“You See, Children Were the – the *Raison D’être*”: The Reproductive Futurism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland*

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**Abstract:** This article argues that *Herland*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s influential 1915 utopia, ratifies and works to renew the ideologies of a white, racist, male-dominated heteronormativity through the body of the child. Through its obsession with the child, *Herland* enacts the “reproductive futurism” that queer theorist Lee Edelman recognizes as the heavily guarded, central constituting principle of heteronormative culture. Gilman’s text does not provide a new vision for America; rather, *Herland* enacts a renewal of the same constitutive fears that heteronormative culture seeks to displace onto the body of the child. Gilman’s text is, thereby, deeply implicated in the very patriarchal subjugation the author wishes to subvert and in the larger reproduction of a racist and heterosexist hegemony.

**Keywords:** Gilman, Edelman, *Herland*, Utopia, mothering

**Résumé** : Le présent article postule que *Herland*, l’utopie d’influence de 1915 de Charlotte Perkins Gilman, ratifie et travaille à renouveler par le corps de l’enfant les idéologies d’une hétéronormativité. Par son obsession de l’enfant, *Herland* met en scène le « futurisme reproducteur » que le théoricien queer Lee Edelman reconnaît comme le principe constituant central fortement protégé de la culture hétéronormative. Le texte de Gilman n’offre pas une vision nouvelle à l’Amérique. *Herland* renouvelle plutôt les mêmes phobies constitutives que la culture hétéronormative cherche à déplacer sur le corps de l’enfant. Le texte de Gilman est donc profondément intégré à la subjugation très patriarcale que l’auteur souhaite bouleverser et à la reproduction plus vaste d’une hégémonie raciste et hétérosexiste.

**Mots clés** : Gilman, Edelman, *Herland*, Utopie, maternage

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Charlotte Perkins Gilman, in her 1915 all-female utopia, *Herland*, attempts to imagine a new world in which the maternal role supersedes all other aspects of society. In the narrative, three male explorers, Vandyck “Van” Jennings, Terry Nicholson, and Jeff Margrave, discover an isolated land inhabited solely by women and children. To the astonishment of the men, Herland is a developed civilization, and through the “miracle” of parthenogenesis, or virgin births, the women have been able to sustain their society for hundreds of years (*Gilman, Herland* 57). As Herlander Moadine explains to the three astonished male explorers of Herland, “Here we have Human Motherhood – in full working use” (67). Gilman’s privileging of the female role has, in fact, led to *Herland’s* being considered a proto-feminist text. As Alys Weinbaum notes, despite a “few exceptions,” *Herland* is read as “subversive of entrenched patriarchal views and as a prototype for a society free of sexism” (81). Yet, Gilman’s feminism is troubled. While I agree with Jennifer Hudak that Gilman attempts to “rethink” issues of gender in *Herland*, in my view, Hudak’s suggestion that Gilman’s narrative envisions “a restructuring of the fundamental nature of the family and society at large” is problematic (48). Gilman’s vision, I suggest, is deeply committed to maintaining the “fundamental nature” of her society. The narrator, Van, notes, “You see, children were the – the raison d’être in this country” (*Herland* 53). The centrality of the child in *Herland* enacts the child-centric “reproductive futurism” Lee Edelman locates at the heart of heteronormative culture (21). Gilman’s text does not provide a new vision for America; rather, *Herland* enacts a renewal of the same constitutive fears that heteronormative culture seeks to displace onto the body of the Child. Moreover, as a consequence of its failure to envision a full transformation of familial ideology, *Herland* is deeply implicated in the very patriarchal subjugation the author wishes to subvert and in the larger reproduction of a racist and heterosexist hegemony.

