-existent) forms of human interface be shaped. In this sense, the story points towards renewed ways of (re)defining identity and of exploring other forms of interpersonal contacts. Instead of the escape from identity, the story thus understood portrays subjectivities in process of transformation. In terms of feminist politics, this response to “The Cure” not only proves to be more liberating (as it enables an approach to the textual silences as imbued with meaning, especially when this silence is seen as a form of resistance), but it also opens up possibilities of envisioning realities that are not yet existent, in Bloch’s as well as in Kristeva’s terms (when the ‘semiotic’ is understood as that which “does not yet refer”). In this sense, it is more on par with the theorization of a radical version of the feminist “elsewhere”.

Whatever the reading favoured, utopia in the story remains ineffable. The paradox of utopia surfaces in the trope of the blank page, the textual silence upon which the story is constructed. The whole text consists in a whirlpool of words revolving around a blank (utopian) center, evocative of interpretative possibilities. Also, both ways of reading allow an understanding of the tension between the story’s “semiotic” and its “symbolic” as a dramatization of the struggle within feminism between silence and speech, language as (dystopic) foreclosure and as (utopic) possibility. Similarly to Dinesen’s “The Blank Page”, in “The Cure” one woman’s transgressive silence is framed by another woman’s narration. (The problematization of the narration is crucial to this ‘blank-centre effect.’) And perhaps the greatest irony that brings these texts together lies in the fact that the ‘silent’ story is actually told, i.e., language renders the silence possible. Thus, language itself is, in the last analysis, invested with a utopian function. This form of paradoxical silence is, in both texts, heavily charged with connotations of transgression and of utopia hungered for by the characters and by us, the ultimate narrates of the stories. In her analysis of “The Blank Page”, Susan Gubar remarks that “the blank sheet may mean any number of alternative scripts for women” (305). It is the utopian promise of “alternative scripts” that Lisa Tuttle’s short story also keeps in suspension.

III. The utopia of a women’s language: Native Tongue and The Judas Rose

Language features as a key metaphor in the two major plot lines uniting Elgin’s novels. One relates to the monopoly of all negotiations with aliens
held by the Lines, or families of linguists, whose specialized skills in alien languages guarantee their survival. Because the linguists’ role as translators is essential for the inter-galactic trade, their existence is tolerated in a prejudiced environment. They comprise thirteen families scattered throughout the planet who live in separate communal households. Each family is under the leadership of a male linguist, who rules, together with the other men of the Lines, over women and children, imposing inhuman learning and working hours to maximize production. The novels present the tensions between the people of the Lines and the government, the former wishing to maintain their precarious hold on power while the latter attempt to develop the linguistic technologies necessary to carry out negotiations without the linguists’ mediation. Of greater importance here, the second plot line concerns gender polarization. The epigraph to the first chapter of *Native Tongue* ‘quotes’ from the US Constitution and explains how women became deprived of autonomous citizenship, lost the right to vote and were declared minors. When the narrative starts, in 2205, institutionalized sexual stratification (the legal subjection of women by linguists and non-linguists alike) has existed for over two hundred years. Initially from the perspective of the women linguists under a US Line, and then spreading to other women, the novels show the development of an all-female resistance movement brought into effect by a radical act of verbal hygiene: the creation of a women’s language.

Discussing constringent linguistic practices in the dystopias, Walter Meyers states that “the dystopian government . . . must not only enslave words, but also prevent the natural forces of language from freeing them” (200, emphasis added). Underlying his remark is the notion that language is a natural entity subject to spontaneous changes, an argument still pervasive nowadays (Cameron 1995). Centring upon women’s intervention in language making, Elgin’s novels foreground the role of politically motivated human (in this case, female) agency in linguistic change. Thus they help to demystify current assumptions about linguistic change. This reading considers the issue of human agency in the meta-linguistic practices rendered in the novels, observing their extent and effectiveness. I will argue that verbal hygiene is a major concern in the novels, and that the women’s engagement in linguistic construction constitutes a powerful metaphor for the human agency, effort and organization essential for feminist language politics located in the ‘real’ world.

**The heterotopic sites of women’s agency**

Both novels feature heterotopic spaces where the women engage in language-making. In *Native Tongue* the Barren Houses are one such space. The creation of male linguists, they are separate residences for the women who no longer fulfil the valued reproductive function. The term “Barren House” is ironic because precisely in this space the women construct a haven in compensation for their ‘barren’ life. There they “keep their secrets”, and the evidence of (and of their resistance to) verbal hygiene: forbidden books and
archives from the time before change and “the secret language files” (NT 123–24). In this space women’s creative linguistic action starts. “It is difficult to imagine a more triumphant assertion of agency than a proposal to invent a new language,” affirms Cameron, referring to non-fictional artificial languages (1995, 18). Elgin’s novels offer a fictional version of this proposal, with the project of the construction of “a language . . . by women in order to express the perceptions of women” (JR 182). Underlying Láadan, as the language is named, is the premise that the existing human languages are androcentric and so inadequate for this purpose.

Central to Láadan is the Encodings Project, which involves formulating and naming semantic concepts. An Encoding is “the making of a name for a chunk of the world that so far as we know has never been chosen for naming before in any human language, and that has not just suddenly been made or found or dumped upon your culture” (NT 22). The items are collected by the linguist women and codified into their language. And although the novel partially mystifies the women’s linguistic activity, the Encodings succeed as a metaphor for one form of feminist linguistic resistance and intervention. Coining neologisms to express culturally ‘absent’ concepts is among the feminists’ responses to a language which encodes male world-views. It is a way of inscribing women’s experiences and perceptions in language and culture, and helping to shape what counts as reality. Metonymic for the Láadan Project, the Encodings render a fictionalized version of this phenomenon and foreground the human factor behind linguistic change.

