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WRITING FEMINIST FUTURES
Connecting Form and Meaning in Popular Speculative
Fiction for Women

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ABSTRACT

Suvi Parhankangas: Writing Feminist Futures: Connecting Form and Meaning in Popular Speculative Fiction for Women
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The thesis analyses how three recent works of popular speculative fiction construct their ideologically feminist message. *The Power* by Naomi Alderman, *The End of Men* by Christina Sweeney-Baird, and *Dietland* by Sarai Walker all create feminist utopias that engage in social critique of contemporary society. Their feminisms are influenced by fourth-wave feminism and include recognisable connections to current public discussions. However, the novels' subversive societies only focus on the effect of gender on social hierarchies of power, omitting the intersectional examination of other factors influencing the position of a group or an individual despite introducing characters identified as belonging to marginalised groups. The feminisms introduced by the novels therefore follow a mainstream understanding, instead of suggesting new or controversial ideas.

All three novels reverse gender roles and place women in previously male-dominated positions of power. Their feminisms question the stability and validity of the patriarchal power hierarchies in contemporary societies. The novels connect this feminist message to their form by using narrative tools recognised as typical for fiction written by women, particularly their voice and narrative situation. To instil familiarity within their subversive stories the novels borrow elements popularised by chick-lit and include visual breaks in the narrative. The paratextual elements further contextualise the novels as social critique to ensure a feminist reading. The connection between form and meaning supports authorial intention over the reading of the novels and the interpretation of the feminisms of the novels as intended, allowing for their ideologies to become accessible to a wide readership.

Keywords: speculative fiction, feminist utopia, feminism in literature, feminist literary criticism

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TIIVISTELMÄ

Suvi Parhankangas: Writing Feminist Futures: Connecting Form and Meaning in Popular Speculative Fiction for Women

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Pro gradu analysoi kolmen viihteellisen spekulatiivisen romaanin tapaa rakentaa feministinen ideologia. Naomi Aldermanin *The Power*, Christina Sweeney-Bairdin *The End of Men* ja Sarai Walkerin *Dietland* tarkastelevat kriittisesti nyky-yhteiskuntaa feministisen utopian kautta. Niiden feminismit pohjaavat neljännen aallon feminismille ja viittaavat tunnistettavasti tämänhetkiseen julkiseen keskusteluun. Romaanit kuitenkin keskittyvät yhteiskuntakritiikissään vain sukupuolen vaikutukseen sosiaalisten valtasuhteiden määrittäjänä eivätkä tarkastele intersektionaalisesti yksilön tai ryhmän positiota, vaikka identifioivat osan hahmoista marginalisoituihin ryhmiin. Romaanien rakentamat feminismit seuraavatkin valtavirtaista feminististä ajattelua eivätkä tuo siihen uusia tai vielä kiistanalaisia näkemyksiä.

Jokainen kolmesta romaanista kääntää odotetut sukupuoliroolit pääläelleen ja asettaa naiset patriarkalisessa yhteiskunnassa miehille tyypilliseen valta-asemaan. Niiden feminismit kyseenalaistavat nyky-yhteiskunnan hierarkian vakauden ja oikeutuksen. Romaanit tukevat feministisiä ideologioitaan käyttämällä kerronnassa ääntä ja kertojaa naiskirjallisuudelle tyypillisellä tavalla. Kumouksellisen juonen rinnalla romaanit hyödyntävät erityisesti chick-lit-kirjallisuudesta tuttuja visuaalisia elementtejä luomaan tunnistettavuutta. Parateksti sekä kirjojen kannet kontekstualisoivat romaanit yhteiskuntakriittiseksi naiskirjallisuudeksi vahvistaen niiden feminististä luontaa. Muodon ja viestin yhdistäminen tukee tekstin intentiota ja tekstien tulkintaa feministisinä, mikä mahdollistaa romaanien ideologian leviämisen laajalle lukijakunnalle samankaltaisena.

Avainsanat: spekulatiivinen fiktio, feministinen utopia, feminismi kirjallisuudessa, feministinen kirjallisuudentutkimus

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1. Introduction

What if the social norms we've learned to live by were to suddenly shift and the world became controlled by women? Would the result be a more just society, or would the power hierarchies remain the same, only with a different group being oppressed? How would the ones losing their privileges react to the fall of the patriarchy? Three contemporary novels, *The Power* by Naomi Alderman (2016), *The End of Men* by Christina Sweeney-Baird (2021) and *Dietland* by Sarai Walker (2015), all present a different answer to these questions, imagining speculative (but not-so-distant) futures where gender dynamics in society drastically change. Each includes its own interpretation of contemporary feminism and creates an outline of how that ideology would manifest itself in society. Despite their popularity and critical acclaim, these novels have enjoyed only very minimal academic interest. This may be due to their position in the literary field: they are written by women, deemed as written *for* women, and marketed as popular literature, while academia still largely focuses on canonical authors, who are overwhelmingly male (Bloom).

Yet, this does not mean these novels do not have a larger impact on society. All literature has the potential to change the minds of readers, and even more so when it presents a clear, ideological message. The question then becomes how, and to whom, this message is presented. More women than men read books, women spend more time reading books than men, and more women than men read books by women (Global English Editing, Sieghart). Romance literature, which is almost exclusively marketed to women, is the genre most sold and read in the world (Global English Editing). The combined overall copies sold of the Harry Potter series make it the most popular fiction in the world, but ironically the author's first name Joanne was replaced by initials J. K. on the publisher's insistence in order to attract more male readers (Polland, Amanpour). Because the novels at the centre of the thesis are read by a wide audience, their message has the potential to spread worldwide. *The Power*, *The*

End of Men, and *Dietland* draw from both contemporary feminism and popular women's fiction in their content and form, which makes the popular feminist message each novel creates readily accessible to a large audience of readers.

To frame the feminism(s) of the novels, an overview of fourth-wave feminism and a brief history of feminist literature and literature written by women is presented. The second chapter analyses how various themes in the novels pull from contemporary feminisms to engage in the discussion outside of themselves and are able to introduce them to the reader. The third chapter analyses how the narrative structure of the novels, each including multiple narrators, contributes to the construction of the feminisms presented and provides for multiple opportunities for relatability, increasing the potential for reader engagement and therefore the accessibility of the novels' ideologies. The fourth and final chapter portrays how the visual and paratextual elements of the novels link them to feminist literary canon and the tools of fourth-wave feminism, presenting the reader with already familiar elements and therefore further facilitating their feminist reading and underlining their message.

Feminism in the fourth wave and the three novels

Literature is a part of the society it emerges from and can either reflect the hegemonic values or offer alternatives. The three novels under analysis oppose patriarchal norms and create their own ideologies by using discussions from contemporary feminism(s). Kimberle Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" in 1989 to emphasise the biased perspective of social justice discourse, where the oppressed subject was most often identified as a white woman. It has since developed into mainstream thinking within many fields of academia (Carbado 811) and informs the fourth wave of feminism to an extent that it is often called intersectional feminism. Intersectionality seeks to map societal factors affecting the subject's position in that society and makes visible different structures of power that influence an individual's life in multiple, simultaneous ways. Often confused with the concept of double-

jeopardy, or the understanding that an individual may be experiencing more than one oppressive factor, intersectionality recognises privileges as well (Carbado 814). Intersectional feminism focuses on gender, attempting to identify how different other social factors may influence the experience of a person or group who is experiencing prejudice or discrimination due to their gender. Some examples: statistically white women out-earn women of colour and women of immigrant background. Women of lower social classes have less freedoms than their wealthier peers. Sexual and gender minorities experience discrimination and violence that cis-heterosexuals do not. Women with disabilities face hardships able-bodied women do not. By including the previously marginalised social groups, intersectional feminism has attempted to right some of the wrongs of the previous waves by positioning all possible social categories as equally important to examine (Carbado 812), and answer to the public backlash of previous waves of feminism.

Although Kim Loudermilk questions whether the intentions of this public criticism towards feminism was ever to improve the movement itself, or rather to undermine its efforts by focusing on any minor flaw, it is clear that the fourth wave explicitly states the women's issue as an intersectional one. No single experience of being a woman is lifted above others, and each deserves its voice to be heard. Second-wave feminists decried the use of the word 'gender' rather than 'women' when speaking of the focus of the movement in mainstream media as they saw it as an attempt to again make men the focus of the question rather than the rights of women. Intersectional feminism intentionally chooses to use 'gender', not because it is less concerned with women's issues, but because the word is more inclusive to gender minorities such as transgender people and those identifying as non-binary. Roxanne Gay, however, argues that because the media has maintained the message of essentialism – the idea that biological sex determines gender – for so long, the aims of feminism have been misunderstood as well (89) as an attempt to create freedoms and rights for women at the cost

of men's rights. According to Gay this "doesn't allow for the complexities of human experience or individuality" (90), but actually appears as the opposite of the message that intersectional approach to feminism is attempting to foreground.

As more subjects of oppression are recognised, the feminist movement has become even more fragmented than before. Without an understanding that there is power in bringing these diverse groups together to explore the intersections of marginalisation and discrimination, the collective power of the movement can be lost and its transformative impact remain minimal. Still, it is perhaps more useful to speak of feminisms in plural. As more space is allowed for different representations of feminisms, they can coexist together instead of in opposition to one another. More emphasis has also been given to the question of who is allowed to speak for a group's experience: intersectional feminism attempts to lift diverse voices, and prominent activists refuse to give statements on behalf of other identity groups. Then again, marginalised and discouraged groups do need allies, people who themselves may benefit from the status quo but realise that those privileges only exist at the cost of someone else's freedoms being undermined, and only as long as they themselves conform to the existing norm hierarchy. Rachel Solnit equates misogyny to racism as it can "never be adequately addressed by its victims alone. The men who get it also understand that feminism is not a scheme to deprive men but a campaign to liberate us all" (123). Contrary to the common misconception, feminism also scrutinises and attempts to disrupt societal structures affecting men negatively because of their gender. The often-repeated mantra of intersectional feminism is that by changing the society to better include the marginalised, the outcome is a better experience for all.

What truly separates the fourth wave from its predecessors is its methodology: an important tool for the dissemination of intersectional feminism is the internet, along with social media. The accessibility of these digital spaces has allowed for a new collectivity: for

the marginalised to create spaces exclusive for them, for the collection of stories and experiences, and for coming together to focus on a single issue no matter your background. A recent example of this is the emergence of a subreddit to help women affected by changes in law in several US states to limit access to abortion (Verma). Women organised informally to help those in need of abortion by providing transportation to a neighbouring state in addition to financial and emotional assistance. Another example is the Everyday Sexism Project, launched by Laura Bates in 2012 to collect the experiences of women around the world. The original project developed into a book, and the website currently has 25 versions for different countries, still collecting entries. As individual instances they have not instigated change or formal investigations to the reported incidents, but the thousands of stories as a collection have already influenced the training of public office holders and prompted public awareness campaigns (Cochrane 46). The democratisation of the movement through the internet also aligns with the principle of rejecting a single spokesperson and allows for individuals to create their own platforms around an issue of their choosing.

To be clear, this is a description of the theoretical understanding of the aims and functioning of fourth-wave feminism. The real-life experience may vary greatly, as with any social movement comprising of unofficially organised individuals shortcomings are to be expected. Many campaigns are organised without a governing organisation and mistakes may happen, but unfortunately these issues are often reported in the media as failures of feminism without further analysis. The actions of one woman are therefore generalised as exemplary of the failures of the entire gender. Any progress is progress, however, and while some discussions still echo the 1980's in saying women are 'equal enough', feminism is not something that is being abandoned. Solnit explains this contrast in views from in- and out-group perspectives through a parable: "That so much change has been made in four of five decades is amazing: that everything is not permanently, definitively, irrevocably changed is

not a sign of failure. A woman goes walking down a thousand-mile road. Twenty minutes after she steps forth, they proclaim that she still has nine hundred ninety-nine miles to go and will never get anywhere” (110). The discouragement is logical from the perspective of the privileged group concerned of losing its previously uncontested power. However, Kira Cochrane shows how the attempts to silence protesters have instead empowered them, as the backlash has often proven the very injustice being campaigned against (50). For the women, men, and others driving change, any advancement is a positive step forward and a new line to protect. These positions are in constant movement for different groups and different feminisms.

The Power, *The End of Men* and *Dietland* all present a speculative future where these incremental changes happen in a short time period, eventually resulting in a complete reversal of gender dynamics in society. Each novel begins in a setting recognisable to readers as close to the contemporary reality, but after a triggering event women gain positions and power previously held predominantly by men. The immediate response to change and its aftermath show contrastive attitudes towards gender and power relations in society from men and women. Not all change is positive, and many men experience oppression similar to women in contemporary societies. Therefore, all of the novels treat gender not only as an identity but as a power relation and set the examination of these hierarchies as prerequisite to equality.

The Power by Naomi Alderman presents a world where the power dynamic between genders is reversed completely but without other structural changes, resulting in women holding an oppressive position similar to that of men in 21st century reality. This is made possible by the development of an organ near the collarbone called ‘skein’ that allows its bearer to give electric shocks at will through their hands. The organ only exists in those born biologically female. The men attempt to curb the progress through violence, oppression, and even forcible removals of the skeins. The women respond through violence, oppression, and

revolution. These events are referred to as the Big Change during the years immediately following the development of skeins. Eventually the world descends into Armageddon (referred to later in the novel as Cataclysm), which results in a complete reversal of gender roles. This is revealed through a frame narrative that occurs 5000 years after the events of the novel: male police officers and soldiers are unheard of, and men are the victims of gender-based discrimination and violence. As the novel does not present a transformation of power hierarchies, its feminism highlights the importance of dismantling oppressive societal structures and scrutiny of reasons behind gender-based violence in order to obtain equality between all genders.

The End of Men by Christina Sweeney-Baird imagines a world where gender dynamics are forever altered because of a virus outbreak that results in 90% of men being infected and killed. The immediate response is chaos, as almost half of the world's population dies within years, leaving gaps everywhere in society. While men's reaction is fear and desperation they are unable to act in a meaningful way to save themselves, and women are left to lead and execute recovery efforts even though most suffer from the loss of their family members. The world rearranges itself on an international level – Scotland and Northern Ireland separating from the UK, China falling to 12 female-led states after a civil war – and on a societal and personal level, as previously held expectations of families and career dreams are no longer relevant. As the very survival of humanity is at stake, measures are taken to protect the remaining few men and to better accommodate society for the now majority female population. The novel portrays women taking on roles previously held by men in the army, government, and many trades, and the adjustments made based on the decision-making of female leaders make for a safer society for both women and men. Thus, the novel portrays a feminist message that more inclusive practices and allowing for women to rise to their potential would lead to a better society for all.

Dietland by Sarai Walker follows two intertwining narratives: those of Alicia and Jennifer. While Alicia's story discusses gendered expectations for women on a personal level, Jennifer's is more speculative and imagines a societal shift in gender dynamics. During the novel Alicia is able to shed her negative body image and create a stronger relationship with herself and other women by distancing herself from oppressive societal gender norms. This change is reflected in her name: she chooses to go by Plum until she has become her ideal self, which eventually happens not because of her size has changed, but because size no longer defines her identity. Both names are used during the thesis according to the name Plum/Alicia uses of herself at the point of the novel under analysis. A parallel story follows Jennifer as she acts in revenge to gender-based violence by attacking men who have gone unpunished for crimes against women. The initial response of public outrage eventually becomes a movement which other women join in masses. As the novel ends at the beginning of the movement it does not describe whether any meaningful and permanent change in society forms as a result. Both storylines discuss internalised misogyny and while Alicia is able to disregard it through personal growth, Jennifer's story shows that societal shift is slow and incremental. The feminism of the novel promotes self-acceptance and actively working against oppressive attitudes and structures through collective action.

