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“Happy People at Work”: Work Society’s Other Spaces in Margaret Atwood’s *The Heart Goes Last*

Rebekka Rohleder

This chapter looks at Margaret Atwood’s *The Heart Goes Last* (2015) through the lens of its representation of work. The creation of jobs is a central concern of the novel, with the Positron Project making use of a prison surrounded by a 1950s-themed suburban gated community, Consilience, to offer its inhabitants waged work. In this chapter, I analyze Consilience as a heterotopia in a Foucauldian sense with regard to its outside world within the novel. Foucault describes heterotopias as spaces that stand in a specific kind of relationship to the surrounding society; in the novel, Consilience’s relations with the world around it are defined by ideas and practices of work. Thus, the protagonists’ introduction to Consilience resembles the introduction to a new employer; the community’s specific, nostalgic temporality evokes a time in which people supposedly had ordinary jobs, while the actual work performed there has a theatrical quality. Through the problematic of work in Consilience, the novel renders visible the problematic of “work society,” both within the novel and in the world its readers inhabit.

Keywords: heterotopia, hypocrisy, work, surplus population, Margaret Atwood, *The Heart Goes Last*

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Heart Goes Last* (2015) begins in a post-financial crisis world, in which people lose their homes and have to sleep in their cars. They also lose their jobs, even when they do their best to make themselves employable. Thus, Charmaine, a woman who is left with a temporary job as a waitress in a less-than-appealing bar, has originally "made the most of herself. She'd majored in Gerontology and Play Therapy, because Grandma Win said that way she'd covered both ends, and she had empathy and a special gift for helping people" (*Heart Goes Last* 16). Charmaine's degrees and talents are of no use to her, though. Her husband Stan's hard work is no more use to him either, as he reflects: "He'd busted his ass. He might as well not have bothered, in view of the fuck-all he's been left with. It makes him cross-eyed to remember how hard he'd worked. Then everything went to ratshit" (8). Both of them follow the rules of meritocratic ideology: they trust in degrees and hard work to give them monetary security. But the promised reward does not materialize. Instead, even "the employment office itself closed down, because why keep it open if there was no employment" (9). For Stan and Charmaine at least, who think of themselves as "middle-of-the-road people" (9), this loss of employment prospects goes hand in hand with societal breakdown.

Conversely, the community they join, the Positron Project, is characterized by more explicitly stated rules, and those who obey them are rewarded with secure employment and a home. It is a strictly 1950s-themed gated community, and it comes with a catch: not only are the inhabitants forbidden from leaving, making the town itself a kind of prison; it is also centered around an actual prison, which the founders of the project make the source of all employment in the town. For the inhabitants, the prison is good because the prison creates jobs. The town, Consilience, is therefore dependent on the prison and upholds it by supplying the prison population: all inhabitants have to spend half their time as prisoners in the Positron Prison and the other half as good citizens of Consilience.

The prison as a setting has already attracted critical interest. Thus, Barbara Miceli reads the Positron Project as a Foucauldian "discipline society" in which the surveillance mechanisms that characterize the prison are internalized by the inhabitants, who have to assume that they are under constant surveillance in the town as well and who act accordingly (83–85). Eleanor March, too, reads *The Heart Goes Last* as a "prison narrative": a story about the experience of imprisonment (14), which should be read with regard to "the politics of the real prison" (12). These are very useful readings of the novel's perspective on the prison,

which is central to the narrative as well as the Consilience/Positron enterprise. What I would like to add to these approaches is a focus on the novel’s treatment of work—which is obviously central to the prison and the town in the novel, but not to be captured entirely by prison narratives or even by a focus on surveillance.

