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Revolutionary Utopianism and Subjectivation: Nikolai Chernyshevsky's and Lu Märten's Queer Aesthetic Paradigms, 1860s-1920s

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REVOLUTIONARY UTOPIANISM AND SUBJECTIVATION:
NIKOLAI CHERNYSHEVSKY'S AND LU MÄRTEN'S
QUEER AESTHETIC PARADIGMS,
1860s-1920s

Mari Finch Jarris

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ABSTRACT

Revolutionary Utopianism and Subjectivation: Nikolai Chernyshevsky's and Lu Märten's Queer Aesthetic Paradigms, 1860s-1920s examines the utopianisms of the revolutionary socialist literary critic Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1828-1889) and the Marxist author and theorist Lu Märten (1879-1970). Both figures turned to utopianism to intervene in distinct, yet historically interconnected revolutionary moments: the radicalism of 1860s Russia and the Marxist cultural politics of the early Weimar Republic. Their revolutionary utopianisms present a counternarrative to the increasingly dominant modes of "scientific socialism" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which drew rigid distinctions between reform and revolution, gender and class, and fiction and nonfiction. In contrast, Chernyshevsky and Märten imagine queer aesthetic paradigms based on the transformation of labor processes, sensuality, and gendered subjectivity. Through an analysis of Chernyshevsky's and Märten's literary and theoretical texts, this dissertation defines utopianism as an ongoing intervention in processes of subjectivation aimed at collectively generating new aesthetic paradigms. These histories of revolutionary utopianism contribute to the contemporary field of queer Marxism by demonstrating the potential of literary forms and queer relationality to transform socialist projects from within.

Revolutionärer Utopismus und Subjektivierung. Queere ästhetische Paradigmen bei Nikolai Tschernyschewski und Lu Märten, 1860er-1920er untersucht den Utopismus des revolutionär-sozialistischen Literaturkritikers Nikolai Tschernyschewski (1828-1889) und der marxistischen Schriftstellerin und Theoretikerin Lu Märten (1879-1970). Beide bedienten sich des Utopismus, um in zwei zwar unterschiedliche, jedoch geschichtlich miteinander verknüpfte revolutionäre Momente einzugreifen: den russischen Radikalismus der 1860er Jahre und die Debatten um eine marxistische Ästhetik in der frühen Weimarer Republik. Ihr revolutionärer Utopismus stellt ein alternatives Modell zum zunehmend vorherrschenden „wissenschaftlichen Sozialismus“ des späten neunzehnten und frühen zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts dar, der streng zwischen Reform und Revolution, Gender und Klasse, fiktiven und nicht-fiktiven Texten unterschied. Im Gegensatz dazu entwerfen Tschernyschewski und Märten queere ästhetische Paradigmen auf der Grundlage einer Umwandlung von Arbeitsprozessen, Sinnlichkeit und gegenderter Subjektivität. Anhand einer Analyse literarischer und theoretischer Texte Tschernyschewskis und Märten wird Utopismus als kontinuierlicher Eingriff in Subjektivierungsprozesse mit dem Ziel der kollektiven Erzeugung neuer ästhetischer Paradigmen definiert. Im Ergebnis trägt die vergleichende Studie zur gegenwärtigen Historisierung und Theoretisierung des queeren Marxismus bei, indem sie das Potential literarischer Formen und queerer Relationalität veranschaulicht, sozialistische Projekte von innen heraus umzugestalten.

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NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION

This dissertation follows the Library of Congress transliteration system with slight modifications to assist with pronunciation. In certain cases, the standard spelling of proper names is adopted.

All translations are the author's unless otherwise noted. Block quotes are given in the original language followed by an English translation.

INTRODUCTION: UTOPIAN INTERVENTIONS

The concept of “utopia” has consistently posed definitional problems. This is not only due to its original ambivalence as both a “good place” (*eu-topos*) and a “non-place” (*ou-topos*) in the title of Thomas More’s 1516 text, but also because of the tension between its widespread colloquial use as naive, impossible, or simply boring, and the distinct literary and philosophical traditions in which it has developed. In response to this instability, there has been no lack of proposed definitions. These fall under roughly two categories: first, utopia as an ontological state, as in Karl Mannheim’s utopian consciousness or Ernst Bloch’s educated hope (*docta spes*). And second, utopia as a literary genre or subgenre: this includes Ursula K. Le Guin’s ambiguous utopias, Tom Moylan’s critical utopias, and Darko Suvin’s categorization of utopia as a subgenre of science fiction. In contrast to these general definitions of utopia, this dissertation examines revolutionary utopianism as an intervention in the reproduction of subjectivity in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian and German revolutionary movements. The utopianisms I consider present a counternarrative to the dominant modes of “scientific socialism,” which often drew rigid distinctions between reform and revolution, gender and class, and fiction and nonfiction. Furthermore, these histories of revolutionary utopianism demonstrate the potential of literary forms and queer relationality to transform socialist projects from within.

The attempts to define utopia operate within a larger political and philosophical climate in which the concept has long served as the battle ground for debates on human nature, the role of the state and technology, the organization of gender and sexuality, and the “free market” in contrast with social democratic reformism and communism. During the Cold War, liberal and right-wing critics to a large degree succeeded in equating utopianism, communism, and totalitarianism in the popular imagination as well as in academic scholarship in the capitalist world. Much of this anti-utopian effort consisted in celebrating the plurality and tolerance of liberal democratic systems in opposition to static

and oppressive visions of socialist society. On the left, this anti-utopian sentiment has been echoed by poststructural critiques of Marxism as universalist and therefore unable to account for difference.

The conflation of utopianism and Marxism is particularly paradoxical in light of utopia's fraught status within Marxist thought. Marx and Engels praised the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century French and English utopian socialists for their relentless critiques of capitalism and corresponding challenges to the family and gender roles, wage labor, and private property.¹ However, they emphasized the limitations on the reformist programs of Robert Owen, Henri de Saint-Simon, and Charles Fourier due to the underdeveloped state of class antagonisms. This allegedly brought the utopian socialist thinkers closer to humanism and idealism than the necessary revolutionary mobilization. Engels eventually solidified utopian socialism's reputation as an unscientific and reactionary predecessor to the "science" of historical materialism. Of course, the understanding of *Wissenschaft* in the nineteenth century was far less restrictive than the contemporary English-language usage of the term "science." The Marxist aspiration to scientificity was nevertheless accompanied by an emphasis on rigor and objectivity that was coded distinctly masculine. As Bini Adamczak observes, the rise of scientific socialism corresponded to a process of "universal masculinization" that could theoretically include women, but not femininity.²

Raymond Williams has observed that "[n]o contrast has been more influential, in modern political thought, than Engels' distinction between 'utopian' and 'scientific' socialism."³ This dichotomy, or rather, hierarchy, of utopia and science would grow even stronger in the period of the First and Second International. Although Marx in particular recognized the historically specific

¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifest der kommunistischen Partei," in *Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels Werke*, ed. Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED, vol. 4 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1959), 491.

² Despite the apparent progressiveness of Bolshevik gender politics, Adamczak argues that "[t]he privileging of masculinity as a more highly developed form of the human is retained; it is, in fact, proclaimed as universally accessible—a movement that is only thinkable within the gender continuum, not the essentialized gender dichotomy [...] the androcentric universalism can in theory smoothly—in practice not at all smoothly—integrate women, just not femininity." Bini Adamczak, *Beziehungswiese Revolution: 1917, 1968 und kommende* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2017), 162.

³ Raymond Williams, "Utopia and Science Fiction," *Science Fiction Studies* 5, no. 3 (1978): 205.

contributions of utopian socialism, this nuance was largely lost in a period in which the dominance of scientific socialism entailed the widespread dismissal of utopianism as idealist, reformist, and bourgeois. *The Principle of Hope* (*Das Prinzip Hoffnung*), Ernst Bloch's three-volume treatise published between 1954 and 1959, marked a turning point in reframing Marxism as itself a "concrete" utopian endeavor.⁴ Bloch's work has inspired countless attempts to rethink the relationship between Marxism and utopianism, primarily by reviving utopia as a form of critique: according to Theodor Adorno, in its function as the determinate negation [*bestimmte Negation*] of the present.⁵

In my dissertation, I focus on two thinkers, Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1828-1889) and Lu Märten (1879-1970), whose utopianisms seek to transform the social relations that shape subjectivity as part of the revolutionary transition to socialism. Blurring the lines between fiction and nonfiction, Chernyshevsky and Märten offer queer aesthetic paradigms based on the utopian potential of both sensuality and art when released from their reified forms. They stand out from their socialist contemporaries in their emphasis on the possibilities of non-normative sexual and gender relations. By situating Chernyshevsky's and Märten's utopianisms within their revolutionary aesthetic paradigms, I join Ruth Levitas in arguing that utopianism should not simply be reduced to a form of critique.⁶ Considering the surplus generated by utopianism illuminates its distinct history as a means of intervening in the reproduction of gendered subjectivity, the affective dimension of a reader's interaction with a utopian text, and the particular affordances of utopian literary strategies. Furthermore, these currents of revolutionary utopianism are fundamentally queer in their rejection of naturalized gender and sexual identities for freer forms of relationality and subjectivity, and their insistence on infusing social life and production with new sensual possibilities.

⁴ Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung, Kapitel 1-32*, 11th ed., Ernst Bloch Werkausgabe Band 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2019), 167–68.

⁵ Ernst Bloch, "Etwas fehlt. Über die Widersprüche der utopischen Sehnsucht. Ein Rundfunkgespräch mit Theodor W. Adorno, 1964," in *Tendenz - Latenz - Utopie*, Gesamtausgabe (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978), 362.

⁶ Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, *Ralahine Utopian Studies* 3 (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), 8–9.

Chernyshevsky's and Märten's utopianisms not only undermine the teleology of utopian to scientific socialism, they also challenge our contemporary distinctions between desire and determinism, individualism and collectivism, essentialism and social constructivism. In the works I examine, they grapple with these contradictions: whether through the confrontation between utopian desire and rational egoism in Chernyshevsky's realist aesthetics or Märten's socialization of motherhood divorced from biological kinship. By appealing to utopianism to transform labor and gender relations, they generate new processes of producing subjectivity beyond the market, the factory, and the family. Chernyshevsky and Märten shift analytical and imaginative scales from individual agency to the autonomy enabled by collectivity, from the subject to subjectivation, working to evoke and "educate" their readers' desires.⁷ This, I argue, remains the potential of utopianism today.

In contrast to static visions of a perfect society, I examine revolutionary utopianism as an ongoing intervention in processes of subjectivation aimed at collectively generating new aesthetic paradigms. I understand subjectivation [*assujettissement*] in Louis Althusser's terms as the social reproduction of subjectivity that necessarily entails subjection: the ongoing ideological processes that generate subjectivity at the intersection of society and the individual. While the primary aim of my dissertation is to expand radical leftist archives to include historically situated utopian interventions from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in my introduction I situate my project in relation to recent theoretical debates. My work is guided by the assumption that contemporary queer and socialist theories and movements are directly shaped by our understanding of their histories. As Rosemary Hennessy observes, this self-reflective approach includes "a process of unlearning that opens up the identities we take for granted to the historical conditions that make them possible" as well as "resituating how we know them in a different historical frame."⁸ The works I examine challenge us to

⁷ Miguel Abensour, "William Morris: The Politics of Romance," in *Revolutionary Romanticism: A Drunken Boat Anthology*, ed. Max Blechman (San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 2001), 145.

⁸ Rosemary Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 229.

be more ambitious in our organizing and theorizing, to expand the imaginative and affective scope of our projects to include the prospect of utopia.

I begin by introducing the historical contexts in which Chernyshevsky's and Märten's revolutionary utopianisms arose, amidst the growing dominance of scientific socialism. The next section addresses the strained relationship between Marxism and queer theory in order to frame this project as a contribution to the emerging field of queer Marxism. I then return to a central moment of queer theory's break from Marxism: Althusser's account of the interpellation of the capitalist subject and Judith Butler's Foucauldian reinterpretation of subjectivation. Rather than a conceptual turning point, I argue that subjectivation as the production of the subject within conditions of constraint is precisely that which links Marxism and queer theory. Revolutionary utopianism, in turn, functions as a queer Marxist intervention in the reproduction of subjectivity, situating the social transformations that affirm non-normative desires and relations within a revolutionary framework. In the final section, I elaborate on my definition of utopianism as an intervention in subjectivation through the creation of new aesthetic paradigms, drawing on Herbert Marcuse's and Félix Guattari's comprehensive notions of aesthetics to underscore Chernyshevsky's and Märten's visions of revolutionized productive and sensual capacities.

Historical Backdrops

Chernyshevsky and Märten turned to utopianism to intervene in distinct, yet historically interconnected revolutionary moments. Chernyshevsky was a leading radical figure during the period of the Great Reforms in 1860s Russia, which saw the emancipation of the serfs. His theoretical writings and, in particular, his novel, *What Is to Be Done? From Tales of the New People* (*Chto delat'? Iz*

rasskazov o novykh liudiakh, 1863), had an unprecedented historical impact.⁹ In contrast, Märten's unorthodox approach fell between the workers' and women's movements in late imperial Germany and the Weimar Republic. She nevertheless succeeded in intervening in the debates on Marxist aesthetics within the Communist Party of Germany (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*, KPD), at a time when its cultural agenda was still under negotiation. At the same time, she was a prolific author of fiction, much of which remains unpublished. Both Chernyshevsky and Märten worked as literary critics and were thus acutely aware of the collaborative production of texts through the relationship between authors, critics, and readers.

Five years after the publication of Chernyshevsky's novel, the reformist socialist intellectual Alexander Herzen reflected on the intimate relationship between literature and reality in 1860s Russia: "[i]t's a strange thing, this interaction between people and books, books and people. A book takes its whole shape from the society in which it appears, synthesizes it, makes it more vivid and sharp, and then it is surpassed by reality." He continues to observe that "[y]oung Russian people after 1862 were almost all out of *What Is to Be Done?*"¹⁰ Chernyshevsky's account of the revolutionary "new people" inspired fictitious marriages to free women from their parents' households, love triangles, sewing cooperatives, and militant revolutionaries, not to mention Vladimir Lenin's 1901-2 political pamphlet bearing the same name.¹¹ As a former editor of the radical journal, *Sovremennik* (*The Contemporary*),

⁹ The Marxist theorist and revolutionary Georgii Plekhanov remarked "since the introduction of printing presses into Russia no printed work has had such a great success in Russia as Chernyshevsky's *What Is To Be Done?*" The revolutionary theorist Pyotr Tkachev referred to *What is to be Done?* as the "gospel" of the Russian revolutionary movement and the anarchist philosopher Pyotr Kropotkin described it as "the banner of Russian youth." Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891-1924* (London: Cape, 1996), 130; Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Stir of Liberation, 1860-1865* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 285.

¹⁰ A. I. Gertsen, "Eshche raz Bazarov. Pis'mo pervoe," in *Sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh. Proizvedeniia 1867—1869 godov. Dnevnikovye zapisi*, vol. 20 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1960), 337.

¹¹ Russian revolutionaries including Nikolai Ishutin and Sergei Nechaev emulated the novel's militant revolutionary, Rakhmetov, the former by getting a job on a Volga River steamboat and the latter by sleeping on bare boards and eating only bread. When the anarchist Alexander Berkman attempted to assassinate Henry Clay Frick in 1892, he used Rakhmetov's name as an alias. For a discussion of the various communal experiments and fictitious marriages that emerged from the novel see: Irina Paperno, *Chernyshevsky and the Age of Realism: A Study in the Semiotics of Behavior* (Stanford University Press, 1988), 29–35; Andrew Michael Drozd, *Chernyshevskii's What Is to Be Done?: A Reevaluation* (Evanston:

Chernyshevsky was driven to write this first novel while imprisoned on charges of subversion and prohibited from publishing nonfiction. Authoring a utopian novel not only allowed him to evade imperial censorship, it also facilitated an imaginative challenge to his realist aesthetics and, with this, his readers' notion of the real.

Over half a century later, Lu Märten saw her own revolutionary aesthetic program reflected in Chernyshevsky's work. As a member of the KPD, she hoped to democratize the cultural politics inherited from the Marxist literary historian Franz Mehring by directing attention away from the "bourgeois heritage" [*bürgerliches Erbe*] to her broader category of "forms," and from aesthetic appreciation to everyday aesthetic production. She cites Chernyshevsky's 1855 treatise on materialist aesthetics, *The Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality* (*Esteticheskie otnosheniia iskusstva k deistvitel'nosti*, 1855), as precedent. Published in German translation as *The Abolition of Aesthetics* (*Die Abschaffung der Ästhetik*), Chernyshevsky's work affirmed Märten's own break from the traditional study of aesthetics as well as from the KPD's notion of realist aesthetics.¹² In a review of *On the Realist Conception of Art* (*Über realistische Kunstauffassung*, 1949) by Paul Reimann, the head of the Czech Central Committee's agitprop department, Märten defends her understanding of Chernyshevsky's work against this pronouncement of the party position.¹³ Rejecting Reimann's universalization of Chernyshevsky's realist aesthetics to support his reduction of art to ideological content, she insists on learning from Chernyshevsky's own historical approach¹⁴: "My utmost respect to Chernyshevsky," she writes, "but precisely his perception of art is completely and utterly a product of his time."¹⁵

Northwestern University Press, 2001), 114; Paul Avrich and Karen Avrich, *Sasha and Emma: The Anarchist Odyssey of Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2012), 13.

¹² N. Tschernischewsky, "Die Abschaffung der Ästhetik," *Der Volksstaat. Organ der Sozialistischen Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands*, no. 72–80 (June 23–July 12, 1876).

¹³ Chryssoula Kambas, *Die Werkstatt als Utopie. Lu Märten's literarische Arbeit und Formästhetik seit 1900*, Studien und Texte zur Sozialgeschichte der Literatur (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1988), 247.

¹⁴ Paul Reimann, *Über realistische Kunstauffassung*, 4th ed. (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1952), 68.

¹⁵ Lu Märten, "Paul Reimann: Über realistische Kunstauffassung," ca. 1949, 2, Folder 54, International Institute of Social History.

Märten not only shared Chernyshevsky's repudiation of existing discourses on aesthetics, she also adopted his historicizing approach in her interventions in the 1920s debates on Marxist aesthetics. Unlike Chernyshevsky, her utopianism did not assume the form of a novel that can be clearly situated in the tradition of utopian literature. Rather, her utopian interventions operate within multiple genres, integrating the fictional and nonfictional elements of the fairytale, autobiography, ethnographic study, and manifesto. Chernyshevsky and Märten both identified a parallel between overcoming genre conventions and activating the utopian imagination of their readers as the capacity to think and desire beyond existing ideological boundaries. Their utopianisms reveal the greater potential of literary forms to generate affective connections between the individual and the collective, reality and dreams, often through the disregard of normative as well as generic constraints on method, affect, and scope.

The scientific socialism that increasingly dictated the means available to socialist and communist thinkers in the late nineteenth century left little room for utopian experimentation within the organized workers' movements. In *The Development of Socialism from Utopia to a Science* (*Die Entwicklung des Sozialismus von der Utopie zur Wissenschaft*, 1880), Friedrich Engels famously proclaimed that the utopian socialists of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century lacked an understanding of the historical materialist laws of history and, in their appeal to all of humanity, were doomed to descend into "pure fantasizing" [*reine Phantasterei*].¹⁶ While Chernyshevsky and Märten drew on Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, Robert Owen, Victor Considerant, and Louis Blanc—particularly in their exploration of gender relations, sensuality, and communal living and labor—they crucially diverged from these early utopian socialists in their insistence on class antagonism and, consequently, revolution as an integral component of their utopianism.

¹⁶ Friedrich Engels, "Die Entwicklung des Sozialismus von der Utopie zur Wissenschaft," in *Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels Werke*, ed. Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED, vol. 19 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1987), 194.

Chernyshevsky and Märten developed revolutionary theories of the reproduction of gendered subjectivity through social processes that can be consciously and collectively transformed. Far from deterministic, this materialism underlies their portrayal of desire as shifting and potentially disruptive—as queer in the contemporary sense of “a term defined against ‘normal’”—and their corresponding attempts to intervene in the production of gendered subjectivity through new forms of labor, erotic relations, and non-biological kinship.¹⁷ This is apparent in the socialization of feminized labor in Vera Pavlovna’s sewing collective in *What Is to Be Done?* and Hazar Loewen’s polyamorous relationships in Märten’s first novel, *Torso: The Book of a Child* (*Torso. Das Buch eines Kindes*, 1909). At the same time, readers are called on to rethink their own relationship to history and normality, through the interruptions by Chernyshevsky’s idiosyncratic narrator or Märten’s direct appeal to her readers in her *History of Women from the Mother Right to the Present* (*Geschichte der Frau vom Mutterrecht bis zur Gegenwart*, 1947).

The revolutionary utopianisms I consider strive to create ideological ruptures in the reproduction of existing relations in order to generate new modes of subjectivity. Psychoanalytically informed Marxism has provided the primary framework for thinking through these problems of subjectivation. Freud’s theory of the unconscious dispelled the bourgeois myth of the autonomous and coherent personality: as Marcuse emphasizes, it revealed the ways in which sexuality uniquely reaches beyond the individual.¹⁸ My exploration of revolutionary utopianism is intended to supplement both accounts of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scientific socialism, which largely dismissed gender and sexuality, and Freudo-Marxism, which centers sexuality while adopting a scientific approach to its study. I do so by recovering pre-Freudian efforts to intervene in subjectivation by

¹⁷ Michael Warner, “Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet,” *Social Text*, no. 29 (1991): 16.

¹⁸ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974), 146.

employing the literary imagination in aesthetic projects intended to transform modes of thinking, feeling, and relating.¹⁹

Utopianism Between Marxism and Queer Theory

Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scientific socialism as well as the succeeding Freudo-Marxism provide the broad historical backdrops for my study of revolutionary utopianism. In this section, I turn my attention to contemporary theoretical debates, situating revolutionary utopianism in relation to the alleged divide between Marxism and queer theory. Marxists and queer theorists alike have insisted on the irreconcilable differences between the two approaches: queer theory was, to an extent, established in direct opposition to Marxism and often minimizes the importance of class analysis, while many Marxists have been rightfully criticized for their disregard of gender and sexuality. This narrative dominated through the early 2000s, and the relationship only became less antagonistic with Marxism's apparent neutralization as a serious political threat. In the last two decades, queer of color theorists beginning with José Esteban Muñoz and Roderick Ferguson have built on Marxist feminism, Black feminism, and Chicana feminism to account for the interplay of racism, heterosexism, and capital. At the same time, scholars including Rosemary Hennessy, Kevin Floyd, Peter Drucker, Petrus Liu, James Penney, Holly Lewis, and Bini Adamczak have provided various opportunities for resituating queer theory within a Marxist framework under the label "queer Marxism."

The existing attempts to unify queer theory and Marxism can generally be divided into two approaches: first, the queer theoretical adoption of select Marxist concepts and, second, the examination of queer sexualities and genders within a Marxist framework. In the former category,

¹⁹ Märten is a contemporary of Freud; however, she did not incorporate psychoanalysis into her work. In a similar sense, Chernyshevsky is "pre-Marxist": although Marx read and even translated his work, Chernyshevsky is not known to have read Marx and is consistently framed as a predecessor to Marx within Russian and Soviet intellectual history. Teodor Shanin, ed., *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and "the peripheries of capitalism"* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 179.

queer of color critique has gone the furthest in incorporating Marxist theoretical perspectives. Roderick Ferguson explains that queer of color critique “disidentif[ies] with historical materialism” in order to utilize its critical methods without reproducing its naturalization of white heteropatriarchy.²⁰ By adopting José Esteban Muñoz’s term “disidentification” to characterize the queer of color relationship to Marxism, Ferguson follows Muñoz in rejecting both the unambiguous identification with the fraught history of Marxism and the flat-out rejection of it suggested by counteridentification. Disidentification is a third option that entails “transform[ing] a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance.”²¹ Marxism thus provides a resource for queer of color thought to the extent that it can be distinguished from its universalist claims and oppressive histories.

In contrast, recent scholarship under the label of queer Marxism has worked to expand Marxist projects by recovering figures from the latter half of the twentieth century who centered non-normative gender and sexuality in their theory and practice. These are typically thinkers who integrated psychoanalysis into their Marxist theories, such as Herbert Marcuse, Guy Hocquenghem, and Mario Mieli, in order to account for queer sexualities excluded from most Marxist feminist approaches. Queer Marxism builds on foundational Marxist feminist critiques of the exploitation of women within capitalism while challenging the reification of gender and sexual dichotomies through their employment as analytical categories.²² In distinction to Marxist feminism, which typically operates with

²⁰ Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 11.

²¹ Muñoz draws on Michel Pêcheux’s reading of Althusser’s theory of interpellation to resituate disidentification within a queer context. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11–12.

²² A justification of the analytical use of “women” as a “specification of class relations” that treats gender as more than just a cultural reality can be found in Federici’s introduction to *Caliban and the Witch*. She argues that “the debates that have taken place among postmodern feminists concerning the need to dispose of ‘women as a category of analysis, and define feminism purely in oppositional terms, have been misguided. To rephrase the point I already made: if ‘femininity’ has been constituted in capitalist society as a work-function masking the production of the work-force under the cover of a biological destiny, then ‘women’s history’ is ‘class history,’ and the question that has to be asked is whether the sexual division of labor that has produced that particular concept has been transcended.” In answering no to this question, Federici insists that we continue to see reproduction as a site of women’s resistance. Federici’s defense of a

the category of “women” and implicitly centers heterosexuality in historical and social analysis, queer Marxism considers the formation of gendered subjectivity in its interdependence with normative and non-normative sexualities.²³ In my dissertation, I build on queer of color critique while framing revolutionary utopianism as a contribution to the queer Marxist project. In doing so, I aim to extend the historical scope of this field to include case studies from the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

In the next section, I return to the site of queer theory’s “inaugural break” from Marxism to examine how this formative rejection of Marxist theory and politics was established as common sense.²⁴ Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity was instrumental in this paradigm shift. Their conflation of Marxism with an oppressive unity and corresponding insistence that poststructuralism carries “the cipher of democratic promise on the Left” in its “refusal to become resubordinated to a unity that caricatures, demeans, and domesticates difference” characterizes the suspicion of Marxism within queer theory to this day.²⁵ Marxism is frequently portrayed as a form of totality thinking that undermines the queer theoretical attention to difference. As Jordy Rosenberg and Amy Villarejo explain, “the beautiful, endangered details that flourish within queer studies have, for a number of reasons, been posed against a totalizing methodology, and this perceived conflict is the result, at least

politics centered on the category of “women” takes on a more insidious form in her recent book, *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin: Rethinking, Remaking, and Reclaiming the Body in Contemporary Capitalism* (2020), in which she criticizes performative theories of gender and articulates a trans-exclusionary feminism. As she writes, “[p]aradoxically, a testimony to the relevance of difference in our experience of our physical makeup comes from a large section of the trans movement that is strongly committed to a constructivist view of gender identities, as many undergo costly and dangerous surgeries and medical treatments in order to transition to a different gender.” Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, 1st ed. (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2004), 14; Silvia Federici, *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin: Rethinking, Remaking, and Reclaiming the Body in Contemporary Capitalism*, Paperback (Oakland: PM Press, 2020), 50.

²³ While situating herself in relation to Marxist feminism, Rosemary Hennessy appeals to queer theory to respond to the fact that “most of the archive of marxist feminist work has been more attentive to developing an analysis of gender oppression than developing a materialist approach to sexuality.” Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure*, 10.

²⁴ Penney, *After Queer Theory*, 72.

²⁵ As Floyd has shown, totality can also be understood as a category linking the Marxist emphasis on the whole of capitalist relations with the queer theoretical analysis of gender and sexuality’s material and epistemological connections with other—if not all—aspects of social life. Judith Butler, “Merely Cultural,” *Social Text*, no. 52/53 (1997): 276–77, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466744>; Kevin Floyd, *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 7.

partly, of equating the Marxist tradition of totality-thinking with universality.”²⁶ Even when Marxist concepts are selectively employed within queer theory, as in the case of queer of color critique, they are often accompanied by qualifications such as the “disidentification” with Marxism.

My dissertation makes a case for the value of identifying with Marxism and other forms of revolutionary socialism as a means of situating our theoretical projects and political movements in relation to these historical legacies. This does not entail identification as uncritical affirmation; on the contrary, it demands the rejection of normative restraints on our political imagination, the persistent reflection on the contradictions emerging from historical and contemporary Marxist theory and practice, and an expansion of the Marxist archive to include histories of queerness, utopianism, and experimental literary forms. It is with this in mind that I argue for radicalizing queer theory and queering Marxism through the lens of revolutionary utopianism.

The Production of Subjectivity

However contested the relationship between Marxism and queer theory may be, they remain conceptually linked by the notion of subjectivation. The “interpellation” of the ideological subject as both a subjugation and the production of subjectivity was first theorized by Louis Althusser in his influential essay in 1970, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (“Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d’État”), and published in its full manuscript form as *On Reproduction (Sur la reproduction)* in 1995. Althusser’s theory of the interpellation of the subject as a necessary condition for the reproduction of capitalist relations of production was soon generalized beyond its Marxist-Leninist framework, shedding its revolutionary politics along the way. In what follows, I reconstruct the

²⁶ Jordy Rosenberg and Amy Villarejo, “Introduction: Queerness, Norms, Utopia,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18, no. 1 (December 16, 2011): 7.

development of the concept of subjectivation from Althusser via Michel Foucault to Judith Butler in order to reframe it as a point of convergence between Marxism and queer theory.

Soon after Althusser offered his reflections on the production of capitalist subjectivity within ideology, Michel Foucault proposed a competing theory of subjectivation in distinction to Marxism, which he charged with operating with a reductive notion of power. In *Discipline and Punish* (*Surveiller et punir*, 1975), he rejects theories of state power or class conflict, arguing that the power relations that produce the subject “are not localized in the relations between the state and its citizens or on the frontier between classes.” He maintains that subjectivation occurs within “power [that] is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who ‘do not have it’; it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them; it exerts pressure upon them, just as they themselves, in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them.”²⁷

Foucault’s discussion of subjectivation provided the framework for Butler’s understanding of identity, subversion, and “agency as a reiterative or rearticulatory practice” at the heart of their theory of gender performativity.²⁸ Butler joins Foucault in positing subjectivation within discourse as a necessary step beyond Marxism’s deterministic foreclosure of agency.²⁹ However, Butler’s Foucauldian aversion to reductivism and their attempt to salvage individual agency from materialist determinism has inadvertently led to such diffuse notions of power that they provide few opportunities to challenge existing power relations. James Penney, who argues that queer theory is

²⁷ Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 27; Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 31–32.

²⁸ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (Routledge, 1993), xxiii.

²⁹ Butler begins *The Psychic Life of Power*, which contains their readings of Althusser’s and Foucault’s theories of subjectivation, by aligning themselves with Foucault in opposition to Marxism as a determinist theory of capital: “Although this study is indebted to Foucault’s formulation of the problem of *assujétissement* [...] the formulation of the subject at issue resonates with a larger cultural and political predicament, namely, how to take an oppositional relation to power that is, admittedly, implicated in the very power one opposes. Often this postliberatory insight has led to the conclusion that all agency here meets its impasse. Either forms of capital or symbolic domination are held to be such that our acts are always already ‘domesticated’ in advance, or a set of generalized and timeless insights is offered into the aporetic structure of all movements toward a future.” Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford University Press, 1997), 16–17.

fundamentally at odds with Marxism, observes that Foucault's notion of discourse displaced Marxist ideology critique within queer theory to the extent that most queer theorists "proceed[] as if the critique of ideology had never taken place."³⁰ Indeed, the queer theoretical insistence on difference over unity has paradoxically come to resonate with neoliberal individualist agendas and preclude politics that fundamentally oppose capitalist regimes.³¹ Butler's rejection of Althusser's revolutionary politics and prioritization of a Foucauldian analysis fueled queer theory's move from the analysis of ideology to discourse, capital to power, and the reproduction of the relations of production to the reproduction of identities.

Although Butler's reading of Althusser's essay on ideology is, of course, not the single moment of Marxism's erasure from queer theory, it is indicative of the field's rhetorical and conceptual shift from a Marxist to a poststructuralist framework.³² Returning to Althusser's discussion of ideology and the subject provides a very different picture than what Butler criticizes as his theory of purely linguistic interpellation, and which, when taken on its own terms, provides the foundation for a queer Marxist theory of subjectivation. Crucially, Althusser's guiding question is: "*how is the reproduction of the relations of production secured [assured]?*"³³ The relations of production encompass not only the economic transactions between those who own the means of production and those who possess only their labor

³⁰ James Penney, *After Queer Theory: The Limits of Sexual Politics* (London: Pluto Press, 2013), 24.

³¹ Hennessy refers to this phenomenon as "local-izing" or "a way of seeing or knowing the world that imagines any social entity—for example, a collectively shared identity or social practice—to be simply a temporary occurrence or a provisional point of departure for defining the goals of emancipation." Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure*, 8.

³² The influence of Butler's reading of Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" is underscored by the fact that it is the one example cited by Etienne Balibar in his forward to the second edition to illustrate the essay's role as the "reference point [...] that contemporary philosophy in the structuralist or post-structuralist line continues to work on." Etienne Balibar, "Althusser and the 'Ideological State Apparatuses,'" in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, by Louis Althusser (New York: Verso, 2014), viii.

³³ Althusser distinguishes between the Repressive State Apparatuses—characterized by the direct use of violence—and the Ideological State Apparatuses, including education systems, the family, the law, religion, politics, and culture. Although the various Ideological State Apparatuses often come into conflict with one another—exemplified by the political, legal, and religious battle over abortion—it is precisely in this plurality that they ensure "the reproduction of the relations of production, i.e. of capitalist relations of exploitation." Original emphasis. Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (New York: Verso, 2014), 246; 250; Louis Althusser, *Sur la reproduction* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1995), 285; 290.

power, but also the ideological conditions for the continued performance of these roles. It is in this sense that subjects “work by themselves [*marchent tout seuls*]” to reproduce the social relations that simultaneously subjugate them. Evoking Marx’s doubly-free wage worker—“free” to sell their labor power and “free” from the means of production—Althusser offers his definition of interpellation.³⁴

Dans l’acception courante du terme, sujet signifie en effet 1) une subjectivité libre : un centre d’initiatives, auteur et responsable de ses actes ; 2) un être assujéti, soumis à une autorité supérieure, donc dénué de toute liberté, sauf d’accepter librement sa soumission. Cette dernière notation nous donne le sens de cette ambiguïté, laquelle ne réfléchit que l’effet qui la produit : l’individu *est interpellé en sujet (libre) pour qu’il se soumette librement aux ordres du Sujet, donc pour qu’il accepte (librement) son assujétissement*, donc pour qu’il “accomplisse tout seul” les gestes et actes de son assujétissement. *Il n’est de sujets que par et pour leur assujétissement. C’est pourquoi ils “marchent tout seuls.”*³⁵

In the ordinary use of the term, subject in fact means: 1) a free subjectivity, a centre of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions; 2) a subjected being, who submits to a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission. This last note gives us the meaning of this ambiguity, which is merely a reflection of the effect which produces it: the individual *is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjectivation*, i.e. in order that he shall make the gestures and actions of his subjectivation ‘all by himself’. *There are no subjects except by and for their subjectivation.* That is why they ‘work all by themselves.’³⁶

Subjectivation is the ceaseless process of producing the subject who in turn “freely” reproduces the relations of production. This interpellation of the subject always occurs through concrete and historically contingent practices. The “Subject” to whom the subject submits can therefore be God, the president, a boss, a teacher, a newscaster, or a tech billionaire—in fact, all of these figures serve as projections and personifications of ideological relations that contribute to the production of subjectivity. Yet the repetitive and multifaceted nature of subjectivation at the same time indicates its vulnerability: if subjects must be continually reproduced, then there are that many more opportunities

³⁴ Karl Marx, *Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Ökonomie. Erster Band*, ed. Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED, vol. 23, Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels Werke (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1962), 742.

³⁵ Original emphasis. Althusser, *Sur la reproduction*, 311.

³⁶ Translation altered. Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 269.

to interrupt this process. What Butler confronts as the “paradox of subjectivation”—that the agency to be used against power is itself a product of that power—is, in fact, a basic condition of subjectivity in capitalism.³⁷ It only becomes a problem of complicity when we subscribe to (neo)liberal morality that holds individuals responsible for conditions beyond their control, as Thomas Patterson reminds us.³⁸ Acknowledging this continuity between queer and Marxist understandings of subjectivity within hierarchical social relations illuminates the ideological assumptions behind this framing of the paradox and shifts attention from the questions of guilt and individual responsibility that Butler raises to those of social necessity and possibilities.

Althusser defines ideology as the “(imaginary) relationship of individuals to the relations of production and the relations that derive from them.”³⁹ “Imaginary,” however, does not mean immaterial or incidental; Althusser insists that ideology exists only in the practices of concrete subjects. Even when narrowing his scope to the subject, Althusser does not sever it from the social relations within which it acquires meaning. As he explains, “where only a single subject (such and such an individual) is concerned, the existence of the ideas of his belief is material in that his ideas are his material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the ideas of that subject.”⁴⁰ Through this repetitive formulation, Althusser underscores the concrete historical dimensions of ideology—as well as the relentless nature of interpellation itself—alluding to Marx’s frequently cited claim that it is not consciousness that determines being, but being that determines consciousness.⁴¹

³⁷ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, xxiii.

³⁸ Thomas C. Patterson, “The Turn to Agency: Neoliberalism, Individuality, and Subjectivity in Late-Twentieth-Century Anglophone Archaeology,” *Rethinking Marxism* 17, no. 3 (July 1, 2005): 377, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08935690500122172>.

³⁹ Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 258; Althusser, *Sur la reproduction*, 218.

⁴⁰ Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 260; Althusser, *Sur la reproduction*, 221.

⁴¹ Karl Marx, “Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie,” in *Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels Werke*, ed. Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED, vol. 13 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1961), 9.

In a postscript, Althusser reminds the reader that “to adopt the view of reproduction is to adopt the view of the class struggle.”⁴² The interpellation of the subject can only be made sense of as part of the reproduction of the relations of production, that is, of class relations. A necessary condition of the reproduction of labor power—the source of surplus value—is not only the reproduction of professional qualifications, but also the “practice” of the dominant ideology: deference to bosses and managers, the desire to get good grades or a promotion, or the maintenance of one’s position within class, gender, sexual, racial, and national hierarchies.⁴³ In this way, whether through education, work, or consumption, ideology acquires its force by establishing itself as human nature or, as Ben Conisbee Baer observes, as “common sense.”⁴⁴ In another demonstratively tautological statement, Althusser remarks: “[i]t is indeed a peculiarity of ideology that it imposes (without appearing to do so, since these are ‘obviousnesses’ [*évidences*]) obviousnesses as obviousnesses.”⁴⁵ Considering subjectivation within capitalist social relations means adopting the critical perspective that undermines the apparent obviousness of common sense.

In Butler’s discussion of Althusser’s theory of interpellation, they explain that he is concerned with the “reproduction of social relations,” insisting that “the reproduction of labor is not central here—the central reproduction is one proper to the subject and takes place in relation to language and to the formation of conscience.”⁴⁶ Although presented as summary, Butler’s shift in emphasis fundamentally alters Althusser’s theory by dispensing with its revolutionary framework. Their

⁴² Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 270; Althusser, *Sur la reproduction*, 312–13.

⁴³ In his discussion of the reproduction of labor power through the culturally-specific goods needed to reproduce the worker, Marx draws attention to the central role of education: “[i]n order to modify general human nature so that aptitude and proficiency are acquired in a particular labor sector—so it becomes developed and specialized labor power—a certain education [*Bildung*] or training [*Erziehung*] is required.” In addition to undermining Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham’s accounts of capitalist subjectivity as human nature, this point highlights the function of what Althusser elaborates on as the function of the “scholastic apparatus” in reproducing the worker-subject. Marx, *Das Kapital*, 23:186; Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 52; 75; Althusser, *Sur la reproduction*, 79; 107.

⁴⁴ Ben Conisbee Baer, “Primitive Accumulation, Again [Manuscript],” in *Translation and Universality: Sites of Struggle*, ed. Gavin Arnall and Katie Chenoweth (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022), 4.

⁴⁵ Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 262; Althusser, *Sur la reproduction*, 303–4.

⁴⁶ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 117–18.

translation of Marxist terminology into everyday language transforms its meaning. By referring to the “relations of production” simply as “social relations,” Butler minimizes the importance of the reproduction of labor, which is, indeed, central to Althusser’s investigation of ideology. Through these rhetorical subtleties, Butler neutralizes the political stakes to which Althusser repeatedly returns.⁴⁷ Their narrowing of scope not only shifts the focus from “revolution” to “subversion,” but also removes the subject from the antagonistic material relations in which it operates.⁴⁸

Butler’s reading draws both explicitly and implicitly on Foucault’s critique of accounts of centralized power to argue for the limitations of Althusser’s theory.⁴⁹ Their corresponding reduction of Althusser’s discussion of subjectivation to a “sovereign model of interpellative speech” and their attempt to account for the diffuse nature of power abstracts from concrete material relations to the extent that the subject seems to exist outside of power relations.⁵⁰ In this vein, Butler defines gender performativity as “that power of discourse to produce effects through reiteration.”⁵¹ Through these notions of power and agency as iterability, Butler sidesteps the question of the relationship between the gendered subject and the relations of production initiated by Althusser.⁵² Reflecting on Butler’s work as a whole, Kathi Weeks identifies the shift in perspective at play in Butler’s reading of Althusser

⁴⁷ Butler is interested in adapting Althusser’s inquiry to account for the subject’s psychological constitution, specifically the function of bad conscience and guilt. They investigate the compulsory nature of subjectivation through an exploration of its psychological mechanisms, searching for opportunities for “disobedience.” Apparently disregarding the revolutionary stakes of Althusser’s argument, Butler claims “he does not consider the range of *disobedience* that such an interpellating law might produce.” Original emphasis. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (Routledge, 1993), 82.

⁴⁸ Bini Adamczak observes that the shift from a Marxist to poststructuralism paradigm was accompanied by a displacement of the concept of revolution in favor of subversion. Bini Adamczak, *Beziehungsweise Revolution: 1917, 1968 und kommende* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2017), 233.

⁴⁹ In his typical polemical style, Penney identifies the consequences of Foucauldian notions of power, particularly in his later work such as *The History of Sexuality*: “The concept of power attains such grandiose heights of abstraction in late-period Foucault that any neo-materialist attempt to reconnect power with capital becomes the very emblem of retrograde theoretical naivety.” Penney, *After Queer Theory*, 75.

⁵⁰ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 6.

⁵¹ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, xxviii.

⁵² Precluding Butler’s reading of interpellation as only occurring within language, Althusser explains not only that the individual is “always-already a subject,” but also a gendered subject in that the child must “‘become’ the sexual subject (boy or girl) which it already is in advance.” Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 266; Althusser, *Sur la reproduction*, 288.

from the relations of production to discursive practices and the displacement of the political arena from the class struggle to resignification.⁵³ The more compelling question, Weeks maintains, is that of “[t]he relations between socioeconomic and political institutions on the one hand and everyday signifying practices on the other.”⁵⁴ However, Butler’s claim to the “‘normative’ dimension” of their work as the “radical resignification of the symbolic domain” need not be dismissed as an unfounded faith in resignification as inherently radical, as Weeks suggests and Nancy Fraser similarly maintains.⁵⁵ In fact, the “subversive” potential of disrupting performative practices constitutive of gender and sexual normativity resonates with the same argumentative move within Marxist theory: locating the openings generated by capitalism’s incessant reproduction of itself and its ideological conditions, never having completely interpellated the subject.⁵⁶

A queer Marxist approach to subjectivation entails an examination of the reproduction of gendered subjectivity and sexuality within culturally specific relations of production. This requires an expansion of the scope of analysis beyond the agency of the subject, which puts artificial limits on the possibilities of collectively transforming processes of subjectivation. Although it provides the framework for maintaining the connections between these multiple scales, Althusser’s theory of

⁵³ Butler responds to criticisms such as these in the preface to *Bodies That Matter* and, indeed, in the book as a whole. They retort “perhaps someone forgot to teach me ‘the facts of life’? Was I lost to my own imaginary musings as that vital conversation was taking place? And if I persisted in this notion that bodies were in some way *constructed*, perhaps I really thought that words alone had the power to craft bodies from their own linguistic substance?” Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, ix.

⁵⁴ Kathi Weeks, “Subject for a Feminist Standpoint,” in *Marxism Beyond Marxism*, ed. Saree Makdisi, Cesare Casarino, and Rebecca Karl, (Routledge, 1996), 95–96.

⁵⁵ Fraser argues that Butler’s “poststructuralist Foucauldian framework” forecloses a necessary degree of normativity: “[a]t the deepest level, she understands women’s liberation as liberation from identity, since she views identity as inherently oppressive. It follows that deconstructive critique—critique that dereifies or unfreezes identity—is the privileged mode of feminist theorizing, whereas normative, reconstructive critique is normalizing and oppressive. [...] In fact, dereifying processes and reifying processes are two sides of the same postfordist coin. They demand a two-sided response. Feminists need both deconstruction and reconstruction, destabilization of meaning and projection of utopian hope.” Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, xxix; Nancy Fraser, “False Antitheses,” in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 71.

⁵⁶ It is in this sense that Ferguson problematizes “the heteronormative subject [as] the goal of liberal and radical practices” and tasks queer of color critique with identifying “the role that those normalizations and disruptions [of sexuality] have played within liberal capitalism.” Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*, 11.

interpellation is firmly situated within the legacy of scientific socialism and faces the corresponding constraints on method, genre, and affect. In contrast, a queer Marxist approach to subjectivation draws on a range of fictional and nonfictional forms to pose the questions: what is the relationship between resignification as the interruption of the performative citation of normative gender and sexuality on the one hand and Althusser's call to "[d]isrupt the conditions of the *reproduction* (= duration = existence) of a mode of production and establish new relations of production" on the other?⁵⁷ How does the "heterosexual logic that requires that identification and desire be mutually exclusive" operate not only as a "psychological instrument," as Butler identifies, but also as a material practice that contributes to the reproduction of existing class relations?⁵⁸ Finally, what are the implications of what Muñoz, drawing on Butler's reading of Althusser, describes as the "worldmaking power of disidentificatory projects" for local queer communities on movements that cross national boundaries?⁵⁹ As I will argue in my analysis of Chernyshevsky's and Märten's work, revolutionary utopianism offers the scope and range of fictional and nonfictional forms necessary to consider these questions without severing the subject from social relations or individual disobedience from collective action.

Utopian Aesthetic Paradigms

Chernyshevsky's and Märten's utopianisms combine the revolutionary scope of Marxist theories of subjectivation with the queer theoretical attention to the construction of desires and gendered subjectivities. They seek to disrupt the normative reproduction of subjectivity by identifying ideological and material ruptures that become particularly visible during revolutionary periods. In Chernyshevsky's case, these contradictions were apparent in the abolition of serfdom in 1861 and the

⁵⁷ Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 151; Althusser, *Sur la reproduction*, 182–83.

⁵⁸ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 183.

⁵⁹ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, ix.

parallels to the emancipation of women. For Märten, conflicts over the priority of the “woman question” emerged between the socialist and bourgeois feminist movements. Chernyshevsky and Märten employed utopianism to imagine the transformation of contradictions into their dialectical others, from the collectivization of reproductive labor in *What Is to Be Done?* to the vision of “classless forms” in Märten’s aesthetic theory. In doing so, they not only offered alternatives to the hypermasculine revolutionary subject exemplified by Chernyshevsky’s “extraordinary man,” Rakhmetov, but also generated new processes of subjectivation that situate everyday relationships within a revolutionary framework.

In their focus on transitional processes, Chernyshevsky’s and Märten’s utopianisms differ from the visions of new subjectivities in a revolutionary utopian novel such as William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* (1890). Chernyshevsky and Märten are less concerned with offering images of harmonious societies than with generating the productive and sensual relations within which new subjectivities can emerge. Locating the site of the transition to a utopian society at the intersection of subjective and aesthetic production, they maintain that intervening in subjectivation requires a simultaneous transformation of labor, particularly aesthetic production.⁶⁰ Märten’s *Woman Artist* (*Die Künstlerin*, 1919) thus connects the “nameless ingenuity” [*namenlose Genialität*] of the proletarian mother with that of the woman artist, insisting on overcoming the division of labor and transitioning to non-biological forms of “social motherliness” [*soziale Mütterlichkeit*]. The narrativization of ethnographic research on the mother right in Märten’s *History of Women from the Mother Right to the Present* blends science and myth, fiction and nonfiction, to call on women to collectively author their own history and future. These tentative relational and literary forms reconfigure social processes of subjectivation both within and outside the narrative. In *What Is to Be Done?*, Vera Pavlovna’s four dreams demonstrate the revolutionary stakes of her love triangle and sewing collective, revealing the interdependence of her

⁶⁰ Eric Naiman, *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology* (Princeton University Press, 1997), 14.

everyday desires and transformed landscapes of social production and sensuality. Her sewing cooperative epitomizes the ways in which feminized and unpaid labor can serve as the basis for independence through interdependence when it is released from the confines of the biological family to become a collective endeavor. Revolutionary utopianism as an aesthetic project thus intervenes simultaneously on multiple scales: Vera Pavlovna's subjectivity is transformed through shifting material and erotic constellations, the historical stages of gendered subjectivation are mapped out in her fourth dream, and the readers are called on to collectively enact new social relations, thereby altering the production of their own subjectivity.

This current of revolutionary utopianism operates with an expansive notion of aesthetics as encompassing labor, perception, sensuality, and representation. It resonates with Marcuse's later attempt to recover aesthetics from the repressive reason of the performance principle by demonstrating "the inner connection between pleasure, sensuousness, beauty, truth, art, and freedom — a connection revealed in the philosophical history of the term *aesthetic*."⁶¹ Chernyshevsky and Märten theorize these revolutionary aesthetic paradigms while simultaneously enacting and reshaping them in their literary texts. In *The Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality*, Chernyshevsky calls for democratizing art through a privileging of the beauty of everyday life, renouncing Hegelian idealism for a materialist aesthetics that he would later expand to account for utopian desire. Märten similarly rejects the disciplinary boundaries of art history—as well as the ideological constraints of the debates on Marxist aesthetics—to instead write an ethnography of aesthetic forms, culminating in the promise of "classless forms" based on the reconciliation of art, craft, and manual labor. At the center of these aesthetic projects lies the transformation of the relations of production as a question of sensuality and gendered subjectivity.

⁶¹ Marcuse continues to explain that: "[t]here the term aims at a realm which preserves the truth of the senses and reconciles, in the reality of freedom, the 'lower' and the 'higher' faculties of man, sensuousness and intellect, pleasure and reason." Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 172–73.

The connections between utopian aesthetics, subjectivity, and revolutionary politics are made explicit in Herbert Marcuse's and Félix Guattari's discussions of a new aesthetic paradigm. As Guattari observes, "[o]ne creates new modalities of subjectivity in the same way that an artist creates new forms from the palette."⁶² More than just a novel style or art form, this entails a project such as Chernyshevsky's and Märten's to fundamentally alter the relationship between art, production, sensuality, and queerness. While he would later draw on Angela Davis's work to reframe his theory in relation to gender, Marcuse elaborates on the aesthetic implications of a New Sensibility [*Neue Sinnlichkeit*] as a liberated Eros in his influential work, *Eros and Civilization* (1955).⁶³ His radical interpretation of Freud's metapsychology rejects the surplus repression of the reigning performance principle and situates sexuality within a new aesthetic paradigm that restores the expansive reach of aesthetics. Excluded from the rationality of the late capitalist Reality Principle, fantasy serves as the cognitive function that connects non-normative sexuality or "polymorphous perversity,"⁶⁴ artistic production, and the prospect of a society characterized by non-repressive sublimation. "Phantasy not only plays a constitutive role in the perverse manifestations of sexuality; as artistic imagination, it also links the perversions with the images of integral freedom and gratification."⁶⁵ In this sense, fantasy implies an expansion of scope: it facilitates visions of the re-eroticized body, labor, and art to the extent that reality itself is transformed.⁶⁶ Peter Drucker emphasizes the queerness of this utopian

⁶² Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, trans. Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 7; Félix Guattari, *Chaosmose* (Paris: Galilée, 1992), 19.

⁶³ Herbert Marcuse, "Marxism and Feminism," in *The New Left and the 1960s: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, vol. 3 (Taylor & Francis, 2004), 169.

⁶⁴ In the 1966 Political Preface to *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse explains his radicalization of Freud's term: "[p]olymorphous sexuality' was the term which I used to indicate that the new direction of progress would depend completely on the opportunity to activate repressed or arrested organic, biological needs: to make the human body an instrument of pleasure rather than labor. The old formula, the development of prevailing needs and faculties, seemed to be inadequate; the emergence of new, qualitatively different needs and faculties seemed to be the prerequisite, the content of liberation." The use of the past tense reveals Marcuse's increasing pessimism since publishing the first edition. Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, xv.

⁶⁵ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 50.

⁶⁶ According to Marcuse, fantasy is the cognitive function linking art and utopia: art is the realm in which the utopian synthesis can be imagined, even as it is rendered impossible by the performance principle. Aesthetics is then not only the study of art, but also the study of utopia. Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 143-44.

project of “resituating sexual life in the wide panoply of human affection and connection.” Releasing Eros from reified gender and sexual identities “means infusing human productive and reproductive activities in general with beauty and erotic energy.”⁶⁷

Utopianism situates instances of queer subversion or resignification within a revolutionary framework through its emphasis on the individuality enabled by self-governed collectives, rather than positing independence as the freedom from constraint. In his discussion of the “Production of Subjectivity,” Félix Guattari describes the premise and results of these collective practices of subjectivation. Based on his work with psychiatric patients in the La Borde clinic, Guattari demonstrates the importance of “creat[ing] local centres for collective subjectivation” that allow for reconstituting intellectual, affective, and embodied dispositions through variations in forms of labor and social activity. He observes that those who previously performed manual labor practice music, sculpting, and theater, while others who engaged in administrative work learn to cook and garden. These disruptions of everyday routine allow for a “resingularization,” in Guattari’s psychoanalytic terms: “Grafts of transference operate in this way, not issuing from ready-made dimensions of subjectivity crystallized into structural complexes, but from a creation which itself indicates a kind of aesthetic paradigm.”⁶⁸

In calling for a new “ethico-aesthetic paradigm,” Guattari argues: “[w]e are faced with an important ethical choice: either we objectify, reify, ‘scientifize’ subjectivity, or, on the contrary, we try to grasp it in the dimension of its processual creativity.”⁶⁹ During a period in which the conventions of scientific inquiry increasingly restricted the acceptable genres, objects, and affects of socialist writing, Chernyshevsky and Märten reimagined subjectivation precisely in its “processual creativity”

⁶⁷ Peter Drucker, *Warped: Gay Normality and Queer Anti-Capitalism*, Historical Materialism Book Series (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2015), 386.

