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The (Dystopian) Promise of Happiness: Hope, Happiness and Optimism in Contemporary Feminist Dystopias

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Abstract This article explores how recent utopian studies have conceptualized hope as a shapeless "horizon" characterized by its collective, positive and revolutionary core, and compares it to recent discussions on hope in the fields of feminist theory and affect studies that problematize affirmative conceptualizations of hope, happiness and optimism in calling for a more complex vision on the topic. Such reflections will be applied to the increasingly realistic contemporary feminist dystopias of recent years, which demonstrate a decisive change concerning where and how dystopian worlds are set and represented. Finally, an analysis of the novel *The Book of X* (2019) by Sarah Rose Etter, with its stunning lack of any utopian horizon traditionally intended, will try to break open Baccolini and Moylan's definition of "critical dystopia", detaching the presence of a critical angle from the presence of a properly intended utopian opening.

Keywords feminist theory; utopian studies; Sara Ahmed; Lauren Berlant; Sarah Rose Etter

1. Introduction: The legacy of Ernst Bloch and the metamorphosis of contemporary feminist critical dystopias

Hope has always been a fundamental concept in the field of utopian studies, ever since its elaboration in Ernst Bloch's widely renowned *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (1954). Bloch's magnum opus, which has been rediscussed throughout the history of utopian thinking[1], was notably elaborated on by José Esteban Muñoz. Muñoz, in his *Cruising Utopia*, starts from a recognition that, if "in our everyday life abstract utopias are akin to banal optimism" (2009: 3), the concept of *docta spes*, "educated hope", which is key to Bloch's idea of

[1] An overlook of the whole extension of this influence would be too far-reaching to be carried out here; some of the texts that could be mentioned among those that use Bloch as a starting point are Jameson (2005), who quotes Bloch as early as page 2; Levitas (1990; 2013); numerous contributors in the collections edited by Baccolini & Moylan (2003) and Ostalska & Fisiak (2021); and of course Moylan (2000; 2021); Muñoz (2009).

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concrete utopia, can instead actually lead to a concretely utopian impulse capable of brightening an otherwise bleak and antiutopian present.

Yet this ambivalence between a more concrete and abstract utopianism has left open the possibility of pursuing varied degrees of openness and closure within this range, from the naïve optimism mentioned by Muñoz to the concrete actuation of a sociopolitical utopian program; indeed, this problematic issue was to be found within a later stage of Bloch's philosophy as well. If Bloch's main achievement is succinctly described by Jameson as the formulation of "a Utopian impulse governing everything future-oriented in life and culture" (2005: 2), many have however recognized that "Bloch's utopian hermeneutic negated his own ideological tendency to hypostasize the fixed telos of orthodox Marxism" (Moylan 2021: 17); in other words, as Jameson poignantly sums up, "Tom Moylan pertinently reminds me that Bloch already had a concrete Utopia; it was called the Soviet Union" (Jameson 2005: 3).

Tom Moylan himself inherits the legacy of the "hermeneutic problem" (Jameson 2005: 3) in Bloch's excessively narrow idea of utopian impulse to elaborate what he retrospectively terms "the concept of horizon" (Moylan 2021: 20), seeking to dismantle the binary opposition between an abstract utopian impulse and a concrete utopian program. This broad and unspecified horizon of hope, which aims to avoid closure while still being distinguished by its utopian capacity, constituted a cornerstone within Baccolini and Moylan's literary formulation of "critical dystopias"[2], meaning those texts that were described by Baccolini as "maintain(ing) a utopian core" (Baccolini 2000: 13) that resides in the resisting protagonists or that is to be found in the open endings that often characterize this genre. If we were to analyze more closely the utopian quality of this "impulse", as Baccolini still called it, we could describe it through recourse not only to Lyman Tower Sargent's notorious classification of utopias as "considerably better than the society in which the reader lived" (Tower Sargent 1994: 9) (or, in this case, in which the dystopian citizen lived), but also in respect to Darren Webb's explanation of utopian hope

[2] The formulation of the concept of the "critical dystopia" presents a long, winding history that in fact begins earlier than Moylan's 2000 formulation. As Dillon succinctly explains, "the term was coined by Lyman Tower Sargent in 1994 to define a work that 'takes a critical view of the utopian genre'. Crucially, the critical dystopia has its origins in feminist dystopian writing. Sargent chooses Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* (1991) as his example of this subgenre. Raffaella Baccolini adopted the term in 2000, using it retrospectively to define Katharine Burdekin's *Swastika Night* (1937) and *The Handmaid's Tale*. Tom Moylan develops it further in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* (2000), again locating its origins in feminist dystopian writing" (Dillon 2020: 171). For further elucidation of the topic, see: Cavalcanti (2022).

as "collective, mutually efficacious and socially transformative", as "the utopian hoper critically negates the present and is driven by hope to annunciate a better alternative" (Webb 2007: 78).