There are at least two possible ways of approaching the work/prison nexus in *The Heart Goes Last*. One would be to focus on the prison itself and to read work with regard to what March terms “the politics of the real prison” (12). This would involve thinking about “the ways in which prison systems are being transformed by global capitalism” (Rimstead and Rymhs) and the ways in which the novel is invested in describing a reality rather than a dystopian society of the future. After all, Atwood likes to emphasize that even her more apparently far-fetched creations have a solid basis in reality (Brookes). Both the popular reception of her novels and literary criticism echo this claim. Thus, costumes that imitate those from the *Handmaid’s Tale* TV series (2017 ff.) have been used at real demonstrations in order to make a point about women’s reproductive rights. With regard to *Oryx and Crake* (2003), Ashley Winstead has suggested that Atwood’s speculative fiction ought to be read as not just reflecting, but also trying to directly influence reality through language, by “appropriat[ing] modern forecasting narratives that also strive to produce legitimate knowledge about the future” (229). And with regard to *The Heart Goes Last*, Miceli has argued that the dire economic situation at the outset of the novel is not at all dystopian because it reflects the real 2008 financial crisis (80). A similar point could surely be made about the justification of the prison as an employment generating institution.

Here I want to broaden my focus past the Positron Prison to include the entire town of Consilience. After all, Consilience is sold to its prospective inhabitants as a place with “happy people at work in it, doing ordinary jobs: butcher, baker, plumber, scooter repair, and so on” (40). It is a community whose whole *raison d’être* is the availability of what its inhabitants understand to be “ordinary jobs.” It is also, despite its ostensible commitment to echoing suburbia in the 1950s, a community in which all adults engage in waged work: the women as well as the men. Charmaine works at a bakery, Stan in scooter repair. In addition, they also have jobs in prison, which sound ordinary as well but are not quite what they seem.

In the following, I want to explore the relationship of this nostalgically conceived community of “happy people at work [...] doing ordinary jobs” with the world around it, a world in which even the employment office closes down for lack of employment. In particular, I want to take very

literally Coral Howells's proposition that "Atwood the novelist continues to reinvent our world within the *spaces* of her fiction" ("True Trash" 313; my emphasis). I want to read *Consilience* as a heterotopian space in a Foucauldian sense with regard to its outside world: as a counter-space which stands outside (but not quite), but at the same time in relation to, the other spaces of the society in question. In this case, the relationship between these spaces is defined by work. I will therefore begin by placing *Consilience*'s focus on "ordinary jobs" and their meaning for society in the context of the cultural function of work in the present. After that, I want to more specifically look at the ways in which work in *Consilience/Positron* reflects on the surrounding society. And finally, I want to tentatively explore the relationship of this fictional heterotopia with our own world.

Work and Society

To begin with, *Consilience* is advertised as a community which offers its citizens "ordinary jobs: butcher, baker, plumber, scooter repair, and so on" (40). This is surely a persuasive selling point in a world in which people live in their cars because they have lost their incomes. Nonetheless, it also opens up the question of what defines an ordinary job and what that means in the context of a community that sells itself to its prospective members as a realized utopia—but one that nonetheless has nothing more appealing to offer than regular waged work in a bakery or in scooter repair. Utopias have always been concerned with mechanisms for ensuring that work is distributed equally and that no one works too hard, or, conversely, not at all. Work is thus a central feature of utopian discourse in texts ranging from Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) over the writings of Charles Fourier in the early 19th century, to William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890). But such utopian texts certainly tend to be more inventive than the *Consilience* founders' ostensible nostalgia for a world of small trades.

It should be noted at this point that in *The Heart Goes Last*, the self-presentation of the community's investment in employment is clearly framed in moral terms: work is moral and unemployment is immoral in their account of the world outside and inside the project. The absence of employment outside the project is, to the founders of *Consilience/Positron*, "a recipe for systems breakdown [...]: for anarchy, for chaos, for the senseless destruction of property, for so-called revolution, which means looting and gang rule and warlords and mass rape, and the

terrorization of the weak and helpless” (46). In their rhetoric, a lack of jobs is suspect, not just politically but also morally, since it leads directly to a world in which private property and “the weak and helpless” are both no longer respected. On the other hand, the new citizens of Consilience are promised protection from “dangerous elements” and exhorted to “Work with like-minded others! Help solve the nation’s problem of joblessness and crime while solving your own!” (31). Despite the community’s focus on the prison, the employment it offers is thus cast as precisely the opposite of crime. Work emerges as morally commendable; unemployment, on the other hand, equals criminality. This depiction of work in Consilience is complicated during the course of the novel, as the more morally dubious sides of the community are explored. But it works as a selling point because it is in accordance with the high esteem in which contemporary society arguably holds work.