⁶⁸ Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, 7; Guattari, *Chaosmose*, 19.

⁶⁹ Translation altered. Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, 13; Guattari, *Chaosmose*, 27.

by exploring the ambivalence of desire, the possibilities of queer relations, and the limits of formal representation. They center the social relations that shape and reshape subjectivity, foreclosing a focus on the atomized individual. This understanding of subjectivation consequently demands collective action rather than expressions of individual agency: in fact, it undermines the theoretical validity of the latter as an ideological effect of capitalism. By transforming existing aesthetic paradigms along with their forms of producing, sensing, and relating, these utopian projects seek to enact revolutionary change.

Chapter Summary

My understanding of utopianism is derived from currents of revolutionary thought within international socialist and Marxist movements in Russia and Germany, running from the 1860s through the 1920s. Chernyshevsky and Märten stood out from their contemporaries as socialists intent on collectively transforming the social relations that produce subjectivity in the transition to a utopian society. As they believed that the reconciliation of individual and social necessity was never complete, their utopianisms entailed an unceasing responsiveness to the production of and changes in subjective and collective desires, as well as a fundamental reconsideration of the distinction between the two. Through their anti-conventional approaches to fictional and nonfictional forms and rejection of the dichotomy between science and utopia, they imagine revolutionary aesthetic paradigms that demand the collective transformation of subjectivation. In this way, these thinkers' work both expands the socialist archive and contributes to queer Marxist theories of subjectivity.

My dissertation is divided into two parts. Part One treats Chernyshevsky's work in 1860s Russia, focusing on his utopian novel, *What Is to Be Done?* Part Two considers Lu Märten's utopianism across various fictional and nonfictional forms in Imperial and Weimar Germany. The two parts are conceptually continuous and historically linked through the international socialist movements as well

as the thinkers' intellectual biographies. At the same time, this division allows for a greater historical contextualization of their work and its reframing within the existing scholarship. The chapters emphasize distinct aspects of utopianism's intervention in subjectivation in the construction of revolutionary aesthetic paradigms: utopian literary strategies, gendered resubjectivation, the collective negotiation of desire, formal experimentation, aesthetic production, and temporal scope. *Chapter I: Utopian Realism* introduces Chernyshevsky's work in the context of nineteenth-century Russian realism in order to explore the revolutionary aesthetic paradigm that emerges from the confrontation between his realist aesthetics and utopian novel, *What Is to Be Done?* *Chapter II: Desire & Collectivity* analyzes the movement of Vera Pavlovna's utopian desire through her various productive and erotic constellations, focusing on the transformation of gendered subjectivity within her fictitious marriage and love triangle as well as the sewing cooperative as a site of collective subjectivation.

Chapters III, IV, and V address Lu Märten's work. I consider her writing in various fictional and nonfictional genres both in order to explore utopianism beyond the utopian novel and to account for her extensive contributions to the Weimar debates on Marxist aesthetics alongside her gender theory, an unexplored aspect of her work. *Chapter III: Utopian Fragments* analyzes Märten's first novel, *Torso* as her formal and ideological subversion of the worker's autobiography and a first attempt to enact her genre-crossing "classless forms." *Chapter IV: The Art Worker* traces Märten's rejection of the bourgeois myth of the proletariat through her debate with the Communist Party cultural critic, Gertrud Alexander, and her ethnographic study of aesthetic forms, *Essence and Transformation of the Forms/ Arts* (*Wesen und Veränderung der Formen/Künste*, 1924). *Chapter V: Mythologies of the Future* delves into the gendered dimension of Märten's aesthetic paradigm, moving from the socialization of feminized relations in her early writing to the visions of androgyny in her major unpublished work, *The History of Women from the Mother Right to the Present*, not completed until 1947.

The *Conclusion: The Transition to Utopia* reframes the revolutionary interventions in subjectivation in terms of the “paradox of utopia.”⁷⁰ It addresses the contradictions that emerge when we imagine radically new subjectivities from perspectives necessarily limited by the present. In this context, I turn to a figure who bridges the historical and geographic divide between Chernyshevsky and Märten, Alexandra Kollontai (1872-1952). I consider her response to the problem of generational transition in her short story, *The Love of Three Generations* (*Liubov’ trekh pokolenii*, 1923). The conclusion makes a case for why, amidst the symptomatic “waning of the utopian idea,” reviving the revolutionary utopian dreams of the nineteenth and twentieth century is not merely a historical exercise, but also a challenge to the “obviousness” of the present.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Adamczak, *Beziehungsweise Revolution*, 45.

⁷¹ Fredric Jameson, “Politics of Utopia,” *New Left Review*; London 25 (January 1, 2004): 36.

PART ONE: NIKOLAI CHERNYSHEVSKY

(1828-1889)

CHAPTER I: UTOPIAN REALISM

In his controversial dissertation, *The Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality* (*Esteticheskie otnosheniia iskusstva k deistvitel'nosti*, 1855), the literary critic and revolutionary theorist Nikolai Chernyshevsky announced the principle of his realist aesthetics: “beauty is life” [*prekrasnoe est' zhizn'*]. He continues to explain that the “true, highest beauty is precisely the beauty a person encounters in the world of reality, and not the beauty created by art.”⁷² According to the literary critic Nikolai Shelgunov, Chernyshevsky’s aesthetic treatise sent the packed audience at his defense into raptures, ushering in a new era of materialist aesthetics at a time when the word “materialism” itself was subject to imperial censorship.⁷³ Far from rejecting art or merely subsuming it to “reality,” Chernyshevsky offered an alternative to Hegelian idealism by transposing beauty from the realm of the ideal to the real, directing attention away from the alleged perfection of a still life and toward the dynamicity of labor reflected in the calloused hands of working people. A decade later, imprisoned on charges of sedition and banned from nonfiction writing, Chernyshevsky would both extend and challenge his realist aesthetics by writing his first novel, *What Is to Be Done? From Tales of the New People* (*Chto delat'? Iz rasskazov o novykh liudiakh*, 1863). In this chapter, I read Chernyshevsky’s influential work within the genre of literary utopianism to illuminate the ways it expanded his realist aesthetics as well as his readers’ notion of the real.

Chernyshevsky’s work is widely received within the tradition of Russian realism, which he both actively shaped and subverted. This distinct form of realism emerged amidst the revolutionary ferment of the 1860s, a period of liberalization beginning in 1855 with the reign of Tsar Alexander II and

⁷² N. G. Chernyshevskii, “Esteticheskie otnosheniia iskusstva k deistvitel'nosti,” in N. G. Chernyshevskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii. Stat'i 1858—1859*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1949), 14.

⁷³ N. V. Shelgunov, *Vospominaniia. V dvukh tomakh*, vol. 1 (Saint Petersburg: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1967), 192.

ending with Dmitrii Karakozov's attempt on his life in 1866.⁷⁴ The radicals of the 1860s rejected the idealism of the romantics before them, instead embracing positivism, utilitarianism, and realist aesthetics. As Irina Paperno explains in her comprehensive study of Chernyshevsky's work, "[a] true realist had to forsake miracles, personal immortality, and 'ideality' (*ideal'nost'*) in approaching feelings, human relations, and everyday life, in favor of rationalism, practicality, energetic activity (including political action), and an unshakable belief in science and education as guarantees of moral, social, and economic progress."⁷⁵ While Chernyshevsky played an instrumental role in theorizing and disseminating this understanding of realism as an editor of the major radical journal, *Sovremennik* (*The Contemporary*), his socialist utilitarianism came up against its limits in his utopian novel. In *What Is to Be Done?*, Chernyshevsky introduces a new element into his realist aesthetics: the unpredictable, relational, dynamic force of utopian desire.

Following Molly Brunson's observation of the "emergence of multiple realisms" in nineteenth-century Russia, I argue for reading Chernyshevsky's novel as a work of utopian realism.⁷⁶ Situating *What Is to Be Done?* within the genre of utopian literature shifts the reader's expectations to account for its positive affective register, allows for an examination of the ambiguity generated by utopian frame narratives and the expansion of "reality" in the utopian novel, and draws out the particular function of the novel's "perspicacious reader" [*pronitsatel'nyi chitatel'*], who assumes the role of the utopian traveler in his staged debates with the narrator. After addressing these aspects of the novel's utopian realism, I consider the strategies of the "old order" through the figures of the former sex worker and protagonist's mentor, Julie Letellier, and the protagonist's mother, Marya Aleksevna.

⁷⁴ Andrzej Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Marxism* (Stanford University Press, 1979), 183.

⁷⁵ Irina Paperno, *Chernyshevsky and the Age of Realism: A Study in the Semiotics of Behavior* (Stanford University Press, 1988), 8.

⁷⁶ Brunson maintains that "when works of artistic realism do cross into subjective or spiritual or imaginary realms, they are not violating their own aesthetic commitments. In these instances, they do not become hybrid, romantic, or protomodernist, but rather exploit the inherent paradoxicality of realism itself." Molly Brunson, *Russian Realisms: Literature and Painting, 1840–1890* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), 2; 14.

These two characters reveal the limitations of “rational egoism” as the theory of calculated self-interest that can be directed toward the good of society, the term adopted by scholars to capture the ethical counterpoint to Chernyshevsky’s realist aesthetics, typically associated with his male protagonists.⁷⁷ I illustrate the ways in which Julie Letellier and Marya Aleksevna demonstrate the limits of the pre-revolutionary logic of individual autonomy through the disavowal of relations of dependency, particularly on men. In Chapter II, I address the ways in which the utopian desire of the “new people” challenges rational egoism to account for the unpredictable and educatable changes in human needs. I explore the novel’s alternative models of independence through interdependence that characterizes the sewing cooperatives and living arrangements of the “new order.”

Chernyshevsky was born in Saratov, a port city on the Volga River, in 1828. He was taught several languages by his father, Gavriil Ivanovich, a provincial priest, and was otherwise largely self-educated in his youth. After four years in the Saratov seminar, Chernyshevsky’s parents sent him to Saint Petersburg University, where he studied for five years. While in Saint Petersburg, Chernyshevsky gravitated away from an academic career and began to gain popularity as a literary critic through reviews published in *Otechestvennye zapiski* (*Notes of the Fatherland*) and *Sovremennik*. He was eventually hired at *Sovremennik* by the prominent poet Nikolai Nekrasov, where he soon became editor himself. In 1862, Chernyshevsky was imprisoned on charges of subversion, largely on the basis of forged evidence, and sentenced to fourteen years of hard labor followed by permanent exile. He would remain in exile in eastern Siberia for eight years until he was permitted to move to Astrakhan, a port on the Caspian Sea, and finally back to Saratov in June 1889, where he died four months later.⁷⁸

Chernyshevsky wrote *What Is to Be Done?* while incarcerated in the Peter and Paul Fortress in Saint Petersburg and awaiting trial. The major charge against him consisted in a proclamation

⁷⁷ The term “rational egoism” does not appear in Chernyshevsky’s work.

⁷⁸ Michael B. Katz and William Wagner, “Chernyshevsky, What Is to Be Done? And the Russian Intelligentsia,” in *What Is to Be Done? From Tales about the New People*, by Nikolai Chernyshevsky, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 12–15.

critiquing the emancipation act, “To the Landlord’s Peasants” (*K barskim kresti’ianam*, 1861), which to this day cannot be conclusively attributed to him. Rumors of Chernyshevsky’s revolutionary activity abounded during and after his lifetime, although there has been no evidence that his involvement extended beyond his work for *Sovremennik* and his influence on the revolutionary student protests in the early 1860s.⁷⁹ Ultimately, Chernyshevsky was prohibited from writing political or literary criticism, but was granted permission to write a novel.

Against all odds, the manuscript of Chernyshevsky’s novel made it past the censor in what came to be known as “the most spectacular example of bureaucratic bungling in the cultural realm during the reign of Alexander II.”⁸⁰ *What Is to Be Done?* directly responded to novels including Alexander Herzen’s *Who Is to Blame?* (*Kto vinovat?*, 1845-1846) and Ivan Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons* (*Ottsy i deti*, 1862).⁸¹ Due to the influence of these works, Chernyshevsky recognized the political potential of the genre, stating that the novel is “something that is destined for the masses.” In a characteristically provocative tone, he continues by insisting that: “[t]he lightness of the form must be compensated for by the solidity of the thoughts, which inspire the masses.”⁸² Despite Chernyshevsky’s ambivalent remarks about the form of the novel, it indeed permitted him to disseminate ideas that would never have been publishable in nonfiction form. Furthermore, it both provided him with new

⁷⁹ There is still speculation about the degree to which Chernyshevsky was involved in underground political organizations. Both Franco Venturi and Walicki claim that Chernyshevsky participated in the first all-Russian revolutionary *Zemlya i Volya*,” (*Land and Freedom*), was the main inspiration for the secret periodical, *Velikorus’* (*Great Russia*) and authored the proclamation critiquing the emancipation act, “To the Landlord’s Peasants.” Paperno, on the other hand, insists that Chernyshevsky was “uninvolved in any outright illegal and violent actions or an underground organization” and that there is no evidence that he wrote the proclamation. Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought*, 175, 189; Paperno, *Chernyshevsky*, 22; Katz and Wagner, “Chernyshevsky,” 14.

⁸⁰ Although most scholars attribute the publication of *What Is to Be Done?* to bureaucratic oversight, others, including Andrew Drozd, point to evidence that the censor read Chernyshevsky’s novel carefully and had many opportunities to prevent the publication due to the fact that it was submitted and published in installments. Drozd therefore argues that it is more likely that the publication of *What Is to Be Done?* was either the result of the state’s failed attempt to discredit Chernyshevsky due to the novel’s lack of literary merit or a public demonstration of its tolerance. Drozd, *Chernyshevskii*, 9.

⁸¹ Chernyshevsky borrows the names for his protagonists, Kirsanov and Lopukhov, from Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons*.

⁸² N. G. Chernyshevskii, *Protsess N. G. Chernyshevskogo: arkhivnye dokumenty*, ed. N. A. Alekseeva (Saratov: Saratov. obl. gos. izd-vo, 1939), 295.

literary strategies and expanded the scope of his realist aesthetics to include the utopian dream. As I will demonstrate in Chapter II, this was accomplished by introducing the indeterminacy of desire as the driving force behind the establishment of the revolutionary “new order.”

What Is to Be Done? From Tales of the New People begins with Vera Pavlovna, a young woman with a “very ordinary upbringing” living in Saint Petersburg in the 1850s, suffering under the tyranny of her abusive mother, Marya Aleksevna, who is intent on marrying her to a wealthy suitor, Storesnikov.⁸³ After several failed attempts to escape her oppressive family situation, Vera Pavlovna finally succeeds when her brother’s tutor, Dmitrii Lopukhov, offers her a fictitious marriage: a known practice of the time to liberate young women from their parents’ houses through marriage without sexual or social obligations. Vera Pavlovna carefully conceives of a living arrangement based on Lopukhov’s shared apartment with his best friend, Alexander Kirsanov, in which their bedrooms are separated by a neutral room and they acknowledge each other’s right to withhold information. While living with Lopukhov, Vera Pavlovna founds an all-women sewing cooperative based on Louis Blanc’s and Charles Fourier’s models of collective labor. She seeks out other young women in similar positions and immediately procures clients with the help of her friend and mentor, Julie Letellier.

Initially, Lopukhov provides the necessary financial and emotional support for Vera Pavlovna to dedicate her energy to the collective and her own intellectual formation, but she soon becomes restless and falls in love with Kirsanov, whom she initially suspects of having an intimate relationship with Lopukhov. After Lopukhov unsuccessfully attempts to propose a polyamorous solution, he feigns his death to allow the two to be together. The “extraordinary man” [*osobennii chelovek*], Rakhmetov enters the narrative at this point to explain to Vera Pavlovna that Lopukhov had, in fact,

⁸³ Nikolai Chernyshevskii, *Chto Delat’? Iz Rasskazov o Novykh Lyudyakh* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1975), 15; Nikolai Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done? From Tales about the New People*, ed. William G. Wagner and Michael B. Katz, trans. Michael B. Katz, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 50.

removed himself from the scene to serve both Vera Pavlovna's and his own interests.⁸⁴ It is Rakhmetov's militant discipline that causes Lopukhov to entrust him with the responsibility of conveying this message. Despite his own renunciation of love in favor of revolutionary organizing, Rakhmetov dutifully carries out his task, using the opportunity to explain his own rational analysis of the situation.

The novel is punctuated by Vera Pavlovna's four dreams, which serve as turning points in the narrative that simultaneously situate the events within a revolutionary framework, zooming out to demonstrate the large-scale effects of the gradual, everyday changes in subjectivation. The series culminates with Vera Pavlovna's frequently excerpted fourth dream, in which she encounters a goddess who reveals the course of history to her, a dialectical progression between four goddesses, each of whom represents a different stage in economic and gender relations. The dream culminates in a vision of utopian society characterized by the pleasure of collective labor and sexual freedom, the Fourierian transformation of deserts into fertile land, and a Crystal Palace that contains a massive dining hall, ballroom, and sound-proof bedrooms. Recognizing herself in the final goddess, Vera Pavlovna becomes aware of her own role as a revolutionary subject in bringing about the promised utopia.

Literature and Reality

The intimate relationship between literature and everyday life in 1860s Russia is often characterized as a "specifically Russian phenomenon."⁸⁵ This was certainly the predominant belief at the time, as the editor of *Otechestvennye Zapiski* Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin wrote: "[l]iterature predicts the laws of the future, produces the image of the man of the future [...] Under the influence of these new types,

⁸⁴ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 214; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 292.

⁸⁵ Paperno, *Chernyshevsky and the Age of Realism*, 9.

modern man, without realizing it himself, acquires new habits, assimilates new views, and receives a new point of view. In a word, he gradually makes a new man of himself.”⁸⁶ Just as there was no clear distinction between literature and reality within the realist paradigm, the role of the literary critic was not easily discernable from that of the author. As Paperno observes, the literary critic was seen as a “co-author of the text” who interpreted the work for the public and in doing so, produced new meaning.⁸⁷

This conception of literary criticism and authorship produced a cultural environment in which the literary critic was one of the most influential political figures on the left. Vissarion Belinsky was the first person to occupy this role, as the editor of both major literary journals, *Sovremennik* and *Otechestvennye Zapiski* throughout the romantic period of the 1840s. As Andrzej Walicki observes, Belinsky’s “philosophical explorations found an outlet in essays of literary criticism that had an unprecedented and indeed unparalleled influence on nineteenth-century literature.”⁸⁸ The function of the literary critic changed but became no less influential when Chernyshevsky succeeded Belinsky as editor of *Sovremennik* in 1853. Chernyshevsky occupied “a role that combined the occupation and expertise of a literary critic, popularizer of science, and public activist.”⁸⁹ His literary criticism and political analyses were already widely read by the time he published *What Is to Be Done?* in 1863.⁹⁰

Although Chernyshevsky wrote his novel during the period of the Great Reforms—the years from 1861 through 1874 in which Tsar Alexander II introduced a series of reforms to the educational, judicial, administrative, and military systems—there were still strict limitations on the freedom of the press. Imperial censorship compelled authors and literary critics to develop new ways of writing and, in turn, the public to learn new ways of reading. As an editor of *Sovremennik*, Chernyshevsky was in a

⁸⁶ Quoted in Paperno, 10.

⁸⁷ Paperno, 10.

⁸⁸ Walicki, 121.

⁸⁹ Paperno, 20; 11.

⁹⁰ Walicki, 188.

particularly vulnerable position. He and the other contributors, including Nikolai Nekrasov, Alexander Herzen, and Nikolai Dobroliubov, were forced to develop an “Aesopian language” to evade the censor while still remaining legible to their readers. The literary historian Hugh McLean observes the generative function of this “game of substitutes.” He argues that censorship not only contributed to literary production, but also made the didactic message of these texts subtler and therefore more effective, concluding that “the power of the censor thus helped impose the logic of a new style.”⁹¹ One effect of this new form of realism was to further collapse the boundaries between literature and politics, art and reality. Despite the imperial state’s attempts to exert control over political expression, literature became the arena in which social issues were debated. Through the feedback loop of the author, literary critic, and reader, literature had quite tangible effects.

The Threat of Utopia

In his 1864 novella, *Notes from Underground* (*Zapiski iz podpol'ia*), Fyodor Dostoevsky offers a scathing parody of Chernyshevsky’s *What Is to Be Done?*⁹² Written in response to Chernyshevsky’s utopianism and collectivism more broadly, Dostoevsky’s underground man asks:

И с чего это взяли все эти мудрецы, что человеку надо какого-то нормального, какого-то добродетельного хотения? С чего это непременно вообразили они, что человеку надо непременно благоразумно выгодного хотения? Человеку надо — одного только *самостоятельного* хотения, чего бы эта самостоятельность ни стоила и к чему бы ни привела.⁹³

And from where did all these sages get the idea that man needs some kind of normal, some kind of virtuous desire? Why have they unfailingly imagined that man definitely

⁹¹ Hugh McLean, “The Development of Modern Russian Literature” *Slavic Review*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 397-8.

⁹² Dostoevsky—along with the governor of Saint Petersburg, Alexander Suvorov—was convinced that Chernyshevsky was the mastermind behind the student protests and fires in St. Petersburg in May 1862, which were used as a pretense for the government to shut down *Sovremennik*. Indeed, Dostoevsky appeared at Chernyshevsky’s door on the night of the fires, begging him to put an end to them. Paperno, 21.

⁹³ F. M. Dostoevskii, “Zapiski iz podpol'ia,” in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii. T. 5. Povesti i rasskazy. 1862-1866.*, vol. 5 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1973), 113.

needs rational, advantageous desire? Man needs one thing only: *independent* desire, whatever that independence costs and wherever it may lead him.⁹⁴

Dostoevsky's major objection to utopianism is that it necessarily subordinates the individual to collective interests. Indeed, Dostoevsky's underground man is opposed to any relational theory of desire, insisting that it is a fundamentally individual experience. The unpredictable nature of desire is precisely that which constitutes the human. According to Dostoevsky, Chernyshevsky's advocacy of socialism as the stage in which individual interests coincide with the interests of the collective would not only be "dreadfully boring," but completely misunderstands the nature of human desire.⁹⁵

Dostoevsky's portrayal of Chernyshevsky's rational egoism appears more accurate if we only consider the latter's theoretical texts. In Chernyshevsky's most comprehensive account of his philosophical materialism, his 1860 essay posing as a book review, *The Anthropological Principle in Philosophy* (*Antropologicheskii printsip v filosofii*), he offers a socialist spin on Benthamite utilitarianism:

[Д]обрый человек бывает тогда, когда для получения приятного себе он должен делать приятное другим; злым бывает он тогда, когда принужден извлекать приятность себе из нанесения неприятности другим. Человеческой природы нельзя тут ни бранить за одно, ни хвалить за другое; все зависит от обстоятельств, отношений [учреждений].⁹⁶

A man is good when in order to obtain pleasure for himself, he must give pleasure to others. A man is bad when in order to obtain pleasure for himself he is obliged to cause unpleasantness for others. Human nature cannot be blamed for one thing nor praised for the other; everything depends on circumstances, relationships [institutions].⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Translation altered. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 27.

⁹⁵ Dostoevskii 113; Dostoevsky 26.

⁹⁶ N. G. Chernyshevskii, "Antropologicheskii printsip v filosofii," in N. G. Chernyshevskii. *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii. Stat'i 1858—1859*, vol. 7 (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1950), 264.

⁹⁷ Translation altered. Nikolai Chernyshevsky, *Selected Philosophical Essays* (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2002), 99.

Chernyshevsky adopts the utilitarian conception of human behavior as governed by pleasure and displeasure, shifting the focus from the moral individual, as posited by theories of human nature, to relationships: “everything depends on circumstances, relationships [institutions].” Morality, subjectivity, and desire are products of these circumstances and relationships. Following his reference to relationships, Chernyshevsky brackets the term “institutions,” likely in an attempt to make the political stakes clear, while exercising the necessary caution to avoid antagonizing the censor. He evidently does not mean institutions or economic structure in lieu of interpersonal relationships, but it is not until *What Is to Be Done?* that he explores the implications of this interconnectedness.

Scholars have generally refrained from theorizing utopianism in Chernyshevsky’s novel, instead frequently relying on Dostoevsky’s albeit comical portrayal of Vera Pavlovna’s vision in his *Notes from Underground* in their descriptions of Chernyshevsky’s utopia. Eric Naiman ironically recounts the object of the underground man’s polemics, “[t]he novel’s utopian Crystal Palace,” as “all glass and light, save for the chambers whither the lovers disappear to make love.”⁹⁸ Claudia Verhoeven adopts Dostoevsky’s words directly in her definition of Chernyshevsky’s “utopia” as: “techno-phalansteries wrapped in a glass-iron edifice about which Dostoevsky’s underground man says, ‘Well, and maybe I’m afraid of this edifice precisely because it is crystal and forever indestructible and it will be impossible to put out one’s tongue at it even on the sly.’”⁹⁹ Following Dostoevsky’s influential parody, the utopian literary strategies Chernyshevsky employs have been overlooked by reducing utopia to the content of a perfect society.

The tendency to read utopia in terms of content is by no means limited to *What Is to Be Done?* Indeed, Thomas More’s wordplay on utopia as a non-place and a good place invites this reading. Ruth Levitas identifies three overlapping tendencies to define utopia as either content, form, or function.

⁹⁸ Eric Naiman, *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology* (Princeton University Press, 1997), 37.

⁹⁹ Claudia Verhoeven, *The Odd Man Karakozov: Imperial Russia, Modernity, and the Birth of Terrorism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 62.

Each approach elucidates particular aspects of utopias, while obscuring others. As Levitas explains, defining utopia in terms of content, that is, as the portrayal of an ideal society, leads to the normative problem of who is evaluating it. It can thus become difficult to distinguish between utopia and dystopia, an ambivalence present in More's *Utopia* and—as Dostoevsky's underground man underscores—in *What Is to Be Done?* Definitions of utopia as a form tend to limit their studies to the utopian novel, which can cause utopianism in other literary genres, the visual arts, or theory to be overlooked.¹⁰⁰ Finally, definitions that highlight the function of utopia often reduce it to a political instrument either in its negative, critical function or in its positive, agitational function.¹⁰¹ Following Levitas, I combine these multiple perspectives in my analysis of Chernyshevsky's novel.

The reception of *What Is to Be Done?* is dominated by readings of its utopian content and its related didactic function. Irina Paperno characteristically identifies the high points of the novel in Vera Pavlovna's four dreams and, specifically, the fourth dream's "utopian vision of the society of the future."¹⁰² Similarly locating the utopia of *What Is to Be Done?* in the fourth dream as "an explicit vision of a future society," Richard Stites emphasizes its corresponding didactic function as a "handbook for New People who would build and perhaps inhabit" the future society.¹⁰³ Readings that equate the utopianism of *What Is to Be Done?* with Vera Pavlovna's fourth dream tend to portray Chernyshevsky's utopia in particular—and utopia in general—as static and often oppressive, indicating the slippage facilitated by viewing utopia solely in terms of content. Vladimir Kantor's discussion of Chernyshevsky's future society as "built on the absence of administrative coercion" proves to be the exception.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ In Part Two, I expand my study of utopianism to include both a novel by Märten that is not clearly categorizable as utopian and her additional fictional and nonfictional forms.

¹⁰¹ Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, *Ralahine Utopian Studies* 3 (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), 4.

¹⁰² Paperno, *Chernyshevsky and the Age of Realism*, 26.

¹⁰³ Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (Cary: Oxford University Press, 1988), 25.

¹⁰⁴ Vladimir Kantor, «*Srubleonoe drevo zhizni*» *Sud'ba Nikolaia Chernyshevskogo* (Moscow, Saint Petersburg: Tsentr gumanitarnykh initsiativ, 2016), 135.

Critics have thus bracketed the novel's utopianism and interpreted *What Is to Be Done?* within the tradition of the literary realism. This comparison with Tolstoy and Dostoevsky often seems to demand a qualification of Chernyshevsky's allegedly inferior style, a charge that Chernyshevsky himself anticipated in the novel's preface. In his essay on the concept of literary realism, René Wellek provides a representative account of *What Is to Be Done?*, admitting that "[t]his incredibly bad novel altered, however, the whole direction of the lives of important people."¹⁰⁵ Reading *What Is to Be Done?* as a utopian novel compels readers to question their own assumptions about what makes "good" and "bad" art. Utopian literature challenges readers to open themselves up to new affective experiences, beyond the limits of respectability governing processes of canonization. This is yet another way in which *What Is to Be Done?* confronts readers with the limits of their own aesthetic judgment.¹⁰⁶ As Sara Ahmed suggests in her assessment of the cultural and political valences of "bad taste," while it seems to speak to the nature of what we have consumed, "something tastes bad only within the mouth of the one who tastes."¹⁰⁷

Recent scholarship has argued for the ways in which *What Is to Be Done?* shaped, challenged, and expanded the genre of realism in order to affirm its legitimacy as an object of literary study. Sonia Werner convincingly argues for the novel's place in the realist canon.¹⁰⁸ Werner interprets the realist

¹⁰⁵ René Wellek, "The Concept of Realism in Literary Scholarship," *Neophilologus* 45, no. 1 (December 1, 1961): 12, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01515025>.

¹⁰⁶ A reading of *What Is to Be Done?* solely as a work of realism can perhaps cause one to draw the conclusion that "Chernyshevskii's general treatment of characters and his awkward employment of hackneyed literary devices compounds the difficulties of establishing the line between intended parody and his incapacity as a writer." However, a familiarity with utopian literary traditions recasts these supposed insufficiencies as means of engaging with the reader, which the novel's reception history has proven to be profoundly effective. Thus, the reader's inability to definitively identify the author's intention is revealed to be precisely the strength of satire—as Friedrich Engels point out, a longstanding attribute of utopianism—and the stilted conversations with the perspicacious reader are shown to be deliberate provocations intended to elicit strong emotional responses. William F. Woehrlin, *Chernyshevskii: The Man and the Journalist* (Harvard University Press, 1971), 316; Friedrich Engels, "Die Entwicklung des Sozialismus von der Utopie zur Wissenschaft," in *Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels Werke*, ed. Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED, vol. 19 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1968), 196.

¹⁰⁷ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 83.

¹⁰⁸ The interpretation of *What Is to Be Done?* as a realist novel sought in part to recover it from its Soviet reception, which largely focused on the figure of Rakhmetov as a predecessor to the Bolshevik revolutionary. For a comprehensive summary of the Soviet reception see: Antonov, V. F. N.G. *Chernyshevskii. Obshchestvennyi ideal anarkhista*, URSS, 2017.

form of *What Is to Be Done?* to demonstrate that it not only operates within the genre of realism, but actively subverts realist conventions. John Mersereau summarizes these general attributes of the Russian realist novel as: “absence of author, imperceptibility of devices, homogeneity of narrative voice, individualization of characters’ speech, density of details, possibility (rather than probability) as the determinant in the relationship of events, motivation of all story material, and most important, psychologization.”¹⁰⁹ Werner demonstrates how Chernyshevsky responded to these conventions, often by explicitly thematizing his rejection of them.

Werner’s investment in demonstrating Chernyshevsky’s contribution to realist technique causes her to distance herself from readings of *What Is to Be Done?* as “naively utopian.”¹¹⁰ Correspondingly, she describes the novel as utopian to the extent that Vera Pavlovna’s fourth dream contains a utopian vision and the novel reveals a “utopian impulse.” However, she qualifies this last claim, asserting that “Vera’s dreams ultimately underscore the ways in which the novel challenges the very oppositions between what constitutes the ‘real’ and the ‘ideal,’ making ‘real life’ the definitive place within which utopian ideals are to be realized.”¹¹¹ This, I argue, is precisely the utopianism that is at stake in *What Is to Be Done?* Indeed, the aspects of the novel that Werner identifies as challenging the genre of realism—Vera Pavlovna’s dreams, the invasive narrator, the idealized characters, the narrative layering, and the “utopian impulse” or desire—are all attributes of utopian literature.¹¹² Reading the novel as a work of utopian realism sheds further light on these literary techniques and enables a deeper understanding of the novel’s innovation of nineteenth-century Russian realism.

¹⁰⁹ John Mersereau, “Toward a Normative Definition of Russian Realism,” in *California Slavic Studies*, ed. Robert P. Hughes, Simon Karlinsky, and Vladimir Markov, vol. 6 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 143, <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520330078-013>.

¹¹⁰ Sonia Werner, “The Reality Effect and the Real Effects of Chernyshevsky’s ‘What Is to Be Done?’,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 47, no. 3 (2014): 432.

¹¹¹ Werner, 434.

¹¹² Werner, 424.

Utopian Strategies

Moving beyond accounts of the utopian content of the fourth dream and the novel's didactic function allows for an analysis of the novel's unprecedented effect on its readers. First, reading *What Is to Be Done?* as utopian literature sheds light on what Joseph Frank refers to as the novel's powerful "emotional dynamic that eventually went to make the Russian Revolution," that is, its distinct affective register.¹¹³ If the "horrific reality" portrayed by Tolstoy and Dostoevsky represents the tragic element of Russian realism, as Erich Auerbach argues, then Chernyshevsky's novel, in contrast, must be read for its utopian affects, bringing its realism closer to sentimentalism and romanticism than tragedy.¹¹⁴ Second, while both realist and utopian literature dwell on quotidian realities, the status of the "real" differs in these two genres. As we have seen, Russian realist literature operated by "[t]aking its material from life, refashioning it, and then returning to life for imitation and actualization."¹¹⁵ Utopian literature, in contrast, seeks not to refashion, but to revolutionize everyday life through an expansion of the readers' notion of the possible. Third, viewing Chernyshevsky's novel through the lens of utopian literature reframes the perspicacious reader as the utopian traveler, who, guided through the utopian landscape of the new people by the narrator, serves as a stand-in for the skeptical reader. Through the narrator's repeated interrogations of the perspicacious reader, readers are compelled to question their own assumptions and confront the artificial constraints on their imagination, manifested in the perspicacious reader's prejudices.

No doubt anticipating the outrage that his novel would cause, Chernyshevsky begins with a preface that prepares uninitiated readers for his work:

[М]оя добрейшая публика, толкуя с тобою, надобно договаривать все до конца; ведь ты хоть и охотница, но не мастерица отгадывать недосказанное. Когда я

¹¹³ Joseph Frank, "N. G. Chernyshevsky: A Russian Utopia," *The Southern Review*; Baton Rouge 3, no. 1 (January 1, 1967): 68.

¹¹⁴ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis. Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur* (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1982), 34–35.

¹¹⁵ Paperno, *Chernyshevsky and the Age of Realism*, 9.

говорю, что у меня нет ни тени художественного таланта и что моя повесть очень слаба по исполнению, ты не вздумай заключить, будто я объясняю тебе, что я хуже тех твоих повествователей, которых ты считаешь великими, а мой роман хуже их сочинений. Я говорю не то. Я говорю, что мой рассказ очень слаб по исполнению сравнительно с произведениями людей, действительно одаренных талантом; с прославленными же сочинениями твоих знаменитых писателей ты смело ставь наряду мой рассказ по достоинству исполнения, ставь даже выше их — не ошибешься! В нем все-таки больше художественности, чем в них: можешь быть спокойна на этот счет.¹¹⁶

[M]y dearest audience, when I address you, it behooves me to spell everything out; although you are eager, you are not at all experts at guessing unstated meanings. When I say that I have not one bit of artistic talent and that my tale is very weak in execution, you should by no means conclude that I'm any worse than those storytellers whom you consider to be great, or that my novel is any poorer than their works. I'm not saying that. I'm saying that my novel is very weak in execution when it's compared with the works of genuinely gifted writers. You can confidently place my story side by side with the illustrious works of your renowned authors, even higher than theirs—you won't be mistaken! It certainly contains more artistry than them—rest assured on that point.¹¹⁷

In the preface, Chernyshevsky not only alerts his readers to his use of Aesopian language, he employs his idiosyncratic narrator to present the novel within the context of his iconoclastic materialist aesthetics, offering new definitions of truth, artistry, and the novel. The narrator's attack on established notions of art is delivered in a characteristically ironic tone. The grammatical gender of audience [*publika*] is carried over to feminize—and therefore condescend to—the uninitiated reader, who is construed in quaint terms as an *okhotnitsa*, eager to prove himself, rather than a *masteritsa*, capable of understanding the text. Both offensive and self-deprecating, the narrator welcomes the readers to the unsettling, ambivalent, and excessive story to come.

Chernyshevsky's narrator repeatedly attempts to provoke the readers by eliciting the outrage of his imagined opponents and the appreciation of the “new people.” Victoria Frede and Molly Brunson have observed what the latter calls the “affective imperative” of the Russian realist aesthetic:

¹¹⁶ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 14.

¹¹⁷ Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 48.

the insistence on evoking intense emotional responses.¹¹⁸ Frede argues that the radicals of the 1860s viewed emotions as the primary source of knowledge of oneself and the world, grasped as physiological needs rather than abstract states as they were understood by the “fathers” of the 1840s.¹¹⁹ It was precisely this understanding of the relationship between literature and reality—in which the boundary between art and life was blurred and literary types were treated as models for individual imitation and social change—that generated the ideal conditions for a utopian novel that aimed to expand its readers’ sense of possibility.

Utopian literature departs from the assumption that there is no contradiction between affirmation and critique. In contrast to *Who Is to Blame?* and *Fathers and Children*, Chernyshevsky’s novel is dominated by positive affects, exemplified by the frequent proclamations of love; the celebration of the pleasures of friendship, labor, and learning; and the repeated exclamations of “my dear” [*moi milyi*]¹²⁰—which appears no less than eighty-two times in the novel. Utopian literature leverages positive affect to generate new collectivities: as Sean Grattan emphasizes, “utopian affects bind together, circulate, and energize potential forms of social collectivity.”¹²¹ Frede and Anne Eakin Moss note that these utopian affects were distinctly gendered in 1860s Russia, and their embrace entailed an elevation of the “feminine” to a general principle. The marginalized perspectives of women were seen as providing unique insights into society as a whole. Thus, as Eakin Moss argues, it is the “feminine instinct for the ‘love of humanity’” in *What Is to Be Done?*—embodied by the final goddess of Vera Pavlovna’s fourth dream—that provides the condition for the realization of a utopian future when released from its gendered exclusivity.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Victoria Frede, “Radicals and Feelings - The 1860s,” in *Interpreting Emotions in Russia and Eastern Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 88.

¹¹⁹ Frede, 62.

¹²⁰ Sean Austin Grattan, *Hope Isn’t Stupid: Utopian Affects in Contemporary American Literature* (University of Iowa Press, 2017), 22, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt20q23mz>.

¹²¹ Anne Eakin Moss, *Only Among Women: Philosophies of Community in the Russian and Soviet Imagination, 1860–1940* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2019), 26.

Utopian literature's unrestrained embrace of positive affects is often accompanied by the appeal to other extreme and contradictory emotions. The satirical effect of these displays of excess compound the ambivalence generated by the use of frame narratives, which have aided the publication of utopian texts in hostile political climates. The genre of utopia, in fact, emerged under conditions of state censorship not unlike Chernyshevsky's. In *Utopia*, More creates a narrator who bears his own name. In Book I, the fictional Sir Thomas More recounts his conversations with the utopian traveler, Raphael Hythlodæus. Hythlodæus then assumes the function of the first-person narrator in Book II to detail his impressions of the land of Utopia. On the one hand, utopian literature's use of frame narratives reinforces the reader's sense of the story's authenticity, similar to in realist works. On the other hand, the multiple narrative layers generate an ambivalence that has rendered More's intention in *Utopia* the subject of controversy for the five centuries since its publication. The "sanctuary of ambiguity" produced by the frame narrative and the rivaling standpoints also served a practical function: it protected More—albeit temporarily—from the threat of imprisonment and beheading.¹²²

In 1860s Russia, Chernyshevsky faced similar obstacles to More, the exception being that he was already imprisoned when he wrote *What Is to Be Done?* The form of the novel was thus as much a practical as a strategic choice for Chernyshevsky when he was banned from writing political or literary criticism. In Chernyshevsky's case, writing under these conditions not only facilitated "the logic of a new style," as Mclean argues, but also a new form that brought with it its history of navigating state censorship. Moreover, the reader was directly implicated in this project. By deciphering the Aesopian language that concealed political messages from the censor, Gary Saul Morson argues, "reading becomes a form of complicity, which is to say, a political act."¹²³ Chernyshevsky's decision

¹²² Paul Turner, "Introduction," in *Utopia*, by Thomas More, trans. Paul Turner (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), xiv.

¹²³ Gary Saul Morson, *The Boundaries of Genre: Dostoevsky's Diary of a Writer and the Traditions of Literary Utopia* (Northwestern University Press, 1988), 102.

to write a utopian novel not only enabled the publication of his explosive work, it also put new literary techniques at his disposal.

As much as realist literature in 1860s Russia sought to intervene in the lives of its readers, it operated with a relatively stable sense of the reality that it aimed to reflect. Realism is “aspirational,” yet it is “forever aware of the impossibility of its project” to collapse the distance between art and life.¹²⁴ Utopianism, in contrast, performatively rejects the prospect of failure. It appeals to readers to suspend disbelief and make the “utopian leap” of imagining the change that would lead to the total transformation of society.¹²⁵ Utopia’s aim is the “‘infection’ of its audience with the ‘reality’ of its fiction,” which seeks “to make the representation of a nonexistent state of affairs the means for its realization.”¹²⁶ Unlike realism, literary utopias do not reflect a mimetic relationship to reality; instead, they strive for a more fundamental expansion—in Chernyshevsky’s case, a revolution—of the reader’s notion of the “real.”

Morson identifies Chernyshevsky’s division of the readers into multiple groups—one which he insults and contradicts and another which he admires—as typical of utopian literature. These groups are introduced in Chernyshevsky’s preface to *What Is to Be Done?*, which draws on both More’s *Utopia* and, even more explicitly, on Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s second preface to his sentimental novel *Julie, or the New Heloise* (*Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*, 1761). Much as in Rousseau’s second preface, in which the author “R.” is presented as a character rather than Rousseau himself, in the preface to *What Is to Be Done?*, Chernyshevsky’s narrator speaks both as author and intradiegetic narrator. The preface is preceded by a brief episode in which “progressives” and “conservatives” debate whether a man, later revealed to be Vera Pavlovna’s first husband Lopukhov, committed suicide or merely faked his death. As discussed above, the author then employs this episode and the readers’ imagined reactions

¹²⁴ Brunson, 15.

¹²⁵ Jameson, *Politics of Utopia*, 38

¹²⁶ Morson, 96.

to didactically defend the value of his book based on a realist notion of truth rather than the “great poetic talent” of established novelists.¹²⁷ The irony of this gesture is underscored by its deliberate subversion of the readers’ expectations. While “in Realist prose we do not expect to encounter evidence of authorial control of the story material or chatty comments which call attention to author-reader relationships,” Chernyshevsky responds by doing just this.¹²⁸

In the preface, the author divides the readers into three overlapping groups, which he addresses in turn: female readers and male readers, the general public and the “new people,” and current and future readers. The preface begins with a disinterested comment by the female reader: “[t]he subject of this work is love, the main character is a woman; that’s fine, even if the work itself is not that good’ says the female reader. / ‘That’s true,’ I reply.”¹²⁹ The preface quickly escalates as the author imagines a conflict with the “male reader,” later ironically dubbed the “perspicacious reader”:

Читатель не ограничивается такими легкими заключениями, — ведь у мужчины мыслительная способность и от природы сильнее, да и развита гораздо больше, чем у женщины; он говорит, — читательница тоже, вероятно, думает это, но не считает нужным говорить, и потому я не имею основания спорить с нею, — читатель говорит: «я знаю, что этот застрелившийся господин не застрелился». Я хватаюсь за слово «знаю» и говорю: ты этого не знаешь, потому что этого тебе еще не сказано, а ты знаешь только то, что тебе скажут; сам ты ничего не знаешь, не знаешь даже того, что тем, как я начал повесть, я оскорбил, унизил тебя. Ведь ты не знал этого, — правда? — ну, так знай же.¹³⁰

The male reader does not confine himself to such easy conclusions, since a man’s intellectual capability is by nature greater than woman’s and also much better developed. He says—she probably thinks it, but sees no need to say it, so I have no grounds to quarrel with her—the male reader says: “I know that the gentleman who shot himself did not really shoot himself.” Seizing upon the word, “know,” I reply,

¹²⁷ In this sense, Chernyshevsky once again draws on Rousseau’s second preface to reveal the illusory nature of the distinction between author and reader, fiction and reality. In his discussion of Rousseau’s second preface, Paul de Man argues that “this elusive author is not initially a subject but the metaphor for readability in general.” If reading means understanding writing, de Man explains, then it also means determining the referential status of a text, that is, making (ethical) assumptions about what is at stake in the text and who has the authority to determine this. In the case of *What Is to Be Done?*, imperial censorship places additional interpretative authority on the reader. Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 202.

¹²⁸ Mersereau, “Toward a Normative Definition of Russian Realism,” 138.

¹²⁹ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat’*, 12; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 47.

¹³⁰ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat’*, 14.

“You don’t know it, because you haven’t been told it yet, and you only know what you have been told; you yourself don’t know anything, you don’t even know that in the way I started this work I insulted and humiliated you. You didn’t, did you? Well, now you know.”¹³¹

What at first appears as the author’s misogynistic affirmation of male superiority is quickly revealed to be a parody of the male reader’s chauvinistic view—emphasizing not that he knows something that the female reader does not, but that he feels entitled to say it. The author proceeds to explain that in his rush to judgement, the male reader failed to notice that the author had used the “conventional ruse of a novelist” by previewing a dramatic scene from the middle of the novel to build suspense and draw in the reader. It was an insult to the reader to resort to such “vulgarity,” but a necessary lesson. “Now that you’ve fallen into my hands, I can continue the story as I see fit without further tricks” the author explains. Yet the author continues insulting the reader, only to move on to insulting himself. Rather than merely providing instructions on how to read his book, he posits a new criterion for judging literature: truth as the antithesis of literary talent. The author then reveals that his arrogance was itself a pedagogical tool, employed to alert the readers to their subservience and therefore catalyze the questioning of his authority. He quickly changes his tone to address the second group of readers, the “new people,” or young generation of radical leftists that stand out from among the general public:

Но есть в тебе, публика, некоторая доля людей, — теперь уже довольно значительная доля, — которых я уважаю. С тобою, с огромным большинством, я нагл, — но только с ним, и только с ним я говорил до сих пор. С людьми, о которых я теперь упомянул, я говорил бы скромно, даже робко. Но с ними мне не нужно было объясняться. Их мнениями я дорожу, но я вперед знаю, что оно за меня. Добрые и сильные, честные и умеющие, недавно вы начали возникать между нами, но вас уже не мало, и быстро становится все больше. Если бы вы были публика, мне уже не нужно было бы писать; если бы вас еще не было, мне еще не было бы можно писать. Но вы еще не публика, а уже вы есть между публикою, — потому мне еще нужно и уже можно писать.¹³²

¹³¹ Translation altered. Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 48.

¹³² Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 14.

But there is among you, readers, a certain group of people, by now a fairly significant group, that I respect. With you, with the vast majority, I am insolent, it is with you and only with you, that I was speaking thus far. But with these people I just mentioned, I would speak humbly, even timidly. There is no need to offer them any explanation. I value their opinions, but I already know that they are on my side. Good, strong, honest, and capable people, you have only just begun to appear among us, but there's already a fair number of you and it's growing all the time. If you were my entire audience, there'd be no need for me to write. If you did not yet exist, it would be impossible for me to write. But you're not yet my entire audience, although some of you are numbered among my readers; this is it's still necessary and already possible for me to write.¹³³

The existence of the new people enables the narrator to document their tales, yet the writing is only necessary because it is not yet complete. It now becomes clear that the aim of the first part of the preface is to expand the group of readers counted among the new people by teaching the chauvinistic male reader how to read. Noting the Aesopian language Chernyshevsky uses to mask his revolutionary message, Morson argues that in imperial Russia, “censorship has functioned not only as a literary distortion, but also as a ‘literary fact’ itself,” the presence of which teaches readers to search for hidden meanings in texts. Not only the male reader of the preface, but also the censor is added to the list of implied readers, producing “yet another kind of double encoding, this one with the censor as dupe and the readers—or more accurately, some readers—as partners in deceit.”¹³⁴ The preface is therefore not intended primarily for the new people, because they already know how to read: they understand that the question “what is to be done?” is a provocation rather than a prescription. Instead, the preface serves to initiate the uninformed reader into the Aesopian language of Chernyshevsky’s revolutionary text.

Although Morson does not discuss the utopian traveler in relation to *What Is to Be Done?*, his description of this figure in utopian literature illuminates the function of Chernyshevsky’s “perspicacious reader”:

¹³³ Translation altered. Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 49.

¹³⁴ Morson, *The Boundaries of Genre*, 102.

In most utopias, the traveler's questions are self-implicating in that their presuppositions, which the utopian citizens do not share, are revealed as the ideology of immoral people or an immoral society. It is common for a delineator to answer what the reader might take to be an innocent and obvious question by interrogating the questioner. Pointing out the question's presuppositions, he reproaches the questioner and, by extension, the reader.¹³⁵

The narrator's interrogation of the perspicacious reader repeatedly interrupts the narrative, serving as a premise for reflecting on—and challenging—the readers' assumptions about the plot development, the morality of the new people, and the prospects of change: the narrator ironically congratulates the perspicacious reader for deducing that it is Lopukhov who faked his death in the first scene. Anticipating the perspicacious reader's outrage at Vera Pavlovna studying medicine, the narrator insists that it is he who should be dismissed as a bluestocking for talking about subjects of which he has no understanding. Finally, a staged dialogue with the perspicacious reader before he is temporarily expelled from the narrative allows for an extensive explication of the "extraordinary man" Rakhmetov's presence in the novel and the centrality of the other, ordinary characters.¹³⁶ The perspicacious reader as a presumptuous and narrow-minded utopian traveler stands in for the skeptical reader, allowing Chernyshevsky to stage disputes aimed to undermine the readers' assumptions and catalyze self-reflection. By the end of novel, the perspicacious reader has become superfluous as a pedagogical tool. This corresponds to the ways in which, as Eakin Moss maintains, "the novel evolves stylistically over time along with its characters and, implicitly, with its readers, moving from the cajoling and admonishing that are necessary to reach the skeptical reader of critical realism, to end with impressionistic lyrical prose for which those in the know would need to excess explanation."¹³⁷ By the end of the novel, its readers are trusted to have learned to reflect on—and act on—the radical potential of their quotidian desires. Just as the ordinary Vera Pavlovna is transformed

¹³⁵ Morson, 98.

¹³⁶ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 214; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 294.

¹³⁷ Moss, *Only Among Women*, 31.

from a mere dreamer into a utopian visionary by enacting her desires, the readers are educated to become new people through the experience of reading: they are offered a reflection of themselves in the face of the final goddess of Vera Pavlovna's fourth dream and asked to assume responsibility for translating the text into reality.¹³⁸

Rational Egoism and the Old Order

Chernyshevsky's realist aesthetics are said to find their ethical encapsulation in the rational egoism of the new people in *What Is to Be Done?*, in particular, of Vera Pavlovna's first husband, Lopukhov. As the narrator explains, "the main characteristics of this type [are] cold-blooded practicality, measured and calculated activity, and active common sense."¹³⁹ In her refutation of dismissive readings of Chernyshevsky's work as eclectic and inconsistent, Paperno stresses the continuity between *What Is to Be Done?* and his theoretical writings.¹⁴⁰ She draws on Chernyshevsky's essay *The Anthropological Principle in Philosophy* to argue that "the power of mathematic to provide an 'all-encompassing formula' that would explain and govern everything (a typical desire of a utopian mind) symbolized the essence of science for Chernyshevsky."¹⁴¹ Paperno's emphasis on continuity leads her conclude that "Chernyshevsky maintained that every act or impulse of individual human beings arises as the direct realization of the calculus of pains and pleasures, which prevails over spontaneity and emotional immediacy of any kind," an argument that resonates with Dostoevsky's parody of Chernyshevsky in *Notes from Underground*.¹⁴²

¹³⁸ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 281; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 376.

¹³⁹ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 149; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 211.

¹⁴⁰ Joseph Frank offers a representative example of this portrayal of Chernyshevsky's thought as a "curious and ill-digested amalgam of crude Feuerbachian materialism and determinism, Benthamite Utilitarianism, and Utopian Socialist perfectionism." Joseph Frank, *Through the Russian Prism: Essays on Literature and Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 194.

¹⁴¹ Paperno, 168.

¹⁴² Paperno, 108.

Although Chernyshevsky's utilitarian rationalization of behavior is evident in *The Anthropological Principle in Philosophy*, the utopian desire expressed in *What Is to Be Done?* consistently evades calculation and prediction. His materialist theory of rational egoism can be easily reconciled with his realist aesthetics; however, *What Is to Be Done?* stands out among his work precisely due to its challenges to scientific calculability, which is most evident in the movement of utopian desire. In the remainder of this chapter, I consider two major figures of the "old order," Marya Aleksevna and Julie Letellier. I argue that their characters demonstrate the limits of rational egoism, in this way laying the foundation for the shift to a utopian paradigm based on Vera Pavlovna's expansive desire. While both Marya Aleksevna and Julie Letellier candidly navigate the commodification of desire and attempt to assert their autonomy by freeing themselves from relations of dependency, Vera Pavlovna's utopianism consists in her construction of new collectivities that generate a relational subjectivity conceived of as the "product of individuals, groups and institutions."¹⁴³

What Is to Be Done? thus does not merely present the positive story of Vera Pavlovna, in which the utopian possibilities of the present are revealed, but contrasts it with negative examples that emphasize the limitations of the old order. The novel begins with the two counterexamples of Marya Aleksevna and Julie Letellier. Marya Aleksevna is introduced as a manipulative and abusive woman, who only stops corporally punishing her daughter when she recognizes that Vera Pavlovna will only attract a wealthy suitor if she appears presentable.¹⁴⁴ Although Marya Aleksevna's husband, Pavel Konstantinovich holds the official title as building manger and honorary "assistant to the head of a government department," she proves to be much more financially and professionally adept. Indeed, it is Marya Aleksevna who is responsible for installing her husband as building manager and generates a larger profit in the side job they both engage in, pawnbroking. Pavel Konstantinovich serves a merely

¹⁴³ Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, trans. Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 1.

