

Turning the tables: the table as utopian object for future struggle

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Turning the tables: the table as utopian object for future struggle

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Abstract

Instead of looking for objects that contain within them an immanent Utopia, we propose to queer the everyday object of the table for use in the contemporary struggle for a future egalitarian society. We begin by applying Sara Ahmed's critique of white male philosophy via the table in Queer Phenomenology, to To the Lighthouse by Virginia Woolf, in which Lily Briscoe is expected to imagine philosophy as 'a kitchen table [...] when you're not there.' Woolf considers the table, not as a 'phantom' object, disassociated from its use value, but as an object at the centre of domestic life with labour etched into its very surface. Lily Briscoe cannot imagine the table as merely a symbol of philosophy but of one that is 'scrubbed...grained and knotted', marked by both the history of its use and its production. Next we consider the table in a range of utopian writing, from Thomas More's Utopia to Ernst Bloch's The Principle of Hope before considering the table in The Dispossessed by Ursula Le Guin. In Le Guin's novel the table acts as a novum of capitalism, estranging the protagonist Shevek from his own anarchist culture. The table becomes a way for Shevek to understand the gendered division of labour that structures and drives capitalist society; he sees a 'woman in every table top' as both constituting and being constituted by hierarchical relations between genders under capitalism. We then suggest a number of ways in which the table can be reoriented towards a Utopian future via queer use in present struggles; proposing the kitchen table as multi-purpose surface for domestic labour and resistance; through demanding 'a place at the table' for marginalised groups; and lastly through 'turning the tables', transforming that everyday object into revolutionary barricade.

Keywords: Science Fiction; Utopian studies; Queer theory; Tables; Transformative politics

Introduction

Tables are all around us; everyday objects that we use all the time. Often we overlook them, take them for granted and use them without much thought. They are objects that are essential to the workings of the social; to the reproduction of our everyday life, and so are both at the centre of individual experience and capable of connecting disparate and various experiences. In that sense they are unique objects, which both bring us together— people sit around a table,

work together at a table, and socialise at a table— and divide us— we are separated by the table between us, and by those who are present or absent from a table. They are positioning devices, which orient us towards and away from particular positions and relationships of use, community, and labour.

Our fundamental argument is that the ways in which we relate to the table, the ways in which we use tables, relate to each other at and across tables, are central to the ways in which we envisage the future. In other words, the table is an object of potentiality— it can be, and has been, used to build inclusive, progressive, and democratic visions of society. The table is, precisely because of its everyday quality and its function as an orientation device, a utopian object, which holds within it a hope or a model for a better world.

After defining what utopia means for us, we look at Ahmed's critique of the table as the object of philosophy through *To the Lighthouse* (1927) by Virginia Woolf. We then move to Ursula Le Guin's anti-utopian, gendered tables in *The Dispossessed* (1974), via Ernst Bloch and Thomas More's use of tables in *The Principal of Hope* (1959) and *Utopia* (1516) respectively. We finish with potential reorientations of the table for future struggle, including studies of Silvia Federici's 'Wages Against Housework' (1975), artworks by Carrie Mae Weems and Martha Rosler, and radical black lesbian publishers Kitchen Table Press.

What does queer theory teach us about utopia?

The definition of 'utopia', in both contemporary and historical scholarship and everyday vernacular, is maddeningly broad and disparate. Like definitions of 'queer', 'queerness' and 'queer theory', 'utopia' maintains a constitutive slipperiness; attempting to escape the totalitarianism of rigid and boundaried meanings.

In proposing tables as utopian objects, we also put forward a particular (queer) meaning of utopias and the utopic; grounded in, but divergent from, those put forward by a range of recent Utopian Studies and queer scholars. Ruth Levitas takes on precisely this failure to agree on what constitutes a utopia, arguing for a definition that allows for an infinite number of individualized forms and content, while still remaining meaningful.¹ For Levitas, utopia is sited in desire, following from Bloch's treatise on hope, but deviating from it, in that for Levitas *hope* is not necessarily located in possibility, nor in present difficulties, whereby *desire* expresses a hope that may one day be realized and is grounded in a state of the world 'in which the scarcity gap is closed or the "collective problem" solved.'²

For Levitas, both conservative desires for 'better worlds' and neoliberal desires for unregulated markets are constituted as utopias, although this postulate does not foreclose criticism of such imagined states, or publics.