Women writing for women

"I am actually hopeful about the possibility that thinking and writing and debating and believing can make a difference. Otherwise I wouldn't have written a novel."

This statement from Naomi Alderman (in Jarvis 124) is echoed by women writing literature for centuries. As women were denied access to public discussion, writing literature became a way to participate in society. Of course not all texts written by women were intended as political, but in her contributions to feminist narratology Robyn Warhol identifies engaging narratives in Victorian women's texts (e.g. Gaskell, Stowe, Eliot) that don't appear in literary

works written by male authors, as they had “other public places in which they could, if they chose to, say something” (1989, 165). And this historical continuum of literature written by women and *for* women that attempts to engage and raise consciousness appears to be working. Loudermilk writes how women have reported finding feminism specifically by reading novels (60). Sarai Walker acknowledges Dorothy Bryant as a writer who introduced her to the potential of the feminist novel (Ping), affecting her decision to write *Dietland*. Literature engages the reader’s imagination, offers the possibility to see a potential reality different from our own, and encourages acting towards it. Solnit likens the potential of presenting new realities to the Pandora’s box: “what doesn’t go back in the jar or the box are ideas. And revolutions are, most of all, made up of ideas” (112). More novels are read than political pamphlets, and a popular novel has the potential to spread far and wide. Christine Jarvis argues that fictional texts “provide opportunities to challenge hegemonic positions on gender without determining the reader’s final interpretation of the politics” (122), allowing for the reader to interact with the ideas presented rather than simply receiving them as presented from a position of authority. This is what separates a feminist literary text from a feminist political text: it engages the reader to a discussion with the text rather than as receiver of a message. The method therefore also challenges the teacher-learner power hierarchy between the author and the reader, connecting the form of address to its message.

The study of these connections in feminist literary criticism, however, began as the analysis of male texts and their language. Notable works from the budding field include Judith Fetterley’s *The Resisting Reader* (1978), in which she argues that the American literary canon forces women as readers to identify as male, as the texts presume maleness as universal. Early feminist literary criticism concerns itself with analysing male dominance in literary works and literary canon and exposing the hegemonic male in language of literature, arguing that literature erases women and their experience. To counter this erasure, Sandra

Gilbert and Susan Gubar published *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) to examine the position of women as characters and authors in literature, which influenced the expansion of the canon explored in literary research. They also point to an even earlier example: Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* from 1929 criticises women's unequal position of society as having a negative effect on their ability to express themselves creatively. As first- and second-wave feminist thought influenced literary research, the question of female authorship and women's position in literature itself became a topic of research. Feminist literary criticism has evolved from the critical study of male canon to the deliberate inclusion of women's texts in research, and later to influence research on postcolonial studies and the development of queer theory. The word 'criticism' is thus important: the field has not only created a methodology but managed to instigate the very change it concerns.

Much like research, literature is also in constant interaction with the society it emerges from and can reflect but also advance social critique. Feminist utopia as a genre is particularly adapted to connecting ideology with imagination. Tatiana Teslenko identifies the difference between the traditionally patriarchal genre of utopias and its feminist iterations as twofold: a failure of mainstream utopias to imagine gender equality despite their extensive social reconstruction, and a portrayal of a stable reimagination of society where progress is already achieved, and therefore unnecessary (3, 23). A feminist utopia is functional, reacts to the sexism of the "real" patriarchal world (168), and offers a possibility for communication between reality and fiction, which makes its ideology visible and presenting "what could be" (173). Teslenko describes the last of Gershuny's three phases of feminist utopia – criticism, transformation, and transcendence – as creating an "imaginative and conceptual space between the real and utopian worlds" and having the potential to move beyond the pages of the novel to affect real, social change (63-4). Similarly, Patricia Waugh argues there is an inherent "*political*, utopian potential of fantasy" (169, emphasis original) and Alyson Miller

recognises speculative fiction as a vehicle “through which the marginalised are able to denaturalise and thus dismantle hegemonic systems of power” (401). Therefore, the genre of speculative fiction, particularly *feminist* utopia, achieves the full potential of feminist fiction in its ability to subvert reality while still remaining in close connection with it. *The Power* focuses its criticism on biological essentialism of gender and a societal monopoly on gender-based violence as the source of gender inequality. *The End of Men* similarly identifies gender as a power hierarchy rather than identity, urging for all genders being allowed to act on their potential and be included to create a more equal society. *Dietland* centres its criticism of patriarchy in its impunity of men who act with sexism, violence, and discrimination towards women (and especially those women it does not consider fitting the norm) and shows patriarchy can be rejected through collective action by women. All utopian, their transcendent message calls for the readers to say “enough” to the discrimination in their everyday reality. Their potential to generate social change, however, is dependent on their ability to spread this message to a wide audience.

Yet, when women write to the masses, their fiction is labelled ‘popular’ as opposed to ‘literary’. This is especially visible in the critique of chick-lit, a term popularised in researched by Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell in *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* (1995) to describe new and emerging experimental fiction by women. Heike Missler lists humour and confessional narrative as some of the features defining the genre (32), which has evolved since its first iterations to include more diversity in its characters and themes (202). While the original criticism did condemn the genre for its whiteness and class-blindness (not unlike the criticism received by second-wave feminism), the larger crime appears to be its light-heartedness and entertaining nature. Missler views this as revealing larger value judgements within literature: of whose writing is valued as artistic, and whether female cultural production is deemed on par with its male equivalent (39, 3). Popularity is a curious concept

to criticize, as most authors wish to be read by the millions, and the literary classics certainly are. Yet not all texts are deemed illegible because of their popularity. The vitriol with which female writers are attacked when their works are marketed as popular stems from both a patriarchal hegemony in the literary publishing industry, as well as an elitist view on literature as an artform.

Still, it would be unwise to disregard these novels as insignificant. Fiction has the potential to alter the readers' perception of others (Keen 139) and a novel popular among women is popular among the majority of readership. The change in attitudes caused by literature cannot be defined if the books most consumed are ignored. Loudermilk agrees that popular novels have the potential to impact culture as they familiarise large numbers of readers with social concepts and offer alternatives through their imagined realities (11). Feminist utopias subvert reality, which deviates from traditional chick-lit that relies on the familiarity of its themes, such as romance and work, and reflects society as it is known to its readers. While authors of feminist speculative fiction such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman (*Herland*, "The Yellow Wallpaper"), Joanna Russ (*Herland*, "When It Changed"), and Margaret Atwood (*The Edible Woman*, *The Handmaid's Tale*) are considered esteemed authors and are widely read, they are not labelled as popular fiction. The category of popular feminist fiction therefore merges elements both recognisable and novel to the reader. *The Power*, *The End of Men* and *Dietland* are rooted in concepts familiar to larger feminist discussions in society, include multiple characters for increased relatability, and a paratextual style recognisable to readers of chick-lit. The choice of genre and form allows for the ideologically feminist message of these novels to become accessible to large audiences, enhancing their potential to impact cultural change.

2. Linking Reality and Fiction through Thematic Connections

The three novels in question connect to contemporary feminisms as well as women's literature throughout history through their thematic choices within the question of gender hierarchies in society. Violence and sexual violence against women have been portrayed in literature both by women and men, both of whom have been criticised for fetishizing female victims, retraumatizing readers, and participating in normalising violence against women (Ferber 6). *The Power*, *The End of Men*, and *Dietland* also include violence perpetrated by women against men and ask how gendered violence defines gender relations in society. All novels also include collectives and communities of women as ways to mitigate and overcome gendered oppression, connecting to historical and current feminist activism's message of sisterhood. This sisterhood, however, is not as inclusive as its real-life counterpart. A significant shortcoming for all three novels is their treatment of gender and ethnic minorities despite their prominence in fourth-wave feminism.

Violence in feminist literature, and the three novels analysed here, reflects the theoretical understanding of violence in wider feminist theory. As Gwen Hunnicutt states, "explanations of violence against women should center on gendered social arrangements and power" (554), meaning feminist scholars see a difference between the cultural and societal reasons between female and male victims of violence. Violence may be physical or emotional, but it is always linked to power, either between individuals or between groups of people. Hunnicutt argues violence in patriarchal societies is linked to its inherent "systems of domination" privileging one group over another: "old dominate young, men dominate women, men dominate men, Whites dominate people of color, developed nations dominate developing nations, and humans dominate nature" (563). Violence is therefore a symptom of a society with asymmetrical power relations, and gendered violence only one example of a social context where it appears. In literature these structures of domination are reflected when

women are portrayed in a victim-position and men as their protectors, which Kristine DeWelde argues presents women's subordination as twofold: first as victims, then as relying on men to correct the situation (18). By contrast, women may choose to refuse this position and challenge patriarchal structures by acting violently against men, the physical use of their bodies informing the prefix of "physical" feminism (21). The gendered logic behind this is therefore reactionary or preventative. According to Miller, feminist speculative fiction has a history of subverting societal patterns of dominance by creating spaces where women are protected from violence against men (404). Some early examples of this are Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*, published in 1975, and James Tiptree Jr.'s (pseudonym of Alice Sheldon) 1976 novella *Houston, Houston, Do You Read?*. Both depict a society of only women that is free of sexual violence and murder, where men are viewed as threatening that peace. In *The Power* and *Dietland* this is done by positioning women as physically dominant in society, and in *The End of Men* by weaponizing female bodies as carriers of the virus and therefore posing a physical threat to men.

In conjunction to violent revenge, the novels introduce peaceful collective action between women to counteract the societal balance of power as a theme. In fourth-wave feminism, collective action is used to uncover systemic oppression (such as the case of the #MeToo movement), to mobilise protesters, and to share ideas. While the digital tools used may be contemporary the method is not novel, as it has been an important factor in feminism through the ages. bell hooks describes how women's liberation in the 1960s formed its sisterhood on the basis of shared oppression (485). The limitations to public expression and freedoms in patriarchal societies have drawn women together to form informal support networks (Abrisketa & Abrisketa 934), for example in order to seek protection from domestic abuse (Hunnicut 565). This approach has been criticised because of its focus on the victim-position of women, and because it can divide the in-group as not all women express similar

struggles. The privileged position of some may even harm others. According to hooks this divide is again a symptom of patriarchy, where women are forced to compete against one another for the limited space available (485), and Hunnicutt agrees it is a natural occurrence as privilege allows women to also oppress women (565). As a solution, shared values as opposed to individual goals are proposed as uniting the sisterhood (e.g. Abrisketa & Abrisketa 984, hooks 485). In feminist utopian literature the female (/feminist) collectives date back to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* in 1915, where the society comprised only of women is a peaceful ideal. A similar theme is explored by Marge Piercy in *Woman on the Edge of Time* from 1976, where peace is achieved after destruction through collective action. While not necessarily possible in real life, a fictional feminism may forgo all social structures of oppression in order to present its utopia, including those of class and race. The example of literature therefore shows that in order to form a sisterhood to overcome structural oppression, women must also be aware of their own position within those structures.

This approach requires acknowledgement of intersectionality and diversity among women. Although now prominent in fourth-wave feminism, the critique of mainstream feminism being too White and Anglo-centric has been cried from among minority groups for decades. The idea of victimhood distanced many black women's activists from the second wave of feminism (hooks 486), as did the calls to 'join' the movement. Mainstream feminism was owned by the privileged group, white women, who saw themselves as "necessarily more capable" of leading other women (hooks 492). This reproduces rather than dismantles patriarchal structures. These feminists have attempted to create a uniform idea of womanhood by refusing or concealing internal differences. Joan Peters, however, argues that progress is achievable only by maintaining these differences (195). Women's literature has responded to this call for diversity by writing them visible and creating stories specifically highlighting the experiences of women from diverse backgrounds. More recently, minority identity has

become less central to the plot, therefore normalising these experiences instead of separating and exoticizing them. Catherine Riley and Lynne Pierce describe how this has affected gender minorities, as literature including characters from sexual and gender minorities by authors such as Ali Smith, Emma Donoghue, and Sarah Waters has begun to destabilise societal narratives on gender, dismantling the presumed binary (87–91). This approach differs from one seen in earlier feminist fiction, such as *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin (1969), which imagines a society without genders, thus erasing rather than acknowledging difference. Accepting diversity therefore complicates the question of gender hierarchies in society, as it breaks neat divisions between gender, ethnicity, class, and ability to fragmented experiences. This means literature presenting a uniform experience as basis for its ideology is no longer rooted in the larger social discussion on feminism. The careful contextualisation of Anglo-American fictional feminisms is especially important because of the publishing power and position of lingua franca of the English language (Hemmings 15). An inclusive text has the ability to transcend national borders, social classes, and ethnic groups, creating a more accessible message.

Gendered violence as a tool for societal control

All three novels include elements of violence perpetrated by women against men, and occasionally against other women, who oppose the change in gender dynamics. In *The End of Men* women respond to domestic violence by killing their abusive spouses at a time when the deaths of men are not investigated, as most are dying of the virus. In *Dietland*, Jennifer's crime spree targets men accused of crimes against women but who have not been held responsible by the justice system. The violence in *The Power* is the most pervasive and is used to incapacitate, rape, and kill, but begins as in the other novels as an act of revenge or to escape harm (Jarvis 125). The violence of the novels is connected to real-life experiences. According to Alderman herself, in her novel “nothing happens to a man ...that isn't

happening to a woman somewhere in the world right now” (Jarvis 121). The case in *The End of Men* is reflective of many legal cases presenting a “battered wife defence”, whereby the unlawful killing of an abusive spouse has resulted in a not-guilty verdict (Langer). In *Dietland*, the violence committed by Jennifer against men is first seen as more serious than the acts those men have committed against women. Solnit argues that violence against women is not seen as structural in society because it is reported in the media as isolated incidents instead of treating it as a pattern revealing underlying attitudes (23), and these crimes largely go unreported to law enforcement (Criado Perez 47-66). There are many reasons for women not reporting crimes committed against them, but Solnit argues the violence committed by men against women is endemic enough to discourage reporting (22). The novels therefore reflect a reality and create a connection to the familiar by exploiting the societal bias of viewing violence against men as more ‘important’ than violence against women by portraying similar incidents happening to men that happen to women in the world outside of the novels. The subversion therefore asks why these crimes are not treated as serious enough to elicit a widespread response at the level presented in the novels, in which the victims are male.

The Power as a novel about the shifting hierarchies of power relations in society portrays those relations as shaped and formed by violence. The first incidents are in self-defence: Roxy first uses her powers to defend herself and her mother from intruders in their home (7), Tunde first witnesses a woman using her skein in self-defence against a man sexually harassing her in a store (16), and Allie’s first time is to stop the advances of two boys she has repeatedly turned down but who continue to escalate their harassment (28). Because these acts of violence are framed as responses to recognisable acts of sexual harassment, readers have reported to feeling the use of force is “entirely justified”, and any retaliatory act against a man was “already happening to women somewhere in the world” (Jarvis 126). According to Miller, this framing specifically focuses the reader on violence against *women*

(421), meaning the reversal in the novel is not a revenge fantasy, but a sobering reminder of the everyday experience of women. According to Jarvis, Judith Butler's theory about gender as created through performative action (*Gender Trouble* 1990) can be stretched to explain how violence defines a man and a woman, as perpetrators and as victims (125). As Alderman's novel trivializes gender dynamics in its parodical reversal violence loses its value as defining gender, and rather it is shown to always be used as a method of control between the oppressor and the oppressed if there is inequality in society.

