

GRADUATE STUDENT ESSAY CONTEST WINNER

# Growing Old in Utopia: From Age to Otherness in American Literary Utopias

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Utopian Studies and Age Studies, as disciplines, have traditionally had little to do with one another despite a great deal of shared scholarly "territory." This essay examines one such nexus of shared territory: the changing representation of age as a component of social formation in American utopian fictions of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. A perceptible shift in Anglophone utopian depictions of aging can be identified in the approximate years 1890-1914, before which aging was largely figured as a non-othering, normative characteristic, and after which aging became a particularizing and potentially othering feature of identity. Using a "stage" vs. "state" theoretical approach modeled on the work of Andrea Charise, the analysis here focuses on the brief interim where narrative figurations of age became noticeably unstable in utopian literature, fluctuating between othering and non-othering configurations (sometimes both simultaneously) in well-known American utopias such as Ignatius Donnelly's *Caesar's Column* (1890), Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* (1912), and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915).

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Categories of difference are fascinating in utopian fiction; they prompt wave upon wave of fresh readings of race, gender, and class throughout developmental stages of political, legal, economic, and social imagination. Utopian treatment of categorical difference frequently draws critical accusations of racism, sexism, varieties of classism, and problematic representation of differences in innate physical and mental ability in the effort to imagine a better (or worse) future. But age is a category that stands apart from these, and it is age that I wish to explore here, particularly in its configuration at the very end of the nineteenth century. This period is of specific interest because it is roughly around this time

that aged characters in utopian fiction begin to be figured as radically “other.” I locate this shift in the approximate years 1890–1914, after which age becomes a widely malleable category of social difference in utopian narrative, and before which age seldom figures as a categorical difference at all.

If the dearth of research into their common themes is any indication, historically age studies and utopian studies have had little to do with one another. Imaginative revision of age and aging presents outsized existential problems to the utopianist, whose work prefigures mortality in ways that seem ontologically inescapable. Likewise, age studies seem compatible enough with utopian concerns of identity, history, and even futurity, but less so with fanciful revisions of aging—which seem external to the discipline—than with inquiry and revision of perception surrounding age as commonly experienced.

Sweeping claims about either discipline are not my aim here, but rather I would like to suggest that these two areas of study are natural allies that share age and aging as creative and scholarly “property” in common. By way of demonstrating one such overlap, I mean to show that through a shift in narrative methodology during the period just prior to World War I, American utopian authors began to use imaginative revisions of age in their fiction in order to metabolize understandings of modernity, mortality, and selfhood that continue to be addressed today in the contemporary study of age.

#### **GROWING OLD IN UTOPIA**

Age studies scholar Andrea Charise points out that age is an inconsistent component of cultural being in narratives. It might be, and for most of the nineteenth century generally was, thought of as a universal “stage” of human identity (908). One might not be “young” or “old” at any given moment, but barring premature death one could expect to be both of those things, and every other stage in between, in his or her lifetime. Thus, the first of two primary configurations of age in utopian

fiction figures age and aging as a *fundamentally non-malleable universal form of difference*. This version of age merits mention and contributes to identity, but is far less narratively “malleable” (my term) than characteristics like class or gender, and constitutes neither a particularizing categorical difference nor its logical negative capacity: age as otherness.

The second version of age in utopian narratives, which emerges mostly after World War I and persists through the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, is a configuration of age as *eminently malleable*, and hence, to continue borrowing Charise’s terms, a “state” rather than a “stage” of life (908). As a non-universal, particular “state” (again, like race, class, and gender), it is subject to the discriminatory functions of categorical difference; it can be—and frequently is—used to categorize the aged as “other.” Between these two broader, persistent defining configurations was a brief and illuminative transition period, roughly from 1890 to 1914, where age was *inconsistently malleable* in utopian fiction. Anglophone—especially American—utopian fictions from this important, brief period coincide with a number of social and scientific shifts that helped textualize age as a categorical difference, including newfound understandings of microbiology framed as disease.

By narrative “malleability” I mean the extent to which a utopian fiction writer is invested in and capable of shaping and molding the characteristic of age. Put plainly, of what use is “othering” the aged, when age is universal and all-inclusive? Age, after all, is among the most fastidious of non-discriminators. People age. Trees age. VCRs age. Minerals age. Atoms age. This is an important distinction because as forms of difference go, age presents a unique difficulty to the utopianist: it is symbolic of—or, perhaps more accurately, the inscription on the body of—mortality, and like the universalizing continuity between “young” and “old” age is problematically inevitable. An author might, for example, assign a character a non-universal (and hence potentially “othering”) race, class, gender, or degree of ability; but particularizing a character via age is less straightforward. Outside of a small range of experimental writing, narrative

time *must* pass. An “old” character may be narratively particular in his or her agedness, but he or she was once necessarily “young” and calling attention to the characteristic of age only reinforces this seemingly-inescapable continuity. A character’s age, like the rules of reality (even, most of the time, narrative “reality”), could be thought of as unmalleable in that respect. An author might choose to set a temporal beginning or end point to a story, or even jumble timeframes around, but the passage of time in any story, as in reality, however long or short, constitutes a form of aging and a nod to the universal, non-malleable configuration of age. Until approximately 1890–1914 there were few attempts in Anglophone utopian fiction to overcome this unmalleability.