In The Judas Rose, the heterotopic space is a Catholic convent, which mirrors the Barren Houses by being an all-female space for those outside the reproductive ‘market’. Like the latter, it allows freedom from the male-dominant order necessary for the accomplishment of subversive verbal hygiene. As Láadan crosses the boundaries of the Barren Houses, it reaches non-linguist women and attracts the attention of Catholic priests who see in the new language used in the ‘mixed women’s’ religious ceremonies a possibility to boost the Catholic faith. What follows is a verbal hygiene double move, in which firstly the priests assemble a ‘holy task force’ of nuns under the leadership of Sister Miriam Rose to “stamp out the [women’s] heresy” by means of “a systematic modification of the language of the heretical texts” (JR 216). The strongly regulatory impulse is marked by the recurrent metaphor of a heresy that must be purified before the language can be appropriated. But instead of the action to curb Láadan, Sister Rose greatly contributes to its spreading by producing and distributing copies of the translations they were expected to “clean up”. She “was actually in charge of a secret rebellion inside the convents” (JR 351), working “to preserve the heresy” (JR 337).

The two ‘heterotopic islets’ represent to the women compensatory freedom from a male-dominated environment. In these retreats, they appear as linguistic agents, able to resist male control by engaging in the verbal hygiene practices of constructing an alternative language and assuring its expansion. Such marginal “utopian enclaves”, to borrow Moylan’s term
(1995, 186), repeat a pattern observed in other feminist dystopias. In Elgin’s novels, community is marked by linguistic activity. And metaphors usually associated with utopia (“home”, “paradise”, “freedom”) combine to shape the female retreats as spaces of resistance. Uniting these threads is the women’s dream of a common language.

The dream of a women’s language revisited

Elgin’s novels re-elaborate on the ancient myth of a common language. According to this myth, human beings once had a common language, which enabled perfect communication among all peoples. This language is now lost, but remains the object of much utopian dreaming, many cultural manifestations and concrete enterprises. Second-wave feminism has produced its counter-myth with the dream of a common language for women.27 The dangers underlying the feminist version have been pointed out in feminist postmodernist theory, especially the trend known as cyborg politics. Donna Haraway is adamant in her critique: “The feminist dream of a common language, like all dreams for a perfectly true language, of perfectly faithful naming of experience, is a totalizing and imperialist one” (1992, 173). In this perspective, Elgin’s “heresy” can be aligned with the reactionary orthodoxy it aims to resist. Discussing the topic, Cameron offers a critique of Haraway’s own orthodox position: “The dream of a common language is impossible; but if we are to have a politics of affinity in difference, the drive to connect is indispensable” (“Why the Cyborg” 10). She is alluding to Adrienne Rich’s poem advocating “the dream of a common language”, a major text of radical feminism. While my reading of the novels is informed by the postmodernist suspicion of the dream, it also stresses the importance of women’s “drive to connect” made manifest in the metaphor of collaborative language construction.

Elgin’s vision of linguistic communities is idealized in that it provides a simplistic picture of women working for the common goal of the construction and spreading of Láadan. Although they represent different cultural backgrounds, virtually no dissent exists among the women with regard to Láadan, which brings about closeness and provokes a positive reaction from linguist and non-linguist women. Thus considered, the novels are problematic for a feminist reading because they obscure differences among women (and men) revealing, as they construct their utopia of language, what Haraway would define as a “totalizing” face.

In spite of this, the novels still offer interesting insights for feminist utopianism. Crucial for feminist politics is the emphasis placed on “the drive to connect”. If the novels ‘fail’ for not rendering differences among women, they succeed in portraying women establishing connections which, based on the experience of shared oppression, enable political activity in an androcentric culture. To borrow Cameron’s phrase, “a politics of affinity” is clearly on the agenda here, and the dream of Láadan plays a key role in promoting the sense of a collective self, whose importance is foregrounded
even in Haraway’s sceptical elaboration of feminist postmodern selves, when she stresses “the need for community.” \(^28\) Secondly, the novels are relevant for feminist thought because they show women’s linguistic agency at the crossroads of gender and power, thus contributing to raise readers’ awareness of the role played by language in the construction and transformation of what we call ‘reality’. Besides, the limited transformative power of verbal hygiene is also an issue. In my view, the novels acquire relevance by presenting an allegory of women’s engaging in the process of politically motivated linguistic activity, not by rendering a fully successful verbal hygiene story (which they clearly do not do).

Rather than a literal interpretation of the Láadan project as a representation of empirical women’s search for “a perfectly true language, of perfectly faithful naming of experience”, I propose a symbolic one. Instead of the implausible picture of a group of ‘real’ women working on a common language, Láadan is better understood as a metaphor for one version of a feminist “elsewhere”, which serves as a source of inspiration for transformative action and without which feminism loses its raison d’être. According to this view, the women’s dream of Láadan as a common language remains in the utopian horizon not because it offers any sort of blueprint, but because it constitutes a manifestation of the Blochian “Not-yet”, which is essential for all political projects.

**Láadan under cover, or the paradox of an ‘absent’ utopia of language**

Láadan is seldom ‘seen’. It is hidden from the men, linguists and non-linguists, as well as from us, readers. This aspect has greatly annoyed Elgin’s feminist critics, who want to learn the narrative linguistic secret in order to understand its radical function and meaning. I argue that this ‘absence’ has a function and meaning in itself which closely relates to the construction of the narrative’s utopia by presenting an emblem for the novels’ anticipatory consciousness. Commentators on fictional languages in narrative have stressed their usually brief appearances. \(^29\) Regarding Elgin’s novels, David Sisk observes that “Láadan is conspicuously absent”, and qualifies the brief displays of the language as “token appearances” (162). It is striking that, in over six hundred pages, the Láadan appearances should be limited to a few words and three full sentences. \(^30\) Readers get to know about the women’s language (some formal details, its origins and aims, mythologies), but the access to the language itself is extremely limited. While the ‘absence’ of Láadan repeats a convention, it also functions as a motivational element in the story plot and as a carrier of utopian meaning.

At her arrival in the Barren House, as Nazareth learns about the construction of Láadan, she also learns about the need to hide it, quite literally, in the “nooks and crannies” of the women’s quarters (NT 244). (Láadan is also ‘hidden’ in the sense that it has been memorized). Having an analogous function to those “nooks and crannies”, a physical space actually concealing the language files, is Langlish, another artificial language in which Láadan
is wrapped up. “Langlish, with its endless growing list of phonemes and the constant changes in its syntax, all the nonsensical phenomena, was only a charade. A decoy to keep the men from discovering the real language” (NT 160). Displayed as the ‘public version’ of the women’s project and tolerated by the men as a whim or hobby, Langlish offers the women the excuse for their meetings and the subject for the storytelling and mythologies passed on to little girls in preparation for the later knowledge of Láadan. Another contrivance with a similar purpose is plotted by the sisters in The Judas Rose, who produce poor revisions of Láadan to serve as a protection for the translations they are copying.