The End of Men only includes one instance of physical violence towards men, another revenge act, in response to domestic violence. Irina smothers her husband in his sleep after months of praying that he would die of the virus for her to be safe from his attacks (190). After realising his immunity and killing him, two women in hazmat suits come to cover the body in a biohazard bag and take him away without launching an investigation as most men at the time are dying in their beds anyway (193). Contrary to the method of *The Power* underlining violence against women through a complete reversal, this instance is more directly connected to the reality outside of the novels. Irina also reveals that incidents of violence against women have been on the rise since the outbreak (191), a fact also supported by real-life statistics: domestic violence is even "more prevalent than conflict-related sexual violence" in disaster and conflict zones (Criado Perez 296). Even in times of peace and safety home is not a safe place for a woman, and statistically women are more likely to die at the hands of an intimate partner or family member than a stranger (UNODC 17). The leading cause of death for pregnant women in the US is murder by their spouse (Solnit 29). The other two novels also refer to these statistics: *Dietland* nonchalantly stating "that could happen to any girl" (93), and *The Power* describing how "men in town beat their wives" for helping victims of human trafficking (94). Solnit argues that before domestic violence is recognised as a symptom of a larger culture of how patriarchy exerts control over women, men will

continue to kill their partners (28). In contrast to the graphic detail in portrayals of violence against men in the novels, domestic violence against women is depicted as habitual. This contrast again highlights the intentionality in keeping women in the victim-position.

More widely than murder, patriarchal control is exercised through rape. Coined in the 1980s, the term 'rape culture' began to be used to describe a culture in which rape and sexual assault is normalized as natural behaviour of men and boys, victims are held responsible for crime committed against them, women are not believed when they don't consent, women are accused of false reporting, women are shamed for similar sexual behaviour men engage in, and rape is viewed as a private matter and not a crime, among other things (Burnett). In *The Power* rape is used against men, and Roxy comments how "this is not what happens to a man, except now it is" (195). According to Miller, this reversal of "sexual dynamics based on existing power relations" emphasises the patriarchal definition of women as objects to be used for male pleasure (419-20), rooting rape at the core of gender hierarchy in society. This hierarchy is repeated no matter the level of observation, wherever a group of people constitute their own little society: Solnit describes how rape culture is especially prevalent on US university campuses, where women are instructed "not to go out alone after dark or not to be out at all" (77) and "not to dress like sluts" (121). These instructions are examples of the idea that women should protect themselves from violence, instead of holding men responsible for the sexual crimes they commit (122) or educating them in appropriate behaviour. In *Dietland* a group of women burn a fraternity house in response to the inaction of the university administration (231). These women are empowered to act because of Jennifer, whose crimes are triggered when a 12-year-old girl is held responsible by media for the gang-rape committed against her, resulting in her suicide (151); 'Jennifer' is later revealed to be her mother. Women respond to Jennifer positively as they feel she is bringing her victims to justice, something the police or courts have not done (155). Rape is an obvious theme in the

novels because of its prevalence. The speculative aspect of the novels does not ask what *if* this were to happen, but as it *is* happening, how could society adequately respond. The fictional solution the novels present is by dismantling asymmetrical gender power hierarchies and forcing both perpetrators and bystanders to face consequences.

This solution is informed by the novels recognising that rape is not as a crime against *a* woman but a crime against *women*. It is a method of control exerted to preserve the status quo of gender hierarchies in society. This is what Solnit sees at the heart of the problem of violence against women: it “doesn’t have a race, a class, a religion, or a nationality”, and as such it is not treated as a pattern or a crisis by those investigating them (21). Violence is gendered, as the overwhelming majority of perpetrators are men (25). Men also become victims of violence, but they too experience it at the hands of other men, and society does not define them through victimhood. In *The Power*’s reversal Tunde realises women act violently “because they can” (283). When read through the cultural lens of contemporary reality, this equates to men being violent because they both have the physical ability to do so, and the privilege of not being held responsible when their victims are women. *The Power* describes this privilege by stating the “power to hurt” is “a kind of wealth” (71), indicating society accepts one gender as superior because of their ability to hold the monopoly on violence. In *The End of Men* Catherine realises men are afraid of her, for the first time in her life, because she has the power to kill with her presence as a carrier of the virus. She realises “this must be what men used to feel like ... no wonder they used to get drunk on it” (134), showing the mere *ability* to hurt is enough to assume power. This connects to Solnit’s argument that male-perpetrated violence on women is first and foremost authoritarian (27): the victim is below the perpetrator in social hierarchy. An incident in *Dietland* exemplifies this: when Alicia refuses the advances of a man he responds by punching her in the face (149). As the man does not believe a woman has the innate right to deny him, he uses his position of authority to punish

her. Women in society have to take precautionary measures as they cannot know beforehand which men choose to escalate this privilege into using violence against them. *Dietland* refers to this dilemma as a “form of terrorism”: “we’re terrified of being raped, abused, even killed by the *bad man*, but the problem is, you can’t tell the good ones from the bad ones ... the fear of men is ingrained in us from girlhood” (232). While Jennifer is accused of being a terrorist by her critics in the novel, the simple everyday existence of women is likened to the same experience: a constant threat of violence or intimidation forces the victim to protect themselves by complying with the requests of the perpetrator. Thus, violent acts of some men are both the result of, and an upholding factor in patriarchal gender hierarchy and the norms that govern what kind of behaviour is allowed for women. According to Walker herself, she wrote Jennifer not as means to take revenge on men, but as a speculative method of ending patriarchy (McDowell). The novels discuss violence because it is the reality of how power and control is visible in gender dynamics in our society. Violent acts are not isolated incidents, but a method of control and oppression. According to the novels, the systematic violence against women will continue as long as there is power imbalance between genders.

Enacting change through collective action

As an approach to overcome this imbalance and the presumed societal victim position, all three novels suggest collective action between women. In the microcosm of *The Power*, Allie brings sixty women with her to release a woman held in prison, and her answer to a guard’s question “By what power do you ask for release?” is to point to the mass of women she is with (117). In the absence of men, in *The End of Men* women only have each other to lean on to first bring order to chaos and eventually reorganise society completely, resulting in safer practices for all (374). In *Dietland* Plum is able to shed her previous outlook on life and form a new perspective after meeting the women of Calliope House, a women’s collective (195). Women acting together to stand up for each other, to support each other, and to educate each

other have been common in feminism across all its iterations. However, Cochrane recognises this action takes new forms in the current wave: grassroots campaigns are born around individual instances of injustice, almost as singular movements, and often through networks created online; such was the first SlutWalk organised in Canada by Heather Jarvis through Facebook (48). Cochrane connects this to other social justice movements which have worked in such reactive way before (73). Each individual feminist protest, large or small, raises awareness in young women and girls, raising a generation with the language and tools to act on a structural and systemic level (74). In the case of feminism, these individual campaigns are part of an informal network where each action encourages another, acts as an example, and spreads understanding and solidarity that generates a push for structural change. In the novels, this is reflected in how the change is presented as progressing exponentially, each step following from more women getting involved.

The novels give fictional examples of creating networks for women that empower and help to survive the oppressive conditions. Allie creates a new religion in *The Power* from the group of abandoned girls in the convent she escapes to and calls for women to renounce the previous teaching of living as husband and wife in favour of other women to “help one another, to band together and be a comfort one to the next” (83). Later, she teaches that in gathering together, women are able to “perform great wonders” (186). By juxtaposing the former teachings on the sanctity of marriage to an ideal congregation of only women, Allie elevates female companionship above romantic relationships. This allows her to create a network of followers that is eager to fight for her in the Cataclysm. While intended to heal instead of to destroy, in *The End of Men* Catherine also employs the power of the collective in her choice of writing a book called “Stories of the Great Male Plague” (400), so that the world after the virus can adapt with more empathy towards one another. As the stories and experiences of the world during and after the outbreak are all biased and subjective, her

attempt is to create understanding through sharing (403). Previously held ideas of what is considered a tragedy have shifted: grief is accepted as common rather than exceptional, and its commonness has made ‘widow’ an insignificant title (229). New groups in need of support are recognised, and formal networks have been created to answer their needs, such as zones for single women with children to live together (337). This connects to the reactive nature of feminist campaigning: changing focus according to the identified group in need.

Dietland presents through Plum’s time in Calliope House how important a female support network can be to overcome the effects of internalised misogyny on the sense of self of an individual. In addition, it echoes the method of fourth-wave feminism in its examples of individual, small campaigns of action around the world, all sparked by Jennifer’s example. Jennifer is not the perpetrator’s name, and this is intentional: it is recognised in the novel as a very common first name (82), making ‘Jennifer’ an ‘everygirl’ instead of an actual person and therefore a relatable figure many women can connect with. As the face of Leeta – one of the women of Calliope House – begins to be printed on T-shirts, akin to the iconic images of Che Guevara, Alicia predicts that “soon, there will be other faces” (225), specifying Leeta is not *the* face, but *a* face of the protests. This view of Jennifer and Leeta mirrors reality, as feminism as a movement does not have a single face or spokesperson. The refusal to appoint a single leader allows the power to be held in the hands of the many and emphasises the collective above the individuals working together no matter their personal position in society, connecting the message and method of fourth-wave feminism.

Disregarding representation and diversity

The message of women acting as a collective overrides acknowledgement for individual representation in all three novels. The experience of gender-based discrimination is described as uniform and without variance according to factors typical in considerations of intersectional feminism. According to Loudermilk, this erasure of ethnicity, class and queer

representation is exclusionary to many women, and even “contains [feminism’s] revolutionary potential” (35). *The End of Men* only briefly mentions Dawn being black, in her statement of often being both the only woman and the only person of colour in the room (70) – but nothing in her experience of the outbreak is described as being different to others because of her ethnicity. Of *Dietland*’s ‘Jennifer’, Mexican-born Soledad Ayala, only gendered commentary is reported, none referring to her being Hispanic. The two POC narrators in *The Power* – Allie who is mixed-race, and Tunde who’s black – describe their experience of the world and the Big Change only in terms of navigating the changing gender dynamics, and in no way allude to being treated differently to others around them. While this could be seen utopian, it also erases any notion that people’s experiences differ according to their ethnicity. This is especially poignant in the case of Tunde, whose travels take him around the world and to many environments which would warrant commentary on whether ethnic prejudice impacts his ability to do his job. Miller sees this erasure as positioning “white women as the default victims of patriarchal hegemony” (425), repeating the mistakes of previous waves of feminism that have been criticised for not adequately taking racism into account. As long as we do not live in a utopia where ethnicity really does not matter, ignoring it is harmful and exclusionary, and against the intersectionally informed message of fourth-wave feminism.

Instead of complete erasure as in the case of ethnicity, *The Power* and *The End of Men* find ways to include the experience of characters of marginalised gender identities, but neither is inclusive in their treatment. Not all women in *The Power* develop skeins or they do not function properly, and an example of this is Jocelyn, whose sexuality is described as bisexual (154). Jocelyn’s new boyfriend Ryan also has a skein because of a “chromosomal irregularity” (153). These examples link the irregularities in biology to marginalised expression of sexuality and gender, echoing experiences of shame and exclusion of trans and

intersex persons. However, Jocelyn and Ryan are not trans. Hoyle criticises this fantastical reimagination of marginalised gender expression as another way of erasure, in place of including actual trans characters and showing how they would experience the world of the novel. Every character with atypical skein function – Jocelyn, Ryan, or Darren who gets his sister’s skein surgically implanted – experiences exclusion and hardship. The novel’s conclusion of women holding a dominant role in society does not specify a role for these atypical expressions of gender, suggesting their marginalisation is inevitable. Both the exclusion of actual trans characters and the treatment of atypical gender expression of the ones the novel chooses to include echo biological essentialism, undermining the strength of the novel’s feminist argument on the arbitrariness of gender as a determiner of identity. *The End of Men* includes a discussion between Amanda and Tanya, a leader of a sexual health clinic who is described as a trans woman. The interaction acts as self-criticism of the novel’s exclusion of trans voices and characters. According to Tanya, trans rights “became irrelevant” in the face of the outbreak and biological essentialism turned into hate speech as Tanya herself was told she should have “stayed as [man]” since they were now in short supply (356). The fact that Amanda is only interested in protecting the lives of the LGBTQI+ community on day 1660 of the outbreak (354) is reflective of trans invisibility in the health care community and society at large. However, the late appearance in the novel itself reads as tokenistic, and none of the societal adaptations listed later in the novel speak to specific inclusion of gender minorities. The feminism of the novel therefore functions only on the binary scale of gender.

Of the three novels, *The End of Men* is still the most inclusionary in its attempts to incorporate diversity. The discussion with Tanya also comments on how sexuality produces differing experiences of the outbreak: gay men are now a micro-minority, and their suicide rate has “risen by 450 per cent” since the outbreak (355), creating a desperate need for new

ways of support. The novel also mentions an ambassador (108) and Rosamie's upper-class employer (122) dying of the virus as a reminder of how a virus does not care for status or class but fails to comment on how the lower classes – especially men without stable homes – are unable to isolate to protect themselves. In addition to the experiences of women with children dealing with the fear or grief of losing them, the novel portrays experiences of women with infertility, as both Faith and Catherine's struggle is exacerbated by the sudden disappearance of available sperm donors, and any hint of hope for them to have children in the world after the outbreak is lost (230). This inclusion distances the novel from simply biological considerations of gender, shaping the message of a performative and constructed gender experience. Of the three novels, *Dietland* is least diverse in its characters, but Plum/Alicia's entire narrative focuses on a specific feminist campaign – body positivity – that the two other novels exclude entirely. The invisibility of fat women in media is what Plum describes as a source of her pathological body-image, and this is largely reflective of reality. *Dietland* does the opposite of the two other novels by relying on a subjective experience and expecting relatability, or at the very least spreading understanding.

The expectation that the 'generic woman' is a white, able-bodied, cis-gendered, middle-class heterosexual whose experience others can relate to is far from the contemporary understanding of an intersectional approach to feminism, and the novels' choice of not including more diversity affect how their fictional feminisms can be read. *The Power* disregards any other factor than gender in forming societal power hierarchies, and the question remains how the Cataclysm has truly changed the lives of people not fitting the middle-class experience of its characters describing the world 5000 years later. In *The End of Men* Dawn remains the only black person in meeting rooms, even after the men are gone. *Dietland* erases diversity almost entirely but chooses to highlight an experience otherwise largely ignored in popular media. The novels draw on the methodology and ideology of

fourth-wave feminism, but remain within the sphere of a white majority, dismissing intersectional considerations. Nevertheless, the hints to gender and ethnic minorities – however tokenistic – make these exclusions visible, offering the reader a path to questions about the experience of minorities in the circumstances portrayed in the novels, and lead to further consideration of the treatment of minorities in culture and society at large.

In order to create a recognisably feminist novel, themes have been chosen from contemporary popular feminism. These themes are questions that have been prevalent in feminist discussions for decades, creating a sense of familiarity, which eases the acceptance of the new ideas they present. The choice of speculative fiction as a genre allows for an exploration of how gendered violence would change in a society run by women, how sisterhood could have an impact on this change, and how the inclusion of diverse groups of women would impact the dismantling of power hierarchies in society. Unfortunately, the latter is the least developed in the novels. While Teslenko criticises male authors of speculative fiction of excluding gendered structures in their reimaginings of society, these three novels *only* take gender into account and dismiss other identity factors as having an impact on systems of dominance in society. Their feminisms therefore remain on the mainstream of Anglo-centric white experiences. This ignores the context of the larger feminist discussion that attempts to include diversity. Even more problematic than the complete absence of minorities is their *attempt* at representation, as it remains incomplete. While fourth-wave feminism/s hail the inclusion and foregrounding of diverse women, allowing each group to speak for themselves, these novels allude to minority experiences without giving them equal representation compared to other characters and therefore erasing their identity. This creates a risk of reproducing the patriarchal social dynamics, as it gives the message that gender is the foremost of social factors causing oppression, a misconception

discarded by many feminists. The minority characters appear to have another function separate from the thematic, analysed in the following chapter.