¹⁴⁴ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 17; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 53.

symbolic value both in his unpaid government position and as the apparent head of the household, a soon to be obsolete remnant of the patriarchal tsarist system. Marya Aleksevna, on the other hand, has learned to extract value from personal and professional situations by adopting an explicitly capitalistic mindset. As we learn, “Marya Aleksevna also was in possession of a tidy bit of capital—5,000 rubles or so, as she used to tell her fellow gossips, but in fact it was more than that.”¹⁴⁵ She is a skillful speculator who even recognizes the importance of undervaluing her assets and “if she suffered losses that her husband managed to avoid (since he was more discriminating in his choice of clients), she also realized greater profits.”¹⁴⁶ In the nascent capitalism of mid-nineteenth century Saint Petersburg, Marya Aleksevna learns to exploit the opportunities that emerge with the decline of traditional social and economic structures.

In a rare moment of vulnerability fueled by three glasses of punch, Marya Aleksevna confides in Vera Pavlovna, revealing the psychological motivation behind her instrumentalization of familial and professional relations. What begins as the emotional response to the trauma of having an illegitimate daughter taken from her develops into a strategy for improving her position in the household and her family’s status as whole. Marya Aleksevna confesses that after suffering years of humiliation from her husband and being deprived of her daughter from another man, “I turned even more vicious! Then I turned mean. And our affairs started to improve.” It was only after developing an instrumental relationship toward others that she was able to lift the family out of poverty and gain the respect of her husband: “[b]efore that he persecuted me and humiliated me, For what? He didn’t need a reason, Verochka; it was just because I wasn’t mean enough.”¹⁴⁷

On the one hand, the example of Marya Aleksevna reveals one of the few possibilities for women to escape persecution and humiliation by their husbands while providing for their families in

¹⁴⁵ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat’*, 15; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 51.

¹⁴⁶ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat’*, 13; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 51.

¹⁴⁷ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat’*, 22; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 59.

pre-revolutionary Russia. Even Pavel Konstantinovich admits that Marya Aleksevna makes the decisions for all the family members, that is, until Vera Pavlovna defies her will and marries Lopukhov without her parents' consent. On the other hand, the character of Marya Aleksevna highlights the differences between emancipation based on the disavowal of dependency, characteristic of the old order, and the new forms of interdependency established in the new order. As I address in Chapter II, it is Vera Pavlovna's utopian desire to construct new relations rather than merely strategically navigate existing structures that distinguishes her materialism from her mother's.

The narrator intervenes to defend Marya Aleksevna, explaining that despite her apparent cruelty, she in fact shares much in common with the rational egoism of the new person, Lopukhov. "Just like her, he said that everything was based on advantage; that when a scoundrel acted like a scoundrel, there was no reason to get excited and whine about principles of honor that he ought to be observing; that the scoundrel was not a scoundrel for nothing, that he had to be one because of his circumstances."¹⁴⁸ Both Marya Aleksevna and Lopukhov attempt to gain control of their lives by making rational calculations and succeed in achieving financial security after being born into poverty. Both subscribe to a theory of social constructivism, whereby social and economic "circumstances" rather than individuals are to be held accountable. The crucial point of divergence is their gendered positions: while Lopukhov is introduced as a bachelor surviving on a meager income as he pursues his medical career, Marya Aleksevna could only leave her parents' home through marriage and resorts to cruelty to assert herself against the mistreatment by her husband.

The narrator dwells on the example of Marya Aleksevna, connecting her story to the overall theory of revolutionary transformation in a brief section entitled "Eulogy of Marya Aleksevna," which consequently marks her exit from the narrative. Addressing her directly, the narrator provides an interpretation of her character: "[y]ou're now engaged in a bad business because your environment

¹⁴⁸ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 72; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 120.

demands it; but if we were to provide you with a different environment, you'd gladly become harmless, even beneficial, because you don't want to do evil without financial reward, and if it were in your own interest, you'd do anything at all, you'd even act decently and nobly if necessary." The narrator salvages Marya Aleksevna's otherwise unlikeable character by shifting the parameters from a question of blame and personal responsibility to "environment" and "circumstances."¹⁴⁹ In attributing individual choices to incentives or "financial reward" provided by economic structures rather than morality or free choice, Chernyshevsky recalls his theory as articulated in *The Anthropological Principle in Philosophy*. This crucially reframes the question of individual guilt and the atomistic subject as a problem of social relations and a fundamentally relational notion of subjectivity.

The Limits of Individual Agency

To her mother's dismay, Vera Pavlovna's first love is not the wealthy son of the landlady, Mikhail Storeshnikov, nor is it even her soon-to-be fiancé, Lopukhov. Instead, Vera Pavlovna learns to love when she meets Julie Letellier, pulled from the pages of Rousseau's *Julie; or, the New Heloise*. Julie teaches Vera Pavlovna about love by evoking her desire and encouraging her to reflect on it, both in their conversations and through the example of Julie's unconventional and autonomous lifestyle. However, when Julie advises Vera Pavlovna to marry Storeshnikov, a union that would mark the "the best possible position for a woman in society," the protagonist launches into a passionate monologue¹⁵⁰:

Вы называете меня фантазеркою, спрашиваете, чего же я хочу от жизни? Я не хочу ни властвовать, ни подчиняться, я не хочу ни обманывать, ни притворяться, я не хочу смотреть на мнение других, добиваться того, что рекомендуют мне другие, когда мне самой этого не нужно. Я не привыкла к богатству — мне самой оно не нужно, — зачем же я стану искать его только потому, что другие думают, что оно всякому приятно и, стало быть, должно быть приятно мне? [...] Я хочу быть независима и жить по-своему; что нужно мне самой, на то я готова; чего мне не нужно, того не хочу и не хочу. Что нужно мне будет, я не знаю; вы

¹⁴⁹ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 114; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 169.

¹⁵⁰ Chernyshevsky 74; Chernyshevskii 35.

говорите: я молода, неопытна, со временем переменюсь, — ну, что ж, когда переменюсь, тогда и переменюсь, а теперь не хочу, не хочу, не хочу ничего, чего не хочу! А чего я хочу теперь, вы спрашиваете? — ну да, я этого не знаю. Хочу ли я любить мужчину? — Я не знаю, — ведь я вчера поутру, когда вставала, не знала, что мне захочется полюбить вас; за несколько часов до того, как полюбила вас, не знала, что полюблю, и не знала, как это я буду чувствовать, когда полюблю вас. Так теперь я не знаю, что я буду чувствовать, если я полюблю мужчину, я знаю только то, что не хочу никому поддаваться, хочу быть свободна, не хочу никому быть обязана ничем, чтобы никто не смел сказать мне: ты обязана делать для меня что-нибудь!¹⁵¹

You call me a dreamer and ask what I want out of life. I don't want to dominate, nor to be subjected, I don't want to deceive, nor to pretend, I don't want to be concerned about other people's opinions, or strive for what others advise, when I personally have no need for it. I have not become accustomed to wealth, and have no need for it myself. Why should I seek it out only because others think that it's pleasant to have and therefore that it should be pleasant for me? [...] I want to be independent and live my own way; what I personally need, for that I am ready, what I don't need, I don't want, I don't want it. I don't know yet what I'll need later. You say that I'm young and inexperienced and that in time I'll change. So what? When I change, then I change; but for now, I don't want a thing, nothing, nothing, not a thing! And you ask me what I want now? Well, I don't even know that. Do I want to love a man? I don't know. When I awoke yesterday morning, I didn't even know that I would want to love you; for several hours before I began loving you, I didn't know that I would love you, nor did I know how I would feel when I was loving you. So now I don't know how I would feel if I loved a man; I only know that I don't want to submit to anyone, I want to be free, I don't want to be obligated to anyone for anything, I don't want anyone to ever say, "You're obliged to do something for me!"¹⁵²

Dismissed by Julie as a *fantazorka*, Vera Pavlovna is both a dreamer and a visionary, insisting on alternatives even when they do not yet exist. Within the terms of the old order, this refusal to engage in the practices that reproduce feminized white middle-class subjectivity is perceived as a naive and even childish obstinacy. Indeed, Vera Pavlovna's reaction is not the result of a calculating strategy. It merely reflects her experience of normative subjectivation as subjugation: singing and playing piano for guests, sewing the clothes for her family by age fourteen, and deflecting her mother's bigoted

¹⁵¹ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 35.

¹⁵² Translation altered. Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 75.

attempts to make her into a more desirable commodity by berating her for her dark complexion: “Scrub that face [*rozhu-to*] of yours—you look like a gypsy girl!”¹⁵³

Vera Pavlovna’s stance falls under what Herbert Marcuse calls the “Great Refusal” as the rejection of the social norms and institutions that would channel her desires toward the accumulation of wealth and prestige, hierarchical social relations, and heterosexual, erotic love.¹⁵⁴ She abstains from the existing forms of gendered subjectivation, which Marya Aleksevna and Julie have successfully navigated, and rejects what “must be” for what should be. Julie, for her part, quickly recognizes this, “for she was unable to refrain from bursting into flames when a fire burned so close to her.”¹⁵⁵ She dramatically declares her agreement, disparaging herself for her inability to see beyond the constraints imposed by her habits of idleness and luxury. The two soon become close—their interactions are playful and flirtatious—and Julie plays a key role in the establishment of Vera Pavlovna’s sewing collective, using her connections to find the first clients.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 17; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 53.

¹⁵⁴ In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse identifies the Great Refusal as the critical function of fantasy, which is allowed to exist within art, but is dismissed as utopia in its nonfiction manifestations. Citing Theodor Adorno, he explains: “[t]his Great Refusal is the protest against unnecessary repression, the struggle for the ultimate form of freedom ‘to live without anxiety.’ But this idea could be formulated without punishment only in the language of art. In the more realistic context of political theory and even philosophy, it was almost universally defamed as utopia.” *What Is to Be Done?* makes use of the ambiguous space between art and philosophy to offer a utopia meant to transform reality. Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974), 149–50.

¹⁵⁵ Translation altered. Chernyshevsky 75; Chernyshevskii 36.

¹⁵⁶ After toasting to Vera Pavlovna’s fictitious marriage, she and Julie quickly forget Lopukhov’s presence:

У нее закружилась голова, подняли они с Жюли крик, шум, гам; Жюли ушпинула Верочку, вскочила, побежала, Верочка за нею: беготня по комнатам, прыганье по стульям; Лопухов сидел и смеялся. Кончилось тем, что Жюли вздумала хвалиться силою: «Я вас подниму на воздух одною рукою». — «Не поднимете». Принялись бороться, упали обе на диван, и уже не захотели встать, а только продолжали кричать, хохотать, и обе заснули.
С давнего времени это был первый случай, когда Лопухов не знал, что ему делать.
She felt dizzy, she and Julie began to shout, yell, and raise a rumpus. Julie pinched Verochka, jumped up, and began to run around, chased by Verochka. They ran through all the rooms, bouncing on chairs. Lopukhov sat and laughed. It came to an end when Julie decided to boast about her strength. “I can lift you into the air with one hand.” “Oh, no, you can’t.” They started to struggle, but fell onto the sofa; they no longer tried to stand up, but merely continued to shout and giggle; soon they both fell asleep.

This was the first time in a long while that Lopukhov didn’t know what to do.
Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 119; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 175.

In addition to her material support, Julie's unabashed and often theatrical approach to the commodification of femininity—first as a sex worker and then in Petersburg society—is crucial in enabling Vera Pavlovna's relative freedom from the compulsion of binary gender and heterosexual monogamy. Despite Julie's self-deprecating identification as a “fallen woman” [*pogibshaia zhenshchina*], the reader gains a more nuanced understanding of Julie's strategic navigation of femininity in an earlier episode. After Storesnikov and his two friends, Jean, and Julie's partner, Serge, spend the evening ogling Vera Pavlovna at the opera, the protagonist storms home angrily while Julie joins them for dinner at an upscale restaurant. The conversation quickly turns to dissecting Vera Pavlovna's figure:

— Нога удовлетворительна, — подтвердил Жан: — но я как человек положительный интересуюсь более существенным. Я рассматривал ее бюст.
 — Бюст очень хорош, — сказал Сторешников, ободрившийся выгодными отзывами о предмете его вкуса, и уже замысливший, что может говорить комплименты Жюли, чего до сих пор не смел: — ее бюст очарователен, хотя, конечно, хвалить бюст другой женщины здесь — святотатство.
 — Ха, ха, ха! Этот господин хочет сказать комплимент моему бюсту! Я не ипокритка и не обманщица, мсьё Сторешник: я не хваюсь и не терплю, чтобы другие хвалили меня за то, что у меня плохо. Слава богу, у меня еще довольно осталось, чем я могу хвалиться по правде. Но мой бюст — ха, ха, ха! Жан, вы видели мой бюст — скажите ему! Вы молчите, Жан? Вашу руку, мсьё Сторешник, — она схватила его за руку, — чувствуете, что это не тело? Попробуйте еще здесь, — и здесь, — теперь знаете? Я ношу накладной бюст, как ношу платье, юбку, рубашку не потому, чтоб это мне нравилось, — моему, было бы лучше без этих ипокритств, — а потому, что это так принято в обществе.¹⁵⁷

“Her feet are satisfactory,” Jean confirmed. “But as a positivist sort, I’m interested in something more substantial. I examined her bust.”

“Her bust is very fine,” said Storesnikov, encouraged by such favorable reactions to the object of his predilection and concluding that now he could pay Julie a compliment, something he hadn’t dared before. “She has an enchanting bust, although, of course, to praise another woman’s bust in present company is a sacrilege.”

“Ha, ha, ha! This gentleman wishes to compliment my bust! I’m neither a hypocrite nor an imposter, Monsieur Storesnik. I don’t praise myself, nor can I tolerate others’ praise for my deficiencies. Thank God I still have enough to be genuinely proud of. But my bust—ha, ha, ha! Jean, you’ve seen my bust—tell him! You’re still silent, Jean! Your hand, Monsieur Storesnik.” She grabbed his hand. “Can you feel that that’s not my body? Try over here...and here. Now do you understand? I wear a false bust just

¹⁵⁷ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 24.

as I wear a dress, a skirt, or a chemise, and not because I like to (I think it better to do without such hypocrisy) but because it's what's customary in society.¹⁵⁸

Julie interrupts the fantasies of the men around her by stripping femininity of its mystery and corresponding eroticism. She cannot, however, compel Jean to be complicit in this revelation.¹⁵⁹ Thus, in the middle of the “fashionable restaurant,” Julie takes Storeshnikov’s hand and places it on the appendage he had just mistaken for the natural expression of feminine beauty. By forcing this haptic confrontation with the deliberate material construction of femininity, Julie undermines the authenticity of gender as it is experienced by Storeshnikov, Jean, and Serge: “Can you feel that that’s not my body? Try over here...and here.”

Julie’s enactment of femininity is framed as a necessary and unpleasant result of societal expectations, manifested in the often unconscious act of wearing a dress, a skirt, or a padded bra. Yet, for Julie, this show and its capacity to elicit desire is entirely conscious and becomes a source of material and social security. Compelled to perform femininity not because it expresses her “true” self, but because “it’s what’s customary in society,” she leverages this necessity to minimize her material disadvantage as a feminized subject with limited rights and few professional options. In Paris, sex work offered her the rare opportunity to become financially self-sufficient. Now, it is her relationship with the wealthy Serge that allows her unprecedented autonomy for a woman of the time, precisely because she does not grant him legal ownership over herself and her body, as marriage would entail: “Marriage? The yoke? Prejudice? Never!” she proclaims.¹⁶⁰ Julie’s pragmatism characterizes her as a woman of the “old order” who refuses to accept the subservient position that society offers her, yet lacks the resources—financial, legal, social, and even imaginative—to reconstitute the power relations in which she finds herself. As a foil to Vera Pavlovna, Julie represents the best possible outcome for women in

¹⁵⁸ Translation altered. Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 61-62.

¹⁵⁹ Curiously, Julie turns not to her partner Serge, but to Jean for support, a detail that is not pursued further.

¹⁶⁰ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 25; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 61.

pre-revolutionary society: through her self-conscious cynicism accompanied by a sentimentalism verging on camp, she offers a model of individual agency within existing constraints that nevertheless fails to alter the social production of gendered subjectivity itself.¹⁶¹

With the character of Julie, Chernyshevsky demonstrates what has now become the widely accepted critique of gender performativity: “[w]hat we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body.”¹⁶² Judith Butler famously illustrates this point through the example of drag: when we think that we see a man dressed as a woman, we are making assumptions about the “real” gender as distinct from the “secondary,” illusory gender that is being enacted. This apparent tension between “reality” and “illusion” reveals the instability of the very categories upon which our judgment relies. In the restaurant, Julie counters Storesnikov’s common sense assumptions about feminized anatomy by reversing the power relations and forcing him into a defensive position. From her constrained position, she nevertheless succeeds in disrupting the naturalized ideology of commodified femininity. Chernyshevsky does not give us a character in drag, but by presenting a woman dressed up as a woman, he reveals the “imitative structure of gender itself” while avoiding the misunderstanding about the inherent subversiveness of drag that Butler’s analysis caused.¹⁶³ Julie imitates gender, but the gender she is imitating is the same gender that is culturally ascribed to her. In this way, Chernyshevsky’s Julie underscores the contingency of femininity, while demonstrating that this knowledge alone does not destabilize gender categories or even mitigate their material effects. Instead, the ideological ruptures

¹⁶¹ Julie’s character embodies the theatricality of camp, which Jack Babuscio highlights in his discussion of camp aesthetics: “To appreciate camp in things or persons is to perceive the notion of life-as-theater, being versus role-playing, reality and appearance.” Jack Babuscio, “Camp and the Gay Sensibility,” in *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*, ed. David Bergman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 24.

¹⁶² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), xv.

¹⁶³ Compelled to correct the misconceptions about drag as an inherently political act, Butler offers a more tentative explanation of the subversiveness of drag in *Bodies that Matter*: “drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality’s claim on naturalness and originality.” Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 175; Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (Routledge, 1993), 85.

Julie creates are the condition for the transformation of gendered subjectivation through the collective projects of the new people.

While Julie ceases to play a significant role in the narrative as the reader's attention is redirected toward the relationships between the new people, the final goddess of Vera Pavlovna's fourth dream evokes Julie by locating her own origins in Rousseau's character: "[d]o you know who first sensed that I had been born and who announced it to the others?" the goddess asks Vera Pavlovna. "It was Rousseau in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. Through her, people heard about me for the first time."¹⁶⁴ The connection between Rousseau's heroine, Chernyshevsky's incarnation of Julie, and the final realization of equality in the new people is highlighted in the "idyllic scene" at the conclusion of the novel. When Vera Pavlovna is asked to tell her story, she begins not with her tyrannical parents, nor with her first marriage to Lopukhov, but with Julie.¹⁶⁵ While most of Vera Pavlovna's retelling is omitted, marked simply by ellipses, one character's reaction is not left up to the reader's imagination: "[h]a, ha, ha! It's that darling Julie! I really love her! Throwing herself on her knees, rebuking everybody, and behaving without any propriety at all [*bez vsiakogo prilichiia*]!"¹⁶⁶ Chernyshevsky begins his novel with Julie Letellier, whose disregard for convention enables Vera Pavlovna's oppositional stance and collective enactment of new productive and erotic relations. While Julie's character undermines the ideological constraints on the reproduction of the gendered subject, it is only through her relationship with Vera Pavlovna that new sites of subjectivation are generated: fictitious marriage, love triangles, the sewing collective, and finally, the utopian Crystal Palace.

¹⁶⁴ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 365; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 280.

¹⁶⁵ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 336; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 433.

¹⁶⁶ Translation altered. Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 337; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 434.

CHAPTER II: DESIRE & COLLECTIVITY¹⁶⁷

The utopian dreams enacted in Nikolai Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* spread not only throughout Russia, but also across the Atlantic. In her autobiography, Emma Goldman recounts her time working first in a garment factory, then in a corset factory after emigrating from Saint Petersburg to Rochester, New York in 1885. The “deadly monotony” of industrial wage labor motivated Goldman to secretly enroll in a dressmaking course and, upon arriving in New York City, she hoped to finally escape factory work.¹⁶⁸ In her autobiography, she reflects on an early conversation with her fellow anarchist, Alexander Berkman: “I asked him whether I could hope to establish myself in New York as a dressmaker. I wanted so much to free myself from the dreadful grind and slavery of the shop. I wanted to have time for reading, and later I hoped to realize my dream of a co-operative shop. ‘Something like Vera’s venture in *What’s to be Done?*’ I explained.”¹⁶⁹ Although Goldman’s work for the anarchist journal *Freiheit* (*Freedom*) and the first of her speaking tours would take her away from this project, Chernyshevsky continued to exert a strong influence over her. As she wrote, the revolutionaries portrayed in *What Is to Be Done?* “became to me heroes and martyrs, henceforth my guiding stars.”¹⁷⁰

In this chapter, I examine the creation of new sites of subjectivation in *What Is to Be Done?* I trace Vera Pavlovna’s utopian desire through various relational constellations leading to the collective intervention in subjectivity through the all-women’s sewing collective. The interplay between material conditions and the momentum of utopian desire drives the plot forward, generating new intimate and productive relationships which, in turn, enable the production of new processes of subjectivation.

¹⁶⁷ I am grateful to the participants in the workshop *Chernyshevsky, His Time and His Legacy* in Princeton in 2019 and the ATGender Spring Conference in Gijón in 2019 for their feedback on earlier drafts of this chapter.

¹⁶⁸ Emma Goldman, *Living My Life*, vol. 1 (New York: Dover Publications, 2015), 16.

¹⁶⁹ Goldman, 26.

¹⁷⁰ Goldman, 28.

While Vera Pavlovna's desire repeatedly comes into conflict with the demands of middle-class, heterosexual femininity and its institutionalization in monogamous marriage and unpaid reproductive labor, it generates new possibilities precisely in its excess of these normative forms. Utopian desire within the novel thus functions not only as a challenge to the calculations or "rational egoism" of figures from Vera Pavlovna's mother, Marya Aleksevna, to her first husband, the materialist Lopukhov, but also expands the reach of Chernyshevsky's realist aesthetics, as I argue in Chapter I. By both illustrating and educating utopian desire, *What Is to Be Done?* appeals to its readers to intervene in the social reproduction of subjectivity through the creation of their own sites of collective subjectivation.

After introducing the "education of desire" in the novel, I follow the movement of Vera Pavlovna's queer, utopian desire from her fictitious marriage and love triangle through to her founding of the sewing collective, highlighting the ways in which the utopian novel accounts for a certain autonomy of desire and the consequent transformations in gendered subjectivity. I then consider the establishment and expansion of the all-women's sewing collective as the primary "centre for subjectivation."¹⁷¹ In his model of the sewing workshop, Chernyshevsky adapts the utopian socialist visions of Louis Blanc and Charles Fourier by socializing women's reproductive labor as the foundation for higher forms of production and subjectivity, revealed to Vera Pavlovna in her fourth dream. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how Vera Pavlovna's four dreams situate the changes in everyday gendered subjectivity with a revolutionary framework that promises to enact them on a social scale.

¹⁷¹ Félix Guattari, *Chaosmose* (Paris: Galilée, 1992), 19; Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, trans. Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 6.

Educating Desire

In *What Is to Be Done?*, utopian desire manifests in the refusal of heteronormative institutions and gender normativity as well as the insistence on opening a path for an elevated sensuality and a plurality of desires. In this sense, utopian desire in Chernyshevsky's novel can be characterized as queer: both as "that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing" and as the dream of "enact[ing] new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds."¹⁷² In his now canonical characterization of queer theory, Michael Warner points out that, as "a term defined against 'normal' and generated precisely in the context of terror," queerness is fundamentally utopian in its insistence on radical alternatives out of necessity.¹⁷³ The emergence of utopianism out of oppressive or abusive environments is illustrated both in Vera Pavlovna's flight from her parents' home and in the many stories of the other women escaping normative gender roles and family structures. Reading utopian desire in Chernyshevsky's novel as defiant, queer, and always in movement underscores its incongruity with the confines of marriage, monogamy, the gendered division of labor, and binary gender norms in nineteenth-century Russia.¹⁷⁴

What Is to Be Done? progresses in stages marked by Vera Pavlovna's pursuit of her often disruptive desires. The story begins with Vera Pavlovna escaping her parents' home through her fictitious marriage with her brother's tutor, Lopukhov. Through her marriage with Lopukhov, Vera Pavlovna acquires the means to establish a sewing collective that provides women with the financial independence and social support—as well as history lectures and opera subscriptions—to "educate"

¹⁷² José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (NYU Press, 2009), 1.

¹⁷³ Michael Warner, "Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet," *Social Text*, no. 29 (1991): 16.

¹⁷⁴ Jordy Rosenberg and Amy Villarejo identify utopianism as the meeting point of Marxism and queer theory and the queer political response to a capitalism always in crisis. Building on José Esteban Muñoz's work and other queer of color critique, they argue that utopianism captures the "defiant aspects of queerness," which reject capitalist and heteronormative futurity to think contradictions together, in opposition to universalisms that, in Judith Butler's words, strive to "domesticate difference." Jordy Rosenberg and Amy Villarejo, "Introduction: Queerness, Norms, Utopia," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18, no. 1 (December 16, 2011): 5; Judith Butler, "Merely Cultural," *Social Text*, no. 52/53 (1997): 277.

their desire, as Miguel Abensour has labeled the self-reflective development of desires brought on by revolutionary utopian thought.¹⁷⁵ Yet the independence gained by these alternative forms of marriage and employment causes further developments in Vera Pavlovna's needs. Initially, Vera Pavlovna's jealousy of Lopukhov's best friend, Alexander Kirsanov, threatens to undermine the polygamous practices of the radical generation of the 1860s. This "bourgeois" emotion—marked as a remnant of the old order—highlights the difficulty in prescribing paths for desire.¹⁷⁶ At the same time, Vera Pavlovna's jealousy eroticizes the men's relationship, itself introducing the possibility of polyamory.

Each improvement in Vera Pavlovna's material and social circumstances activates the further reach of her desires. The temporary stability of her first marriage is interrupted by her involuntary love for Kirsanov, which she proves unable to suppress. After Vera Pavlovna rejects Lopukhov's offer of a polyamorous relationship with Kirsanov, the former stages his own death in order to enable Vera Pavlovna to enter a new marriage with the latter. Although Vera Pavlovna is intellectually and emotionally fulfilled in the fluid gender roles of her second marriage—Kirsanov is "more on the side of the ladies, even entirely so"—she soon becomes restless in her work.¹⁷⁷ She thus decides to study medicine, a professional opportunity for women that had just begun to emerge in the early 1860s before women were prohibited attending universities in 1863.¹⁷⁸ Meanwhile, Lopukhov returns under the alias of Charles Beaumont and marries Katerina Vasilievna, who is, incidentally, Kirsanov's former patient. Katerina Vasilievna develops a close friendship with Vera Pavlovna, and the four friends move into adjoining apartments.

¹⁷⁵ Miguel Abensour, "William Morris: The Politics of Romance," in *Revolutionary Romanticism: A Drunken Boat Anthology*, ed. Max Blechman (San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 2001), 145.

¹⁷⁶ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 226; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 305.

¹⁷⁷ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 123; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 180.

¹⁷⁸ Anne Eakin Moss, *Only Among Women: Philosophies of Community in the Russian and Soviet Imagination, 1860–1940* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2019), 29–30.

This development toward the final collective living arrangement is often read as a seamless progression. However, the desires that set it in motion prove to be more complicated. By illustrating their overflow of even radical forms of social organization such as fictitious marriage, Chernyshevsky accounts for that which escapes the calculations of rational egoism or a deterministic materialism. Desire as configured in Chernyshevsky's novel is thus not a state of contentment or equilibrium, but a disruptive force that undermines organizational forms and propels the narrative toward the utopia of the crystal palace, bringing the readers along with it. The four dreams that interrupt the narrative remind the reader of the necessary link between the queer utopian desires in the everyday lives of the new people and the revolutionary action that will allow these new processes of subjectivation to be generalized on a societal scale. By following the "education" of Vera Pavlova's desire, the readers are encouraged to reflect on and cultivate their own desires beyond these prescribed forms.

As Miguel Abensour has observed in his analysis of William Morris's revolutionary utopianism, the education of desire acquires an "organizing function" in the utopian novel, operating both within the plot and in interaction with the reader.¹⁷⁹ Yet, this does not mean that desire is predictable or contained: "the point is not for utopia [...] to assign 'true' or 'just' goals to desire but rather to educate desire, to stimulate it, to awaken it—not to assign it a goal but to open a path for it."¹⁸⁰ In this way, E.P. Thomson maintains, the revolutionary utopian novel seeks to "liberate[] desire to an uninterrupted interrogation of our values and also to its own self-interrogation."¹⁸¹ This concept is notably distinct from the didactic function attributed to *What Is to Be Done?* as a "guide to life": the

¹⁷⁹ Abensour derives his notion of the "education of desire" from readings of William Morris's utopian novels, *A Dream of John Ball* (1888) and *News from Nowhere* (1890). Morris's work has served as the impetus for a revival of utopianism within the Marxist critical tradition. Following Abensour, scholars including E.P. Thompson, Miguel Abensour, Fredric Jameson, and Matthew Beaumont have argued for the place of utopian thought within Marxist theory, centering its function as the "education of desire." None of these scholars, however, have identified the education of desire in *What Is to Be Done?*, which preceded Morris's utopian novels by several decades.

¹⁸⁰ Abensour, "William Morris: The Politics of Romance," 145.

¹⁸¹ Edward Thompson, "Romanticism, Utopianism and Moralism: The Case of William Morris," *New Left Review* 1, no. 99 (October 1976): 97.

reader is not asked to adopt a mimetic relationship to the text, but instead to strive for critical self-knowledge and the subsequent elevation of sensuality through new forms of sociality.¹⁸²

In *What Is to Be Done?* Vera Pavlovna's desires are first activated by her interactions with Julie Letellier, who teaches her to love and articulate her needs, and Lopukhov, who helps her attain the social and material means to develop her desires. Together, they "open a path" for Vera Pavlovna's desires—and, in turn, for the reader's—which then serve as the organizing principle of the forward movement toward utopia. An essential condition for the education of Vera Pavlovna's desire is her avid reading. Chernyshevsky's emphasis on the education of desire through the act of reading underscores the ways in which knowledge is productive in a material sense. At the same time, it is a nudge to the readers that they too can educate their desire through self-reflective reading practices—in fact, that is precisely what they are doing by reading *What Is to Be Done?*

Yet reading alone does not suffice. Vera Pavlovna expresses her frustration with the limitations of Sand, Dickens, and Russian authors, who all lack the conviction to enact their desires, that is, to leave the realm of fantasy and engage in what Ernst Bloch deemed "concrete" utopianism:

Ведь вот Жорж Занд — такая добрая, благонравная, — а у ней все это только мечты! Или наши — нет, у наших уж вовсе ничего этого нет. Или у Диккенса — у него это есть, только он как будто этого не надеется; только желает, потому что добрый, а сам знает, что этому нельзя быть. Как же они не знают, что без этого нельзя, что это в самом деле надобно так сделать и что это непременно сделается, чтобы вовсе никто не был ни беден, ни несчастен.¹⁸³

Take George Sand, for instance—she's so kind and upstanding, but in her books it's all about dreams! What about our own writers? No, they have nothing of this sort at all. Or take Dickens. He has it, but he doesn't seem to be hoping for it; he merely desires it because he is kind, but he knows that it can never be. How can they not know that it is impossible to do without, that this really must be accomplished, that it certainly will be—so that no one will ever be poor or unhappy again?¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² Irina Paperno, *Chernyshevsky and the Age of Realism: A Study in the Semiotics of Behavior* (Stanford University Press, 1988), 11.

¹⁸³ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 59-60.

¹⁸⁴ Translation altered. Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 103.

The reader accustomed to the revolutionary Aesopian language is quick to substitute the placeholder “it” with the desired “revolution.” In this internal monologue, Vera Pavlovna conveys two central aspects of utopian desire in Chernyshevsky’s novel. First, utopian desire is revolutionary desire. Second, it is distinguished by the conviction that change must and will occur. José Esteban Muñoz has emphasized that this form of queer utopian desire arises from the necessity of imagining alternatives to oppressive realities based on racialized, gender, and class positionality.¹⁸⁵ In the radical literature of the 1860s, these visionary monologues are thus frequently delivered by woman protagonists, characterized by their “determination to make dreams a reality.”¹⁸⁶ Utopian desire is tied to revolutionary action, yet it is not the affected martyrdom of Rakhmetov, who survives on a diet of beef and sleeps on a bed of nails.¹⁸⁷ Instead, everyday life is presented as the stage for the revolutionary transformation of social relations that must accompany the political revolution. It is Vera Pavlovna’s firm belief that these changes are not only attainable, but also necessary, that distinguishes her utopian dreams from the mere fantasies of the authors she admires. In this sense, the recurring motif of the dream in utopian literature is distinguished by “the power to become reality if enough other people read, agree with, and act on the principles and practices the utopia presents.”¹⁸⁸

Vera Pavlovna’s desire catalyzes her own resubjection and, ultimately, the creation of new social processes of gendered subjectivation. Hence, it cannot thrive in the isolation of her parents’ home. She can only enact and further develop her desires once she gains the material foundation through her fictitious marriage to Lopukhov, and the independence through dependence that it enables. These material improvements are the condition for Vera Pavlovna to bridge the changes in her own gendered subjectivity and the revolutionary potential contained in her books. As Marya

¹⁸⁵ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 94.

¹⁸⁶ Victoria Frede, “Radicals and Feelings - The 1860s,” in *Interpreting Emotions in Russia and Eastern Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 72.

¹⁸⁷ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat’*, 212; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 288.

¹⁸⁸ Barbara Goodwin, *The Philosophy of Utopia* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2001), 15.

Alekseyna drunkenly remarks at her daughter's bedside: "[y]our books say that we're not supposed to live like this. Don't you think I know that Verochka? But in those books of yours it says that in order not to live like this, everything has to be organized differently; now, no one can live any other way. So why don't they go ahead and set up a new order?"¹⁸⁹ Marya Alekseyna's distracted reflections on the disconnect between dreams and their realization is a direct provocation: not only for Vera Pavlovna, but also for the readers, who, as the narrator regularly reminds them, are tasked with establishing the new order.

Desire Beyond Calculations

Lopukhov's rational assessment leads him to propose a solution that finally allows Vera Pavlovna to escape from her oppressive family situation: fictitious marriage. This allows her to gain the benefits of marriage, namely, the independence that comes with moving out of her parent's home, without entering into a new relation of dependence with her husband. The lack of social and sexual obligations in fictitious marriage stood in stark contrast to the 1836 legal code that dictated that a married woman "obey her husband, reside with him in love, respect, and unlimited obedience, and offer him every pleasantness and affection as the ruler of the household."¹⁹⁰ Fictitious marriage was already practiced by the young generation of Russian radicals when Chernyshevsky wrote *What Is to Be Done?* Indeed, the story of Vera Pavlovna and Lopukhov was a fictionalization of a fictitious marriage between Mariya Obrucheva, the sister of a well-known radical and Pyotr Bokov, a medical student who, following Chernyshevsky's advice, agreed to tutor Obrucheva and eventually proposed a fictitious marriage to allow her to leave her parent's home and pursue a medical career.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁹ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 22; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 59.

¹⁹⁰ Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860-1930*, 1991, 6–7.

¹⁹¹ Stites, 91.

Chernyshevsky's portrayal of Lopukhov liberating Vera Pavlovna through a fictitious marriage can and has been interpreted as paternalistic.¹⁹² This relationship is cited in order to illustrate that although the novel contains a woman protagonist, she only progresses through the stages of revolutionary consciousness with the aid of men. Consequently, the feminist message contained in *What Is to Be Done?* is said to be at best infantilizing and at worst, merely an instrument in establishing the intellectual and moral superiority of men. However, as Anne Eakin Moss has argued, it is women who are largely associated with activity and men with inactivity: "[w]omen, we find from the very start of the novel, look out for other women and take action based on altruistic instincts, while men engage in sterile study and debate."¹⁹³ Indeed, the story does not end with Vera Pavlovna and Lopukhov's fictitious marriage, as Vera Pavlovna soon goes on to build more extensive relational networks.

Initially, Vera Pavlovna adopts the logic of the old order, arguing that "[y]our books say that the person who has money has both power and rights. That means that as long as a woman is living at a man's expense, she is in a state of dependence."¹⁹⁴ Vera Pavlovna and Lopukhov's fictitious marriage, down to the organization of their shared apartment, is based on this understanding of independence defined in negative terms as the lack of dependency on others. However, Vera Pavlovna soon seeks relationships that offer more than an individualistic model of freedom. As Lopukhov admits, "[b]efore, one kind of love was enough; now you need another. Yes, you've become a woman now, my friend. You need something now that you never needed before."¹⁹⁵ In contrast to the logic

¹⁹²The most influential of these readings is Nikolai Shelgunov's commentary on *What Is to Be Done?* in his 1868 essay, "Russkie idealy, geroi i tipy," in which he argues that the relationship between Vera Pavlova and her husbands, Lopukhov and Kirsanov, is that of a student to her teachers. N.V. Shelgunov, "Russkie idealy, geroi i tipy," *Russkaya kritika epokhi Chernyshevskogo i Dobrolyubova* (Moscow: Detskaya literature, 1989). Citing this essay, Valeria Sobol states that in this interpretation, Vera Pavlovna is "repeatedly saved by male characters." *Febris Erotica: Lovesickness in the Russian Literary Imagination* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 141. Drozd critiques Shelgunov's portrayal, observing that he is "disturbed by Vera Pavlovna's love of comfort, which is hardly characteristic of an emancipated woman devoted to the cause." Andrew Michael Drozd, *Chernyshevskii's What Is to Be Done?: A Reevaluation* (Northwestern University Press, 2001), 17.

¹⁹³ Moss, *Only Among Women*, 8.

¹⁹⁴ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 93; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 144.

¹⁹⁵ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 177; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 244.

of the old order, the new order that Vera Pavlovna goes on to construct is based on forms of interdependency and collectively that enable a higher degree of independence for all genders. In order to build the relationships that will generate these new forms of subjectivity, both in her own life and on a larger scale, Vera Pavlovna moves beyond the binary logic of dependence and independence as well as femininity and masculinity that defines even her fictitious marriage with Lopukhov.

Vera Pavlovna's problematization of binary gender in dialogue with Lopukhov links her desire for alternative forms of living and working to the gendered subjectivity that these non-normative desires reconstitute. Presented as naïve questioning, Vera Pavlovna's disregard for gender norms comes into conflict with Lopukhov's calculating view. He perceives her rational behavior as an expression of masculinity, informing her "[t]here's so little femininity in your nature, Vera Pavlovna, that you'll probably express utterly masculine thoughts."¹⁹⁶ She continues to press him to explain his reasoning:

Ах, мой милый, скажи: что это значит эта «женственность»? Я понимаю, что женщина говорит контральтом, мужчина — баритоном, так что ж из этого? Стоит ли толковать из-за того, чтоб мы говорили контральтом? Стоит ли упрашивать нас об этом? зачем же все так толкуют нам, чтобы мы оставались женственны? Ведь это глупость, мой милый?¹⁹⁷

Ah, my dear, tell me, what does this "femininity" mean? I realize that a woman's voice is contralto, and a man's is baritone. What follows from that? Is it really worth persuading us to speak with a contralto voice? Is it really worth entreating us? Why does everyone explain that we should remain feminine? Isn't that nonsense, my dear?¹⁹⁸

Lopukhov immediately yields, agreeing that this enforcement of femininity is mere vulgarity [*poshlost'*].

Vera Pavlovna's contextualization of Lopukhov's offhand comment highlights the assumptions

¹⁹⁶ Translation altered. Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 94; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 145.

¹⁹⁷ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 94.

¹⁹⁸ Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 145.

behind his offhand comment about her insufficiently feminine “nature” and masculine behavior.¹⁹⁹

Vera Pavlovna rejects the disciplinary function she identifies in this regulation of femininity and masculinity. This brief episode illustrates the degree to which the reproduction of gendered subjectivity is not only a process of subject formation, but also a subjugation to restrictive norms. Operating within this limited imaginary, Vera Pavlovna is compelled to restrict herself to what Lopukhov deems “masculine” behavior in order to escape the marginalization of the feminine position. “Well, my dear, I for one shall not worry about my femininity” she maintains. “I’ll express utterly masculine ideas about how we are to arrange our life.”²⁰⁰

It is not only until Vera Pavlovna has established her material independence through her sewing cooperative that she is able to enter into an intimate relationship based on interdependence and adopt a more playful approach to “femininity” and “masculinity.” This shift is exemplified by her attitude toward hand-kissing, the standard chivalrous gesture that men used to greet women at the time. In her marriage with Lopukhov, Vera Pavlovna repeatedly insists that he refrain from kissing her hand, observing that “it means that a man can’t lower his dignity before a woman, that she’s so much lower that however much he degrades himself before her, he’s still not her equal.”²⁰¹ Vera Pavlovna and Lopukhov do not have a sexual relationship and are even mistaken for sister and brother. Once Vera Pavlovna has established her material security through the establishment of her sewing cooperative, she not only seeks out a relationship that includes eroticism, but also does not force her to choose between masculine or feminine behavior. Her second husband, Kirsanov, may

¹⁹⁹ Vera Pavlovna’s attitude echoes Chernyshevsky’s own opinion about sexual difference, which he insists is primarily a result of social and familial norms: “We say only that this natural intellectual difference between the sexes is insignificant in comparison with the influence that upbringing, social traditions and demands, and the difference in familial and social situation render on the development of the features of the female mind and character.” Cited in Drozd, *Chernyshevskii*, 80-81.

²⁰⁰ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat’*, 94; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 145.

²⁰¹ When Lopukhov tries to kiss Vera Pavlovna’s hand after she tells her about her plans to form a sewing collective she tells him “later, my dear, after I’ve succeeded.” When Lopukhov continues to insist she retorts “by force? I’ll scream!” Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat’*, 117; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 173.

kiss her hands and even act as her maid [*gornichnaia*] every morning without it signaling condescension.²⁰²

Vera Pavlovna's desires eventually exceed the constraints of binary gender as well as even fictitious monogamous marriage. When she falls in love with Lopukhov's best friend, Kirsanov, and introduces an erotic triangulation between Lopukhov, Kirsanov, and herself, she suddenly finds herself in the position of determining the emotional and, ultimately, existential fate of all three involved. The standard interpretation of the love triangle between Vera Pavlovna, Lopukhov, and is that it is a radical alternative to traditional marriage, but Vera Pavlovna "is not ready for the reconfiguration of the adulterous paradigm into a new form of erotic relations in which triangulation would serve as the catalyst of revolutionary change."²⁰³ Although Vera Pavlovna rejects Lopukhov's proposal to enter into a "triple union" with him and Kirsanov, the function of her character is not to interrupt the two men's otherwise perfected revolutionary program, but to confront the materialist philosophy that they espouse with the limitations of desire under the given social conditions. In this way, her character illustrates that desire cannot be subordinated to a calculated political program, but, as we also see in the case of the sewing cooperative, must be constantly reassessed and accounted for.

The first obstacle that Vera Pavlovna presents to the "new form of erotic relations" promised by the triple union is her jealousy of Kirsanov. Her jealousy threatens to remove Kirsanov from the picture, at the same time as it introduces the erotic element of Lopukhov and Kirsanov's relationship into the narrative. Prior to Vera Pavlovna's decision to "express utterly masculine ideas," she is firmly situated in the feminized role of the eager student to whom the older, educated Lopukhov imparts his knowledge.²⁰⁴ Marking her transition out of this role, Vera Pavlovna continues to state: "[w]e will be

²⁰² Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 267; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 351.

²⁰³ Olga Matich, *Erotic Utopia: The Decadent Imagination in Russia's Fin-de-Siècle* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 252.

²⁰⁴ Translation altered. Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 94; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 144.

friends. But I want to be your best friend. I have yet to say how I despise your dear Kirsanov!”²⁰⁵ Entering into an equal relationship with Lopukhov consists not only in disregarding the conventions of femininity, but also in displacing Kirsanov in order to occupy the masculine space of Lopukhov’s “best friend.” The language that Vera Pavlovna employs emphasizes the universality of the model of male friendship as an egalitarian form: as Valeria Sobol points out, when Vera Pavlovna insists on occupying the position of Lopukhov’s “best friend” [*pervym tvoim drugom*], “the masculine grammatical gender of the Russian noun ‘friend’ (*drug*) facilitates her transition into the homosocial world of the two friends.”²⁰⁶ Indeed, the narrator later affirms this view of friendship as the model for romantic relationships. Spelling out this “secret” for the bigoted perspicacious reader, the narrator explains “[a]cknowledge her freedom just as openly and formally, with no reservations, as you recognize your friends’ rights to value or spurn your friendship. Then, ten years or even twenty after your marriage, you’ll be just as dear to her as you were when you were a bridegroom.”²⁰⁷

In the beginning of their marriage, Vera Pavlovna forbids Lopukhov from seeing Kirsanov, voicing her suspicion about the nature of their relationship: “undoubtedly you’re always in each other’s arms” she accuses Lopukhov, “you sit together, embrace and quarrel, quarrel and embrace.”²⁰⁸ Rather than the homophobic conflation of any expression of intimacy between men with repressed homosexuality—as Vasilii Rosanov suggests in his paranoid reading of the love triangle—it is Vera Pavlovna’s jealousy that first eroticizes Lopukhov and Kirsanov’s relationship for the reader, therefore introducing the possibility that the three might enter into a polyamorous relationship.²⁰⁹ Instead of merely rejecting Kirsanov because of his supposed intimacy with Lopukhov, Vera Pavlovna is

²⁰⁵ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat’*, 94; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 144.

²⁰⁶ Sobol, *Febris Erotica*, 141.

²⁰⁷ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat’*, 272; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 354.

²⁰⁸ Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 145.

²⁰⁹ Olga Matich suggests that Rozanov’s interpretation of the eroticism between Lopukhov and Kirsanov in the love triangle may be a modernist reading influenced by Zinaida Gippius and Dmitrii Merezhovsky’s multiple love triangles. Matich, *Erotic Utopia*, 252.

interested in mimicking Kirsanov and recreating the homosocial relationship he has with Lopukhov, a homosociality which, according to Eve Sedgwick, always exists on a continuum with homosexuality.²¹⁰ Vera Pavlovna's queering of Lopukhov and Kirsanov's friendship releases erotic desire from its confinement in monogamous heterosexual relationships, at the same time as it further destabilizes her own gendered position.

Learning to love Lopukhov "the same way" that Kirsanov does thus means preserving the erotic potential of their relationship alongside the emotional and material independence that it entails. However, acknowledging the intimacy between Lopukhov and Kirsanov triggers Vera Pavlovna's jealousy and demands Kirsanov's displacement because neither the structure of Vera Pavlovna's desire nor the social conditions are, at this point, conducive to an equal relationship between the three parties. More than the mere product of economic conditions, Vera Pavlovna's jealousy forecloses the possibility of an erotic triangulation "as the catalyst of revolutionary change" until all parties are equal.²¹¹ This transformation eventually occurs in stages. After Vera Pavlovna establishes her sewing cooperative her hatred for Kirsanov turns into love. In this relationship, Vera Pavlovna and Kirsanov are able to move between gender roles more freely, resulting in a more expansive experience of sensuality. As the final goddess tells Vera Pavlovna in her fourth dream: "[p]reviously sensual pleasure wasn't known fully because without the free attraction of two lowers, neither could experience radiant rapture."²¹² By the end of the novel, the reader has been transported from an apartment with carefully established rules to ensure each person's privacy to a crystal palace whose rosy-cheeked inhabitants can withdraw to rooms equipped with "thick carpets [that] absorb every sound."²¹³ The leap between

²¹⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 1.

²¹¹ Matich, 252.

²¹² Matich, 368.

²¹³ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 290; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 378.

the strictly regulated and still monogamous lifestyles at the novel's outset and the eventual free play of desire is achieved by producing new modes of gendered subjectivity.

Resubjection in the Sewing Collective

It is Vera Pavlovna's sewing cooperative that provides the opportunity for the new people to collectively reshape their subjectivity. Three years into her second marriage, Vera Pavlovna confides in Kirsanov: "Sasha, what a great support your love is to me. Through it I'm becoming independent and casting off all reliance, even on you, yes, even on you."²¹⁴ In contrast with her first marriage, in which her desire to avoid dependency ultimately constrained her behavior, the independence enabled by her second marriage allows Vera Pavlovna to become one of the first women to study medicine and, together with Kirsanov, expand their home to include Lopukhov and his new wife, Vera Pavlovna's best friend, Katerina Vasilievna. At the same time that Vera Pavlovna becomes less dependent on Kirsanov, the plot itself becomes less dependent on Vera Pavlovna: she increasingly appears in relational constellations and the story follows minor characters such as Rakhmetov, Nastasia Kriukova, and Katerina Vasilevna.²¹⁵ The dialectical logic that later enables Vera Pavlovna to gain independence through dependence in her relationship with Kirsanov is reflected in the structure of the all-women's sewing collective that she establishes after her marriage to Lopukhov. The cooperative is organized to grant its members the autonomy they were denied according to traditional labor and gender norms by replacing them with relationships based on equality and reciprocity. For this reason, Vera Pavlovna avoids assuming a position of authority and denies the members' requests to pay her a higher wage. She actively decenters herself in the organization of the cooperative, and we learn that her "dearest dream" [*liubimaia mechtai*] is that it continue to function

²¹⁴ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 272; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 355.

²¹⁵ Indeed, the last chapter is entitled "New Faces and Denouement" ("*Novye litsa i razv'iazka*").

without her.²¹⁶ The education of Vera Pavlovna's own desire and corresponding transformation of her gendered subjectivity is recreated on a larger scale: the sewing collective intervenes in the social reproduction of subjectivity, providing its members with the employment, security, and education to become new people themselves.

Immediately following Vera Pavlovna's second dream, we learn that "Vera Pavlovna's workshop was quickly established."²¹⁷ Her decision to found the sewing collective disrupts the association of masculinity with activity and femininity with passivity: "[w]e all talk a lot but do nothing," Lopukhov explains. "You began thinking about all this after we did, but you resolved to get down to work sooner."²¹⁸ If Rakhmetov represents the highest form of masculine individuality, then the sewing collective illustrates the independence generated by socializing feminized forms of interdependence. The equality of its members ensures their autonomy through a dependence that manifests positively as collectivity, rather than negatively as vulnerability. It serves as the primary site of collective resubjectivation within the novel, transforming the marginalized position of women and status of feminized labor into the basis for a socialist subjectivity characterized by the reconciliation of individual and social needs.

The character of women's formerly unpaid reproductive labor is altered through the organization of the workshop in which profits are equally distributed and decisions are made collectively, while the women are able to build on their previous skills developed out of necessity. Like Vera Pavlovna, the other women who join the collective became talented seamstresses in their parents'

²¹⁶ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 139.

²¹⁷ In Vera Pavlovna's second dream, she witnesses a dialogue between Lopukhov and his friend, Aleksei Petrovich, in which they explain that no healthy individuals can emerge from an unhealthy society using an analogy adapted from Liebig's theories of the fertility of different types of soil. Aleksei Petrovich explains that "labor constitutes the fundamental form of movement which provides the basis and content of all other forms." He then calls for the newly discovered method of "drainage" to restore the soil, a recognizable call to revolutionary action. Translation altered. Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 130; 124 Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 188; 183. Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 183.

²¹⁸ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 117; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 173.

households without any formal training. The new relationship between labor and collectivity changes not only the labor processes, but also the workers' subjective constitution. As Guattari argues, "[t]hese complexes actually offer people diverse possibilities for recomposing their existential corporeality, to get out of their repetitive impasses and, in a certain way, to resingularise themselves."²¹⁹ The collective allows women to escape the abuse they were subjected to as governesses, housewives, or sex workers, including the associated risks of illness and alcoholism. The new organization of labor also transforms their physical and mental health, as we will see in the case of the former sex worker Nastasia Kriukova. Crucially, the autonomy enabled by this "new order" differs not only from Rakhmetov's, but also from that of Marya Aleksevna or Julie Letellier in that it is not characterized by a disavowal of relations of dependency and corresponding instrumentalization of men.

The sewing cooperative provides a form of collective interdependence that enables its members to determine their own working conditions, freely engage in sexual and romantic relationships, and pursue an education. Their desires are not fulfilled, but rather amplified in this process. Alluding to the increased purchasing power of the sewing cooperative to procure better food, accommodations, and allow for more leisure time, Vera Pavlovna reflects on this expansive character of desire:

«Будто мой аппетит ослабевает, будто мой вкус тупеет оттого, что я не голодаю, а каждый день обедаю без помехи и хорошо. Напротив, мой вкус развивается оттого, что мой стол хорош. А аппетит я потеряю только вместе с жизнью, без него нельзя жить» (это уж грубый материализм, замечают я вместе с проницательным читателем).²²⁰

²¹⁹ Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, 7; Guattari, *Chaosmose*, 19.

²²⁰ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 272.