And yet we know that age does indeed constitute contemporary otherness both in firm reality and in fictions common to the latter twentieth- and twenty-first-century utopian configuration. In order to understand the complex ways that later utopias deal with age, we must first examine how and why age can be configured as a categorical difference, the term I favor to describe the non-universal, particularizing components of identity.

In *Aged by Culture* (2004), age studies scholar Margaret Morganroth Gullette calls aging “the most inaccessible layer of our social formation” (27). She argues that age acts as both a physically universal experience and a social category of otherness in turns, and that this duality helps camouflage the more insidious mechanisms of age-targeted extractive economies of all kinds, which tend toward age-as-otherness as an unsustainable cult of youth (32, 57-58). Other scholars describe how age-otherness can be both pervasive and mundane and have far-reaching effects into our perception. Older adults may find themselves largely invisible to the rest of the world—sometimes literally so, as in the case of an elderly woman killed in a collision with a cyclist who claimed simply in his defense, “I didn’t see her” (Woodward ix)—and a variety of mundane age-based biases are embedded in our culture and institutions, including a strong rejection of the idea of elderly sexual activity (Rubin 87). Older people are afforded a variety of special privileges (pricing for

services, priority seating on transportation, etc.) and face a similar variety of special sanctions (additional testing for driving licenses, cutoffs for participation in certain forms of work, and so forth).

These forms of differential, particularizing, often flatly unequal treatment—manifestations of otherness—are not harmless; Rubin, Woodward, and Gullette all stress that the casual othering of older people can potentially cause great harm. Feelings of loneliness, abandonment, anxiety, invisibility, inferiority, undesirability, and helplessness recall many of the same negative psychological effects of other, more easily recognizable forms of socially constructed difference like racism, sexism, classism, and ableism. Moreover, these forms of otherness are dynamic: Merrill Silverstein and Jeffrey Long, researchers in the field of marriage and families, analyzed patterns of older individuals interacting with their grandchildren and discovered that some forms of age-based othering followed a linear progression, the divergence worsening with increasing age (921). In sum, age seems to function similarly to “othering” categorical differences when deployed as such: it is socially constructed and reinforced, readily recognizable, patently harmful, and contains dynamic differences in scope even within individual biosocial phenomena.<sup>1</sup>

It would seem, given this understanding, that age and aging would be fertile ground for the utopian imaginary in fiction. Gullette even indirectly calls for this when she suggests that our inability to imagine age in innovative ways and our vulnerability to cultural mirrors play into the hands of a toxic consumer culture, perpetuated by a relentlessly linear and negative narrative of decline (8). As I mention above, however, until the early twentieth century, age was rarely understood in literary utopias as an identity characteristic that could be radically altered by a better or worse future. Only a handful of American utopian texts before 1900 feature age as

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<sup>1</sup> That is to say, degrees of agedness correlate to degrees of “whiteness” or “wealth” or “fitness” or “masculinity” within the larger category of difference under inquiry.

a major thematic or plot element, and only two before 1890.<sup>2</sup> What we see instead prior to 1890 are stories concerned with age that, in the main, behave like “instructive” life-stage stories rather than utopian revisionary texts, with marriage being one of the most common plot points (Heath 28). This scarcity is confirmed by the small number of scholars, including Andrea Charise, who have studied age in literary utopias.

Leah Hadomi, writing for *Utopian Studies*, ruminates on this peculiar contradiction: death, dying, age, and time are widespread sites of examination in all literary genres but, as she puts it, they are “almost dismissed from literary utopias—death is extraterritorial to utopia, being as [Ernst] Bloch phrased it, ‘the harshest anti-utopia’” (85). Hadomi sees the narrative malleability of age, in the form of the imaginative elimination of death or radical revision of the concept of mortality, as something that is typically “beyond the values, priorities, or concrete intention of utopia,” and notes that stories of this type are usually fantastical and escapist in nature (85). This is consistent with what we know of age-concerned utopias prior to 1890, among which we only very rarely encounter utopias of immortality or concerned with characters who could cease aging entirely. The existential nature of death, and the hard limits and motivations we attribute to it in the physical world, suggest an inescapable narrative overdetermination: a world of immortal humans—or worse, *some* immortal humans—must rapidly devolve into dystopia rather than eutopia. In this sense, the utopia of indefinite longevity or immortality tends to crash land the utopian impulse, compounding the problematics of identity by folding the temporal intractability of age into Malthusian logics of eternal resource exhaustion,

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<sup>2</sup> Bibliographies consulted for this essay include Lyman Tower Sargent’s *British and American Utopian Literature 1516-1975: An Annotated Bibliography*; Glenn Robert Negley’s *Utopian Literature: A Bibliography With a Supplementary Listing of Works Influential to Utopian Thought*; Carol Farley Kessler’s “Bibliography of Utopian Fiction by United States Women, 1836-1988”; and the bibliographic portion of Kenneth Roemer’s *The Obsolete Necessity: America in Utopian Writings, 1888-1900*.