It is significant that the spatial metaphors of “nooks and crannies”, evocative of enclosed spaces (chinks, cracks, crevices) where Láadan is sheltered, have analogous manifestations of linguistic nature: a cover language and textual fragments. I suggested above that the women’s language is better understood symbolically, as a metaphor for the radical ‘vision’ of a feminist “elsewhere”. I want to reinforce this idea by pointing out that the elaborate metafictionality of the novels helps to construct their utopian meaning. On one level, they are about layers of language covering the women’s language, which is, in turn, symbolic of an alternative good place for women. On another, the novels themselves constitute a layer of language which, by ‘covering’ the utopian ‘good place’, preserves it as ‘no place’. Utopia thus ‘surfaces’ as the motor and enigma of feminist dystopian narrative, its desire machine.

Centred upon the narrative gap, this way of reading Elgin’s texts relates the non-articulation of the women’s good place to the radical notion of a feminist “elsewhere” as that which is, like Bloch’s “Not-Yet”, absolutely new, and therefore ineffable. Another way of understanding the “elsewhere” is the female subject’s contradictory position in face of a male-dominant order. Elgin herself is fascinated by this paradox in terms of women’s relationship to language.31 This is reflected in her fictions, which offer interesting insights concerning this contradictory “elsewhere”. The novels remind us that it is in the context of the very oppressive social structures, represented by the microcosms of linguist Households and a Catholic convent, that women’s subversive verbal hygiene comes into existence and acquires meaning. While the limited success of their linguistic enterprise portrayed in the Láadan novels appear to be disappointing, they enable a critical perspective concerning the phenomenon of verbal hygiene. Finally, the Láadan novels importantly offer an allegory for the female feminist subjects’ need to “connect” and to shape language into an instrument of liberation, in constant process of (re-)construction.

IV. A utopia of language under “reduced circumstances”:
The Handmaid’s Tale

I look at verbal hygiene practices in The Handmaid’s Tale in relation to issues of authority. Discussing the questions of power and authority under-
lying linguistic conventions, Cameron remarks that “the social function of the [linguistic] rule is not arbitrary. Like other superficially innocuous ‘customs’, ‘conventions’ and ‘traditions’. . . , rules of language use often contribute to a circle of exclusion and intimidation, as those who have mastered a particular practice use it in turn to intimidate others” (1995, 12). It is desirable, she continues, that this non-arbitrariness be exposed and debated. Commentators on literary dystopias have remarked that language is often shown as a means by which social control is communicated and maintained (Barnes; Meyers; Sisk). The genre provides an interesting ground for the discussion of the non-arbitrariness mentioned by Cameron. Atwood’s novel exposes forms of linguistic authority constructed upon a gender hierarchy which has an extremely clear social agenda (the maintenance of an order based on the suppression of women’s voice and desire). It also raises more subtle points concerning the pervasiveness and effectiveness of verbal hygiene. Here I explore the tensions between the dystopic element of linguistic authority in its overlapping with patriarchal order and ideology, and the acts of resistance and subversion countering such authority.

Following “the reduction of women” convention observed in feminist dystopian writing, the novel depicts a futuristic space in which women’s social roles have been thoroughly dominated and severely limited by a patriarchal order.32 It is represented by the Republic of Gilead, a fundamentalist state established after a takeover by an extremist right-wing élite, as a backlash against the revolutionary feminist developments of the previous decades. In this militaristic near-future state run by a Christian-fundamentalist minority, the Commanders, women have been stratified into the castes of Wives, Aunts, Handmaids, Marthas, Econowives, and Widows. Dressing according to a rigidly assigned colour code publicly marks the status of women, and those who do not fit into this social grid are forced into life-risking work. Aunts and Wives have collaborated with the takeover, collude with male power, and help enforce the status quo. Aunts patrol and indoctrinate other women into fitting their assigned social slots. Their roles are more public when compared to the Wives’, who hold domestic control over the Marthas and Handmaids. In a society where the fertility rate has fallen dramatically, fertile women have become “a national resource” (HT 61) and are assigned the role of Handmaids, following the biblical precedent of the old testament, serving as surrogate mothers of the patriarchs’ offspring. There is absolutely no space for, using Angela Carter’s term, “the voluntary sterile”, or for pleasure in sex. The practice of utilizing women as breeders is an allusion to Genesis 30: 1–3, quoted in one of the epigraphs to the novel and repeated in the “reading” episode (HT 84). The monthly rape “Ceremony” follows the scriptural “and she shall bear upon my knees”, and grotesquely requires the presence of Wife, Handmaid, and Commander. It synthetizes the institutionalized humiliation, objectification, and ownership of women in Gilead.

Gilead is contrasted extratextually to our present society, which functions as its immediate past, and intratextually with Nunavit, situated in its
future. (Gilead also offers satiric images of certain aspects of contemporary gender relations, in which sense it parallels, rather than contrasts to, the world as we know it.) Nunavit apparently offers an eutopian alternative to Gilead, as the social status of women has improved from the perspective of that future. Nevertheless, this space is no feminist utopia. More subtly conveyed when compared to the horrors perpetrated in Gilead, misogyny in Nunavit is to be read between the lines of Professor Pieixoto’s speech about “The Handmaid’s Tale”.