“As if my appetite were weakened or my taste dulled because I don’t starve myself, but instead have no trouble eating very well every day. On the contrary, my taste develops because my table has so much to offer. I’d lose my appetite only with life itself; one can’t live without it.” (This is clearly crude materialism, I observe together with the perspicacious reader.)²²¹

With the perspicacious reader as a pretense, the narrator does not hesitate to remind us of the political stakes of this educated and educatable desire, which—in contrast to Dostoevsky’s critique of utopian desire—is not a constant or defined through suffering and renunciation, but changes along with material conditions. Utopia does not bring boredom, because “[o]nly idle fantasy knows satiety.”²²² In contrast to the idle fantasy of abstract utopianism, concrete utopian desire only ascends to new levels with its education. Chernyshevsky’s theory of desire in *What Is to Be Done?* is an explicit revision of his earlier understanding as articulated in *The Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality*, written a decade earlier. He employs the same metaphor in this text, but in order to draw the opposite conclusion: “[d]reaming whips up desire to fever heat only when wholesome, even though fairly simple, food is lacking.” Chernyshevsky elaborates by expanding the metaphor to include housing in addition to basic nourishment:

Воображение строит свои воздушные замки тогда, когда нет на деле не только хорошего дома, даже сносной избышки. Оно разыгрывается тогда, когда не заняты чувства; бедность действительной жизни – источник жизни в фантазии. Но едва делается действительность сколько-нибудь сносною, скучны и бледны кажутся нам пред нею все мечты воображения.²²³

The imagination builds castles in the air when reality lacks not only a good house, but even a tolerable hut. It plays out when the feelings are not engaged; the poverty of real life is the source of life in fantasy. But as soon as reality becomes at all tolerable, all the dreams of the imagination appear to us as dull and pale.²²⁴

²²¹ Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 355.

²²² Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 252; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 355.

²²³ N. G. Chernyshevskii, “Esteticheskie otnosheniia iskusstva k deistvitel'nosti,” in N. G. Chernyshevskii. *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii. Stat'i 1858—1859*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1949), 36.

²²⁴ Translation altered. Nikolai Chernyshevsky, *Selected Philosophical Essays* (University Press of the Pacific, 2002), 318.

The form of the utopian novel compels Chernyshevsky to grapple with the “limitlessness” and unpredictability of desire that he had adamantly rejected in his earlier refutation of idealism. It allows him to develop a materialist aesthetic theory that expands on his main tenet that “beauty is life” to account for the utopian desire in the everyday.²²⁵ The tradition of utopian literature unleashes the potential of the dream for Chernyshevsky, so that it is no longer is a sign of insufficiency, but rather a revolutionary demand.

In his description of the sewing cooperative, Chernyshevsky adopts not only the form and content, but also the style of the utopian socialists, in particular, Charles Fourier’s minute attention to detail. He documents each stage in the cooperative’s development, even including the financial calculations of the collective purchase of silk umbrellas. It is perhaps this often monotonous account of everyday logistical concerns that distracted the censor from its political character, despite the obvious references to utopian socialist texts. At the same time, the instructional nature of Chernyshevsky’s portrayal illustrates the transition to utopia in simple language based on incremental changes, so that the total transformation of labor and subjectivity achieved in the cooperative occurs almost unnoticed. “In very simple terms she began to explain extremely comprehensive things,” the narrator stresses, “but things the seamstresses had never before heard from her or from anyone else.” Chernyshevsky emphasizes the ordinariness not only of Vera Pavlovna and the other workers, but also of the workshop itself. “[W]hat’s so unusual about that?” the narrator asks. “There’s nothing to ponder, nothing to distrust” he repeats in a paranoid tone, as if to remind the reader to do just this.²²⁶

The realist descriptions of the sewing collective’s finances, its step-by-step expansion, and the accounts of its benefits and conflicts present the transition to utopia as an everyday task with a revolutionary outcome. In the description of the sewing collective, Chernyshevsky frames utopia as a

²²⁵ Chernyshevskii, “Esteticheskie otnosheniia iskusstva k deistvitel’nosti,” 13.

²²⁶ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat’*, 130; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 189.

mere extension of reality, achievable for common people such as Vera Pavlovna and the readers themselves. The workshop brings together the rational calculations of egoism following the anthropological premise outlined in Vera Pavlovna's preceding dream—"labor constitutes the fundamental form of movement which provides the basis and content of all other forms: recreation, relaxation, amusement, enjoyment"—and the democratic processes necessary to respond to the emerge of new desires.²²⁷ After successfully operating for a month, Vera Pavlovna explains the novel organization of the workshop to her fellow seamstresses: "[c]lever people have said that things turn out well only if people themselves desire it. That's what I think, too. So you've no need to fear anything new; everything will continue to be done in the same way unless you wish to change it. Nothing will be changed without you wishing it."²²⁸ Vera Pavlovna follows the utopian socialists or "clever people" in making the members' desires the driving force behind the workshop, while ensuring that it remains self-governed through collective decision-making processes. This is not based on an abstract form of equality, but on careful calculations: while wages differ based on skill-level and working time, the profits are shared equally, for they are a product of the "character of the workshop" for which each member is equally important. As the narrator explains, "[t]he tacit consent of the most timid or the least talented was no less essential in the maintenance and development of the order for the general good and success of the whole than the active zeal of the liveliest or most talented."²²⁹

The censorship conditions made it necessary for Chernyshevsky to use the Aesopian language of "clever people" and avoid directly presenting the sewing collective as the implementation of a political project based on Louis Blanc's *atelier social* or Fourier's *phalanstère*. This account of the workshop as a concrete endeavor rather than an abstract ideal works to expand the realm of the real to include utopia: the sewing collective as a center of resubjection that ushers in the "new order"

²²⁷ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 124; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 182.

²²⁸ Translation altered. Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 132; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 191.

²²⁹ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 134; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 193.

is not an idle dream, but is instead presented as a completely ordinary and inconspicuous hobby such as gardening:

Добрые и умные люди написали много книг о том, как надобно жить на свете, чтобы всем было хорошо; и тут самое главное, — говорят они, — в том, чтобы мастерские завести по новому порядку. Вот мне и хочется посмотреть, сумеем ли мы с вами завести такой порядок, какой нужно. Это все равно, как иному хочется выстроить хороший дом, другому — развести хороший сад или оранжерею, чтобы на них любоваться: так вот мне хочется завести хорошую швейную мастерскую, чтобы весело было любоваться на нее.²³⁰

Good and clever people have written many books on the subject of how to live in the world so that everyone is happy; and the most important thing, they say, is to organize workshops according to the new order. So I want to see if we can establish this order together, as is necessary. It's the same as when someone wants to build a nice house, and another person wants to plant a nice garden or erect a greenhouse for pleasure. I want to organize a good sewing shop so that it will be pleasant to admire.²³¹

Vera Pavlovna's thinly veiled allusion to utopian socialist writings situates the project within the established of the new order, while stressing its harmlessness as a mere passion that she would like to pursue with the other seamstresses. There is no need to deliberately radicalize or politicize the other members of the collective; the success of the workshop itself will do this work. This assumption is based on Chernyshevsky's belief that "a truly rational individual would not be motivated by any reified notion of community, friendship, or the good, but only by the recognition that cooperative behavior would serve as the most efficient means to individual happiness and self-realization."²³² The recognition must occur in stages: just as Vera Pavlovna's desire to found the workshop could only emerge after she escaped from her parents' home and was able to educate herself, the collective will produce new needs in the other women, which in turn influence the workshop.

²³⁰ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 132.

²³¹ Translation altered. Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 190-91.

²³² Moss, *Only Among Women*, 22.

Chernyshevsky closely traces the new processes of subjectivation generated by this collective organization of labor, documenting the changes in habits and desires it produces. The resubjectivation of its members is particularly pronounced in the account of the workshop's expansion from a labor and living collective to an educational institution.

Вера Павловна с первых же дней стала приносить книги. Сделав свои распоряжения, она принималась читать вслух, читала полчаса, час, если раньше не перерывала ее надобность опять заняться распоряжениями. Потом девушки отдыхали от слушания; потом опять чтение, и опять отдых. Нечего и говорить, что девушки с первых же дней пристрастились к чтению, некоторые были охотницы до него и прежде. Через две-три недели чтение во время работы приняло регулярный вид. Через три-четыре месяца явилось несколько мастериц читать вслух; было положено, что они будут сменять Веру Павловну, читать по получасу, и что этот получас зачитывается им за работу. Когда с Веры Павловны была снята обязанность читать вслух, Вера Павловна, уже и прежде заменявшая иногда чтение рассказами, стала рассказывать чаще и больше; потом рассказы обратились во что-то похожее на легкие курсы разных знаний. Потом, — это было очень большим шагом, — Вера Павловна увидела возможность завести и правильное преподавание: девушки стали так любознательны, а работа их шла так успешно, что они решили делать среди рабочего дня, перед обедом, большой перерыв для слушания уроков.²³³

From the very first day Vera Pavlovna had begun to provide books. After giving the seamstresses instructions, she began to read aloud to them and would continue to do so for half an hour or even an hour, unless she was interrupted sooner by the need to provide further instructions. Then the girls would get a rest from listening; more reading was followed by another rest. Needless to say, from the very beginning the girls conceived a liking for reading; some had been avid readers even before. Within two or three weeks this reading during work hours had become a regular institution. After three or four months several excellent readers emerged from the group. It was decided that they would replace Vera Pavlovna and would read for half an hour each, and this time would be counted as part of their work. Once Vera Pavlovna had been relieved of her obligation to read aloud, she began to relate more tales of her own devising (some of which she'd already done as an alternative to reading). Gradually her tales began to resemble light lectures on various fields of knowledge. Then—and this was a very large step— Vera Pavlovna saw the possibility of establishing a regular course of instruction. The girls were so eager to learn and their work was going so well that they decided to take a long break in the middle of the day just before lunch to conduct their lessons.²³⁴

²³³ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 136-7.

²³⁴ Translation altered. Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 194-5.

What is often criticized as Chernyshevsky's rambling style—which Ivan Turgenev claimed aroused “physical aversion” in him—becomes here a means of registering the minor developments that make the ongoing transition to a utopian society plausible.²³⁵ In this passage, Chernyshevsky documents how reading aloud gradually transforms into formal instruction as an established part of the workday. Although Vera Pavlovna begins the process by reading aloud, the workers develop a passion for reading and several become skilled readers themselves. In a similar way, Vera Pavlovna's stories slowly morph into lectures. Eventually, the group collectively decides to reorganize the working day to include their courses. Vera Pavlovna and several of the other members take on the role of “professors” while inviting Lopukhov and his friend, Aleksei Petrovich to give lectures. The pages of description that Chernyshevsky dedicates to the establishment of the sewing cooperative in its final form are crucial in demonstrating that this kind of project does not come in a ready-made form, but must respond to the changing needs of its members.

Similarly to the educational component, the desire to make collective purchases and live together emerges as a logical consequence of the workshop, simply because it is more practical and efficient. We learn that some of the workers previously engaged in sex work; indeed, the collective living more closely resembles the co-habitation of sex workers than the bourgeois nuclear family. While many of the women are single, others bring their families with them: the elderly women and men receive wages for doing the housework and some of the children eventually join the workshop. As an alternative to the traditional family structure, the collective assumes many of its responsibilities. When a member marries, her dowry is paid from the workshop's reserve fund and one of the more senior women serves as a “proxy mother” during the wedding ceremony.²³⁶ The sewing cooperative does not demand a radical break from the past or the renunciation of the family or marriage; instead,

²³⁵ Turgenev I.S., “Turgenev I. S. - Shcherbaniiu N. V., 2(14) Iiunia 1863 g.,” Ivan Turgenev, 1890, <http://turgenev-lit.ru/turgenev/pisma-1862-1864/letter-207.htm>.

²³⁶ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 139; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 198.

it bestows these institutions with a new meaning based on the democratic and non-hierarchical organization of labor and intimacy. As Irina Paperno argues, for Chernyshevsky “the social principle of collectivity had a firm psychological foundation: social harmony was viewed as an extension of family harmony, which was itself the result of the practical realization of the belief that love—a mediated emotion—was essentially of a collective nature.”²³⁷

Chernyshevsky both adopts and transforms Blanc’s utopian socialist model of collective labor through his deliberate choice of an all-women’s sewing workshop. He stresses the benefits of the workshop in utilitarian terms, echoing Blanc’s assertion that “the social workshop would have an advantage over any other due to the efficiency of communal life and the mode of organization by which all of the workers, without exception, are interested in quick and quality production.”²³⁸ However, while Blanc stresses the importance of government support, Chernyshevsky situates his workshop in the hostile environment of Tsarist Russia. The state is largely absent from the novel—a necessity for its publication—however its presence is alluded to after Vera Pavlovna and her friend Natasha Mertsalova open a second sewing cooperative and, finally, a store on Nevsky Prospekt. The store bears the name “Au bon travail. Magasin de Nouveautés.” In the context of the cooperative organization of labor, it is a clear allusion to Blanc’s “social workshops” based on the socialist notion of the “right to work” [*droit au travail*] articulated in Blanc’s *Organization du travail* (1839). If the political stakes are not immediately evident to the reader, then they soon become clear when Kirsanov is visited by an acquaintance of a colleague and questioned about the name of Vera Pavlovna’s shop. “Was it really a good idea to include the work *travail*? Kirsanov said that *travail* means work, and that ‘Au bon travail’ meant a store that filled its orders well. They discussed whether it wouldn’t be better to replace that motto with some surname.”²³⁹ They eventually settle on renaming the shop “A la bonne foi”

²³⁷ Paperno, *Chernyshevsky*, 158.

²³⁸ M. Louis Blanc, *Organisation du travail* (Paris: Prévot, 1840), 112.

²³⁹ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat’*, 291; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 380.

based on the French translation of “Vera,” meaning “faith,” but the message is clear: “Natasha Mertsalova and Vera Pavlovna considerably clipped the wings of their own daydreams and concerned themselves more with preserving what they had already achieved than with forging ahead.”²⁴⁰

The intervention by Kirsanov’s “acquaintance” on behalf of the state recalls the outcome of the National Workshops (*ateliers nationaux*) in the June Days uprising, a topic that Chernyshevsky had previously addressed in *Sovremennik*. In an 1858 article, he documents Blanc’s unsuccessful attempt to implement his vision of small, state-run workers’ collectives as a member of the provisional government and “at the time, the strongest of the socialist leaders.”²⁴¹ Chernyshevsky recounts how the provisional government instead transformed the National Workshops into absurd parodies of Blanc’s model in the repetitive and useless labor of digging holes, nevertheless providing workers with a meager wage to prevent their total destitution.²⁴² When the decision was made to close the workshops, the brutal suppression of the resulting workers’ uprising led to thousands of casualties. Chernyshevsky notes “[t]he most short-sighted person could, evidently, understand that it is dangerous to suddenly take away the wages of a mass of 150,000 people, organized like an army, without providing these people with any other means of subsistence.”²⁴³ The sewing cooperative in *What Is to Be Done?* thus not only offers a corrective through its successful model of Blanc’s workshop: in the portrayal of state repression it evokes the promise of working class rebellion. As Chernyshevsky warns, “[t]he government’s mistakes led to the inevitable civil war.”²⁴⁴

²⁴⁰ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat’*, 291; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 380.

²⁴¹ N. G. Chernyshevskii, “Cavaignac,” in N. G. Chernyshevskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii. Stat’i 1858—1859*, vol. 5 (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1950), 21.

²⁴² Marx similarly emphasizes the symbolic value that the national workshops acquired despite the distortion of Louis Blanc’s socialist vision in their implementation: “In name, but not in content, the *National Workshops* were the embodied protest of the proletariat against bourgeois industry, bourgeois credit, and the bourgeois republic.” Karl Marx, “Die Klassenkämpfe in Frankreich 1848 bis 1850,” in *Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels Werke*, ed. Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED, vol. 7 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1960), 27.

²⁴³ Chernyshevskii, “Cavaignac,” 24.

²⁴⁴ Chernyshevskii, “Cavaignac,” 26.

By tracing the slight alterations in habits through the workshop's organization of labor and collective decision-making process, Chernyshevsky translates the utopian intervention into a plausible economic endeavor. As the goddess in Vera Pavlovna's fourth dream reveals, transforming both human and non-human nature in this way is not beyond the horizon of the possible. "All of this happened not in one year, not even in ten; I accomplished it gradually" the goddess reflects, looking back from the post-revolutionary future. Reminding Vera Pavlovna of her sewing cooperative, she explains: "[w]hy you yourself are doing something for me, in my own way! Is it really so hard?"²⁴⁵ The new processes of subjectivation generated by collective labor, living, and education in the sewing cooperative culminate in the enhanced sensuality displayed by the occupants of the crystal palace. Although the new subjectivity lies beyond the temporal boundaries of Vera Pavlovna's pre-revolutionary existence, her fourth dream provides her with a glimpse of the ways in which it preserves and elevates the positive aspects of the old forms of subjectivity: "here their constitution is still strong like that of our own workers, as well as developed and impressionable, like our own [...] It's easy to understand why their merriment, enjoyment, and passion are so much stronger, broader, sweeter, and livelier than ours."²⁴⁶ As the state intervention in the expansion of the sewing cooperative reminds the readers, these transformations cannot occur simply through local initiatives, but must be contextualized within the revolutionary overthrow of the existing regime.

Gendered Labor and Embodied Subjectivity

Vera Pavlovna's sewing cooperatives reflects the positive and negative aspects of subjectivation: the possibilities enabled by equal and free relations, as well as the subjugation necessarily involved in all processes of subjective reproduction. The story of one of the workers, Nastasia Borisovna Kriukova,

²⁴⁵ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 288; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 375.

²⁴⁶ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 289; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 378.

highlights the ambivalence of subjectivation in this transitional period. In this brief account of Nastasia Kriukuova's time as a sex worker then a domestic worker before joining the sewing workshop, Chernyshevsky foregrounds the reproduction of embodied subjectivity through gendered labor processes. This examination of the production of "existential corporeality" highlights the physical and moral subjection involved in the process of gendered subjectivation.²⁴⁷ Through the story of Nastasia Kriukova, Chernyshevsky explores the consequences of the few professional opportunities available to women in mid-nineteenth century Russia on the body, presenting the sewing cooperative as a utopian intervention not only in needs and desires, but also in the health and life expectancy of its members. Although Nastasia Kriukova is already in the final stages of tuberculosis when she joins the sewing collective, "in this workshop she'd been given a chance to live a little longer."²⁴⁸ Her relationship with Kirsanov plays an ambivalent role in both facilitating her recovery and compelling her to adopt more conventional feminized behavior.

After encountering Kirsanov at the sewing cooperative and taking him back to her room, Nastasia Kriukova insists on telling her story to Vera Pavlovna to avoid any misunderstandings. Vera Pavlovna initially resists, having heard similar confessions from other workers with "all the noble human qualities" like Nastasia Kriukova. However, Nastasia Kriukova persists in describing her transformation: "I was very insolent [*derzkaia*], I did not have any shame whatsoever, and I was always drunk. That's why I'm so sick now, Vera Pavlovna."²⁴⁹ Nastasia Kriukova proceeds to explain that she was previously a sex worker. While working on Nevsky Prospect she approached Kirsanov and even though he rejected her advances, she succeeded in accompanying him home, proclaiming "I won't let

²⁴⁷ Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, 7; Guattari, *Chaosmose*, 19.

²⁴⁸ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 156; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 220.

²⁴⁹ Vera Pavlovna reflects that these stories of previous sex work are no different than her own; these women merely responded to their environment: "[s]he was astonished the first time she heard such a confession. But after thinking about it for a few days, she asked herself, 'What about my own life? The soil I grew up in was also bad, but it didn't stick to me!'" [...] When she listened to the second confession of this sort she was no longer so astonished that the girl making it had preserved all the noble human qualities: unselfishness, loyalty in friendship, a tender heart—even a fair share of innocence." Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 157; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 221.

you leave me behind, you're so good looking."²⁵⁰ There in his student apartment, he refuses to offer her wine, observing that she displayed symptoms of tuberculosis and advising her to stop drinking entirely, to which she responds "we can't do without it."²⁵¹ Alcoholism is presented as one of the occupational hazards of women's professional opportunities in the old order, from sex work to Marya Aleksevna's financial speculation. When Kirsanov tells Nastasia Kriukova that she should stop living "that sort of life" she retorts "[w]hy should I give it up? It's fun!" Frustrated and offended by Kirsanov's unresponsiveness she leaves "the wooden one" [*dereviannyi*], as she nicknames him, "angry that the evening had been wasted." "After all, we have our pride too," she explains to Vera Pavlovna.²⁵²

Nastasia Kriukova's sickness progresses to the point where she begins to take Kirsanov's warnings about her health seriously, yet she makes it clear that it's not merely a matter of choosing a different profession. Unlike Kirsanov or Lopukhov, who grapple with the question of whether to become doctors or chemists, Nastasia Kriukova is portrayed as having few options. Sex work is presented as one of the only professions that does not require dependence on parents, a husband, or a wealthy family and which provided a higher income than traditional forms of wage labor. Chernyshevsky portrays feminized labor in general as making women vulnerable to sexual violence: when Nastasia Kriukova later finds employment as a domestic worker for an actress, she is eventually compelled to resign after the actress's father-in-law assaults her. Sex work is not idealized, but is shown to vary based on working conditions, similar to other forms of employment.

Nastasia Kriukova explains her dilemma to Kirsanov, "[h]ow can I give up this kind of life? The madam won't release me. I owe her seventeen rubles." For Vera Pavlovna's sake, she explains, "[t]hey keep us constantly in debt so that we have no other choice." Nastasia Kriukova has therefore continued her work not only because "it's fun," but also because of the deliberate restraints built in to

²⁵⁰ Translation altered. Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 158; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 222.

²⁵¹ Translation altered. Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 159; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 223.

²⁵² Translation altered. Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 159; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 223.

maintain her dependency. These include both the system of debts and the “yellow tickets” [*zheltye bilety*] or special passports issued by the state. Sex workers were forced to relinquish their personal identification to the local police in exchange for these “replacement” or “medical” cards as they were officially designated, which required their holders to appear for regular medical examinations and simultaneously served as resident permits.²⁵³

To Nastasia Kriukova’s surprise, Kirsanov gives her the money to pay her debt without asking for anything in return. Yet the problem of her documentation remains, as she explains to Vera Pavlovna, “I paid off the madam and rented myself a room. But there was nothing else I could do. We’re issued special tickets. Where could I show up with such a ticket?”²⁵⁴ Nastasia Kriukova continues:

Я и жила по-прежнему — то есть, не по-прежнему: какое сравнение, Вера Павловна! Ведь я к себе уж принимала только своих знакомых, хороших, таких, которые не обижали. И вина у меня не было. Потому какое же сравнение. И, знаете, мне уж это легко было перед прежним. Только нет, все-таки тяжело; и что я вам скажу: вы подумаете, потому тяжело, что у меня было много приятелей, человек пять, — нет, ведь я к ним ко всем имела расположение, так это мне было ничего. Вы меня простите, что я так говорю, только я с вами откровенна: я и теперь так думаю. Вы меня знаете, не скромная ли я теперь; кто теперь слышал от меня что-нибудь, кроме самого хорошего? Ведь я в мастерской сколько вожусь с детьми, и меня все любят, и старухи не скажут, чтобы я не учила их самому хорошему. Только я с вами откровенна, Вера Павловна, я и теперь так думаю: если расположение имеешь, это все равно, когда тут нет обману; другое дело, если бы обман был.

So, I resumed my previous life—no, not exactly. What a difference, Vera Pavlovna! I received only certain acquaintances, those men I knew to be good, who wouldn’t abuse me. And I didn’t drink. That’s why it was so different. Compared to my previous life, it was easy for me. No, it was still difficult. Here’s what I want to say: you may think it was difficult because I had so many male friends—five or so. But I was fond of them all; that wasn’t it. Forgive me for saying so, but I’m being honest with you. And I still think that. You know me. Am I immodest now? Who’s heard anything but good of me? I spend a lot of time with the children in the workshop. Everyone likes me. The old women can’t claim that I’ve taught them anything bad. But to be honest with you,

²⁵³ Richard Stites, “Prostitute and Society in Pre-Revolutionary Russia,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 31, no. 3 (1983): 349.

²⁵⁴ Translation altered. Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat’*, 159; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 222-23.

Vera Pavlovna, I still think that. If you're fond of a man, then there's no harm, provided there's no deceit.²⁵⁵

With the help of Kirsanov, Nastasia Kriukova is able to pay off her debt and lead a healthy lifestyle, while continuing to make her living as a sex worker. The crucial difference is that she now has the freedom to determine who her clients are and no longer has to endure mistreatment and abuse. Consequently, she is no longer compelled to drink to tolerate her work. Sex work under these conditions is juxtaposed with loveless and abusive marriage and, in contrast, proves to be an option that grants women a greater degree of self-sufficiency.

The story of Nastasia Kriukova is often understood in strongly moralistic terms. As Joseph Frank summarizes: “[i]t figures as a minor episode in *What Is To Be Done?*, where one of the heroes salvages a fallen woman from a life of debauchery, lives with her for a time, and turns her into a model member of Vera Pavlovna's cooperative until she dies of tuberculosis.”²⁵⁶ Affirming this reading, Colleen Lucey writes “[a]nalysis of Chernyshevsky's depiction of Kriukova shows that while he hoped to present a new model for gender relations, he nevertheless succumbed to a heavy-handed paternalism when it came to the question of commercial sex.”²⁵⁷ In fact, it is Kirsanov's attitude, not Chernyshevsky's, that is paternalistic. In contrast, Chernyshevsky's portrayal of sex work from Julie Letellier to Nastasia Kriukova is much more ambivalent.

Kirsanov “salvages” Nastasia Kriukova to the extent that he provides her with the financial means to pay her debt and engage in sex work on her own terms as well as regularly monitors her health as she is recovering from alcoholism. At the same time, his presence represents her very literal

²⁵⁵ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 159-60; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 224.

²⁵⁶ Frank, *Dostoevsky*, 333.

²⁵⁷ Colleen Lucey, *Love for Sale: Representing Prostitution in Imperial Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 30.

domestication into a middle-class feminized subject. After Nastasia Kriukova stops drinking and changes her habits, Kirsanov confesses “[a]nd now, Nastenka, you are starting to appeal to me.”²⁵⁸

И говорил, что я стала хорошенькая и скромная и стал ласкать меня, — и как же ласкать? взял руку и положил на свою, и стал гладить другою рукою; и смотрит на мою руку; а точно, руки у меня в это время уж были белые, нежные... Так вот, как он взял мою руку, — вы не поверите, я так и покраснела: после моей-то жизни, Вера Павловна, будто невинная барышня — ведь это странно, а так было.²⁵⁹

And he said that I'd become lovely and modest, and he began to caress me. How did he caress me? He took my hand and placed it on his and then began to stroke mine with his other had. All the while he was looking at my hand. In fact, at that time my hands were very white and delicate... As soon as he took my hand, you won't believe it, I blushed. After my kind of life, Vera Pavlovna, it was strange to be acting like an innocent young lady, but that's what happened.²⁶⁰

Nastasia Kriukova explains that Kirsanov fell in love with her when she “had gotten used to behaving myself and speaking more modestly.”²⁶¹ Thus, with Kirsanov's help, Nastasia Kriukova ceases to work altogether and becomes “lovely and modest” with “very white and delicate hands”—Chernyshevsky's code for upper class decadence.²⁶² This domestication catalyzed by the relationship with Kirsanov evokes Nikolai Gogol's treatment of the figure of the prostitute in St. Petersburg in “Nevsky Prospect” (“Nevskii Prospekt,” 1835), which, as Lucey emphasizes, “ushered in the theme of commercial sex in Russian literature.”²⁶³ In this short story, Gogol portrays the sex worker as disrupting the balance of binary gender by displaying masculine behavior: “she is stripped of everything feminine and repulsively

²⁵⁸ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 160; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 224.

²⁵⁹ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 160.

²⁶⁰ Translation altered. Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 225.

²⁶¹ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'*, 160; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 224.

²⁶² In *The Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality*, Chernyshevsky describes the results of inactivity on the “beauty of high society.” He writes: “[f]or several generations her ancestors have lived without working with their hands; with an inactive lifestyle, little blood flows to the limbs; with every new generation the muscles of the arms and legs weaken, the bones become thinner; an inevitable consequence of all of this are small hands and feet—they are the symptom of the only kind of life the upper classes of society think is possible—life without physical labor.” Translation altered. Nikolai Chernyshevsky, “The Aesthetic Relation of Art to Reality (A Dissertation),” in *Selected Philosophical Essays* (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2002), 287-88; Chernyshevskii, “Esteticheskie otnosheniia iskusstva k deistvitel'nosti,” 11;

²⁶³ Lucey, *Love for Sale*, 23.

adopts all the mannerisms and insolence of a man, and ceases to be that weak, that beautiful being so different from us.”²⁶⁴ While Gogol’s Piskarev clearly states his intention to liberate the unknown sex worker [*neznamomka*] he follows home from Nevsky Prospect by turning her into an obedient wife—“you’ll sit by me, inspiring my labors, embroidering or doing some other needlework, and we won’t lack for anything”—the pressure Kirsanov exerts on Nastasia Kriukova is more subtle.²⁶⁵ Unlike the sex workers who mock Piskarev for his failed proposal—“I’m not a laundress or a seamstress who would start doing work!”—Nastasia Kriukova eventually accepts Kirsanov’s help and herself embraces the feminized fragility with which the relationship endows her, even going on to become a seamstress.²⁶⁶

Although Nastasia Kriukova health initially improves during the two years living with Kirsanov, in which she no longer works, her tuberculosis suddenly returns in its final stage. Their love proves to aggravate her condition and she is forced to seek employment as a domestic worker and end their relationship. It is only after joining the sewing cooperative that her health ceases to rapidly decline. However, after running into Kirsanov and again leaving her work and the collective apartment of the sewing cooperative—a situation more similar to her earlier communal living than the seclusion of married life—she dies within a month.²⁶⁷ This is not a story of redemption or emancipation, but an account of the contradictions of the emergent new order and its models of femininity and desirability. Thus, Kirsanov both saves Kriukova from succumbing even earlier to her illness, and repeatedly

²⁶⁴ Translation altered. Nikolai Gogol, “Nevsky Prospect,” in *The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol*, trans. Larissa Volokhonsky and Richard Pevear (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011), 256; N. V. Gogol, “Nevskii prospekt,” in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem: v dvadtsati trekh tomakh: Tom 3. Arabeski*, vol. 3 (Moscow: Nauka, 2009), 135.

²⁶⁵ Translation altered. Gogol, “Nevsky Prospect,” 266; Gogol, “Nevskii prospekt,” 144.

²⁶⁶ Translation altered. Gogol, “Nevsky Prospect,” 266; Gogol, “Nevskii prospekt,” 144.

²⁶⁷ Nastasia Kriukova is overjoyed to be reunited with Kirsanov, despite the stimulation accelerating the final progression of her illness. Kirsanov, on the other hand, spends this last month living with her out of pity: “but of course Kirsanov’s feeling for Kriukova at the time of their second meeting wasn’t at all like hers for him. Any love for Kriukova had long since passed. He merely remained fond of her, as one does of a former lover. His previous love was only a result of his youthful desire to love someone, anyone at all. [...] When he outgrew his youth, he could feel sorry for her, but no more.” Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat’*, 165; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 230.

causes her to relinquish her own means of supporting herself, as well as give up her formerly boisterous behavior for a conservative ideal of feminine modesty. Her story provides a crucial counterbalance to the otherwise linear narratives of the women in the sewing cooperative: while the workshop provides an opportunity for gendered resubjection through collective living and labor, it continues to exist within a society shaped by normative demands and desires.

The Fourth Dream

According to José Esteban Muñoz, concrete utopias are not only found in elaborate fantasies, but also “exist in the quotidian.”²⁶⁸ The critical function of utopia thus arises from its rejection of the present through the affirmation of the desire for something that does not yet exist, in Ernst Bloch’s terms, the “Not-Yet-Conscious.”²⁶⁹ Muñoz sees queer utopianism as both a “structuring and educated mode of desiring” and “a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present.”²⁷⁰ Rather than the mere negation of heteronormativity or normative modes of desire that characterizes the stances of both the radical feminism of Catherine MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin or Valerie Solanas and, to an extent, the queer antirelationality of Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman, Muñoz is invested in the openness of the critique imbedded in queer utopianism.²⁷¹

The revolutionary utopian intervention of *What Is to Be Done?* turns on the relationship between the four dreams and the everyday life of Vera Pavlovna that plays out between them. In Bloch’s words, “the point of contact between dreams and life, without which dreams only yield abstract utopia, life only triviality, is given in the utopian capacity which is set on its feet and connected

²⁶⁸ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 9.

²⁶⁹ Bloch, *Principle*, 4; Bloch, *Prinzip*, 4.

²⁷⁰ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

²⁷¹ In his discussion of Lee Edelman, Muñoz addresses the limitations of antirelational queer theories: “[t]heories of queer temporality that fail to factor in the relational relevance of race or class merely reproduce a crypto-universal white gay subject that is weirdly atemporal—which is to say a subject whose time is a restricted and restricting hollowed-out present free of the need for the challenge of imagining a futurity that exists beyond the self or the here and now,” Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 94.

to the Real-Possible.”²⁷² The role of dreams as translating unconscious desire into action in *What Is to Be Done?* has the additional effect of decentering the will of individual characters. Vera Pavlovna is presented as a revolutionary subject not because she throws off all relations of dependency, as in the minor character of Rakhmetov, but because she insists on building new forms of interdependency. As we have seen in the Chapter I, this contrasts with the approach of her mother, Marya Aleksevna, and Julie Letellier. Rejecting the social and legal institutions that limit women’s options to marriage or sex work, Vera Pavlovna instead develops relationships that generate new desires and, ultimately, new forms of subjectivity.

While the novel is rooted in the everyday of Chernyshevsky’s time, Vera Pavlovna’s fourth dream maps out a materialist theory of history culminating in a vivid description of utopian society. The four historical periods described in the dream are characterized by the economic relations that structure material life, while each stage is represented by a goddess who emerges from the status of gender relations in that period. Beginning with the “sensuality and servility” of Astarte in the agricultural period in which women were first conceived of as property, history progresses to the reign of Aphrodite, who is idealized and, consequently, reduced to an object of aesthetic contemplation. Women’s recognition of their subordinate status initiates the reign of Chastity, a period lasting centuries, in which withdrawing from society is the only means for women to maintain the respect they derive from the fetishization of female purity.

Vera Pavlovna is guided through her dream by the goddess representing the final stage of history, who explains that: “[w]hen a man acknowledges a woman’s rights as equal to his own, he’s renouncing his view of her as his personal property.”²⁷³ Abolishing private property therefore requires both the revolutionary transformation of economic structures and the transformation of gendered

²⁷² Bloch, *Prinzip*, 165; Bloch, *Principle*, 146.

²⁷³ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat’*, 282; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 368.

subjectivity. The final goddess presents herself as both the destruction and the synthesis of the previous goddesses. She retains the positive qualities of her predecessors—the sensual pleasure of Astarte, the sublime beauty of Aphrodite, and the conviction of Chastity—yet their meanings are transformed and intensified in their final incarnation. The final goddess explains to Vera Pavlovna that the “new element which distinguishes me from all others is ‘equal rights between lovers,’ that is, an equal relationship between them as human beings.”²⁷⁴ As in the novel as a whole, Chernyshevsky’s critique extends beyond notions of negative freedom. Emancipation is framed as the independence that is achieved through a collective of equals with liberated desires.

After guiding Vera Pavlovna through the stages of history, the fourth goddess finally reveals her identity: “I have no name other than that of the person to whom I appear. My name is her name. Now you have seen who I am. There’s nothing nobler than a human being, nothing nobler than a woman. I am the woman to whom I appear, the one who loves and is loved.”²⁷⁵ Vera Pavlovna’s recognition that the goddess is none other than herself does not elevate her to the realm of the divine, but rather locates the utopian in the everyday. The final stage of history, ushered in by the goddess of freedom and equality and illustrated by the collective labor and leisure of life in the Crystal Palace, is no longer an abstract or divine ideal. Instead, it is contained within the otherwise ordinary Vera Pavlovna, who has collectively generated the material conditions for full freedom in sensuality. In opposition to the ascetic lifestyle of the political agitator Rakhmetov, the utopian content of Vera Pavlovna’s revolutionary subjectivity is derived from her dialectical reintroduction of love and intimacy into her relationships with Kirsanov and the women of the sewing cooperative after establishing the material security to maintain her independence within relationships of interdependency.

²⁷⁴ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat’*, 282; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 368.

²⁷⁵ Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat’*, 281; Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 367.

As the final goddess reminds Vera Pavlovna, she is already initiating the transition to utopia through her sewing collective. Vera Pavlovna is driven neither by abstract political ideals nor by elaborate “rational” calculations. She is, rather, motivated by the immediate economic advantages of organizing a collective sewing cooperative and the sensual pleasures it produces in the form of intellectual stimulation, intimate friendship, material comfort, and the continued development of her desires in and through relations with others. It is therefore crucial that Vera Pavlovna’s vision of history culminating in utopian society is not the product of meticulous top-down planning as it was for her utopian socialist predecessors. Appearing in the form of her final dream, Vera Pavlovna’s utopian vision foregrounds desire over discipline, the collective over the individual, and accessibility over exceptionalism.

According to Angela Davis, utopianism presents a concrete alternative to idealism in formulating a feminist anti-capitalist politics when it is situated within a revolutionary program: “[t]he personal relations which cluster around women contain in germ...the destruction of the whole nexus of commodity exchange. But yet this utopian content is only a promise and nothing more. Its radical implications remain impotent unless they are integrated into a practical revolutionary process.”²⁷⁶ Due to the disproportionate burden of social reproduction that falls on women within capitalism and their corresponding exclusion from and discrimination within the market, women’s labor has historically adhered to a different logic than the wage labor that forms the basis of Marx’s critique. Within the “equalization-repression dialectic” that Davis identifies, the liberating potential of capitalism contained in the demand for labor regardless of race, gender, or sexuality is countered by the gendered and racialized role of social reproduction in the form of—often unwaged—domestic labor and care work.²⁷⁷ Davis rejects a feminist politics that merely expands the sphere of masculinity to include other

²⁷⁶ Angela Y. Davis, “Women and Capitalism: Dialectics of Liberation and Oppression,” in *The Angela Y. Davis Reader*, Blackwell Readers (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 1998), 180.

²⁷⁷ Davis, 176.

genders, just as she warns of the danger of furthering a utopian agenda derived from idealized women's relations without contextualizing them in revolutionary politics.

Writing a century before Davis's dialectical critique of gender, Chernyshevsky offers forms of "non-subversion negation" that do not merely universalize masculinity or idealize femininity, but seek to transform gendered subjectivity within the specific constraints of nineteenth-century Russia. *What Is to Be Done?* asks readers to desire more than the existing organization of labor and gender offers them. As Chernyshevsky writes to his cousin-in-law, Iuliia Pypina, "someday there will only be 'people' on earth, neither women, nor men (who are much more unbearable to me than women) will remain. Then people will be happy."²⁷⁸ In his signature combination of humor and sincerity, Chernyshevsky expresses his utopian dream as an extension of reality. What, precisely, is to be done to achieve this is left to his readers.

²⁷⁸ N. G. Chernyshevskii, "IU. P. Pypinoi (25 fevralia 1878)," in N. G. *Chernyshevskii. Polnoe sobranie sochinenii. Pis'ma 1877—1889 godov*, vol. 15 (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1950), 152.

PART TWO: LU MÄRTEN

(1879-1970)

CHAPTER III: UTOPIAN FRAGMENTS²⁷⁹

Writing in the Social Democratic women's journal *Die Gleichheit* (*Equality*) in 1912, Clara Zetkin reflects on a workers' play published three years earlier: "[i]t offers a piece of proletarian reality that makes the hardship and ruin of the entire exploited class come alive within the fates of individuals, but also their rebirth into a pure, powerful humanity through their thinking and acting for others in preparation for the act of liberation."²⁸⁰ The author of this celebrated one-act drama, *The Miners* (*Bergarbeiter*, 1909), was Lu Märten (1879-1970), a socialist theorist and author who would later become known for her contributions to the debates on Marxist aesthetics in the early 1920s. Zetkin was one of Märten's few mentors, inviting her to contribute to *Die Gleichheit* from 1904 to 1909.²⁸¹ Although Märten increasingly found herself at odds with the cultural politics of the Social Democratic Party (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, SPD), she was initially embraced by Zetkin and other cultural critics within the Party as a "proletarian author."²⁸²

Along with *The Miners*, Märten's debut novel published the same year, *Torso: The Book of a Child* (*Torso. Das Buch eines Kindes*, 1909), was lauded as a worker's autobiography. Märten's depiction of a proletarian girl's illness and displacement followed by her political radicalization situated *Torso* within

²⁷⁹ I am grateful to Sophie Duvernoy for editing an abridged version of this chapter appearing in *Representing Social Precarity: Vulnerability and Dispossession in German Literature, Film, and Society* (under contract with Bloomsbury Press). I am also thankful for the feedback on an earlier draft of this chapter from the participants in the GSA 2020 panel series, "Representations of Social Precarity: Theoretical and Historical Perspectives."

²⁸⁰ Clara Zetkin, "Ein Arbeiterdrama," *Die Gleichheit*, Beilage "Für unsere Mütter und Hausfrauen," no. 16 (1912): 61.

²⁸¹ Chrysoula Kambas, *Die Werkstatt als Utopie. Lu Märten's literarische Arbeit und Formästhetik seit 1900*, Studien und Texte zur Sozialgeschichte der Literatur (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1988), 94; Beatrix Geisel, "Unterdrückte Sozialismuskritik. Lu Märten, eine frühe feministische Dissidentin," *Feministische Studien* 9, no. 1 (1991): 34.

²⁸² Through her life, Märten wrote for both socialist newspapers, including Kurt Eisner's *Vorwärts* and Adelheid Popp's *Arbeiterinnen-Zeitung* as well as bourgeois women's journals such as Minna Cauer's *Frauenbewegung*, and Helene Lange's *Die Frau*. According to Beatrix Geisel, Märten likely ceased to publish in Zetkin's *Die Gleichheit* due to their divergent views on strategies for women's emancipation. Clara Zetkin, "Die sozialdemokratische Frauenbewegung," in *Zur Geschichte der proletarischen Frauenbewegung Deutschlands*, ed. Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1958), 218; Geisel, "Unterdrückte Sozialismuskritik. Lu Märten, eine frühe feministische Dissidentin," 34; Ursula Münchow, *Frühe deutsche Arbeiterautobiographie*, Literatur und Gesellschaft (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1973), 46.

this best-selling genre.²⁸³ In *Torso*, the bedridden child and aspiring author chronicles the fictionalized events of Märten's own childhood: like her protagonist, Märten lost all of her family members and was facing a terminal diagnosis when she wrote *Torso* in her late twenties.²⁸⁴ While *Torso*'s first half provides a first-person account of proletarian life, the second half of the novel upends the genre conventions of the worker's autobiography through its radical formal experimentation, moving from odes to "Personality" and the "Conscious Human" to symbolist drama and scenes from a fairytale. In this shift from a confessional account of working-class life to an assemblage of modernist forms, *Torso* foreshadows the Marxist aesthetic theory of "classless forms," which Märten would develop in the 1920s in opposition to the content-driven cultural politics of the Communist Party (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*, KPD).²⁸⁵ Märten thus undermines the formal and ideological conventions of the worker's autobiography in her first novel, countering the myth of the proletariat with an attempt to render the contradictions of embodied working-class subjectivity. In place of the masculine revolutionary at the center of the typical worker's autobiography, she offers the incomplete figure of the torso assembled from various literary forms, at the same time demanding that new aesthetic and social relations emerge from this provocation.

Torso is roughly divided into two parts: the first presents the diary of an unnamed child grappling with the death of her family members and her own illness; then the novel follows the grown protagonist, now a Marxist named Hazar Loewen intent on writing a book, through a shifting landscape of poetry, prose, drama, fairytale, and hymn. An enthusiastic review in a daily newspaper depicts this rupture: "[w]hen you read the first part, you're profoundly happy to have discovered this accomplished work of art, this rich, mature, pure book. But Lu Märten was not content with merely

²⁸³ Birgit A. Jensen, "Bawdy Bodies or Moral Agency? The Struggle for Identity in Working-Class Autobiographies of Imperial Germany," *Biography* 28, no. 4 (2005): 544.

²⁸⁴ Kambas, *Die Werkstatt als Utopie*, 14.

²⁸⁵ Lu Märten, *Wesen und Veränderung der Formen/ Künste. Resultate historisch-materialistischer Untersuchungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Taifun Verlag, 1924), 209.

writing the absorbing, wonderfully lively story of a ‘child.’” The reviewer continues to explain: “[s]he wanted more, not to give us just anything, but to disperse herself, gather herself, search for herself, discover herself, in order to overcome herself!”²⁸⁶ In Märten’s shift from chronological, first-person narration to a polyperspectival, nonlinear narrative, she departs from the formal conventions of the worker’s autobiography. She rejects both the idealization and minimization of working-class life and instead seeks to create new literary forms that represent a fragmented and multifaceted subjectivity as constantly being reshaped by its surroundings. The novel’s lack of resolution and the protagonist’s inability to fully align herself with normative scripts is accompanied by suggestions of queer and classless alternatives in the fleeting polyamorous relationships and enactment of genre-crossing forms. *Torso* does not affirm proletarian identity by adopting bourgeois notions of masculine agency, as is typically found in workers’ autobiographies, but instead presents the instability of gendered, working-class subjectivity as a challenge to literary form that itself contains a utopian potential.

This chapter begins by introducing Märten as an author and a theorist at the margins of the workers’ and women’s movements before moving to an analysis of *Torso*. I argue that Märten’s first novel upends the conventions of the worker’s autobiography to imagine new ways of representing and, indeed, revolutionizing working-class subjectivity: first, it depicts the material and ideological formation of the proletarian subject from a distinctly gendered perspective; second, it posits debility as endemic to the working class; and third, it rejects aspirations for bourgeois subjectivity and its literary realization in the confessional narrative. Märten presents social relations beyond marriage, monogamy, and the biological family as necessarily implicated in the project of rethinking aesthetic form: transforming both social and aesthetic relations necessitates the rejection of gender and genre conventions to allow for the emergence of new productive relations. *Torso* formally enacts these

²⁸⁶ J. Friedberg, “Pamphlet with Excerpted Reviews of ‘Torso,’” *Neue Badische Landeszeitung*, 1909, Lu Märten Papers, Folder 120, International Institute of Social History.

changes by departing from a linear narrative structured by “straight time” and depicting the fracturing of the narrative voice as the work moves between prose, poetry, and drama.²⁸⁷ Märten not only offers the fragment, or torso, as a more accurate rendering of gendered, working-class subjectivity than the alleged cohesiveness of the bourgeois subject, but she also suggests that it contains a utopian potential to evoke new aesthetic forms along with a revolutionized subjectivity. As *Torso*’s protagonist observes: “[s]hattering a form to arrive at its content and finding a new form for the content—that is art.”²⁸⁸

Between Classes and Movements

Louise Charlotte Märten was born in 1879 in a rapidly expanding Berlin. From an early age she adopted the gender-neutral name “Lu.”²⁸⁹ Despite the reception of Märten as a proletarian author, her class background is ambiguous.²⁹⁰ Although her maternal grandfather was born into Brandenburg nobility, poverty forced him to renounce his title and live as a “poor craftsman,” leaving Märten’s mother to be raised by another family.²⁹¹ Märten’s father grew up in a rural peasant community and served in the Prussian army, eventually receiving a position as a railway official in Berlin. Increasingly bedridden, he died when Märten was eleven years old. Due to her own illness, Märten was forbidden from attending school and studied philosophy, art history, music, and literature independently and with the help of her siblings. At an early age, Märten began writing poetry, plays, short stories, and fairy tales. Following her older brother Walter’s death, the Märten family lapsed into extreme poverty,

²⁸⁷ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (NYU Press, 2009), 22.

²⁸⁸ Lu Märten, *Torso. Das Buch eines Kindes* (Munich: R. Piper & Co., 1909), 206.

²⁸⁹ This would lead to repeated misunderstandings, including reviews of the work of “Herr Märten” and a letter from the influential women’s rights activist, Hedwig Dohm addressed to Märten as “Herr Doktor.” Despite Märten’s insistence that she authored the play *Bergarbeiter* (*The Miners*), Dohm retorts that it demonstrates a “vehemence” and “terseness of dialogue” that could not have been penned by a woman. Hedwig Dohm, “Letter from Hedwig Dohm to Lu Märten,” February 16, 1909, Lu Märten Papers, Folder 14, International Institute of Social History.

²⁹⁰ Ursula Münchow categorizes *Torso* as one of the early German worker’s biographies, despite the fact that “Lu Märten did not come from a working-class family, as is frequently asserted, but rather from a petty bourgeois family without means and impoverished by illness, so [...] from a proletarianized background.” Münchow, *Frühe deutsche Arbeiterautobiographie*, 46.

²⁹¹ Lu Märten, *Autobiographie* quoted in Kambas, 9.

as Märten reflects, “the actual serious destitution.”²⁹² They were forced to relocate to a smaller apartment in a tenement building, supported in part by the oldest child, Margarete, who worked at home as a seamstress and doll maker.²⁹³

In her unpublished autobiography, Märten emphasizes the formative influence of her family relationships and her exposure to music, the crafts, philosophy, and poetry through her siblings, in stark contrast to the image of a childhood of desperation reflected in *Torso* or attributed to her as a proletarian author. Her family’s loss of social status following the death of her father was counterbalanced by the informal education that Märten received at home. She wrote fairytales and plays for her siblings, they organized musical performances, and studied poetry and philosophy together. She portrays this period as an anti-authoritarian ideal: in Chryssoula Kambas’s words, an “alternative world to Wilhelmine Germany.”²⁹⁴ Märten’s friend Otto Jenssen characterizes both Märten and her work as persistently “between the times and between the classes.”²⁹⁵

The fantasy and play that characterized Märten’s early childhood was quickly overshadowed by the loss of her remaining family members to tuberculosis—the so-called “proletarian illness”—in the sixteen years following her father’s death.²⁹⁶ Margarete died abruptly a year after her father, followed by Walter’s prolonged illness and death seven years later. Soon after Margarete’s death, Märten received a terminal diagnosis of a kidney infection that caused episodes of incapacitating pain until an operation in 1905. Märten survived and lived until the age of ninety; however, while she was recovering in the hospital, she lost her mother, followed by her younger brother Hermann a year

²⁹² Kambas, *Die Werkstatt als Utopie*, 10.

²⁹³ Kambas, 13.

²⁹⁴ Kambas, 22.

²⁹⁵ Kambas, 5; Ursula Münchow, *Frühe deutsche Arbeiterautobiographie*, Literatur und Gesellschaft (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1973), 46.

²⁹⁶ Geisel, “Unterdrückte Sozialismuskritik. Lu Märten, eine frühe feministische Dissidentin,” 30.

later.²⁹⁷ Following the death of her final family members, Märten began to write *Torso*, which she dedicated to her mother.²⁹⁸

Märten's engagement in organized political movements began in 1901. Motivated by her own experience of Berlin's housing crisis, Märten joined the Association of German Land Reformers (*Bund deutscher Bodenreformer*) and the political party with which it was associated, Friedrich Naumann's *National-Social Association* (*Nationalsozialer Verein*, NSV).²⁹⁹ More commonly known as the Land Reform Movement (*Bodenreformbewegung*), the organization emerged in response to the alleged paradox of increasing economic inequality in the face of rapid industrial development in the late-nineteenth century. Märten soon became disillusioned with the predominantly middle- and upper-class reformist movement and turned to Marxism. In 1903 she joined the revolutionary SPD before moving to the KPD in 1920.³⁰⁰

In 1902, Märten published her first short story and articles, beginning a publishing career that lasted over sixty years. During her time in the Land Reform Movement, she wrote primarily for bourgeois women's journals such as *Frauenbewegung* (*The Women's Movement*) and *Frauen-Rundschau* (*Women's Review*) and Naumann's publications *Die Zeit* (*The Time*) and *Die Hilfe* (*The Help*). After joining the SPD, she continued to write for women's rights journals, while contributing to socialist publications including *Die Gleichheit*, *Arbeiterinnen-Zeitung* (*Working Women's Newspaper*), and *Vorwärts* (*Forward*) on topics from sex work and centralized kitchens to art criticism and international working class solidarity.

²⁹⁷ Kambas, 31-32.

²⁹⁸ Kambas, 14.

²⁹⁹ Kambas, 26.

³⁰⁰ In her autobiography, Märten reflects: "I was on socialism's side from the beginning, as much as I knew about it at first." Bärbel Schrader, "Aufbruch in ein neues Zeitalter (1918-1923)," in *Literaturdebatten in der Weimarer Republik. Zur Entwicklung des marxistischen literaturtheoretischen Denkens 1918-1933*, by Manfred Nössig, Johanna Rosenberg, and Bärbel Schrader (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1980), 112; Kambas, *Die Werkstatt als Utopie*, 26.

With the outbreak of the First World War, Märten married the sculptor Wilhelm Repsold, an almost fictitious marriage or, in her words, “an official marriage, because we would only have mutual rights to each other’s work and affairs.”³⁰¹ Beatrix Geisel suggests that the marriage was a practical arrangement due to Märten’s need for support during the war and ended in part due to Märten’s frustration with her second-class position in the marriage as a woman artist. Märten never remarried and showed no interest in having children.³⁰² During both World Wars she lived in poverty and largely ceased publishing. Virtually all copies of her major work of aesthetic theory, *Essence and Transformation of the Forms/Arts* (*Wesen und Veränderung der Formen/Künste*, 1924) were destroyed by the Nazis. However, Märten was able to preserve her unpublished manuscripts and materials, with the exception of the correspondences that she destroyed herself. Although Märten remained in West Berlin, her literary work was published in the East, solidifying her outsider status as, in her words, an “earner in the East, who lives in the Western sector.”³⁰³

Märten’s legacy has largely been limited to her contributions to the debates on Marxist aesthetics in the early 1920s in journals including *Die Rote Fahne* (*The Red Flag*), *Der Gegner* (*The Adversary*), and *Die Aktion* (*The Action*).³⁰⁴ While *Essence and Transformation of the Forms/Arts* was reissued in 1949, it was largely ignored by her socialist and communist peers, and other works even further outside of the increasingly rigid cultural politics of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), including her *History of Women from the Mother Right to the Present* (*Geschichte der Frau vom Mutterrecht bis zur Gegenwart*, 1947) remain unpublished. Although *Torso* and *The Miners* saw moderate success and Märten published articles in roughly eighty newspapers and journals, her work remains largely inaccessible outside of the

³⁰¹ Märten, *Autobiographie* cited in Kambas, *Die Werkstatt als Utopie*, 107.