Yet today the genre of the feminist critical dystopia seems to be undergoing some changes[3]. As Sarah Dillon recently stated, "contemporary works have become merely 'dystopias', not 'critical dystopias'" (Dillon 2020: 170-171) due to the increased realism of feminist dystopian fiction[4], particularly concerning the depiction of horrors suffered by real-life contemporary women: in fact, "the worlds of such novels are now too closely aligned with that of the real world to offer any sort of critical perspective on it" (2020: 170). Dillon notes in particular that "such works have become even more relevant to contemporary Western society, in particular North America, since the election of President Donald Trump" (2020: 170). As a consequence of this increased realism, the "feminist dystopias of the contemporary moment (…) in failing to balance the utopian and the dystopian (…) are simply anti-utopias, rather than critical dystopias, and as such they lose their political motivational power" (Dillon 2020: 171); in other words, they don't present any properly conceived utopian impulse or horizon that, respecting the aforementioned categories, constitutes a concrete hope towards a "considerable" and "collective" betterment of the living conditions for the dystopian female citizens, to recover Tower Sargent's and Webb's formulations. But does this mean that such "political motivational power" has altogether disappeared from contemporary feminist dystopias? Or perhaps this utopian hope has been replaced by an alternative form of hope that challenges the categories introduced by Tower Sargent and Webb, considering them too rigid to be effectively introduced in a

[3] Such changes appear as all the more relevant for the development of utopian thought widely intended if we recall that the feminist critical dystopia as formulated by Baccolini (2000) constituted the basis for the elaboration of the critical dystopia *tout court*, as Dillon (2020) poignantly reminds us; see note 2.

[4] This shift towards more realistic feminist dystopias is identified by Dillon through a lengthy list of volumes (2020: 169) which portray the female characters as suffering realistic ailments. However, among these, there are novels in which the realism is primarily conveyed through a narrative shift from a removed, future setting to an alternative present reality; in these novels, the dystopian quality does not necessarily pertain to a political and economic backdrop that resembles what we would define as a traditionally dystopian setting, but rather resides in the private sphere of the protagonists' existence. These novels include Jennie Melamed's *Gather the Daughters* (2017), Sophie Mackintosh's *The Water Cure* (2018), and, if we were to broaden Dillon's list, Sarah Rose Etter's *The Book of X* (2019), which is analyzed in the final section of the present paper.

dystopia striving for a realistic portrayal of the oppressions that women suffer in our current world?

The focus of this article is to analyze how the shift towards more realistic, complex and subjective conceptualizations of hope in contemporary feminist dystopias can be justified through an analysis of hope, happiness and optimism within recent feminist theory. In the last fifteen years, characterized by disheartening political contingencies in which, as we have seen and will see, many feminist scholars openly position themselves, the turn towards an affect-based framework operated by European and North American feminists has been key to recognizing the coexistence of negative and affirmative views of hope, happiness, and optimism; these concepts were thus acknowledged as extremely subjective and far from univocally positive – possibly even deceitful. We will see how this conceptualization, particularly voiced by Sara Ahmed (2010) and Lauren Berlant (2011; 2012), leads to questioning the very idea of utopian hope as previously elaborated; hope, optimism and happiness can rarely be said to reside in a horizon that can be considered as simplistically positive, as implied by Tower Sargent and Webb through what they respectively phrased as "considerably better" and "a better alternative" to a negative reality. Such hopes are instead revealed to be extremely subject- and context-based, dismantling the collective dimension underlined by Webb as the fundamental quality for his idea of utopian hope. We will finally use this analytic framework to consider one of these "realistic", almost "concrete" feminist dystopian texts, namely *The Book of X* (2020) by Sarah Rose Etter, to see if the controversial ending that characterizes it – as the protagonist's utopian impulse results in an ending that completely nullifies hope – allows us to find anyway a critical angle throughout the text.

2. Reconceptualization of the utopian horizon in contemporary feminist theory: hope, happiness, and optimism

Webb himself, in the aforementioned article, positions his research on hope in a "wider resurgence of interest in the emotions", which was already at the time aiming to recover "the affective dimensions of human life" (2007: 66). The same turn to the affective dimension[5] characterizes the context in which recent

[5] This context is better described through Patricia Clough's influential definition of "affective turn", that she locates from the 1990s onwards and that concerns "a response to what (critical theorists and cultural critics) argued were limitations of post-structuralism and deconstruction" pointing to "a dynamism immanent to bodily matter and matter generally"

feminist reflections on the concept of hope take place. Discussions of hope, happiness, and optimism are affectively interrelated as they are all used to formulate a subjective desire towards an indefinite "better" target, often described as "a good life". We will see these terminological parallelisms throughout our analysis: however, to raise some preliminary examples, we can already note that Ahmed, in her problematization of the concept of happiness, starts from recognizing happiness as akin to a hope, an optimistic desire for something better, defining it as "a wish, a will, a want" (Ahmed 2010: 2), and the "placeholder of human desire" (2010: 15); she also asks, not without irony, "surely, feeling better is better, and we all want to feel better?" (2010: 8). Similarly, Berlant describes optimism as residing in "conceptions of a better life than what the metric of survival can supply" (Berlant 2011: 3), establishing a formulation that she will later go on to use to describe the object of desire as something that forces us "to scavenge for survival while remembering that there is a better beyond to it" (Berlant 2012: 13).

