Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor. *Postmodern Utopias and Feminist Fictions*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2013.

BY ROBIN SILBERGLEID
Michigan State University, East Lansing

Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor’s *Postmodern Utopias and Feminist Fictions* uses feminist standpoint theory as a way to think through the radical potential of utopian literature produced in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Grounded in feminist philosophy, her study asks whether a shift from *logos* to *eros* might in fact allow for a utopian vision derived from hospitality and community rather than individual interest. Such utopian consciousness, she contends, advances the work of feminist narratology as well. Toward this end, she concentrates on the figure of the “speculative traveler,” akin to the idea of the nomad or wanderer. That is, building on the work of writers like Toni Morrison who emphasize exclusion as a central feature of paradise, Wagner-Lawlor contends that “Speculative standpoint gestures toward a vision of utopia defined not in terms of inclusivity and exclusivity, but in terms of a radical hospitality that admits of—in fact celebrates—imagination’s political and ethical possibilities” (19). The production of art—particularly speculative fiction—is central to this political work.

Building from a solid foundation of feminist epistemology set up in the introduction, the first chapter considers the classic works of Angela Carter and Octavia Butler, alongside Nalo Hopkinson’s more recent and less-discussed *Midnight Robber*, within the generic context of bildungsroman. Actively interrogating the genre’s historical focus on male subjectivity and patriarchal ideology, Wagner-Lawlor concentrates on the plot of these post-apocalyptic novels, astutely noting that instead of a happily normative marriage and productive birth, these novels choose to end with actual or attempted rape. This radical move necessarily calls into question “the symbolic fulfillment of conservative bourgeois ideals”
(53) in a typical bildungsroman and thus furthers the work that Rachel Blau DuPlessis famously characterizes as the feminist project of “writing beyond the ending.” As addendum to the discussion of plot, the chapter briefly references these writers’ complex use of narrative voice; however striking, at less than two pages, this observation would benefit from development and firmer grounding in theories of narrative and/or stylistics.

Chapter two offers a comparative discussion of novels by Jeanette Winterson and Margaret Atwood, in order to investigate the necessity of art and imagination for utopian vision. Looking to her formative work *The Passion* and the more recent *The PowerBook*, Wagner-Lawlor marks Winterson’s shift from nostalgia for an absent childhood home to the utopian possibilities of cyberspace. By contrast, she suggests that Atwood’s novels *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Year of the Flood* are much more skeptical about technology, positing “a world without an authentic respect for art generally is not a world worth living in, the worst kind of human dystopia” (67). Within the broader generic context of “speculative romance,” both novelists allow for an investigation of the tropes of sexuality and desire, literal and metaphorical reproduction.

More explicitly focused on the question of rewriting history, the third chapter continues its discussion of Jeanette Winterson, in *The Stone Gods*, alongside Ursula LeGuin’s *The Telling* and Doris Lessing’s *The Cleft*, to ask who has the authority to tell and how, with a particular focus on questions of gender and genealogy. As she puts it, “It almost goes without saying at this point that the underlying topic of much speculative and perhaps all utopian fiction is history—but so, too, is the topic of historiography” (121). Perhaps this chapter’s most noteworthy move, Wagner-Lawlor attempts to recuperate Lessing’s book from its reception as essentialist and anti-feminist, with “cartoonish versions of masculinity and femininity” (95); rather, in foregrounding the narrative frame of a fictionalized scholarly project, she claims that the book explores “the shifty interconnections of history, romance, and myth” (96).

In terms of an explicit exploration of hospitality for feminist vision, the strongest chapter of the book is arguably chapter four, which juxtaposes Susan Sontag’s *In America* and Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* as historical novels that engage “the myth of American
exceptionalism” and privilege that undergirds utopian vision (125). Taken together, the two books together isolate difference and diversity, rather than homogeneity, as critical to an American utopian project. Yet, in the end Morrison’s vision, she argues, “offers a more sustaining and optimistic sense of hope and possibility” (150), as it uses the example of Ruby, Oklahoma to work toward a model of “home that is truly hospitable” (152). Wagner-Lawlor’s analysis provocatively explores the alternative space of the Convent as an instance of imaginative sympathy and productive intersubjectivity.

Pushing the question of hospitality further, the final turn of the book is to consider Muslim feminist writers which, Wagner-Lawlor admits, “may be unexpected” (154). While such a focus admittedly offers a useful site of speculative standpoint that overtly challenges a Western investment in nationalism, this chapter feels less organically tied to the rest of the project, not only in its choice of writers (whose works would seem to be read in translation) but in its treatment of genre, as the author also expands the terms of her discussion to memoir. Given its distinct cultural tradition and implications for imaginative sympathy, this chapter might arguably have become the focus of a book project itself.

On the whole, Wagner-Lawlor’s Postmodern Utopias and Feminist Fictions offers a stimulating exploration of newer feminist speculative fiction, as it pushes us to consider the importance of the theme of hospitality and utopia as a communal, rather than individual, sensibility. Throughout the study, Wagner-Lawlor’s background in nineteenth-century literature enriches the analysis, lending important context and a broad view of generic development. While at times the book feels more comprised of distinct essays than a unified argument, for anyone interested in feminist utopian narratives, this project enacts its own “speculative” standpoint via persuasive readings of noteworthy texts by twelve authors—an exceptional starting point for looking back to classic examples and suggesting the direction of future work.