cultural and individual stagnation and anomie, and gerontocracy (Hadomi 85-90). Illustrative of Hadomi's argument are stories like Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* (1897) or John Boorman's film *Zardoz* (1974), in which immortality becomes a perverse or even horrific eternal dystopia, and in which the rejection of immortality and the "right" to a natural death constitutes a cautionary anti-utopia (Groys, Sorokina, and Meers 349).<sup>3</sup>

Yet we return to the image of the individual particularized by age—invisible, marginalized, other, and lonely—and we cannot fail to see the categorical difference in play, and the evident gulf between the present and a better future. This is the playground of the utopian impulse and, while rare, utopias of the nineteenth century in America and elsewhere did not ignore age completely. Prefigured by centuries of discourse on age by prominent writers like Hippocrates, Aristotle, Galen, and Cicero (Charise 914), as well as age narratives of legendary, mythological, or abstract philosophical nature ("fountain of youth" stories, crone mythologies, etc.), the "long" nineteenth century saw its first major utopian text dealing with age published in 1799 in Britain: William Godwin's *St. Leon*.<sup>4</sup> Other Anglophone utopias that followed included an exploration of aging backward (Irish poet Melesina Trench's 1816 epic *Laura's Dream; or, The Moonlanders*)<sup>5</sup> and a demographic dystopia where loss of property or even euthanasia is prescribed for those reaching various ages (British-born Anthony Trollope's 1881 novel, *The Fixed Period*).

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout this essay I favor the taxonomy of utopia from Lyman Tower Sargent's "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited"; hence I term cautionary immortality utopias "dystopias" (the "bad place"), because that's what they are for the immortal characters. Others call them "anti-utopias" (utopias critical of the utopian form, in Sargent's terms), and that is also technically correct.

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Godwin and Malthus were contemporaries, and critical of each other's work (Charise 906).

<sup>5</sup> The "aging backward" trope is common enough in all literature, but Trench's version was specifically an arcadian-style lunar utopia.

American utopias came to the topic a bit later in the nineteenth century, and the notable handful of pre-1900 American age-related utopias include gerontocracies, fountains of youth, utopias that can only be reached after death, and even the occasional utopia of immortality.<sup>6</sup> But these stories were the rare exception, rather than the rule. For most major American utopian novels of the nineteenth century, age is a mundane, universal, non-narratively-malleable characteristic. These novels frequently feature aged, elderly, or anachronistically-preserved individual characters, but this almost invariably takes the form of utopian circumstances that slow or temporarily pause age, but do not eliminate or reverse it.

To touch on just a few prominent examples, John Cleves Symmes's *Symzonia* (1820) mentions age only in the context of retirement from compulsory work and, as is typical of most American nineteenth-century utopias, privileges age as a characteristic of maturity, intelligence, and political agency. In other words, age is a difference, but a universal, non-malleable difference which carries some benefits and little or no tendency to assign otherness (164). Likewise, Mary E. Bradley Lane's *Mizora: A Prophecy* (1880) features a number of *whitened* but not *wizened* female characters in its all-female utopia. As in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's later novel *Herland* (1915), mothers are essential to its parthenogenic utopian vision, hence aging and age difference must logically be retained. Unlike the Herlanders, however, Bradley Lane's Mizorans "made no concealment of the practice they resorted to for preserving their complexions," maintaining the illusion of youth "past the age allotted to grandmothers" (16) even in the total absence of men and sexuality. When a young Mizoran drowns, her funeral dirge hints at an even deeper

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<sup>6</sup> Specifically, these include James Reynold's *Equality, a History of Lithconia* (1802) and Henry Gaston's *Mars Revealed* (1880), both gerontocracies; Gustabus W. Pope's *Journey to Mars* (1894), a utopia featuring a fountain of youth; two utopias that can only be reached after death, Carlyle Petersilea's *The Discovered Country* (1892) and Amos K. Fiske's *Beyond the Bourn* (1891); and a utopia where characters become immortal, Emile J. Hix's *Can a Man Live Forever?* (1898). Also, in Edward Bellamy's short story "The Blindman's World" (1898) characters' physical aging remains a constant, but they are given foreknowledge of their future lives.



profoundness of age in *Mizora*: “youth sleeps in round loveliness when age should lie withered and weary, and full of honor” (68). In *Mizora* age, like death, is visible, but as a “stage” not a “state,” and though it constitutes a conspicuous difference that merits amelioration, it is once more not a source of otherness.

Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1888) similarly treats age as a condition that has relevance and deserves some superficial revision, but which is essentially still a “stage.” “We hold the period of youth sacred to education,” Dr. Leete explains to Julian West, “and the period of maturity, when the physical forces begin to flag, equally sacred to ease and agreeable relaxation” (88). In Bellamy’s Boston of the year 2000 “age approaches many years later, and has an aspect far more benign than in past times” (272). As in *Mizora*, and other texts, true old age begins to be difficult to discern as older individuals appear younger than the presumed nineteenth-century reader’s concept of “old age,” and often as young or younger than the novels’ youthful narrators and protagonists. Bellamy even uses West’s discovery of future-Boston’s retirement scheme as an excuse to protest that the aged are less capable than the young: “At forty-five, a man still has ten good years of manual labor in him, and twice ten years of good intellectual service. To be superannuated at that age and laid on the shelf must be regarded rather as a hardship than a favor by men of energetic dispositions” (269). But the reader needn’t fear; Bellamy has other plans for those who have reached retirement age: steering the ship of state.

In these and other texts, age is a non-malleable identity category, one that may be ingeniously accommodated or biosocially altered to reduce its most loathsome effects, but which remains universal and generally not used to signify otherness. This authorial avoidance of age as a categorical distinction also doesn’t seem to have a gendered aspect. Carol Farley Kessler’s excellent bibliography of utopian fiction by American women

that covers the years 1836-1988 mentions only five texts before 1900 that make a point of addressing age at all.<sup>7</sup>

After World War I, and particularly after the publication of George Bernard Shaw's *Back to Methuselah* (1921) and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1931), there was a noticeable change in the approach to age in utopia: not simply the fact that there were suddenly many more age-concerned utopias published in the post-war period (which we might attribute to the proliferation of popular fiction in general), but also that age is much more commonly figured as a particularizing "state" than a universal "stage" of being. Though Shaw and Huxley were prominent early-adopters of this new approach to age, American utopianists soon followed, exploring the demographic-dystopian and posthuman possibilities of malleable age and aging in pessimistic, gerontophobic Cold War-era dystopias.<sup>8</sup> These stories tended to brood on the decline of fertility and substantial increase in life expectancy experienced by most Western countries during this period (Domingo 728).

Utopian fiction from World War I onward not only acknowledged the capacity of age as a categorical difference—an inscription on the body of socially-constructed otherness—but it also tended to view this category as increasing in strength over time. Late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century utopian fictions begin to figure age as eminently malleable; postmodern questions of being and representation prompted utopian revisions that profoundly altered age, or even stripped it away

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<sup>7</sup> Louisa May Alcott's "At Forty" (1873), "Tales of a Great-Grandmother" by Ruth Ellis Freeman (1891) and Agnes Bons Yourell's *A Manless World* (1891) deal tangentially with age and aged characters, while Anna Adolph's *Arctiq: a Study of Marvels at the North Pole* (1899) features a society without death and Harriet Mogan's *The Island Impossible* (1899) includes childlike characters who remain children and do not age.

<sup>8</sup> To name just a few: Robert Sheckley's "Cost of Living" (1954), Harry Harrison's *Make Room! Make Room!* (1966), William F. Nolan and George Clayton Johnson's *Logan's Run* (1967), Kurt Vonnegut's "Welcome to the Monkey House" (1968), and John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar* (1968). Age also began to intersect regularly with gender politics, typified by Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives* (1975), a satirical dystopia that privileges domestic feminine conformity (encoded partly as beauty and youth) at the expense of individuality.

from human-ness entirely. The promise of mechanistic or digital immortality was explored in a large number of novels from cryogenic telepresence in Philip K. Dick's *Ubik* (1969) to time-dilation space travel in Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War* (1974), to immortality via virtual reality in Greg Egan's *Permutation City* (1994). Margaret Morganroth Gullette's linear, culturally constructed and visually represented idea of age comes full circle in recent, comedic dystopias like Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010) and Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* (2011) that satirically play with longevity as the ultimate advertising campaign backed by a youth-obsessed, nostalgia-fueled culture industry.

#### AGE AS BOTH "STATE" AND "STAGE"

What makes the period of 1890-1914 remarkable is that representations of age became noticeably unstable during this timeframe. Once more British utopianists led the trend,<sup>9</sup> but American writers soon followed, with imagined futures directly addressing age as difference and reviving ageist propositions like property surrender at cutoff ages. But this was a very uneven movement; adherents to the non-malleable conception of age sometimes stubbornly refused to acknowledge age as an othering categorical distinction even as late as 1915. The all-female utopian society of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's well-known novel *Herland* is instructive here because of how oddly fastidious it is in avoiding the exploration of the malleability of age.

Gilman's novel has come under attack by contemporary critics for its adherence (as in many utopian texts of this era) to eugenic ideologies, her treatment of race and class, and even her troubling representation of the disabled. Yet Gilman, whose conventional utopian form in this book moves methodically from subject to subject, does not interrogate the

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<sup>9</sup> Several age- and longevity-related utopias were published in London during this period, including John Coulson Kernahan's *A World Without a Child* (1905), James Elroy Flecker's *The Last Generation* (1908), Algernon Petworth's *The Little Wicket Gate* (1913), and Frederic Carrell's *2010* (1913).

