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The Narrow Ethical Terrain of a Dystopian World: Attempting to Redefine Meaning in the
Continued Absence of Feminism

Works of climate change fiction frequently depict a dystopian world in which the few remaining inhabitants struggle to reconfigure their prior ways of understanding the world. Shari Evans's piece "'Not Unmarked': From Themed Space to a Feminist Ethics of Engagement in Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*" characterizes this struggle to locate meaning as a consequence of "themed spaces" — rhetorical and physical spaces in which everything is standardized, including the individuals within them. These spaces attempt to replace lived meaning with a manufactured theme, which inevitably leads to a learned inability to exercise agency. While Evans's article is in direct conversation with Atwood's novel, she also discusses a feminist ethics of care, which provides a framework through which *Gold Fame Citrus* can be examined. Through Jimmy's narration in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and Luz's centrality in Claire Vaye Watkins's *Gold Fame Citrus*, the limitations and possibilities of ethical engagement in a post-apocalyptic world are explored. Both of these novels display an ultimately flawed potential for ethical participation due to characters' reliance on ideologies that have been rendered meaningless by large-scale catastrophe. Furthermore, the persistence of gender divisions — as evidenced by Jimmy's misogynistic relationship to women and Luz's desire to embody the traditional image of motherhood — reveal that interpersonal connection is not a sufficient platform from which to assert one's autonomy and begin making ethical choices.

Oryx and Crake examines the persistence of gendered stereotypes and institutions in a post-apocalyptic world primarily through Jimmy, or Snowman's, narration. Jimmy oscillates between voicing his own past and narrating the current environment in which he struggles to survive; while Jimmy is central to the narration, he is not central to this dystopian world. By doing so, Atwood not only disrupts male centrality, but also uses Jimmy's fragmented narrative voice to reveal society's ethical failures and their consequences. Jimmy's own lack of ethical development is showcased throughout the novel via the ways in which he narrates his relationship to the two most prominent women in his life — his mother and Oryx. Snowman describes his childhood mainly in relation to his mother as she "...persists as a clear image, full color, with a glossy white paper frame around her like a Polaroid, but he can recall his father only in details..." (Atwood 49). Moreover, Snowman describes that at fleeting moments in his early childhood, "She was like a real mother and he was like a real child" (Atwood 30), which foregrounds this narrative world as one organized into themed spaces. According to Shari Evans, a themed space is one in which an individual's life is completely circumscribed, and that degree of restriction replaces real people and their ideologies with imitations of them. Evans further argues that "Themed space relieves its occupants of responsibility for engaging, reading, or understanding the world; it relieves them of ethical participation" (54). With this notion in mind, Jimmy's emotional distance from his mother and from himself reflects an inability to think beyond the confines of the themed spaces. In an effort to incite any kind of reaction out of his mother who otherwise had "...the flat voice, the blank eyes..." (Atwood 32), Jimmy would purposely upset her and "He loved her so much when he made her unhappy..." (Atwood 33). This interaction is not only a sinister portrayal of Jimmy's lack of ethical concern for his mother, but also demonstrates his misguided effort to create meaningful connections in his life.

Oryx presents a similar opportunity for Jimmy to engage with the world and his position in it in a meaningful way, but Atwood once again illustrates that love cannot guarantee ethical development in an individual. In the pre-apocalyptic world in which Jimmy and Crake first forged their friendship, they spent the majority of their time together watching "...disgusting and forbidden sites..." (Atwood 85) — executions and pornography being the most frequently viewed. However, upon seeing Oryx — a young girl in child pornography — Jimmy felt for the first time "...that what they'd been doing was wrong. Before, it had always been entertainment, or else far beyond his control, but now he felt culpable" (Atwood 91). The way in which Oryx "...looked over her shoulder and right into the eyes of the viewer — right into Jimmy's eyes..." (Atwood 91) ruptured the passivity he assumed to have as an observer. This moment represents a confrontation between Jimmy's assumed — or preferred — lack of agency and his active participation in an industry of child abuse and sexual exploitation. Oryx interrupts and complicates the image Jimmy has of himself, and continues to do so throughout their relationship. In contrast to Jimmy's formulaic approach to other romantic interests, "Oryx had neither pity for him nor self-pity. She was not unfeeling: on the contrary. But she refused to feel what he wanted her to feel" (Atwood 191). Oryx exercises a kind of emotional agency that frustrates Jimmy's misogynistic view of women as all having the same vulnerabilities and desires. Not only does Oryx represent a feminist unwillingness to conform to male hegemony, she exists outside of the themed spaces that Jimmy has grown accustomed to, and is therefore largely unrecognizable to him. Jimmy perceives Oryx as unpredictable precisely because she is able to make choices of her own volition. In this sense, the themed space infantilizes the people within them by significantly narrowing their lived experiences and prohibiting them from making decisions independent of the theme. However, Jimmy fails to understand the limitations

in his own perspective and instead thinks that “Any moment now [Oryx] would open herself up, reveal to him the essential thing...the thing he was longing to know. The thing he’d always wanted. What would it be?” (Atwood 314). Jimmy only conceives of his relationship to Oryx in terms of what she can give him, which exemplifies Jimmy’s absence of ethical behavior — an absence that resulted from theming and its removal of all models of ethical behavior.