**Heterosexuality and the Child: The Subjects of Herland**

After experiencing the series of cultural and natural disasters that isolated the Herland women from the society of men, the “miracle” of parthenogenesis provided Herlanders with the “dawn” of a “new hope” (*Gilman, Herland* 58). This “new hope,” the child, was immediately recognized as a central constitutive element of the new society. As Moadine explains to Van, “children in this country are the one center and focus of all our thoughts. Every step of our advance is always considered in its effect on them – on the race” (67). Indeed,
Van’s own observations confirm the centrality of the child: “From those first breathlessly guarded, half-adored race mothers, all up the ascending line, they had this dominant thought of building up a great race through the children” (95). Yet while Van initially suggests that the religio-political foundation of Herland was a “sort of Maternal Pantheism” (61), his later comments reveal that the mother was revered solely as a vessel of the true deity, the child: “No sole heir to an empire’s throne, no solitary millionaire baby, no only child of middle-aged parents, could compare as an idol with these Herland Children” (72). This is not a female-centred world, but one founded on the cult of the child.

Herland’s singular focus on the child is intimately connected to the underlying heteronormativity of Gilman’s text. Admittedly, Gilman repeatedly notes, throughout her text, that this is a community of women who do not experience sexual desire. As Ellador explains to her frustrated partner, Van, “We are Mothers, and we are People, but we have not specialized in this line” (125). The “line” to which Ellador refers is the line of sexual desire. The lack of desire evinced by the women in Gilman’s novel leads Val Gough to conclude that Herland presents “a lesbian-feminist vision of the nurturing and collective capacities of women” (197). Gough’s argument, though, is problematic to the extent that she equates a lack of sexual desire with same-sex relations. Conversely, for Weinbaum, Gilman’s text does not present a “utopian lesbian” (83); rather, she argues that Herlanders “occupy a liminal position” in relation to the categories of “‘homosexual’ or ‘heterosexual,’ ‘lesbian’ or straight” (102). Yet Weinbaum’s assertion of a “liminal” sexuality is also troubled, in that she fails to address the fact that bearing children, a central, constitutive demand heteronormative culture makes of its members, meant to ensure the maintenance of the status quo power structures that privilege heterosexuals, is the implicit, unquestioned, basis of existence for these “Conscious Makers of People” (Gilman, Herland 69). The women’s “rapid determination” upon discovering that men have entered Herland is that “[t]his may be a chance to re-establish a bi-sexual state for our people” (88). Heterosexuality is viewed as a return to a lost originary state, a fact that Herlander Zava confirms: “We have always thought it a grave initial misfortune to have lost half our little world” (79). Moreover, while Weinbaum notes that the acculturated Van “commits himself (at least for the duration of the novel) to a life devoid of heterosexuality” (99), Van’s desire remains firmly directed toward the opposite sex. As he emphatically states to Ellador, “I’d rather have you with me – on your own terms – than
not to have you” (138). I agree, then, with Susan Gubar that “[w]hile tenderness and friendship characterize the relationships between women in *Herland*, as they did in Gilman’s life, sexuality is fairly closely identified with heterosexuality” (197–8). The sexuality depicted in *Herland* is based on a decidedly heteronormative vision.

Herland’s focus on the child is intimately related to its assumption that heterosexuality is natural; and, although the erasure of men from Herland society put an end to heterosexual relations, it did not eradicate heteronormativity. The centrality of the child in *Herland* creates a fictional world that allows both for the enactment of the “reproductive futurism” that Edelman recognizes as the central organizing principle of heteronormative culture and for the inherent subjugation of other cultural models (21). As Edelman explains, the “fantasy subtending the image of the Child,” like the one rehearsed in *Herland*, organizes “communal relations” to such an extent that any resistance to the “absolute privilege” of heteronormativity is “render[ed] unthinkable” (2). Edelman notes that “[o]n every side, our enjoyment of liberty is eclipsed by the lengthening shadow of a Child whose freedom . . . terroristically holds us all in check and determines that political discourse conform to the logic of a narrative wherein history unfolds as the future envisioned for a Child” (21). The figure of the child thus “marks the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity: an erotically charged investment in the rigid sameness of identity” (21). Moreover, in Gilman’s narrative, this “investment in the rigid sameness of identity” has a decidedly racialized construction. In the novel, Van surmises that “there is no doubt in my mind that these people were of Aryan stock, and were once in contact with the best civilization of the old world” (*Gilman, Herland* 55). The child imagined in *Herland* is the fantasy of a specifically white hegemony whose identity the explorers are forced to assume.