So, although these tendencies towards something "better" seem similar to what is implied by Moylan, Tower Sargent and Webb in their ideas on utopian hope, we can see that, through the adoption of an affective and gendered lens, this orientation can be highlighted as extremely subjective, and the polarity of "better" and "worse" – which Moylan already sought to dismantle through his idea of the critical dystopia – becomes even further undone by feminist and affective reinterpretations that make space for more ambivalent relations and challenge any sort of polarizing thought. Indeed, in the introduction to their edited collection *Hope and Feminist Theory*, Coleman and Ferreday remarked that any reflection on hope in a feminist framework must "deal with the simultaneity of hope and hopelessness, dreams and futility, optimism and cruelty" (Coleman & Ferreday 2010: 319) – once more pairing the concept of hope to other adjacent terms.

Having started to interrelate the concepts of hope, happiness, and optimism, let us now see each of them up close, in order to understand how the previously analyzed proposals of a utopian horizon are problematized by feminist theory, specifically underlining that such an impulse towards something "good" is actually always subjective, positioned within a specific context and, possibly, even harmful.

Indeed, already before the onset of the Trump era, which was identified by Dillon as key in the metamorphosis of the critical stance in contemporary

(Clough 2008: 1), returning to a subject-based perspective without losing sight of the interactions between subjects. For further information about the topic, see Clough (2008).

Anglophone feminist dystopias, we have seen that hope for feminist theory more widely intended was already paired with its antonym: hopelessness. Coleman and Ferreday recognized how a degree of utopian hope had been present indeed from the very birth of the feminist movement, as feminism "might be characterized as a politics of hope, a movement underpinned by a utopian drive for full equality" (Coleman & Ferreday 2010: 313). However, a number of factors have contributed to an upturning of this original hopeful and utopian impulse in recent times: the failure of the hope invested in the outcome of both the UK elections of 1997 and the USA elections of 2008 went hand in hand with "the narrative of a crisis 'of' and (…) 'within' feminism" (2010: 315) which characterized feminist movements even before the onset of postfeminist ideas most famously addressed by Angela McRobbie (2004; 2008). This negative conjuncture has led to what Coleman and Ferreday have bleakly described as "a notion of hopelessness (that) suggests that hope exists always in memory: as an object of nostalgia, of mourning, of regret (…) Hope, the last fragile thing to exit Pandora's box, is a frail creature that is always in danger of being lost" (2010: 315).

This political-historical conjuncture is the same in which both Ahmed and Berlant explicitly situate themselves, and it can be said to constitute a sort of extraliterary, real-life dystopian context that has taken hold of Europe and the United States from 1990 onwards. Describing this timeframe, Berlant identifies "a shift in how the older state-liberal-capitalist fantasies shape adjustments to the structural pressures of crisis and loss that are wearing out the power of the good life's traditional fantasy bribe without wearing out the need for a good life" (Berlant 2011: 7). Moreover, going on to see how this historical conjuncture has impacted contemporary aesthetics, Berlant interestingly describes the creation of a trend that bears a "relation to older traditions of neorealism" (Berlant 2011: 7), referring to a literary and cinematic movement that wanted to deal realistically with a number of social problems. This assertion reminds us of the aforementioned tendency towards a bleak realism which was lamented by Dillon in contemporary feminist dystopias: realistic tendencies that ensue in harsh times, when the reality is already as desolate as a literary dystopia, and it does not need to be overtly fictionalized.

In this real and realistic dystopian context, the aforementioned hope for "a good life" is both recovered and scaled back; already some years prior, Mary Zournazi, while describing the search for happiness in late capitalism and in the context of the success of right-wing governments, recognized the concepts of hope and happiness as inherently revolutionary, with the former being regarded

as "not simply the desire for things to come, or the betterment of life. It is the drive or energy that embeds us in the world" (Zournazi 2002: 14-15). However, it is noteworthy that this shapeless drive is described first and foremost as a personal inclination, concerning one's capacity for feeling embedded in a world, rather than an ascension towards something "better" beyond the present. Indeed, coming back to the introduction to Coleman and Ferreday's edited collection, the research questions chosen to inquire into the concept of hope through contemporary feminist theory are quite telling:

> What is involved in an "affirmative" theorization of hope and feminist theory is not necessarily a belief that hope is true and good (although it may well turn out that hope is, indeed, "good"), but rather a consideration of what hope does. Does hope necessarily imply a fantasy of perfectibility, a progression to a utopian future, or might it also be conceived of as an attachment, a tendency, an inclination, a lure? (Coleman & Ferreday 2010: 315)

Hope shifts from being a "utopian fantasy of perfectibility" – it is interesting that in their phrasing the term "utopian" seems to assume an almost negative connotation – to being a vaguer drive, an "inclination"; however, it is implied that such inclination is not necessarily "true and good", as, in its extreme subjectivity and context-specificity, it can indeed arise from a negative influence coming from said dystopian context. Already at this point, the concepts of "good" and "better" begin to appear more complex and interrelated indeed.

This idea of a shapeless drive, which is always influenced by the context in which it takes place – and even more so when such context is negatively connoted – emerges most significantly in Ahmed's greatly influential *The Promise of Happiness* (2010). Here the concept of happiness is depicted as an orientation towards the future, a vague "promise", that may initially seem close to Moylan's idea of utopian horizon, yet their different positionings bring them to different conclusions: Ahmed problematizes the very concepts of "good" and "collective" that constitute the cornerstones of an idea of hope developed according to utopian studies. Let us now go on to see up close how this is carried out.