3. Connecting Narration and Meaning

While the novels may omit diversity as a theme, the analysis of the form of narration reveals an attempt at including diverse voices in order to appeal to a wider readership and therefore aid in the dissemination of the ideologies of the novels. The narrative of all three novels is a combination of multiple perspectives and changing narrative focalization, which creates a fragmented narrative through which the novels are constructed. In this chapter the novels are analysed through theory of feminist narratology concentrating on narrative voice, the choice narrative focus, and the tension between the relatability and reliability of narration to show the style of narration supports their feminist reading.

Focalization is defined as the “perspective in terms of which the narrated situations and events are presented” (Prince 44), distinguished from the *focus* of narration, which defines the narrative situation of the novel. According to Ellen Peel, the difference between these two, or the difference between “who sees” and “who speaks” is important because it “determines what is seen, how it is seen, and – also crucial – what is not seen” (12). While the definition Peel uses suggests a visual interpretation, this can be extended to mean that the reading of a novel is necessarily informed by the perspective(s) through which it is narrated and influenced by what attitudes are conveyed by the choice of focalizer. In the three novels, out of the 24 focalizers combined only four are identified as men. This already marks the perspective as focused on women and their experience, placing women as the perceivers of the events taking place and pushing the male perspective to the marginal position. The novels thus separate themselves from what has been found of popular culture, as research shows it is mainly informed by the male gaze, placing women in the position of observers of themselves being observed (Warhol 1992, 8). Peel views the deviation from the presumed male perspective as challenging “patriarchal claims about the natural”, or what is accepted as natural in a patriarchal society (83-4). The choice of perspective as opposite from this

(presumed) norm is a conscious choice, and the form of the narration of the novels thus mirrors their message of questioning the patriarchal order of society.

Feminist narratology, or the study of narrative form through feminist perspectives, as a field of research was launched by Susan S. Lanser's seminal paper "Toward a Feminist Narratology" in 1986 and has since evolved into multiple directions including intersectional and queer theories. Lanser saw the need to include feminist criticism in a field that had previously treated gender as irrelevant, meaning narratology was based on a foundation of literature written by men (1986, 343) and presumed to be universally applicable to all texts by all writers. Due to the development of the field, researchers were forced to treat the theory arising from these men's texts as normative, placing their own findings from women's texts in opposition to this 'norm'. For Lanser, the question was both about including women's texts into the canon on which the research on narratology was based, and about introducing gender as context to the study of meaning in narrative (ibid). Her suggestion was eventually accepted and developed by others and is now seen as having reoriented the study of narratology as a whole (Mezei 4). Feminist narratology views gender as an aspect carrying meaning (Page 52) and acknowledges that meaning is not neutral but constructed and informed by the gender of both the author/narrator and the reader (Warhol 1999, 342). This meaning can be visible on the level of form: an example of this is Ruth Page's characterization of "'female' plots ... as non-linear, repetitive, resistant to closure, [and] structured around multiple endpoints or stasis" as opposed to the "action-centered, teleologically focused progression of the so-called 'male plot'" (45). The multiple narrators and open endings of all three novels under analysis place them under Page's category of 'female' plot, supporting their analysis through feminist narratology, as opposed to narratology *tout court*.

The development of feminism has also informed the development of feminist narratology, now including an intersectional approach. In "Toward (a Queerer and) More

(Feminist) Narratology”, Lanser recognizes that as feminism no longer assumes a universal ‘female’ experience, feminist narratology must also adopt more aspects of analysis to its contextualisation of texts (28). According to Keen, this approach may ask “whether the age, gender, ethnicity, and literary experience of a reader makes a difference” in their response to a text (127). Similarly, all of these factors may influence the writing of an author. The features of each narrator in a text with multiple voices may elicit a host of responses from readers depending on either how closely these features align with how they identify themselves, or due to their attitudes toward these characteristics. However, Keen’s study on narratology and empathy views narratives as effective in “breaking through barriers of difference thrown up by distance, time, culture, experience” (142) by generating an emotional connection between the reader and the text. While complicating the analysis, the intersectional study of narratives can reveal previously hidden aspects of narration that affect the emphatic response of the reader, which in turn contributes to “real-world changes in attitudes and behavior” (124). Similarly, Lanser views the “intersection of social identity and textual form” as vehicle for ideology (1992, 15). These are connected through her study of narrative voice, which she divides into authorial, personal, and communal voice, the latter of which is used in all three novels under analysis. The use of communal voice creates a markedly female perspective for the novels, and the form of narration questions women’s position as object in society while creating multiple opportunities for relatability, connecting the form of the novels to their content as subversive feminist fiction with popular appeal.

A female voice for a women’s story

Lanser bases her hypothesis in *Fictions of Authority* on the difference between male and female textual voice. Female voice – as opposed to the normative, white male in Western literature – “is a site of ideological tension” (6): the form of narration and ideology of a novel are inherently connected in a manner that is not visible in the texts on which preceding

narratological theory was based. Communal voice is a manner of narrating for a group: either through one narrator speaking for a collective, a plural “we” narrator, or a sequential narrative of individual narrators taking turns (21). It is “primarily a phenomenon of marginal or suppressed communities” – a category to which most female authors and protagonists belong because of their position in the literary canon – as the male “I” is already speaking for a hegemonic “we” (21). Lanser argues communal voice almost always constructs a female community, placing the emphasis of the narration on a shared experience instead that of an individual (22). This amplification questions the previously defined position of women in Western fiction as subordinate characters and portraying marginal experiences. The “plurality itself” is what creates the “convergence of representation and narration” (256), meaning as women are formally presented as many instead of one the form of the novel necessarily creates a representation of gender. This representation provides a possibility for sharing ideology, but Lanser herself recognises it is not automatic (266) that this form should influence its recipient. The three novels all use the communal voice but construct it differently, creating a scale of the strength with which the form and message of the novels are connected.

The End of Men utilises a sequential narrative from multiple subjective perspectives, which combined creates a sense of a shared experience. The 16 individual narrator-focalizers, marked by their name as the chapter title, narrate one chapter at a time and never appear in two or more consecutive chapters. The distribution of narrators throughout the novel is shown in table 1. Catherine’s chapters begin and end the novel, her appearances being the most frequent overall. Because of both Catherine’s position as the narrator of the opening and closing chapters and the frequency of her chapters, her position among the narrators is the most visible and therefore authoritative. Her story is that of a young mother working in academia who loses her entire family to the virus, eventually dedicating herself to collecting

stories of the Great Plague. The foreword to her book of these stories ends the novel immediately after her last chapter. Similarly, Maria's chapters are written as "Washington Post" articles not only describing her own experience, but those of other women in varying fields of life. Through emphasising these two narrator-focalizers, two collectors of stories, by making their appearances among the most frequent the novel mirrors its own form, as both narrators use the communal narrative of speaking for a collective *within* the overall novel's communal narrative of sequential narrators.

The distribution of the narrator-focalizers throughout the novel shows the greatest attention is placed on the characters who are from Western countries and in positions of authority. The six most frequent narrators are from the US, Canada, or the UK, all working in either medicine, research, government administration, or media. The form of the novel, therefore, emphasises the formal response to societal change and women gaining influence in formerly male-dominated institutions. The narrators appearing only once each add a contrastive view to these six: either geographically (Irina from Russia, Rachel from New Zealand) or through their position in society as outsiders to the institutional framework, which is officially responsible for the crisis response. Faith is one of the women joining armed forces as men keep disappearing and finds new meaning in life through an opportunity previously unavailable to her. Frances's chapter concludes her husband Toby's narrative, as she succeeds in saving his life. Clare narrates a traumatic stampede during the chaos of the early days of the outbreak, resulting in a change in careers later described in a chapter narrated by Maria. Jamie, Morven's son, describes how the change in gender dynamics has impacted him, as he has begun his life in the privileged gender but now experiences marginalisation. Despite only appearing once they are thus connected to the others, creating a coherent group between all of the narrator-focalizers. This underlines that the change and adjustment, loss and recovery are a shared experience, the form of narration mirroring the

message of the novel by refusing a singular message of survival and emphasising the comfort in sharing within a collective.

Narrator	First chapter (page)	Last chapter (page)	No. of chapters	Location
Catherine	3	393	16	London
Amanda	15	354	11	Glasgow
Lisa	34	383	7	Toronto
Elizabeth	50	366	8	London
Maria	63	369	6	Washington
Dawn	69	386	8	London
Clare	74	74	1	San Francisco
Morven	85	175	2	Scotland
Rosamie	95	360	3	Singapore/Philippines
Helen	112	281	2	Penrith, UK
Toby	136	243	3	Coast of Iceland
Irina	190	190	1	Moscow
Rachel	198	198	1	Auckland
Faith	226	226	1	Military base, USA
Frances	240	240	1	London
Jamie	344	344	1	Scotland

Table 1
Distribution of chapters by narrator

The sequential narrative of *The Power* evolves from a systematic one to unmarked, reflecting the events of the novel descending from a familiar world order to apocalypse. As opposed to the uneven distribution of narrators in *The End of Men*, each section of *The Power* includes four chapters focusing on one of the main characters each, titled with the name of its focalizer. Their experiences begin as separate from each other – Roxy as the daughter of a gangster in the United Kingdom, Allie as an abused foster child in the United States, Tunde as a budding journalist in Nigeria, and Margot as a mayor in the United States – and converge 9 years later in the section titled “One year” (216), where they are all invited to attend an event hosted by the president of Bessapara. These separated narratives allow for diversity “without making any single experience or consciousness normative” (Lanser 1992, 263). A crucial

difference to *The End of Men* is the inclusion of a contrastive, questioning narrative throughout the novel in Tunde's chapters. As a journalist he reports on reactionary events to the Big Change, but not from the perspective of individuals like Catherine and Maria in *The End of Men*, thus not creating another communal narrative. His perspective is closer to that of Jamie, as he questions his own position in a reorganised world. His vulnerability and sense of powerlessness are, however, overshadowed by his misogyny and sense of entitlement to a higher social position, revealed by comments such as "the way it ought to be" (171) when referring to the time before. This, in addition to the plurality of female voices as opposed to one individual male narrator, strengthens the message of the female focalizers' narratives.

The last three sections of the novel no longer follow the neat organisation of the sequential narration, shifting the focus from the individual to the collective of voices. "Can't be more than seven months left" (249) is the only section in the novel without Margot, replaced as focalizer by Jocelyn, her daughter. She describes feeling disappointed by Margot and trying to find evidence to prove she's involved in illegal activity in Bessapara. The shift in focus from Margot, who works for the government, to Jocelyn, who takes direct action, creates tension between the two characters previously shown as part of the same collective, which constructs the message of the novel of gender as an arbitrary definition of a person's character. This section also includes a chapter titled "Darrell". As Roxy's chapter in the previous section has shown her skein being surgically removed and put in her brother, this shift follows the *skein* rather than the character. This raises the power produced by the organ on an equal level as the object of the narration along with the characters themselves, underlining the emphasis the novel places on societal hierarchies of domination. Finally, the last section of the novel removes chapter titles, but not individual focalizers apart from three chapters. In the timeline of the novel, the events of this section happen immediately before the Cataclysm, which takes place in between this section and the frame narrative. The first

chapter, beginning with “These things are happening all at once” (293), describes the locations of Jocelyn, Allie, Tunde, and Roxy and establishes a merging of narratives and therefore experiences. This creates a sense of anticipation, yet the reader is left to imagine the following events. The removal of chapter titles removes emphasis on individuality, contributing to the sense of shared experience. The form of the novel moves from individual to a collective, showing women now actively preparing for war and Tunde passively observing, which suggests the switch in power hierarchies has already taken place.

Unlike the other two novels, the narrative of *Dietland* is not a sequential communal voice. The novel mainly follows only one focalizer, Plum/Alicia, while the chapters recounting Jennifer’s crimes include multiple focalizers and never only one perspective. Plum/Alicia’s chapters, in fact, are narrated in *personal voice*, recognised by Lanser as the conventional choice for white Western female authors since the 1980s (1992, 90). It offers no possibility of masking the narrator’s gender (19), making the narrative explicitly female. The form of the voice underlines the internal transformation as the narrative moves from Plum’s submissive “I spent most of my time trying to blend in” (4) at the beginning of the novel to Alicia’s unphased “I kept going ... taking a leap into the wide world, which now seemed too small to contain me” (307) at the end. Jennifer’s narrative, however, suggests a collective. The descriptions of instances of other women being inspired to act against their oppressors, and the references to Jennifer as being an ‘everygirl’ (82) create a sense of the narrative speaking for a group. Jennifer’s narrative therefore elevates the novel’s message to a societal level by creating a shared female experience in contrast to Plum/Alicia’s gendered but highly subjective narrative. The form of narration of the novel through these two alternating voices, linked by Plum/Alicia’s commentary on her and the wider world’s reactions to Jennifer, intertwines the personal with the collective. This tension in the form creates the message of

the novel that asserts transformation requires a change in attitudes both on the individual as well as the societal level.

Connecting narrative situation to social tension

The tension between the alternating voice is also reflected in the alternation of the narrative situation in all three novels, which connects the ideologies of the novels to the world outside of them. The narrative situation in fiction is most commonly divided between first-person narrative and third-person narrative (Prince 89): a first-person narrator is often themselves a character in the narrated events, but a third-person narrator cannot be. The change in narrative situation may impact the focalization of the narration as well: the focalizer is the subject of first-person narration, and the object of third-person narration (Peel 86). The narrative situation therefore determines who perceives, who speaks, but also who *is perceived*. This is important in assessing the gendered nature of a text, especially when comparing the patriarchal male gaze of society and the narrative perspective of a text that criticises or comments on that perspective. According to Peel, the relationship between subject and object is especially important for women in a “sexist society” as “patriarchy constructs them as objects” (87). A feminist text, then, would be acutely concerned with who it places in the subject position and who is presented as the object and why. Peel’s research on unnatural narratology connects the unnatural – narratives deviating from the conventional by violating their form or content – with the feminist in its refusal of the ‘naturalness’ of the patriarchal order (86-7). An alternating narration, or one shifting between first- and third-person narration, is characterised as unnatural when compared to the stability in narrative situation in a conventional narrative (87), and Peel argues this type of unnatural narrative has the potential to form connections between the fictional and real worlds (90). This provides an opportunity for the text to comment on the society outside itself, where women are similarly struggling with the duality of their subject/object position.