In the earliest moments of the male explorers’ contact with Herlandians, as Van notes, the women are characterized as “frolicsome children” whose eyes were “as free from suspicion as a child’s who has never been rebuked” (17, 18). Yet this infantilization of the female sex is forcefully corrected in the narrative. From the outset of *Herland*, Van’s reminiscences about his encounter with the women reveals an unexpected, at least for the explorers, reversal of imagery surrounding the sexes: “It makes me laugh, knowing all I do now, to think of us three boys – nothing else; three audacious impertinent boys – butting into an unknown country without any sort of guard or defence” (23). Speaking with hindsight, Van repeatedly
characterizes himself and his fellow explorers in relation to Herland as “boys.” Significantly, it is their capture by “a regiment of old Colonels” that initiates the process of their infantilization (22). As Van notes, “I had the funniest feeling – a very early feeling – a feeling that I traced back and back in memory until I caught up with it at last . . . Jeff felt it too; I could see he did. We felt like small boys, very small boys” (21). When the men attempt to escape, Van describes their failure as a feeling that they were “lifted like children, straddling helpless children, and borne onward, wriggling indeed, but most ineffectually” (25). Moreover, under the control of the women, the infantilized threesome is subjected to the same subtle yet rigorous education experienced by all Herland children. The men, like the children of Herland, who “did not dream” that their pleasant daily experiences were pedagogically driven, are treated as children whom the Herland mothers work to educate (108). Van states that Ellador “always seemed to understand just what I wanted to know, and how to give it to me” (101). Van, like the children of Herland, was not aware he was being “educa[ed]” (108). Even later, after the men marry their chosen partners, they continue in their roles as children. Van describes his marriage to Ellador as a “coming home to mother . . . I mean the feeling that a very little child would have who had been lost – for ever so long” (139). In this society, there is room for two figures only: the child and the nurturer of the child, the mother. Incapable of being mothers, the male trio are forced to assume the identity of the child.

**Death and the Child**

In order to more fully appreciate the impact of a child-centric, heteronormative ideology on Gilman’s narrative, it is important to note, as Edelman does at length, that this “fetishistic fixation” is intimately related to a constitutive gap in the individual psyche. As Jacques Lacan argues, the Self is constituted at the moment of one’s mis-recognition of one’s own Othered body in the mirror as an “ideal-I” (“Mirror Stage” 76). On the one hand, this misrecognition allows the subject to form a vision of a coherent self; on the other hand, it is an identity that is based on an image that is outside the self. In this instant, and continuing throughout the subject’s life, the self’s experience of wholeness is simultaneously threatened by an intense fear of the possibility of fragmentation. As Edelman notes, in an attempt to negotiate this constitutive schism, the subject, unable “to merge with the self for which it sees itself as a signifier in the eyes of the Other,” must develop “various strategies designed
to suture [itself] in the space of meaning” (8). The inner child, projected into an endless future, is a site at which cultural socio-political discourse attempts to “suture” this unmanageable schism. Edelman explains that the child enacts “the governing fantasy of achieving Symbolic closure through the marriage of identity to futurity in order to realize the social subject” (14). The overarching demand to reproduce in a heteronormative culture reflects a demand for the child who will one day grow into an adulthood of promised wholeness and thus retroactively authorize the denial of instability in the present self. The child represents a nostalgic yet impossible desire for a self who, in the future, will “suture” the constitutive gap in the present self and thereby promises a future that holds both meaning and closure.

Importantly, Edelman points out, the repetition of the subject’s and the social order’s attempt to negotiate through denial that which remains “outside the logic of meaning” is closely aligned with the death instinct (10). Sigmund Freud writes that the “most obscure and inaccessible region of the mind” is directed by competing instincts of self-preservation and a desire to return to originary stasis or death (7). Significantly, the instinctual move away from the stillness of death is intimately related to the sexual instinct. Pointing to the reproductive function of what he labels “germ-cells,” Freud notes that “[t]hese germ-cells, therefore, work against the death of the living substance and succeed in winning for it what we can only regard as potential immortality, though that may mean no more than a lengthening of the road to death” (40). In effect, the reproductive instinct reflects a psycho-biological desire for immortality that is achieved by reproducing the self through the production of the renewed self, the child. While Freud’s views are problematic in the extent to which they naturalize heterosexuality, they nonetheless help to elucidate Herland’s obsession with the child.7 The child, “bound” to the death instinct, “enact[s] a logic of repetition that fixes identity through identification with the future of the social order” (Edelman 25–6). In other words, the heteronormative obsession with the figure of the child and the cultural demand that members reproduce, as is rehearsed in Gilman’s narrative, reflects an unending, and doomed to fail, attempt, through renewal, to deny the inevitable: death.