Firstly, whereas Webb underlined the collective aspect of utopian hope, the distinctly subjective dimension on which Ahmed builds her idea of happiness is clear from the start: happiness is recognized as a tension that phenomenologically and affectively "participates in making things good" (2010: 13) – once more, the idea of what is "good" and "better" becomes

problematized and relativized, as "ordinary attachments to the very idea of the good life are also sites of ambivalence, involving the confusion rather than the separation of good and bad feelings" (2010: 6). Indeed, Ahmed's affective perspective leads her to describe the present moment and the promise of happiness not in dichotomized terms, as something good or bad, dystopian or utopian; the present, in all its contextual negativity, is described as "the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds" (2010: 22), as happiness consists of a promise "which we glimpse in the unfolding of the present" (2010: 160), rather than constituting its "critical negation" as Webb argued.

Moreover, the consequence of the shift towards the future that is implied in seeing happiness as the most paramount hope determines the impossibility of actual happiness in the present. According to Ahmed, getting close to the object of desire entails a necessarily disappointing actualization of the promise of happiness, and, as such, implies the end of hope itself. This presents a different perspective than Moylan's, which regarded the impossibility of reaching the utopian horizon as one of its most important advantages, as it avoided the closure that resulted in the downfall of Bloch's philosophical trajectory. Ahmed connects the unrealizability of the promise of happiness not only to the undecided quality of the objects of human desire, but also to the reduction of one's critical capacity that the promise of happiness causes. Linking once more the concept of hope to that of desire and wish-fulfillment, Ahmed states that "if happiness is what we wish for, it does not mean we know what we wish for in wishing for happiness. Happiness might even conjure its own wish. Or happiness might keep its place as a wish by its failure to be given" (2010: 155). The promise of happiness as the supreme "good life" is therefore a lie, an empty placeholder, especially as "desire is both what promises us something, what gives us energy, and also what is lacking, even in the very moment of its apparent realization" (2010: 31). Even in negative contexts, such as the real and yet dystopian one we are considering, desire may seem to have an energizing effect, but at the same time, as it never achieves its promise, it cannot steadily and considerably contribute to one's resistant capacity. The failure that always hides within the promise of happiness can only bring the hoping subject back to the negativity and to the hopelessness that characterize the inhabited context.

Indeed, Ahmed's subjective approach does not mean that she does not take into consideration the context in which the promise of happiness is evoked. After having described happiness as subjective, Ahmed goes on to show how

objects of desire, which she defines as "happy objects", are always shaped by preexisting social ideals. She argues that happy objects become happy through "circulation" (2010: 18), a process which often follows the conformism of traditional society, rather than "critically negating" it, as Webb argued utopian hope should do; indeed, Ahmed positions her reflections once more in a negative context, stating that "what is striking is that the crisis in happiness has not put social ideals into question and if anything has reinvigorated their hold over both psychic and political life" (2010: 7). This is the case for the chief happy object according to Ahmed: the heteronormative family structure – interestingly the same example that is used by Berlant in *Cruel Optimism* (2012), which will also prove relevant to our literary analysis. The happiness that derives from following social norms constitutes what Berlant (2002: 75) had previously described as a "stupid" optimism (qtd. in Ahmed 2010: 11), and what will later be formalized as "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2011), as we will see shortly. This socially determined idea of happiness, which is shaped "as if relative proximity to those norms and ideals creates happiness" (Ahmed 2010: 11), can, according to Ahmed, only be avoided by turning into what she calls "affect aliens" (2010: 42): the affect aliens, unaligned with their surroundings, are characterized by their lack of desire towards happiness altogether, which allows them to refuse the socially determined idea of "good life". In doing so, affect aliens could be recognized as the keepers of a possible utopian impulse: but their utopian stance is quite different to the one elaborated within utopian studies, as it equates with an altogether lack of hope for something "good", something "better". The polarization of good and bad that was still present in the conceptualizations of utopian hope carried out within utopian studies is thus upended by Ahmed's position; in doing so, Ahmed seems to be referring to something similar to the queer negativity[6] invoked by many others before her, yet through her conceptualization of happiness she makes a further step forward, dismantling the opposition of positivity and negativity altogether.

A similar skepticism towards dualistic conceptions of good/bad is to be found in Berlant's work as well. Berlant's position on the topic can already be detected in *Desire/Love* (2012), her exploration of the concept of desire – a

[6] This concept, famously formulated by Lee Edelman in *No Future* (2004) is opposed by Muñoz in the previously mentioned *Cruising Utopia*, in which the author argues instead that "queerness is utopian, and there is something queer about the utopian" (Muñoz 2009: 26). Ahmed's volume can be said to be commenting on this debate concerning the negativity or utopian quality of queerness (indeed, she devotes a chapter to unhappiness and queerness) contributing towards the dismantling of said opposition.

term that, not by chance, was often used by the feminist theorists we are here quoting when talking about hope, happiness and optimism. Indeed, Berlant's discussion of desire touches on the same aspects which Ahmed attributed to the promise of happiness: desire is described as undecided, future-oriented and unrealizable, a constant tension between closeness and longing. Desire is "the cloud of possibility that is generated by the gap between an object's specificity and the needs and promises projected onto it" (Berlant 2012: 6). Moreover, another tension is hinted at: the strain caused by the impossibility of achieving an objective perspective on desire due to the ubiquitous influx of subjective and social "needs and promises" that impedes us in determining what is "good" and "bad" within our desires.