The Handmaid’s Tale is composed of two narrative blocks. The first part consists in June’s/Offred’s description, in diary form, of her experience as a Handmaid under the Gileadean regime. This is a transcription of recordings found by historians after the fall of Gilead, and is divided into fifteen chapters alternating reconstructed renderings of the daily life and routine of a Handmaid and, in the “Night” chapters, her thoughts and recollections, dreams and nightmares. Her narration presupposes other dissidents or escapees from Gilead, potential narratees to June’s/Offred’s story, to whom readers of the novel become ‘shadow’ or ‘second-degree’ narratees. The “Historical Notes” which form the second block contain the proceedings of a conference on Gileadean Studies. The time gap separating the two parts is of approximately two hundred years. The notes are formed mainly by Professor Darcy Pieixoto’s paper on the manuscript of the first block. Readers of the novel are again positioned as ‘second-degree’ narratees, shadowing the conference audience. While in the two blocks narration is constructed intradiegetically (the narratees ‘exist’ within the text), together they also form a third (extradiegetic) level, to which we are the addressees. Using Susan Lanser’s terminology, this distinction can be put in terms of “public” and “private” levels of narration. “Public” narration is “simply narration (implicitly or explicitly) addressed to a narratee who is external (that is, heterodiegetic) to the textual world and who can be equated with a public readership; private narration, in contrast, is addressed to an explicitly designated narratee who exists only within the textual world” (620). The whole novelistic text, comprising “The Handmaid’s Tale” and the “Historical Notes”, can be approached as a third narrative level addressing us, ‘real’ readers. My interest in the exploration of the narrative embeddings in The Handmaid’s Tale relates to the multi-layered instances of verbal hygiene presented in the novel, as well as the political perspective engendered by its sophisticated narrative structure.

Level One: “The Handmaid’s Tale”

Her tale shows that the oppression of women in Gilead, which is political and economic and maintained by force, is also evidenced and maintained linguistically. The gender-polarized power imbalance is expressed in a meditation by June/Offred which encapsulates the essence of this linguistic economy: “He [the Commander] has something we don’t have: he has the word. How we squandered it, once” (HT 84). Men have (power
over) “the word”, women do not; “the word” is singular, monolithic, and biblical because originated by God, the father. Women’s linguistic circumstances are of legally enforced scarcity. Overtly gender-based, verbal hygiene works at institutional levels to maintain the male hegemony. Several passages evidence the power politics invested in linguistic control. Reading and writing are forbidden for women; writing on tickets and notice boards is replaced by pictures; books and other reading materials are banned. Women are brutally silenced, and among the Handmaids, a cliché form of communication based on the scriptural texts, imposed. The women’s “amputated speech” (HT 189) and forbidden access to written language are metaphors for their overall reduced circumstances under the Gilead regime.

The figuration of enforced uses of (usually simplified, reduced, and clichéd) language as means of social control and manipulation appears as a pervasive trait in the literary dystopias. Feminist dystopias expose the gender ideologies underlying such linguistic contestations, and this is illustrated by the sexually-polarized linguistic economy in Gilead. If on the one hand the literary dystopias have conventionally provided a fictional space for the staging of authoritarian verbal hygiene, on the other the genre also portrays the failure of verbal hygiene in its manipulative and politically conservative form. The presence of an element of resistance implies that (cultural and linguistic) impositions are never totally effective. In other words, in spite of its pervasiveness, the effectiveness of verbal hygiene is limited.

“The Handmaid’s Tale” in itself constitutes an act of resistance. June’s/Offred’s narration (and here Atwood’s choice of a first person narrator is crucial) frames the verbal hygiene imposed upon her in such a way as to enable her own authorial voice to be inscribed. This act of resistance is further revealed in the narrator’s careful and conscious use of language in countermovements against the verbal hygiene imposed upon women. The Handmaid’s narration materializes a feminist utopia of language characterized by creativity and plurivocality, presented against the backdrop of the linguistic ‘utopia’ of static, monolithic meaning necessary for the existence of Gilead. Earlier commentators have exposed the facets of this resistance, which I shall summarize here.35 Analyzing the dominant discourses in “The Handmaid’s Tale” (the discursive law of the theocracy and June’s/Offred’s story), Hilde Staels contrasts the “absolutely homogeneous, univocal signs” forced upon the inhabitants of Gilead and “the potential polysemy of discourse” which has been suppressed and breaks through the theocratic law (457). Although Staels has appropriately identified this tension, I disagree with the point that “Gilead Newspeak makes all other modes of thought impossible” (457), as June’s/Offred’s strategic uses of language clearly evidence alternative world-views.

The protagonist’s response is perceptible on two levels. Some linguistic transgressions are ‘visible’, i.e., readers can actually ‘see’ them as elements in the story plot, i.e. in its content. One example lies in her stolen exchanges with other Handmaids. Most of the transgressions, however, are not ‘seen’, but expressed in June’s/Offred’s (spoken) reconstructed narration, i.e. in the
novel’s form. In the mental operations which acquire narrative shape post factum the contrast between the rhetorical richness of her heresies and the barrenness of Gileadean dogma brings the ineffectiveness of the acts of verbal hygiene imposed upon her into full view. To combat monolithic meaning, June/Offred composes what she terms “litanies”, speculations exploring the polysemy of lexical items: “I sit in the chair and think about the word chair. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable in charity. It is the French word for flesh. None of these facts has any connection with the others. These are the kinds of litanies I use, to compose myself” (HT 104). In addition to lexical items, longer pieces of language also acquire various meanings, as is the case with the dog Latin inscription the Handmaid finds scratched in her cupboard. Another device that defies Gileadean monolithic meaning is the exposure, as an inevitable condition in narrative, of its constructedness and incompleteness. June/Offred “squanders” the Gileadean “word” and becomes a verbal hygienist herself by rejecting the linguistic normativity which clearly “contribute[s] to a circle of exclusion and intimidation” of women, and critically restoring linguistic freedom and creativity. Implicit in June’s/Offred’s speech are the counterideologies of her radical utopian orientation, in opposition to Gilead’s own conservative utopia. Despite the extremely limited political impact of her narrative effort (its self-liberating potential is unquestionable, but no evidence is given as to whether this text ever reaches her contemporaries), June/Offred contests the linguistic tyranny of Gilead and inscribes, in this case, ‘speaks’ her own authority in, over and through language. This narrative level allows an understanding of the conflicted authority at stake in verbal hygiene practices and counter-practices, and of the limitations and partiality of such practices.

Level Two: Historical Notes

This narrative layer, which functions as a pseudo-documentary framing enfolding the Handmaid’s story (Murphy), is formed mainly by the transcript of an academic paper on Gilead. It also presents a set of metalinguistic practices which can be understood in relation to the concept of verbal hygiene. Dramatizing the issue of authority, linguistic control perceptible at this level parallels the silencing of women effected in Gilead, and functions as a metaphorical representation of forms of appropriation of feminist discourse in a sexist environment.