Death, throughout Gilman’s narrative, figures as prominently, as does the image of the child. Herland is a land that promises the death of the male: it is “a land of women – no men – babies, but all girls. No
place for men – dangerous” (Herland 7). Herland, as Van discovers, is, in fact, founded on the death of its male inhabitants. The men die first through war and natural disaster and then at the hands of the surviving females, who battle Herland’s remaining male slaves, the “would-be masters” of Herlandian female survivors: “There were many women and but few of these would-be masters, so the young women, instead of submitting, rose in sheer desperation and slew their brutal conquerors” (56). While the text does not explicitly characterize these “brutal conquerors” in racialized terms, Van’s comment that Herlanders were a “slave-holding people, like all of their time” leverages the racial valence of slavery in an American context and thereby codes these “conquerors” as black. Indeed, throughout the narrative, civilization is associated with whiteness and savagery with blackness. Herland’s white population “look[s] safe and civilized,” in contrast to the “hinterland” of “savages” that surrounds it (14, 4). The society of Herland is not only formed and maintained through the child but is also intimately related to the active slaughter of non-white males. Moreover, Van and his friends learn that it is not only the males that have been extinguished but also an assortment of animals and vegetation. For example, Herlander Zava informs explorer Jeff that Herland no longer has any horses because “[t]hey took up too much room” (49). Ellador likewise tells Van that she decided to become a forester after her discovery of a “big purple-and-green butterfly” that the women had been “trying to exterminate … for centuries” (101). In Herland, any living organisms that threaten Gilman’s utopian world of white motherhood is eradicated. Significantly, this underpinning of violence remains with Van long after he has left the community of women. As he notes in the initial moments of the narrative, other men, whether they be “self-appointed missionaries, or traders, or land-greedy expansionists[,] … will not be wanted, I can tell them that, and will fare worse than we did if they do find it” (3). Herland remains a “strange and terrible ‘Woman Land’” that promises death (4).

The relationship between reproduction and death that shapes the contours of Gilman’s narrative reflects an ambivalent relationship that Freud recognizes between the self’s instinct toward death and its instinct toward reproduction. Freud points to the oral stage of the organization of the libido, or sex instinct, that occurs in infancy, where “the act of obtaining erotic mastery over an object coincides with that object’s destruction” (54). As Freud explains, the death instinct may be influenced by the “narcissistic libido” to the extent that it may be “forced away from the ego and has consequently only
emerged in relation to the object” (54). The death instinct, then, as Freud tells us, at times “enters the service of the sexual function” (54). For the purposes of analysing Gilman’s text, what is critical is the fact that the death instinct and the sexual instinct can each operate in the “service” of the other, and that both ultimately point toward death. In terms of Gilman’s narrative, the violence of Herland’s origin and the destructive influence of that violence on Herland’s environment are intimately related to its drive to reproduce. In other words, the desire for the child within Herland reflects, not only an attempt to deny death, but also an unrelenting drive toward death.