³⁰² Geisel, “Unterdrückte Sozialismuskritik. Lu Märten, eine frühe feministische Dissidentin,” 40.

³⁰³ Kambas, *Die Werkstatt als Utopie*, 242.

³⁰⁴ Chryssoula Kambas’s decision to reprint Märten’s monograph, *Die Künstlerin* (1919) in 2001 was motivated by the disregard of Märten’s gender theory and literary work in the reception of her work. Chryssoula Kambas, “Geschlechter-Differenzen überdenken. Lu Märten’s Schriften zu Kunst und Kultur der Frauen,” in *Die Künstlerin* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2001), 115.

archive.³⁰⁵ The two exceptions remain a special issue of the West German *alternative* on Märten's aesthetic theory published in 1973 and Rainhard May's selection of her essays published in 1982.³⁰⁶ Both publications center her exchange with the cultural editor of *Die Rote Fahne*, Gertrud Alexander, in 1920-21, which I address in Chapter IV. In 2021, the first English translations of four of Märten's articles on aesthetic theory appeared, making her work accessible to an English-speaking audience for the first time.³⁰⁷

The single monograph published on Märten, Chryssoula Kambas's comprehensive work, *The Workshop as Utopia: Lu Märten's Literary Work and Formal Aesthetics since 1900* (*Die Werkstatt als Utopie. Lu Märten's literarische Arbeit und Formästhetik seit 1900*, 1988) remains the authoritative work on Märten. Kambas provides a well-documented historical account of Märten's life and writings, situating her criticism as well as her aesthetic theory within broader political and art historical discourses. At the same time, she calls for more scholarship on Märten's literary work and gender theory, which lie outsidings of the bounds of her monograph. Since the publication of *The Workshop as Utopia*, several scholars have touched on the theme of androgyny and the woman artist in Märten's work, including Kambas in subsequent articles, Sonja Dehning, and Beatrix Geisel.³⁰⁸ The scholarly focus on her theory of aesthetic forms has revived her as an aesthetic theorist, but not yet accounted for her fictional

³⁰⁵ The majority of Märten's work is included in the Lu Märten Papers at the International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam. A partial archive is housed at the Akademie der Künste (AdK) in Berlin.

³⁰⁶ Hildegaard Brenner, ed., "Lu Märten's Kunsttheorie zwischen marxsem Arbeitsbegriff und sozialdemokratischer Technikgläubigkeit," *alternative*, Materialistische Literaturtheorie VI, 16, no. 89 (April 1973); Lu Märten, *Formen für den Alltag. Schriften, Aufsätze, Vorträge*, ed. Rainhard May (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1982).

³⁰⁷ See: Lu Märten, "Lu Märten: Four Texts," trans. Timothy Grundy, *October*, no. 178 (December 29, 2021): 15–34, https://doi.org/10.1162/octo_a_00437. In addition to these translations, an English-language article and book chapter on Märten were published in 2021. See: Jenny Nachtigall and Kerstin Stakemeier, "Art Work as Life Work: Lu Märten's Feminist 'Objectivity,'" *October*, no. 178 (December 29, 2021): 35–54, https://doi.org/10.1162/octo_a_00438; Martin I. Gaughan, "Märten and the Development of a Theoretical Position: From Reformism to the November Revolution," in *The German Left and Aesthetic Politics: Cultural Politics between the Second and Third Internationals* (Brill, 2021), 108–30, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004471566_005.

³⁰⁸ Sonja Dehning, *Tanz Der Feder. Künstlerische Produktivität in Romanen von Autorinnen um 1900* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2000); Beatrix Geisel, "Unterdrückte Sozialismuskritik. Lu Märten, eine frühe feministische Dissidentin"; Chryssoula Kambas, "Androgynie — Ein Selbstentwurf Lu Märten's zwischen Romantik und Sozialismus," *Frauen und Film*, no. 46 (1989): 50–63.

and nonfictional work on androgyny, the woman artist, and gendered labor. In the three chapters of Part Two, I aim to demonstrate the ways in which Märten's aesthetic and gender theory are interconnected and together constitute her revolutionary utopianism.

Shattering the Form of the Worker's Autobiography

Märten's reputation as a proletarian author was not hindered by the fact that she did not, strictly speaking, come from a working-class background.³⁰⁹ Her contemporaries received both *The Miners* and *Torso* as autobiographical works and they were revived in the 1970s and 80s in the GDR for their "enormous documentary value due to their authentic character."³¹⁰ The demand for "authenticity" in these accounts often translated into an formulaic plot which chronicles the protagonists' exploitation and victimization, culminating in their self-realization within the class struggle.³¹¹ The desire for first-person accounts of working-class life was both voyeuristic and framed in philanthropic terms: as August Bebel informs readers in his 1909 preface to the influential autobiography of the factory worker and founder of the Austrian proletarian women's movement Adelheid Popp: "[f]or the upper strata of society, this is a completely new world that opens up before their eyes, but it is a world of

³⁰⁹ Münchow, *Frühe deutsche Arbeiterautobiographie*, 46; Kambas, *Die Werkstatt als Utopie*, 9.

³¹⁰ Though contemporary scholars have distanced themselves from the GDR reception of *Torso*, they have continued to interpret the novel primarily through Märten's biography. Kambas argues that "[w]ith *Torso* Märten wrote her autobiography" while Sonja Dehning qualifies *Torso* as a "fictional autobiography." The parallels between *Torso* and Märten's own childhood are undeniable: the protagonist's siblings bear the same names as her own with the exception of her younger brother Hermann who appears as "Erman" and the deaths in the novel mirror her own loss of all of her family members by age twenty-seven. However, the existing autobiographical interpretations of *Torso* minimize its formal experimentation and often fill in the gaps with details from Märten's own life rather than exploring the literary function of the ambiguity they produce. Münchow, *Frühe deutsche Arbeiterautobiographie*, 7; Kambas, *Die Werkstatt als Utopie*, 55; Dehning, *Tanz der Feder. Künstlerische Produktivität in Romanen von Autorinnen um 1900*, 188.

³¹¹ In a representative passage connecting individual struggles with the collective fate of the proletariat, Moritz William Theodor Bromme concludes his autobiography, *Lebensgeschichte eines modernen Fabrikarbeiters* (*The Life History of a Modern Factory Worker*, 1905) by insisting that he does not see himself as a martyr despite the hardship he has gone through, because he knows he has hundreds of thousands of "comrades in suffering" [*Leidensgenossen*] who have endured as much as or more than him. Moritz William Theodor Bromme, *Lebensgeschichte eines modernen Fabrikarbeiters*, ed. Paul Göhre (Jena: Eugen Diedrichs, 1905), 368; Kambas, *Die Werkstatt als Utopie*, 51.

misery, of hardship, of moral and spiritual atrophy, that makes you ask yourself in horror, how can this be possible in our society, so proud of its Christianity and civilization?”³¹² Workers’ autobiographies were thus expected to portray the hardships of proletarian life for the benefit of a bourgeois readership. Märten begins *Torso* by meeting her readers’ expectations of proletarian life, depicting it as a struggle with eviction, untreated illness, and starvation wages. However, she soon departs from this narrative to instead offer a critique of mythologized proletarian identity, bourgeois notions of subjectivity, and the gendered assumptions that underlie them.

The most successful workers’ autobiographies in the early twentieth century told stories of personal struggle, upward mobility, or revolutionary awakening. They most often took the form of a confessional or epic narrative.³¹³ While authors such as Carl Fischer and Gustav Hänfling did not present their life writings in a single political framework, others, including Moritz William Theodor Bromme, Adelheid Popp, Wenzel Holek, and Franz Rehbein chronicled the emergence of their class consciousness and commitment to the SPD. These autobiographies, which were strongly informed by their editors’ expectations and interventions, sought to provide an unmediated glimpse into the “reality” of proletarian suffering. As Paul Göhre, SPD member and editor of numerous workers’ autobiographies, announces in his introduction to Bromme’s *The Life History of a Modern Factory Worker*, (*Lebensgeschichte eines modernen Fabrikarbeiters*, 1905), his aim is to offer a “general knowledge of the real life of today’s proletariat, penned by the proletarians themselves.”³¹⁴

Frank Trommler has observed that “proletarian literature at the beginning of the century was increasingly characterized by this mythologization of the proletariat as an autonomous historical force,

³¹² August Bebel, “Ein Geleitwort,” in *Die Jugendgeschichte einer Arbeiterin*, by Adelheid Popp, 4th ed. (Berlin: J.H.W. Dietz, 1922), 17.

³¹³ Sabine Hake, *The Proletarian Dream: Socialism, Culture, and Emotion in Germany, 1863-1933* (Berlin/Boston, Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2017), 143.

³¹⁴ Paul Göhre solicited and edited many of the major workers’ autobiographies including Fischer’s, Bromme’s, and Holek’s. Original emphasis. Paul Göhre, “Zur Einleitung,” in *Lebensgeschichte eines modernen Fabrikarbeiters*, by Moritz William Theodor Bromme (Jena: Eugen Diedrichs, 1905), v.

as the embodiment of a natural humanity that must only be awakened.”³¹⁵ In *Torso*, Märten only initially conforms to this expectation of the worker’s autobiography, which is limited to the “representation of the worker in his relationship to the class struggle, to work, to his coworkers, to his family.”³¹⁶ Adhering to the genre conventions in the first part of *Torso*, Märten chronicles the childhood of a proletarian girl through a series of diary entries. The protagonist depicts her politicization through her initial contact with the Land Reform Movement and radicalization with her discovery of the “dialectic, sharp as glass—the *discerning, scathing, militant* principle.”³¹⁷ However, her contact with Marxism does not culminate in enthusiastic party membership or an affirmation of her political agency. She remains on the fringes of society, and increasingly distances herself from legible political and social institutions in her search for adequate aesthetic and relational forms.

Märten’s departure from the “great, swelling immediacy” demanded of the proletarian author unsettled the prominent art critic Wilhelm Hausenstein. In his review of *Torso*, he admits: “[t]he book has wonderfully visual language, but the cultivation of rhetorical beauty becomes pretentious.” The novel’s second half causes him to regretfully observe “one would like to ask the author [...] to continue the trajectory along which the first part of the book proceeds so animatedly: the trajectory of a simple epic.”³¹⁸ In both her fiction and, later, in her aesthetic theory, Märten rejected genre conventions as well as the entangled ideological investments of socialist party politics. In *Torso*, her unorthodox approach to genre is apparent in its resonance with expressionist prose and symbolist drama through the protagonist’s fragmentary consciousness; the slippage between reality, dream, fantasy, and hallucination; and the personification of Consciousness, Delusion, and Personality in the dramatic

³¹⁵ Frank Trommler, *Sozialistische Literatur in Deutschland. Ein historischer Überblick*. (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1976), 240.

³¹⁶ Münchow, *Frühe deutsche Arbeiterautobiographie*, 12.

³¹⁷ Original emphasis. Märten, *Torso*, 89.

³¹⁸ In his review of *The Miners*, Hausenstein explains what he understands to be the task of the proletarian author: “[i]t is very difficult to capture proletarian life poetically without elevating, stylizing, or constructing it [...] The poet of the proletariat must create with great, swelling immediacy, without an aesthetic consciousness. One imagines him to be primitive—but absolutely spot on.” Wilhelm Hausenstein, “Aus einer Besprechung in der ‘Münchener Post,’” in *R. Piper & Co Pamphlet Containing Reviews of Torso*, 1909; Hausenstein, “Bergarbeiter. Schauspiel in Einem Akte von Lu Märten.”

episodes. Märten “shatters the form” of the workers’ autobiography by depicting the precarity of working-class subjectivity through a fragmentary and experimental literary form, producing a work that puzzled and provoked her readers. Within the narrative, the protagonist repeatedly reflects on the dialectics of form and content as the driving force behind artistic production: “there is no other justification for form than content. And the content that cannot be forced into existing forms must find a new one.”³¹⁹ In *Torso*, Märten traces the dialectical movement of precarious working-class life from its disruption of subjective and narrative stability to its intimation of utopian social and aesthetic relations.

Gender in the Worker’s Autobiography

In her comprehensive study of workers’ life writings, Sabine Hake considers the challenges of reading these texts today:

Is their main purpose to promote social reform or socialist mobilization? Are they modeled on bourgeois narratives of individual advancement or directed toward a collectivist view of society? Can this kind of writing be likened to a therapeutic process through which a clear sense of self is acquired or restored? Or do the writers merely produce the performances of subjectivity considered necessary for admission to the bourgeois public sphere?³²⁰

These questions highlight the extent to which Märten rejected the terms of the genre. Rather, she formulated more fundamental objections to the notions of subjectivity, identity, and form undergirding the worker’s autobiography. She does not frame her novel as inspiration for proletarian women, in contrast to Popp’s *Autobiography of a Working Woman*, (*Jugendgeschichte einer Arbeiterin*, 1909), published the same year as *Torso*.³²¹ In place of agitational appeals, Märten portrays the dissolution of

³¹⁹ Märten, *Torso*, 175.

³²⁰ Hake, *The Proletarian Dream*, 145.

³²¹ Adelheid Popp concludes her autobiography by stating her intentions with its publication: “[w]hen I sensed the need to write about how I became a socialist, it was driven solely by the wish to bring courage to the countless women

subjectivity as well as its constitutive structures: the social conventions of marriage, linear time, and masculine productivity. She represents the fracturing effects of precarity, portraying the ‘incomplete individuality’ of proletarian women and the latent emancipatory potential of this fragmented consciousness as an alternative to gendered bourgeois subjectivity.³²²

The worker’s autobiography was a product of the tension between individual and collective notions of subjectivity, which often played out in the negotiations between the editor and author. In his introduction to Carl Fischer’s *Memories and Reminiscences of a Worker* (*Denkwürdigkeiten und Erinnerungen eines Arbeiters*, 1903), Göhre argues that this work deserves a place alongside the autobiographies of distinguished historical figures. “A man of the people is not among them,” he maintains. “A life account of his world is missing: the world of the people, in which the subject is much less individuality, and much more a partial manifestation of the great masses.”³²³ As Hake has observed, working-class men were able to establish their individuality and distinguish themselves from the bourgeois notion of ‘the anonymous masses’—often espoused by the editors themselves—by performing their masculinity, which was itself perceived as a form of self-determination. In Fischer’s case, this manifests in a homosociality that includes quips about exchanging a daughter for a day of work and outbursts of profanity that win him the respect of his foreman.³²⁴

This masculine assertion of individuality, however, was not available to women authors.³²⁵ Instead, women could choose between distancing themselves from what Bebel refers to as the “moral and intellectual atrophy” of the working class by adopting bourgeois norms of chaste femininity—as

workers who thirst for activity with a heart full of longing, but are scared away again and again, because they do not believe themselves capable of achieving something. Just as socialism transformed me and gave me strength, it can do the same for others.” Adelheid Popp, *Die Jugendgeschichte einer Arbeiterin*, 4th ed. (Berlin: J.H.W. Dietz, 1922), 104.

³²² Märten, *Torso*, 71.

³²³ Paul Göhre, “Vorwort,” in *Denkwürdigkeiten und Erinnerungen eines Arbeiters*, by Carl Fischer, Volume 2: Leben und Wissen (Leipzig: Eugen Diedrichs, 1903), iv.

³²⁴ Carl Fischer, *Denkwürdigkeiten und Erinnerungen eines Arbeiters*, Volume 2: Leben und Wissen (Leipzig: Eugen Diedrichs, 1903), 124; 282.

³²⁵ Hake, *The Proletarian Dream*, 152.

Otilie Baader does in *A Stony Path: Memories of a Socialist* (*Ein Steiniger Weg. Lebenserinnerungen einer Sozialistin*)—or setting aside questions of sexuality and gender specificity like Popp.³²⁶ *Torso* takes a different path by depicting an androgynous protagonist who is chronically ill and thus has a fraught relationship to her body, is uninterested in marriage or children, and is determined to create new aesthetic and social forms.

Märten does not attempt to assemble a recognizable whole from the fragments of bourgeois individuality that are afforded to working-class women. On the contrary, she places the experience of working-class women at the center of her narrative in order to explore the ways in which their precarious position upsets gender and class identities. Correspondingly, *Torso*'s protagonist does not suddenly acquire class consciousness through her contact with the SPD or abstract notions of capitalist exploitation. Rather, her political and artistic practices are transformed by witnessing working-class women:

[U]nter dem Begriff Arbeiter erstand mir zunächst nicht irgendwelche Vorstellung eines Arbeitstempes oder einer Lohnhöhe, sondern zugleich und selbstverständlich eine Unzählichkeit von unvollkommenen und unvollkommen existierenden Individuen. Ich sah, bestimmt durch meine erste Lektüre, vor allem die Frauen als den in der Masse unbewußtesten und ausgenütztesten Teil der Arbeiterschaft. Jedes Nachdenken über die Emanzipation der Frau im wirtschaftlichen und damit weiteren Sinne brachte mich zu Konsequenzen, denen jene Parteiangehörigen nie und nimmer zugestimmt hätten [...]

Dann war es die Not der Frauen, die mich unter allen eigenen Schmerzen seinen Augenblick verließ, und die meine Nächte lange Zeit zu einer Pein machte; ja, sie war es, die mir die ersten, nun vergessenen Lieder aus der Seele locket.³²⁷

[T]he concept of the worker initially did not conjure a particular understanding of a work pace or a wage rate for me, but rather at once and self-evidently a countless number of incomplete and incompletely existing individuals. I saw—determined by my early readings—first and foremost women from among the masses as the least conscious and most exploited part of the working class [...]

³²⁶ Bebel, "Ein Geleitwort," 17; Jensen, "Bawdy Bodies or Moral Agency?," 550, 554; Katharina Gerstenberger, *Truth to Tell: German Women's Autobiographies and Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 107.

³²⁷ Märten, *Torso*, 70–71.

Then it was the plight of women that left its mark on me through all of my own suffering, and for a long time turned my nights into agony; yes, it was this, which lured the first, now forgotten songs from my soul.

The protagonist's first creative impulses emerge from a sense of helplessness at the suffering of working-class women, a group to which she belongs. Her poetry is "lured" out by this lived experience rather than consciously created as a product of deliberate authorship.³²⁸ After expressing her frustration with the members of the Land Reform Movement in this passage, the protagonist suggests that Marxism eventually provided her with a framework for understanding the exploitation of working-class women. However, this revelation is not tied to party politics. It is the structural oppression of proletarian women that catalyzes her artistic practice, in which she attempts to find adequate forms for expressing such fragmented individuality, as well as the revolutionary potential of this marginalized perspective.

The protagonist takes up the Romantic and Marxist critique of the division of labor as the division of the individual, while reframing it in explicitly gendered and aesthetic terms.³²⁹ Märten references this notion, developed by both John Ruskin and Karl Marx, throughout her writings.³³⁰ As

³²⁸ The reference to the protagonist's "first, now forgotten songs [*Lieder*]" recalls the title of Märten's first published poetry collection, *My Languages of Song* (*Meine Liedersprachen*, 1906).

³²⁹ In portraying workers as incomplete individuals, Märten offers a critique of the division of labor that is traceable from Romanticism to Marxism, as E.P. Thompson demonstrates through the work of William Morris. As Marx puts it in his chapter on the division of labor and manufacturing in Volume I of *Capital*: "the specific functions of labor are not only divided among individuals, but the individual himself is divided, transformed into the automatic engine of a particular function," rendered in William Morris's free translation from the French as "it is not only the labour that is divided, subdivided, and portioned out betwixt divers men: it is the man himself who is cut up, and metamorphosized into the automatic spring of an exclusive operation." E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), 36–39; Karl Marx, *Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Ökonomie. Erster Band*, ed. Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED, vol. 23, Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels Werke (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1962), 381.

³³⁰ In a 1903 article in *Die Zeit* entitled "The Artistic Moments of Labor in Ancient and Modern Times" ("Die künstlerischen Momente der Arbeit in alter und neuer Zeit"), Märten cites Ruskin, explaining: "[t]hrough the specialization of labor, upon which current production is based, the worker experiences and can only experience a scant amount of joy in his work on a single component of the product that he must complete; for this type of labor does not allow him to express himself completely in his work as the craftsman of antiquity and the Renaissance still could, and whose labor the great English philosopher of art and friend of the workers, *Ruskin*, wished for all work; that is to say, that it be labor of the head, the heart and the hand. Lu Märten, "Die künstlerischen Momente der Arbeit in alter und neuer Zeit (1903)," in *Formen für den Alltag. Schriften, Aufsätze, Vorträge*, ed. Rainhard May (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1982), 10.

Ruskin argued, “[i]t is not, truly speaking, the labour that is divided, but the men: —Divided into mere segments of men—broken into small fragments and crumbs of life.”³³¹ Ruskin’s solution to this fragmentation through the combined “labor of the head, the heart, and the hand” appears repeatedly in Märten’s work, and she similarly evokes the ideal of medieval craft production.³³² *Torso* only alludes to this utopian synthesis, which remains outside of the bounds of the novel. Head, heart, and hand remain disconnected from one another, a fact which limits the working class to specific forms of manual labor, and is reflected in the fracturing of consciousness and narrative perspective in the novel’s second half.

While Ruskin and Marx, as well as most authors of workers’ autobiographies, assume that this division occurs in the factory, and the fragmented individuals are men, Märten explores how the gendered division of labor contributes to the even greater precarity of working-class women. At the same time, the exclusion of women from certain professions and areas of the labor market, including artistic production, grants them a greater distance from the rigidity of commodified labor. As Märten later argues in *The Woman Artist*, (*Die Künstlerin*, 1919), women’s uncompensated reproductive labor is both an unequal burden that prevents their “differentiation” within capitalism, and a relational model that, if generalized, would permit the emergence of collectivist forms such as “social motherliness” [*soziale Mütterlichkeit*] divorced from biological notions of the family.³³³ As I address in Chapter V, Märten’s solution to the gendered distinction between public and private spheres does not lie in the defense of family life against the market, but rather the complete socialization of the private sphere

³³¹ John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, vol. 2 (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1873), 165.

³³² Märten, “Die künstlerischen Momente der Arbeit in alter und neuer Zeit (1903),” 10.

³³³ Lu Märten, *Die Künstlerin*, ed. Chryssoula Kambas (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2001), 106–7, 32.

through collective childrearing and living, which will necessarily give rise to new forms of intimacy and experiences of gender.³³⁴

Debility and the Working Class

Märten makes a further intervention in the genre of the worker's autobiography by substituting the typical narrative of the non-disabled, male worker with that of a debilitated child and young adult excluded from both wage labor and conventional gender scripts. Due to her illness, *Torso's* protagonist is unable to attend school regularly, work in a factory like her brothers, or engage in paid or unpaid reproductive labor along with her sister and mother. Märten's expansion of the worker's autobiography beyond the factory or agricultural worker to include non-normative gendered and embodied experiences reflects a broader understanding of working-class identity. The precarity that characterizes it is not only a product of insufficient wages, dangerous working conditions, and workplace injuries, but also the gendered and often racialized experience of what Lauren Berlant calls "slow death" or the "condition of being worn out by the activity of reproducing life": the physical and mental exhaustion of entire populations within capitalism.³³⁵ For those barely getting by, such as Märten's young protagonist, living is already dying: "[i]n the nights and through the pain I always ask myself: how will this life and my life go—and must I really use up all of my energy in suffering?"³³⁶

Building on Berlant's notion of slow death, Jasbir Puar employs the term "debility" to describe these experiences of precarity that do not fall within the binary of disabled or non-disabled. In contrast to "disablement," Puar maintains, debilitation "foregrounds the slow wearing down of populations

³³⁴ Märten identifies Lily Braun's model of the *Einküchenhaus* or "single-kitchen house" as an example of a collective housing project with a centralized kitchen designed to relieve women from housework. During her time in the Land Reform Movement, Märten served as a spokesperson for the *Einküchenhaus*. Kambas, *Die Werkstatt als Utopie*, 30–31.

³³⁵ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2011), 100.

³³⁶ Märten, *Torso*, 39.

instead of the event of becoming disabled.”³³⁷ Without a distinct before and after, debility cannot be represented in a clear narrative arc.³³⁸ In *Torso*, Märten’s depiction of debility illustrates the limits of the epic and confessional narratives typical of workers’ autobiographies by dwelling on the “normal” or mundane costs of capitalism that resist closed narrative forms.³³⁹ The story of a working-class child unable to work cannot be resolved through self-realization in labor, political practice, or the subordination to straight time that would otherwise dictate her transition to married life and motherhood.

The protagonist’s inability to produce value is framed as constitutive of working-class subjectivity, as the counterpoint to her brother Walter’s poorly compensated labor. In this way, Märten posits the protagonist’s everyday experience of debility as a necessary supplement to the image of the revolutionary proletariat embodied by the male wage worker: the political imagination must extend beyond factory walls and labor organizations to those excluded from capitalist forms of production. Far from glorifying the marginalized perspective of her protagonist, Märten confronts the reader with the contradictions of this expanded image of the working class. The protagonist reflects on the frustration and shame conjured by her need to represent her experience, eventually causing her to depart from the confessional mode:

Ich denke, daß ich bald Geld verdienen müßte und habe nichts dazu gelernt — und keine Schule gehabt und immer krank gewesen. Jetzt möchte ich etwas lernen, aber es ist kein Geld dafür, und Walter will es nicht, weil ich krank bin und will alles allein schaffen. Dann zanken wir uns oft solange und heftig, und ich kann nichts tun. Ich lese alles, was man lesen sollte, ich weiß aber nicht, was ich einmal damit tun soll. Ich möchte selber Bücher schreiben, aber das werde ich wohl nie können, und von dem da soll niemand wissen.³⁴⁰

I’ve been thinking I’ll have to earn money soon and haven’t learned how to—didn’t go to school and have always been sick. Now I want to learn a trade, but there’s no

³³⁷ Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Duke University Press, 2017), xiii–xiv.

³³⁸ Puar, xiv.

³³⁹ Puar, xiv.

³⁴⁰ Märten, *Torso*, 23.

money for it and Walter doesn't want me to, because I'm sick and he wants to do everything himself. So we often have long, intense fights, and there's nothing I can do. I read everything you're supposed to, but I don't know what to do with it. I want to write books myself, but I'll never be able to do it and no one can know about it.

Torso's first part, "Childhood," begins as the protagonist lies awake at night, reflecting on her illness, her wavering belief in God, and her compulsion to write a diary. The protagonist tells her story in real time, in simple, childlike language, cultivating a sense of immediacy. She witnesses her brothers receive insufficient wages, her mother sell their belongings in a futile attempt to pay off their mounting debt, and her sister maintain the household by day and sew clothing for wealthy patrons by night. The only form of activity she can engage in is writing. Yet instead of serving as a means of self-realization, as is implied by the autobiographical form, the self-conscious act of writing is portrayed as a shameful indulgence that "no one can know about."³⁴¹

Throughout the novel, the protagonist reflects on the effect of the illness and death in her family on her writing: "[d]uring the day I write secretly in this book. Secretly, because it's not what I want to write, only what always *comes back to me, so that I have to hold onto it*."³⁴² The need to stay silent so as not to disturb her dying father, her helplessness when observing her siblings and mother labor while unable to work or attend school herself, and of course, the pain that confines her to bed are not sources for romanticized narratives of suffering, but obstacles that limit her art to representing that pain. The gaps between diary entries reproduce the disruption of the protagonist's illness for the reader. After an indeterminate pause, the narrator picks up her pen again: "[t]he fact that I'm just sneaking back to my book now, and only hesitantly, is because it wasn't always possible to utter a word from all of the screams and all of the pain."³⁴³ The protagonist frequently imagines the dialogue with her reader taking place not in written, but in oral form—as if the reader can hear her words and

³⁴¹ Märten, *Torso*, 23.

³⁴² Original emphasis. Märten, *Torso*, 1.

³⁴³ Märten, *Torso*, 40.

screams—contributing to the impression that this is not a stylized fictional text, but a document allowing direct access to her thoughts as they come to her.

The protagonist's single attempt to monetize her work by selling riddles to a newspaper meets with further disillusionment: "[w]hen I have no choice but to be sick, I invent various [riddles] and, recently, I sent them to a newspaper to earn some money, because it wouldn't have been worth it otherwise. The newspaper printed them too, but they didn't give me any money for them. I won't do anything like that anymore."³⁴⁴ Motivated by the need to earn money as much as by the desire to write, the protagonist interprets her inability to commodify her work as further confirmation that she lacks artistic potential. The literary forms that are available to the protagonist are the short forms of riddles, plays, fairytales, and poetry. These forms—largely associated with "low" culture—come to constitute the novel as a whole. In the first half, the protagonist repeatedly alludes to the stigmatization of short forms as well those that fall outside of a sober realism. She recounts her suppression of fantasy during her childhood storytelling: "[w]hen we used to be sick a lot as children, I always had to tell stories at night. But I was always somewhat ashamed and just told stories about everyday incidents; I couldn't say what I really wanted, because it was so strange [*fremd*]."³⁴⁵ The protagonist is unable to create a heroic narrative out of her poverty and illness: this condition only contributes to her compulsion to discipline her imagination as an irresponsible flight from reality.

When the protagonist attempts to write a short story, she finds herself slipping into fantasy and composes a fairytale that she eventually destroys in frustration. She tells the story of a woman with a passion for music who is forced to give up playing the violin after she marries because her husband can't comprehend her love of music. This sacrifice leads to the woman's illness and death, at which point the narrator loses control over the story and it begins to tell itself: "[t]hat's what I wanted

³⁴⁴ Märten, *Torso*, 37.

³⁴⁵ Märten, *Torso*, 23.

to portray, and I did it, but it didn't really work the way I wanted and ultimately turned into a fairytale, because the woman's violin started to play itself after she was long dead. But it wasn't supposed to be a fairytale."³⁴⁶ Just as the violin began to play after the woman's death, the protagonist's story unfolds on its own accord. The protagonist experiences this slippage into fairytale—a form of folk art that, as a collective and traditionally oral form, is particularly resistant to monetization—as a reckless indulgence at odds with the pragmatic demands of the market. Consequently, the protagonist recounts: “[t]hen I burned everything up again, because I know too little about what really goes on between people.”³⁴⁷ The protagonist's illness prevents her from gathering experiences for her stories or even from transforming her diary into a legible autobiography. At the same time, she initially rejects fantasy as mere escapism, leaving her with no options to develop her work. Märten's challenge to the generic bounds of the worker's autobiography plays out in the protagonist's struggle with form in the novel's first half. Unable to mold her life into the teleological narrative of the mythologized proletarian, the protagonist embodies the fractured subjectivity that fall outside of this genre and identity. In its second half, *Torso* pursues the literary forms that could adequately render this experience of working-class life, at the same time increasingly embracing the potential of the fragment.

Queer Relationality Beyond the Subject

Märten's temporary adoption of the confessional mode in the first half of *Torso* only heightens the reader's disorientation in the second half of the novel when this structure falls away. While the subtitle, *The Book of a Child*, determines the reader's expectations for the diary [*Tagebuch*] of its first half, the fragmentary and suggestive figure of the title, *Torso*, captures its second half. The confessional narrative is displaced by the fractured and depersonalized appearance of contrasting literary forms in

³⁴⁶ Märten, *Torso*, 24.

³⁴⁷ Märten, *Torso*, 24.

which the protagonist's perspective is merely one of many. This shift is both a further fragmentation and affirmation of the protagonist's identity: amidst the multiplicity of forms and perspectives, the protagonist is finally given a name: Hazar Loewen. This deliberately exoticized name combines the gender-neutral, Arabic first name meaning "vigilant" and "nightingale" with a variation on Märten's mother's surname, "von Loeben," transformed into "lion" and stripped of its class signifier.³⁴⁸ Hazar's outsider status is emphasized by the uncritical allusion to a racial "other," non-human animals, and ambiguous gender identity. The formal rupture in the novel is accompanied by Hazar's departure from normative relational forms: following the death of her biological family, she leaves the prospect of married life behind and moves between polyamorous relationships. The episodic scenes of the second half are presented as a misaligned composite of continually shifting genres and perspectives, ultimately producing the image of a torso.

The diary's chronological narration is interjected with pauses reflecting the interruptions caused by the protagonist's illness or family members' deaths. This realist technique serves to further enhance the impression of linear time. Yet following her mother's death, which comes after the passing of her father, older brother, and sister, Hazar's usual stream of consciousness is replaced by incomplete, repetitive phrases and gaps:

Ich darf noch reden — denn ich lebe ja noch. — Es war einmal ein Schrei. — Meine Mutter ist tot — und ich lebe noch! — Es war einmal ein Schrei. —
 Es war einmal eine lange Nacht — da wollt' ich nicht zur Ruhe vor ruhelosen Glück — da läuteten alle Glocken in mir — alle Heimatglocken — Nachhausekommen. — Der Morgen weckte so grau — ich starrte immer auf einen Brief, die "Mutter sei so krank, — das Schlimmste sei nahe — — —"
 Ich wußte die Lüge. — Ich starrte ohne Leben — — da stand Fred Angele in der Tür — wie sah der aus — der hatte sich gepackt wie zu einer Tat — so kam er auf mich zu. — Da schrie ich ihm die Frage entgegen — das kleine Wort — — —
 Da nickte er nur so — — —
 — — — — —³⁴⁹

³⁴⁸ Kambas, *Die Werkstatt als Utopie*, 9.

³⁴⁹ Märten, *Torso*, 136.

I may still speak — because I am still alive. Once upon a time there was a scream. —
My mother is dead — and I am still alive! — Once upon a time there was a scream.
— Once upon a time there was a long night — I just wanted rest in my restless
happiness — all the bells were ringing in me — all the homecoming bells — Going
home —

The morning awoke so grey — I stared constantly at a letter, “Mother is so sick, —
the worst is coming — — —”

I saw the lie. — I stared lifelessly — — there stood Fred Angele in the door —
the way he looked — he had braced himself as if for a crime — that’s how he came to
me. — Then I screamed the question at him — the little word — — —

Then he just nodded like that — — —

— — — — —

When Hazar learns of her mother’s death, she is in the hospital recovering from an operation to address the episodes of pain that frequently confine her to bed and had been diagnosed as terminal. The “homecoming bells” are quickly silenced when she realizes that her childhood home no longer exists. Presented as a reconstruction of the initial shock, the fragmentary thoughts and em dashes mirror the experience of trauma and the fracturing of the protagonist’s consciousness. Although she “may still speak,” her voice is no longer a continuous thread that carries the narrative, nor the intentional expression of her interiority.

Märten evokes the genre of the fairytale through the recurring phrase, “[e]s war einmal ein Schrei.” Recalling the sound of the violin that plays on after the woman’s death, the disembodied scream marks the transition from the exploration of authorship as constitutive of the self in the novel’s first half to the polyperspectival narration of the second half. The scream does not emerge directly from Hazar and, detached from the individual, it begins a new story in which Hazar’s voice is one among many. At the same time, the scream serves as a hyperbolic rebellion against the desire for proletarian writing “without an aesthetic consciousness” expressed by the readers of workers’ autobiographies.³⁵⁰ Taken to its extreme, trauma without stylization is merely unintelligible and even

³⁵⁰ Hausenstein, “Bergarbeiter. Schauspiel in einem Akte von Lu Märten.”

unwritable. It is not pure experience, but rather a reminder of the contradictions of the demand for authenticity.

When Hazar's character is salvaged from her precarious position between life and death, her first-person perspective is sidelined. Although she is not dead, she is also not fully alive or restored to coherent subjecthood following her recovery: "[i]ch starrte ohne Leben," she recalls. She continues to further eschew convention rather than attempting to recreate the stability of the family. After her childhood attempts to suppress her imagination, she now embraces fantasy as an alternative to regulatory (hetero)normative structures. Her choice to escape into art represents the alternative to the protagonist of her fairytale, who gave up her music to save her marriage. As Hazar's fiancé, Fred Angele, observes, "[t]he decisive factor in your life is creation, not being together or uniting with me."³⁵¹ When he attempts to protect her from the news of her mother's death, the casual, even dismissive language of her recollections clashes with the gravity of the event, suggesting Hazar's growing disengagement from the relationship. Definite articles replace pronouns ("wie sah der aus") and vague filler words supplant adjectives ("Da nickte er nur so"). Fred Angele's paternalism in withholding the truth—which she perceives as lying—is characteristic of his normalizing and normative function in the narrative. The fragmentation of Hazar's consciousness announced in this passage is finalized with the death of her last remaining sibling, unmooring her completely from her biological family. Fred Angele repeatedly attempts to drag her out of her fantasies into the practicalities of everyday life. "Why do you want to have a routine [*Alltag*], which everyone merely tolerates?" Hazar inquires. "But Fred Angele doesn't know about me, doesn't understand my language. Flesh remains flesh, and word only word. Day is day, and night remains night. Nothing is solved."³⁵² Hazar increasingly distances herself from her fiancé, and the relationship eventually breaks down.

³⁵¹ Märten, *Torso*, 154.

³⁵² Märten, *Torso*, 239.

With the loss of her normative grounding, Hazar's character becomes more diffuse, moving between genres and intimate constellations. Two fantastical figures suddenly appear: Nysos, recalling the Greek god of ecstasy, suffering, madness, wine, dance, and festivity (in German: "Dionysos") and "the dancer Eli."³⁵³ The fantasy world they occupy together contrasts starkly with the life that Hazar shares with Fred Angele. While Hazar's everyday life with her fiancé is chronicled in abrupt, repetitive, and often incomplete sentences—"I drag myself along"; "Sometimes I can't go on"; "Uphill and downhill"—the episodes with Nysos and Eli are rendered in ornate, stylized language.³⁵⁴ After drinking wine from Nysos's hands following their first encounter, Hazar ceases to drive away the fantasies that she had suppressed throughout her childhood: "I feel a new rhythm inside of me [...] I am so restless and reveling in this agitation and burden—this plentitude—I serve all unfamiliar creation, all unfamiliar souls [*allen fremden Seelen*]."³⁵⁵ Hazar's embrace of fantasy is framed as an erotic encounter with something beyond herself, an excess that breaks down the final boundaries of her subjectivity.

Märten rejects aspirations for a unified self, countering the larger project of workers' autobiographies to "[produce] knowledge about the worker's soul."³⁵⁶ In *Torso*, the myth of individual interiority is replaced with a subjectivity that is fundamentally relational, a mosaic assembled by multiple voices or "souls." "Fred Angele appears so foreign [*fremd*]," Hazar reflects, "The many souls frightened him away."³⁵⁷ Although this plurality proves incompatible with monogamous marriage, it allows for new existential and narrative possibilities. The *fremde Seelen* in the dream sequences and the dramatic episodes with Nysos and Eli function as a *Verfremdungseffekt* that underscores the constructedness of the confessional form and its underlying assumptions about individuality and

³⁵³ Märten, *Torso*, 174.

³⁵⁴ Märten, *Torso*, 239.

³⁵⁵ Märten, *Torso*, 177.

³⁵⁶ Hake, *The Proletarian Dream*, 140–41.

³⁵⁷ Märten, *Torso*, 179.

interiority. Desire is a lack that points beyond the self toward the unknown, driving Hazar's search for relational and aesthetic forms emerging from this instability.

Hazar's encounter with Nysos and Eli serves as a turning point in the novel, after which it takes on an increasingly fragmentary form. They appear in a dreamlike interlude dividing the novel's two parts. All but the first page of this passage was struck from the 1908 manuscript of *Torso* by Märten's editor at Piper Verlag—undoubtedly due to its eroticism—but the episode nevertheless made its way into the final publication.³⁵⁸ The scene opens with an anthropomorphic description of the autumn sun “[shouting over] the forest with radiant exultation,” evoking the setting of a fairytale. During their night together in the forest, Hazar first declines Eli's outstretched hands before going to Nysos. When Nysos asks her to show him her “naked beauty” to appease the “lust for beauty” within him, Hazar reacts with disgust and fear. She reflects: “I thought of life and how it comes in this dark night and makes a demand. And I thought that it always makes demands—amidst wine or blood—and never gives.” Hazar continues to reject the ideal of female beauty under which Nysos subsumes her: “Nysos, you will not see the female [*das Weib*], when see you me – you will see *a* female [*ein Weib*], a child's body, young and rough – and astonished that it is female at all.”³⁵⁹

Hazar does not reciprocate nor identify with Nysos's desire for perfection, whether embodied by aesthetic or feminine beauty. The demands made by heterosexual desire compel Hazar to grapple with her gender identity, which clashes with the image that Nysos projects onto her. Lacking alternative social scripts, she frames her androgyny as a childish immaturity, explaining her lack of desire as a lack of femininity. The child of the novel's first half reappears not only in the playfulness

³⁵⁸ Sexual content was unusual for workers' autobiographies, although men were granted more leeway than women. The most open descriptions of sexual encounters—including attempted rape, seduction by a fourteen-year old girl, and *coitus interruptus* as a means of birth control—can be found in Bromme's autobiography, causing the editor, Göhre, to warn the readers not to let the book fall in the hands of children. Göhre, “Zur Einleitung,” xii; Bromme, *Lebensgeschichte eines modernen Fabrikarbeiters*, 217; 218; 225; Lu Märten, “Torso. Das Buch eines Kindes (Manuscript)” (1908), Lu Märten Papers, Folder 120, International Institute of Social History.

³⁵⁹ Original emphasis. Märten, *Torso*, 182.

of fantasy, but also as a form of resistance to masculine desire that, at the same time, evokes this intrusive desire. The unsettling scene is interrupted when Nysos is thrown into a panic by the thought of his own fiancée, causing Hazar to go silent and “[hold] my mistreated soul tight in my hands.”³⁶⁰ The encounter shatters the fantasy world that Hazar entered with Nysos and Eli, rendering her an outsider once again. As she reflects, “you had forgotten me and my path in this moment, you were not the devoutly smiling heir of the great connoisseurs of beauty, who justify all new forms, you were the heir of an old world of prescriptions and promises.”³⁶¹ The ambivalent status of this episode—which is dismissed as a “delusion” by Fred Angele and presented as a dream—underscores the impossibility of generating new aesthetic forms without the creation of alternative social forms. Much like the goddesses in Vera Pavlovna’s fourth dream, discussed in Chapter II of this dissertation, Märten ties the former ideal of beauty with the subjugation of women. Although Nysos proves to be too entrenched in the conventions of the “old world” to accompany Hazar further, Eli offers to continue with Hazar: “[g]ive me your hand for a wordlessly beautiful dream. From now on — — —.”³⁶²

Hazar temporarily finds the harmony she could not achieve with Fred Angele or Nysos and Eli with a sculptor, Lonza, and his former lover, Lisa. When Lisa approaches Hazar, Hazar invites her to join the relationship. “Then came a strange time between the three of us. With festivals of roses and light, covering up lies and truth, which slept in equal standing. Lisa celebrated beauty—for Lonza’s sake—und celebrated me. Dangerous games. The unspoken, the enigmatic.” These idyllic relations only last for a moment, however, “[a]nd now festival and light are extinguished, and Lisa is sick with doubt.”³⁶³ Lisa, like Nysos, remains attached to monogamy as a form of stability. She is unfulfilled by this new polyamorous arrangement, in which she is both feminized and marginalized in relation to the

³⁶⁰ Märten, 183.

³⁶¹ Märten, *Torso*, 184.

³⁶² Märten, *Torso*, 185.

³⁶³ Märten, *Torso*, 225.

negligent and masculinized Lonza and androgynous Hazar. While the latter two are concerned primary with their art and view sensuality as an extension of their creative projects, Lisa seeks a form of intimacy beyond their abstract investment in beauty. The relationship ends and when Lisa reappears, the genre has shifted from prose to drama. In the chapter “Scene on a Stage,”—as well as in the increasingly frequent episodes presented as a script with stage directions—Hazar’s account is decentered, as the genre no longer demands narration bound by a single perspective.

Lisa: [...] Weißt du noch die Nacht, als du bei uns auf weißen Rosen lagst und wir deine Schönheit als Fest hatten?

[...]

Lisa (langsam): Es geschah, daß wir zueinanderkamen, zu einer gleichen Stunde, alles war so seltsam ähnlich jener Nacht — nur du warst fortgegangen. Da geschah es, daß aus dieser Nacht ein Kind wurde — gezeugt aus einer Sehnsucht, die nicht mir galt — — — das Kind wuchs ein wenig — und sah aus, wie du — Hazar.

Hazar: (hat Lisa losgelassen und sich an die Wand gelehnt, kaum hörbar): Also das wollte sein — — —

(Pause.)

(Tonlos): Wie alt ist das Kind, daß dies wahr zu sehen wäre?

Lisa: Diese zwei Jahre alt.

Hazar: Wo ist es?

Lisa: Tot.

— — — — —³⁶⁴

Lisa: [...] Do you remember that night with us when you lay on white roses and we celebrated your beauty?

[...]

Lisa (slowly): It happened that we came together again at that same hour, everything was so strangely similar to that night — only you had left. Then it happened, a child

³⁶⁴ Märten, *Torso*, 292-93.

came from this night — conceived by a longing that was not for me — — — the child grew a little — and looked like you — Hazar.

Hazar (has let go of Lisa and is leaning on the wall, hardly audible): So it wanted to be — — —

(Pause)

(Silently): How old is the child, so that this could be seen to be true?

Lisa: Two years old.

Hazar: Where is it?

Lisa: Dead.

— — — — —

In contrast with the earlier episodes, in which Lisa's perspective is mediated by Hazar's perception of the events, this dramatic dialogue disrupts her first-person narration. At the same time, it offers another form of immediacy: without Hazar's retrospective narrativization, the reader experiences the dialogue without a clear interpretative framework. The characters' body language detailed by the stage directions—Hazar stroking Lisa's hair as she tells her that she once loved her, then letting her go and backing away—emphasizes the fragility of the scene, the interpretive possibility introduced by physical proximity, tone, and staging.³⁶⁵ Finally, the extravagant symbolism—the bed of white roses, the child born out of the desire for an absent person, its premature death—is further dramatized by the laconic speech that concludes with the total absence of language. The queer relations between Hazar, Lisa, and Lonza hint at alternatives to marriage, heterosexuality, and individualized artistic production, yet the death of their child reveals that the persistence of these new forms cannot depend on the reproductive reflexes of the "old world."³⁶⁶ The fate of the collectively-conceived child in *Torso* suggests a more fundamental challenge to reproductive futurity, to the behaviors and desires that

³⁶⁵ Märten, *Torso*, 291-92.

³⁶⁶ Märten, *Torso*, 184.

reproduce heteronormativity, the family, gender, and genre.³⁶⁷ As Märten will explore in her later work, the creation of new social and aesthetic forms demands a transformation of collective practices beyond isolated acts of intimacy.

Utopian Fragments

In *Torso*, Märten undermines the formal conventions of the worker's autobiography through a disorienting movement between narrative perspectives and genres. She expands the depiction of working-class subjectivity to include non-normative gendered and embodied experiences, challenging the aspiration to bourgeois subjecthood and its corresponding genre conventions. Märten rejected the narrative closure offered by the worker's autobiography, culminating in the assertion of masculine subjectivity or identification with the Party, as it precluded the utopian potential of the fragment. The destruction of form is therefore the first step toward what Märten would later develop into her theory of classless forms: aesthetic forms that overcome the division between art, craft, and manual and machine labor, as well as bourgeois genre distinctions.³⁶⁸ Interjected between odes to "Personality" and "the Conscious Human," reflections on the function and possibilities of art tie the protagonist's aesthetic aspirations to the formal experimentation found in the novel:

Eine Form zertrümmern, um zu ihrem Inhalt zu gelangen und für den Inhalt neue Form finden – das ist Kunst.

Darum reden wir von Bildern und Zielen, wenn wir vom Wege verkünden; darum verachte man nicht Bilder und Utopien – mögen sie nun Christentum oder Sozialismus heißen – denn sie sind allesamt Spuren und Wege, und niemand gibt seine letzte Form und Hülle – er kann sie nur denken.

Das geniale Kunstwerk aber bleibt noch Torso.

Denn: Wo ist die Form für das Alles und das Letzte, was gelitten und gedacht sein kann? Wo ist der Schrei, der geschrien werden müßte? – Und weil es solches nicht gibt, drängt alles Stärkste zur andeutenden, über sich hinausweisenden Form – zum

³⁶⁷ The fate of the collective child would of continue to serve as a dramatic allegory for the production and reproduction of socialism from Sergei Tretiakov's *Khochu rebenka!* (*I Want a Baby!*, 1926), to Bertolt Brecht's *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis* (*The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, 1944-45).

³⁶⁸ Lu Märten, *Wesen und Veränderung der Formen und Künste*, 209.

Symbol – zur Botschaft der Splitter, die vom Erdbeben zeugen – geht alle Wucht zu einem Teil. So bist du selbst und was du zeigen muß ein Torso – Symbol, was hinter und vor sich denken läßt. Ein Glied, von dem [d]er Körper weiß, ein Weg, dessen Ziel er denken kann. – Ein Schweigen, das ihn schreien machen wird. – Kunst.³⁶⁹

Shattering a form to arrive at its content and finding a new form for the content—that is art.

That is why we speak of images and aims when we proclaim the way; that is why we do not disdain images and utopias—may they be called Christianity or socialism—for they are all traces and paths, and no one provides their last form or framework—they can only conceptualize it.

The ingenious artwork, however, remains a torso.

For: Where is the form for everything and the final thing that can be suffered and thought? Where is the scream that would have to be screamed?—And because there is no such thing, the strongest things are compelled to the suggestive forms that point beyond themselves—to the symbol—to the message of the splinters that testify to the earthquake—all of the force goes into the part. For you yourself and that which you must depict is a torso—a symbol that allows for thought behind and beyond it. A limb, of which the body knows, a path, whose aim it can conceptualize — a silence, that will make it scream.— art.

The unresolved tension between the fragment and the whole, silence and the scream, reality and fantasy, constitutes the transitional period that Märten seeks to capture in *Torso*: the in-between that renders assimilation undesirable and utopia necessary yet still unattainable. While the workers' autobiographies of the early twentieth century contributed to the mythological construction of the "proletariat as an autonomous historical force," Märten confronts this fantasy with symbols, splinters, torsos, and limbs whose absences are the closest approximation to utopian relations.³⁷⁰ Completed the same year as Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo," ("Archaischer Torso Apollos," 1908), Märten's *Torso* is not a monument to the timelessness of art, but to its radical historicity, not a celebration of virility, but a testament to the contradictions of gendered embodiment and queer desire. Märten pursues the suggestiveness of the fragment without attempting to make it whole. She offers the figure of the torso

³⁶⁹ Märten, *Torso*, 206.

³⁷⁰ Trommler, *Sozialistische Literatur in Deutschland*, 240.

to catalyze the imaginative work of generating new forms of aesthetic and subjective production. This utopian gesture would eventually serve as the foundation for her vision of Marxist aesthetics.

CHAPTER IV: THE ART WORKER

Lu Märten's early fiction, *Torso: The Book of a Child* (*Torso. Das Buch eines Kindes*, 1909) and *The Miners* (*Bergarbeiter*, 1909), earned her a reputation as a proletarian author, even as the former diverged from genre conventions. However, the celebrated authenticity of these works in their portrayal of working-class struggles soon proved to be a limitation on her work.³⁷¹ When Märten attempted to publish a second novel in 1936, *Yali. A Novel Before All Becoming* (*Yali. Ein Roman vor allem Werden*), an impressionistic account of a bohemian circle in Munich centering the intimate relationship between two women, it was rejected by multiple publishers with reference to its insubstantial audience. As Karl Quenzel from Hesse & Becker publishing house explained, "[i]t is written for an audience that could be compared with the invisible church. The novel presupposes people who are educated, benevolent, sharp and witty [...] We modern people are tougher and more closed off."³⁷² If Märten appealed to this notion of harsh modernity in *Torso*, then she chose the opposite path amidst the rise of National Socialism in Germany, reflected in the alternate subtitle she gave *Yali*: "These People Existed Too, From the Time Before 1923" ("Auch diese Menschen gab es. Aus der Zeit vor 1923"). Märten's attempt to recover the utopian impulse of the early 1920s in her second novel never reached its select audience in the way that Nikolai Chernyshevsky's *What Is To Be Done?* was able to invoke and engender the "new people." Rather, as Quenzel maintained, her utopianism was deemed irreconcilable with the required realism. He concludes, "[y]our novel does not reflect real life, but rather, if I may, provides a mirror image of your dreams of life."³⁷³

³⁷¹ Chrysoula Kambas, *Die Werkstatt als Utopie. Lu Märten's literarische Arbeit und Formästhetik seit 1900*, Studien und Texte zur Sozialgeschichte der Literatur (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1988), 51–52.

³⁷² Karl Quenzel, "Letter from Karl Quenzel of Hesse & Becker Verlag to Lu Märten," April 4, 1936, Lu Märten Papers, Folder 11, International Institute of Social History, 1.

³⁷³ Quenzel, 1.