José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* harnesses hope in a manifesto for queer futurity where both queerness and utopia are positioned as the not-yet-present; figures of longing that propel a 'rejection of here and now'.³ Muñoz's text is in direct opposition to the anti-futurity tomes of queer writing in the HIV era, in particular Lee Edelman's *No Future*⁴ and Bersani's 'Is the Rectum A Grave?'⁵, which position the homosexual as necessarily and productively outside of familial and capitalist reproduction and futurity, as a non-citizen of the future. Muñoz's primary claim is that the future should not only belong to straight (white) people; and

¹ Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1990).

² *ibid.*, 221.

³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* (New York: New York University Press, 2009): 1.

⁴ Lee Edelman, *No Future* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

⁵ Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?", *October* 43 (1987): 197–222.

that hope for a better world for queer people, people of colour and other marginalised bodies might be a driving point for real political change.

For Caterina Nirta, writing in 2018, Muñoz and other writers' formulations of utopia as a future state negate the real possibilities for understanding utopic bodies and lives in the present. Nirta situates her argument for transgender utopias as 'just the opposite'⁶ of Muñoz's futurity, asserting that utopia is located in the present, as a state of perpetual becoming, an 'urgency of the now', arguing that 'it is possible to think of an ethical utopianism that feeds from the materialism of everyday life and manifests itself as an act of the present, in the present and for the present.'⁷

For our purposes, 'utopia' as a concept requires a definition that crosses dichotomies: both radically open, and particular; outside, and inclusive; in the present and future; material and speculative, etc. This in-betweenness, oscillation, and the attendant boundary crises of the term 'utopia' is also evident in the multiple and disparate claims for 'queer', as foundationally laid out in Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's 1995 essay 'What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about X?' In this text, Berlant and Warner focus on the operational possibilities of 'queer' and 'queer theory', where 'part of the point of using the word queer in the first place was the wrenching sense of recontextualization it gave, and queer commentary has tried hard to sustain awareness of diverse context boundaries.'⁸ Queerness here is situated primarily *via* its potentiality for extreme reorientation – a wresting of bodies and desires out of straight time and space. Queer is further defined as necessarily non-normative, with queer work creating counter publics, 'publics that can afford sex and intimacy in sustained, unchastening ways [...] publics whose abstract spaces can also be lived in, remembered, *hoped for*.'⁹

For Berlant and Warner, the formulation of queerness resembles utopia; it is messily, meatily entangled with both desire and hope. Like the scholarly formulations of Jack Halberstam and Eve Kowalksy Sedgwick, this queerness is simultaneously engaged with multiple futures, presents and pasts. While Levitas argues that utopias include, for example, conservative utopias, and those spaces sought out by the alt right, we would argue that we should retain both the 'good' and the 'no' place (or not-place, or other-place), of utopian etymology. Utopia is in opposition to power – a reorganizing or reorienting of systems of control, *not* the extension of those impulses of violence etc. that are already driving or orienting state apparatus.

Taking Levitas' formulation of utopia-as-desire, intertwined with both Bloch and Muñoz's conception of utopia-as-hope, we then take a queer turn towards affirming utopia as necessarily *non-normative* desire, potentially abject hope and, making kin with Donna Haraway's 'despised space'¹⁰ or Sara Ahmed's 'killjoy utopianism', 'a willingness to inhabit what seems negative as an insistence that worlds can be otherwise.'¹¹

'The hope of queer politics,' Ahmed continues,

is that bringing us closer to others, from whom we have been barred, might also bring us to different ways of living with others... A queer hope is not, then, sentimental. It is affective

⁶ Caterina Nirta, *Marginal Bodies, Trans Utopias*, (Abingdon ; New York: Routledge, 2018):. 38.

⁷ *ibid.*, 3.

⁸ Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "What Does Queer Theory Teach Us About about X?," *Pmla* 110, no. 3 (May 1995): 345.

⁹ *ibid.*, 344. Emphasis our own.

¹⁰ Nicolas Gane, "When We Have Never Been Human, What Is to Be Done?," *Theory, Culture and Society* 23, no. 7 (2006): 143.