The paradoxical relationship between death and the child is revealed in the initial moments of the trio’s imprisonment, when Van describes waking from his anaesthetically induced sleep. Van wakes “[f]rom a slumber as deep as death, as refreshing as that of a healthy child” (Herland 26). While Van’s awakening simultaneously recalls infantile memory and the experience of death, death is only fleetingly remembered, and the imagery then turns decidedly in the direction of the infant. Van arises “up, up, up through a deep warm ocean, nearer and nearer to full light and stirring air” (26). Van is born into Herland culture in the same moment that he recalls the “slumber” of death. In a moment that rehearses the tension between the competing instincts of reproduction and death, entrance into Herland marks a moment of pleasure and a fantasy of wholeness grounded in individual annihilation. This move toward a longed-for erasure of individual subjectivity is further reflected in Herlandian women’s communally determined denial of the trauma of individual mortality. In conversation with Van, Ellador is unable to comprehend the idea of “Eternity,” or “life, going on forever” (115). As Ellador states, “I want my child – and my child’s child – to go on – and they will. Why should I want to?” (116). In a world constituted around the figure of the child, individual subjectivity holds no value beyond its maternal role. Women do not fear death because they are culturally constituted as collective beings who are trained to repress individual desires and fears in favour of the interests of the children. When Van inadvertently presents Ellador with the concept of abortion, Ellador must run to the temple, “blinded and almost screaming,” in order to be cleansed (110). The death of the child, like the death of Herland culture, is unthinkable. In effect, Herland enacts the nightmare that is the perverse dream of heteronormativity: a refusal to recognize the inherent trauma of the inevitable death of the subject through a communal focus on the child.
Subjugation in (and outside) Herland

The “socialist community” of Herland, as K. Graehme Hall suggests, reflects Gilman’s interest in imagining a society in which women were valued as equal citizens (161). Gilman was an active spokesperson and author of a number of texts, including her often referenced *Women and Economics* (1898), which expound upon the value of women’s role in society. As Katherine Fusco explains, Gilman’s “primary aesthetic and ideological framework” is based on “her commitment to understanding people as the products of systems” (423). This structuring principle reflects Gilman’s view that women’s work in the domestic and private realms would only be “visible” and valued if it were properly organized and managed as was work in the public sphere (421). Certainly, Gilman’s interest in rethinking the connection between gender and societal roles is evident from the earliest moments of *Herland*, in the explorers’ evocation of the reductive stereotypes that surround women’s potential roles in their community. Upon first hearing of the possibility of an “undiscovered country of a strictly Amazonian nature,” Terry suggests to his fellow explorers that the women “would fight among themselves . . . Women always do. We mustn’t look to find any sort of order and organization” (*Herland* 10). In contrast to Terry’s view, Jeff opines, “It will be like a nunnery under an Abbess – a peaceful, harmonious sisterhood” (10). While the views of the two men diverge in terms of the underlying violence or peacefulness of the imagined community, both opinions are grounded in stereotypical views of women as irrational beings who are, therefore, incapable of the organization and management of a society. Indeed, most surprising to the trio of men is the obvious level of rational organization of the community. In their initial aerial sweep of the community Van exclaims, “But they look – why, this is a civilized country! . . . There must be men” (13). Although the self-proclaimed holder of the “highly scientific . . . middle ground,” Van is unable to imagine a developed, civilized community of women (11). Notably, much of the conversation the Herlanders have with the explorers works to affirm the women’s ability to manage and organize their resources and people and thus subverts reductive stereotypes. Gilman’s vision, as Fusco notes, is one in which women are “full economic and political participants in the society” (420). Indeed, Gilman’s egalitarian “collective” vision, a vision that Jeanne Connell associates with communitarianism, underpins the society of Herland (20). As Ellador states, she must “think in we’s” (*Herland* 127). Van expands on this vision of collectivity in his discussion of the socio-political
philosophy of Herlanders: “They themselves were a unit, a conscious group . . . As such, their time-sense was not limited to the hopes and ambitions of an individual life” (80). Yet, the narrative insistently pins the “hopes and ambitions” of Herland on the individual life of each child. As Van notes, “To do the best work [the women] had to specialize, of course; the children needed spinners and weavers, farmers and gardeners, carpenters and masons, as well as mothers” (68). The society of Herland is not structured according to the “collective good” of its female members but is predicated on the needs and desires of the child, and this severely troubles the suggestion of Gilman’s text as proto-feminist.12

Subjugation, a central tenant of patriarchy, is an inherent feature of Gilman’s “radical” envisioning of community and is intimately related, as Edelman’s discussion of reproductive futurity makes clear, to the authority of the child, and as such, has dramatic consequences for the autonomy of Herland’s mothers. Even though parthenogenesis provided all women with the ability to bear a child, the process is highly regulated. In an effort to maintain a manageable population, as Herlander Somel notes, some women “voluntarily defer” motherhood and “solace [their] longing by the direct care and service of the babies we already had” (71). In addition, the community of women “appealed” to women with “bad qualities” on the basis of their “social duty . . . to renounce motherhood” (83). According to Somel, many of these women oblige; however, some women, women with a “disproportionate egotism” (in other words, a fully developed sense of self), go against the will of the community (83). However, even these women do not escape the regulatory force of Herland culture. As Somel explains to an astonished Van, only women “fit” for the “supreme task” of mothering are allowed to “rear” children, even though “almost every woman values her maternity above everything else” (83, 84). The women are not subjugated to men in the narrative, but their subjugation to the figure of the child enacts a cultural model that mimics patriarchal structure.