The way in which work is imbued with meaning has been subject to historical change. There is a well-established historical narrative of work in Western culture, according to which work was not valued in antiquity, regarded as ambivalent (both curse and devotional practice) in the Middle Ages, and finally invested with central importance in modernity (Kocka 477–78). This “standard account” of attitudes towards work is, as Josef Ehmer and Catharina Lis have pointed out, difficult to either verify or falsify (6). But it is certainly a historical narrative which has been extremely influential and which is therefore instructive. Among other things, this narrative tells us something important about the present, namely that our culture values work to such an extent that a crucial story we tell ourselves about ourselves is how we came to value work so much. Thus, work is for instance, and famously, a central issue in Max Weber’s influential account of the development of the modern world, in which certain cultural attitudes towards work, namely the Protestant work ethic, play a crucial role.

It is nonetheless possible that both Weber’s and our own concept of work is so completely different from any earlier concepts of work that it would be all but unrecognizable even, say, to an Early Modern Calvinist. Indeed, historians have argued that it is only from the 1880s on that work became central to an individual’s integration in a social group, in particular the nation state, and that only from then on work became what it is now (but what it had not been before), namely a basic principle of the socio-political order (Conrad, Madamo and Zimmermann 450–51). This is in accordance with the highly meaningful status work acquired in the late 19th century, when idleness ceased to be an uncontested indicator of a high social status (Osterhammel 959; Fludernik 405). Interestingly, as

Monika Fludernik points out, the high appreciation for work that emerged in the Victorian period had implications for the use of work in prisons as well: it oscillated between “a social duty, and a therapy against idleness, drunkenness, unruly behaviour and immorality” (405) and meaningless work was used as a punishment because meaningful work began to be seen as a reward rather than as a punishment (406). These Victorian moral assumptions and ambiguities about work and its uses are influential even in the present (Fludernik 465) and are arguably part of the complex work-crime nexus in *The Heart Goes Last*, too.

After all, in the present, as Kathi Weeks has argued, we still live in a “work society”: a society in which waged work appears necessary and inevitable and in which work functions as a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion. Waged work makes a person a social and political subject and provides the dominant values in today’s world (Weeks 5–8). At the same time, however, waged work itself and the demands made upon the employee have not been a constant. From the 1990s onwards, sociologists have noted significant changes to the practice and cultural meaning of work for the individual. The coherent working biography that was considered the norm through much of the 20th century may still exist as an ideal, but this ideal is increasingly being replaced by that of the flexible employee, who is continually able and willing to adapt to new circumstances and who has to be adept at self-marketing. This is, for instance, a transformation noted in Richard Sennett’s *The Corrosion of Character* (1998) and Zygmunt Bauman’s *The Individualized Society* (2001). Both also note that this transformation has disorienting and destabilizing effects for both individuals and society. And in a society in which work is fundamental to political subjecthood—in the “work society” Weeks describes—these effects are only to be expected.

To take a historical perspective, the situation in place prior to the transformations described by Sennett and Bauman is not, of course, a timeless norm, but a very specific moment in the history of work. But the idea that everyone should be employed in “ordinary jobs” is clearly an unquestioned norm in *The Heart Goes Last*, and it is at the same time subject to nostalgia for a bygone era in which these “ordinary jobs” were supposedly prevalent. Therefore, *Consilience* is an unabashedly nostalgic project: it is designed to imitate the “overall look and feel” of the 1950s “because that was the decade in which the most people had self-identified as being happy” (*Heart Goes Last* 50). This goes along with the slogan “a meaningful life,” which consists in “gainful employment, three wholesome meals a day, a lawn to tend, a hedge to trim, the assurance that you were contributing to the general good, and a toilet that flushed”

(50). Security, order, and cleanliness are emphasized and connected to the prevalent aesthetics of the 1950s, that is. Accordingly, Barbara Puschmann-Nalenz’s has read the world of *The Heart Goes Last* as an example of Retrotopia (a concept which in turn goes back to Bauman): a movement toward nostalgia driven by fear (Puschmann-Nalenz 118).

