

Agnes Malinowska, “Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Fungal Female Animal: Evolution, Efficiency, and the Reproductive Body.” *Modernism/modernity* 26. 2 (2019): 267-288.

Agnes Malinowska argues for an “organism studies” approach to the work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Organism studies, distinct from both animal studies and humanism, takes biological organisms (here a fungus and a protozoic original female) as its point of departure. The choice of these organisms derives from the history of evolutionary theory and the biological implications of Taylorist efficiency discourse.

Malinowska begins with Gilman’s famous short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892). Her reading hinges on a fungus the narrator sees in the titular paper. The “waddling fungus growths” represent a brainless mode of toxic fecundity that traps womankind in her reproductive function. The final act of tearing down the wallpaper no longer represents a rebellion – it is not the “good wife” rejecting the “rest cure” as feminist scholars have long seen it. Instead it signifies the final step in the dehumanizing reduction of the narrator to pure reproductive capacity, as the fungal properties of the paper are transferred onto her body.

The “fungal femininity” that Malinowska identifies in “The Yellow Wallpaper” haunts Gilman’s utopian fiction and economic theory. The article goes on to analyze Gilman’s theoretical work *Women and Economics* (1898), and two feminist utopian novels, *Herland* (1915) and *Moving the Mountain* (1911). Evolution, here, offers an alternate organism to counter the unheimlich fungus.

In contemporary evolutionary thought, visions of mushrooming fecundity isolated women from the human. Gentlemen scientists, like Grant Allen, saw women as “a sub-species, told off for purposes of reproduction merely” (qtd. in Malinowska, 270). Gilman countered that women are the “race-type” and men the “sex-type” of the species. Following Lester Ward’s “Gynaecocentric Theory of Life,” she hypothesized a female organism capable of asexual reproduction as the original life form on earth, and the political grounds for a modern matriarchy.

This heroic form of asexual reproduction governs the gynocentric utopia of *Herland*, yet even protozoic females worry. Utopian reproduction should be a bit more cerebral and a bit less fungal. The article introduces the “transcendence” strain of American evolutionary thought to account for the sublimation of sexual desire into asexual reproduction in *Herland*. The idea is that the human species would someday transcend biological life completely, evolving into pure mind. There is an echo of this discourse in our contemporary moment, in technophilic dreams of uploading human consciousness to computer clusters.

The transcendence strain privileges human evolution at the expense of plant and animal, and shares with efficiency discourse an investment in human control of the natural world. In *Herland* this domination takes the form of gardening, pest control, and animal husbandry. The nation is a garden, even the forests are orchards, and animal life has been abolished, except for cats and birds, who are bred for human pleasure. In *Moving the Mountain*, it takes the form of “humaniculture” – the “scientific management” of human reproduction. In other words, eugenics.

Gilman understood eugenics to be inseparable from feminism. Other critics have addressed her investment in eugenic theory at length, yet here, eugenics is subordinated to a larger claim about the disavowal of organic life. Hypermasculine

efficiency discourse, the technoscientific domination of nature, is attractive to Gilman precisely because it suppresses the distressing embodiment of female reproductive capacity that threatens to overwhelm the intellect and reduce womankind to a creeping fungal growth, a parasite on the properly human male.

Positioning her primary contribution as “organism studies,” Malinowska recuperates Gilman’s repressive use of model organisms by celebrating the communal networks of fungal bodies. The closing claim that “we extend ourselves outward in nets and skeins, binding root and soil, alive as part of a much larger, invisible organism” (282) evokes Anna Tsing’s *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, though Tsing is not named in the notes. Yet the bioengineered groupthink of *Herland* is hardly convincing as a model of human collectivity.

The article’s intervention in the field lies not in this methodological proposition, but in its use of historical theories of biology and technology as tools to re-read the legacy of American feminism. Gilman’s investment in evolutionary theory and her desire to see women named within the category of human, her embrace of efficiency discourse and her repression of biological life, helps us understand the long love affair between feminism and racism in America. If the sexual bodies of demure white mothers looked threateningly fungal to Gilman, how much more so did the hypersexualized bodies of black American women look to white American feminists? Malinowska’s article contributes a solid historical ground in literature and science for future research on this powerful question.

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