Given the underlying, culturally imposed subjugation of Herland, I agree with Hudak, who notes that the “thoughts as well as the actions of the Herlanders are regulated, in a Foucauldian sense, through each individual’s sense of social duty” (472)13; and nowhere is this regulation more evident than in the language of Herland. Significantly, Gilman’s utopian vision raises the issue of the authority of language in its opening moments. As Van notes, “[w]hole books full of notes, carefully copied records, first-hand descriptions, and
the pictures – that’s the worst loss” (Herland 3). The narrative emerges from a space of symbolic loss and thus gestures toward Gilman’s interest in destabilizing masculinist notions of language, a point that advocates of Gilman’s feminism often raise. But it is the Herlander language itself, a language that Van briefly mentions in the text, that offers critics such as Gubar evidence of Gilman’s radical feminism. Gubar argues that Herland’s language reflects “Gilman’s refusal of the phallic law of the father” (196) and though the author is

understandably vague about how a mother tongue would constitute a different kind of linguistic activity from the father’s law . . . [the] very word “Herland” implies that this language, mirroring the two-in-one of mother-and-child, would allow for simultaneous expression of the self as self and the self as object. (196)

Though Gubar’s argument no doubt reflects Gilman’s interests, it is important to note that the name “Herland” was created, not by the women, but by Terry, arguably the most chauvinistic and masculinist of all the male explorers (Herland 14). “Herland” does not provide evidence of a “mother-tongue”; rather, it illustrates the power of a phallic authority to signify the women’s community and, as “Herland” was the titular choice of Gilman, arguably the text itself. Relying on the work of Helene Cixous, Jennifer Hudson argues that Gilman’s text imagines an “écriture feminine”; a “feminine, non-linear, cyclical, and open discourse that holds nothing back” and therefore works to subvert the inherent subjugating binaries of patriarchal thought (7, 8). As evidence of the mother tongue, Hudson points to Van’s description of the Herlandian language as “an absolutely phonetic system . . . not hard to speak, smooth, and pleasant to the ear” (11). Yet, despite its imagined fluidity, this mother tongue does not escape the subjugating influence of the child. As Van notes, “[t]he language itself, they had deliberately clarified, simplified, made easy and beautiful, for the sake of the children” (Herland 103). The figure of the child serves as the structuring principle of Herlandian language, a fact that has dramatic consequences for the dynamics of power within Herland.

Gilman’s imagining of a mother tongue, a language predicated on the authorizing presence of the child, works to affirm the subjugating authority of the child, not the mother. As Michel Foucault argues, “in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number
of procedures, whose role is to avert its power and its dangers” (216). Discourse, of which language is a primary component, is a mechanism of power through which society implements control of its subjects. Moreover, Foucault reminds us that the psychoanalytic theory of Lacan has proven that language and subjectivity are inex-tricably related (216). Lacan suggests that “language, with its structure, exists prior to each subject’s entry into it at a certain moment in his mental development” (“Instance” 413). The self is born into and, through language as subjectivity, relies upon the “field of the Other” for signification of the self (“Alienation” 207). As Lacan says, “[t]he Other is the locus in which is situated the chain of the signifier that governs whatever may be made present of the subject” (203). In other words, the subject is an “effect” of the other’s signification. For the purposes of considering the nature of Herlandian language, this connection is “significant.” The child is the signifier, the ideal-I and the other upon whose authority language (and the subject) relies for its existence. This suggests, then, that subjectivity outside the image of the child, in Herland, is impossible. In Lacanian terms, the Herlander women occupy the position of “effect” in relation to the child.