Cameron explains that some verbal hygiene practices are grounded on the “fetish of communication”, the notion that successful human communication depends on language functioning according to a fixed code which guarantees the transfer of ‘transparent’ messages between people. She reminds us that linguistic forms which break the rules of ‘good communication’ (understood in terms of the fixed code model) may generate anxiety and trigger specific reactions from verbal hygienists:

The social analogue of a ‘breakdown in communication’ is a breakdown in cultural and political consensus, the irruption into public discourse of irrecon-
cible differences and incommensurable values... Just as 'we speak the same language' is a metaphor for sharing interests and values, so the idea that meaning is contested and relative is a metaphorical recognition of the inevitability of difference and conflict. There are forms of verbal hygiene for whose proponents this recognition holds no terror... But most forms of verbal hygiene are practised in order to ward off the threat, by making language a fixed and certain reference point. (1995, 25)

For Professor Pieixoto, the Handmaid's text is marked by difference and threatens to disrupt a stable order represented and shaped by his liberal discourse. The impulse "to ward off the threat" of (sexual, political and linguistic) difference reveals his conservative outlook. Veiled in his prose is a utopian vision modelled according to patriarchal ideology not so distant from Gilead's own.

Besides satirizing the historian's discourse and serving as a metacommentary on our own position as readers, the "Notes" display elaborate, institutionalized forms of verbal hygiene. It is manifested in the activities of editing and interpreting the manuscript, to which authority is central. Pieixoto's speech signals the effacement of the Handmaid's voice from its very title, "Problems of Authentication in Reference to The Handmaid's Tale" (HT 282). To authenticate means to give authority or validity to something, and the insertion of the term "problems" announces the questioning of the manuscript's authority and validity. Paradoxically, the scholars who co-edited the textual finding, making it visible, are also the verbal hygienists who formally and symbolically deny the protagonist's authority. Formally, the professors perform a series of editorial moves (transcription, selection, ordering, titling) which inevitably affect the manuscript's meaning. Although Pieixoto addresses some "difficulties", which led them "to make some decisions as to the nature of the material" (HT 284), the fact that such decisions cannot be value-free is not raised. Nor are the loss of some meanings, and inscription of others, brought into effect by the whole procedure. The scholarly practices are representative of the sort of editorial verbal hygiene that usually passes unnoticed. By producing this metafictional commentary, Atwood is making these practices visible. In so doing, not only does she highlight the palimpsestic quality of texts as they reach us (reinforcing one of the novelistic leitmotifs), but she also casts light on the sexual, textual and political assumptions which may ground editorial verbal hygiene.

Verbal hygiene also operates on the more symbolic levels of genre valuation and authoritative interpretation. The confessional mode of June's/ Offred's (spoken) narration is a marker of difference and strangeness for Pieixoto, as evidenced in his uneasy attitude in terms of accommodating it in the category of historical document:36 "What would we not give, now, for even twenty pages or so of printout from Waterford's private computer! However, we must be grateful for any crumbs the Goddess of History has designed to vouchsafe us" (HT 292). Authenticating a document also involves interpretative tendencies as we have learned from the power of some interpretative communities and the fate of the dissidents of interpreta-
tion at certain moments in history. I want to draw some attention to the point already noticed by critics that Pleixoto misreads June/Offred. Or, as Michele Lacombe puts it, “[s]he is also ‘off-read’ or mis-read . . . by the academic historian who reconstructs her ‘strange’ manuscript” (7–8). The plural interpretative possibilities posed by the Handmaid sharply contrast with the Professor’s obsession with single referents and ‘official’ versions. His repeated use of the inflated “we” of academic prose (“our saga”, “our period”, “our author”) demonstrates an assimilation of June’s/Offred’s narrative act. His interpretative authority remains unchallenged by a sympathetic (if ghostly) audience, whose reaction is limited to “laughter”, “applause”, “some groans”.

Another issue concerns one area of interest in feminist sociolinguistics: the neutralization and depoliticization of feminist meanings in a sexist environment. Studies carried out by Susan Ehrlich and Ruth King focus on the social construction of meaning, specifically the mechanisms of appropriation of feminist meanings and linguistic innovations by the (sexist) dominant culture in which the former are recontextualized: “terms originally with very specific feminist-influenced meanings are subject to redefinition and, not accidentally, are redefined in terms of the perspective of a white male’s experience” (1998, 170). Some of the mechanisms they describe find striking parallels in Atwood’s metafictional depiction of the professor’s discursive strategies, instrumental in the redefinition and depoliticization of June’s/Offred’s narration as a feminist indictment of a patriarchal dystopia. Her (once radical) account undergoes a similar process of trivialization, delegitimization and co-option by academic liberal discourse camouflaged in pseudo-neutrality. On a par with contemporary linguistic theories, the “Historical Notes” problematize the reception of radical discourse and raise readers’ awareness concerning the ideological disputes (and the accompanying visions of utopia/dystopia) informing linguistic contestations.

Level Three: The Handmaid’s Tale

In one of the “Night” passages, June/Offred speculates: “What I need is perspective. The illusion of depth, created by a frame, the arrangements of shapes on a flat surface. Perspective is necessary. Otherwise there are only two dimensions” (HT 135). This excerpt evidences the Handmaid’s analytical stance, while offering a metafictional commentary on textual structure and the readers’ response. One way of adding perspective to our reading is by considering the ‘third text’, meaning the novel as a whole, finished literary piece, understood in the sense that the two narrative blocks, “The Handmaid’s Tale” and the “Historical Notes”, together with other prefatory materials, yield a third, or public level. A consideration of public narration enables a more detailed exploration of the relations between narrators, author and readers. Atwood’s structural choices play a crucial role in shaping the individual reader’s psychological response, and allow us to envision her socio-political and feminist perspective more clearly. Under the light of
the ‘third text’, the politics of verbal hygiene practices become even more perceptible.