In this chapter, I consider Märten's utopian intervention in the debates on Marxist aesthetics in the early 1920s. Adopting this perspective not only illuminates her dialectical argumentation culminating in "classless forms," it also reveals the imaginative possibilities of a revolutionary utopianism that works by expanding historical and temporal scope. Märten operated with an expansive notion of aesthetics as encompassing a range of labor processes, artistic forms, and sensual capacities. As she explains in a 1919 article, "Socialism and Artists" ("Sozialismus und Künstler"), "I am not speaking here as the representative of *one* kind of art, but of art and art work [*Kunstarbeit*] in relation to it all [...] not of animating things or distributing mere enjoyment or contentment, not of 'aesthetics,' but of allowing *the creative and constructive essence* [schöpferisches und gestaltendes Wesen] *in every being* to become conscious and be nurtured."³⁷⁴ With reference to Chernyshevsky's *The Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality* (*Esteticheskie otnosheniia iskusstva k deistvitel'nosti*, 1855), Märten distances herself from the disciplinary study of aesthetics, drawing instead on historical materialism and ethnography, in order to present a much more ambitious program of transforming subjectivity by revolutionizing labor processes.³⁷⁵

In dialogue with the cultural critic, Gertrud Alexander, and then in her major theoretical work, *Essence and Transformation of the Forms/Arts* (*Wesen und Veränderung der Formen/Künste*, 1924), Märten's utopian intervention consisted in radically extending the historical scope of the debate, redefining art

³⁷⁴ Märten's notion of creative, productive activity as the essence of life resonates with Marx's at the time unpublished theory of the species beings [*Gattungswesen*] in his 1844 Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (*Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844*). Here, Marx famously argues that humans are distinguished from non-human animals by their "conscious life activity," yet estranged labor deprives them of this freedom, transforming their labor from the expression of life into a mere means to existence. While Märten similarly views creative labor as the condition for life that must be consciously cultivated in a truly free society, she does not limit this to human life. In an unpublished manuscript she argues for the necessity of including the defense and protection of non-human animals in the "totality of all the questions of humanity that the proletariat fight for," insisting that it would be most consistent with the goals of the working class: "not to exclude any creature that lives and suffers like the human from the protection and rights of the human creature. Karl Marx, "Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844," in *Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels Werke*, ed. Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED, vol. 40 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1968), 516; Original emphasis. Lu Märten, "Sozialismus und Künstler," in *Formen für den Alltag. Schriften, Aufsätze, Vorträge*, ed. Rainhard May (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1982), 38; Lu Märten, "Tierschutz und Kultur – Tierquäler – Menschenquäler," n.d., Lu Märten Papers, Folder 33, International Institute of Social History.

³⁷⁵ Lu Märten, "Zur Frage einer marxistischen Ästhetik," *Die Linkskurve* 3, no. 5 (1931): 17.

as the more expansive “form,” and shifting attention from the consumption of art to aesthetic production. In contrast to the existing emphasis on literature and, in particular, the question of the “bourgeois heritage” [*bürgerliches Erbe*], Märten drew on ethnographic studies to release art from its exclusivity and offer an alternative genealogy of forms stretching from “primitive” tools to Gothic cathedrals and contemporary Russian constructivism. While her interlocutors in the KPD claimed that she misunderstood the nature of artistic genius, Märten’s attempt to reconcile manual labor, machine production, and the artisanal attention to material and technique was intended to democratize aesthetic production as the productive foundation for communist society. According to Märten, revolutionizing everyday labor processes would at the same time transform the sensibility and corporeality of the worker, producing “art workers” [*Kunstarbeiter*] rather than artists and wage laborers, and “classless forms” in place of fetishized objects of speculation and low-quality commodities. Märten rejected arguments that revolutionizing the mode of production would necessarily lead to a new proletarian culture and subjectivity. Instead, she insisted that workers be equipped with the tools and resources to initiate this transition themselves.

I begin this chapter by examining Märten’s turn to utopianism through her interpretation of Marx’s dialectical theory of history. The following section contextualizes Märten’s work in the debates on revolutionary art initiated by Franz Mehring that played out within the KPD. I then explore Märten’s role in the debates on Marxist aesthetics in the early 1920s, first in her exchange with Alexander and then in her ethnographic study of aesthetic forms in *Essence and Transformation of the Forms/Arts* (*Wesen und Veränderung der Formen/Künste*, 1924). I consider the tension that characterizes Märten’s appeal to the “ethnographic imagination”: between historicism and essentialism, science and myth, natural drives and socially constructed needs.³⁷⁶ Within the era of scientific socialism, ethnography provided one of the few sanctioned modes of speculative utopianism due to its status as

³⁷⁶ Fritz Kramer, *Verkehrte Welten. Zur imaginären Ethnographie des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt am Main: Syndikat, 1981), 7.

a science. However, as Nicola Gess observes, the “primitivist paradigm” was “a fiction shaped by the affects, needs, and projections of researchers [*Wissenschaftler*], which almost entirely lacked a scientific foundation [*wissenschaftliche Grundlage*].”³⁷⁷ I read Märten’s major work of aesthetic theory in this ambivalent space between fiction and nonfiction.

Märten’s Utopian Turn

The trajectory of Märten’s work from proletarian literature portraying the “destitution of women” and the working class to her explorations of classless forms and new modes of subjectivity corresponds to a broader shift in her work from a focus on individual psychology to collective paths forward. While even the second half of Märten’s first novel, *Torso*, is loosely assembled around the solitary protagonist’s search for appropriate aesthetic and social forms, her expansion into the genres of ethnography and aesthetic theory allows her pose these questions on a social scale. In these theoretical works, the localized subjectivity that had already begun to break down in *Torso* is replaced by the notion of human’s basic creative drive, the different appearances this essence takes on within various cultural and material constraints, and the expressive forms produced by the collective rather than specific personalities. This reframing of artist production mediated by individual experience in terms of the collective possibilities of the past and future is accompanied by an affective change: from the predominately negative affects that dominate *Torso* and *The Miners* to the resolute hope of *Essence and Transformation of the Forms/ Arts* and her major work on gender, *History of Women from the Mother Right to the Present* (*Geschichte der Frau vom Mutterrecht bis zur Gegenwart*, 1947).

Looking back on her work, Märten reflects on the differences between her fiction and aesthetic theory, noting that it is likely that “no one could recognize the same person in the author of the

³⁷⁷ Nicola Gess, “Literarischer Primitivismus: Chancen und Grenzen eines Begriffs,” in *Literarischer Primitivismus*, ed. Nicola Gess (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2013), 4.

rigorous intellectual work (*Essence and Transformation*) and *Torso, Yali*.³⁷⁸ In her judgement of her own work, Märten affirms a hierarchy of nonfiction over fiction and science over literature. However, these very distinctions are troubled by the works themselves: just as *Torso* challenges ideological and formal assumptions about the worker's autobiography, *Essence and Transformation* derives its scientific authority from the cultural fictions of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century ethnography. Although moving from a consciously subjective to an allegedly objective account allows Märten to increase the scope of her claims, it is not reducible to the distinction between fiction and nonfiction.

When Märten describes the motivation behind her study of aesthetic forms, she foregrounds the need to overcome the disciplinary boundaries of aesthetics through a more comprehensive and historically-grounded approach:

Schon seit 1910, als ich viel Geschichte, bes. Völkergeschichte studierte, fielen mir Dinge und Einflüsse auf die sogenannten Künste auf, die im Widerspruch zur schrankenlosen Freiheit dieser zum Spieltrieb usw. standen. Als ich dann auf Marx kam und die Methode solcher Forscher kennenlernte, kam ich auf den Gedanken, eine Geschichte der Formen (Künste) im Gegensatz zu den Wertungen des Individuums und der reinen Ästhetik zu versuchen.³⁷⁹

As early as 1910 when I was reading a lot of history, esp. ethnography, I noticed certain things and influences on the so-called arts that contradicted their limitless freedom in regard to the play drive, etc. Then, when I discovered Marx and the methods of these researchers, it occurred to me to attempt to write a history of the forms (arts) in contrast to individual evaluations and pure aesthetics.

In the decade before the debates on Marxist aesthetics unfolded within the KPD, Märten identified the need to provide an alternative to Schiller's play drive and Kant's aesthetic judgement in order to grasp the full range of what was often reduced to its manifestation in "art." Unlike Gertrud Alexander or the communist playwright Karl Wittfogel, Märten's primary aim was not to reveal the ideological

³⁷⁸ Lu Märten, "Abschrift eines Briefes an Professor W.u.L. Tomaszewski, Berlin, auf Fragen nach einigen Arbeiten," ca. 1956, 2, Folder 109, International Institute of Social History.

³⁷⁹ Lu Märten, "Abschrift eines Briefes," 2.

assumptions undergirding art or aesthetics—although this was one consequence of her analysis—but rather to develop a historical materialist methodology that brought together the scope of Marx’s dialectical theory of history with the insights into alternative possibilities of aesthetic production reinforced by ethnographic research. In the late nineteenth century, August Bebel’s *Woman and Socialism* (*Die Frau und der Sozialismus*, 1879) and Engels’ *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (*Der Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums und des Staats*, 1884) offered influential attempts to integrate ethnographic research into a materialist view of history. As I discuss in Chapter V, Märten would follow Bebel and Engels in writing her own history of women based on the “discovery” of the matriarchal origins of society. However, she first considered the potential of this research in an area in which it had not yet been considered: the historical materialist study of aesthetic form.

The result of Märten’s incorporation of ethnographic research into her Marxist aesthetics is a distinctly utopian understanding of the dialectics of history. While this tendency is only latent in Bebel’s and Engels’ appeals to ethnography, Märten explicitly frames her project as utopian. To emphasize her temporal orientation toward historical materialism, Märten reproduces a passage from a 1843 letter to Arnold Ruge in *Essence and Transformation*, in which Marx calls for analyzing the mystical and unknown aspects of consciousness in order to realize the possible future contained within history.³⁸⁰ “It will then become apparent that the world has long held the dream of something of which it must only become conscious in order to really obtain it,” Marx writes. “It will become apparent that it is not a matter of drawing a straight line between the past and the future, but of the *fulfillment* of the thoughts of the past. It will finally become apparent that humanity must not begin *new* work, but consciously complete the work of the past.”³⁸¹ Departing from this understanding of history, Märten’s

³⁸⁰ In the 1949 edition of *Essence and Transformation*, Märten includes a collection of excerpts from Marx and Engels’ writings. Lu Märten, *Wesen und Veränderung der Formen und Künste. Resultate historisch-materialistischer Untersuchungen* (Weimar: Verlag Werden und Wirken, 1949), 389.

³⁸¹ Original emphasis. Karl Marx, “M. an R., September 1843,” in *Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels Werke*, ed. Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED, vol. 1 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1981), 326.

shift from the scale of the individual to the world-historical potential of aesthetic production leverages the alterity of past forms to undermine the necessity of the present and insist on her dreams of the future.

The new forms of aesthetic production that Märten imagines represent neither the linear continuation of the past nor a radical break from it: they are the dialectical outcome of the contradictions emerging from capitalist industrialization, the increasing significance of the machine, and the commodification of art. Märten's aesthetic theory draws out the utopian implications of Marx's dialectics, captured by his materialist account of the negation of the negation in the first volume of *Capital* (*Das Kapital*, 1867). In the concluding section of his chapter on so-called primitive accumulation, "The Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation," Marx describes the internal contradictions that will undermine the capitalist mode of production:

Die aus der kapitalistischen Produktionsweise hervorgehende kapitalistische Aneignungsweise, daher das kapitalistische Privateigentum, ist die erste Negation des individuellen, auf eigne Arbeit gegründeten Privateigentums. Aber die kapitalistische Produktion erzeugt mit der Notwendigkeit eines Naturprozesses ihre eigne Negation. Es ist Negation der Negation. Diese stellt nicht das Privateigentum wieder her, wohl aber das individuelle Eigentum auf Grundlage der Errungenschaft der kapitalistischen Ära: der Kooperation und des Gemeinbesitzes der Erde und der durch die Arbeit selbst produzierten Produktionsmittel.³⁸²

The capitalist mode of appropriation that results from the capitalist mode of production, capitalist private property, is the first negation of individual private property based on one own's labor. But capitalist production engenders its own negation with the necessity of a natural process. This is the negation of the negation. It does not reestablish private property, but it does establish individual property on the basis of the achievements of the capitalist era: cooperation and the common ownership of land and the means of production produced by labor itself.

According to Marx, the first negation occurs with the expropriation of property from its producers as part of the capitalist accumulation of the means of production. The historical tendency toward the

³⁸² Karl Marx, *Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Ökonomie. Erster Band*, ed. Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED, vol. 23, Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels Werke (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1962), 791.

concentration of capital leads to monopolies that are increasingly incompatible with the necessarily expansive movement of capital. This centralization is accompanied by a standardization and globalization that already lays the groundwork for the socialist mode of production. At the same time, as Marx and Engels famously proclaim, capitalism produces its own “gravediggers” in the growing proletariat.³⁸³ The negation of the negation occurs when these contradictions are driven to their extreme and “[t]he expropriators are expropriated.”³⁸⁴ The masses of the working class seize control of monopolies, thereby transforming the nature of property from a product of exploitation to the object of conscious self-actualization. Capitalism’s ideological contradictions follow the same path: the promise of the formal freedom that renders workers doubly “free” to sell their labor and “free” from the means of production will finally be realized in the form of a free association [*Verein freier Menschen*] with collective ownership of the means of production.³⁸⁵ It is in this sense that Theodor Adorno would later observe that “utopia essentially consists in determinate negation.”³⁸⁶

In *Essence and Transformation*, Märten explores the utopian implications of this dialectic in the realm of aesthetics. The increasing specialization and individualization of aesthetic production that she traces over time brings it so far from its origins that it eventually ceases to have any relation to spontaneous sensual expression. By reminding her readers of the possibilities contained within history and diverse cultures, Märten seeks to generate a consciousness of aesthetic production that overcomes the artist and even art. The reconciliation of necessity and freedom in aesthetic production that Märten

³⁸³ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Manifest der kommunistischen Partei,” in *Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels Werke*, ed. Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED, vol. 4 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1959), 474.

³⁸⁴ Marx, *Das Kapital*, 23:791.

³⁸⁵ The contradictions presented by bourgeois notions of freedom are embodied by what has become known as the *doppelt freier Lohnarbeiter* or the “doubly free wage worker.” Marx explains that the “polarization of the commodity market” generates a select number of capitalists who own the means of production and a growing class of workers with nothing to sell but their labor-power. It is not, however, unfreedom that characterizes the producer-turned-wage-worker, but rather freedom “in a dual sense.” Workers are free in that they can “freely” sell their labor-power as a commodity: they are not enslaved and can consensually enter into labor contracts. At the same time, they are “free” from the means of production necessary for realizing their labor-power in production: as Marx ironically remarks, “frei, los und ledig.” Marx, 23:742; Marx, 23:92.

³⁸⁶ Ernst Bloch, “Etwas fehlt. Über die Widersprüche der utopischen Sehnsucht. Ein Rundfunkgespräch mit Theodor W. Adorno, 1964,” in *Tendenzen - Latenzen - Utopie*, Gesamtausgabe (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978), 362.

identifies in ethnographic studies is characterized by their grounding in everyday life. “Poetry is not the occupation of poets, art not that of artists,” she insists. “The person who worked the material of the jug more capably, who created the most functional jug, is the artist. And the fisher or the shepherd who could create the particular linguistic form for his sensibility [*Empfinden*] is the poet.”³⁸⁷ Märten’s emphasis on sensibility is crucial to her understanding of functionality. She does not seek to reduce aesthetic forms to bare necessity, but redefines material needs to include sensual expression and fulfillment, accounting for the significance of ornamentation in its satisfaction of the “decorative drive” [*Schmucktrieb*].³⁸⁸ Just as Ernst Bloch identifies the utopian potential of the simple jug with which he begins his *Spirit of Utopia* (*Geist der Utopie*, 1918), Märten stresses the artistry of that which is not considered to be art. “The old jug has nothing artistic about it,” Bloch writes, “but a work of art should at least be like this in order to be one, and that would indeed already be a lot.”³⁸⁹

Märten looks to history to recover the labor processes contained within everyday life, which she believes to contain more mastery and creative potential than what is considered artistic practice. The dialectical argumentation she adopts from Marx, however, precludes the nostalgic desire to return to a former state, a charge brought against her by the art historian Martin Wackernagel. Märten corrects this misconception, clarifying that “[i]t is, of course, impossible to ignore the machine and its revolution or reverse developments. But today’s understanding of art only touches the tip of the iceberg, which can hardly stand when it comes to the vast majority of people.”³⁹⁰ Märten follows the contradictions manifested in the alienation and individualization of commodified art, machine production, bourgeois genre distinctions, and artistic genius into their possible utopian futures.

³⁸⁷ Lu Märten, “Historisch-Materialistisches über Wesen und Veränderung der Künste. Eine pragmatische Einleitung (1921),” in *Formen für den Alltag. Schriften, Aufsätze, Vorträge*, ed. Rainhard May (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1982), 59.

³⁸⁸ Märten, *Wesen und Veränderung der Formen und Künste. Resultate historisch-materialistischer Untersuchungen*, 33.

³⁸⁹ Ernst Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, vol. 16, Ernst Bloch Gesamtausgabe (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1971), 15.

³⁹⁰ Lu Märten, “Abschrift eines Briefes an Professor W.u.L. Tomaszewski, Berlin, auf Fragen nach einigen Arbeiten,” 4.

Märten's utopianism was not a welcome contribution to the emergent cultural politics of the KPD. As Florian Vaßen observes, "[i]n contrast to Social Democratic as well as, to a large extent, Communist literary criticism (the Mehring School), Lu Märten departs from the Marxian concept of labor in her aesthetic theory; she insists on [transforming] the critique of art into the critique of labor (form)."³⁹¹ Alexander dismissed her argument as mechanistic and undialectical and charged her with overestimating technique and underestimating the importance of ideological content.³⁹² Wittfogel argued that her notion of classless forms was "formalistic barbarism," characterizing her aesthetic theory as "idealism, which the proletarian culture will not adopt."³⁹³ Perhaps even more indicative of the party's response, the contemporary reception in Germany was largely limited to these two polemical reactions. Ultimately, most of the interest in *Essence and Transformation* came from abroad: a Russian translation was commissioned to be overseen by Anatoly Lunacharsky and it was enthusiastically embraced by the Czech poetists Karel Teige and Bedřich Václavěk.³⁹⁴

The Question of the Bourgeois Heritage

From Franz Mehring's influential literary history to his student Gertrud Alexander's program for the aesthetic education of the proletariat, the search for revolutionary art within the KPD allowed for little experimentation on the part of working-class authors themselves. Mehring was one of the first thinkers to offer a systematic, historical materialist approach to literary theory and history.³⁹⁵ While he only lived until 1919, his work to a large extent set the terms of the debates on Marxist aesthetics and

³⁹¹ Florian Vaßen, ed., "Lu Märten's ästhetische Theorie. Die Verbindung von marxischem Arbeitsbegriff und sozialdemokratischer Technikgläubigkeit," *alternative*, Materialistische Literaturtheorie VI, 16, no. 89 (April 1973): 87.

³⁹² G.G.L. (Gertrud Alexander), "Historischer Materialismus und Kunstkritik," *Die Internationale. Zeitschrift für Praxis und Theorie des Marxismus*, no. 5 (1921): 181.

³⁹³ Karl August Wittfogel, *Zur Frage einer marxistischen Ästhetik. Abhandlung* (Cologne: Köln: Kalkverlag, 1973), 34.

³⁹⁴ Kambas, *Die Werkstatt als Utopie*, 191.

³⁹⁵ See: Franz Mehring, *Die Lessing-Legende*, ed. Thomas Höhle, Hans Koch, and Josef Schleifstein, vol. 9, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1963); Franz Mehring, *Zur Literaturgeschichte von Calderon bis Heine*, ed. Eduard Fuchs (Soziologische Verlagsanstalt, 1929); Franz Mehring, *Zur Literaturgeschichte von Hebbel bis Gorki*, vol. 2, *Gesammelte Schriften und Aufsätze* (Berlin: Universumbücherei für Alle, 1930).

proletarian art in the early 1920s.³⁹⁶ He played a leading role in the Spartacus League and co-founded the KPD but was even more influential as a historian, biographer of Marx, and literary critic.³⁹⁷ Despite his reservations about Mehring, even György Lukács admitted that he was “doubtlessly one of the most significant and multifaceted figures of the entire period of the Second International.”³⁹⁸

Mehring’s contribution was not only to reject the notion of autonomous art and demonstrate the ways in which bourgeois art served political aims. In addition, his cultural politics presented “the programmatic attempt to make art serve politics,” specifically the workers’ movement at the end of the nineteenth century.³⁹⁹ This project consisted in defending the German humanist tradition and claiming it for the working class.⁴⁰⁰ Mehring distinguishes between two periods in bourgeois art history: first, the revolutionary, ascendant period of the 18th century, in which bourgeois literature embodied humanistic, progressive values, and the subsequent period of decadence and decline lasting to the present day, in which the bourgeoisie had become the dominant class and betrayed its democratic aspirations.⁴⁰¹ According to Mehring, literature from the revolutionary period—embodied by the classics of Lessing, Goethe and Schiller—had not lost its potential for the working class. As opposed to contemporary literature that contained no value for workers, the classics revealed a “joyful militant element that is the life substance [*Das Leben des Lebens*] of the class-conscious proletariat.”⁴⁰²

Mehring’s aesthetic judgment regulates not only content, but also affect. According to Mehring, modern art is “thoroughly pessimistic in the sense that it only sees the misery in the misery

³⁹⁶ Reinhold Jaretsky, “*Interimsästhetik*”: *Franz Mehrings früher Versuch einer sozialgeschichtlichen Literaturbetrachtung* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1991), 7.

³⁹⁷ Lukács explains the extent of Mehring’s influence on Marxist literary criticism: “even his political opponents bowed down before his intellect and his knowledge in the area of literature and, it is fair to say, that literary historical judgements were essentially determined by Mehring up through the final years of the German workers’ movement.” György Lukács, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Ästhetik* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1956), 319.

³⁹⁸ Lukács, 318.

³⁹⁹ Jaretsky, 10–11.

⁴⁰⁰ Hans Koch, *Franz Mehrings Beitrag zur marxistischen Literaturtheorie* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1959), 8.

⁴⁰¹ Walter Fähnders and Martin Rector, “Theorie und Organisation einer proletarisch-revolutionären Literatur 1919–1923,” in *Literatur im Klassenkampf. Zur proletarisch-revolutionären Literaturtheorie 1919–1923* (Munich: C. Hanser, 1971), 8.

⁴⁰² Franz Mehring, *Kunst und Proletariat*, Year 15, Volume 1, Nr. 5, *Die Neue Zeit*. Wochenschrift der deutschen Sozialdemokratie (Stuttgart: Dietz, 1896), 130.

of the present.”⁴⁰³ Every revolutionary class, in contrast, is deeply optimistic. However, Mehring is careful to distinguish this revolutionary optimism from utopianism:

Das hat selbstverständlich mit irgend welchem Utopismus nichts zu thun. Der revolutionäre Kämpfer mag in der nüchternsten Weise die Chancen des Kampfes abschätzen: ein revolutionärer Kämpfer ist er doch nur, weil er die felsenfeste Ueberzeugung hat, daß er eine Welt umwälzen kann. In diesem Sinne ist jeder klassenbewußte Arbeiter ein Optimist: er sieht voll froher Hoffnung in die Zukunft, und er schöpft diese Hoffnung gerade aus dem Elend, das ihn umgiebt.⁴⁰⁴

Of course, this has nothing to do with any kind of utopianism. The revolutionary fighter may assess the prospects of the struggle in the most sober sense: but he is only a revolutionary fighter because he has the unwavering conviction that he can revolutionize the world. In this sense, every class conscious worker is an optimist: he looks to the future with joyous hope and he generates this hope precisely from the misery that surrounds him.

Although describing a hope emerging out of necessity that is consistent with the affective structure of Märten’s utopianism, Mehring echoes the scientific socialist rejection of the term. The revolutionary hope that Mehring endorses is distinctly militant and, indeed, masculinized, excluding the range of other utopian affects. Characteristic of the trajectory of Mehring’s legacy in the KPD, rather than an investment in the open and self-reflective education of desire through art, Mehring’s program reveals the attempted prescription of desire, down to the specific quality of optimism that the enlightened worker should demonstrate: suffering, yet hopeful; realistic, but convinced of success. Mehring’s historical periodization entails a rejection of contemporary literature as a symptom of decline, as well as a notion of revolutionary art based primarily on consuming rather than producing art. His treatment of the working class as a monolith and his claim to speak for not only their present, but also their future desires would remain a dominant tendency in the debates on Marxist aesthetics.

⁴⁰³ Mehring, *Kunst Und Proletariat*, 130.

⁴⁰⁴ Mehring, *Kunst Und Proletariat*, 130.

Mehring's position was most prominently defended and developed by his colleague and student Gertrud Alexander, the feuilleton editor for the KPD's newspaper, *Die Rote Fahne* and the KPD's most prominent cultural critic in the early 1920s. Alexander further simplifies Mehring's theory: while she adopts his historical periodization of the rising and declining bourgeoisie, she universalizes the first period, transforming the "top artistic achievements of the progressive bourgeoisie into norms that transcend class" and asserting "their unconditional validity for the proletariat."⁴⁰⁵ Accordingly, Alexander insisted that Expressionism, Dadaism and other forms of avant-garde art were at best insignificant and, at worst, corrupted the working class. Classic bourgeois art, in contrast, contained a revolutionary impulse from which the proletariat could still benefit.

Alexander's cultural politics were initially met with opposition from inside and outside of the party. Externally, she was challenged by the anarchistic Left Communists. Originally dominant within the KPD, the faction broke off and founded the General Workers' Union (*Allgemeine Arbeiter-Union*, AAU) and the Communist Workers' Party of Germany (*Kommunistische Arbeiter-Partei Deutschlands*, KAPD). The artists and intellectuals in these parties emerged from Expressionism and Dadaism, including Franz Jung, Oskar Kanehl, Franz Pfemfert, and Franz Wilhelm Seiwert, and opposed centralization and bureaucratization. They instead called for the immediate, spontaneous uprising of the proletariat, in part through contemporary art as a form of agitation. But the sharpest critics of Alexander's call for the preservation of the classical bourgeois heritage came from within the party: from the Dadaists led by John Heartfield and his brother Wieland Herzfelde, George Grosz, Julian Gumperz, and Erwin Piscator, represented by the journal *Der Gegner* and the publishing house, Malik-Verlag, and then from Märlen.⁴⁰⁶ While Mehring and Alexander were primarily concerned with the

⁴⁰⁵ Fährnders and Rector, "Theorie und Organisation einer proletarisch-revolutionären Literatur 1919-1923," 14.

⁴⁰⁶ Walter Fährnders and Martin Rector, *Linksradikalismus und Literatur. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der sozialistischen Literatur in der Weimarer Republik*, vol. 1 (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1974), 99.

proletariat's relationship to bourgeois art, the Dadaists insisted on a drastic break from artistic traditions. It was the latent utopianism of Dada's radical negation that resonated with Märten.

Eberhard Roters identifies the three structural elements of Dadaism as negativism, trivialism, and dilettantism. The movement encompassed both the investment in the immediate transformation of artistic production through the development of new practices—of which montage is the most notable example—and the nihilistic denial of art: “a nihilism that questioned all traditional values in order to gain everything from their radical destruction; everything, that means: an equally radical new beginning, the constitution of a new future from the ground up.”⁴⁰⁷ For this reason, Robert Goldwater describes Dada's nihilism as “instrumental rather than fundamental.”⁴⁰⁸ Although Märten sided with the Dadaists against Alexander, she did not reject bourgeois art in itself as much as the bourgeois commodification of art and the limited role of the artist in bourgeois society. She therefore proposed the category of “forms” rather than negatively defined “anti-art” to replace the commodified and fetishized notion of art in bourgeois society.

The standoff between the Dadaists and Alexander came to the fore in the wake of the infamous “Kunstlump” [*Art Rascal*] controversy in March through June of 1920.⁴⁰⁹ As Barbara

⁴⁰⁷ Eberhard Roters, *Fabricatio nihili, oder, Die Herstellung von Nichts. Dada Meditationen* (Berlin: Argon, 1990), 143; Brigid Doherty describes the Dadaist technique of montage as the medium of revolutionary force and its failure: “Berlin Dada produced an art of failed revolution, in which the destructive energy as well as the actual collapse of revolutionary politics in Germany circa 1919-20 are figured in the destruction of the traditional work of art as a component of the work of Dada montage. The medium of that destruction, montage embodies the energy as well as the collapse, and the Dadaists' technique keeps both in play.” Brigid Doherty, “The Work of Art and the Problem of Politics in Berlin Dada,” *October* 105 (2003): 92.

⁴⁰⁸ Robert Goldwater, review of *Review of The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*, by Robert Motherwell, *The Art Bulletin* 34, no. 3 (1952): 250, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3047430>.

⁴⁰⁹ John Heartfield and George Grosz's polemic “The Art Rascal” (“Der Kunstlump”) was written in response to Oskar Kokoschka's appeal to consider works of art over political differences following the damaging of Peter Paul Ruben's painting *Bathsheba* during the Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch. Heartfield and Grosz's manifesto-like document sets out to eviscerate Kokoschka's claims about the sanctity of art by denying that it has any value for the worker and embracing its destruction. Treating the “Kunstlump” Kokoschka as a “symptomatic person” whose perspective reflects the logic of the art market and art's privileged role in capitalism, Heartfield and Grosz argue that Rubens and Rembrandt's masterpieces “for us today, no longer contain the slightest amount of life worth”: their only worth is as a store of value for the bourgeoisie. Structured by the refrain “what is the worker supposed to do with art?”—Heartfield and Grosz attack the bourgeois notion of art from all angles: art's denial of economic and social conditions is not merely apolitical, it is counterrevolutionary; beauty means nothing when workers earning starvation wages would happily exchange a “masterpiece” for food; the bourgeoisie itself values art primarily as a commodity; if art provides comfort that allows the

McCloskey notes, this scandal corresponded to the KPD beginning its “systematic purge of all left-extremist elements within its membership” in early 1920.⁴¹⁰ Märten made her own intervention in the debate with a defense of Dadaism against Alexander’s charges of bourgeois decadence published in August in *Die Rote Fabne*.⁴¹¹ Along with her pamphlet *Historical Materialism on the Essence and Transformation of the Arts (A Pragmatic Introduction)* (*Historisch-Materialistisches über Wesen und Veränderung der Künste (eine pragmatische Einleitung)*, 1921), which appeared the next year, this catalyzed the debate between Alexander and Märten on historical materialist method, technique and form, and the history and future of revolutionary art.

Producing the Art Worker

The debates on Marxist aesthetics in the early 1920s were often framed in terms of broad historical periods: either by emphasizing the legacy of bourgeois art or attempting to locate the source of revolutionary, proletarian art in the present or the post-revolutionary future. As the tension between the Mehring School and the Dadaists illustrates, this led to questions such as: who has the authority to speak for the proletariat? How should the proletariat relate to history? What are the appropriate

bourgeoisie to more successfully perform its role as exploiters, it similarly attempts to pacify and disarm the proletariat. The *Kunstlump* polemic solidified Gertrud’s view of Dada as “art anarchism,” [*Kunstanarchismus*] “which rejects all past art and literature and considers it worthy of annihilation and wants to stamp the new—which can only be proletarian—out of the ground.” John Heartfield and George Grosz, “Der Kunstlump,” ed. Julian Gumperz and Karl Otten, *Der Gegner* 1, no. 12 (April 1920): 50; Gertrud Alexander, “Zur Frage der Kritik bürgerlicher Kunst,” in *Literatur im Klassenkampf. Zur proletarisch-revolutionären Literaturtheorie 1919-1923*, ed. Walter Fähnders and Martin Rector (Munich: C. Hanser, 1971), 88.

⁴¹⁰ Barbara McCloskey, *George Grosz and the Communist Party: Art and Radicalism in Crisis, 1918 to 1936* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 67.

⁴¹¹ In a two-part article entitled “History, Satire, Dada and More,” (“Geschichte, Satyre, Dada und Weiteres”) published in *Die Rote Fabne*’s feuilleton, Märten argues for Dada’s significance as satire, contextualizing it in the history of satire from the Middle Ages to high capitalism. Märten resignifies Alexander’s portrayal of Dada as a symptom of bourgeois decline and decadence by instead praising Dada as a “Zeiterscheinung” or a sign of the times, which reveals that satirical nature of capitalism itself. She argues that, its advanced state, capitalism has reached such extreme levels of contradiction and excess that the mere reproduction of reality through photography or found objects conveys its absurdity without the need for mediation or “translation” through artistic form or consciousness. Lu Märten, “Geschichte, Satyre, Dada und Weiteres I,” *Die Rote Fabne*, no. 163 (August 22, 1920); Lu Märten, “Geschichte, Satyre, Dada und Weiteres II,” *Die Rote Fabne*, no. 164 (August 24, 1920).

affects of the proletarian revolutionary and which literature reflects or enhances them? Or even, as the title of a 1922 article in *Die Rote Fahne* bluntly puts it, “What Should the Proletarian Read?”⁴¹²

Building on almost two decades of art criticism, Märten intervened by posing a new set of questions that extended the scope of the debate into ancient history as well as beyond literature to include a variety of artistic forms, from dance and music to photography and film. Johanna Rosenberg observes that Märten departs from an entirely different set of assumptions than the Mehring school: “Lu Märten’s theory is not only not developed from literature [...], but not even from art at all. Her fundamental thought [...] consists in conceiving of art not only as historically changeable, but as a transitory appearance altogether, as a result of the social division of labor and thus class society, whose conditions are lost and die off with the sublation [*Aufhebung*] of this class society.”⁴¹³ Märten takes an active approach to overcoming the division of labor in aesthetic production, offering models of labor processes to catalyze this transition rather than assuming that such a shift will necessarily result from the abolition of class society.

As a working-class woman author, Märten did not perceive the proletariat as an abstract Other, but a contested and unstable class identity to which she belonged. Correspondingly, she was interested not in identifying a set curriculum for the working class, but instead enabling herself and others to engage in their own aesthetic experimentation. As she explores in *Torso*, this not only demands a basic level of material security and access to training and resources, but the labor process itself also alters the subjectivity of the art worker. In her debate with Gertrud Alexander, she thus redirects attention from ideological content to questions of technique, method, and form. She rejects the understanding of “genius” as a limited resource, insisting that it can and must infuse workers’ everyday lives.

⁴¹² Walter Fähnders and Martin Rector, eds., “Was soll der Proletarier lesen?,” in *Literatur im Klassenkampf. Zur proletarisch-revolutionären Literaturtheorie 1919-1923* (Munich: C. Hanser, 1971), 102–5.

⁴¹³ Johanna Rosenberg, “Lu Märten’s Entwurf einer historisch-materialistischen Theorie der Künste,” *Weimarer Beiträge* 25, no. 10 (January 1, 1979): 39–63.

Dismissing the issue of proper consumption habits, Märten pursues the question of aesthetic form as inseparable from the revolutionary subjectivity that both shapes it and is shaped by it.

Märten makes several utopian interventions that alter the terms and expand the scope of the debates on revolutionary art: first, she insists that what is known as art or “pure art” in high capitalism is only one, commodified form of appearance [*Erscheinungsform*] of the products of labor that must be considered in the context of their historical and technical development rather than broad ideological period. Second, she posits that the transition to communist society on the basis of creative production is not a matter of determining a transhistorical set of aesthetic values, but of deliberately organizing the technological basis of society in order to grant collective, artistic creation a “dictatorship over the machine,” prioritizing material, form and usefulness to establish a “craft quality” [*handwerkliche Qualität*] in production.⁴¹⁴ Third, she argues for reframing artistic production as a form of labor and the artist as an “art worker” in order to facilitate the revolutionary resubjection that results from aesthetic production. I map these three interventions first in Märten’s debate with Gertrud Alexander, then in her comprehensive history of aesthetic forms.

Märten provides the first systematic presentation of her historical materialist method in her pamphlet, *Historical Materialism on the Essence and Transformation of the Arts* (*Historisch-Materialistisches über Wesen und Veränderung der Künste*, 1921). The text reaches from the Greek epic and the fairytale to Gothic architecture and the nineteenth-century Russian novel. By adopting this broad scope, Märten sketches the outlines of a scientific method for examining the relationship between the economic and technical organization of production and the production of human sensibilities throughout history. She explains her understanding of historical materialism as not only economic or objective, but also embodied and subjective:

⁴¹⁴ Märten, “Historisch-Materialistisches über Wesen und Veränderung der Künste. Eine pragmatische Einleitung (1921),” 93.

Historisch – das heißt nicht nur in der Reihenfolge ihrer Entstehung, sondern nach der *Abhängigkeit* ihres Entstehens. Materialistisch – das heißt nicht nur nach ihren technischen Zusammenhängen, sondern auch nach ihren physischen, aus dem Organismus des physischen Menschen selbst. Nach den Abhängigkeiten und Einwirkungen, die sie aus dem sinnlich Vermögen des Menschen haben. Die Wechselwirkung, die sie aus der technischen Mechanik – die des Kapitalismus oder einer anderen – mit dieser physisch-psychischen Ausdrucksenergie im Menschen erfährt.⁴¹⁵

Historical—that means not only in order of their emergence, but according to the *dependency* of their emergence. Materialist – that means not only according to their technical contexts, but also physical, from the organism of the physical humans themselves. According to the dependencies and influences that they acquire from the human sensual faculty. The interaction between the technical mechanisms—of capitalism or otherwise—and this physical-psychological expressive human energy.

Märten situates her aesthetics at the intersection of labor, art, and sensuality. According to Märten, “historical” does not entail a periodization in terms of “feudal” and “capitalist” or Mehring’s “classical bourgeois” and “decadent bourgeois” periods. Instead, historical inquiry demands an interrogation of the specific economic and social needs that produce certain techniques and forms as dominant. “Materialist” describes the examination of both relations of production and the technological means of production as well as the physiological and emotional constitution of the individual. The human “sensual capacity” is not simply determined by the mode of production, but is both shaped by the labor processes of a given community and influences the character of this labor. Märten’s understanding of the relationship between creative production and subjectivity is reflected in Félix Guattari’s emphasis on “not only the confrontation with a new material of expression, but the constitution of complexes of subjectivation: multiple exchanges between individual-group-machine.”⁴¹⁶ The possibility of generating new subjectivities is embedded in Märten’s project to generate new aesthetic forms from the multiplicity of possibilities found in the past.

⁴¹⁵ Märten, 54.

⁴¹⁶ Translation altered. Félix Guattari, *Chaosmose* (Paris: Galilée, 1992), 19; Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, trans. Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 7.

Märten's understanding of the resubjection that occurs through creative production led her to reject a focus on the proletariat's consumption of art. In an article published in *Die Aktion* in 1925, Märten responds in depth to what she understood to be the ineffectual and condescending approach to the KPD education of workers' aesthetic sensibilities: "in order to demand something that will decorate the walls of the new life," she writes "it is necessary to comprehend that these walls themselves must be transformed and made anew."⁴¹⁷ Consequently, she calls for the "emancipation from all old art fetishes—as if art is something that exists outside of the course of things and outside of the daily interactions of things, as if it were the expression of a temporally and spatially bound sensation and not the expression of life itself, as it should be."⁴¹⁸ Märten's identification of artistic production with a more fundamental, "primitive" force allows her to argue that it is not only the sensual capacities that contribute to the production of art, but also labor that itself transforms sensuality:

Denn wenn der Satz, daß die Dinge unser Bewußtsein bestimmen und nicht umgekehrt das Bewußtsein der Dinge zunächst, als eins unserer wissenschaftlichen Fundamente zu Recht besteht, so muß gefolgert werden, daß auch unsre sinnlichen Reagenzmöglichkeiten sich verändern können und nicht ewig die gleichen bleiben. Das heißt: Es ist keine absolute, sondern nur historisch einzureihende Tatsache, daß uns ein Bild oder eine Figur, überhaupt eine künstliche Form notwendig zu Affekten des Genusses bringen muß.⁴¹⁹

For if the proposition that things determine our consciousness and not, conversely, that consciousness in the first place determines things rightfully exists as one of our scientific fundamentals, then it must follow that the possibilities of our sensual reactions can also be changed and do not perpetually stay the same. That is to say: it is not an absolute, but a historically-contingent fact that an image or a figure, any artistic form at all, necessarily brings about pleasurable affects.

⁴¹⁷ Lu Märten, "Kunst und Proletariat (1925)," in *Formen für den Alltag. Schriften, Aufsätze, Vorträge*, ed. Rainhard May (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1982), 115-16.

⁴¹⁸ Märten, "Kunst und Proletariat (1925)," 114.

⁴¹⁹ Märten, "Kunst und Proletariat (1925)," 114-115.

Märten extends Marx's influential argument about the shift from idealism to materialism to the realms of aesthetics and affects.⁴²⁰ From Marx's assertion that "[i]t is not humans' consciousness that determines their being, but rather, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness," Märten concludes that because the material world shapes our consciousness, and not our consciousness that shapes the world, our desires and experiences of pleasure are themselves alterable.⁴²¹ She identifies the fundamentally utopian potential of this observation. Rather than accepting the reified notions of beauty or art that formed the basis of both idealist and the existing KPD approaches to aesthetics, Märten argues for consciously and collectively re-organizing the labor processes that structure sensibility and experiences of pleasure. As she emphasizes, this is not a matter of determining true and false needs, but is rather a question of an education toward a self-conscious practice: "now and then a chapter on the good or the bad in art is taken up in front of the worker and he *must* stand there without comprehension, he *must* accept it uncritically, *because the tools of criticism are not handed to him, but only the critique.*"⁴²²

Märten's utopianism reconciles the need for immediate reforms with the historical scale of its revolutionary vision. She insists on providing workers with the resources, education, and technical training to engage in aesthetic production themselves. Although she agrees that it is impossible to predict or prescribe the development of art, she rejects the repeated attempts to defer the problem to the future:

Das vielgesprochene und geschriebene Wort: daß Formen, Art und Wesen der Künste der Zukunft sich nicht bestimmen lassen und getrost eben dieser Zukunft überlassen werden dürfen, ist insofern richtig, als es der Wissenschaft nicht einfallen kann, hier

⁴²⁰ Karl Marx, "Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie," in *Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels Werke*, ed. Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED, vol. 13 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1961), 9.

⁴²¹ While Märten does not develop her argument about the alterability of affect further, instead focusing on the labor process, Angela Davis would later frame this aspect of Marx's early writings explicitly in terms of gendered desire and sensuality. Angela Davis, "Women and Capitalism: Dialectics of Liberation and Oppression," *The Angela Y. Davis Reader* (Malden: Blackwell, 1998), 179.

⁴²² Original Emphasis. Märten, "Die Revolutionäre Presse und das Feuilleton," ed. Julian Gumperz and Wieland Herzfelde, *Der Gegner* 1920/21, no. 6 (March 1921): 188.

etwas im einzelnen und Formalen vorauszusagen; das ist kaum auf wirtschaftlichen Gebieten zunächst unternommen worden. Aber es bleibt nicht richtig, soweit dabei nicht daran gedacht wird, daß die Künste und Künstler die heutige isolierte und vom Zufall diktierte Stellung in ihren kapitalistischen Voraussetzungen nicht mehr haben können.⁴²³

The much-spoken and much-written phrase: that the forms, type and essence of the future arts cannot be determined and may be left to the future with confidence is correct insofar as it cannot occur to science to predict anything here formally or in detail; that has hardly even been undertaken in economic spheres. But it remains incorrect to the extent that we don't consider that the arts and artists can no longer maintain their position under today's capitalist premises, isolated and dictated by chance.

Märten positions her argument in opposition to Lunacharsky's stark distinction between the proletarian culture of today and the classless, socialist culture of the future, instead attempting to create the material conditions for this transition to occur.⁴²⁴ She does not see a contradiction between fighting for reforms and furthering her revolutionary agenda; nor does she back down from offering her own visions of aesthetic production of forms as well as subjectivity itself. Märten continues by reframing the question of specific artworks as a question of "art workers":

Damit aber wird ihre Einstellung eine Frage einer *bestimmten Art von Arbeitern*, deren Arbeit auf persönliche—nicht maschinelle Arbeit beruht; eine Frage des Organisatorischen, nach bestimmten Forderungen von seiten der Kunstarbeiter wie von seiten der Bedürfnisse der Gesellschaft. Mit dem Hinweis auf die allgemeinen Folgerungen aus dem allgemeinen Zustand ist da wenig getan; schon weil sie konkrete Bedingungen wie Vorstellungen verlangt. Dies nebenbei. Es entstehen hier alle Fragen, die mit den fachlich-handwerklich neuen Grundlagen der Künste zusammenhängen. Und ferner: Wie soll dem Menschen der neuen Gesellschaft, dem man als Proletarier heute – von Bildern, Literaturen, Richtungen, Ismen, Künsten und Afterkünsten aus dem Stegreif erzählt – geantwortet werden, wenn es sich darum handelt, Kenntnisse,

⁴²³ Märten, "Historisch-Materialistisches über Wesen und Veränderung der Künste. Eine pragmatische Einleitung (1921)," 48–49.

⁴²⁴ The key passage in the German translation of Lunacharsky's *The Cultural Tasks of the Working Class* (*Kul'turnye zadachi rabochego klassa*, 1917) that Märten cites reads: "Im Sozialismus unterscheiden wir mit vollkommener Bestimmtheit die Blume, zu der sich der Menschheit einst entfalten wird, und den Vorgang selbst, durch den der dünne und verhältnismäßig unansehnliche Stengel trotz des Gesetzes der Schwere in die Höhe schießt. Die sozialistische Kultur der Zukunft ist die allgemeinmenschliche, außerhalb der Klassen stehende Kultur, eine harmonisch und ihrem Typus nach klassische Kultur, in der der Inhalt, der sich durch einen gesunden organischen Prozeß gebildet hat und sich weiter entwickelt, eine ihm vollständig entsprechende Form erhält." A. Lunatscharskii, *Die Kulturaufgaben der Arbeiterklasse*, ed. Franz Pfemfert, vol. 3, Allgemeinmenschliche Kultur und Klassen-Kultur (Berlin-Wilmersdorf: Die Aktion, 1919), 19.

Wissen, Grundlagen – gleich denen aus der Wirtschaft darüber zu vermitteln. Und was hätten die Erwartungen von einer neuen schöpferischen Art in Kunst und Poesie für historische Vorstellungen, wenn man sich nicht klar wird über das, was Dichtung, Poesie, Musik oder irgendeine dieser Kategorien samt ihren Gattungen im einzelnen nach ihrem historischen Wesen und Begriff bedeuten.⁴²⁵

Their approach therefore becomes a question of a *certain type of worker*, whose work is based on personal—not machine labor; a question of organization according to the particular demands of art workers as well as the needs of society. A reference to the general demands emerging from the general condition accomplishes little; if only because this requires concrete conditions and conceptions. Incidentally, all of the questions connected to the new, technical-artisanal foundation of the arts emerge here. Furthermore: how should we to answer to the person of the new society—who, today as the proletarian, is told off-hand about images, literatures, tendencies, isms, arts, and degenerate arts—when it is a matter of conveying skills, knowledge, fundamentals, just as in regard to economics. And what kind of historical notions could underlie the expectations of a new, creative type of art and poetry if we do not clarify what literature, poetry, music or any of these categories along with their genres mean in particular according to their historical essence and concepts.

In this passage, Märten refutes the Mehring School's historical periodization as well as the corresponding emphasis on the revolutionary heritage contained within bourgeois artworks. Corresponding to her shift from consumption to production, she directs attention away from aesthetic objects to aesthetic producers, what she calls "art workers." This allows her to offer a vision of future productive relations while leaving an opening for their inevitable variations. Finding a balance between the autonomy of the art workers and the needs of the "new society" is an ongoing organizational task that demands the historical awareness she seeks to provide with her work. Märten imagines a form of labor that does not discard the machine entirely, but is based primarily on the personal relationship of the producers to their products. The question of the New Person is Märten's entry point into the various issues of social organization: the aesthetic foundation of society she imagines combines artisanal skill and conscious production with a vision of universal education and the democratization

⁴²⁵ Original emphasis. Lu Märten, "Historisch-Materialistisches über Wesen und Veränderung der Künste. Eine pragmatische Einleitung (1921)," in *Formen für den Alltag. Schriften, Aufsätze, Vorträge*, ed. Rainhard May (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1982), 49.

of art.⁴²⁶ In referring to the “people of the new society” who are known today as the “proletariat,” Märtén highlights the transitional nature of these categories: the proletariat will cease to exist in a classless society, just as art will cease to exist in a society in which the distinctions between art and craft, labor and pleasure have been overcome.

In her response to Märtén’s pamphlet, Gertrud Alexander initially acknowledges Märtén’s attempt to situate art within the history of craft production as a potentially valuable alternative to the bourgeois notion of the ahistorical perception of art. Nevertheless, she quickly dismisses Märtén’s rhetorical question of whether it would not be better to provide workers with the tools and knowledge to produce their own art and art criticism, rather than engaging in abstract debates on bourgeois art in daily newspapers. Recognizing the latter point as implicating her own work, she retorts: “[o]ne should think that such questions are futile, for both approaches are surely justified and it is really a matter of applying the historical materialist method *dialectically* and not mechanistically or from the outside. It will be shown that this form of enlightenment and instruction [*Belehrung*] must necessarily result from his struggle, as a part of it.”⁴²⁷ Echoing her refutation of the Dadaists, Alexander repeatedly employs this strategy to refute Märtén’s argument in the course of the exchange: the class struggle itself will produce the answers. Both Alexander’s deferral of the problem to the future and her emphasis on enlightenment to characterize the relationship to the working class reveal her disregard of Märtén’s problematization of precisely this form of paternalism.

Alexander views Märtén’s attempt to transform labor by releasing artistic production from its exclusivity not as emancipatory, but rather as undermining precisely that which makes art art. For

⁴²⁶ Similarly to the way in which “sex worker” has come to replace the term “prostitute,” Märtén’s concept of the “art worker” points to the status of artistic production as a form of labor—and the need to organize it as such—as well as attempts to restore the dignity to all work when it serves as a free and generative form of relating to oneself, society, and the material world.

⁴²⁷ Original Emphasis. G.G.L. (Gertrud Alexander), “Historischer Materialismus und Kunstkritik,” *Die Internationale. Zeitschrift für Praxis und Theorie des Marxismus*, no. 5 (1921): 181.

Märten, craft is the result of the mastery of technique, knowledge of materials, and sensual, creative capacity of every person. Alexander perceives this emphasis on technique and accessibility as betraying a lack of understanding of art in opposition to craft:

Selbst von dem vollendetsten Handwerker trennt den Künstler eine Welt. Denn das Wesen des Künstlers, das, was ihn unterscheidet, ist seine Intuitionskraft, sein Gestaltenwollen und -müssen in einzigartig notwendigen Formen, in denen der grosse Künstler den überzeitlichen und überindividuellen Ausdruck für Zeitliches findet. Wo diese Kraft gross genug ist und zwingend, wird das Technische spielend überwunden, und zwar gilt dies nicht nur für den Künstler als Einzelercheinung, sondern auch für den Gestaltungswillen einer Gesamtheit.⁴²⁸

There is a world of difference between the artist and even the most accomplished craftsman. For the essence of the artist, that which distinguishes him, is his power of intuition, his desire and need to create through unique, necessary forms, in which the great artist finds an expression for the temporal that exceeds temporality and individuality. When this power is great enough and compelling, the technical is overcome with ease and, indeed, this is not only true of the artist as an individual phenomenon, but also for the creative will of the collective.

This notion of the “great artist” and the transcendent quality of art that overcomes temporal, subjective, and technological limitations precludes any form of Dadaist dilettantism or everyday aesthetic production. Adopting Märten’s language of “essence,” Alexander repeats: “[a]rt can never be the highest quality of craft [*Handwerke*], for it is, according to its *essence*, something completely different, namely, something highly spiritual, the highest power of perception combined with the capacity to express it in a form that is comprehensible to the collective from which it emerges, but also extraordinary.”⁴²⁹ Alexander does not see Märten’s attempt to alter the meaning of art from within as a utopian gesture, but rather as an attack on the sanctity of art. According to Märten, this inability to look beyond art’s “bourgeois conceptual disguise” [*bürgerliche Begriffsverkleidung*] traps Alexander in a

⁴²⁸ G.G.L. (Gertrud Alexander), 182–83.

⁴²⁹ G.G.L. (Gertrud Alexander), 84.

paradigm that can only yield misguided enlightenment programs, rather than the more fundamental transformation of labor processes.⁴³⁰

Märten would eventually respond to Alexander's critique by shifting the emphasis of her analysis from a narrative of decline due to the severing of "pure art" from the crafts through the introduction of the machine in manufacturing to the potential of newer technology including radio and film to generate collective forms. Her investment in decentering the individual and undermining the cult of the artist compels Märten to draw attention to the affordances of different media and materials, blurring the distinctions between the artisan, the manual laborer and the artist—reflected in the language of the *Handwerker*, *Handarbeiter* and *Kunstarbeiter*—and the materials and technology themselves. While Alexander was given the last word in *Die Rote Fahne* as the feuilleton editor, this exchange compelled Märten to refine her method and drove her further away from the KPD's top-down cultural politics. She published her findings several years later, this time reinforced by examples drawn from ethnographic research.

An Ethnography of Forms

In *Essence and Transformation of the Forms/Arts* (1924), Märten further expands the scope of her earlier introductory pamphlet and her subsequent exchange with Gertrud Alexander. In 1921, she drew primarily on the ideal of artisanship in the Middle Ages to call for the reintegration of the crafts within the arts and refute Alexander's privileging of individual genius and the "eternal" nature of great art.⁴³¹

⁴³⁰ Alexander's repeated emphasis on the qualitative difference between art and craft and the former's incomparably higher form is precisely what causes Märten to reject the term "art." She argues that questioning this notion of art—along with all other such forms of appearance—is the very condition for her analysis: "the work required here would, however, possibly have little effect, if one were to allow the categories from which the individual appearances emerge to keep existing in their bourgeois conceptual disguise—even 'art' is one such word—or if one assumes that all of these have already implicitly been signified as historical or revolutionary." Lu Märten, "Die revolutionäre Presse und das Feuilleton," 188.