subject of age with the same didacticism as other forms of difference. Rather than entire chapters explicitly dealing with everything from psychological illness to the undesirability of dogs as pets, we are left to try and gather Gilman's feelings on age from scant clues. The male visitor-characters occasionally mention the perceived sexlessness of the "maiden aunts" and "old Colonels" (50, 85) of which Herland largely consists, and later, when the men marry, they experience an analogous passionlessness on the part of their young Herlander wives. But aside from this and one blithe remark by an older Herlander hinting at the rambunctious nature of the younger women (92), there is virtually no direct authorial comment on age in the novel. To the extent that *Herland* contains a cogent statement about age at all, I would suggest that age is encoded as a sense of maturity rather than chronology, and, like most other subjects in the novel, it is complicated by sex. On the one hand, the idea of a continuum of (cultural) maturity between the enlightened Herlanders and their immature male visitors suggests the universal configuration of age as "stage." Then again, if even the younger Herlanders, so rigorously educated and sexually unassailable, are more "mature" than the men, we are left to wonder if any Herlander is *ever* "immature" in the same way the men are. In that sense, whether as Herlander maturity or male immaturity, age behaves more like a "state."

Ignatius Donnelly's 1890 novel *Caesar's Column* manifests nearly the opposite: Donnelly, ahead of his time at least in this respect, is eager to embrace and literalize the particularizing potential of age in his dystopia. Age becomes chameleonic: Maximilian, a major character, is able to move freely in the spy-infested oligarchical New York City of 1988 by masquerading as an old man, and Gabriel Weltstein, the novel's protagonist, relates a vision of the city's children, "prematurely aged and hardened . . . their bold eyes revealed that sin had no surprises for them" (54). Here age and class become a sort of intersectional, combined category of otherness. Poverty has the power to etch old age into the faces of the chronologically youngest characters and create

in them a categorical exclusion by way of invisibility. Conversely the oligarchs of Donnelly's New York are written as vain, youth-obsessed atheists who attend a grotesque self-worshipping version of a church service where, by "virtue of many cunning arts," they appear fair and beautiful long past middle age (264). During the service, an old woman "dressed like a girl of twenty, with false rubber shoulders and neck and cheeks, to hide the ravages of time, hurled a huge hymn-book, the size of a Bible" at Weltstein (279). The satire to some extent blurs the finer distinctions, but age in *Caesar's Column* is both universal *and* otherness in turns, and is both socially constructed and inscribed on the body.

Of the American utopias that confront age from 1890-1914, none succeeds quite so completely in crystallizing the shifting utopian discourse of age at the end of the nineteenth century as Jack London's novel *The Scarlet Plague* (1912). Largely forgotten in favor of London's other work, this novel captures the complexity of aging in a better or worse future at its most conceptually unstable. *The Scarlet Plague* concerns an old man and three young boys living on the shores of a post-apocalyptic San Francisco sixty years after an epidemic has killed almost everyone on earth. Granser is the only man alive old enough to remember the time before the plague—a time ruled by oppressive oligarchs—and the story largely consists of his account to the boys of the apocalypse and its immediate aftermath. Granser's child companions, who seem to alternately enjoy and taunt him, are Edwin, Hoo-Hoo, and Hare-Lip. London describes the boys as savage in both behavior and appearance. They spend most of their time using primitive tools and weapons to herd and hunt animals, and they are accompanied by a small pack of Londonesque hunting dogs.

The book was not a commercial success and there is some evidence that the story was not very well received (Raney 398), even by critics normally friendly to London and despite its importance as an early example of the modern plague-apocalypse narrative. It was also unnervingly prescient: the novel was published in book form a mere three years

before the outbreak of the 1918 Spanish influenza pandemic which killed between 50-100 million people (Barry 397)<sup>10</sup>. A critical reading of the novel's form today partially reveals why it met such tepid praise: the novel is mostly told in scattered flashback, contains no major female characters in-scene, and has the dubious distinction of being a dystopia wrapped in a flashback wrapped in a utopia, told from the point of view of the only person left on earth for whom the new world isn't a utopia. It's a *peculiar* novel, even for a writer whose groundbreaking work in speculative fiction is sometimes overlooked in favor of the linear, Naturalist fiction that secured his legacy. The book frustrates the reader by refusing to clearly encode the new feral San Francisco as either a disappointment or an improvement.

But it is exactly this peculiarity that situates *The Scarlet Plague* so perfectly at the juncture of the shifting conception of age in utopian fiction. David Raney, in his analysis of *The Scarlet Plague*, calls the boys “objects of pity, chasing goats with homemade bow-and-arrow and scrabbling for clams” (403), but they are also, the book implies, *better* specimens of humanity than those in London's late-nineteenth century: strong, weather-hardened, hunger sharpened, keen, and catlike in the narrowed realm of body that their minds permit them. They are ignorant savages, as Granser repeatedly asserts, but they are also the beneficiaries of a new world that has sloughed off the eternal problems of scarcity and war. They are not beholden to money or debt—they cannot, it turns out, even count higher than ten—and they brook no impingement of their individual will, under pain of immediate violence. As Raney points out, “this is the myth of America writ large: a few hardy souls find themselves in a rough new world they have reached only through trials” and who are “engineering a new society without the strictures of the old” (409).