¹¹ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 165.

precisely in the face of the persistence of forms of life that endure in the negative attachment of 'the not.'¹²

Behind the philosopher's table

Sara Ahmed critiques phenomenology by considering the table in the work of Husserl. She shows how the table is made into an abstract object for philosophical thought by the exclusion of all forms of use of the table and its material production: 'to see the table means to *lose sight of its function* [...] "this table" becomes "the table"¹³. A specific table, with its history of production and use, its relationship to those who made and use it, must be excised, in order it to become 'the table', the object to be understood, objectified, and controlled by the philosophical gaze. Ahmed shows how the process of 'this' to 'the', from specificity and history, to the universal and a-historical, mimics Marx's concept of commodity fetishism, in which objects (and specifically tables¹⁴) become imbued with pure exchange value at the expense of use value.

Though Ahmed concentrates on Husserl, the table is in fact 'the' object of philosophy going back to at least Bishop Berkeley. David Hume and G. E. Moore, among others, used the table to illustrate philosophical standpoints because, as Ahmed explains, the writing-table is the object closest at hand for the philosopher. In Bertrand Russell's *The Problem of Philosophy*, the central problem is the reality/unreality of the table.¹⁵ The person who cleans the table definitely knows that the table *is* real, however we imagine Russell never thought to ask her.

A re-orienting of the table away from the symbolic object of philosophy, towards the production, distribution, and use of tables, is a method through which we might glimpse new or previously occluded social relations: a refusal to see the table as cleared of history. An example of the work of reorientation can be seen in *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf. The painter Lily Briscoe, on holiday with the Ramsay family, asks about Mr. Ramsay's philosophical work. Andrew, Mr Ramsay's son, explains it as being about 'Subject and object and the nature of reality [...] Think of a kitchen table then [...] when you're not there.'¹⁶ Andrew explains that the question of philosophy is the relationship between the subject, the philosopher, and the object, in this case the table. The table is one which is removed from the subject, denuded of contact, but still exists as an abstract object. Lily attempts the thought experiment but is unable to imagine the abstract table, rather seeing a specific one, 'one of those scrubbed board tables, grained and knotted, whose virtue seems to have been laid bare by years of muscular integrity.'¹⁷ Rather than seeing the universal object of philosophy, mastered by the male philosopher, Lily sees a particular table, marked by its production (grained and knotted), and its use (scrubbed board, muscular integrity), which shows us its history of production and its role as a domestic object, as well as its relation to those who use it. Tongue in cheek, Lily suggests that only the 'finest minds', trained to see only 'angular essences', can reduce the complexity of reality to 'a white deal four-legged table.'¹⁸ Woolf, like Ahmed, suggests that reality must be reduced in order for it to be controlled and objectified. Woolf *via* Lily gives us a material critique and an alternative, showing us the labour that has been excised to see the

¹² *ibid.*, 165.

¹³ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, (Durham ; London: Duke University Press, 2006), 35.

¹⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Vol. 1.* trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, [1867] 1990): 163-165.

¹⁵ Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, [1912] 1980).

¹⁶ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1927] 1975), 28.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 28.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 28.

table of philosophy, and so gives us new orientations and possibilities through the complexity of lived experience.

The principle of hope?

Within utopia as well as philosophy, the table takes a central place. It is both a structural device for organising the 'better world', in terms of production, reproduction, and social relations, as well as an abstraction for determining relations between subject and object. Bloch analyses the symbol of the table when discussing the utopian unconscious present in dreams. For Bloch, dreams are the basic component through which we express wishes and desires, which in turn lead us to action tending toward utopia. Following Sigmund Freud, Bloch proposes that the content of dreams stands in for sexual desire.¹⁹ He identifies a number of 'lost' symbols—unconscious and not recognised by society—for 'woman', namely 'the symbols of wood, table, and water.'²⁰ Working *via* a series of associations, Bloch delineates the symbolic valence of the table for utopian consciousness: 'The table clearly stands in for a room or house, the symbol of wood leads back to the family tree, a very old mother-image; it also suggests living wood, the tree of life.'²¹