This duality is visible in *Dietland*'s narrative, divided into Plum/Alicia's first-person narration and a third-person narration with variable internal focalization in the Jennifer chapters. In addition, within Plum/Alicia's chapters additional voices are presented through embedded emails, lists, notes, and footnotes, analysed here as narrative elements and in the next chapter as paratextual elements. The first-person narrative places Plum/Alicia in the subject position, acting as the agent in the events of the novel. The internal monologue, however, reveals Plum views herself as a passive character in her life, constantly aware of her position as object in society: "I was used to being stared at" (4) and "If I was smaller they wouldn't stare" (40) show how she views her size as the source of attention from people surrounding her. However, the reader will realise this as irony as all women are subjected to the objectification of male gaze in a patriarchal society no matter their size. At the beginning of the novel, Plum thinks Leeta is stalking her. From Leeta's 'handwritten' notes embedded in Plum's narration later in the novel, her actual perspective on Plum is revealed: "watching her is like watching a caged animal at the zoo, except he doesn't know she's in a cage" (188). After reading the notes both Plum and the reader realise Leeta's gaze is not intended to hurt like Plum has thought, and like she views everyone else watching her, but to gain information in order to help her. Plum's obsession on others only viewing her through her size therefore distances her from them, hindering opportunities for connections that could help her change her mindset. A narrative juxtaposition of footnotes within Plum's internal narration further emphasises how her sense of self is confused. Excerpts from Verena's tell-all book about her mother, Plum's weight loss hero, show how the program was created to first convince women their size was the primary source of their unhappiness, and then sell them a 'solution' in the form of a diet (46-7, 49-55, 57-8). Plum's concurrent narrative shows she has blindly followed the program for decades, even refusing to visit her father because following the diet was more important. The reader can see how Plum has relinquished control of her own life to

the program, much like she has given control of her self-image to the societal pressure. The unnatural juxtaposition of the first-person narrative and third-person perspective therefore positions Plum simultaneously as the subject and object of the text.

This tension between the form creating a subject position for a character viewing herself as an object is relieved when Plum is able to distance herself from the values she has previously based her identity on and begins living on her own terms. Plum's perspective of herself as a passive object in her life is linked with her obsessive eating habits, and the resolve of these conflicts happens simultaneously. Her realisation that "the eyes with which I interpreted the world around me were new" (195) is closely followed by the first time in the novel Plum lists what she eats without their calorific content, stating "I didn't bother to count calories" (199). This shift breaks the unnaturalness of subject-as-object and positions Plum in the expected subject position of the narrator-focalizer. According to Warhol, focalization through one character connects the extradiegetic gaze and the intradiegetic look (1992, 8). While the reader has been able to recognise the irony in Plum's narration because of the additional, embedded elements providing a juxtaposing intradiegetic look, now the reader's and Plum's perspectives become aligned. This creates an opportunity for the transformation in perspective experienced by Plum to move beyond the novel.

While Plum/Alicia's narrative is highly personal and only recounts what she personally experiences, the Jennifer chapters describe people finding her victims, the media response to her attacks, her daughter's story, and how other women start to imitate her – anything *but* Jennifer's own perspective. Jennifer as a focalizer only appears in the last two of her chapters, which include her internal perspective, revealing what led to her decision to start the attacks. The third-person narrative follows Jennifer's story but excludes her as the object, as she is visible only through the consequences of her actions. This emphasises the impact of her *actions* rather than her as a *character*, placing her in a position of being the catalyst of all of

the events but not the subject of the chapters. She's the object of all the conversation and speculation of other characters, but, in contrast to Plum, whose main concern is being seen, always invisible. This does not protect her from being personally attacked, but as none of the commenters know anything about her she is insulted by being called lesbian or a bad mother, which could be said of any woman. This reveals what characteristics are deemed the worst in society – the ones not conforming to the patriarchal ideal of a woman. The reader's gaze is again connected to the characters' perspective, both being in an observing position, as the narration does not reveal anything more about Jennifer than what is known to the characters. The third-person narrative in *Dietland* therefore distances the events from Jennifer herself, allowing for a reading that connects the story on the page not to a single character but to a larger context, and the society outside the novel itself.

The societal and personal attitudes are similarly separated by alternating narrative situation in *The Power*, although functioning in reverse. The third-person narrative is linked with a single internal focalizer – the title character of each chapter – apart from the three chapters already mentioned with multiple focalizers in the last section of the novel. Only the frame narrative, written as emails between Naomi and Neil, are written in the first person, as are the embedded comments from a web forum “Freedom of Reach” (139-146). The forum excerpt exhibits how hateful language – “Bitches need to see a change” (146) being an example of the tamer insults – is used when everyone is presumed to be in the in-group and sharing the commenters' oppressive views about women. The frame narrative portrays how 5000 years later a person with authority is comfortable with using discriminatory language towards men when speaking *to* a man, such as suggesting they consider “publishing under a woman's name” (339). Both examples are presented as a discussion, or speech directed at another character (or the public), which reveal their attitudes toward gender through *language* instead of action and internal speech as in the other chapters. In contrast to the narration in

Dietland, the third-person narrative in *The Power* places the focalizers as the agents of the action. As it *only* reveals their internal perspective, it is the opposite of how the reader is able to view Jennifer. Because of this, the reader is allowed to see the personal transformation of each character – from conflicting emotions to acceptance and eventually revelling in the situation for the female protagonists, and from a privileged sense of entitlement to shock and fear for Tunde. The difference between Plum/Alicia’s internal transformation narrated in the first person, and that of the characters in *The Power* described in third person and therefore as objects of the events connects with the source of tension in the novels. The Big Change is an external change, a change in the human physiology for which none of the characters themselves are responsible. They are *reacting* to a change in circumstances, while Plum/Alicia’s transformation is about her finding the strength to create the change herself. The narrative situations of *The Power* therefore emphasise how individuals act in reaction to societal change, adhering with its message of gender being fundamentally an arbitrary determiner of social dynamics.

Instead of action, the choice of narrative style in *The End of Men* emphasises emotion. The novel is narrated in the first person – the chapter title character – and does not include alternation in narration. The stable internal focus emphasises the psychological response to the traumatic events following the outbreak, therefore fulfilling Page’s definition of a “female plot” (45). The characters are presented as subjects of the narrative and their lives: all 14 female narrators use the situation to their advantage in some way and choose a path not previously available to them. Only the two male narrators are placed in a helpless situation where they’re forced to act submissively: Toby is stranded on a boat off the coast of Iceland with dwindling supplies not knowing when, if ever, rescue would come and unable to act to save himself. His only comfort is his brother, and he admits “if we’re still together I’m not as scared” (243), which shows how familiarity provides comfort in adversity. Jamie is first

forced to a cabin on the outskirts of his family's farm to wait for an end to the outbreak. When he returns to society he realises "when people talk about 'people' they say 'women' now. I mentioned it to a teacher at school in sociology and she said it was just because of the majority. I didn't think that was a very good reason to ignore the men that are left" (346). The irony immediately apparent to the reader is that 'men' is used even as they are only half the population, whereas in the world of the novel women are now 90%. Jamie's response is therefore emotional rather than logical. As the narrative situation underlines emotional response, this contrast between women finding internal strength to adapt and men desperately clinging to life before questions the patriarchal view of women as passive bystanders in society, which connects to the feminism of the novel promoting a more inclusive approach to decision-making.

Reliability and relatability creating empathy

While the message of each novel is shown to be constructed by both the voice and narrative situation of the novels, the eventual impact of that message is determined by whether the reader trusts the narration and it succeeds in evoking an emphatic response. The complex construction of narration suggests these novels attempt to heavily influence the readers' response. According to Lanser, the relationship between the reader and the narrator is impacted by the narrator's sex, gender, and sexuality, and this relationship influences the reliability of narration (1996, 251). She does not suggest these are the only factors to take into consideration, but that they are "narratologically significant elements that intersect with other textual elements" (Lanser 1996, 265) in having an effect on the reader's understanding. Peel states that the presence of multiple perspectives allows for the reader to imagine a different world themselves (97), suggesting the possibility of multiple interpretations of the text. Keen argues that for fiction, empathy for characters is enhanced by the third-person narrator's presumed reliability in their description of a character's inner life (128), and a stronger

emphatic response has a higher probability in having an impact on the reader's perception of others (Keen 142). Thus, reliability and empathy have the ability to cause a change in attitudes. In a study conducted by van Lissa et al., the authors conclude that readers' trust and reliability of narration grew more than empathy when the same text was changed from first-person to third-person narration, even when the characters were portrayed in the text as objectively and equally untrustworthy (58). This may be due to the perception of third-person narrative being a "mediated" narrative (van Lissa et al. 59), meaning the reader would be less likely to trust a character's own description of events and even their feelings when narrated in the first person compared to third-person internal focalization. The reliability of narration is therefore impacted (among other things) by the narrative situation and the presence of alternative sources supporting or contradicting a first-person narration, as well as the connecting or distancing characteristics between the individual reader and the narrator.

Based on these factors, it could be presumed *The Power* in its third-person internal focalization would be deemed the most reliable out of the three novels, and therefore the one most capable of influencing readers of its ideology. The distance between the narrator and the protagonist allows for empathy even when the characters act in what would be considered immoral in society because the reader has first been introduced to the individual hardships they experience. At the beginning of the novel Allie is described as a foster child and a victim of sexual assault, and Roxy witnesses the death of her mother: both traumatic experiences evoking sympathy and an empathic response to their eventual rise to leaders in the uprising that causes Armageddon. Both characters also commit murder, but these are presented as justified: Roxy avenges her mother by killing her attackers, and Allie kills the president of Bessapara in order to take control of the country and its armed forces, her quest presented as more righteous than that of the president who has been shown to abuse her staff – especially men. As the novel is presented as 'historical' fiction and includes manufactured 'evidence'

from the past, this *increases* the fictionality of the novel – a factor Keen views as enhancing the emphatic response as it releases the reader from obligation towards the real world in the moment (134). The events are presented as fictional enough for the reader to not have to question whether the message directly aligns or contradicts their own views, but the transcendence created by the relatability allows for the idea of questioning set gender hierarchies to penetrate the consciousness.

The novel ensures the trustworthiness of the narration by using its form to comment on the other focalizers' experiences. The characters' reliability is increased by including descriptions of the same event in all four main characters' chapters (217-247) with corroborating information. Margot's chapter describes Tunde "dropping something on to the floor and immediately retrieving it" (223), while Tunde's own recounts him receiving a secret note and reading it the exact moment Margo witnesses him (240). These individual moments are not exact copies of each other told from two perspectives, rather the narratives are intertwined to fill what is missing from the others. The reader therefore has no indication to doubt the reliability of the narrative, as illogical sequences of events would be revealed. The high reliability and sense of empathy, in addition to the many opportunities the multi-ethnic, multinational, and multigenerational cast of characters provide to form connections between the reader and the characters, both increase the likelihood the novel would be successful in creating a change in perspective for the reader.

The reliability of *Dietland's* Plum/Alicia and Jennifer narratives differ from each other because of their narrative situation. The Jennifer chapters' third-person multiple internal focalization is conventionally more accepted as reliable, as the narrator is an outsider and therefore presumed to be an objective observer. The chapters also include sources already otherwise presumed trustworthy, such as descriptions of news outlets reporting on the Jennifer incidents and characters both supporting and condemning the crimes, which creates

an illusion of objectivity. The news coverage is also commented on in Plum/Alicia's chapters (e.g. 156, 270). The crimes, while fictional, even have equivalents in real life events; a film director being accused of raping a thirteen-year-old girl and going to win an Academy Awards perhaps being the most obvious, alluding to Roman Polanski. This ensures the crimes are not seen as too extreme or fantastical to be believable, and the story presented through the Jennifer chapters can be viewed as reliable. As Jennifer herself has lost a child and is being blamed for the death, the reader most likely also feels empathy towards her.

The reliability of Plum/Alicia's narrative does not suffer from its first-person perspective because of its extreme subjectivity. The narrative is both empathy-evoking and trustworthy as it recounts not only the neutral and positive but also the negative feelings Plum has toward herself. When preparing for a date she is sure of rejection, saying "Plum would be humiliated, which is what she deserved" (159). This shows how Plum views her fat self as unlovable, while Alicia is a woman who is not only thin but accepted and therefore will never experience the mental pain Plum does. There is no reason to doubt how Plum experiences the world, although the reader is able to distinguish Plum's comments are about how she *thinks* people view her, rather than objectively describing their thinking. This corroborates the message of the novel, as the hurt Plum feels due to the societal pressure's she experiences is not less real just because she may have misjudged exactly how many people around her actually see her as she sees herself. Because the narrative focuses heavily on Plum/Alicia's internal monologue, the feelings of inadequacy and of desperation are something many readers can recognise and therefore relate to, even if the source of these emotions are not the same issues Plum has. The two narrative situations thus create empathy and reliability in the opposite ways, contributing to the overall meaning of the novel by showing how damaging outside pressure can be for an individual by high level of subjectivity, and how casually

crimes against women are treated compared to those directed at men by referencing objective truths from reality outside the novel itself.

Similarly to *The Power*, the narrative of *The End of Men* is constructed of characters from multiple backgrounds to elicit relatability, but it enhances this by also recounting the emotional reactions to the outbreak and its aftermath. This allows the reader to find multiple points to connect to within the novel, either through shared identity or on the level of emotion. The portrayal of grief, anger, and fear also evoke empathy, which allows for the reader to relate to characters less closely linked to their own identity. The novel, like the two others, also lends reliability to the characters' narratives by linking them to each other: the Chinese civil war, the development process of the vaccine, and the government programs to fulfil jobs left vacant by disappearing men all become topics in multiple characters' narratives, describing differing reactions ranging from the practical to the emotional. The only hint of unreliability is in Amanda's narration, which shows her doubting herself. As her attempts to demonstrate the implications of the outbreak are not taken seriously, she admits sounding "like a paranoid conspiracy theorist" (43). However, later she recognizes the reactions as another instance of a woman not being heard (157). This shows how her self-doubt is a symptom of internalised misogyny, and not a question of relatability of narration. The reader is also given proof of her treatment in emails, written by the officials she has tried to warn, which describe her in derogatory terms by saying she had a "breakdown at university" and calling her "a stark raving lunatic" (27), corroborating Amanda's interpretation of the situation. This example occurring early in the novel provides an assurance of reliability to the strong emotional responses throughout, as not just imagined sexism but real attempts to silence women and keep them adhering to their submissive position. The narrative therefore presents how the gender dynamic at the beginning of the novel (i.e. that most closely linked to our own society) harms women in both tangible and

emotional ways, which impacts how the readers view the eventual transformation in social hierarchies as necessary.

The narrative choices in the novels are feminist in their form, constructing the feminisms the texts attempt to convey to their readers. The communal voice in *The End of Men* merges individual narratives into a shared experience, emphasising survival through coming together and the importance of including diverse perspectives. In *The Power* the communal voice portrays how women and men both adhere to and depart from their gendered collective, which constructs its reversal of gender dynamics and the message of how gender as determiner of power is arbitrary. The combination of personal and communal voice in *Dietland* juxtaposes a personal and societal transformation, underlining the need for both to elicit permanent change. The alternation in the narrative situations of the novels creates links to the world outside of them, which allows the reader to connect their messages with the contemporary society. Finally, the dissemination of the ideologies of the novels relies on the narratives' relatability and reliability, which the novels create through intertwining the narration of multiple characters with each other and by providing multiple opportunities for relatability.

4. Contextualising Interpretation through Iconicity and Paratext

While the narrative choices of the novels connect the form to their ideologies, all three include elements that increase the accessibility of the messages they attempt to convey through elements familiar in other popular literature. Meaning in novels is formed not only through the text and semantics, but also through its connections to other media and other texts. As the visual and paratextual elements of the three novels link the novels to other popular feminist literature, they create a frame for their feminist interpretation. These elements reproduce meanings from outside of the literary work itself, which contributes to the conversation between literature and society. Visual elements, such as photographs or maps, or the use of different typographical features can be used to change the visual form of the narrative. Christina Ljungberg argues these additional elements have as much of a performative function as the text itself (2). She identifies two functions for using photography in fiction: firstly, to authenticate the narrative because of its historically documentative value, and secondly, to remind us of and trigger memories, creating a link between the past and the present (117). The performative function provides a structuring element that moves the story forward (118). Visual imagery as part of a narrative can therefore reinforce the authorial control over the text, which encourages a certain interpretation of the text. Lars Elleström distinguishes between “visual” and “iconicity” in poetry by categorising the former as sensory, and the latter as semiotic: iconicity conveys *meaning* beyond the verbal signs (437-8). Iconicity in literature can therefore enhance the meaning of the text.