⁴³¹ In her earlier debate with the Dadaists, Alexander explains her understanding of the eternal nature of art: "[i]t followed clearly from my remarks that the *eternal* [*das Ewige*] is not the *timeless* [*das Zeitlose*] for me, but rather that it is a document of that which *remains* of its time, in which it is born and to which it is bound, but born of *genius* [*Genie*—

In her 1924 book, by contrast, Märten offers a more extensive, global origin story of the “so-called arts” as emerging from the most basic organizational principle of the “forms.” While Alexander was able to dismiss Märten’s critique of her notion of art as merely an ideological form of appearance in their feuilleton debate, Märten now employs a decade of ethnographic research to present “unequivocal facts” that she hopes will compel her readers to question their assumptions about art.⁴³²

Märten frames her work as a study of forms as the most basic “expression of life,” rather than an art historical investigation in the tradition of Wilhelm Worringer. She establishes the construction of forms as a primal instinct of both human and non-human animals, positing “forms” as the most basic organizational unity. Märten identifies tools such as bowls or textiles as the “orginary forms” [*Urformen*] that are “inseparably bound up with the essence and purpose” of the labor process.⁴³³ Her emphasis on functionality, however, does not stand in opposition to beauty or ornamentation. The primitive impulse to create forms [*Formbildung*] is a respond to both the material needs for food and shelter and the sensual needs for beauty and expression. Märten therefore posits a “decorate drive” that explains the early emergence of ornament. Originally, she argues, ornamentation retains a symbolic relationship to a specific purpose: the decoration on a vase, for example, initially represents the vessel’s content and becomes increasingly abstracted until it consist of geometric figures. The history of ornamentation reveals that “ornament [has] the purpose of animating an otherwise inanimate surface” or, more literally, “giving life to a dead surface” [*eine sonst tote Fläche zu beleben*]. Much like Chernyshevsky, she connects beauty and usefulness in an understanding of aesthetic production as basic to life itself. While Chernyshevsky summarizes this notions of aesthetics in his statement “beauty is life,” Märten formulates this idea through her history of “forms as an expression

geboren].” Gertrud Alexander, “Kunst, Vandalismus und Proletariat. Erwiderung,” in *Literatur im Klassenkampf. Zur proletarisch-revolutionären Literaturtheorie 1919-1923*, ed. Walter Fähnders and Martin Rector (Munich: C. Hanser, 1971), 58.

⁴³² Lu Märten, *Wesen und Veränderung der Formen/ Künste. Resultate historisch-materialistischer Untersuchungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Taifun Verlag, 1924), 11.

⁴³³ Märten, *Wesen und Veränderung der Formen und Künste. Resultate historisch-materialistischer Untersuchungen*, 24.

of life” [*Formen als Lebensausdruck*].⁴³⁴ At the same time, by defining human needs as including the sensual experience of beauty, Märten refutes her contemporary, Adolf Loos’s identification of ornamentation with barbarity, femininity, and decline.⁴³⁵

Märten delves into the construction of this origin story, insisting on the importance of revealing the “recognizable, originary beginnings of things lying deep in history” in order to enable the deliberate construction of future forms. She maintains that a crucial historical development occurs with the transformation of collective, social forms into increasingly individualized forms or artworks attributed to artistic movements or individual artists. “If form is initially a collective conception,” she writes, “then it slowly becomes more and more differentiated, more individuated, until we finally delineate it as a single type of form or art and, eventually, ascribe it to a specific artist’s personality.”⁴³⁶ By tracing the origin of the arts back to their social function within the collective, Märten lays the theoretical groundwork for creating future forms with the aid of new media that revive the synthesis of purpose and ornament on a higher sensual and material level.

Rather than an opposition between individual aesthetic production and collectivity, she views the collective as the condition for the expansion of “primitive individuality.” In her chapter on dance, she argues that “[t]he collectivity is the space in which primitive individuality found its more expansive form corresponding to its more expansive purposes.”⁴³⁷ Following John Ruskin and William Morris, she traces this tendency to its expression in the Gothic construction hut [*Bauhütte*], a workshop association that combined the various crafts necessary to build Gothic cathedrals. She highlights the anonymous, collective production in the collaboration between different artisans rather than the privileging of a certain form of art in the building of Gothic cathedrals. “The sculpture of this period

⁴³⁴ Märten, 24.

⁴³⁵ See: Adolf Loos, *Ornament & Verbrechen*, ed. Peter Stuijber (Wien: Metroverlag, 2012).

⁴³⁶ Märten, *Wesen und Veränderung der Formen und Künste*, 20.

⁴³⁷ Märten, *Wesen und Veränderung der Formen und Künste*, 73.

is nameless, collective, it is almost never signed. Different degrees of skill are recognizable, but it is a superior skill from the masses of skill.”⁴³⁸ Although she only alludes to it in *Essence and Transformation*, she would later develop this notion of “nameless ingenuity” [*namenlose Genialität*] as an alternative to individual artist genius in the context of her gender theory.⁴³⁹

Märten warns against the temptation to merely transpose past forms onto the present or to treat historical identities as static. She insists that “the collective is nothing absolute, it does not determine the value and meaning of a form. For that reason it is also not correct to presuppose the historical, collective character of the forms of the proletariat in every case.”⁴⁴⁰ As she explores in *Torso*, she was aware of the tendency to present, in Patrick Eiden-Offe’s words, “[t]he indeterminability of the proletariat [...] as the boundlessness of the political mandate.”⁴⁴¹ Contrary to Alexander’s championing of restaging Schiller plays, Märten maintains that it is not as simple as reanimating old forms. Instead, the category of the proletariat and proletarian art must be continually reconceptualized: art workers must work toward indefinite “classless forms” that both usher in and are made possible by the broader disillusion of class in communist society.

From the dialectic of “originary forms” and “pure forms,” “classless forms” emerge as the combination of artistic experimentation with the attention to purpose and technique of craft.⁴⁴² Märten sees the clearest indication of classless forms not in literature, where the Mehring School focused its attention, but in painting. Märten observes the signs of its emergence in Expressionism’s resonance with the working class, which she attributes to its deduction of the formal principles of color and linearity from Impressionism and the subsequent negation of Impressionist objectivity

⁴³⁸ Märten, *Wesen und Veränderung der Formen und Künste*, 181.

⁴³⁹ Lu Märten, “Glossen: Ketzereien,” *Frauen-Zukunft*, no. 5 (1911): 442.

⁴⁴⁰ Märten, *Wesen und Veränderung der Formen und Künste*, 73.

⁴⁴¹ Patrick Eiden-Offe, *Die Poesie der Klasse. Romantischer Antikapitalismus und die Erfindung des Proletariats*, (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2017), 27.

⁴⁴² Märten, “Wesen und Veränderung der Formen (Künste),” 208–9.

[*Gegenständlichkeit*]. Yet, despite its experimentation, Expressionism remains well within the boundaries dictated by bourgeois artistic genres. Nevertheless, “the instinctively correct interest” it awakens in the working class suggests the possibility of forms that do not merely reflect a single class’s ideology.

As Märten explains:

Man mache sich “klassenlose” Kunst einmal deutlich – auch in dieser Linie klar. Klassenlose “Kunst” kann es da überhaupt nicht heißen, denn “Kunst” selbst ist als Luxusbegriff der Arbeit – ein Klassenbegriff. Es kann als nur heißen: *klassenlose Formen*. Die ihrem Wesen nach klassenlosen Formen – die rein sachlichen wie die reinen Empfindungsformen – werden bestehen, und das sind architektonische, technische und plastische Formen. Andererseits musikalische, zum Teil sprachliche und zum Teil malerische Formen. [...] die Formen im ganzen – jede Sachform, gleichviel welcher Art – [bezieht] die Überlegenheit der sonst bloß künstlerischen Form in sich ein[], etwa mit dem Resultat einer vollkommen künstlerischen Kultur – nämlich einer *Qualität* der Formen nach *Zweck* und *Sache* und *Material*; und dennoch vielleicht ohne “Künste.”⁴⁴³

Let us for once make it clear what “classless” art is, also in this regard. It can in no sense be called classless “art,” because “art” is itself a luxury concept of labor—a class concept. So it can only be called: *classless forms*. Forms that are, according to their essence, classless—both the purely objective and the purely sensual forms—will persist: architectonic, technological and sculptural forms. On the other hand, musical, to a degree verbal and to a degree pictorial forms. [...] the forms in general—every objective form, whatever the type—[draws] the superiority of the otherwise merely artistic form into itself, like the result of a completely artistic culture, that is, according to the *quality* of the forms based on *purpose* and *object* and *material*; and nevertheless perhaps without the “arts.”

Märten calls for classless forms to displace the notion of “art,” which not only reproduces ruling-class interests, but also renders aesthetic production a luxury only granted to an elite group of workers known as “artists.” The pure forms of bourgeois art correspond to the polarization of commodities into low-quality, mass-produced objects on the one hand and highly valued objects of financial speculation on the other. On both ends of the spectrum, commodity production is dictated by exchange-value. Classless forms, in contrast, realize the bourgeois ideal of art as exempt from the logic

⁴⁴³ Original emphasis. Märten, *Wesen und Veränderung der Formen/ Künste. Resultate historisch-materialistischer Untersuchungen*, 208–9.

of exchange by coming into being in a society governed by quality rather than quantity, use-value rather than exchange-value. Märten reminds the reader of isolated historical models in the formal and material mastery demonstrated by ukiyo-e woodblock prints and Indian pottery and metalwork.⁴⁴⁴ Similarly, the future “objective” or objectified forms and the “sensual” or immaterial forms are not entirely freed from necessity. They are the results of production within the constraints determined by the art workers’ interaction with the materials and techniques at hand, rather than the ideological limitations of the social division of labor or commercially-driven genre distinctions. The leap from quantity to quality in aesthetic production captured by Märten’s notion of classless forms infuses the new culture with an artistic sensibility, which, at the same time, entails a fundamental reorganization of economic production based on an aesthetics devoid of “art.”

Although Expressionism only begins to hint at the possibility of classless forms, Märten observes that Tatlin’s “machine art” marks a turning point, on the cusp of existing artistic practices and the classless production of the future. Märten quotes extensively from Konstantin Umanskii’s manifesto-like review, “Tatlinism or Machine Art” (“Der Tatlinismus oder die Maschinenkunst,” 1920), in which he proclaims that the counter-relief represents a “new language of art” through the artist’s partnership with his “most powerful ally, the machine.”⁴⁴⁵ The search for a new form of expression that overcomes the limitations of language—characteristic of the avant-garde’s primitivism—takes on a new form through the embrace of machine production. Märten quotes Umanskii while adding her own emphasis to his reference to technique: “[a] triumph of the intellectual and material, the negation of the spirit’s rights to isolated autonomy, the quintessence of today’s reality, of the *sovereign technique*, of victorious materialism.”⁴⁴⁶ Constructivism challenges the holiness of art, places it in parentheses, and deems everything and everyone worthy of the new language that should

⁴⁴⁴ Märten, 205.

⁴⁴⁵ Konstantin Umanskij, “Der Tatlinismus oder die Maschinenkunst,” *Der Ararat* 4, no. 12 (January 1920), 12.

⁴⁴⁶ Märten, *Wesen und Veränderung der Formen/ Künste. Resultate historisch-materialistischer Untersuchungen*, 208–9.

take its place. Märten continues to explain that the promise of Tatlin's machine art lies in its refusal to remain static: "[t]he particular programs do not want to offer up solutions that have already been found, they are constantly searching for new answers to all of the new questions that arise." It is this probing, dynamic approach to aesthetic production that causes Märten to identify the suggestion of classless forms in Constructivism. It offers "art's last word and its revolutionary deformative force and the first intimation of new, future syntheses."⁴⁴⁷

In Märten's introduction to the 1949 edition of *Essence and Transformation of the Forms and Arts*,⁴⁴⁸ she explains that her book "is about the modification of the natural, primitive forms into socially and class determined and therefore complex and artificial reproductions (that which we call 'art') and the eventual modification of these through their transformation back into natural (classless) forms."⁴⁴⁹ Märten's deployment of primitivism illustrates the extent to which it is "essentially a temporal concept [...] not an object of Western thought."⁴⁵⁰ Primitivism is the unstable foundation supporting Märten's temporal triad of the "originary forms" of the past, the reified "pure forms" of the present, and the desired "classless forms" of the future. On the one hand, she adopts the temporality of civilizational narratives, organizing the chapters based on the progression from physical and sensual to mediated, written expression. On the other hand, Märten employs a form of dialectical argumentation that does not merely glorify the past or condemn the present. Ethnography provides Märten with the temporal scope and structure for her utopianism, echoing primitivism's "common desire for a determinate negation of the world order that culminated in imperialist capitalism."⁴⁵¹

⁴⁴⁷ Original emphasis. Märten, 208–9.

⁴⁴⁸ Märten slightly alters the title of the new edition to avoid any misunderstandings caused by her original title, *Essence and Transformation of the Forms/Arts*.

⁴⁴⁹ Märten, *Wesen und Veränderung der Formen und Künste*, 344.

⁴⁵⁰ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 18.

⁴⁵¹ Ben Etherington, *Literary Primitivism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), xvi.

Ethnography's claim to scientificity was just as crucial as its fictional foundation. The unacknowledged slippage between empirical evidence and the play of fantasy opened up precisely the space in which utopianism could emerge. More than even the determinate negation of colonial expansion, machine production, or commodified art, primitivism was one way in which socialist thinkers could suspend critique—and indeed, self-criticism was often quite limited—in order to express the longing for a different world. While Märten's novel, *Yali*, was rejected for reflecting her dreams rather than reality, the “ethnographic imagination” allowed her to combine the authority of science with the speculation and inventiveness of fiction. As Franz Kramer explains, “the efficacy of ethnography unfolds in an area that stretches from the symbolism of primitive man to the myth of the orient.”⁴⁵² Ethnography's sweeping geographic and temporal scope provided a framework for Märten to extend her aesthetic vision to all of human history, including its future, as well as the diverse cultural forms of aesthetic production. However, she adopted not only the possibilities provided by primitivist narratives, but also the contradictions contained within them. As Ben Etherington observes, “the coherence of the concept of primitivism rests on the structural unity of the imperial world, but this was an emphatically uneven system.”⁴⁵³ The colonial relations that served as ethnography's condition of possibility are conspicuously absent from *Essence and Transformation*. In spite, or perhaps because of this, the tension between the field's historicizing gesture and its universalist tendencies remains unresolved in Märten's treatment of aesthetic form.

⁴⁵² Kramer, *Verkehrte Welten. Zur imaginären Ethnographie des 19. Jahrhunderts*, 7.

⁴⁵³ Etherington, *Literary Primitivism*, xvi.

CHAPTER V: MYTHOLOGIES OF THE FUTURE

Lu Märten proved to be much more critical of the social construction of gender than that of the racialized narratives of “primitive peoples.” As she maintains in her monograph, *The Woman Artist* (*Die Künstlerin*, 1919), “all of the problems of the contemporary woman as an artist and a worker are social problems, therefore they demand purely social solutions—all other talk of ‘nature’ and ‘determination,’ etc. is nonsense.”⁴⁵⁴ Her appeal to the ethnographic research on the mother right in her unpublished *History of Women from the Mother Right to the Present* (*Geschichte der Frau vom Mutterrecht bis zur Gegenwart*, 1947) combines scientific authority with the narrative power of myth. In contrast to the primitivism characteristic of *Essence and Transformation of the Forms/Arts* (*Wesen und Veränderung der Formen/Künste*, 1924), Märten saw herself as a part of the audience that she is both addressing and attempting to constitute in the post-war period. Her emphasis thus relies less on the stability of its origin—the collective consciousness of “primitive individuality”—than on the transformation of gendered subjectivity over time.⁴⁵⁵ The contrast between Märten’s essentializing primitivism and anti-essentialist approach to gender in her two ethnographic works underscores the contradicting emerging from this heavily speculative form and the divergent narrative functions it fulfilled.

Märten was highly critical of essentialist accounts of gender, at a time when the widespread “biologization of the social” meant that even the most progressive figures in the women’s movement in Germany employed eugenic arguments about sexual health and racial hygiene.⁴⁵⁶ In contrast to

⁴⁵⁴ Lu Märten, *Die Künstlerin*, ed. Chryssoula Kambas (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2001), 106.

⁴⁵⁵ Lu Märten, *Wesen und Veränderung der Formen und Künste. Resultate historisch-materialistischer Untersuchungen* (Weimar: Verlag Werden und Wirken, 1949), 73.

⁴⁵⁶ Ulrich Herbert, “Rassismus und rationales Kalkül. Zum Stellenwert utilitaristisch verbrämter Legitimationsstrategien in der nationalsozialistischen ‘Weltanschauung,’” in *“Vernichtungspolitik”. Eine Debatte über den Zusammenhang von Sozialpolitik und Genozid im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland*, ed. Wolfgang Schneider (Hamburg: Junius, 1991), 28, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015028400524>; Kirsten Leng, *Sexual Politics and Feminist Science: Women Sexologists in Germany, 1900-1933* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017), 26;36, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt1w1vjsc>:[“www.jstor.org”].

bourgeois feminists including Grete Meisel-Hess or even fellow socialists such as Johanna Elberskirchen, Märten did not appeal to the new sciences of sexology or psychology to create sexual taxonomies, but instead attempted to release gendered subjectivity from its conceptual and material restraints.⁴⁵⁷ At the same time, she does not adopt the form of gender abolitionism that leads to the “universal masculinization” of many of her socialist peers, which, as Bini Adamczak observes, could “in theory smoothly integrate women [...] just not femininity.”⁴⁵⁸ Instead of departing from a generalized masculine subjectivity, Märten explores new processes of subjectivation based on the universalization of feminized positions, captured by her notion of “social motherliness” [*soziale Mütterlichkeit*] as a utopian “social form” beyond biological kinship.⁴⁵⁹ Much like Chernyshevsky’s *What Is to Be Done?*, Märten’s work is characterized by a tension between a materialist theory of gender as a shifting and relational product of circumstance and the attempt to define the specificity of women’s position as the point of departure for collectivist affects and subjectivities. Märten ultimately posits androgyny, or rather, gynandry, as a utopian form of gendered subjectivity, reinterpreting the Romantic figure within a revolutionary framework.⁴⁶⁰ Corresponding to her notion of aesthetic forms freed from class determination, Märten portrays the emancipation from binary gender, gendered labor, the biological family, and monogamy as the social processes of subjectivation that must accompany the transition to communist society.

In this chapter, I trace Märten’s utopian intervention in gendered subjectivation through the socialization and generalization of feminized relations. Märten’s notion of “nameless ingenuity” [*namenlose Genialität*] bridges the divide between her aesthetic and gender theory, connecting her vision

⁴⁵⁷ See: Grete Meisel-Hess, *Die sexuelle Krise. Eine sozialpsychologische Untersuchung* (Jena: Eugen Diedrichs, 1909); Johanna Elberskirchen, *Die Liebe des dritten Geschlechts. Homosexualität, eine bisexuelle Varität - keine Entartung - keine Schuld* (Leipzig: Max Spohr, 1904).

⁴⁵⁸ Bini Adamczak, *Beziehungsweise Revolution: 1917, 1968 und kommende* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2017), 162.

⁴⁵⁹ Märten, *Die Künstlerin*, 106.

⁴⁶⁰ Susan J. Wolfson, review of *Review of Romantic Androgyny: The Women Within*, by Diane Long Hoeveler, *The Wordsworth Circle* 22, no. 4 (1991): 238.

of classless forms of aesthetic production with the reconciliation of individuality and collectivity she identifies in the figure of the proletarian mother and androgyne. I examine the nameless ingenuity of women's productive and reproductive labor in Märten's early fiction, "The Birth of Mothers" (*Geburt der Mütter*, 1911), and her monograph, *The Woman Artist*, before concluding with her *History of Women from the Mother Right to the Present*. Through the contrast between these three works—the first, a hybrid work of fiction, the second, a nonfictional theoretical treatise, and the third, a scientific account based on historical fictions—I consider the ways in which Märten's utopianism challenges the distinction between fiction and nonfiction.

Motherhood as a Social Form

Throughout her work, Märten insists that motherhood is a social relation that can and should be divorced from biological kinship. She saw motherliness as a form of subjectivity that need not be at odds with individuality, as she observed under patriarchal and capitalist conditions, but rather contained the potential to reconcile the needs of the individual and the collective. In her eyes, the proletarian mother is defined by her creative capacity and, as a creator [*Schaffende*], already suggests the subjectivity that will produce classless forms. For Märten, the precarity that comes with proletarian women's exclusion from and marginalization within the formal labor market was an extreme whose dialectical result rendered new social forms released from their exclusivity in the male genius or the bourgeois family.

In a short opinion piece entitled "Heresies" ("Ketzereien," 1911) published in the bourgeois women's journal *Frauen-Zukunft* (*Women's Future*), Märten first proposes her concept of "nameless ingenuity." This call to release genius from its gendered and class exclusivity marks the most explicit connection between Märten's aesthetics and gender theory, which she otherwise largely treated in

distinct works due to the political division between the workers' and women's movements.⁴⁶¹ Her identification of everyday, nameless ingenuity undermines the definition of art proposed by Gertrud Alexander as "the *eternal*" and "born of genius."⁴⁶² The gendered implications of Märten's ideal of "nameless, collective" production exemplified by the Gothic construction hut in *Essence and Transformation* are revealed in her earlier work on the "nameless ingenuity" of women and, in particular, mothers.⁴⁶³ In "Heresies," Märten suggests that the proletarian mother should replace Napoleon as the embodiment of ingenuity:

Wer oder was zum Beispiel ist ein Genie? Überall wo man will, kann man lesen: Napoleon ist ein Genie. [...] Napoleon ist eine außergewöhnliche Energie, die wir Gelegenheit hatten, auf weltgeschichtlicher Bühne aktiv zu sehen und zu bewundern. [...] Es gibt keine Wertmesser der Ewigkeit. Auch das Genie ist durchaus zeitlich relativ zu werten. Ist es aber schlechtweg das Außerordentliche, dann ist die geistig hoch arbeitende Proletarier-Mutter von sechs Kindern, die von Jugend auf den zähesten adligsten Kampf ihrer Klasse führte, mit den Mitteln eines außergewöhnlichen Bewußtseins, einer merkwürdigen Energie – bis gestern, wo sie starb – für mich auch Genie. [...] Unter den Männern mag ein Napoleon ungewöhnlich extrem erscheinen, denn die Männer von gestern finden nur kräftig, was ihnen auf die Schädel tritt. Das noch unregistrierte außerordentliche Frauentum hat sich die Napoleonsseele als Alltagserscheinung, und von der *namenlose Genialität* der Frauen bleibt noch zu sagen.⁴⁶⁴

Who or what, for example, is a genius? Anywhere you like you can read: Napoleon is a genius. [...] Napoleon is an extraordinary force that we had the opportunity to see active on the world-historical stage and admire. [...] There are no value judgments for eternity. Genius, too, can only be evaluated relative to its time. If it is simply the extraordinary, then it is the intellectually hard-working proletarian mother of six who is a genius to me: she who led the toughest, noblest struggle of her class since her youth with the means of an extraordinary consciousness, of remarkable energy—until yesterday, when she died. [...] Among men, a Napoleon may seem unusually extreme, for the men of yesterday only recognize strength when it hits them in the head. The still unregistered, extraordinary womanhood contains the Napoleonic soul as an everyday occurrence, and there remains much to say about women's *nameless ingenuity*.

⁴⁶¹ The major exception to this is *The Woman Artist*. Indeed, Chryssoula Kambas's decision to reprint Märten's monograph, *Die Künstlerin* (1919) in 2001 was motivated by the disregard of Märten's gender theory and literary writings in the reception of her work. "Chryssoula Kambas, "Geschlechter-Differenzen überdenken. Lu Märten's Schriften zu Kunst und Kultur der Frauen," in *Die Künstlerin* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2001), 115.

⁴⁶² Original emphasis. Gertrud Alexander, "Kunst, Vandalismus und Proletariat. Erwiderung," in *Literatur im Klassenkampf. Zur proletarisch-revolutionären Literaturtheorie 1919-1923*, ed. Walter Fähnders and Martin Rector (Munich: C. Hanser, 1971), 58.

⁴⁶³ Märten, *Wesen und Veränderung der Formen und Künste. Resultate historisch-materialistischer Untersuchungen*, 181.

⁴⁶⁴ Original emphasis. Lu Märten, "Glossen: Ketzereien," *Frauen-Zukunft*, no. 5 (1911): 442.

Märten begins with a change of scene: rather than looking to the “world-historical stage” of imperialist warfare to locate genius, she identifies it in everyday life. She follows Marx and Engels in their sardonic dismissal of Hegel’s idealization of Napoleon as the embodiment of the “World Spirit” [*Weltgeist*]. However, she sees not only the “world market” [*Weltmarkt*] as the true force behind history, but also seeks to understand its gendered dimensions.⁴⁶⁵ Her reframing of the question of genius from a “who” to a “what” both displaces the individual as the agent of history and repudiates its exclusivity by presenting genius as a social force rather than a personality characteristic. By considering ingenuity as an “everyday occurrence,” Märten is able to redirect attention to an alternative manifestation of genius: “the intellectually hard-working proletarian mother of six.” The dramatic language that Märten employs to portray the proletarian mother was no doubt intended to shock her predominantly middle-class readers. At the same time, it draws attention to the hyperbolic terms with which Napoleon is praised as a genius. The class-conscious proletarian mother disrupts the association of genius with individual exceptionalism, recasting it as a form of relationality. This not only frees ingenuity from its association with masculinity, it destabilizes binary gender distinctions more broadly: the working-class mother exemplifies both militancy and care, self-actualization and selflessness.

Märten’s emphasis on “nameless ingenuity” gestures toward forms of subjectivity that reconcile individual and collective needs. Both in *Essence and Transformation* and, more explicitly, in her work on gender, she establishes the decentering of the individual as an essential component of her historical methodology.⁴⁶⁶ In *The Woman Artist*, she explains “I deliberately abstain from mentioning any names here and in the future, because to reference individual names in light of the countless,

⁴⁶⁵ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Die deutsche Ideologie,” in *Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels Werke*, ed. Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED, vol. 3 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1978), 37.

⁴⁶⁶ In addition to “nameless ingenuity,” Märten describes the importance of documenting the work of “nameless fighters” in an article about Gesia Gel’fman, a member of the Russian revolutionary organization, *Narodnaia Volia* (*The People’s Will*). Lu Märten, “Namenlose Kämpferinnen,” *Stimme der Schaffenden Frau*, 1946, Lu Märten Papers, Folder 38, International Institute of Social History.

publicly disregarded achievements would today be unjust and irrelevant.”⁴⁶⁷ Much more so than historical or art historical approaches, ethnographic studies offered Märten a lens through which to view collective cultural developments without privileging the individual. She sought not the denial of individuality, but, as she paraphrases from Lewis Henry Morgan, a “revival in higher form, of the liberty, equality, and cooperativeness [*Genossenschaftlichkeit*] of the ancient gent.”⁴⁶⁸

In the following issue of *Frauen-Zukunft*, Märten published a short story, “The Birth of Mothers,” (“Geburt der Mütter,” 1911). The editors introduce this challenging text by connecting Märten’s concept of nameless ingenuity to Nietzsche’s Zarathustra: “woman’s nameless ingenuity in general is called into consciousness and defines the terms of her social values and struggle,” they write. “A feminine Zarathustra, if you like, who does not command herself as an *Übermensch*, but understands herself as one of many and would like to see the sociality of all occurrences comprehended.”⁴⁶⁹ Indeed, Märten’s text evokes the title of Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* (*Die Geburt der Tragödie*, 1872), while drawing directly on Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (*Also sprach Zarathustra*, 1883-85) in structure, tone, and content. It is no accident that Märten modeled her text on a work that defies classification, both tragedy and parody, philosophy and literature. Märten plays with this tension in order to rewrite the struggle with false morality and false dichotomies staged by Nietzsche’s Zarathustra: she offers the mother as the “creator” [*Schaffende*], calling for the collective determination of the “will to gender” [*Wille zum Geschlecht*] as a response to the cyclical nature of history. Märten reinterprets Nietzsche’s “eternal return” [*ewige Wiederkunft*] as a case for the utopias of the past to repeat themselves in the future: out of Nietzsche’s “everything goes, everything returns” [*Alles geht, Alles kommt zurück*], Märten

⁴⁶⁷ Märten, *Die Künstlerin*, 38.

⁴⁶⁸ Märten translates “fraternity” as the gender-neutral “Genossenschaftlichkeit” or “cooperativeness.” Lu Märten, “Frauenfrage einst - noch immer - und heute,” n.d., 63, Lu Märten Papers, Folder 38, International Institute of Social History.

⁴⁶⁹ Lu Märten, “Geburt der Mütter,” *Frauen-Zukunft*, no. 6 (1911): 470.

derives the revolutionary message, “everything has passed and will come again” [*Alles war und wird wieder sein*].⁴⁷⁰

“The Birth of Mothers” is divided into three parts, each of which rewrites a particular section of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The first, untitled section offers a utopian reading of Nietzsche’s “lonely one” [*der Einsame*] in “On the Way of the Creator” [“Vom Wege des Schaffenden”]. The second, “Women,” presents a retort to “On Old and Young Females” [“Von alten und jungen Weiblein”]. The third and briefest section, “Power” resignifies the concept of the “will to power” [*Wille zur Macht*] in “On Self-Overcoming” [“Von der Selbst-Ueberwindung”] by calling on women to recognize that, as creators, they “[carry] the future within them.”⁴⁷¹ Märten’s text reflects the aphoristic and varied structure of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, somewhere between a fairytale, a poem, and a manifesto. She responds to Nietzsche’s insistence on listening to the text’s “halcyon tone” [*halcyonischer Ton*] by reproducing the atmosphere of the kingfisher’s calm and melancholy song along with its counterpoint in the “omnipresence of malice and exuberance.”⁴⁷² The result is a hopeful, impassioned, agitational, and disruptive call for women to open up the future for themselves and others. “It seems to be a utopia,” Märten writes, “but it would be meaningless if the centuries of symphonies were written for individuals and for a society unable to hear them.”⁴⁷³

The title “The Birth of Mothers” prepares the reader for the text’s cyclical temporality: the use of the genitive case draws attention to mothers as the creators of life (the mothers who birth children) as well as the aspiration to create a new generation of mothers as social rather than biological modes of subjectivity (the birth of “social” mothers). The title’s double meaning evokes the Solemnity of the

⁴⁷⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, Kritische Studienausgabe, vol. 4 (Munich: Walter de Gruyter, 2011), 272; Märten, “Geburt der Mütter,” 520.

⁴⁷¹ Märten, “Geburt der Mütter,” 522.

⁴⁷² For a discussion of Nietzsche’s “halcyon tone” see: Gary Shapiro, *Alcyon: Nietzsche on Gifts, Noise, and Women* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 109–44; Friedrich Nietzsche, “Ecce homo,” in *Der Fall Wagner; Götzen-Dämmerung; Der Antichrist; Ecce homo; Dionysos-Dithyramben; Nietzsche contra Wagner*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, Kritische Studienausgabe, vol. 6 (Munich: Walter de Gruyter, 2011), 259; 344.

⁴⁷³ Märten, “Geburt der Mütter,” 520.

Immaculate Conception, the Catholic holiday rendered in German as the frequently misunderstood *Mariä Empfängnis*, indicating not Maria's conception of Jesus, but Maria's conception by her mother. The text thus begins by situating the readers within a matriarchal understanding of history defined by maternal lineage, a narrative that Märten would later embrace as the basis of her *History of Women from the Mother Right to the Present*. In "The Birth of Mothers," the redefinition of motherhood is achieved not by appealing to scientific studies, but instead embracing the collision of religious, mythological, philosophical, and literary motifs in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

Märten's text is initially structured by the refrain "it was in the time" [*es war um die Zeit*], evoking the outset of a fairytale with its introductory sentence, "[i]t was in the time of the transformation of all things."⁴⁷⁴ If Nietzsche presents the eternal return as the infinite recurrence of life and therefore the impossibility of a drastic break from the past, then Märten views this repetitive tendency as precisely the revolutionary potential contained within history. In framing this cyclical temporality as a social rather than an individual problem, Märten is able to locate utopia within the past as a means of insisting on its recurrence in the future. She proceeds to narrate the transition to utopia in the past tense, retracing the history of the "birth of mothers" as the condition for the birth of the new world:

Und war die erste im Neuland noch so einsam und starb sie in Isoliertheit des Seins, —die nach ihr kommen, die andern, die auf der gleichen Stelle angelangt sein werden, werden ihresgleichen sein. Und es müssen mehr und viele sein, denn wo einer getötet, da ist ein Wallfahrtort und Zeichen. So sprach der soziale Einzelmensch. "Ich will," sprach er, "nicht mehr hergehen in der berechtigten Klage, im weinenden Fluch der früheren. Ich werde sie rächen, indem ich unerbittlich bin, indem ich gefoltert lache und sie beweise, ich werde sie wahr machen, indem ich nach meinem Tode weiterlebe, ich werde hassen wie sie, aber mit dem Haß, der den Gegner durch ein kleines Lächeln hilflos macht; denn ich werde ihm überlegen sein.[""]⁴⁷⁵

And if the first in the new land was still so lonely and died in the isolation of being, then those who come after her, the others who will arrive in the same place, will be of her kind. And it will become more and many, for the place where someone is killed becomes a pilgrimage site and a sign. Thus spoke the social individual. "I will no

⁴⁷⁴ Märten, 516.

⁴⁷⁵ Märten, 519–20.

longer,” she said, “go forth in the justified complaints, in the tearful curse of those before me. I will avenge them through my relentlessness, through my tortured laugh, by serving as their witness, I will deliver them by living on after my death, I will hate like them, but with the hate that disarms the enemy with a faint smile, for I will be superior to them.[”]

Märten follows the “lonely one” from Nietzsche’s “On the Path of the Creator,” into the uncharted territory or *Neuland* as a place in time, not space. Just as Zarathustra calls on the lonely one to embrace his seclusion as a means to finding himself, Märten’s “social individual” [*soziale Einzelmensch*] must first pass through the stages of isolation and outrage demanded by self-respect.⁴⁷⁶ “Do you already know, my brother, the word ‘contempt’ [*Verachtung*]?” Zarathustra asks.⁴⁷⁷ Märten’s social individual learns to hate, but for the sake of herself and others like her, the reaction to an injustice captured by Audre Lorde’s “symphony of anger.”⁴⁷⁸ The antinomy of selflessness and egoism both created and recognized by Zarathustra is reconciled in Märten’s social individual whose rage binds her to the generations before and after, captured by the spirit of motherhood.⁴⁷⁹ Märten regenders Nietzsche’s “lonely one,” or rather, “lonely man,” only to question the imposition of gender in the first place. The social individual continues:

[“]Ich werde so unzerbrechlich sein, wie Frauen es jemals waren, wie Stahl und in einem neuen Leben lebendig; einem Leben, dem ich das Siegel aufdrücke. Ich werde die verwirrten Geister berichtigen, die da meinen: ein Weib opfert den Geist um der Frauenschaft willen. Ihm werde ich jedes Opfer bringen; es wird mir gefallen, meine Frauenschaft zu verspielen, sie wegzuerwerfen, wenn es mir notwendig scheint; ich werde nur einem Opfer bringen. Das eben ist dem Geist. Denn der Geist ist Mutterschaft. Er ist das Geheimnisvolle, dem alles Opfer bringt. Mutterschaft aber ist nicht sinnloses Gebären, sondern das, was für die Frau das kraftvollste Daseins-Bewußtsein erbringen wird. Durch das sie nicht unterging, durch das sie gehemmt wurde, durch das sie Ewigkeit und Befreiung erlangen wird.[”]

Alles war und wird wieder sein.”⁴⁸⁰

⁴⁷⁶ Märten, 519.

⁴⁷⁷ Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, 4:81.

⁴⁷⁸ Audre Lorde, “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 129.

⁴⁷⁹ Nietzsche, “Ecce homo,” 367.

⁴⁸⁰ Märten, “Geburt der Mütter,” 519–20.

["I will be as unbreakable as women always were, like steel, living a new life; a life that I certify. I will correct the confused spirits that think that a female sacrifices the mind for the sake of womanhood. I will sacrifice everything for the spirit, I will enjoy squandering my womanhood, discarding it if it seems necessary to me; I will sacrifice only for one thing. And that is the spirit. Because the spirit is motherhood. It is the mystery for which everything must be sacrificed. But motherhood not in the sense of meaningless childbirth, but rather that which will bring the most powerful consciousness of existence to women. That which did not make her perish, that which inhibited her, that with which she will obtain immortality and liberation. Everything has passed and will come again.]"

From her gendered positionality, the social individual must embrace the stigma and isolation of refusing her subjugation and even accept death. While the "female" [*Weib*] is required to deny her intellect and self-realization for the sake of her womanhood [*Frauenschaft*], the social individual discards her womanhood at will. This womanhood is summarized by Zarathustra with the statement: "[e]verything about the female is a mystery, and everything about the female has one solution: that is pregnancy."⁴⁸¹ By overcoming the Nietzschean notion of womanhood, the social individual does not disavow femininity, but merely rejects the understanding of motherhood as "meaningless childbirth." Instead, the spirit or mind [*Geist*] is redefined as motherhood: the "path of the creator" is revealed to be the path of the mother. Just as identifying "originary" aesthetic forms within history opens up the possibility of future, classless forms, locating this movement toward utopia in the past lays the foundation for its rediscovery in the present. In conclusion, Märten turns to directly address her audience, insisting that women recognize themselves in Nietzsche's creator:

Ich rede zu den Frauen, die früh auf eine große Merkwürdigkeit gestimmt sind und die die Meinung der andern in einen feindlichen Alltag zwang. Laßt euch der Natur nicht als Opfer überantwortet werden. Entscheidet den Willen zum Geschlecht nach eurer Einsicht. Ihr seid die Schaffenden und also berechtigt zum Raum und Zeit für Schaffen. Ihr seid berufen, die fernste Schönheit der Welt zu verheißen und dem Manne nicht zu weichen.⁴⁸²

⁴⁸¹ Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, 4:84.

⁴⁸² Märten, "Geburt der Mütter," (1911) 521.

I am speaking to the women who have long been tuned into a great peculiarity and who have been forced into a hostile everyday life by public opinion. Do not let yourselves be victims consigned to nature. Determine the will to gender according to your insights. You are the creators and thus have a right to the space and time for creation. You are called on to promise the most distant beauty for the world and not to yield to men.

As creators, women bring together the social orientation of mothers with the visionary potential of aesthetic production. Nietzsche's "will to power" is divorced from its individualist implications and becomes a source of solidarity and collective self-determination in the "will to gender." This includes the capacity and obligation to redefine gender and motherhood within the new world they are tasked with creating. Märten takes Zarathustra at his word when he pleads: "[o]h, my friends! If only *your* self were in the deed like the mother is in the child, that would be *your* word on virtue to me."⁴⁸³ Märten stages the birth of mothers as the revolutionary act that is anticipated by the repetitiveness of both history and reproduction: the birth of a new generation of creators and their creation of the new world.

The Creative Principle

In *The Woman Artist*, written three years after "The Birth of Mothers" in 1914 but not published until 1919, Märten again takes up the concept of "nameless ingenuity" in the context of aesthetic production. More so than in any other work, Märten explores the implications of gendered subjectivity within various productive and reproductive relations in *The Woman Artist*—an issue that is conspicuously absent from her later exchange with Gertrud Alexander as well as *Essence and Transformation of the Arts/Forms*. Märten begins the 1914 preface of her monograph by rejecting the terms of the existing debates on whether women are capable of great art or genius: "I would like to emphasize that I am deliberately not engaging with the question or allegation of whether women are

⁴⁸³ Original emphasis. Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, 4:123.

even capable of artistic acts, genius, etc.”⁴⁸⁴ She continues by explaining “I rather assume that they are and examine the inhibitions to this intellectual and social expansion—of ingenious existence.” Märten again writes for an ideal audience that will accept her basic assumptions, following the precedent of Nietzsche’s “Book for Everyone and No One” [*Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen*], as the subtitle of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* reads. In addressing working-class women and artists, she both assumes that her readers are familiar with the problems she tackles and that her writing can serve as a form of mobilization.

In positing the latent artistic genius of women alongside men as the starting point of her monograph, Märten distinguished herself from many of her socialist and communist peers. Indeed, while William Morris’s influence on Märten is particularly pronounced in *The Woman Artist*, Märten’s opening sentence can be read as a refutation of his understanding of the women’s historical and ideal roles. When asked if “women are only fitted to be housekeepers” in a 1894 interview, Morris explained:

By no means; women’s talents vary, the same as those of men. There are many things which women can do equally as well as men, and some a great deal better. I think that people ought to do what they clearly appear to have the ability for doing. [...] The medical profession seems to be suited to women and I am sure women make excellent ‘men of business’ — a little stingy, though. They have a decided faculty for managing and organising. Look at French women; what an important part they take in business affairs. Yes, there’s no doubt women have a born faculty for business. They can hold their own, too, in the intellectual field, but they do not excel in the arts or in inventive power. You haven’t got a female Handel, you know, nor a first-rank woman painter.⁴⁸⁵

Despite the two decades that had passed since Morris’s interview, his ambivalent stance remained representative of the challenges that Märten faced from her peers within the workers’ movement. On the one hand, women’s equality was largely accepted as a self-evident principle of socialism and few would deny that women were entitled to equal treatment. On the other hand, Märten observed that

⁴⁸⁴ Märten, *Die Künstlerin*, 10.

⁴⁸⁵ Sarah A. Tooley, “A Living Wage for Women. An Interview with Mr. William Morris,” *The Woman’s Signal*, April 19, 1894, 261, Women’s Studies Archive.

the “woman question” was not addressed in its specificity within socialist movements. Women were seen as valuable recruits, but no steps were taken to ensure their material equality. “Every attempt to revive the party, for example, after the World War of 1914, was connected with an appeal to women,” Märten reflects. However, the war forced working-class women into a struggle for existence that rendered the questions of access to higher education and voting rights even further off than before. Emphasizing this class perspective, Märten observes: “it appears as if the substance of the singular phrase, for example, “equality” in regard to women has been somewhat forgotten.”⁴⁸⁶

In *The Woman Artist*, Märten stresses the various components of equality, from basic housing and employment to the time and resources to pursue an education, profession, and ultimately aesthetic production. She addresses readers in the workers’ and well as women’s movements, attempting to bridge the gap exhibited by the tension between Morris and his interviewer at *The Woman’s Signal*, a feminist magazine edited by the British philanthropist Lady Henry Somerset. Märten shared the interviewer’s frustration with Morris’s claim that women have a “faculty for managing and organising,” instead seeking to demonstrate their suppressed creative potential. This investment in understanding the specificity of women’s potential brought Märten much closer to bourgeois feminist movements than to her fellow socialists such as Clara Zetkin or Rosa Luxemburg.⁴⁸⁷ *The Woman Artist* allowed her to strike a balance between these politically divided audiences, in part thanks the editor, Adele Schreiber, who similarly worked between the women’s and workers’ movements.⁴⁸⁸ However, as

⁴⁸⁶ Lu Märten, “Frauenfrage einst - noch immer - und heute,” 63.

⁴⁸⁷ Clara Zetkin’s insistence on a “clean separation in theory and practice from the women’s rights movement and bourgeois reformism,” contributed to the break between her and Märten. Rosa Luxemburg, took an even more extreme stance against collaboration with reformist women’s movements, polemically decrying bourgeois women as “the parasites of the parasites of the people’s body.” Clara Zetkin, “Die sozialdemokratische Frauenbewegung,” in *Zur Geschichte der proletarischen Frauenbewegung Deutschlands*, ed. Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1958), 218; Rosa Luxemburg, “Frauenwahlrecht und Klassenkampf,” in *Friedensutopien und Hundepolitik: Schriften und Reden* (Ditzingen: Reclam, 2018), 40.

⁴⁸⁸ Adele Schreiber was an Austrian author, women’s rights activist, and Social Democrat. She was involved in the radical wing of the German women’s movement before joining the Social Democratic Party. From 1920 until 1924 and 1928 to 1933 she served as a Social Democratic member of the Reichstag. Christa Bittermann-Wille, “Adele Schreiber-Krieger,” Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, accessed April 3, 2022, <https://fraueninbewegung.onb.ac.at/node/2233>.

Beatrix Geisel argues, it is likely that Märten's concern with women's emancipation beyond the limitations of the SPD and KPD was even more influential in rendering her a "political non-person" than her unorthodox aesthetic theory and the subsequent accusations of mechanistic Marxism and idealism from within the KPD.⁴⁸⁹

It was not only Märten's familiarity with women artists of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century such as Käthe Kollwitz or Paula Modersohn-Becker that caused her to dismiss claims about the inherent faculties of men or women.⁴⁹⁰ Rather, by approaching the question from the perspective of proletarian women, particularly mothers, Märten radicalizes Morris's critique of the division between art and the crafts and the fragmentation of the individual, extending it into the realm of gender and subjectivity. While Morris provided a crucial model of the reconciliation of utopian Marxism and Romanticism for Märten, she takes his acknowledgement of the material and social determination of subjectivity further by arguing against any natural capacities for a certain type of work on either biological or intellectual lines. She identifies gender not as a matter of the sexual differentiation between a "stronger" and "weaker sex," as Morris maintains, but as a historical form of the division of labor.⁴⁹¹ Märten consequently adopts Marx's and Morris's framework of the historical shift toward increasingly specialized, profit-oriented production based on the exploitation of labor power [*Arbeitskraft*] under capitalism, while exploring its dependency on women's unpaid labor or what she calls "Frauenkraft."

Märten explains the subjective experience of gender difference as it has developed under capitalism as a question of burden [*Belastung*] and the relief from burden [*Entlastung*], adopting terms more common to the bourgeois feminist movement. At the same time, she emphasizes the economic

⁴⁸⁹ Geisel, "Unterdrückte Sozialismuskritik. Lu Märten, eine frühe feministische Dissidentin," 29

⁴⁹⁰ Märten knew Kollwitz and Modersohn-Becker personally and reviewed their work in: Lu Märten, "Käthe Kollwitz," *Die Frau*, no. 5 (1903): 290–92; Lu Märten, "Paula Becker-Modersohn," *Frauen-Zukunft*, no. 5 (1911): 383–91.

⁴⁹¹ Tooley, "A Living Wage for Women. An Interview with Mr. William Morris," 261.

function of women in the private, domestic realm as the condition for the reproduction of wage laborers in capitalism, a theory that would later be developed Marxist feminists including Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James and Maria Mies.⁴⁹² In *The Woman Artist*, Märten's focuses on the everyday material realities of gendered labor within a historical framework. The vocabulary of women's "burden" allows her to emphasize the limitations of Marx's conception of exploitation through wage labor for the analysis of women's unpaid reproductive labor. For Märten, the problem is not only that women are expected to both sell their labor power on the market and perform uncompensated labor at home, but also that they are prevented from concentrating all of their energy into a single task—the condition for aesthetic production. In a break from the bourgeois framework of privacy and rights, Märten insists that the solution lies in further socializing the private sphere:

Die spezifische Belastung der Frau, die als Künstlerin oder Schaffende irgendeines Grades und einer Art, ihre Gesamtkraft in der Hauptsache zu konzentrierten hätte, entsteht darin, daß der hochkapitalistischen Wirtschafts- und Arbeitsform keine entsprechende Organisation des privaten Lebens folgte; des privaten Lebens, das auf der einseitigen Funktion und Inanspruchnahme der Frauenkraft eigentlich aufgebaut und möglich war.⁴⁹³

The specific burdening of a woman—who as an artist or creator of some degree or type should concentrate all of her energy into her primary aim—emerges from the fact that no corresponding organization of private life followed from the high capitalist economic and labor form, which is, in fact, built on and only possible due to the one-sided function and use of women's power.

⁴⁹² Expanding on Marx's discussion of primitive accumulation, Marxist feminists have argued that women's reproductive labor is the unacknowledged premise of the reproduction of labor power and, therefore, ongoing primitive accumulation. Maria Mies demonstrates the extent to which capital accumulation, colonialism, and patriarchy are interconnected in the "international and sexual division of labor." Building on her work, Silvia Federici traces the creation of gender, racial, and national distinctions in service of unpaid and underpaid reproductive labor as one way in which capitalism "justif[ies] and mystif[ies] the contradictions built into social relations [...] by denigrating the "nature" of those it exploits." Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 2014), 3; Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, 1st ed. (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2004), 17.

⁴⁹³ Märten, *Die Künstlerin*, 21.

As she would later demonstrate in regard to aesthetic form, Märten's dialectical solution embraces the utopian potential of driving capitalism's contradictions to their breaking point. She observes that capitalism never aspired to grant women access to a "private sphere" that would allow for free and conscious labor: this ideological promise was only preserved through the unrestrained exploitation of women's labor power that even Marxist critics had overlooked. As capitalist developments cannot be reversed, Märten insists on seizing deliberate control of the tendencies toward centralization by establishing collective kitchens, childcare, and universal education.⁴⁹⁴ This disruption of the distinction between the public and the private sphere, waged and unwaged labor, would transform the productive foundation of society by overcoming the gendered division of labor. In contrast to liberal feminist critiques of women's double burden of employment and housework—what is known today as the "second shift," which frequently leads to the outsourcing to low-paid domestic labor, most often performed by women of color—Märten frames this as a matter of revolutionary politics.⁴⁹⁵ Instead of demanding that the burden of housework be more equitably distributed between women and men, she sees this as evidence for the obsolescence of the family, insisting that the burden of reproductive labor be taken up by society.

While Märten's critique of the family was widely shared by her Marxist contemporaries, she goes further to insist on the transformation of gender itself, which she sees a necessary result of economic transformation. For Märten, the general relegation of women to the private sphere and men to the public sphere—and the creation of this distinction of public and private in the first place—compels women to develop their social, nurturing tendencies, while men are granted the relative freedom of "differentiation" in the public-phasing realms of art, philosophy and science, thereby granting them not individuality, but an individualistic drive. Märten argues that men were gradually

⁴⁹⁴ Märten, 54.

⁴⁹⁵ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home* (New York: Viking, 1989), 4.

compelled to stop producing within the private, family sphere in order to offer their labor power up on the market.⁴⁹⁶ This is not only the creation of the wage laborer, but is also a process of “masculinization” or the historical creation of mutually-exclusive gender roles as a counterpoint to the “feminization” of labor through its increasing precaritization and affective demands.⁴⁹⁷ According to Märten, the male worker thus ceases to serve as a producer within the family, instead only acting as a consumer or, increasingly, an employer or manager who lives off of the surplus labor of his wife and children—if not in commodified form. In response to the weaponized incompetence of Morris’s appeal: “let her cherish the art [of housekeeping] as her own special domain. Men will never do any good at it,” Märten emphasizes the loss that men suffered through the historical process by which they became completely alienated from “the family as an *economic operation*, its technical coherence.”⁴⁹⁸ According to Märten, the gendered division of labor therefore not only constrains women, but also men. By demonstrating that these economic functions and learned habits or drives are products of historical developments, she demonstrates that they are capable of conscious transformation.

According to Märten, men gradually become consumers rather than producers within the family, at the same time gaining a wide range of privileges: they are “groomed, nourished, taken care of” at home, so that they are better able to direct their energy into outward-facing, social aims, to differentiate themselves in society rather than in the private sphere.⁴⁹⁹ Correspondingly, women are compelled to direct their energy into the grooming, nourishing, and caring, which prevents them from differentiating themselves in the public sphere. However, this promise of differentiation for men is undermined by the realities of wage labor. The division of labor and expansion of the workforce has effectively eliminated the possibility of individuality for both working-class women and men, while

⁴⁹⁶ Märten, *Die Künstlerin*, 22.

⁴⁹⁷ Guy Standing, “Global Feminization Through Flexible Labor: A Theme Revisited,” *World Development* 17, no. 3 (1999): 583.

⁴⁹⁸ Märten, *Die Künstlerin*, 22.

⁴⁹⁹ Märten, *Die Künstlerin*, 22.

retaining women's burden of private domestic organization. Märtén doubles down on this rejection of individualistic arguments in light of these tendencies of capitalism:

Die großen gesellschaftlichen Wandlungen der letzten Jahrhunderte, die Vergesellschaftung der Arbeit von Mann und Frau und die der Arbeit überhaupt – hat noch nicht die Vergesellschaftung der privaten Interessen und Formen erbracht. Der sogenannte individuelle Mensch, der längst als Arbeitswesen vergesellschaftet ist – fürchtet noch immer die Aufhebung dessen, was er seine Individualität nennt, und verteidigt krampfhaft, wie ein letztes Bollwerk, seine privaten Interessen – einstige Besitzinteressen – oder für die Masse – Erwerbsinteressen, in der Familienform mit ihren spezifischen Egoismen. [...] Der so die Individualität krampfhaft Verteidigende merkt bei alledem nicht, wie die gesellschaftliche Arbeit, die Produktion und die Produkte, die Normen des äußeren Daseins, ihn selbst bereits entindividualisiert hat, und daß es eine wesentliche Mühe und Arbeit heute bedeutet, sich unter allem diktierten Dasein der Dinge, der Arbeit, des Geschmacks, der Entspannungen usw. ein wirklich individuelles Milieu und Privatsein noch zu schaffen.⁵⁰⁰

The major social transformations of the last centuries, the socialization of men's and women's labor and of labor in general—has not yet brought about the socialization of private interests and forms. The so-called individual human, who has long been socialized as a laboring being, still fears the dissolution of that which he calls his individuality and frantically defends, like a last bulwark, his private interests—formerly property interests—or for the masses, interest in making a living, in the form of the family with its specific kinds of egoism. [...] He who so frantically defends individuality does not notice that social labor, production and its products, the norms of external existence, have already deindividualized him and that it requires quite a bit of effort and work today, given the dictated existence of things, labor, taste, relaxation, etc. to create for oneself a truly individual sphere and private existence.

Märtén identifies the most significant social changes catalyzed by capitalism as the socialization of labor, or the expropriation of the means of production that not only robbed producers of the products of their labor, but also of their individuality. At the same time, the social form of the family has preserved the individualistic ideology long after it has been emptied of content. The socialization of labor on the basis of the distinctions between public and private, social and individual has deprived workers of the conditions for individuality, while pitted them against each other through the competitive egoism of family interests. Those who condemn the interference of the state, unions, or

⁵⁰⁰ Märtén, 30.

the community disregard the fact that they have already been “deindividualized.” Märten advocates for embracing this tendency not because she seeks to subsume the individual to the collective, but because she believes that completing the socialization of society is the true condition of individuality.