Bloch identifies the table as standing in for rooms or houses. The table represents the concrete organisation of the domestic space, both in a micro-scale, in terms of the table itself and the room unit, but also on the macro in terms of an entire building. At the same time, Bloch identifies the table with its most common material, wood, which in turn relates to the 'family tree' and so, *via* its associations with the family, links it with the image of the mother. The rooms and house, which the table symbolised, shift from social organisation to bodily containment—the womb. The family, the basic organising principle in both psychoanalysis and capitalism, is subsumed into the maternal body. Finally, the table, through its material production of wood, represents the 'tree of life' or life itself. The table therefore is both structural and feminised, an object which organises subjects within it, as well as a subject which reproduces the family unit—encapsulating the complex subject-object reproductive bind of women and domestic labour under patriarchal capitalism.

In utopian literature the table both enacts and symbolises the organising principles of a given, better society. In its first manifestation in Thomas More's eponymous *Utopia*, the table is just such a device, ironically mirroring and structuring overall relations of property, production, and reproduction. We might term this mode of production patriarchal communism—a property-less society governed by male elders—if it weren't for the existence of slaves within the polity, a contradiction which sits at the heart of its vision of a better world. At one point, the learned traveller who narrates the story, Hythloday, turns to the arrangement of the communal dinner:

They sit at three or more tables, according to their number; the men sit towards the wall, and the women sit on the other side, that if any of them should be taken ill, which is no uncommon case amongst women with child, she may, without disturbing the rest, rise and go to the nurses' room (who are there with the suckling children), where there is always clean water at hand and cradles, in which they may lay the young children if there is occasion for it, and a fire, that they may shift and dress them before it [...] All the children under five sit among the nurses; the rest of the younger sort of both sexes, till they are fit for marriage, either serve

¹⁹ Though a perceptive critic of Freud, denouncing his method as "the bourgeois individual seen [...] in a bourgeois way" (*The Principle of Hope*, (London: Basil Blackwell, [1959] 1986), 52), Bloch borrowed much of his critical framework of drives and impulses wholesale from Freud.

²⁰ Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, (London: Basil Blackwell, [1959]1986), 81.

²¹ *ibid.*, 81.

those that sit at table, or, if they are not strong enough for that, stand by them in great silence and eat what is given them; nor have they any other formality of dining.²²

The arrangement of people around the tables mirrors the social organisation of Utopia, i.e. the order of devotion and service under patriarchy not attached to any particular class or property. First the men sit against the wall and therefore are unable to move, and so physically unable to aid in the production of society. Rather, they are served by the women and children. Secondly the women sit on the other side of the table and so are separated by the table from the men. Not only does this spatially fix the fiction of two 'separate' and 'opposite' genders, it also allows for the women to get up from the table in case of illness, especially as it relates to reproduction, as well as to serve the table. Women must be able to move in order to both reproduce the social relations—so 'ordering' the tables²³— and biologically reproduce the family unit. Thirdly, children are either kept out of sight or sit with the women dealing with child-rearing, until they are ready to serve the table—taking on the position of servants within society. Finally, the slaves are, importantly, not present at the table in any way; they are kept out of the room. The slaves perform the abject work which cannot be performed by citizens; 'all the uneasy and sordid services about these halls.'²⁴ Earlier we find out that this includes butchery, which must be performed outside the city walls in order to keep the people untainted: 'nor do they suffer anything foul or unclean to be brought within their towns, lest the air should be infected by ill-smells, which might prejudice their health.'²⁵ Slaves carry out the labour that is necessary for the reproduction of the social, but must be ejected from the body politic.

If we follow Bloch's formulation then we can see the table as the first term in a metonymic chain from the everyday reproduction of the social on the micro-scale to the entire workings of the state/society. How the individuals within a group are arranged around the table (and also who is absent from the table) shows us how rooms are organised, how the building is structured, and so to the area or district, the city or town, and finally the state itself. The table is the smallest component in the body politic, arranging bodies into idealised relationships. In a symbolic sense it is that which produces and reproduces the social. The table is a material body which organises the limits of the social, determining what is incorporated and what, for the 'health' of the body must be rejected; the abject, which itself must be produced by abject bodies. Those that fall outside of the body politic must be excised from it, precisely in order that they might reproduce it.