The stylistic choices which contribute to affect the readers’ response to the instances of verbal hygiene in the novel include the title, the order in which the narrative blocks appear (and the symbolic space dedicated to each), and the narrative point of view. I will discuss the last among these. In the two blocks comprising the novel, we readers are constructed as second-degree narratees to the intradiegetic ones. The Handmaid’s account presupposes other dissidents or escapees to whom she is telling her tale—the “you” in her first person narration:

But I keep on going with this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story, because after all I want you to hear it, as I will hear yours too if I ever get the chance, if I meet you or if you escape, in the future or in Heaven or in prison or underground, some other place . . . . By telling you anything at all I’m at least believing in you, I believe you’re there, I believe you into being. Because I’m telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are. (HT 251, emphasis added)

The engaging element observed in passages like this is striking. Firstly by directly addressing her narratees, the narrator prompts the ‘readers’ into sympathetic, interactive response (“I will hear yours too”) and identification with the “you”. The repetition of “believe”, “tell” and “you” adds rhetorical strength to the excerpt and heightens the readers’ affective response. The passage also conveys the utopian desire for “some other place” where a better form of human interaction will be possible. The utopian impulse is marked, in the Handmaid’s story, by a desire for a space where narrative can flow and linguistic exchange exist outside the constraints of the dystopic space of Gilead.

In sharp contrast to the Handmaid’s, the academic discourse of the “Notes” generates a negative response from readers. As noted by Murphy, they are initially shocked by the triviality of the conference announcements given just before the Professor’s speech. Lacking the rhetorical sophistication and emotional appeal of the Handmaid’s personal account, the latter consists in a collection of gross misinterpretations, misogynistic asides and jokes, and instances of academic vanity and false modesty delivered to a passive audience. All this is rendered in a type of prose that, by being punctuated by worn out expressions and the editorial “we”, sounds stereotyped to academic readers, increasing the distance between Pieixoto and his audience and conveying an authoritarian and possessive attitude. Finally, Atwood’s satirical parody on the academy is also reflected in the choice of proper names for the conference venue. Drawn from Inuit vocabulary, “University of Denay, Nunavit” echoes “deny none of it” (Bergmann; Murphy; Staels). In brief, the “Historical Notes” cause readers to become critical, suspicious of “the clearer light of [the Professor’s] own day” (HT 293).

The story plot in the novel is one of gender-polarized, conflicted linguistic authority. It crosses (and is crossed by) the “plot of narration” to the extent that the narrative embeddings also stage verbal hygiene tensions,
in a thematic/structural continuum. As a commentary on verbal hygiene, the novel indicates the pervasiveness and the intricate degrees of mediation of this cultural phenomenon. As for its effectiveness, it suggests that verbal hygiene is not totally effective, as there is always space for contestation; and that linguistic struggles are contextual and therefore political. There is no such a thing as a neutral space where linguistic interventions (feminist or otherwise) can float. This is relevant because, if on the one hand, it implies that radical interventions are liable to be co-opted, on the other the possibility of re-appropriating and re-contextualizing discourses is indicated. Framed in the academic context, the linguistic utopia constructed by June/Offred partially loses its impact. Nevertheless, the ‘third text’ makes the parody of the historian’s discourse more prominent, and ‘restores’ the feminist meanings suppressed by the academic discourse.

Finally, I want to return to June’s/Offred’s desire for “some other place” of narration. I define this desire as utopian because it is critical of ‘her’ present and reveals an alternative world-view. And as feminist because it is marked by gender, and critical of patriarchy. Atwood’s novel reveals a critical attitude by constructing June’s/Offred’s utopia as contextual, ideological, and liable to co-optation. This version of a feminist “elsewhere” incorporates the contradictions between a woman’s assertion of her desire and the dystopic contingencies which generate and surround it. In addition to this form of critical utopianism, the novel renders another version of the feminist “elsewhere”, hinted at in the last words of the Handmaid’s account: “And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else into light” (HT 277). Although this end gives us no resolution, it evokes the space of and off narration: ‘of’ narration because it is where June’s/Offred’s voice comes from; ‘off’ narration because it is absent from the novelistic text. Such a space, where a woman’s storytelling is not only possible, but free from the male dystopic orders which constrain it, conveys the utopian paradox in the sense that the feminist “good” place of linguistic freedom is also the narrative “no” place.

V. Conclusion: Verbal Hygiene and the Feminist Dystopia

In his recent study about the role of language in literary dystopias, David Sisk argues that “language is so crucial to the dystopia that we are justified in labeling it a generic structural element: without its inclusion, a fiction cannot be considered a dystopia” (174). His hypothesis is problematic because if we take “language” in its broad meaning as the essential element in the composition of all fictions, Sisk’s point becomes too vague. And when “language” is understood as a thematic structural element in the construction of narrative plot, which appears to be what Sisk has in mind, his argument sounds unconvincing, as a number of dystopian works in which this is simply not the case come to mind. My own understanding regarding this issue is that language often, rather than always, surfaces in the literary dystopias as a key element in the construction of narrative con-
flict. As I have suggested with the readings above, when this happens, the conceptualization of verbal hygiene offers an illuminating way to approach the linguistic tensions and conflicts. I opened my discussion with the statement that dystopias are stories about language, and would like to close it by stressing that the theme of language in this literary genre is actually the theme of metalanguage, i.e., of value-loaded struggle over language. Just as the dystopias are markedly metafictional, so too they are markedly metalinguistic.

Deborah Cameron’s theorization of verbal hygiene has cast light on the pervasive cultural phenomenon relating to human beings’ concern with language and engagement in metalinguistic practices. Literary dystopias offer a privileged fictional space for the staging of this cultural phenomenon, and, in the feminist dystopias examined above, the linguistic practices are intricably linked to the construction and maintenance of gender domination, with language being depicted as an instrument of enforcement (at times, the very materialization) of a highly dystopic order. In an important essay entitled “Language, Gender, and Power”, Susan Gal states that “it is important to remember that domination and power rarely go uncontested” (175). The fictions studied above also focus on the liberating potential of language by showing women engaging in verbal hygiene practices which represent ways of resisting the male-dominant orders surrounding them. Their resistance in itself indicates that the effectiveness of verbal hygiene is represented in partial, limited terms. In a similar fashion, the women’s (re)action, as portrayed in Elgin’s and Atwood’s texts, is never entirely successful, or free from co-optation and/or reaction in the form of further verbal hygiene.