Märten insists that there is no possibility of restoring the “old forms of protection” [*die alten Schutzformen*] through the ideals of the family, marriage, traditional gender roles, or small-scale production. Instead, the individual must turn “society itself into a form of protection for the most personal of lives.” This again requires a leap from quantity to quality by preserving the positive aspects of the family—exemplified by “social motherliness”—on a collective rather than individual scale, as a society “based on *personal* relationships.”⁵⁰¹ She seeks to enact the bourgeois ideals of individuality and freedom on a mass scale: to fulfill capitalism’s contradictory ideological aims by turning them against the structure of capitalism itself. The male worker cannot serve as the model for a new, socialist subjectivity, because he has been reduced to his labor power in the public sphere and plays the capitalist in the private sphere. Correspondingly, the new relations that she calls for cannot be constructed based on granting all genders access to the “universal” category of the masculine, self-realizing subject. Instead, proletarian women, artists, and mothers already embody the collective relations that can be generalized into social forms when released from the ideological constraints of the family. In order to resignify women’s labor from ‘merely’ organizational and reproductive work to a form of creative and aesthetic production, Märten calls for recognizing that “this latent women’s power [*Frauenkraft*] [had] its note taker in the fiction and acts of men in every period.” “Admittedly not a scientific one,” she continues “only desiring, interested, yearning, and not losing sight of themselves—but still a type of knowing, and this deep knowledge demonstrates to this day that the life of women is in many ways a concealed, socially latent artistry [*Künstlerschaft*].”⁵⁰² This, Märten

⁵⁰¹ Märten, 31.

⁵⁰² Märten, 31.

claims, is the “nameless ingenuity” of women that must displace the notions of male genius, egoism, and the biological family.

In *The Woman Artist*, Märten pursues the theoretical implications of her earlier portrayals of the mother and the “mother spirit.” She proposes “social motherliness” as a model for the reconciliation of individuality and collectivity and a creative “social form.”⁵⁰³

Die Frau hat den gemeinschaftlichen Lebensinteressen und Geboten nach ebenso oft verkrüppelt wie befreit – genau wie der Mann; aber ihre freiesten persönlichsten Taten sind sonderlicherweise immer ihre tief mütterlichsten gewesen. Ihre sozialmütterlichsten. Soziale Mütterlichkeit, sozialer Muttergeist ist es denn auch, den die neue soziale Gesellschaft als schaffendes Prinzip braucht. Sie hat ihn weder schon als künstlerische Absicht in der Einzelnen erkannt, noch als integrierenden Teil ihres sozialen Organismus überhaupt – er ist auf keinerlei praktische Weise und zu keinerlei ideellem Nutzen noch gesellschaftlich genutzt. Nicht mit dem zufälligen Gebären hat er nur zu tun, noch mit der bloßen Blutliebe zu eignen Kindern, sondern zu allem Werdenden überhaupt fühlt er sich verpflichtet, als der mächtige Instinkt der Erhaltung im Natürlichen und der tiefe künstlerische – weil organische – im Gesellschaftlichen.⁵⁰⁴

The woman was just as frequently crippled as she was freed by the interests and commands of social life interests, just like the man, but her freest personal acts were always her most deeply motherly acts. Her most social motherly acts. Hence, social motherliness, the social mother spirit is that which the new social society needs as a creative principle. Society has not yet recognized it in the artistic intention of the individual, nor as an integrated part of its social organism at all—it has not been used socially to any degree in a practical sense or for an ideal purpose. It has nothing to do with incidental childbirth or with the mere love for one’s own biological children, but it feels responsible for all that is becoming, as the powerful instinct of preservation in the natural realm and the deep artistic—because it is organic—instinct in the social realm.

After tracing the implications of the socialization of productive and reproductive labor, Märten considers the socialization of subjectivity. While in “The Birth of Mothers” the “social individual” [*sozialer Einzelmensch*] had to struggle in isolation on the path toward the “new land,” Märten now

⁵⁰³ Märten, *Die Künstlerin*, 106.

⁵⁰⁴ Märten, 32–33.

describes the effects of universalizing the “creative principle” of social motherliness.⁵⁰⁵ Social motherliness is distinct from any notion of “incidental childbirth,” and is therefore a subjective form open not only to all women, but to all genders. In distinction to the World Spirit exemplified by Napoleon, social motherliness is both common and exceptional, sustaining and creative, individualized and collective. Through this utopian subjectivity, Märten imagines how a future society could be built on motherliness as a creative principle, socialized beyond the family and biological relations.

Collective Histories

In a 1934 article in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (*Journal of Social Research*), Erich Fromm attempts to account for the “enthusiastic affirmation of matriarchal theories” across the political spectrum. He sets out to explain “why the problem of matriarchy triggers such strong affects or, in other words, which vital social interests it touches on.”⁵⁰⁶ He concludes that the popularity of the theory of the mother right, from Bebel and Engels to the National Socialist ideologue Alfred Baeumler, lies in its “distance from bourgeois democratic society.”⁵⁰⁷ The radical renunciation of existing perspectives that Johann Jakob Bachofen demands of the readers of his major work, *The Mother Right* (*Das Mutterrecht*, 1861), reinforces both a conservative nationalistic nostalgia and an emancipatory socialist stance. The ethnographic research on the mother right thus resonated with all those who rejected the present, “whether they exalt the past as a lost paradise, or they believe in a better future.”⁵⁰⁸ The profound ambivalence of the popular matriarchal theories and ethnographic studies of the time is reflected not

⁵⁰⁵ Märten, “Geburt der Mütter,” 519.

⁵⁰⁶ Erich Fromm, “Die sozialpsychologische Bedeutung der Mutterrechtstheorie,” ed. Max Horkheimer, *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 3 (1934): 196.

⁵⁰⁷ See: Alfred Baeumler, “Einleitung,” in *Der Mythos von Orient und Occident. Eine Metaphysik der alten Welt. Aus den Werken von J. J. Bachofen*, ed. Manfred Schroeter (München: C. H. Beck’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1956).

⁵⁰⁸ Fromm, 197.

only in the split in its political reception, but also within the socialist works themselves: from August Bebel's *Woman and Socialism* (*Die Frau und der Sozialismus*, 1879) and Engels' *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (*Der Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums und des Staats*, 1884) to Märten's unpublished *History of Women from the Mother Right to the Present* (*Geschichte der Frau vom Mutterrecht bis zur Gegenwart*).⁵⁰⁹ These studies oscillate between a radical social constructivism and a selective essentialism, between the attempt to use history to demonstrate the variability of gender and the identification of transhistorical qualities.

Märten had already conducted decades of research on the ethnographic studies of the mother right for *Essence and Transformation of the Forms/ Arts* when she wrote her *History of Women*. The twenty-five years between the completion of these works saw the rise of Nazism and the Second World War. During the war, Märten kept a low profile, living in poverty and barely publishing.⁵¹⁰ Nearly all copies of *Essence and Transformation* were destroyed by the Nazis, motivating Märten to publish a second edition in 1949. The National Socialist ideological appropriation of motherhood compelled Märten to yet again defend her rejection of a reductive biological notion of maternity and reemphasize its radical social potential.

Alle heutigen literarischen Kundgebung beginnen mit dem Spuk der Hitlerregierung und ihren Folgen, weshalb ich sie hier nicht wiederholen will. Was ergab sie für die Frau? Ein erneutes Zurückwerfen der Frauenfragen und Verfälschens des Bewusstseins bis dahin. Die Frauen wurden auf ihren "Naturberuf" zurückverwiesen. Kindergebären und dem Mann die Sorgenfalten glätten – auch sonst noch allerhand "echt Weibliches" wurde ihr gestattet; daneben durfte sie die MGs bedienen, wenn es soweit war. Für Gebärleistungen wurden Orden verliehen und die Tatsache der Mutterschaft mit einer sentimental Gloriele umkleidet. Als ob die bloße biologische Tatsache der Mutterschaft ohne tiefere Bedeutung des Mutterwesens als Erhalterin

⁵⁰⁹ One of the most prominent examples of the reduction of women to their biological function is Bebel's discussion of the importance of breastfeeding within socialist society. He appeals to recent scientific findings to support this claim, while his language grants priority to the woman's breast. As he asserts, "[i]t is self-evident that the mother's breast must be retained for the child for as long as possible and necessary. Moleschott, Sonderegger, all hygienists and doctors agree that nothing can completely replace the nutrients provided by the mother." August Bebel, *Die Frau und der Sozialismus* (Stuttgart: Dietz, 1910), 519.

⁵¹⁰ Chrysoula Kambas, *Die Werkstatt als Utopie. Lu Märten's literarische Arbeit und Formästhetik seit 1900*, Studien und Texte zur Sozialgeschichte der Literatur (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1988), 230.

von Wesenheiten und Werten etwas Glorioses bedeutete. Dieses Mutter-sein, das auch die kinderlose Frau hat oder haben sollte, ist sozial gesehen das Wesentliche.⁵¹¹

All of today's literary announcements are haunted by the spectre of the Hitler regime and its consequences, which is why I do not want to repeat that here. What did it mean for the woman? A renewed setback to the women questions and the distortion of the consciousness achieved up until that point. Women were directed back to their "natural calling." Childbearing and calming men's worries—they were permitted to do anything else "truly feminine"; at the same time, they were allowed to operate machine guns when the time came. Medals were awarded for childbirth achievements and the fact of motherhood was cloaked in sentimental glory. As if the mere biological fact of motherhood without any deeper meaning of motherly existence as the preserver of beings and values could mean something glorious. This motherly existence, which even the childless woman has or should have, is, from a social perspective, the essential aspect.

In light of the Nazi's attempt to reduce women to their ability to bear children through both propaganda and financial incentives, Märten reasserts the social, relational aspect of maternity that exists independently of childbearing.⁵¹² While pointing to the hypocrisy of the attempted essentialization of femininity as a natural calling and the simultaneous employment of women auxiliaries, Märten acknowledges the damage that was done to the women's movement by the Nazi regime.

After the war, Märten fostered new hope for reviving the socialist women's movement. In her *History of Women*, Märten attempts to write a collective history from the mother right to the bourgeois and socialist women's movements in order to draw renewed awareness to the multiplicity of gendered subjectivation within history. She no longer addresses her work to individual women, but to an entire generation that lacks this perspective: "[t]his work was undertaken in order to provide younger generations of women with an overview of their history to this point and their position in the past and present after the last catastrophes of Nazism and the Second World War. History teaches us to

⁵¹¹ Märten, "Frauenfrage einst - noch immer - und heute," 68.

⁵¹² Lauren Nossett, *The Virginal Mother In German Culture: From Sophie Von La Roche And Goethe To Metropolis*, Book Collections on Project MUSE. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2019), 167, {"http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/j.ctvtznwf":["www.jstor.org"]}.

refine our consciousness and to comprehend and value transformations.”⁵¹³ Similarly to *Essence and Transformation*, she frames her historical and ethnographic work as a deliberately constructed narrative with the intention of generating the processes of subjectivation necessary for the revolutionary transition to utopia. It was with the aim of directly intervening in the women’s movement that she sought to publish her book in 1948. However, *The History of Women* never reached the generation of young women to whom it was dedicated: it was censored by the Soviet Occupation Zone’s Cultural Advisory Council in 1948 with the justification that Engels and Bebel had already settled the matter long ago.⁵¹⁴

The History of Women from the Mother Right to the Present is structured as a literary narrative rather than a historical study: in Märten’s manuscript she cites sparingly, moving from ethnographic anecdotes to philosophical and literary sources. Märten clarifies that the mother right cannot be comprehended in terms of capitalist property rights or the patriarchal family unit and, for this reason, necessarily compels an expansion of the notion of the possible.⁵¹⁵ She views the mother right not simply as inheritance based on maternal lineage, but as an entire system of the collective cultivation of land and, crucially, a cultural legacy that proves the historical existence of alternatives to patriarchy and private property.⁵¹⁶ The universalizing gesture of her acceptance of the mother right as an incontrovertible fact of prior civilizations serves as a grand narrative handed down to her from Bachofen, Morgan, Engels and Bebel. As such it provides the “scientific” evidence to challenge the normalization of patriarchy. As she writes: “The fact that the mother right existed—alien to all

⁵¹³ Lu Märten, “Geschichte der Frau vom Mutterrecht bis zur Gegenwart (Querschnitt),” 1947, 5, Lu Märten Papers, Folder 45, International Institute of Social History.

⁵¹⁴ In her unsuccessful appeal of the decision, Märten argues that Morgan, Engels, and Bebel “were the first to direct attention to the lineage of the mother right in ancient history, but they necessarily were not able to recognize all of the results of this research. That is what was addressed here.” Märten, “Protest betr. die Urteile über ‘Stellung der Frau in der Geschichte’ von Lu Märten,” November 8, 1948, 2, Lu Märten Papers, Folder 46, International Institute of Social History.

⁵¹⁵ Lu Märten, “Note: Erbfolge,” Lu Märten Papers, Folder 46, International Institute of Social History.

⁵¹⁶ Märten, “Note: Erbfolge,” Lu Märten Papers, Folder 46, International Institute of Social History.

masculine lines of thought—retains its validity and, in light of its consequences, can no longer be seen as a form of degeneracy [*Entartung*], but could, instead, characterize the absolute patriarchy [*Männerherrschaft*] with its ramifications in this way.” In illuminating different experiences of gender, divergent notions of femininity and masculinity, and alternative forms of organizing sexual relations, the “discovery” of the matriarchal origins of society grants historical legitimacy to future possibilities: its otherness performs the necessary critical function to release the imagination from its current constraints. While Märten acknowledges that “[t]he *traces* that it has left on society to this day are barely conscious,” she sets out to provide the narrative that will compel women to seek out these potentialities in themselves and the post-war present.⁵¹⁷

As Märten moves through history, she deliberately avoids naming well-known women, instead identifying moments in which the social conditions allowed for the greater “differentiation” of women. In the same vein as her 1946 article on “Nameless Women Fighters” (“*Namenlose Kämpferinnen*”) and her concept of “nameless ingenuity,” Märten frames the relationship between gendered subjectivity and the revolutionary movement as a question of social possibilities.⁵¹⁸ She therefore identifies types rather than individuals—the mother, the courtesan, and finally the androgyne—as ideals from the past and models for the future. Perhaps due to the post-war ideological baggage attached to the figure of the mother, Märten now offers the ideal of androgyny emerging from a historical materialist reading of the Romantic figure:

Bei den Romantikern besonders war die Frau als *Mensch* geachtet und ihr Einfluß oder ihre auftretende Überlegenheit freimütiger anerkannt. Aber eine wirkliche Gleichberechtigung der Frau haben jene in geistigen Sphären sich abspielenden Feststellungen nicht erbringen können. Unter den Romantikern haben viele überhaupt konsequenter über die synthetische Möglichkeit der allgemeinen Entwicklung zum Menschentum gedacht, die uns auch in der Frauenfrage als Ziel stets bewußt bleiben muß. So läßt Schleiermacher durch eine Frau den Satz aussprechen: “Ich glaube an die

⁵¹⁷ Original emphasis. Lu Märten, “Geschichte der Frau vom Mutterrecht bis zur Gegenwart (Querschnitt)” (Berlin, 1949), 44, Lu Märten Papers, Folder 45, International Institute of Social History, 11.

⁵¹⁸ Märten, “Namenlose Kämpferinnen.”

unendliche Menschheit, die da war, ehe sie die Hülle der Männlichkeit und Weiblichkeit annahm; ich glaube, daß ich nicht lebe, um zu gehorchen...sondern um zu sein und zu werden....mich aus den Fesseln der Mißbildung zu erlösen und mich von den Schranken des Geschlechts unabhängig zu machen.”⁵¹⁹

For the Romantics in particular the woman was respected as a *human* and her influence or her manifest superiority was more candidly recognized. But these assertions in intellectual spheres could not bring about the true equality of women. Generally, many of the Romantics thought more systematically about the synthetic possibility of the general development of humanity, which must also always remain our conscious aim in regard to the woman question. Thus Schleiermacher had a woman give voice to the words: “I believe in infinite humanity, which was there before it assumed the shell of masculinity and femininity; I believe that I do not live to obey...but to be and to become...to deliver myself from the bonds of deformity and to free myself from the barriers of sex.”

Drawing on Friedrich Schleiermacher’s notion of the “synthetic possibility” of the androgyne, Märten positions this fusion as a central goal of the women’s movement. At the same time, she does not merely accept the Romantic casting of women, but acknowledges the limitations of achieving what remains an ideal. The origin story offered by Schleiermacher in *The Belief (Der Glaube)* provides a model of unity before gender, the “eternal humanity” before humans were compelled to shape themselves exclusively in terms of masculinity or femininity.⁵²⁰ It is not only a matter of liberating women from their subjugation, for men are just as restricted by the “shell” of masculinity. According to Märten, the solution is therefore not only to respect women as “human,” but to translate this into practice by transforming what it means to be human—and what it means to be gendered.⁵²¹ In the context of Märten’s revolutionary utopianism, the Romantic figure of the androgyne is transported to the future.

Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre have described this “revolutionary and/or utopian Romanticism” as “invest[ing] the nostalgia for a precapitalist past in the hope for a radically new

⁵¹⁹ Original emphasis. Lu Märten, “Geschichte der Frau,” 44.

⁵²⁰ Juliane Jacobi, “Friedrich Schleiermachers ‘Idee zu einem Katechismus der Vernunft für edle Frauen’. Ein Beitrag zur Bildungsgeschichte als Geschlechtergeschichte,” *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik* 46, no. 2 (2000): 173.

⁵²¹ Although she only briefly touches on the topic in her book, Kambas argues for a “progressive, historical” reading of Märten’s concept of androgyny as a rejection of essentialism. Kambas, *Die Werkstatt als Utopie*, 264.

future.”⁵²² For Märten, a revolutionary framework is necessary to transform the Romantic androgynous figure from an object of aesthetic pleasure or a muse for male genius into the agent of a new humanity:

Das gemeinsame Ziel aber ist, kein Weibwesen oder Mannswesen in seiner Einseitigkeit zu züchten, sondern für den Begriff “Mensch” müßte dasselbe gelten, wie für das Genie, daß es kein Geschlecht hat. Und in allen seltenen Fällen einer großen und nahezu vollkommenen Menschlichkeit ist das auch der Fall. Man mag soviel aus der Biologie oder dem Vorurteil abgeleitete Abweichungen des Weibwesens behaupten, wie man will; an der logischen Konsequenz in der Verteidigung der Frauenrechte werden sie nicht das Geringste ändern. Die letzten Möglichkeiten von Frau und Mann können sich nur mit dem Begriff “*Mensch*” decken. Was heute als “*Mischform*” erscheint, womit man stets weibliche Menschen mit überragenden Fähigkeiten, sogenannten “männlichen” Eigenschaften bezeichnet hat, so sind sie nicht entartete Typen, sondern nur ein unentwickelter [oder erster]⁵²³ neuer Typus des Menschen.⁵²⁴

The common aim is, however, not to cultivate a female or a male in its one-sidedness, but rather the same thing must be valid for the concept “human” as for the genius, that it has no sex. And in all of the rare cases of a great or almost perfect humanity this is the case. You can make as many claims as you would like from biology or about the deviations of the female derived from prejudice; they will make no difference at all to the logical consequences of the defense of women’s rights. The last possibilities of women and men can only correspond to the concept “*human*.” What today appears as a “*mixed form*,” with which one constantly refers to female people with superior capacities as having so-called “masculine” characteristics, is not a degenerate type, but rather the undeveloped [or first] new type of human.

Mediated by the Romantic notion of androgyny, Märten brings together her concept of “nameless ingenuity” and her vision of a synthetic, higher form of subjectivity freed from the restrictions of gender. The Romantic androgyne provides Märten with the foundation to advocate for overcoming binary gender based on the originary lack of these structuring distinctions.⁵²⁵ However, as her

⁵²² Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre, *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity*, trans. Catherine Porter (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 73.

⁵²³ This is a handwritten interjection added to the manuscript.

⁵²⁴ Original emphasis. Märten, “Geschichte der Frau,” 59.

⁵²⁵ In a 1903 review entitled “Ricarda Huch as Romantic Poet,” Märten summarizes: “[i]n the area of human development, the Romantics also paid homage to the idea of fusion, the complete human, the androgyne. Excessive femininity was ugly to them and exaggerated masculinity repugnant. They considered the subordination of one-sided sexuality to be a higher humanity worth striving for, and the fusion of the masculine and feminine and the so often

corresponding notions of the nameless ingenuity of women and social ingenuity make clear, Märten breaks from the Romantic vision of androgyny as the “attempt to valorize the appropriation of feminine qualities by male heroes.”⁵²⁶ Instead, Märten departs from the position of women to conceptualize “gynandry” not a “androgyny” as a form of subjectivity accessible to all genders.⁵²⁷ With this socialization of femininity, Märten argues for disregarding binary gender in the definition of genius and the human, instead proposing models of gender plurality. Those who are presently mistreated and dismissed as “hybrid” or “mixed forms” defined only in terms of their deviation from binary gender norms are, for Märten, the first manifestations of a new humanity.

For the contemporary reader, Märten language of genius “without gender” and freedom from “the barriers of sex”⁵²⁸ recalls gender abolitionism, which has been deployed by trans-exclusionary feminists to argue against free gender expression. I have attempted to reconstruct her understanding of gendered subjectivity within its historical and theoretical context in order to emphasize the specificity of her utopian intervention and how it challenges our contemporary distinctions between essentialism and constructivism, identity and queerness. For Märten, genius without gender represents not the elimination of gender altogether or the form of “universal masculinization” common to socialist movements, but rather a generalization and socialization of feminized forms. As we have seen from the “Birth of Mothers” through *The Woman Artist* and *The History of Women*, Märten identifies the relations modeled by women, their creative capacity as artists and social mothers, as the “creative principle” of communist society.⁵²⁹

misused and superficially-applied concept of the ‘man-woman’ [*Mannweib*] to designate a beautiful and complete form in which humans could present themselves.” Lu Märten, “Ricarda Huch als romantische Dichterin,” *Centralblatt des Bundes deutscher Frauenvereine*, no. 12 (1903): 92.

⁵²⁶ Diane Long Hoeveler, *Romantic Androgyny: The Woman Within* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990), xiv.

⁵²⁷ Wolfson, “Review of ‘Romantic Androgyny,’” 238.

⁵²⁸ Märten, “Geschichte der Frau,” 44; 59.

⁵²⁹ Märten, *Die Künstlerin*, 32.

Kambas emphasizes the personal appeal of androgyny for Märten, maintaining that she “was caught up in the iconolatry of the turn of the century; she was only able to gain distance from it due to the necessity for objectivity in her theoretical efforts.”⁵³⁰ However, her major theoretical works, *Essence and Transformation* and *The History of Women*, are characterized less by scientific objectivity than a shift from an individual to a collective scale. Märten retained her utopian normativity within these nonfictional genres, insisting that the classless and androgynous forms that could develop out of history were a necessary step beyond the reified and oppressive aesthetic and social forms of the present.

In her theater and film script, *The Dancers: A Psychological Drama from the Lives of Three People* (*Tänzer. Psychologisches Schauspiel aus dem Leben dreier Menschen*, 1939), Märten’s nascent androgynous form is embodied by the autobiographically-inflected protagonist, Raa Merion. The character description, which Märten developed with Greta Garbo in mind, reads:

RAA MERION, Schriftsteller oder geistig produktiver Mensch, Frau, an der Grenze des Alterns. Intellektuelle wie auch künstlerische Potenz. Zeitlos. Frappante Erscheinung. Vergeistigter Typus. Starker Kopf. Knabenhafte Figur. Muß im Ganzen den Reiz der Gestalten des Quattrocento oder des Androgyn des Péladan haben.

RAA MERION, author or intellectually productive human, woman, on the verge of aging. Intellectual as well as artistic virility. Timeless. Striking appearance. Spiritual type. Strong head. Boyish figure. Must have the overall charm of the figures of the Quattrocento or the androgyne of Péladan.⁵³¹

In contrast with the other characters in *The Dancers*, the androgynous Raa Merion is not given a specific age: she is timeless, yet fatalistic; selfless, but condemned to loneliness. She is first human, then woman, characterized by the masculine “Schriftsteller” in contrast with the other woman characters who are marked by grammatical gender. Throughout the script her “boyish figure” and

⁵³⁰ Märten, *Die Künstlerin*, 72.

⁵³¹ Lu Märten, “Tänzer: Psychologisches Schauspiel aus dem Leben dreier Menschen. Schauspiel/Film,” *Frauen und Film*, no. 46 (1989): 66.

“virility” are paired with a temperament that fluctuates between playful and nurturing to melancholy and withdrawn. These aspects of her personality are mirrored in her two lovers, the younger, androgynous dancer Anatol—or, for Raa, the feminine “Lota” or “Lotana”—and the older, practical Nick with his “very masculine appearance.” While Raa and Anatol are depicted as both feminine and masculine, Raa’s drive to reject the normative organization of gender and sexuality along with her utopian desire for totality or “hunger for life” can only end in her destruction. Similarly to Nietzsche’s “lonely one,” Raa cannot find a place in the world as it is: “[a]lways driven to completion, she thus perishes.”⁵³² Märten repeatedly explores the possibilities of androgyny, polyamory, and collective aesthetic production in the present, only to remind the readers of their impossibility on the level of individual action.

The tragedy of isolated utopianism in *The Dancers* underscores Märten’s conviction that nameless ingenuity, classless forms, and androgyny must be situated within a revolutionary framework if they are to be more than fleeting phenomena. She views the transformative aspect of these syntheses in their mediation by the collective and saturation of everyday life, rather than their accessibility for select individuals or classes. Märten’s argument turns on this resignification, the breaking down of boundaries and formerly exclusive terms. In *The History of Women*, she thus generates an understanding of everyday, nameless ingenuity through the negation of individual genius: “[g]enius is nothing other than the synthetic force that creatively expresses in an individual that which is generated by a myriad of social forces up to a certain time, while also pointing beyond.” For that reason, “genius exists, is possible and is recognizable in *every human activity*.”⁵³³ Realizing the utopian potential of nameless ingenuity entails rewriting the history of art, labor, and women to establish new forms of subjectivation. In the final sentence of her *History of Women*, Märten sets aside the auctorial perspective

⁵³² Märten, “Tänzer,” 66.

⁵³³ Original emphasis. Märten, “Geschichte der Frau,” 52.

and adopts the voice of the emergent collective: “our task is no longer to *discuss*, but rather to *declare*, no longer to question, but to fulfill.”⁵³⁴

⁵³⁴ Märten, “Geschichte der Frau,” 63.

CONCLUSION: THE TRANSITION TO UTOPIA

In her unpublished play “The Youth of the 1918 Revolution” (“Jugend der Revolution 1918,” 1919), Lu Märten introduces a character, “Alexandra.” Described as a committed revolutionary and a “slightly Slavic type,” the character evokes the Bolshevik revolutionary and Marxist theorist, Alexandra Kollontai (1872-1952). During a lull in the action, Alexandra reflects: “sometimes I think...it would be best to just stop right in the middle of things...” It is not that she is tired, she explains, “[b]ut it’s as if we’ve all lived through a century. We’re knocked out early—we’re terribly old and can hardly tolerate being terribly young.”⁵³⁵ Märten chooses the figure of Kollontai to express a recurring paradox in socialist utopian thought: if the aim of a revolution is to transform society and the forms of subjectivity it produces, then what happens to the needs and desires of the revolutionaries themselves? How is it possible to be both terribly old—shaped by the limitations of pre-revolutionary society—and remain terribly young, responsive to the rapid changes in the transition to socialism? This is not only a question of the capacity to imagine a radically different society, but also of the ability to desire it.

Following Märten, I turn to Kollontai to consider the theoretical and practical problem of the transition to utopia. A revolutionary who drew on Chernyshevsky and inspired Märten, Kollontai was instrumental in the Soviet transition to communist society as a member of the Bolshevik Central Committee and, along with Inessa Armand, co-founder of the *Zhenotdel*, or Women’s Bureau. As the People’s Commissar for Social Welfare, Kollontai introduced an eight-hour workday for women, maternity leave, and social insurance, supplementing the recently implemented legalization of

⁵³⁵ Lu Märten, “Jugend der Revolution 1918 (Schauspiel),” 1919, 29, Lu Märten Papers, Folder 36, International Institute of Social History.

abortion, liberalization of divorce laws, and widespread literary campaigns.⁵³⁶ However, as an outspoken advocate of revolutionizing sexual and gender norms, she was often construed as a dangerous and “unmarxist” proselytizer of free love, as Lenin famously characterized her work in conversation with Clara Zetkin.⁵³⁷ While Kollontai is best known for her political speeches and theoretical writings, she published a collection of short stories and a novella in 1923, *Love of Worker Bees* (*Liubov’ pchel trudovykh*), confronting the political and psychological challenges arising during the first years of the New Economic Policy (NEP). This conclusion presents theoretical approaches to the paradox of utopia before examining Kollontai’s response to generational theories of transition in her most influential work of fiction, “The Love of Three Generations” (“Liubov trekh pokolenii,” 1923).⁵³⁸

In my dissertation, I have argued for conceptualizing utopianism not as a static vision or even a literary genre, but rather as an ongoing epistemic and affective intervention in historical processes of subjectivation. Adopting the lens of the transition to utopia emphasizes this processual framing of the problem. Instead of projecting the image of a perfect society or revolutionary subject, the questions arise: what new forms of sociality are necessary to collectively conceive of a radically new society? How do we overcome the limitations of our current perspectives while preserving what is valuable in the present? How do we avoid reproducing the current contradictions, thereby undermining the ideal of the future society? The risks are both that we may not be able to imagine radical difference at all and that a utopia too linked to the present cannot be truly utopian.⁵³⁹

⁵³⁶ Valentine M. Moghadam, “Gender and Revolutions,” ed. John Foran (London: Routledge, 1997), 148; Greg Carleton, “Writing-Reading the Sexual Revolution in the Early Soviet Union,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 8, no. 2 (1997): 230.

⁵³⁷ Clara Zetkin, *Erinnerungen an Lenin*, ed. Katja Haferkorn, 4th ed. (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1985), 73.

⁵³⁸ I am grateful to the organizers of the AATSEEL 2020 panel “Early Soviet Aesthetic and Social Theory: Between Immanence and Transcendence,” Anne Eakin Moss and Tom Roberts, as well as the other conference participants for their feedback on my reading of Kollontai’s fiction.

⁵³⁹ Bini Adamczak, *Beziehungswiese Revolution: 1917, 1968 und kommende* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2017), 45.

We have seen this tension play out in Vera Pavlovna's love triangle and her refusal of a polyamorous relationship as triggering her jealousy rather than her desire, followed by the more expansive sensuality enabled by equal relations in her sewing collective and second marriage. In "The Birth of Mothers," Märten presents the possible destruction unleashed by a radical break, both in the demise of the first "social individual" to reach the new world and in the violent rejection of former values. At the same time, she offers "social motherliness" as a new creative principle, revealing how this death can also be a rebirth. Confronting the problem of transition entails a consideration of the constantly shifting relationship between individuals and the collective. It requires balancing the autonomy of desire with the ways in which desire itself is shaped by the relational constellations in which we find ourselves. As Chernyshevsky, Märten, and Kollontai demonstrate, this is not a problem that can ever be solved conclusively. Intervening with the help of various fictional and nonfictional forms, they present these contradictions as provocations for their readers.

The Paradox of Utopia

The transition to utopia does not always present a positive prospect. In his widely-read book, *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology*, Eric Naiman theorizes the "problem of transition" in the context of the New Economic Policy and proceeds to offer one of the few close readings of Kollontai's fiction.⁵⁴⁰ Examining the anxieties characterizing this period from 1921 through 1928 in which capitalist economic policies were reintroduced, Naiman identifies the first signs of the Great Terror that would follow. He departs from this particular historical context to offer a general account

⁵⁴⁰ Kollontai garnered the attention of feminist scholars in the late 1970s and early 1980s, resulting in a wave of English-language biographies and articles, including Barbara Evans Clements's *Bolshevik Feminist: The Life of Aleksandra Kollontai* (1979), Cathy Porter's *Alexandra Kollontai: A Biography* (1980), and Beatrice Farnsworth's *Aleksandra Kollontai: Socialism, Feminism, and the Bolshevik Revolution* (1980). These studies offer strongly biographic readings of both Kollontai's theory and, to a limited extent, her fiction. However, as Naiman observes, they largely interpret Kollontai's fiction as an extension of her theoretical writings. Eric Naiman, *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology* (Princeton University Press, 1997), 13; 228.

of the “paradox that plagues all utopian mentalities”: the drive to communicate a radically new vision within existing “nonutopian” linguistic and historical terms.⁵⁴¹ Naiman observes that this collision between the perfection of the future and the flawed present tends toward a single solution: the complete rejection of reality and history.⁵⁴² The “persecution of the present,” he maintains, is accompanied by a “campaign against origins.” For this reason, “the process of transition is fraught with danger and necessarily becomes a period of purging, in which all imperfections of the here and now must be destroyed.”⁵⁴³

Diagnosing “utopian desire” as the underlying force behind the multiple perpetrator rape in Chubarov Alley in 1926, as well as the Stalinist purges that would begin a decade later, it is not surprising that Naiman interprets the utopianism of Kollontai’s work within this framework. He thus argues that in her novella, *Vasilisa Mahygina* (1923), published in *Love of Worker Bees*, the “pursuit of purity is compulsive and endless.”⁵⁴⁴ Correspondingly, he defines utopian desire as the “desire for the elimination of potentially disruptive differences, of rifts between individual members and the collective.”⁵⁴⁵ Although Naiman does not frame his argument in ideological terms, this account has long been weaponized by liberal thinkers such as Karl Popper, Isaiah Berlin, and Friedrich Hayek, who argue that the “utopian mentality” entails disregarding the means in pursuit of an end, and

⁵⁴¹ Naiman introduces the simile of sexually transmitted infections to enhance the rhetorical power of his claims. Arguing that the utopian ideal is always in danger of being “contaminated” by reality, he writes: “[t]here is no such thing as ‘safe speech.’ [...] The perfect utopia—a utopia immune to linguistically transmitted diseases—would be like the perfect crime: we would be ignorant of its existence.” Naiman, *Sex in Public*, 13.

⁵⁴² Naiman, 13.

⁵⁴³ Naiman, 14.

⁵⁴⁴ Naiman does not provide a close reading of *The Love of Three Generations*, but argues for the validity of this claim for Kollontai’s fiction more broadly, asserting that “Kollontai’s prose vacillates between serving as a sign of ideological anxiety and representing anxiety’s cause.” Naiman, 230; 243.

⁵⁴⁵ In the chapter, “The Case of Chubarov Alley: Collective Rape and Utopian Desire,” Naiman reads the extensive publicity surrounding the rape of a young woman dubbed “Liubov’ B.” by forty men as reflecting the spectators’ utopian desire for the merging of the individual and the collective: “What, after all, was the gang rape in Chubarov Alley and the infection of Liubov’ if not a collective act? Had not the Komsomol been directing its members to bridge the gap between the individual and the collective, to end the situation in which a worker’s personal life lies beyond the threshold of our collectives?” Naiman, 273.

subordinating human life to an ideal of perfection.⁵⁴⁶ With contrary aims to the preservation of the capitalist status quo, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer similarly identify the threat posed by a radical break from history. As they observe, this utopian impulse is evident in the desire for perfection exhibited by the genocidal character of antisemitism.⁵⁴⁷ This identification of utopianism with “one of the ugliest of all human passions” reveals the danger of an ideology that wishes to deny history.⁵⁴⁸

The cases raised by Naiman as well as Adorno and Horkheimer do not necessitate the categorical rejection of utopianism. Rather, they underscore the importance of consciously and collectively grappling with the challenges presented by the transition to a radically better world. The revolutionary utopianisms I have considered look to history as a resource for imagining and enacting these changes. Within these ethico-aesthetic paradigms, transforming subjectivity and society as a whole results not from the rejection of the past, but from pursuing its dialectical outcomes: through the unification of art, craft, and machine production and the enactment of collective living on a broad social scale. As I will demonstrate in my reading of Kollontai’s short story, “The Love of Three Generations,” this definition of utopianism also opens up new aspects of a text, accentuating the ways in which it diverges from dominant narratives to pose questions for the reader.

Rejecting calls for perfection both within and against Marxist and socialist traditions, the queer-feminist theorist Bini Adamczak offers an alternative approach to the paradox of utopia. She

⁵⁴⁶ In *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Popper argues for “piecemeal engineering” to avoid the single-mindedness of the utopian engineer: “[h]e will say, like Lenin, ‘You can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs.’” Berlin extends the metaphor even further, remarking: “[t]o make such an omelette, there is surely no limit to the number of eggs that should be broken—that was the faith of Lenin, of Trotsky, of Mao, for all I know of Pol Pot.” Hayek contrasts liberalism’s “self-generating or spontaneous order” based on “the reconciliation of different purposes for the mutual benefit of the participants” with what he calls the “unfree *telocratic* (purpose-governed) social order.” Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, ed. Alan Ryan and E. H. Gombrich (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 150; Isaiah Berlin, *Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (London: John Murray, 1990), 15; F. A. Hayek, “The Principles of a Liberal Social Order,” *Il Politico* 31, no. 4 (December 1966): 602–4.

⁵⁴⁷ In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (*Dialektik der Aufklärung*, 1944), Adorno and Horkheimer observe, “[f]or the fascists, Jews are not a minority, but rather the anti-race [*Gegenrasse*], the negative principle as such; the world’s happiness depends on their eradication.” Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2011), 177.

⁵⁴⁸ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 288.

considers the problem as a pragmatic dilemma of how to balance the challenges and promises of utopianism within revolutionary leftist projects:

Als Ensemble von Beziehungsweisen sollte sich das Utopische so rekonzeptualisieren lassen, dass es zugleich Stabilität wie Beweglichkeit transportiert und die utopische Gesellschaft ebensowenig zum Maßstab der Subjekte macht wie andersrum die gegenwärtigen Subjekte zur absoluten Begrenzung der utopischen Gesellschaft. Statt ein reines Ideal zu verfolgen, das sich nur grausam und also scheiternd erreichen lässt, müssen revolutionäre Politiken mit den Verletzungen und Beschädigungen rechnen und sorgsam Beziehungen flechten. [...] Vielleicht muss das Begehren, *alles* anders werden zu lassen, an etwas festhalten, das nicht verändert werden soll - und sei es auch nur jenes Moment, das nach dieser Veränderung begehrt.”⁵⁴⁹

As an ensemble of relational forms, the utopian should be reconceptualized, so that it simultaneously conveys both stability and mobility, and the utopian society is made just as little into the measure of the subjects, as the present subjects are made into the absolute limit of the utopian society. Instead of pursuing a pure ideal that can only be achieved brutally and, therefore, fail, revolutionary politics must reckon with injuries and damages and carefully weave relationships. [...] Maybe the desire for *everything* to change has to hold on to something that should not be changed, even if it is only this moment of desire for change.

Adamczak redefines the utopian as a constellation of relationships emerging from the tension between the material constitution of subjectivity and its relative autonomy. She proposes supplanting the drive for perfection with the desire for change as that which remains in the transition between the present and the future. This means both relinquishing a degree of control and establishing collective decision-making processes to consciously navigate the conflicts that will necessarily emerge. For this reason, revolutionary politics cannot proceed on the basis of a purely scientific knowledge that seeks to predict laws and establish objective truths. Adamczak’s utopianism consists in activating the imagination through the alterity of history, and understanding that there are moments when existing desires must be affirmed and others in which they can be challenged and educated. This vision of utopianism incorporates a notion of desire as relational and queer into a revolutionary politics that does not shy

⁵⁴⁹ Adamczak, *Beziehungsweise Revolution*, 54–55.

away from the need for a better world.⁵⁵⁰ It is in this sense that this dissertation seeks to draw attention to revolutionary utopianisms that strive not for the elimination of difference, but for a broader “differentiation,” in Märten’s words: for higher levels of sensuality, creativity, individuality, and collectivity.⁵⁵¹

Desire and Obsolescence

Within the international socialist movement of the early twentieth century, the leading voices largely dismissed the problem of transition. It was not only that utopianism was conflated with reformism; in addition, the production of new forms of subjectivity was often seen as a non-issue. Either the transitional period of the dictatorship of the proletariat before the dissolution of the state would take care of the problem, as Lenin argues, or the revolutionary struggle itself would produce the New Person, as Rosa Luxemburg maintains. In *The State and Revolution* (*Gosudarstvo i revoliutsiia*), completed a month before the Bolsheviks assumed power in 1917, Lenin proclaims “[w]e are not utopians. We do not ‘dream’ of *immediately* dispensing with all management, all subordination.”⁵⁵² He clarifies that these utopians have not grasped the meaning of the dictatorship of the proletariat and merely want to defer the revolution. Continuing, he insists “[n]o, we want a socialist revolution with people as they are now, people who cannot do without subordination, without control, without ‘supervisors and accountants.’”⁵⁵³

⁵⁵⁰ Adamczak offers a “queer-feminist revolutionary theory” that synthesizes Marxist and poststructural approaches by applying “the contingency and variability of *doing gender* assumed on the level of interactions to large social institutions.” Adamczak, 108–9.

⁵⁵¹ Lu Märten, *Die Künstlerin*, ed. Chryssoula Kambas (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2001), 22.

⁵⁵² V. I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniĭ. Gosudarstvo i revoliutsiia*, ed. Institut marksizma-leninizma pri TSK KPSS, vol. 33 (Moskau: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1969), 49; Wendy Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936*, Cambridge Russian, Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 2.

⁵⁵³ As Lenin explains to Clara Zetkin in a 1920 conversation documented in Zetkin’s *Memories of Lenin* (*Erinnerungen an Lenin*): “the first dictatorship of the proletariat is the true pioneer of women’s full social equality.” Lenin continues by explaining “[the dictatorship of the proletariat] eradicates more prejudices than all of the volumes of women’s rights [*frauenrechtlerisch*] literature.” Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniĭ. Gosudarstvo i revoliutsiia*, 33:49; Zetkin, 91.

In an article published in *Die junge Garde* (*The Young Guard*) on December 4th, 1918, shortly after the outbreak of the November Revolution, Luxemburg expresses similar concerns with the utopian investment in theorizing the emergence of new subjectivities. She acknowledges the importance of the New Person, yet refuses to sit around and wait for the “corresponding human material” [*entsprechendes Menschenmaterial*] to emerge. Emphasizing the necessity of immediate action, she argues “we do not need to wait centuries or decades until this species of human develops.” Rather, “[i]n enlisting capable fighters for today’s revolution, we create future socialist workers, as they are necessary for the foundation of a new order.”⁵⁵⁴ Both Lenin and Luxemburg perceived utopianism as a form of deferral that threatened to undermine revolutionary efforts by directing attention to merely subjective concerns. The revolution itself, they argued, would accelerate the otherwise gradual, generational process of subjective change.

Alexandra Kollontai’s intervention thus occurred at a time when the utopian project of transforming sexuality and gendered subjectivity was largely stigmatized. For this reason, she looks back to the 1860s for literary works that dealt with “this complexity of the soul, this bifurcation of feeling.”⁵⁵⁵ As she explains in her 1923 text, “Make Way for Winged Eros! A Letter to Working Youth” (“Dorogu krylatomu Erosu! (Pis’mo k trudiashcheisia molodezhi)”), “Chernyshevsky also came close to the resolution of this problem in his social work *What Is to Be Done?*”⁵⁵⁶ Her reflections came in the wake of the successful revolution, after the urgency of directing energy into the struggle expressed by Lenin and Luxemburg had presumably subsided.⁵⁵⁷ A harsh critic of the New Economic Policy, which she saw as a regressive turn away from communist ideals, Kollontai was invested in

⁵⁵⁴ Rosa Luxemburg, “Die Sozialisierung der Gesellschaft,” in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 4 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1974), 433.

⁵⁵⁵ Alexandra Kollontai, “Dorogu krylatomu erosu! Pis’mo k trudiashcheisia molodezhi,” in *Bol’shaia liubov’: povesti, rasskazy* (Saint Petersburg: Azbuka-klassika, 2008), 375.

⁵⁵⁶ Kollontai, 375.

⁵⁵⁷ As Greg Carleton observes, Kollontai’s “impact was a function of both what she wrote and how she was represented by her contemporaries.” In this sense, her legacy as the site of variously ideological projections requires a untangling similar to Chernyshevsky’s. Carleton, “Writing-Reading the Sexual Revolution in the Early Soviet Union,” 233.

ensuring that the ongoing transition to communist society remained a deliberate and democratic process.

In “The Love of Three Generations,” Kollontai challenges the teleological narrative of generational change, or the idea that the revolution itself would necessarily produce the Soviet New Person. The story begins with an unnamed narrator receiving a letter from Olga Sergeevna, a Marxist revolutionary. The letter details Olga Sergeevna’s previous misunderstandings with her mother, Maria Stepanova, a populist devoted to philanthropy, and, now, the conflict with her own daughter, Zhenya, a Komsomol member who embodies the sexually-liberated, unsentimental New Woman that Kollontai had posited as an ideal a decade earlier. Olga Sergeevna’s letter takes the form of a confession: a detailed account of her youth written over the course of several days, evidenced by the changes in her handwriting, which, the narrator remarks, reflect her fluctuating emotional state. Kollontai does not attempt to reproduce the realism of the epistolary form by presenting the letter as a document for the reader. Instead, she has the narrator reading the letter and interjecting her own reflections. This produces a dialogue between Olga Sergeevna’s account and the narrator’s commentary and questions. Paradoxically, when Olga Sergeevna finally appears in the narrator’s office, the form shifts to a monologue. We learn that Zhenya was raised by her grandmother while Olga Sergeevna was in exile, and that Zhenya only recently moved in with her mother and her mother’s new, younger husband, Andrei.

They all live as “friends” and equals until Olga Sergeevna discovers that Zhenya and Andrei are sleeping together and her daughter is now pregnant, making any child both her grandchild and her stepchild.⁵⁵⁸ What disturbs Olga Sergeevna most is Zhenya and Andrei’s complete lack of remorse. Zhenya, however, is not even sure if she is pregnant from Andrei and knows she will have an abortion

⁵⁵⁸ Alexandra Kollontai, “Liubov trekh pokolenii,” in *Bol’shaia liubov’: povesti, rasskazy* (Saint Petersburg: Azbuka-klassika, 2008), 333.

anyway. Olga Sergeevna repeatedly presses the narrator to tell her if this is simply the new way of life and the “new morality” that she had fought for, at the same time scoffing at the fact that Zhenya and Andrei consider this cold rationality to be communist.⁵⁵⁹ The traditional family roles that were already challenged by the first generation are rapidly dismantled through the rupture of the revolution: in the course of the narrative we see Olga Sergeevna occupying the position of mother, then friend and sibling, and finally child to her own daughter. When Zhenya herself comes to the narrator’s office, she expresses her concern for her mother and Andrei:

– Я уверена, уверена, что мама всегда будет ходить голодная, – с тоской говорит Женья. – Если о ней не позаботишься, не сунешь ей поесть, она весь день так и проходит. Да и Андрей не лучше. Я не знаю, как они без меня проживут. Они – как дети, беспомощные оба. Конечно, я буду к ним забегать, буду делать что могу, но это уже не то. Ведь я тоже занята; когда вместе живешь, это все проще. Она вздыхает. Что-то во всем ее тоне солидно-материнское, когда она говорит о матери и об Андрее, будто в самом деле дело идет о детях, о ее младших сестре и брате.⁵⁶⁰

“I’m sure, I’m sure that my mom will always go around hungry,” Zhenya says with anguish. “If someone doesn’t take care of her, give her something to eat, she’ll go on like this all day. And Andrei is no better. I don’t know how they’re going to live without me. They’re like children, helpless, the both of them. Of course, I’ll drop in on them, I’ll do what I can, but it’s still not the same. After all I’m busy too, when you live together, everything’s easier.”

She sighs. Something in her whole tone is solidly maternal when she talks about her mother and Andrei, as if it were really a matter of children, of her younger sister and brother.

The instability of familial roles is both the realization of a revolutionary aim and the call to establish new forms of kinship no longer contained within the hierarchical distinction between parent and child. Indeed, in a reference to Ivan Turgenev’s 1862 novel, Olga Sergeevna remarks: “Maybe I’m not grasping something and this is the inevitable drama of ‘fathers and children.’”⁵⁶¹ By situating her work

⁵⁵⁹ Kollontai, 344.

⁵⁶⁰ Kollontai, 349–50.

⁵⁶¹ Kollontai, 338.

in relation to this influential tale of generational conflict, Kollontai draws attention to the need for new social forms to emerge with the dissolution of the nuclear family.

Many of Kollontai's contemporaries interpreted her story as a call for sexual promiscuity.⁵⁶² Diagnosing Zhenya's pathological hypersexuality, the psychoanalyst Aron Zalkind protested, "Zhenya evidently suffers from a moderate case of satyriasis, which comrade Kollontai presumably forgot to mention." However, it is not entirely clear whether Zhenya is indeed Kollontai's "ideal" as Zalkind claims or even if this is a story of generational progress or regress.⁵⁶³ While each woman represents a stage in the development of the revolutionary movement in Russia, Kollontai's portrayal of the sexual and gender norms of the three generations presents the progression as far from teleological. Instead, she confronts the reader with taboos—from incest to the "bourgeois" emotion of jealousy—deliberately generating a sense of discomfort. "Where is the boundary of intimacy?" Zhenya asks. Is the act of symbolic incest that transforms Zhenya into both mother and daughter a sign of the transcendence of restrictive norms—a subversion of the patriarchal practice of *snokhachestvo*?⁵⁶⁴ Or is it a symptom of decline, of rationality's dialectical lapse into barbarism? The matter is further complicated when Zhenya challenges her mother to consider her own prejudices in judging her daughter's actions: would she have been so harsh in condemning Zhenya's sexual behavior if she were a boy?

Ultimately, the story's structuring tension of is not the conflict between distinct generations, but rather the more fundamental contradiction between the immutability of emotional needs as they are experienced by each woman and the radical difference between each set of norms. Contrary to

⁵⁶² For a discussion of the contemporary reception of "The Love of Three Generations" and Kollontai's work more broadly, see: Carleton, "Writing-Reading the Sexual Revolution in the Early Soviet Union," 232–41.

⁵⁶³ A. B. Zalkind, *Polovoi vopros v usloviakh sovetskoi obshchestvennosti. Sbornik statei* (Leningrad: Leningradskii gublit, 1926), 53.

⁵⁶⁴ According to Laura Engelstein, sexual relations between the patriarchal head of the peasant household and his daughter-in-law or *snokha*, known as *snokhachestvo*, "were in fact a common feature of the traditional extended family" through the late nineteenth century. Laura Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siecle Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 46.

Naiman's claim that framing devices protect the utopian narrative from the outside world, in Kollontai's account of the transition to utopia, the narrator serves as a mediator both between the generations and between the reader and the text.⁵⁶⁵ She repeatedly interrupts Olga Sergeevna's letter with her own reflections, as if to model a critical reading practice, and finally concludes with a set of questions directed at the reader: "I remain in the room searching for answers to the question: on whose side is the future truth? The truth of a new class, with new feelings, new concepts, new judgements?"⁵⁶⁶ In "The Love of Three Generations," Kollontai does not ask for mere identification. She invites her readers to consider these questions, confronting them with unsettling moments and seeking to stimulate the self-reflective education of utopian desire.⁵⁶⁷

In 1860s Russia, Weimar Germany, and the Soviet Union of the New Economic Policy, Chernyshevsky's, Märten's, and Kollontai's revolutionary utopianisms functioned as targeted interventions: they compelled their readers to confront the challenges of generating new social and aesthetic forms in the transition to utopia. A century later, we are witnessing a renewed interest in utopianism within queer theory in particular. Catalyzed by José Esteban Muñoz's reading of Ernst Bloch, the revival of utopianism reflects the need to resist the pragmatism and nationalist complicity with capital captured by Lisa Duggan's notion of the new homonormativity, Jasbir Puar's homonationalism, and Mark Fisher's capitalist realism. At the same time, thinkers working within the tradition of Critical Theory from Fredric Jameson and Martin Jay to Enzo Traverso and Wendy Brown have condemned the establishment of neoliberal rationality as "our ubiquitous common sense," not only infiltrating schools, hospitals, factories, and universities, but also setting the terms of our needs,

⁵⁶⁵ Naiman, *Sex in Public*, 13.

⁵⁶⁶ Kollontai, "Liubov trekh pokolenii," 351.

⁵⁶⁷ Miguel Abensour, "William Morris: The Politics of Romance," in *Revolutionary Romanticism: A Drunken Boat Anthology*, ed. Max Blechman (San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 2001), 145.

desires, and imaginative capacity.⁵⁶⁸ This condition is often summarized by citing Jameson's remark: "[s]omeone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism." Yet, it is rarely noted that he continues by emphasizing the necessity of utopianism: "[t]he problem is then how to locate radical difference," he writes, "how to jumpstart the sense of history that it begins again to transmit feeble signals of time, of otherness, of change, of Utopia."⁵⁶⁹ Whether in response to the gendered exclusivity of scientific socialism, neoliberal common sense, or gay pragmatism, utopianism carries with it this history of thinking difference and totality together.

Beyond the historical deployment of utopianism in queer and Marxist thought, its potential as a collective practice has become increasingly visible in contemporary social movements. Here, it is evident how utopianism can emerge from dystopian realities: in a period of climate crisis and the related pandemic, mass incarceration and police violence, and the neoliberal glorification of precarity as entrepreneurship, the embrace of utopianism is as much a survival strategy as it is an imaginative and narrative challenge. We see this in the framing of prison abolition as a utopian project, Kim Stanley Robinson's call for a utopian approach to the climate crisis, the direct action of *Ende Gelände*, and the rise of unionization in the United States.⁵⁷⁰ Utopianism as a political, epistemological, and affective intervention rejects pragmatic limitations on the collective imagination and seeks to consciously navigate the effects of knowledge production. It is a movement from a deep pessimism—be it the queer “failure to be normal” or left-wing melancholy—toward the construction of alternative futures.⁵⁷¹

⁵⁶⁸ Wendy Brown, “Neoliberalism’s Frankenstein: Authoritarian Freedom in Twenty-First Century ‘Democracies,’” *Critical Times: Interventions in Global Critical Theory* 1, no. 1 (2018): 62.

⁵⁶⁹ Fredric Jameson, “Future City,” *New Left Review*, no. 21 (June 2003): 76.

⁵⁷⁰ Angela Y. Davis, Gina Dent, Erica Meiners, Beth Richie, *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2022), 15; Kim Stanley Robinson, “Remarks on Utopia in the Age of Climate Change,” *Utopian Studies* 27, no. 1 (2016): 2–15.

⁵⁷¹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (NYU Press, 2009), 172.

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