Gold Fame Citrus also investigates why gendered structures and archetypes remain in a post-apocalyptic California, primarily through the protagonist Luz. Notably, this novel features a formal narrator who consistently provides a perspective or insight that Luz has failed to consider, which establishes her character as limited in significant ways. In contrast to Jimmy who functions as the narrator but not protagonist of *Oryx and Crake*, Luz is central to the narrative world that Watkins has created, and it is through her centrality that her ethical shortcomings are showcased. Moreover, Watkins frames the intricate relationship between gender and ethics mainly in terms of motherhood and intergenerational love. The faults of symbolically using children to inspire hope for a better future are immediately established as Luz Dunn, now twenty-five years old, was previously known as “Baby Dunn, born with a golden shovel in her hand, adopted and co-opted by [the Bureau of] Conservation and its enemies...” (Watkins 11). In other words, Baby Dunn was a political tool designed to encourage more effective water conservation efforts — all of which have failed as Baby Dunn, now grown up, is living in a desolate Californian landscape almost completely devoid of water. Watkins has primed the reader to recognize the problematics of basing a call to action on children as beacons of hope, and yet Luz recreates this exact scenario on an interpersonal scale. Upon observing what she assumes to be a neglected and abused child, Luz concludes that she can and must help this little girl. However, Luz’s conviction to rescue Ig is framed as a rare declaration of her will; “She was

beyond determining her own fitness and had been for some time. And yet, here she felt solid — righteous. She peered fiercely into Ray’s prophet eyes aflame. It had been such a long time since she believed in anything” (Watkins 45). This statement has conflicting undertones because it is simultaneously a feminist assertion of the ethical need to care for others, and a confession that she had long conceded the responsibility of determining right from wrong to her male partner Ray. Luz’s ability to act in an ethically meaningful way is limited because her actions are predicated on the notion that love is an effective platform to enact change. Similar to Jimmy in *Oryx and Crake*, love serves as a promising, but ultimately fractured, opportunity for Luz to engage with the new ethical terrain of a dystopian world.

Luz’s capacity for ethical participation is restricted insofar as she is reliant on paradigms of meaning that were formulated pre-apocalypse; her desire to recreate a nuclear family of her own is an effort to fashion a sense of purpose and belonging out of a structure that is now devoid of significance. The role of mother and caregiver is an archetype of stability that functioned in the pre-apocalyptic world, and Luz relies on that same structure to provide stability in a world now ungovernable by manmade institutions. To that end, the love for Ig that Luz claims to possess is progressively revealed as a way in which to imbue her life with a sense of purpose — thereby marking her maternal relationship with Ig as performative. Once in the Amargosa colony, Luz’s lack of decisiveness, coupled with a strong desire to believe in something larger than herself, resulted in the formulation of a “...lie she needed badly, needed in order to put one foot in front of the other: the baby would never die” (Watkins 210). While Luz theoretically conceives of motherhood as an empowering role to occupy, she fails to perform the tangible responsibilities that are inherent in being a caregiver. Luz maintains the belief that Ig is invulnerable to danger in order to keep her clear conscience, all the while leaving Ig in Dallas’s

care. Dallas remarks that ““Ig was with me — she always was then. Luz root-gone and derelict”” (Watkins 273), which solidifies Luz as uninterested in the ethics of care that motherhood demands of its participants. Furthermore, the disparity between the label of mother and the actuality of being a mother signifies that motherhood is no longer serviceable as a role that imparts importance to an individual. Luz’s continuing desire “To believe in cause and purpose” (Watkins 320), rather than anything tangible epitomizes her ethical limitations — meaningful action cannot be articulated or carried out by someone who prefers fantasy over reality.

Although Jimmy and Luz operate from different positionalities, both of these characters demonstrate an unwillingness to participate in the world as it actually appears; it is much easier to remain within the walls of ignorance or idealism than it is to come to terms with the disastrous state of the world. Jimmy and Luz want to feel as though they have agency, but neither is prepared for the responsibilities that accompany that agency. Ultimately, in order to be ethical, one must make choices for themselves and be fully able to navigate their consequences. This convoluted relationship with agency is a characteristic part of what it means to be human, which is why both Jimmy and Luz feel familiar and legible to readers. These characters reflect the ways in which society and its narratives become internalized, and it is through people that the consequences of large scale ethical failures play out. Jimmy and Luz only come to learn about their world when they personally experience its failures. Jimmy’s loss of his mother and Oryx revealed to him his lack of agency, just as Luz’s failure to provide and care for Ig revealed her lack of autonomy. In both novels, love constitutes an initial hope for ethical engagement, but that platform is insufficient because it assumes that love has a fixed ethical dimension. Ethics are fluid and must therefore be consistently defined and redefined, especially in response to an ever-changing world following a major disaster.

While *Oryx and Crake* and *Gold Fame Citrus* feature different focal points, both of these dystopian novels showcase that gendered divisions have remained following a major catastrophe, which heavily contributes to the survivors' inability to adapt to a world that is no longer recognizable to them. As Shari Evans highlights, the post-apocalyptic landscape presents new ethical challenges and requires new ethical considerations, but both Jimmy and Luz find that when forced to rely on their intellectual resources, neither can act effectively. The love that Jimmy felt towards his mother presented a break in the monotony of themed spaces, and yet he failed to interrogate or cultivate that profound sense of something missing. Oryx presented Jimmy with a perspective that contradicted his own, to which he similarly responded with minimal engagement so as not to rupture his own world view. Luz's reliance on the familiar role of mother to imbue her life with meaning not only reproduces the notion of caregiver as a distinctly feminine role, but signifies her reluctance to look inward for a sense of purpose. Ethics have gendered dimensions in both Atwood and Watkins's imaginings of the world post-apocalypse, which is a testament to how deeply entrenched sexism and gender divisions are in the pre-apocalyptic world. *Oryx and Crake* and *Gold Fame Citrus* make a feminist critique by highlighting sexism as a precondition and forewarning of societal collapse.