The images included in a narrative can either mirror or visualise the text, or provide additional information not referred to in the text. There is a history of authors using diagrams, photographs, and maps to contribute to the world-building within a novel. As a well-known example of this, J.R.R. Tolkien’s use of maps of the fantastical realms he created has been studied extensively. Massimiliano Izzo proposes these additional elements have a distinct

purpose in creating mythology (33). Thus, the meaning created through such iconicity is not merely spatial but also psychological, providing a possible understanding of the worldview of the novel. Alison Gibbons identifies another category of multimodal literature, “ontological hoax”, which presents itself as authentic documentation through the use of multimodal elements but is in fact a work of fiction (2012). Its use attempts to blur the line between fiction and fact, asking why that distinction exists. In addition to including imagery within a work of fiction, the text itself can be manipulated visually. This type of use of typography is widespread enough to refuse generalisations of its function. Zoë Sadokierski categorises the effects of manipulating typography as having an impact on “pace, point of view, tone of voice, characterization and to imply ephemeral documents” (2011). Typography is a visual feature that differentiates a part of text, but the significance of this may vary within the novel as well: it may be used to add intrigue, or to indicate how the text should be read. Iconicity in fiction thus impacts the understanding and interpretation of the content of the text.

Walker, Alderman, and Sweeney-Baird all use visual elements in their novels, which contextualises their reading as popular feminist fiction. In the novels these additional elements have varying functions: they either act in connection with the text as world-building to create the utopias of the novels or add to the text and advance the plot. The world-building elements in *The Power* are drawings, a Bible scripture, e-mails, and fictional research documents. In *The End of Men* these are e-mails and blog posts, and in *Dietland* a quote from *Alice’s Adventures in the Wonderland* as foreword, footnotes, a weight-watcher programme oath, journal entries, lists, and fictional news articles. The plot elements in *The Power* are letters, e-mails, and invitation letters, in *The End of Men* e-mails, letters, a eulogy, text messages, notes, a memo, blog posts, and a lullaby. In *Dietland* these are e-mails and ‘handwritten’ notes. The inclusion of elements of digital interaction in all of the novels also reflect the contemporary reality, as these are methods used in the networks of feminist

discussions and campaigning. As the three novels create their own utopias, they construct a culture and society within them and support the comprehension of their worldviews through iconicity. The links between the form of the novels and the society they are a product of ensure their position as part of the conversation, which provides grounds for their ideologies to spread from beyond their pages.

In addition to the visual material included in the novels, their paratextual elements also inform their reading as feminist novels. Paratext is defined as any element of a literary work that is supplementary to the text itself (Gray 213). The paratextual elements analysed in this chapter are the section title pages and the covers of the novels, as these elements are most closely linked to the construction of the work itself as peritextual – being physically part of them. According to Jonathan Gray, as paratextual elements would not exist outside of the work of literature itself, their sole purpose is to “inflect meanings of the text” (213). They contribute to the interaction between the text and other texts (207) which allows for the reader to derive meanings from outside of the content of the text. The cover as paratext already contextualises the novel within a genre (Nilsson 237). This can “help to establish the text’s intentions: how it should be read, and how it should be not read” (Graham 101). As Gray suggests paratext positions the *politics* or the worldview of the novel (214), the analysis of such elements therefore establish how they impact the construction of the particular feminisms of the three novels in question. The covers as well as the section titles within the novels acts as framing devices. These frames reveal the novels’ authorial intention to position the novels as part of a feminist canon, informing the reader of their intended interpretation as social fiction, therefore aiding in their aim of raising consciousness. As tools recognisable from other popular fiction and contemporary feminisms, the use of iconicity and paratextual elements in the novels allows for their ideologies to become explicit and readily understood.

Building feminist worlds through iconicity

Some of the paratextual and visual elements in the novels exist as additional elements to the text, not as part of it, and their function is to give the reader a better understanding of the world according to the novel. *The Power* includes a strong religious undercurrent, describing the birth of a new religion through its first prophet, Allie – or Mother Eve, as she will later be known – who reverses the contemporary view of most contemporary religious prophets and leaders being men. This aspect of the novel is introduced at the very beginning of the novel, where the 1st book of Samuel of the Bible is paraphrased. The passage describes a people demanding Samuel to give them a king to rule over their free will, and Samuel reluctantly obeys. Samuel’s story is juxtaposed with Allie, who begins a new religion after the girls appoint her as their spiritual leader in the nunnery she escapes to after escaping her foster home. The religious theme continues in the drawings that follow every chapter bar one. The drawings present religious and historical artefacts of the time before the events of the novel and immediately after. As the frame narrative presents the rest of the novel as ‘historical fiction’ written by Neil, these drawings have evidentiary value in the context of Neil’s novel, but also provide the reader a more holistic understanding of the world presented by the novel. Neil himself considers these “suggestive, but readers can – and I’m sure many will! – skip over them” (Alderman ix), stating their function is to add intrigue to his text rather than move the story itself. A drawing of a crucifix (appendix 1, figure 1) includes a caption by Neil that shows to the reader its meaning in the Judaeo-Christian context has been forgotten, and the reader will also realise that symbols from Allie’s religion have been added. Thus, the drawings interact with the text on a timeline both before and after the events of the novel, filling the reader on the 5000-year gap between our time and that of the frame narrative of the novel. This reveals that history has been altered to better include the hegemonic values, erasing evidence of men’s dominance and establishing women’s rule as extending longer

through time than it actually has. Thus, the novel shows how those holding dominant positions in society remove evidence of potential alternatives in order to remain in power.

Along with the drawings, the reader is presented with more evidence from Neil's research concerning the time we now live, which creates a tension between reality and fiction and asks how stable our own view of society and its hierarchies are. Neil's research notes are presented as photocopies of sheets of paper, complete with binder holes. These and the drawings approach the "ontological hoax" category, providing seemingly authentic material to support the fictional narrative of the novel. As the reader realises these are fictional, these function as world-building elements offering pauses within the textual narrative. They provide additional instead of mirrored information, but crucially they are elements without which the textual narrative and understanding of the novel would not suffer. Therefore, they contribute to the creation of the mythology of the novel that is about to form at the time of the events in the story, already widely accepted 5000 years after when the frame narrative takes place. The type of iconicity used within the novel places greater emphasis on the mythological rather than physical world presented by the novel, which focuses the attention of the reader on the social aspects of the novel. As it shows the possible reinterpretations of our own reality from 5000 years in the future as well, it creates a layer of fictionality over contemporary society and asks how stable its power hierarchies are.

The End of Men also creates its own reality, although less fantastical as *The Power's*, and contextualises its feminism through the use of iconicity. As Lisa narrates her endeavour to find a vaccine for the virus, she first describes sending her assistant an e-mail late at night, which gives the sense of urgency and the impression that Lisa is working around the clock. However, the actual e-mail she sends is also included immediately after, typographically differentiated from the rest of the text on the page:

“I type out an email to my assistant, Ashley, for tomorrow morning.

Ashley,

Seen report tonight in NYT science section about flu in Scotland only affecting men. Can you dig up research on this asap tomorrow am and bring to me in a binder by 11?

Thx

Lisa

Dr Lisa Michael

***Professor of Virology, Head of Virology Department,
University of Toronto***

‘Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum’” (Sweeney-Baird, 35, formatting original).

As the e-mail does not provide additional information about the flow of events to the reader, its function is to give information about the context of the events. The style of writing in the email is direct, showing how Lisa speaks to her subordinates, and she gives very limited time to complete the task. She offers little in politeness strategies, only saying “Thx”, before what appears to be an automated signature at the end of the e-mail with her official credentials and a personal motto. The inclusion of the e-mail presents Lisa as demanding, requiring others to work as hard as she does (after all, she is sending a work e-mail last thing before bed), and ready to stand up for what she believes in, as evidenced by her motto, roughly translated as “Don’t let the bastards grind you down”. The Latin sentence originates from Atwood’s *Handmaid’s tale*, where Offred, the main character of the novel who lives in sexual slavery as a handmaid, finds the words carved into her closet. This phrase becomes a slogan for her to not let the oppressive circumstances break her spirit. Connecting this with Lisa implies she refuses to work within the gender norms assigned to her by society. The email thus contributes to Lisa as a feminist character and already suggests to the reader the theme of the novel as women becoming the heroines of the crisis, but also connects *The End of Men* to other feminist fiction. Therefore, the meaning of the email is to contribute to the world-building of the novel as a reversal of gender positions in society, firstly by adding to the sense of urgency amidst the chaos of the virus outbreak, and secondly by informing of the feminist background of the novel.

Another manner in which *The End of Men* utilises iconicity is to present an opposing view to those of the female narrators. A blog post from “The Gynarchy Resistance Blog” is included at around hundred days after the outbreak, but the chapter does not refer to or advance other events in the novel. The fragment presents another aspect of the world ravaged by the virus: a blog written by men who believe the virus was invented by women and spread on purpose, “depriving men from taking their rightful places in society” (Sweeney-Baird 147). Along with the original blog poster, there are comments from one other person included, typographically separated from other text (figure 2). This chapter differs in its misogyny, in its hatred, and in its presentation of conspiracy theories, which are not referred to in the rest of the novel. The blog post and its comments are the only instance in the novel where the capabilities and motives of women are questioned in such harsh terms, as the novel presents its female characters as actively working to help men, including Lisa who eventually succeeds in creating a vaccine that saves millions. Separating the blog visually underlines the views presented in it as marginal. It also presents how differently men and women adapt to the outbreak, as women experiencing loss seek comfort from one another, but these men seek each other to spread hatred. The language of the blog is something many women today are very familiar with, but something that in the timeline of the novel is of the past as the world is already seeing women rise to find solutions. The exclusion of the blog would not create a break in the events of the novel; therefore its function is to offer information on the worldview presented by the novel. The blog is an additional element that shows how exclusion of women from positions in society before the outbreak has contributed to the mindset that women are incapable of performing in these positions. As the rest of the novel presents this as untrue, including the blog questions the necessity of rigid gender hierarchies in society, including our own.

Much like the Bible quote in *The Power*, the function of the quote from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* at the very beginning of *Dietland* is to frame the novel as subversive. While Carroll's story is referenced multiple times, "She waited for a few minutes to see if she was going to shrink any further: she felt a little nervous about this; "for it might end, you know," said Alice to herself, "in my going out altogether, like a candle. I wonder what I should be like then?" (Walker, before page 1) concerns Alice's apprehension about her size. The quote creates an association between weight or size and identity, already presenting that as a central theme to the novel. Framing *Dietland* through *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, a story of a subverted and illogical dream-world, presents Plum as illogical and living in a confused reality. Hence Plum's concern with her weight and her perception of her size as the sole source of her unhappiness is shown to be illogical. The juxtaposition of Plum's recounting of her experiences in the "Baptist Weight Loss" program with footnotes from a fictional tell-all book about the program's creator (figure 3) strengthens this view. According to Linda Hutcheon, a "footnote is the main textual form by which ...believability is procured" (304). Thus the footnote with a quote from the program's senior vice president saying "People who only imagine they're fat are a huge market for us" juxtaposed with Plum saying she was "thrilled to be a part of Eulayla's family" (Walker 47) shows how Plum is given false information of herself for monetary gain, while she thinks they are acting in her best interest. Plum is made to believe something that is untrue in the context of the novel, and while the reader would be able to recognise Plum's obsession with weight loss as unhealthy without the inclusion of the footnotes, they add a layer of credibility to this interpretation. Both the quote from *Alicia's Adventures in Wonderland* and the footnotes therefore present Plum's worldview as flawed and question the patriarchal ideals she aims to achieve. They therefore contribute to creating the feminism of the novel, which promotes relinquishing harmful norms that limit self-expression.

The message of the Baptist Weight Loss program is further described in order to show how it exerts control over its members and how harmful this control is, mirroring how structural male dominance harms women in society. The oath taken by the members and forms about their eating habits (Walker; 47, 52, 57) are included within the text of the novel as illustrations that mimic photocopies along with rectangular frames around them (figure 3). The message conveyed by an oath to follow and strict forms to monitor one's success is that of control and structure. The world portrayed by the handouts of the program is bleak: impersonal and blaming the members for their struggle to advance. Yet Plum's unhappiness and isolation is described in her own narrative, and the overall plot does not rely on these additional elements. Thus they provide additional context to how Plum's worldview has been created. In stark contrast, Plum/Alicia's employer as a teen magazine has a brand of thin, successful women, while Plum herself feels excluded. This brand is represented by a list of lipstick product names and codes, spanning the length of more than two pages (Walker, 72-4). The names such as Amorous.00383, Angel.00384, Beige Beauty.00395, Burgundy Babe.00414, Catfight.00420, Coffee Addict.00433, Do It To Me.00452, Dominatrix.00454, I'm Easy.00483, and Lolita.00497 suggest their user seeks attention, especially sexual attention, which is contrasted with women in the Baptist Weight Loss program only wearing black in order to hide themselves. The strictness of the program and the lipstick names suggesting necessity to attract male attention offer two separate spaces for women to exist in society, both of which place women under control and promote adhering to the norm of patriarchal gaze. According to the worldview presented by these additional elements within the novel, women are either desired or undesirable, and Plum's personal struggle shows this is how she sees society as categorising and valuing women. As both spaces for women are portrayed as equally restrictive, they contribute to the message of the novel that patriarchy necessarily limits the space allowed for women in society.

Visual elements supporting comprehension

The Power's frame narrative is separated from the main body of the novel by its typography, formatting, and content, which allows it to comment both on the world within the novel but also that outside of its pages. The frame narrative is followed by a secondary title page which calls *The Power* "A historical novel" by a "NEIL ADAM ARMON" (1), an anagram of the novel's author's name. The frame narrative is constructed as e-mails between Neil and "Naomi Alderman", an editor, discussing the possible publication of his book. In the e-mails Neil and Naomi speculate how accurate information from 5000 years in the past is. The editor's amusement at "male soldiers, male police officers and 'boy crime gangs'" (x) first alerts the reader to the reversal of gender roles in society compared to their own experience. Naomi's comment about a world run by men being a "kinder, more caring and – dare I say it? – more *sexy* world" (x, emphasis original) compared to that run by women reverses the often-repeated feminist argument that more responsibility placed on women would result in more inclusive decision-making. Alderman herself has commented that she included the frame narrative to ensure the reader will understand the message of the novel (Jarvis 124), which explicitly states the intent of authorial control over the text and its interpretation. The frame narrative thus frames not only the content formally, but the context through which the novel should be read. By showing a woman in a position of power using sexist language and including doubt towards men's capacity at being in positions of power in society, the frame narrative is presented as parody of our own contemporary reality and guides the reader to question similar expectations throughout the rest of the novel.