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<sup>10</sup> Ironically, according to Barry, the Spanish influenza pandemic of 1918 inordinately affected a younger host population, with less than 1% of deaths in persons over the age of 65, and fatalities most severe among young adults and, especially, pregnant women (239-40, 398).

Likewise, Granser is a dualistic character: he has won a seemingly cosmic lottery and survived the plague that killed billions of human beings. He, even more than the boys, was able to appreciate and reap the benefit of the sudden precipitous disappearance of competition for food, shelter, and mates, and he avoided, at great odds, the fate of nearly his entire species. Yet Granser could not escape old age, and in addition to his decrepit form hobbling about, half-blind, he *suffers* from the new order of the world. He was, before the plague, an English professor, and the new savage-dominated world does not include the life of the mind for which he prepared himself. He has amassed books, but cannot read or share them with the illiterate boys. He is as trapped within his dying concept of the world as he is within his dying body. He has won the unlikely cosmic lottery only to discover that the prize, in addition to his life, is a world in which his personal strengths are irrelevant and his intellectual desires impossible. It is a dystopia that consists solely of Granser.

But Granser and the boys also operate as a dualistic unit in the novel, and this is where we can most readily observe *The Scarlet Plague's* ambiguous treatment of age. It is unclear, for example, exactly why Edwin, Hoo-Hoo, and Hare-Lip keep Granser around. At times, they seem distantly entranced by his stories, at others, they seem barely capable of tolerating him. Likewise, Granser is bound to the boys for protection and food, but he inwardly (and sometimes outwardly) patronizes them, calling them ignorant and exposing the dull simplicity of their existence. The two sides, young and old, are bound by a shifting tangle of duty, curiosity, judgment, and utility. At times, Granser is an aged other, a “gabbling old geezer” as Hoo-Hoo calls him, ready to “croak” (40). Other times he is their historically important forebear; keeper of a variety of mystic, arcane secrets that they vaguely feel it would be good to learn; an old *man*, not an *old* man, as it were.

## AGE AND THE APOCALYPTIC BODY

The question of causality remains regarding this shift in utopian age representations between 1890 and 1914. One plausible explanation has to do with contemporaneous advances in modern microbiology—particularly virology, bacteriology, immunology, and epidemiology—in the late-nineteenth century. Age, so far as I am aware, was never wholly conflated with disease processes in American utopias previous to 1890, but the comparison was indirectly drawn in many texts. This appears most commonly in utopias where purification of the environment—nourishing food, frequent exercise, fresh air—results in people who appear youthful for longer portions of their lives. Symzonians, Mizorans, Herlanders, and even (at least as much as the satirical “pastor” of the church in *Caesar’s Column* may be trusted) future New York oligarchs all benefit from a youthful appearance that hinges partly on their air and foodstuffs being free from contaminants.

While the biological basis of this was poorly understood at the time, what stands out is the closely collocated depictions of aging and disease as they are inscribed on the body. It is impossible to pinpoint an exact moment or text in which this first occurs, but Leah Hadomi points out that this is approximately the same time period when care of the aged and dying is no longer private but societal and medicalized (87), a process which began diffusely in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.<sup>11</sup> Hadomi identifies this trend as an important transformative moment for the social conception of death, which made aging a more attractive target for utopianist revision. I would argue the crucial shift can be somewhat more finely identified: diseases, which had previously been thought unavoidable scourges of natural life with ill-defined parameters of selectivity, became, in the light of microbiology, phenomena of

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<sup>11</sup> Historian Phillipe Aries supports this indirectly when he describes hospital- vs. home-death as occurring much more frequently beginning around 1930 (87).



bodily destruction with knowable causes and mechanisms, and hence at least partially avoidable. If plagues were reducible to the interaction, destruction, and resilience of the microscopic building blocks of life, mightn't the aging process also be?

Plague narratives regularly explore the extent to which humans could resist epidemics of lethal diseases. Literary scholar Elana Gomel sees a character in these plague narratives as a sort of canvas, on which is inscribed the features of the “apocalyptic body.” The apocalyptic body, she argues, is primarily “a suffering body, a text written in the script of stigmata, scars, wounds, and sores. Any apocalypse strikes the body like a disease” (406). She notes that apocalypses inherently purify; that is, they eradicate, in the Spencerian sense, all but the fittest of survivors. Interestingly, this purification, she writes, “often seems of less importance than the narrative pleasure derived from the bizarre and opulent tribulations of the bodies being burnt by fire and brimstone, tormented by scorpion stings, trodden like grapes in the winepress” (405).

What Gomel has described, in essence, is *The Scarlet Plague's* Granser. He has survived the plague, indicating he successfully underwent a pocalyptic purification, but it has inscribed itself on his body. He is blind, frail, and toothless, scabby, scratched, sunburned, and scarred, with deeply lined skin, and visible palsy. He requires both a walking stick and a makeshift sun visor to keep the sun off of his head while he moves around. He mumbles when confused and weeps when injured, scolded, or excluded. He is an animated relic, surviving at great cost both the scourge which killed his less-fit companions and the life which came after. But crucially, to Edwin, Hare-Lip, and Hoo Hoo, and to the reader, the inscriptions of suffering on his “apocalyptic” body and his “aged” body are *indistinguishable*.