The Dispossessed

Reading both Bloch and More, we see that the table is not immanently utopic, but rather it is a site of struggle, across and over which the social is constructed. Such a struggle is evident in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* where the table is a cipher for social relations under capitalism. The novel compares the resource-scarce, anarchist world of Anarres with the resource-rich, Capitalist world of Urras, through the eyes of the anarchist physicist Shevek. In the first chapter we follow Shevek as he leaves his home world to visit Urras. On the spaceship between the two worlds (Anarres is the moon of Urras), Shevek is confused by the absence of women. It is explained to him by the doctor Kimoe, that 'running a space freighter was not women's work'. Shevek's discomfort around the Capitalist, gendered division of labour is then mirrored in his relation to objects on the ship:

²² Thomas More, *Utopia*, (London : New York: Verso, [1516] 2016): 90-91.

²³ *ibid.*, 90.

²⁴ *ibid.*, 90.

²⁵ *ibid.*, 89.

It was strange that even sex, the source of so much solace, delight, and joy for so many years, could overnight become an unknown territory where he must treat carefully and know his ignorance; yet it was so. He was warned not only by Kimoe's queer outburst of scorn and anger, but by a previously vague impression which that episode brought into focus. When first aboard the ship, in those long hours of fever and despair, he had been distracted, sometimes pleased and sometimes irritated, by a grossly simple sensation: the softness of the bed. Though only a bunk, its mattress gave under his weight with caressing suppleness. It yielded to him, yielded so insistently that he was still, always conscious of it while falling asleep. Both the pleasure and the irritation it produced in him were decidedly erotic. There was also the hot-air-nozzle-towel device: the same kind of effect. A tickling. And the design of the furniture in the officers' lounge, the smooth plastic curves into which stubborn wood and steel had been forced, the smoothness and delicacy of surfaces and textures: were these not also faintly, pervasively erotic? He knew himself well enough to be sure that a few days without Takver, even under great stress, should not get him so worked up that he felt a woman in every table-top. Not unless the woman was really there.²⁶

Shevek understands that his discomfort around the absence of women is intimately connected with the design of the furniture in Urrasti society; i.e. that there is an equation between the construction of the social and economic. The absent women (social) appear to be suppressed and objectified into the table (economic). Le Guin makes the table into a novum for estranging us from Capitalist society. The sf novum is that new but scientifically plausible object introduced into the sf narrative which produces, according to Darko Suvin (who adapted the term from Bloch²⁷), cognitive estrangement; an object which is not present in our own world and restructures the fictional, so that a comparison is made in the mind of the reader between our own world and that of the text, thereby estranging us from what is presented as the natural. Instead, however, of a new and unknown object, estranging Capitalism, it is the decidedly familiar and everyday object of the table which disorients us in *The Dispossessed*, as we are forced to see capitalism through the eyes of an egalitarian. As Bloch says, 'the good New is never that completely new'²⁸; Le Guin makes us look once again at the table, and the possibility held within it.

Shevek's simultaneous realisation of and revulsion towards the objectification of women and labour is an intentional slippage between the meanings of the fetish: The table here is both a Freudian fetish object²⁹ in the sense that it is a stand-in or replacement for the lost object of desire (i.e. women), and at the same time the table is a Marxist fetish object³⁰ in that it mystifies social relations (i.e. labour time and use value are lost in exchange value). In a sense Le Guin reconnects these two fetishises via their root in the anthropological sense of fetish: magical objects that cannot be explained using a native system of knowledge. All of the objects including the table which Shevek encounters, such as the bed and the 'hot-air-nozzle-towel device', take on magical qualities. This elision makes manifest the connection between objectification, gender, and capitalism. The comparison is not merely analogous but actual—Shevek is certain that he feels a 'woman in every table-top'. The woman is the absent/present, the history and labour that must be suppressed into the object in order to structure capitalist society. As Ahmed might pose the question, whose labour allows the table to become an 'object' devoid of social relations?

²⁶ Ursula K Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, (London: Gollancz, [1974] 2002): 19.

²⁷ For Bloch, the 'novum' is not necessarily a particular 'cognitively' possible object within a literary text, but the category of the possible itself held within objects.

²⁸ Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, 7.

²⁹ Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism" in *On Sexuality*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, [1927] 1977b).

³⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Vol. 1.* trans. Ben Fowkes, (New York: Penguin, [1867] 1990).