All three novels include e-mails within their narrative which create both a visual interruption on the page, but also move the events of the novel to a different direction. While Lisa's e-mail from before only provided context to the world within the novel, other occurrences also influence the story and give the reader a visual cue of a change. An e-mail in

The Power (176) prompts Tunde to meet a prominent men's activist for his next story. Immediately before he has witnessed a terrorist attack committed by the activist's followers and is currently in hospital. The visual connects with the content as the e-mail interrupts both the page and Tunde's recovery, in addition to his somewhat directionless traveling following news stories around the world, and afterwards Tunde continues to write on the experiences of men after the Big Change. The crucial turn in his story is thus underlined through the formatting of the e-mail. The e-mails embedded in the narrative of *The End of Men* break from the personal narrative of the text around them, both in their formatting and their style as they discuss the formal response to the outbreak in professional language. The visual break is again mirrored in the content, as the first group of e-mails ends with "Ignore please" (25-7) as a response to Amanda's plead to start a formal crisis response, literally bringing her attempts to a halt. The second group ends with two automatic responses from men being "out of the office with an illness" and a woman on "compassionate leave" (38-39), again portraying how there will be no formal response at that time. In both examples the visual separation of the formal process from Amanda's desperate personal attempts shows how the structural imbalance of men and women in positions of authority is harmful as they may halt progress, much like the visual formatting halts the flow of text on the page.

The e-mails in *Dietland* also function to create a separation between personal and professional life but show how for Plum these merge towards the end of the novel, which mirrors the connection between personal and societal development in the novel at large. Plum's job is to respond to young girls contacting her employer's advice column, and the e-mails printed in distinguishing formatting include both questions from the girls and answers from Plum to them. As Plum's personal outlook changes throughout the novel, her growing frustrations with societal expectations are revealed in these messages that extend from a few lines to finally the length of over a page. This final e-mail Plum signs with her own name

“PlumK” (242), and the change in tone is revealed in two different responses to questions about breast size: from compliant “Many of us have breasts that don’t match ... *you* are normal!” (Walker 11, emphasis original), to frustrated “Do you really want to end up a lonely, bitter housewife with a drinking problem? Be grateful for your A-cup. Go to Italy next summer. Eat lots of gelato” (243). As Plum refuses her previously passive role in her own life she extends this behaviour to her work, and the emails mirror this change in both their tone and their change in length. The short e-mails of only a few lines at the beginning of the novel reflect Plum’s attempts to make herself invisible and smaller, also visible in the tone of the messages that is foreign compared to her voice. The last long e-mail shows her own opinions and personality, and its extended size mirrors the changes in her physical appearance such as wearing bright colours and no longer hiding her body. The e-mails thus reflect the personal development and growth Plum has experienced as a person.

The Power includes an entire chapter formatted as an online discussion forum discussing similar conspiracy theories as the blog in *The End of Men*, but instead of merely presenting a contrastive view to the attitudes of the female characters it gives justification to the reversal that happens later in the novel. The crucial difference between the two novels is that the hateful views presented in the messages in *The Power* will not die along with their speakers to a virus, so other measures are required to change their minds. Separating the blog visually presents these views as marginal, but also underlines how violently these men are prepared to act when they see their own position in society is threatened. The language in the messages, written by multiple online commentators, include racist rhetoric and misogyny and the chapter ends in a battle cry:

“UrbanDox933

There will be nowhere to hide. There will be nowhere to run
to. There will be no mercy” (Alderman 146, formatting original).

The character UrbanDox has become a leader for the men's resistance movement online, and the emergence of this type of thinking is the catalyst for Allie and Roxy to begin planning an outright war to establish their position of power. Women have begun to act more unafraid about their newly developed powers, which has resulted in the men's resistance to target them violently, either collectively or in isolated incidents. As Allie and Roxy realise they will not be given more control willingly, they decide to encourage other women to fight alongside them. Visually presenting the online forum messages as different from the other text of the novel thus creates a turning point in the novel from harbouring a possibility of finding peaceful coexistence between genders with women holding new physical attributes, to a necessity of removing men from positions of power altogether.

The turning point in Plum's personal transformation is also presented by including a visually separated element: excerpts from a handwritten journal that offer a perspective that questions her own. In contrast to the footnotes in *Dietland* providing an 'authentic' document to prove the errors in Plum's thinking, the notes (185-9) offer a subjective view from another person for Plum to realise she is wrong in how she thinks other people see her. Before reading Leeta's journal entries Plum felt paranoid about having a stalker and was convinced others only see her through her size. The notes break this cycle of thinking by literally breaking her inner monologue on the page (figure 4). The function of including the information as a dated document instead of a dialogue provides a sense of authenticity, both for Plum and the reader. Here authenticity refers to the truthful presentation of Leeta's subjective thoughts in contrast to the footnotes, which include objective truths in the novel's world. By being presented with something this personal, both in terms of content and the form, a journal, Plum begins to be convinced her view of the world is not necessarily the only truth. Other women may genuinely wish to help her towards self-acceptance, instead of demeaning her. Connecting the

two subjective views by including the notes within Plum's narrative supports the novel's message of changing minds through the support of and cooperation with other women.

Creating a feminist context for interpretation

Even before the reader is able to discern the ideologies of the novels through their narrative, they are informed of their feminisms through their covers which include direct references to other works of fiction by feminist authors, and the titles within the novels which direct the evolution of their utopias by explicitly stating its progress. The reading of all of the novels is thus affected by their contextualisation through paratext. Or, as Gray argues, "the interpretive process has already begun – the *text* has started – before we encounter the work (213). Covers are a part of a literary product but available to the public and not only their reader, which means their message is commercial in addition to literary. Similarly public, the book titles are essential (Genette 297), whereas intertitles within the novels are only available for the reader and not necessary, but all three novels include them. The novels are also arranged into sections above the level of chapters, dividing the societal/personal development within the novel into stages. These intertitles can be presumed to be autographic, or written by the author themselves, whereas the covers as the other paratextual frame in question are allographic, or made by someone other than the author, usually an editor or publisher. The meaning of the covers may therefore deviate from the meaning of the paratext inside the books.

Each novel presents a possible change in societal gender expectations by guiding the reader through its intertitles. The intertitles inform the reader either of time passing within the novel, a change in theme, or both. Genette distinguishes titles between rhematic, such as 'Chapter 1', or thematic, which announces the subject of the narrative to come (297). The novels only use thematic titles, which means each intertitle gives information of the chapter's theme and content already before its reading. Gérard Genette identifies the function of titles is "to designate, to indicate subject matter, [and] to tempt the public" (76), the third relevant

only to the title of the book as public information. Designation is not a necessary function, as the beginning of a chapter can be indicated without using any title by beginning on a new page, or, in the case of *Dietland*, with an ellipsis centred on the page. The use of a thematic intertitle is therefore a conscious choice to create an expectation of content of the chapter to follow.

The intertitles in both *The Power* and *The End of Men* inform of the passing of time, directing the reader either towards or away from the trigger point that causes the novels' reversals. The section titles in *The Power* move from "Ten years to go" (5) to "Can't be more than seven months left" (249) and eventually "Here it comes" (291), indicating the movement within the novel is towards change, in this case the "Cataclysm" or Armageddon. By contrast, in *The End of Men* the chapter titles include the number of days since the outbreak or a date, both indicating movement away from something. While both directions of movement indicate a change in circumstances, in *The Power* this countdown creates suspense and a sense of climax, which suggests the change in gender dynamics is complete only after the end of the novel. This is also supported by first presenting the frame narrative. *The End of Men* begins "Five days before" the outbreak, and the second chapter describes "Day 1", which launches the narrative in the chaos that eventually subsides as time passes. The change in gender structure in society is presented as moving firmly away from the patriarchal past as the count of the days increases. This indication of time therefore affects the expectation of the narrative to follow, both novels moving toward change but at a different pace and with opposing arcs of intensity. Whereas *The End of Men* ends in permanent change and an inclusive and safer utopian society for all, *The Power's* pace creates a sense of instability and therefore questions the security of its conclusion.

The thematic section titles of *The End of Men* and *Dietland* guide the reader through the development of their utopias by making the change they present visible step by step, ensuring

authorial control over their messages. *The End of Men* is divided into “Before”, “Outbreak”, “Panic”, “Despair”, “Survival”, “Recovery”, “Strength”, “Adaptation”, and “Remembrance”, which connect with the narrative’s focus on emotion instead of action. In accordance with how time is indicated in the chapter titles, the section titles also move from chaos and confusion to acceptance and adaptation. These titles promise hope, both for surviving the initial tragedy and for the possibility of change, the last section already providing a look back which underlines the permanence of the new society.

The section titles of *Dietland* guide the reader through the change on societal but also on personal level, while contextualising the novel intertextually, allowing for meanings to be derived from outside of the novel. Apart from one, they all are a direct reference to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (later *Wonderland*). In order, “Rabbit hole”, “Alicia and Plum”, “Drink me”, “Underground”, and “Eat me” indicate the stage of Plum/Alicia’s personal journey. Alice enters the Wonderland through a rabbit hole, and the first section presents both Plum’s worldview of placing unnecessarily strong value on appearance, and the sexism of the world surrounding her. The framing thus suggests this perspective as illogical and full of misunderstandings, as such is the world Alice finds. “Underground” refers to the literal basement Plum stays in to distance herself from the outside world and its expectations, and in *Wonderland* the underground is both physically and logically distanced from the ‘above-ground’. According to Donald Rackin, the underground in *Wonderland* is a subversive experience (35), and this section of the novel is where Plum is able to form a new perspective on herself and the world around her. “Drink me” and “Eat me” both concern themselves with Plum/Alicia’s relationship to her size and refer to the labels Alice finds on drink and food changing her literal size in *Wonderland*. The drink in *Wonderland* makes Alice smaller, which is Plum’s goal in this section of *Dietland*: concluding that dieting has not resulted in her becoming Alicia she decides to schedule a weight-loss surgery, and her identity shrinks to

being wholly occupied with imagining her literal shrinking body. By contrast in “Eat me”, Alicia is no longer counting calories, much like Alice in *Wonderland* grows even larger than she was before after eating the cake she finds. The section titles of both *The End of Men* and *Dietland* move the novels thematically from chaos to strength, proposing a more stable world after their gender revolutions.

Before the reader is introduced to the feminisms of the novels through their narratives, these messages are already suggested by their covers which explicitly categorise the novels as they refer to gender as a central theme and inform that the novels subvert reality. The covers as the public image of the novels are a part of their advertising strategy and affect who eventually chooses to read them. Their function is therefore to inform, but also, as Genette argues, “to attract attention” (28). While usually composed by someone other than the author themselves (but authorised by them), they are connected to the experience of the novel as an inseparable piece of the work, affecting its reception and consumption (Genette 1). Genette defines the cover as *threshold* paratext which forms a “zone between text and off-text”, influencing “better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it” (2). The function of this type of paratext is thus to connect the novel to the surrounding literary and societal context, and to support the author’s intention of the meaning of the novel.

The titles and the language used in the covers of all three novels position them among feminist fiction by using elements familiar to the audience. It is also important to note that covers, unlike the contents of novels, are subject to change according to edition, and, in some cases, due to the change in publisher. Only one English-language edition of *The End of Men* has been published by its original publisher as of June 2022, but in the cases of the two other novels, each republication has added information to the covers. “The end of men” as a book title immediately suggests a theme involving gender, but also a radical change in society. However, it does not necessarily indicate the sort of tragedy that follows from the outbreak,

but leaves more to interpretation, evoking intrigue. The “end” can also refer to a will to end the hegemony of men and can be extended to something feminists are sometimes accused of – that they do not aim for equality between genders, but the submission of men. This provocative interpretation ties the novel to discussions around contemporary feminism(s) by asking whether the marginalisation of men would result in a better or worse society than where we currently live in.

The front cover of *Dietland* already suggests both its intertextual and feminist context. The first edition cover only includes the title “Dietland”, a genre indication “A novel” and the author “Sarai Walker”. The back cover only includes a blurb. “Dietland” alludes to diet culture, something that has been long criticised by feminists, but also to “Wonderland”, already providing an intertextual link and suggesting a connection between the two interpretations. This linkage connects the absurdity of *Wonderland* to dieting and informs of how the novel will treat the theme. “The power” as the shortest title relies on the multiple possible meanings for that single word: energy, physical strength, control, ability, authority (Oxford Dictionary of English). The novel merges many of these, as the newly awoken electrical *energy* of the women give them *physical strength*, influencing their *ability* to *control* and establish *authority*. The theme of power relations is therefore immediately presented. Subsequent editions of *Dietland* add complementary commentary about the novel, as well as information about an adaptation to a television series (figure 5). Later editions of *The Power* (figure 6) include a mention of an award – Women’s Prize for Fiction 2017 Winner – making a promise of quality (Gray 213). Louise Nilsson categorises these as paratextual validation, where an element references the popularity of the work in an attempt to entice the reader (238) by its mere existence. The readability of the novel’s fictional feminisms is therefore guaranteed in their advertising by referring to their acceptance by other readers and critics.

To further familiarise the reader with their content before entering the narrative, the covers present the theme of changing gender relations in explicit terms. *The End of Men* includes a promotional statement on the front cover: “Only men carry the virus. Only women can save us” (figure 7). This immediately frames the novel as a story of division between men and women, where men are placed in a victim position and women in the hero/saviour position, contrary to the setting at the beginning of the novel where men are the overwhelming majority of fields such as security services, or in the ‘hero’ position in society. The reversal of this dynamic in the promotional statement introduces the novel’s content and controls its reading as feminist. A similar message is conveyed by “Join the revolution” in third edition *Dietland*’s back cover. ‘Revolution’ suggests an active process of reversal, and ‘join’ invites the reader to interact with the novel, using the tool of consciousness-raising of feminism to instigate change by spreading information.

The press quotations and other commentary on the covers of all three novels also deeply root them as part of the feminist literary genre by using the name-recognition of other authors. The front covers of both *Dietland* and *The Power* include endorsements by Margaret Atwood, “Ferocious and hilarious” and “Electrifying! Shocking! Will knock your socks off! Then you’ll think twice, about everything” (shortened in later editions to simply “Electrifying!”) respectively, while Paula Hawkins has endorsed *The End of Men* with “A fiercely intelligent page-turner”. These quotes act as paratextual validation and position the novels as belonging to a certain category (Nilsson 239). The connection already aids in making a feminist interpretation of the content more likely. This constructs an intertextual network giving credibility to the novel and its author (Nilsson 241), which is especially important for *Dietland* and *The End of Men* as these are both Walker’s and Sweeney-Baird’s debut novels. Without reading the first word the interpretation of the novels has already begun, and the explicit positioning within a genre of feminist popular fiction creates an expectation of social

commentary presented in an accessible manner. The covers therefore have an important role in allowing more readers to view the novels as easy reading despite their serious content, which increases the potential of the novels' ideologies to spread among a wider readership.

The three novels utilise iconicity and paratextual elements within and around their narrative in order to strengthen the authorial control over their reading and to connect them to the world outside of the novels, which ensures the messages they attempt to convey are interpreted as intended. As the inclusion of visual elements within the text is a strategy familiar from other popular literature, their presence in the novels offer recognisable moments within a subversive, speculative story. The iconicity in the novels contributes to the world-building of these subversive utopias and mirror their themes in order to point the reader towards a certain interpretation of their textual content. The intertitles signpost different stages of the transformations, both societal and personal, within the novels, which informs the reading within the novels. The covers and book titles, however, create expectations of the novels as a whole, and position them within feminist popular fiction. The paratexts create connections between the novels and the literary and societal context they emerge from, which allows the reader to derive meanings from outside of the text itself. This brings the reader, the society, and the novel into interaction with each other, enhancing the possibility for the messages of the novels to spread from within their pages to the world around them.