The various tensions that underlie these desiring, hopeful tendencies are analyzed and pointed out by Berlant through an analysis of a wide array of theories concerning desire, ranging from Freud to Lacan, from Foucault to Deleuze and Guattari. In each instance, Berlant stresses the tension between the subjective and collective capacities of desire, and the impossibility to conciliate its positive and negative interpretations. For instance, when discussing Freud's psychoanalysis, Berlant underlines that "the will to destroy (the death drive) and preserve (the pleasure principle) the desired object are two sides of the same process" (2012: 25); this ambivalence between destruction and preservation is again grounded in her problematization of the concepts of "good" and "bad". Berlant goes on in her survey to recognize that, from the 1960s onwards, "the powerful forces of desublimated, freed, or rerouted desire were frequently imagined to have the power to topple unjust conventional intimacies and entire societies" (2012: 47): this capacity of desire gets close to the revolutionary, collective and critical utopian hope that Webb described, but Berlant puts it in more nuanced terms, not focusing on the "critical negation" of reality, but on the destructive force of desire itself. The desire to destroy is therefore hard to separate from a more affirmative desire, the hope for something better, unearthing an ambivalence that resides, unacknowledged, in previous conceptualizations of utopian hope. Indeed, as Berlant poignantly sums up, "desire produces paradox" (2012: 13).

Moving on to analyze Berlant's understanding of desire, we see that this paradox is not limited to the ambivalence between construction and destruction, between good and bad; it also involves the previously mentioned dichotomy between a subjective and collective perspective, as Berlant openly recognizes that desire "both constructs and collapses distinctions between public and private: it reorganizes worlds" (2012: 14). Claiming, as Ahmed did,

that one's subjective orientation to desire is always influenced by one's social context, desire for Berlant cannot achieve the collectively revolutionary status that Webb yearned for: it is therefore impossible for the desire of a single person to entail a collective betterment, as what counts as "better" is neither objective nor fixed. At the same time, desire cannot even lead to an objectively positive outcome for the desiring subject; the tendency of the desiring subject towards the desired object is described by Berlant as "the relation that at once possesses and dispossesses you" (2012: 13), as it builds and at the same time undoes the desiring subjectivity. In doing so, Berlant fully inherits Ahmed's recognition of happiness as always influenced by current social norms, and thus as potentially harmful; indeed, Berlant bleakly states that "your objects are not objective, but things and scenes that you have converted into propping up your world, and so what seems objective and autonomous in them is partly what your desire has created and therefore is a mirage, a shaky anchor" (2012: 6). To sum up Berlant's position on desire, she claims that everything about it is ambiguous and constantly shifting: "an object gives you optimism, then it rains on your parade — although that is never the end of the story" (2012: 13). Yet, without desire there would be no optimism, as Berlant implies here. So, let us proceed to explore how Berlant's description of optimism, famously elaborated in a volume published one year prior to *Desire/Love*, is deeply connected to this shifting conception of desire.

As previously mentioned, Berlant's conceptualization of "cruel optimism" that is carried out in the eponymous volume *Cruel Optimism* (2011) again takes place in a specific political and social contingency that we could describe as realistically dystopian; yet, Berlant here expands her perspective compared to others previously explored in this paper. We have already mentioned how, according to Berlant, the political conjuncture in the 1990s originated a crisis in our general capacity to desire and hope, "wearing out the power of the good life's traditional fantasy bribe without wearing out the need for a good life" (2011: 7). This conjuncture is linked to an "emerging set of aesthetic conventions that make a claim to affective realism" (2011: 11), and as such can be indicated as one of the causes in the turn to realism of recent feminist dystopias. Departing from here, we can also attempt a comparison through which Berlant's idea of "cruel optimism", meaning an empty promise of a "good life", that "traditional fantasy bribe", can be analyzed as a generalized hoping attitude that has invaded the place where a Moylanian utopian horizon properly conceived could have originated: let us see how this is carried out.

The crisis of hope that is implied here develops from the recognition that fantasy, the capacity to imagine that was addressed in *Desire/Love* as key to one's desiring capacity, is currently incapable of detaching from the outside reality, that radiates external, normative and thus potentially negative influences. Indeed, *Cruel Optimism* is described as "a book about the attrition of a fantasy, a collectively invested form of life, the good life" (2011: 11). Optimism is thus described by Berlant in terms of a tendency towards something "good" that is removed into the future, as an "attachment" towards an "object of desire" that is revealed by Berlant to be a mere "cluster of promises" (2011: 16). This comes to once more affirm the similarity between the terms that are here interrelated: promises of happiness, optimism, hope. In a similar way to Ahmed, Berlant reaffirms all of the limitations that have heretofore described: the unrealizability that characterizes the "good life"; the dependency from the preexisting social order that the desiring fantasy is subjected to; the collapse of the dichotomy that separates the public sphere from the private one; the negation of a concept of hope as indisputably positive, especially if it takes place in a negative, almost dystopian, context.