Structurally *The Dispossessed* compares anarchism and capitalism by alternating chapters set on the anarchist world and the world of capitalism, with Shevek suspended between the two. The table is the object of intersection, the fulcrum or copula. Via Shevek, the table disorients us from our own naturalised world of capitalist relations, and this shift, or this confusion, allows for the *reorientation* described by Ahmed as a central action of queer living towards egalitarian futures – the fulcrum also allows the balance to shift, reverse even, and reorients us towards a better future, one which is contained within the present.

So, if we are to rescue the table from abstraction (read philosophy) into the material world *via* fiction, including science fiction, what might we do with these tables with which we now have such a corporeal and embedded relation?

Turning the Tables

First, we might return to the woman who cleans the table, to an acknowledgement of unwaged domestic work as labour necessary for producing the objects of capitalism, including the objects of scholarship (The philosopher can only imagine the table with no one in the room when the person who wipes it clean of real-world referents has made herself and her work invisible).

Federici's revolutionary 'Wages Against Housework' essay of 1975 has a reorientation, a 'turning of the tables' embedded even in its title, which makes clear that the purpose of a campaign asking for wages for house work is imminently a campaign *against* both the wage relation and domestic labour. Like Shevek's table, which denaturalises gendered divisions of labour, Federici writes, when

we struggle for a wage we do not struggle to enter capitalist relations, because we have never been out of them. We struggle to break capital's plan for women, which is an essential moment of that planned division of labour and social power within the working class, through which capital has been able to maintain its power.³¹

i.e., we demand a wage for cleaning the table in order to stop doing it all together – the philosopher, confronted with dust, is forced to reckon with the surfaces of objects against his own body.

In Marther Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, produced in the same year as 'Wages Against Housework' we are directly confronted with the violence produced when the tools of domestic labourers escape the realm of images, signs, and ideals of 'the home', the kitchen, the housewife. In this 6-minute video, Rosler stands at a kitchen table and names kitchen tools alphabetically, flipping second order signs³² of femininity and blissful domesticity so that each tool returns to its material reality – a knife, cuts. As with Federici, Rosler stands at the kitchen table in order to denaturalise the relationship between 'woman' and 'housewife' and its attendant labour practices. By speaking only the name of each object in a deadpan voice, while performing often violent, awkward and failed demonstrations on the table's surface, *Semiotics of the Kitchen* utilises performative contradiction, which, according to Judith Butler 'seeks to counter a certain kind of positivism,'³³ as well as to make visible 'certain metaphysical presumption about culturally constructed categories and draw our attention to the diverse

³¹ Silvia Federici, *Wages Against Housework*, (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1975), accessed February 4, 2019, <https://caringlabor.wordpress.com/2010/10/25/silvia-federici-the-reproduction-of-labour-power-in-the-global-economy-marxist-theory-and-the-unfinished-feminist-revolution/>.

³² Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, (New York: Hill and Wang, [1964] 1969).

³³ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech*, (New York: Routledge, 1997), 144.

mechanisms of that construction [and begins] to articulate [...] the naturalised assumptions of what constitutes reality.³⁴

For the letter *I*, Rosler shows us an ice pick, which she demonstrates by violently attacking—stabbing—the surface of the table. Perhaps we can harness the queer temporality of the utopian to postulate that this ice pick must be borrowed by the artist from Sharon Stone, or more particularly Catherine Tramell, the bisexual anti-hero of ‘Basic Instinct’,³⁵ whose ice pick lies under her bed, ready to murder the besotted male policeman currently sharing it according to the heteronormative ‘romantic’ domestic conditions of Hollywood narrative film. Irrespective of the ice pick’s provenance, however, the table in *Semiotics of the Kitchen* is both the stage, surface, and frame for Rosler’s ironic performance of signs of feminine enclosure; as well as sf’s novum – the familiar object, reoriented to defamiliarize conditions of the present moment, not unlike the table belonging to Shevek’s physician in *The Dispossessed*.