5. Conclusion

The Power, *The End of Men* and *Dietland* are all recent, popular novels by women, for women, and concerning women's issues; all three factors informing their interpretation. Each utilises tools from other literature in these categories in order to increase their appeal to the readership in an attempt to spread their feminist ideologies wider. The gender of the authors necessarily informs the presumed readership of the novels, and therefore the recipient of their message. The marketing and form categorise the novels as popular, while their content nod to the genre of feminist science fiction in creating utopias that subvert reality. This combination allows for the transcendence of their message by creating connections between fiction and reality, which has the potential to allow for the reader to become convinced of the argument to the point that it influences their own thinking. The specific genre and form of the novels therefore create the conditions that allow for the social critique the novels present to be understood and spread in order to impact cultural change in reality.

The Power presents a future very much comparable with contemporary society, only difference being that women are the socially dominant gender. As both men and women gradually change their behaviour in response to the Big Change throughout the novel and begin to act the opposite to their previous socially expected role, the novel questions how stable these presumptions are. The downward spiral into instability is reflected in the narrative form, which begins as systematically following all main focalizers and eventually merges their narratives. The collective voice focuses on the women's experiences of the Big Change, leaving the male characters in the marginal position. The iconicity contributes to the world-building within the novel, and the paratext informs of its intended feminist interpretation. The linkages these methods create with the reality outside of the novel question the stability of social structures, inspiring the reader to examine them critically. The main argument of the novel is that social dominance is inherently linked with power relations between groups and

individuals, and the potential for violence is used as a tool to gain and retain an oppressive position. Without assessing our relationship to the use or the threat of violence in contemporary society, structural inequality will persist.

The End of Men creates a more substantial change by dismantling existing oppressive hierarchies without merely reversing who controls who. As the title suggests, the novel presents an end of the world scenario, or at the very least an end to the world as we know it. The sudden disappearance of almost half the population globally presents unprecedented challenges that the survivors are forced to manage despite their personal feelings of loss. Through the use of collective voice the novel portrays a shared experience without erasing differences, which offers multiple possibilities for relatability and empathy. This creates potential for the reader to engage with the narrative, and for the novel to change attitudes. The intense focus on the emotional response to the crisis underlines the hope for a better future, which the novel describes in its final chapters. As the world run by women does not descend to (more) chaos but rearranges itself to better accommodate for those left behind, the overarching message is that the survival, even thriving, of humanity is possible through cooperation and more inclusive practices.

Dietland also focuses on women working together as the source for societal change. While Plum's storyline presents how the help of other women can influence an individual's perspective of herself and the society around her, Jennifer's proposes the opposite as the actions of one woman instigate groups of women in multiple countries to revolt against structural oppression. The unnatural alternation of the narrative situation and voice create an inherently female narrative, which focuses the attention on the novel's connections to society and the critique it presents. The iconicity and paratext in the novel establish a sense of familiarity and ensures the subversive story is not distancing. The novel portrays how harmful

internalised patriarchal ideals are for women and underlines the role of collective action in counteracting asymmetrical balances of power between genders.

The three novels base their feminist social critique on the discussions of fourth-wave feminism/s, but also use a specifically feminist form in creating their message. This link between form and meaning supports their intended interpretation, and all three authors have stated *feminist* speculative fiction was their intention (Jarvis, Ping, Radio New Zealand). The novels participate in the continuum of women's fiction raising consciousness, Walker and Sweeney-Baird explicitly mentioning other literature as their source for inspiration, *The Power* introducing the genre to Sweeney-Baird (McDowell, Brewer). The novel's marketing and form has influenced their categorisation as popular fiction, a label sometimes used pejoratively to separate them from novels with literary, artistic merit. This is especially common for women's fiction, which still carries the burden of the critical views expressed of chick-lit. These three novels, however, engage in serious themes and employ a genre that has been used to explore explicitly feminist questions for decades. To counteract this, they borrow from the style of chick-lit through their iconicity and underline their theme through paratext in order to guarantee clarity of message. Their attempt is therefore to mainstream the ideologies they present through their choice of form in order to participate in the feminist effort of raising consciousness.

This mainstreaming also unfortunately influences how radical the feminisms of the novels are. Contrary to the intersectional approach of fourth-wave feminism, all three novels treat issues of gender attitudes and dynamics in isolation of other factors affecting their subjects' positions in different areas of society. This limits the reach of the message they're attempting to convey, as many women will, again, be left frustrated for the lack of representation and attention to their specific circumstances. The very obvious and large groups omitted are ethnic minorities, women with disabilities, sexual and gender minorities,

and older women. Any commentary on ethnicity is erased even in situations where any contemporary reader would expect remarks on race, such as the case of Soledad Alaya in *Dietland* based on the public discussion on United States citizens of South American descent, or mixed-race Mother Eve in *The Power*, whose role as religious figurehead is only questioned based on her gender, never because of her ethnicity. The novels treat gendered oppression through a single axis, the male-female binary. This is against the basis of intersectionality as recognising the multiplicity of identities and their interaction in any individual's life. Yet, even these small openings toward LGBTQI+ characters and ethnic minorities do allow for the possibility of the reader to imagine how their experiences would differ if their stories were explored in more detail. As the intersectional approach to the feminisms presented in each novel is clearly lacking, it can be argued they avoid controversy. While empowering to read, they are written for a consumer of literature, not of theory, and thus present a sellable version of feminism. This approach does not lack merit, however. Making discussion on women's issues more mainstream, bringing feminist ideas to corners of societies they have not yet reached, may be possible only through vast publicity and a network of publishing and selling books only available for commercially successful novels.

The analysis of the thesis proved more difficult to execute than expected due to the limitations in research on feminist literary critique and especially feminist narratology, and especially the (in)accessibility of existing research. Analysis in intersectional approaches to literary studies is still an emerging field, and therefore limited in its scope. It also requires a wider geographical range in order to be more inclusive. The position of English language globally means much of theory on feminism and feminist literature stems from English-language literature, and issues concerning women from non-Anglophone societies unfortunately remain in a marginal position. Works of women and for women should also not be only treated with a feminist lens and grouped together, but included in discussions

alongside previously established canon. This would ensure future development of theory on the basis of wider range of works, which has been found to benefit research as the risk for overgeneralisation diminishes. As literature, theory, and society interact with each other constantly, they are able to influence one another and new discoveries and discussions in one may lead to the advances in another. Fiction, as more widely consumed than academic articles or political texts, has the potential to reach masses and disseminate new ideas. More focus is needed on the study of popular literature, especially popular literature for women, in order to understand why these texts appeal, and how they can influence cultural change. Based on the discussions around *The Power*, *The End of Men*, and *Dietland*, they have already succeeded in popularising feminist social critique to new audiences by standing between the familiar and the revolutionary.

Appendix – figures

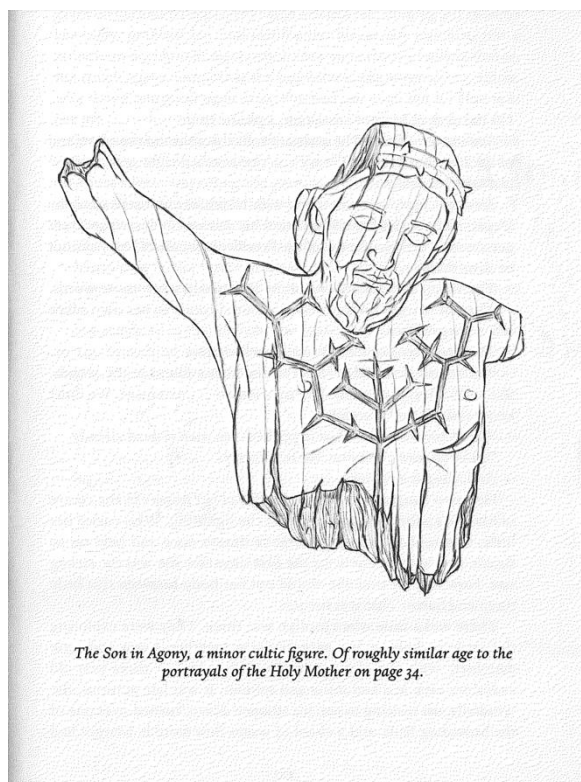


Figure 1. Alderman, 321.

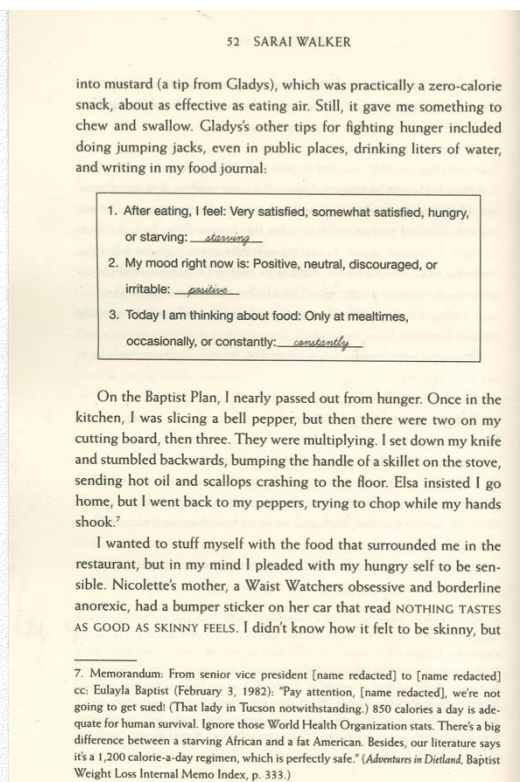


Figure 3. Walker, 52.

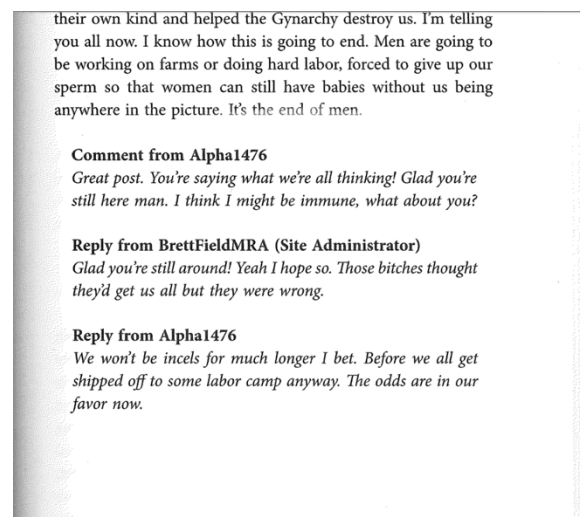


Figure 2. Sweeney-Baird, 149.

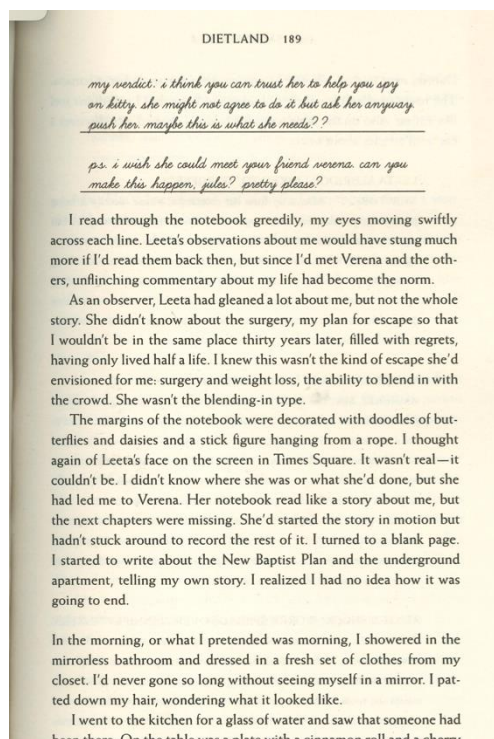


Figure 4. Walker, 188-9.

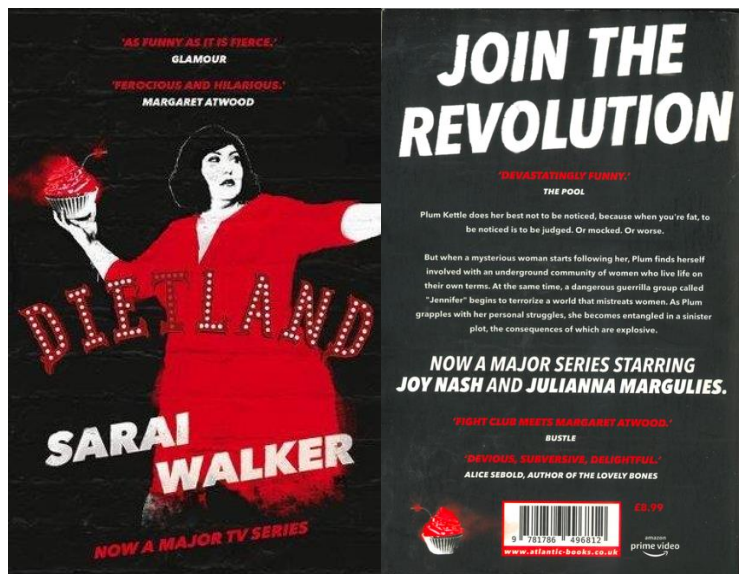


Figure 5. Walker, 3rd edition, front and back cover.

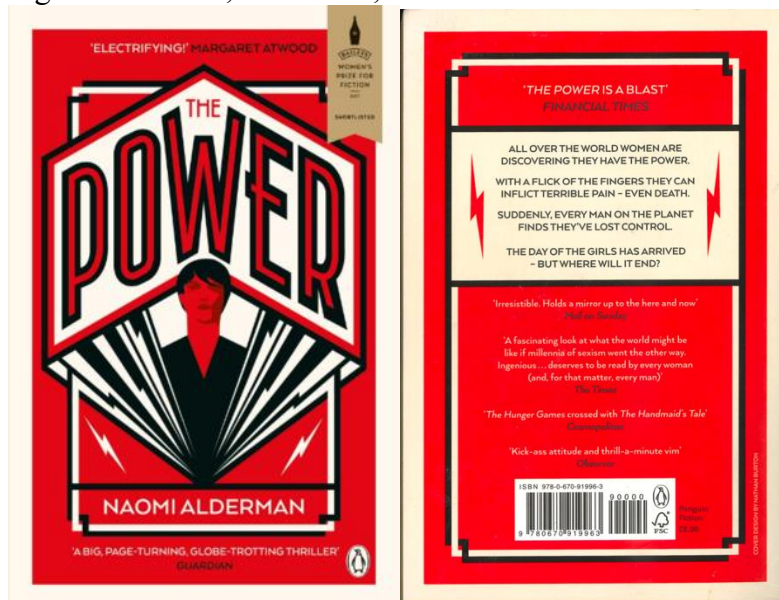


Figure 6. Alderman, 2nd edition, front and back cover.

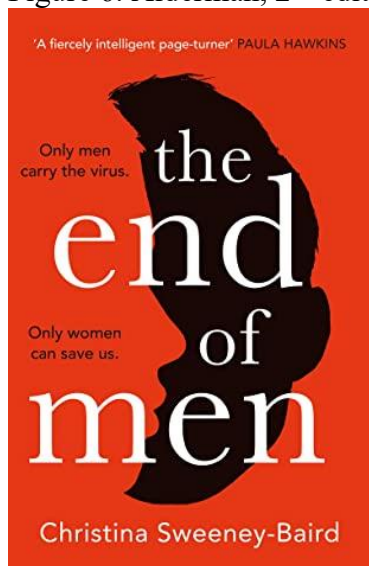


Figure 7. Sweeney-Baird, 1st edition, front cover.

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