Gilman’s inability to imagine a culture not constituted through the reproductive futurity of heteronormativity renders her utopia far from ideal. The Herlandian obsession with reproducing itself in its own infantile ideal, despite violent consequences for individual subjectivity, as I have suggested, reflects the racism of a white hegemony. The text’s privileging of whiteness connects directly to the child-centric foundation of the narrative though what Margaret Smith identifies as the most “frightening” aspect of Gilman’s utopia: “its unmitigated endorsement of eugenics” (166). As Van notes, “[i]n the first place, [the children of Herland] were a ‘pure stock’ of two thousand uninterrupted years” (Herland 121). And Herlander Somel confirms to the explorers, “We have, of course, made it our first business to train out, to breed out, when possible, the lowest types” (83). The Herlandian policing of the “purity” of their race is perhaps not surprising given Gilman’s interest in Social Darwinism. As Bernice Hausman outlines, during the time of Herland’s initial publication, Social Darwinism became a “catchall phrase designating those who relied on evolutionary theory to support their claims about society . . . especially with advocates for eugenics and limited immigration” (494). Herland, a purposefully didactic text, in fact, reflects views that the author espoused in numerous non-fiction writings (Mamigonian 67). For example, writing in a 1923 edition
of the *Forum*, Gilman laments the inclusive immigration policy of America, arguing that it has led to a “resultant flood of low-grade humanity” and she then raises the spectre of miscegenation (Gilman, “*Is America*”). It is the duty of white Americans, Gilman asserts, to protect their “stock” (“*Is America*” 1985) and therefore the nation, from the southern, dark-skinned “sea-weeds and mosses” of other races (1987). As Weinbaum notes, alongside Gilman’s viciously racist belief in eugenics, Herland is “distinguished from other nations by the singular fact that all Herlanders are descended from one mother . . . [and by] quite bluntly, their refusal to engage in interracial reproductive sex” (79). Gilman’s authorial interest may have been in eliminating the “problem of woman’s economic dependency on men,” but her child-centric narrative at the same time ratifies, and renews, the racism of a specifically white, heteronormative society (Nadkarni 225).

**Conclusion**

Although Weinbaum argues that Gilman’s depiction of a “liminal” sexuality inadvertently opens a space for queerness, Herland’s inculcation in the cult of the child allows no such deviation from its normative model. Moreover, while Laura Donaldson suggests that Gilman’s narrative offers a “carnivalesque inversion” which “helps to neutralize the patriarchal script” (375), I agree with Thomas Peyser, who points out that Gilman’s text merely reveals the “discontented mirror” of patriarchy (2). Through the figure of the renewed self, the child, the fictional world of Herland demands that both bodies and desire conform to the supposed naturalness of heteronormativity in order to deny the drive toward death that lies at the heart of its culture. Gilman’s privileging of the child may represent her attempt to deploy the child strategically as an instrument through which to challenge notions of gender; however, her vision nonetheless demands an investment in a particular view of the future that enacts an endless renewal of a white heteronormative consciousness that will brook no resistance. Gilman’s text, like the inhabitants of Herland, remains subjugated to the inner child of a white, male-dominated heteronormativity.

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Notes

1 Weinbaum does recognize a “small and increasingly vocal cohort of thinkers who have bucked the scholarly trend and begun the contentious task of excavating Gilman’s racism and nationalism” (62). For discussions of Herland as a proto-feminist text, see Donaldson; Deegan and Podeschi (esp. 25–33); Rose; Connell (esp. 23–31).

2 Weinbaum also notes that Gough’s assertion is based on a “historically decontextualized analysis” that obscures the actual sexual politics of the novel (83): “Gough grounds her interpretation of Gilman in a retrospective projection onto Herland of a gender-focused and sex-phobic feminism that had its heyday in the 1970s, not 1914” (83).

3 Weinbaum argues that Gilman’s depiction of a “liminal” sexuality, a sexuality that, in effect, occupies a space between heterosexuality and homosexuality, inadvertently opens a space for queerness. Weinbaum points to Van’s “queer feeling, way down deep” as well as his decision to “lov[e] up” as moments in which Gilman’s work “reveals continuities in the conceptualization of ‘queer’ over time and provides evidence of the historical sedimentation of the term” (qtd. in Weinbaum 101; 102).