Lest we forget that plagues were a part of the contemporary cultural consciousness in London's America at the end of the nineteenth century, it's worth noting that London even partially foresees the role of the media in spreading information about plagues in his novel (Augusto

Riva, Benedetti, and Cesana 1755). Apart from the Spanish flu of 1918, legendary in its virulence and lethality, the rhetoric of contagion and disease permeated social and scientific discourse. At times absurd—as in cases of people claiming to be able to see “great big microbes” on their belongings—the entire concept of microbiology was alternately confounding and alarming to some. In 1910, *Popular Science Monthly* ran an article called “the Transmission of Disease by Money,” sparking fears that anything commercial, particularly crowds and currency, put the individual at risk for contagion (Raney 393-96).

And here arises a second important connection of age and disease: while age had always been seen as universally leveling in its effects, disease was frequently attributed to the behaviors and physicality of class, gender, and even race. Such thinking was assisted, in the case of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland*, by the momentum of early-twentieth-century eugenics discourse. The emergent germ theory, however, insisted that vulnerability to disease was *also* universal, non-discriminating, and perhaps biologically avoidable. In the imagination of the reading audience of literary utopias, it became even easier to conflate (or confuse) aging with disease.<sup>12</sup>

Aging and utopia, as well as evolution and apocalypse, converge around a final conceptual intersection that is worth a brief exploration, and it concerns the typical utopian preoccupation with fairness. Groys, Sorokina, and Mears argue that aging is an affront to the fairness of the subject because it makes the individual the passive victim of the historical process; his (or her) descendants in some far future may enjoy the benefits of his survival or the objectives he works for, but it is an “outrageous historical injustice” to the body (or collective bodies) on which age and/or apocalypse is inscribed (348). Age and apocalypse have the power to horrify not simply as body dystopias but as what Lyman Tower Sargent

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<sup>12</sup> While not an American example, this is literalized in 1897’s *Dracula*, where the young Harkers bring the scientific method to bear on the eponymous count’s horrifying epidemiological variety of immortality.

calls “city” dystopias<sup>13</sup> as well: a world in which proof emerges that the subject is part of a larger mechanism of deliberate social change, and that they are part of a cohort who collectively will not benefit from the fairness that they have worked and sacrificed their own earthly utopia to forge for their descendants.

This again prefigures London’s Granser in all his aged, post-apocalyptic misery. Granser bears the inscription of the dual disasters of body aging and bodily apocalypse, but he also represents the body and city dystopic, where unhappy survival is the best possible outcome he can hope for, and where others will unfairly enjoy the benefits of a utopian reconfiguration that his suffering has “earned” them. This appears to be Darwin’s final parting gift to utopian fiction: the nihilistic unfairness of evolution’s individual callousness, even for those whose struggle for survival is uncommonly successful.

The “newly” microbiological body is one possible explanation for the late-nineteenth-century shift in utopian literature toward the configuration of age as otherness, but there are others, including the emergence of new ideas of the self. Sociologists Mike Featherstone and Andrew Wernick remind us that “the aging body is never just a body subjected to the imperatives of cellular and organic decline, for as it moves through life it is continuously being inscribed and re-inscribed with cultural meaning” (2-3). “It is true,” writes Sigmund Freud in his 1919 essay *Das Unheimliche*, “that in textbooks on logic ‘all men must die’ passes for an exemplary general proposition, but it is obvious to no one; our unconscious is still as unreceptive as ever to the idea of our own mortality” (148). Age studies scholar Kathleen Woodward builds on this idea by figuring age as a primarily psychoanalytic experience. Adapting Lacan’s “mirror stage,” she argues that when we regard our aged selves in a mirror, we experience a variant of uncanny Freudian doubling, and what follows is

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<sup>13</sup> Sargent discusses body- and city-eutopias in “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited” (10), but the underlying principle is the same: one is individual and simple, the other social and more complex.

a rejection of both the doppelganger and the age inscribed on it (60). This, you will recall, is virtually a whole-cloth subtheme from *Brave New World*, when Lenina encounters Linda and recoils from their uncanny similarity made grotesque by Linda's uncontrolled aging (79).

Philosopher of aesthetics Christine Buci-Glucksmann writes that “the Freudian uncanny finds a distant origin in the ontological aging of the body and the “eratology” of the skeleton where a terrible and monstrous beauty is found” (226). This suggests that Gomel's apocalyptic body and psychoanalytic notions of the self are not so conceptually different from one another. In *Shell Shock Cinema*, film scholar Anton Kaes draws much the same conclusion: citing both Freud and William McNeil, Kaes points out that one shock of modernity that early silent film needed to teach its audiences to parry was the concept of death on an incomprehensible scale—*mass* death that overrode the Freudian safeguards against accepting the mortality of the self. One of the commonest forms of mass death, a bacteriological pandemic form, notes Kaes, presented as a form of eerily rapid aging, where a healthy person who contracted cholera could decay via dehydration to a wizened husk of their former selves in a matter of hours, and then die (Kaes 94-98). In a sense, not only death but also con-fusions and collocations of disease and aging can become components of the Freudian uncanny.