Issues of female identity, agency and authority inform the analysis of the fictional representations of verbal hygiene. Although the protagonists’ verbal hygiene enacted as escape from language in Lisa Tuttle’s story may ultimately entail the dissolution of identity (and risks a fall into inchoateness), it interrogates the centrality of language in the constitution of female subjectivity. Elgin’s Láadan novels are centred upon women’s agency as language-makers and verbal hygienists, while offering no delusions concerning the extent of this agency. Atwood’s text, in turn, displays hygienic impulses directed at the maintenance of authority (in extremist and liberal guises), and a woman’s resistance through narration. Considered together, the narratives help to expose the gender politics underlying verbal hygiene and raise readers’ awareness of the role of language as a key instrument in the construction of gender identities and relations.

The gender-polarized versions of verbal hygiene observed in the narratives reveal culturally embedded assumptions which tend towards maintaining or changing the status quo, as well as the visions of utopia underlying them. I have identified different manifestations of feminist “elsewheres” envisioned in relation to language. Elgin’s and Atwood’s novels similarly portray women working simultaneously within and against a male dystopic order, a contradictory position associated with the female feminist subject’s “elsewhere”. And Tuttle’s “The Cure” shows the feminist subject’s contradictory relationship with language by ambiguously rendering a woman’s
a-linguistic utopia by means of language, i.e., of narrative. All three texts are marked by the presence of another (more radical) version of the feminist utopian “elsewhere”, also related to the narrative “anticipatory consciousness” and its main motivation. Lisa Tuttle’s suggests the possibility of constructing radically new identities which are less defined in and by language. Suzette Elgin’s envision the paradoxical (because textually ‘absent’) space of feminist connectedness via language. Finally, Margaret Atwood’s evokes the space of female creativity, where an individual freely expresses her desire in an act of narration.

In the title of this paper I refer to the textual construction of feminist utopias of/f language, and my readings stress the distinction between the two fictional manifestations of feminist utopianism, indicated by the possibilities contained in the “of/off” dichotomy. While Tuttle’s “The Cure” presents a feminist utopia “off” language, in the sense that it is literally a-linguistic and ineffable; Elgin’s Láadan novels and Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale render utopias “of” language because their feminist utopianisms are manifested by means of the construction of a women’s language and of a woman’s act of narration, respectively. Another way in which the of/off dichotomy can be perceived is in the sense that these fictions consist, simultaneously, in utopias “of” and “off” language. Firstly because the utopianisms they construct are materialized by means of narrative, and therefore, of language. Secondly because, similarly to the paradox contained in the term “utopia” itself, the elusive figures of the feminist “good place” ‘portrayed’ in them exist in the “no place” of narrative which exceeds the possibility of being encoded in language.

NOTES

1. With specific reference to science-fiction, Darko Suvin borrows Bloch’s concept of the “Novum” in order to define this metafictionality (ix). George McKay uses the term “doubled difference” for similar purposes (52). And Umberto Eco explores the idea of “self-voiding fiction”, literary texts which “demonstrate their own impossibility” by explicitly signalling their fictionality. He also associates this mode with science-fiction (1994, 81, 106).

2. Cf., for instance, the regulatory linguistic practices in Yevgeny Zamyatin’s We (1924) and George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949). This theme has triggered the interest of readers, among whom are Barnes (140–70); Meyers (193–209); and Sisk. Sisk’s book-length study on the topic has a specific chapter on “Language and the Feminist Dystopia” featuring discussions on Margaret Atwood’s and Suzette Elgin’s texts discussed here (107–35).

3. Although, in most cases, the feminist dystopias thematize gender-polarized linguistic struggles by equating the male principle with domination and the female with liberation, this is not always the case.
4. Male linguistic control over women appears, in one or more of these forms, in the following fictions: Burdekin’s Swastika Night (1937), Elgin’s “For the Sake of Grace” (1969), Sheldon’s “The Girl Who Was Plugged In” (1973), Charnas’s Walk to the End of the World (1974), Russ’s The Two of Them (1978), Vonarburg’s The Silent City (1981), Tepper’s The Gate to Women’s Country (1988). One of the most violent pictures of the silencing of women is the parade of crippled, mutilated and silent women in the patriarchal hell portrayed in Wittig’s Across the Acheron (1985, 79–83).

5. Actually, Elgin’s Native Tongue Series includes a third feminist dystopia, Earthsong—Native Tongue III (1994). Because its focus shifts away from the linguistic issues I am investigating, it will not be considered here.

6. Page numbers will be accompanied by the stories’ initials (C, NT, JR, and HT, respectively).

7. The fact that Native Tongue provided materials for a feminist dictionary and a critical anthology (Cameron, ed. 160–63) evidences its favourable reception in the context of feminist linguistics in the 1980’s and early 1990’s.


9. Florence argues that Láadan, the women’s language created in that novel, “has no radical structural function” in the text (Anderson, ed. 82). Andermahr, in turn, criticizes the novel for “fail[ing] adequately to address the relationship between language, ideology and political consciousness” (Griffin, ed. 123). Armit objects to it on the grounds that “the political implications of syntactic structures, which Elgin raises on a discursive level, are not concretised within the narrative form”. She proceeds: “the deconstruction of language as content is important . . . , but perhaps the deconstruction of language as form and structure is more significant” (Armit, ed. 135). Kramaré complains that “while the importance of the [women’s] language structure and construction is made very clear in the novel, there are too few examples of the specific language” (Barr and Murphy, eds. 185). My own reading below indirectly responds to these claims.

10. The untenability of these assumptions has been exposed by feminist critics. For excellent discussions of the problems underlying the direct equation of radical politics with avant-garde literary forms, see Felski, ch. 1, and Morris 126. From the perspective of linguists, see the “Introduction: Why is Language a Feminist Issue” in Cameron, ed. 1–28.

11. From now on, I shall refer to verbal hygiene without quotation marks.

12. Gender-related practices are discussed in Cameron, 1995, ch. 4 and 5.

13. Personal communication

14. Although Cameron does refer to literary texts (Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four and Shaw’s Pygmalion) in her theorization of verbal hygiene, she does so, expectedly, in relation to sociolinguistic practices. Newspeak is mentioned in a discussion of Orwell’s opinions on language (Ab)use of language: the relationship between linguistic manipulation and the totalitarian policing of thought (Verbal Hygiene 69–72, 148–55). Pygmalion appropriately opens a chapter about verbal hygiene for women. An excellent commentary on Verbal Hygiene from the point of view of sociolinguistics is James Milroy’s review (127–34). It is followed by a dialogue including Cameron’s and Milroy’s replies (163–66).