This "cruel" sort of optimism is described by Berlant in these terms: "A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project (…)" (2011: 1), and it is most importantly linked to the negativity of the surrounding context, in a recovery and expansion of one of Ahmed's most salient arguments. As Berlant bleakly asks, "what happens to fantasies of the good life when the ordinary becomes a landfill?" (2011: 3). Cruel optimisms, rather than utopian horizons, tend to ensue in such dystopian contexts: it is the case of "conventional good-life fantasies", described as "that moral-intimate-economic thing" to which people stay attached even though "the evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear cost abounds" (2011: 2). Berlant's formulation substitutes any utopian impulse towards a radically utopian "good" that Moylan and others described. Berlant even addresses specifically utopian impulses, admitting that, in theory, "an attachment (…) might become a solidarity that could produce more and better traction in the world" (2011: 162); yet she concludes by recognizing that "forms associated with ordinary violence remain desirable—perhaps because of a kind of narcotic/utopian pleasure in their very familiarity" (2011: 168). When violence becomes the "familiar utopia", all tendencies towards a utopian horizon are undone, leading "the infrastructure of the social world to be maintained despite its distributions of violence and negation" (2011: 170).

This process is what can be seen in contemporary narrative instances of increasingly realistic feminist dystopias. Indeed, in novels like the one analyzed at the end of the present article, the recognition of the negativity of the surrounding dystopian context does not necessarily lead to the emergence of a positive, utopian impulse as argued by Moylan, but rather complicates the emergence of desire, optimism, hope and, therefore, resistance in the protagonist. The negativity of the realistic dystopian context seeps into the desiring subject, and her desire for something radically "better" becomes fragmented, rhizomatic, impossible to locate in a clear dichotomy of "good" and "bad". If the possibility of finding a positive, affirmative utopian impulse was present in dystopias that were written before this turn to realism, such glimpses become increasingly impossible to find in these feminist dystopias that resort to realism as a new tool for describing the negativity of a real yet dystopian extraliterary context.

3. *The Book of X* by Sarah Rose Etter: A "happiness dystopia"

The novel which was chosen to proof the previously outlined reflections, namely *The Book of X* by Sarah Rose Etter, is not only particularly fitting because of the way it approaches the themes of traditional romantic love and familial structures as targets of the desire and hope of the protagonist, but it can also be aligned with the tendency towards a realistic depiction of the oppressions against women that Dillon pointed to (chiefly exemplified by the sexual assault that the protagonist Cassie experiences), which we have connected with Berlant's mentioning of "an emergent aesthetics (that) marks a relation to older traditions of neorealism" (Berlant 2011: 7), a turn towards realism which is here interpreted through a specific gendered lens. Yet the novel can also be fruitfully positioned within another contemporary tendency towards realism, that again characterizes numerous contemporary dystopian texts; the dystopian[7] world that Cassie inhabits is not dislocated in a different time and space and is socio-politically realistic, arguably similar to the one

[7] Although we have recognized the limitations within the "good-bad" binary implied by Lyman Tower Sargent's seminal paper "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited" (1994), because of the wide influence that his categorization has gathered over the years, we are still resorting to his definition of dystopia as a "non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived" (1994: 9) to pinpoint as dystopias works like *The Book of X*, which are not located in a plausible future but in a surrealist alternative reality.

inhabited by the reader, whereas the main differences that make her world "considerably worse" (Tower Sargent 1994: 9) are to be found in the ontological plan, posing a surreal setting as the backdrop to the realistic struggles experienced by the protagonist. The protagonist Cassie is characterized by a knot, a single hitch that divides her body in two, a genetic malformation that is inherited by all the women in her family; her father earns his living by harvesting meat in the so-called Meat Quarry; there is a popular weight-loss diet that consists of sucking on rocks; her mother cleans their house by rubbing halved lemons on the walls; and the list could go on, as the novel increasingly construes a constellation of surreal details. This sort of dystopia, realistic and surreal at the same time, succeeds in depicting the negative affects that make up the life of the protagonist with a poignant realism; for this reason it can be described through what Berlant termed "affective realism" (2011: 11), a term that, not by chance, Berlant uses in correlation with the previously quoted "neorealism", and which contributes to the interweaving of several different strands of realism in contemporary feminist dystopias.

Indeed, the specificity of such dystopian realism, that consists of the lack of a dystopian socioeconomic system properly intended, determines that the dystopia which the protagonist Cassie inhabits cannot even be symbolically affected by a subjective yet collective, revolutionary, utopian impulse (or horizon) of a hopeful protagonist, dismantling the main pillar of the "critical" dystopia as intended by Baccolini and Moylan. Cassie, suffering her way through a series of extremely masculinist contexts, neatly divided in the three parts that make up the book – the countryside, the unnamed "City", and the mountains – can only hope for a glimpse of personal salvation, an unrelenting tendency towards what, recovering Ahmed and Berlant's conceptualizations, she conceives as a "good life", the possibility of being "happy". The struggle of the protagonist to find happiness again brings us back to Ahmed's seminal volume; in *The Promise of Happiness* we indeed find a whole chapter devoted to dystopias, described as "strange and perverse mixtures of hope and despair, optimism and pessimism" (Ahmed 2010: 163). Ahmed goes as far as inaugurating the subgenre of "happiness dystopias", that "presents us with visions of happiness as a nightmare" and in which protagonists "might revolt by revolting against the demand for happiness" (2010: 192). Cassie, with all her failed attempts to find happiness, can be said to actually go through a peculiar type of happiness dystopia with regards to Ahmed's description: not only because, as we will see, she does not revolt against the normative ideals of happiness that consists of a normative body, an heterosexual monogamous

relationship, and an idealized nuclear family, but also because this triad of "happy objects" is, once more, a realistic representation of our extraliterary reality, in which, as both Ahmed and Berlant recognize, these are considered as the utmost "happy objects". Let us see how these are developed throughout Etter's novel.