Although Virginia Woolf brought the table out of philosophy and back into the room, her insistence that a woman must have a room and money of her own in order to be a writer ignores the black women who were, as Alice Walker put it, entirely ‘outside the room.’³⁶ The kitchen table is the site of a different kind of struggle for black women, who were famously unwritten in canonical white feminist texts dealing with liberation from domestic labour in the sixties and seventies. It is clearly a different table. Here, the kitchen table is not only the surface for the private production of familial, gender and romantic lives, as in Carrie Mae Weems *Kitchen Table* series, it is also a space for organizing—and for activism.



³⁴ Judith Butler, “Performative Agency,” *Journal of Cultural Economy* 3, no. 2 (2010): 147.

³⁵ Paul Verhoeven, dir., *Basic Instinct*, 2006.

³⁶ Alice Walker, “In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens,” in *Within the Circle*, 1994, 404.



Martha Rosler, *Semiotics of the kitchen* 1975, Betacam SP PAL: 4:3, 6:09 minutes, black and white, mono, Queensland Art Gallery

Between 1989 and 1990, Carrie Mae Weems devoted part of every day to photographing herself at her kitchen table, with the table itself – its grained surface and receding planes – taking up much of the image, its lines of sight leading most often to Weems herself. The artist’s performance at the end of the table – of herself and not herself – engaging in feminine rituals of motherhood, beauty, and heterosexual romance ('the man is only concerned with himself. He takes the lobster in the way men often take [...] you don’t become aware of her clenching her teeth until a bit later'³⁷) unglues naturalized calcifications of gendered expectation: Weems’ capacity to perform herself *performing herself* bears witness to Butler’s assertion that gender performativity is constituted of 'a stylized repetition of acts' and that 'the act that one performs is, in a sense, an act that's been going on before one arrived on the scene.'³⁸

The table in Weems’ photographs acts as surface and organizing infrastructure both visually (producing a vanishing point) and conceptually – the table is the site of family and everyday life, but also as the performances that make up both ‘family’ and ‘life’ are made evident, so the table turns to a complex and resisting surface for the production of a black female subject looking back towards the viewer (who is positioned by virtue of camera placement as seated at the table’s near end).

Writing about the *Kitchen Table* series, Robin Kelsey names the precise capacity of the kitchen [table] and its “improvisational capacity to bind subjects in shared experience, and to restore and refashion them in the midst of struggle”³⁹ – to refashion or *re-orient* selves together around the table, 'to inhabit what may seem negative as an insistence that worlds can be otherwise.'⁴⁰

³⁷ Karin Andreasson, “Carrie Mae Weems' Best Photograph,” accessed February 4, 2019, <http://www.guardian.com/artsanddesign/2014/oct/30/carrie-mae-weems-best-photograph>.

³⁸ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 526.

³⁹ Robin Kelsey, “Vision and Justice,” accessed February 4, 2019, <https://aperture.org/blog/vision-justice-around-kitchen-table/>.

⁴⁰ Sara Ahmed, “Refusal, Resignation and Complaint,” (Colonial Repercussions Symposium, Berlin, 2018). Accessed February 4, 2019, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2018/06/28/refusal-resignation-and-complaint/>

Kitchen Table Press was started after a conversation between Audre Lorde and Barbara Smith in 1980 about the need to publish writing by women of colour, and went on to both organize for liberation movements and publish key works of feminist and lesbian literature, including anthologies like Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* and Barbara Smith's *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. In her essay *A Press of Our Own Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press*, Barbara Smith writes,

We chose our name because the kitchen is the center of the home, the place where women in particular work and communicate with each other. We also wanted to convey the fact that we are a kitchen table, grass roots operation, begun and kept alive by women who cannot rely on inheritances or other benefits of class privilege to do the work we need to do.⁴¹

The kitchen table has a triple significance here of labour, communication, and activism. First it is the site of the reproduction of the home, and, following from this, it is a space for communication between women. Finally, the kitchen table, precisely because of its ubiquity and centrality in women's lives, becomes a grassroots tool, the surface upon which activism is organised. The kitchen table therefore represents an embodied relation to labour, its opportunities for relations between women, and the potential to enact change.

⁴¹ Barbara Smith, "A Press of Our Own," *Frontiers a Journal of Women Studies* 10, no. 3 (1989): 11.



Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Eating Lobster)* and *Untitled (Woman and daughter with makeup)* from the *Kitchen Table* Series, 1990, printed 2003, platinum print, National Gallery of Art, Washington,

In the influential anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* the table is used in many of the essays, both as a site of labour and activism ('across a kitchen table, Third World feminist strategy is

plotted⁴²), but also as the structuring device of ‘coalition politics’. Coalition politics is a mode of organising which recognises difference between groups while working towards joint aims. It grew out of the frustration of women of colour with political organising in which their difference was either erased or they were invited to take part, not as equals, but as tokens of a particular race, gender, or class. The table becomes the device through which difference is recognised, but also through which equality and shared goals are communicated. The table separates, but also joins together. As Byllye Avery put it in 1989 on the Donahue program: ‘We are not coming to the table to sit at the foot of the table— of anybody’s table. We are coming to the table as peers.’⁴³ An example of such a meeting, of peers who acknowledge their difference organising for common ends, is expressed in one essay by Mitsuye Yamada, ‘Asian Pacific American Women and Feminism’, about a meeting of Asian American women in San Francisco in the poet Nellie Wong’s home:

One by one, as we sat around the table and talked (we women of all ages ranging from early twenties to the mid-fifties, single and married, mothers and lovers, straight women and lesbians) we knew what it was we wanted out of feminism, and what it was supposed to mean to us. For women to achieve equality in our society, we agreed, we must continue to work for a common goal.⁴⁴

The table here brings together a multiplicity of different subjects, experiencing oppression in a number of different and intersecting ways (age, gender, sexual orientation, race), and yet they are able to come together as equals, working towards the same objectives. The book as a whole works in a similar manner. It is comprised of a series of essays by women of colour writing about their specific experiences within particular social contexts, with the common objective of speaking and listening to the voices of the marginalised and working towards liberation. Each essay speaks to and across each other—a coalition of activists’ voices, rooted in their communities but joined together by their revolutionary aims.

Central to our thesis is the possibility of tables to be *turned* – reoriented, moved, reclaimed, sanded, cut, healed in real-world terms. In 1972, South African Black Consciousness leader, Steve Biko – who would later be horrifically murdered by Apartheid police – framed the table as a site of both violent colonisation and reparative futurity, stating,

we are aware that the white man is sitting at our table. We know that he has no right to be there; we want to remove him from our table, strip the table of all the trappings put on it by him, decorate it in true African terms, settle down and then ask him to join us on our terms if he wishes.⁴⁵

⁴² Cherrie Moraga, “Introduction Between the Lines: on Culture, Class, and Homophobia,” in *This Bridge Called My Back*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga, (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), 106.

⁴³ Kavann Short, “Coming to the Table,” in *Erotics and Containment*, ed. Carol Siegel and Ann Kibbey, *The Differential Politics of This Bridge Called My Back*, 1994, 24.

⁴⁴ Mitsuye Yamada, “Asian Pacific American Women and Feminism,” in *This Bridge Called My Back*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga, (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), 72.

⁴⁵ Steve Biko, “White Racism and Black Consciousness,” in *I Write What I Like*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002), 69.



Conclusion

It would be remiss to talk about the necessity for a material table-ness without pointing to the university table; *this* particular table (*this* here points to the conference panel table where a version of this paper was first delivered). Many scholars, particularly women of colour such as Kimberley Crenshaw and Sara Ahmed, must continue to fight for a seat at the table of academia. However, there exists in the table an innate possibility for turning, or upending, whether this is an entire conceptual reimagining of the academy, the future, of capitalism, or a more literal overturning as seen by these students protesting unfair work conditions for young people in 2006 at Paris' famous philosophy school, the Sorbonne – philosophers whose haptic, corporeal, and *real* awareness of the table comes through a moment of crisis and resistance.

So, to go back to fiction, and particularly to speculative, and utopian fiction, why is this resurrection of the table as fulcrum so important? When we talk about science fiction, technology, and utopia, we very often cite the technological or digital developments that have been prefigured by sf texts, or we look for new industries, objects, or 'advancements', which might close our scarcity gaps or allow a concretisation of our hopes and desires. However, what if we look at technologies not in terms of teleological (straight) advancement or progress, but rather as queer reorientations of the quotidian, the existing everyday object that is already a part of our lives in the present?

What, then, can we do with this new ecology of objects, fulcrums, revolutionary possibilities?

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