15. “Life without words was not life at all. Words were the basis and meaning of our friendship. Words brought us together and kept us close” (C 124–25); “We are composed of words as much as we are of flesh and blood and bone” (C 127).

16. The scenes featuring the narrator’s lover are either evocative of pastoral utopias or show a technology-free home utopia (C 123, 125, 131). In indoor scenes centred upon her linguistic
‘disability’, the buildings themselves (her lover’s study, the doctor’s surgery) become symbolic of the dystopic linguistic edifice, and she is always depicted gazing outside (C 126, 132, 134).

17. From the perspective of the women protagonists, who are afflicted by distinct linguistic handicaps, language surfaces as a barrier, rather than a mediation, for communication in these texts. Cf. Mark Medoff’s *Children of a Lesser God* (1980), Nell (US 1994, dir. Michael Apted), and *The Piano* (New Zealand 1993, dir. Jane Campion). Significantly, in two of these texts the ‘speechless’ female character is antagonized by a man in a paternal/professorial role, allowing readings as rewritings of *Pygmalion*. The films specially highlight the utopian quality of the ‘speechless’ scenes. So did the 1998 stage performance of *Children* (dir. Theodor-Cristian Popescu).

18. For a brief discussion, see Wiemar in Barr and Murphy, eds. 170–71.

19. Formal similarities are the narration made by a storyteller/writer who is also a character and who constructs us, readers, as ‘second-degree’ narratrices; the experience of a woman character whose story remains a ‘blank’ in the narrated discourse, the interpretative possibilities offered by the textual gaps (the blank canvas in “The Blank Page” and the space of experience beyond verbal language in “The Cure”).

20. This simplified version of Kristeva’s theory of subject and identity formation will suffice for present purposes. Her theoretical elaborations on the topic can be found in *The Ethics of Linguistics* (1974) and “From One Identity to Another” (1975), both collected in *Desire in Language* (1980), and in “Women’s Time” (1979), rpt. in *The Kristeva Reader* (1986). Leon S. Roudiez’s and Toril Moi’s introductions to these collections are illuminating.

21. Ernst Bloch theorizes the Not-Yet-Conscious in *The Principle of Hope*, vol. 1. And Julia Kristeva’s formulation of the “semiotic” in its double temporality is found in “From One Identity to Another”, where she discusses it in terms of a “distinctiveness” admitting of an uncertain and indeterminate articulation because it does not yet refer . . . or no longer refers . . . to a signified object for a thetic consciousness” (1987, 133, her emphasis).

22. The pronoun “you”, appearing twice on the third line of the story’s second paragraph, may also refer to a mare (C 123); and this character’s description includes an allusion to her “dog-brown, horse-brown eyes” (C 125).

23. Actually, a Kristevan reading of “The Cure” along these lines could be interrogated on the ground that the “semiotic” is not literally ‘silent’, but ‘agrammatical’. This argument can be countered if one views, as I am proposing one does, the character’s silence as representative of an ‘other’ to the social contract supported by language. This otherness destabilizes the ‘presence’ of language (materialized in the first person narrative), while generating textual elisions and gaps.

24. On silence as resistance, cf. Susan Gal, who challenges the notion that the silence of women is a marker of passivity and powerlessness: “Silence . . . gains different meanings and has different effects within specific institutional and cultural contexts, and within different linguistic ideologies” (172).

25. Mapping this strand of the feminist critique of language is beyond the scope of this paper. For discussions of it, see Cameron, 1990, 12–20; and Ehrlich and King (1994).


27. The cultural pervasiveness of this myth and some of its European manifestations are examined by Eco (1995). The tradition within second wave feminism of the “the dream of a common language” is discussed by Cameron (1992).


29. As opposed to the few literary texts actually written in the fictional language, like Russell Hoban’s *Riddley Walker* (1980). Eco (1995) and Sisk (1997) remark on the brief figurations of fic-
tional languages. In fact, A First Dictionary of Láadan (1983, rpt. 1985, 1988 as A First Dictionary and Grammar of Láadan) was published by Elgin separately. However, my argument will not treat this publication as it is centred in the fictional figuration of the women’s language.  
32. Atwood makes pervasive use of the metaphor of the reduction of women in The Handmaid’s Tale (8, 99, 110). For a discussion of this convention in feminist dystopias, see Lefau (71–75).  
33. The term “extradiegetic”, coined by Gérard Gennette, has been used in narratology to speak of the outermost level of a narrative (as opposed to “intradiegetic” and “metadiegetic”), usually “author-narrators” inscribed in the text (Wales). Nevertheless, my use here also incorporates more recent theorizing in its consideration that an outermost narrative level need not be textually inscribed.  
34. See Fairclough on power and the ideological workings of language and Bakhtın on language as a site of struggle. Bakhtın’s analyses of the constant tension between the centripetal and centrifugal forces, tending towards unitary language and heteroglossia, respectively (271–72), offer an interesting parallel to the major linguistic tensions in The Handmaid’s Tale.  
35. See Andriano 90; Booker 168–69; Hogsette 270; and Staels.  
36. The manuscript is referred to as “the soi disant manuscript”, “our saga” and “this item” (HT 282–83). Appended clauses also show his apprehension: “I hesitate to use the word document” (HT 283, emphasis in the original), or “this document—let me call it that for the sake of brevity” (HT 285).  
37. Cf. also Staels and Hogsette.  
38. Similarly, the excerpt on p. 37 addresses the “you” (intra- and extradiegetically) as the person a letter or a love song is written to, thus generating intimacy and confidence.  
39. For a lengthier discussion of the function of the epilogue in terms of reader’s response, see Hogsette.  
40. Lanser’s term, in contradistinction with the story plot (625).  

REFERENCES


Barr, Marleen and Murphy, Patrick, eds. Women’s Studies—An Interdisciplinary Journal 14 (2) 1987. [Special Issue: Feminism Faces the Fantastic.]