There is no doubt that Cassie is a fiercely hopeful character. The novel represents the chasm between the factual reality of Cassie's (and our own) world and her powerful desires most clearly through a textual ambiguity between two elements that alternate with the first-person narration: on one hand, bullet-point lists of facts that concern the objects and situations she faces; on the other hand, the so-called "Visions", surreal scenes narrated in italics where Cassie imagines various affective materializations of her emotions and desires. An exemplary list represents a collection of facts about kissing, such as "The muscle used to pucker the lips is called *orbicularis oris*" (Etter 2019: 40). This page immediately follows the scene where Cassie's only friend Sophia, with which she has an abusive, subjugating friendship, tells her that she has kissed many different boys ("She kisses the boys with the plain brown hair by the dumpsters after lunch", Etter 2019: 39), sparking in Cassie the desire to kiss Jarred, the boy she is in love with, and who will later rape her ("I think about the smell of rotting lunches in the dumpsters. Then I think about Jarred's mouth on mine", Etter 2019: 39). These desires are mainly represented metaphorically through the "Visions": the numerous instances where Cassie possesses a normative, unknotted body (2019: 11, 19, et al.) that is able to win her the unbridled admiration of her peers; the vision of an idealistically romantic first sexual intercourse that occurs after the scene of the rape (2019: 97-98); the disheartening visions she has shortly before the suicide that ends the novel, where Cassie imagines her life as having gone completely differently, having had a fulfilling family life, married someone she loves, had a baby instead of a miscarriage, and so on (2019: 281, 283).

As shown by these final visions, Cassie's own conceptualization of "the good life" is clearly under the strong and pervasive influences of the dystopian context she inhabits, following the process of circulation named as such by Ahmed but discussed by Berlant as well. Her supreme hope, reiterated throughout her whole childhood, is to have her knot removed; yet, even after she manages to do so by way of an invasive surgery during her early adulthood, she remains an outcast, and she is never loved as she wants to be. As Ahmed states, particularly concerning the female body, and following a bodily, material perspective that is an important part of her being grounded in affect theory:

"happiness demands adjusting your body to a world that has already taken shape. If we take the shape of what is given (which depends on being able to take this shape), we experience the comfort of being given the right shape" (Ahmed 2010: 79). Unable to change the shape of the dystopian world, not even by means of a small, symbolic and personal utopian impulse, the protagonist can only hope to adjust her own body to the surroundings if she wants to achieve what Ahmed defines as "comfort". Indeed, the only hope the protagonist can express is to fit in with the dystopian system, achieving what Ahmed described as "state of flow" (2010: 11), a bodily and psychological state representing "the experience of an individual engaged with the world (...) where the world is not encountered as alien, as an obstacle or resistance" (2010: 11). But how can one feel engaged with such an unwelcoming and dystopian – though realistic – world? The traditional happy objects in which Cassie's hope and happiness reside are translated into the "dystopian nightmare" mentioned by Ahmed, putting Cassie in the position of the "cruel optimist", characterized by what Berlant calls "a desire simply and minimally to be in the game" (Berlant 2011: 177). Cassie's nightmarish trajectory resides precisely in the quality and intensity of her desires: she is not an "affect alien", as Ahmed described those who, recognizing the lie in the promise of happiness, refuse to orient their desire towards something else. Cassie, with all her desire, is and always remains hopeful, oriented towards the only way that she knows she can happy and loved: within the normative framework of the dystopia itself, which at the same time keeps the object of her desire from her.

As was previously stated, this happens not only through her desire for a normative body, but also through her conceptualization of romantic and familial love. The interrelation of these two "happy objects" is attended to by Berlant, who describes the desire towards the familiar structure as "a plot in which the patterns of infantile desire develop into a love plot that will be sutured by the institutions of intimacy and the fantasy of familial continuity that links historical pasts to futures through kinship chains worked out in smooth ongoing relations" (Berlant 2012: 44). The normative aspect of both romantic and familial love is reasserted by Berlant in stating that "the conventional narratives and institutions of romance (…) as sites for theorizing and imaging desire (…) share with psychoanalysis many social and socializing functions (…) and install the institutions of intimacy (most explicitly the married couple and the intergenerational family) as the proper sites for providing the life plot in which a subject has "a life" and a future" (Berlant 2012: 86). Cassie, starving for love ever since her childhood, throughout her adolescence develops her

desire into a longing for what would constitute her individual and normative happiness: an idealized romantic attachment. Importantly, near the end of the novel, Cassie actually comes close to achieving what she wants above all else: she falls in love at first sight with Henry, a man that finally treats her with respect and loves her. Though the dream shatters when Cassie finds out that Henry is married, although his marriage is falling apart. Even though Henry reassures her of the intensity of his feelings for her, she is devastated by the revelation, as this makes Henry unavailable to take part in what Berlant defined as "the conventional narratives and institutions of romance": the marriage plot, the only way Cassie can hope to achieve "a life and a future".