4 Other critics who discuss the heteronormativity of Gilman’s text include Fisher; Mamigonian.

5 As Hudak states, Van’s emphasis on the “whiteness of the Herlanders suggests that he believes that only the ‘civilized’ northern races could create and inhabit this utopia, a belief which is not contradicted in the text or subtext of the narrative” (457). A number of other critics discuss the racism evinced in the text including Egan, who discusses the link between a “clean environment” and “clean race” in Gilman’s novel (77); Hausman; Smith; Nadkarni; and Fusco.

6 My suggestion that the Herland explorers are infantilized contrasts with that of Hudak, who suggests that the men “may struggle ‘manfully,’ but they are ultimately feminized” (462).

7 I recognize that Gilman, though deeply interested in psychology, would likely oppose a psychoanalytic reading of her work. As Moynihan notes, Gilman “held nothing but scorn for [Freud], his theories, and the movement he generated” (194).

8 Carter-Sanborn discusses the violence of Gilman’s text, noting that “[b]y recuperating violence into order and changing its name to motherhood, [Gilman] reinscribes a discursive link between violence and agency that American feminism is still hard pressed to break or bend” (28).
9 Hall argues that *Herland* represents Gilman’s “concretization of a socialistic community of women . . . [which has] brought us all a step closer to transforming through into reality, achieving a society where women are autonomous and self-actualizing” (161).

10 Li-Wen Chang agrees, suggesting that “Gilman proposes to emancipate women from the private so as to prove the false natures of patriarchal mythology of heterosexual norms and to challenge the definition of cultural intelligibility” (325).

11 Connell argues that “Gilman shares the communitarian vision that seeks to reinsert the value of community into everyday life, and to step beyond the liberal view of community as simply a means of enabling individuals to pursue their self-interest” (20).

12 My argument echoes that of Hausman who notes, “In Herland, the social organization of the sexes . . . depends upon, is indeed founded upon, the social organization of reproduction” (505). In Hausman’s view, the women of Herland are “unsexed, precisely because the economy of their country, as well as the economy of their personhood, can get along fine without ‘sex’” (505). While I agree with Hausman’s view that “[s]ocial relations, in Gilman’s feminist revision of evolutionary theory, cannot be separated from sexual embodiment” and that Gilman attempts to imagine a society in which the reproductive function of life “does not define the individual in her or his totality,” my interest lies in the extent to which Herland women, like the women of heteronormative society, are subjugated to the figure of the child (505).

13 Hudak notes, “The Herlanders are not so much obeying authority as they are policing themselves from within . . . The thoughts as well as the actions of the Herlanders are regulated, in a Foucauldian sense, through each individual’s sense of social duty; their common consciousness determines their common sense of purpose” (472). The Foucauldian sense of imprisonment, Hudak recognizes, recalls the nineteenth-century term of “true womanhood” which was invoked to describe a set of characteristics, such as “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity,” in light of which each woman would be judged “by herself, her husband, her neighbours and society” (Welter 152). “True Womanhood” (152), as Barbara Welter explains, held the nineteenth-century woman “hostage” to “all the values which the [nineteenth-century American man] held so dear and treated so lightly” (151).

14 Admittedly, the nature of *Herland’s* engagement with language is the subject of some debate. Weber suggests that *Herland* succeeds as a “feminist utopia” through Gilman’s narrative techniques, which “deconstruct . . . patriarchal assumptions . . . [and] traditional male narrative authority, until the power to name and construct reality passes into the hands of the Herland women” (179). Weber’s argument contrasts dramatically with that of Lant, who suggests that Gilman’s
novel reinscribes “masculinist values” (292): “by centering the
narrative on the issue of Terry and Alima’s uncertain sexual union and
by generating suspense through exploiting the potential violence of
that union – Gilman compromises the integrity of her own text” (292).

My argument echoes that of Lant who suggests that the central role
Terry’s attempted rape of Alima plays in the novel works to
compromise the feminism of Gilman’s text in that “the masculinist
values of patriarchy impose themselves on the feminist values of the
novel” (292).

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