Once more, *The Scarlet Plague* offers a convenient literalization of this: While listening to Granser's story, Edwin, Hoo-Hoo, and Hare-Lip dig in the dirt and unearth a trio of skeletons, including one of a child. With little regard, they knock out the skeletal teeth and string them as necklaces. Granser, whose sense of the uncanny is calibrated differently than the boys', recoils at their behavior. To them, the skeletons, even that of the child, which signals the universal continuity between young and old, are innocent objects not freighted with meaning, whereas Granser is a different sort of link—a skeletal, apocalyptic body that moves and portents their own mortality—and is therefore sometimes uncanny.

The boys recognize vaguely that they are descended from ancestors like

Granser, but death is not approached with any degree of solemnity or seriousness. Hare-Lip, in particular, refers to ancestral deaths flippantly as “croakin’.” He is, however, willing to redeem Chauffeur, his own cruel and violent grandfather, partly out of a sense of savage respect:

I remember him before he died. He was a corker. But he did things and he made things go. You know, Dad married his daughter an’ you ought to see the way he knocked the spots outa Dad. The Chauffeur was a son-of-a-gun. He made us kids stand around. Even when he was croaking he reached out for me, once, and laid my head open with that long stick he always kept beside him (151).

The aged then, even in the worst cases, aren’t completely or consistently othered in *The Scarlet Plague*, but they’re very clearly a class of different persons who do not participate fully in the new utopia. The boys, in their inconsistent figuration of Granser as both “self” and “other,” exemplify how very early 20th century American utopias figured age as almost, but not quite yet, an established and categorical difference.

#### **AGE STUDIES AND UTOPIAN STUDIES: CONCEPTUAL ALLIES**

I offer here a handful of what I hope are useful observations regarding the configuration of age in utopian literature, for the purpose of suggesting utopian literature’s relevance to the field of age studies. I must acknowledge that this framework is still unsatisfactorily broad and that these are not meant to be exhaustive or all-encompassing claims. I intend this initial exploration rather as a demonstration of the idea that age studies and utopian studies are natural conceptual allies. This overlap, this shared scholarly “property,” is an important subtopic to both disciplines that is under-represented in the literature, and ample further study is warranted. Outside of Hadomi, Charise, Gomel, and a handful of others, there are few scholars that bring these disciplines together in this way. My readings of various utopias are non-standard at times (I’m challenged frequently on *Herland* and *Caesar’s Column* for example), but this too reinforces my point: *why are there no standard readings*

*of age in these texts?* The incompatibility between utopian studies and age studies addressed by Hadomi deserves further scrutiny, if not outright rectification. On the one hand, we may acknowledge the existential challenges of immortality and the good sense behind rejecting the need for utopian revision of age and aging: Gullette points out in *Age-wise* (2011) that socially constructed “regimes of decline” are often characterized by “duty to die” and “Eskimo on the ice floe” logic (6-14) that recall gerontophobic, Cold-War era dystopian conceits. On the other, these utopias, whether one chooses to agree or disagree with my framework of universal vs. particular and unmalleable vs. malleable, are nonetheless clearly concerned with the politics and aesthetics of age. It seems equally certain that new utopian visions of age have much to offer by way of continuing examination. If age can be externalized and made particular, it can be compartmentalized and manipulated more easily to utopian effect in narrative in much the same conventional manner as other identity characteristics. This is indeed usually exactly what happens, for instance, in virtual reality or digital immortality utopias. Other contemporary utopian texts like Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (2005), Neil Schusterman’s *Unwind* (2007), and Ben Marcus’ *The Flame Alphabet* (2012) explore youth as cannibalize-able otherness, a largely-unexamined reversal of the more common gerontophobic pattern, and hint at a much deeper emerging utopian age discourse than I have been able to fully address.

It’s clear that we must abandon callous and insufficiently complex views of aging, and cultivate more nuanced understandings of age deployed as a fictional and utopian characteristic. Gullette and Woodward suggest that aging is an inheritance of profound otherness and a reification of anxieties about decline. Other perspectives, such as Catrinel Craciun’s research into what constitutes “successful aging”—low risk for disease and disability, high mental and physical functioning, and being actively socially engaged (374)—point intriguingly backward toward the non-othering age schema of utopian fictions of the 19th century. Isadore Rubin offers anecdotally the plot of Aristophanes’ *Ecclesiazusae*—an

ancient gynotopia where in order for a man to possess a younger woman he must first satisfy an older woman—and implies that age needn't permanently be a category of otherness, even if it does stray at times into such (88). While offered half in jest, Rubin's sentiment is sustained: age is neither a new nor static category of difference, and an understanding of the imaginative futurity of aging, how it may shape and be shaped by otherness, shows every sign of growing critical significance. Likewise, as disciplinary allies, literary utopias have not just a speculative but also a singularly *critical* capacity for exploring age.

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