Immediately after this crisis, Cassie learns that her father is sick, and shortly thereafter he passes away. At this point, the narrative (and Cassie's desires that drive it) change direction completely: she is consumed by pain for the loss of the patriarchal figure of her nuclear family and can only find peace in following him into death. The final scene of the novel sees Cassie taking her own life by overdosing on sleeping pills while lying in the grave that she dug and in which she had laid to rest her share of her father's ashes: Cassie seems to be taking for the first time the leading role, after a life spent waiting to be loved and accepted according to external standards. Yet in refusing what she has finally found to follow her father into death is a reinstatement of the patriarchal hierarchy that had already governed her childhood, during which her father and brother were the breadwinners, the ones in charge of harvesting meat from the Meat Quarry, whereas she was tasked with staying at home with her mother. Cassie's participation in the female genealogy of her family is of course best represented by her knot, yet Cassie's desire to be separated from this genealogy is made clear even beyond the metaphor of the knot. During her childhood, she is described as avoiding her mother's attempts to engage her in "feminine" activities such as dressing-up and putting on make-up, seeking instead the companionship of her father, and insisting on visiting the Meat Quarry to participate in the meat harvesting. This desire to break away from the female/feminine genealogy is also represented in Cassie's death as, by having her knot removed and by dying before having children (and after enduring a miscarriage), she puts an end to the painful and socially impairing genetic malformation that had materialized her unhappiness for so long, as she will be the last woman to bear it. Yet, in order to do so, she must recede her own life. In this sense, via the suicidal ending that symbolizes the failure of all personal hope for the protagonist, there can be found the glimpse of a revolt against false promises of happiness, the refusal of that "fantasy of familial continuity"

mentioned by Berlant, in a similar fashion to what is asserted by Ahmed concerning a queer/feminist interpretation of the refusal of the nuclear family as supreme happy object: "to revolt is to be undone – it is not to reproduce an inheritance" (Ahmed 2010: 197). For these reasons, the paradox of this utopian suicide definitively detaches the idea of utopian hope from the ideals of something "better" and "collective", as, in order to revolt, the protagonist must renounce all her hopes, and renounce her life itself. Cassie dies, and loses her fight for happiness; yet she succeeds in putting an end to her personal struggle, to the impossibility of achieving happiness within the boundaries established by the dystopia and at the same time the impossibility of desiring anything different. Yet, she does not carry on the curse of her non-normative body, leaving the dystopian world to those like Sophia, who goes on to get (unhappily) married and to (unhappily) bear children; those who, accepting the negativity of the dystopia, won't even hope to be happy, and, as such, won't be as unhappy as Cassie was.

4. Conclusions

The turn towards realism in many contemporary feminist dystopias, increasingly stepping back from locating their settings in distant spaces and times, prefers to describe alternative, surreal realities that represent the real horrors suffered by women in our contemporary extraliterary society, which determines a radical change in the by now sedimented concept of the critical dystopia. This multifaceted transformation is by all means deserving of further inquiry; the scope of the present article has been to point out a specific and limited consequence of this change in perspective, namely, how this turn to realism specifically impacts the desiring and hoping drive of the dystopian protagonist. The idea of utopian horizon as a hope to achieve something "considerably better" (Tower Sargent 1994: 9), "collective" and "socially transformative" (Webb 2007: 78), has been demonstrated as not complex enough to withstand the test of recent feminist theory concerning hope, happiness and optimism. The discussion of hope from a feminist perspective was particularly identified as skeptical towards the good/bad dichotomy, and all the more so when the desiring subject is positioned in a negative context such as the dystopian ones. This does not imply that utopian drives are never to be found, but that they call for the inception of a new conversation which, hopefully, this article has contributed to. Admittedly, Berlant in *Desire/Love* acknowledges that "even now, despite everything, desire/love continues to

exert a utopian promise to discover a form that is elastic enough to manage what living throws at lovers (…) the project of this book is also to reopen the utopian to more promises than have yet been imagined and sustained" (Berlant 2012: 112). By recognizing the possible utopian potentiality of desire, Berlant calls for an enlargement of what we conceive as utopian, which might be elastic enough to manage the complexity of reality – a similar enlargement to the one from which, as I argue in this article, the analysis of newly realistic contemporary feminist dystopias could benefit.

The case study, with the suicide that ends it, is an example of the bleak, non-critical dystopias that are the focus of the present paper; the analysis of the novel has demonstrated that the concept of utopia can and actually should be detached from the concepts of hope and happiness, especially when these, such as is the case at hand, appear to be defined by the dystopian system. In doing so, the novel breaks the boundary between a negative and an affirmative vision of hope and happiness, suggesting the possibility of going beyond the good/bad binary in a similar sense to what is argued by affect studies. Indeed, the assumption of an affective framework could be of importance for recognizing the capacity of recent dystopias to realistically describe the evils of our society while still retaining the critical capacity that characterizes dystopian novels.

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