Consilience: Performing Work

In the novel, the nostalgic and highly normative world of Consilience, in which everyone’s behavior is regulated to comply with the ideal of a safe and predictable world, only makes sense in opposition with the world outside the prison, in which the neoliberal ideal of the individual in charge of their own success has clearly failed. Charmaine’s degrees and Stan’s hard work, which were supposed to ensure their success in a society they believed to be meritocratic, were established as useless at the beginning of the novel—not just for them, but also for others. Thus, there is a show called *The Home Front* that Charmaine likes to watch, in which the moderator asks people who are about to be evicted “what happened to their life, and they told about how hard-working they’d been, but then the plant closed, or the head office relocated or whatever” (20). Charmaine likes to watch the show for reassurance, since it shows her that “what happened to her and Stan could happen to anyone” (21). She does not seem to regard the causes of “what happened” as man-made or even particularly scandalous: they appear more like facts of nature. Stan, by contrast, wants to hold someone specific responsible for his own predicament and that of other “middle-of-the-road people,” but he is unsure who that could be: he assumes that “[s]omeone had lied, someone had cheated, someone had shorted the market, someone had inflated the currency” (9). He also treats the economic crisis as a kind of fact of nature, though, and in the same train of thought justifies it as a case of: “Not enough jobs, too many people” (9). This view of the issue is very much in accordance with Bauman’s diagnosis that in the present, responsibility for economic and social problems is displaced: the success or failure of individual working biographies is seen as the responsibility of individuals and/or as a fact of nature but never as a social issue (7–12). The reader of *The Heart Goes Last* may well be dissatisfied with the vagueness of the explanations with which Stan and Charmaine try to understand the financial crisis they live through. What events brought about such a large-scale failure of the system is never made clear, since we only see the situation through the eyes of the two protagonists, who alternately

function as focalizers. However, what is made clear through their inability to provide an explanation is the fact that the economic narratives available to them have failed along with the economy.

The solution Consilience/Positron offers is, first of all, removal to a different space that is apparently (though, as it turns out, economically not really) rigidly separated from the world outside. The relationship between these two spaces—the world outside and Consilience/Positron—is somewhat more complicated than a simple opposition between chaos outside and order inside. Within the fictional world of the novel, Consilience/Positron is not a utopia or indeed a dystopia either, since it is not a plan for an ideal society (or a warning of a repressive one) but a project that has been realized, which is one reason why it can be read as a heterotopia, as I will show below. What happens inside this space still functions in relation to what happens outside, though, and not just because it seems unlikely that anyone could be tempted to agree on being imprisoned for half their life unless the alternative is considerably worse.

To be sure, the Positron Project exploits this contrast when recruiting people. The initiation consists of workshops in which they are shown PowerPoints about Consilience and Positron Prison. As March notes, these scenes stand in deliberate contrast with the induction stage of what she terms the “popular prison narrative” and are more “reminiscent of the introduction to a new job” (22). In that respect, they function as an adequately enticing introduction to Consilience/Positron since a new job is precisely what Stan and Charmaine want. The organizers also have the new recruits spend a last night outside in a motel that serves as a reminder of conditions in the real world. However, this shabby motel, as a transitional space between outside world and Consilience/Positron, has an obvious theatrical quality to it. Stan assumes directly that it “has been tailored for the purpose, with the furniture trashed to order, stale cigarette smell sprayed on, cockroaches imported, and sounds of violent revelry in the room next door most likely a recording” (*Heart Goes Last* 41). This is not the real world; this is the outside world as seen from Consilience/Positron.

This theatrical quality remains noticeable within Consilience as well. The prison is partly a pretend-prison (even if it is also partly a very real one). The inhabitants’ private lives have been described as “essentially adults playing house” (Cannella 17). Their working lives are no less of a performance. This is particularly obvious for their work within the prison, which is described in much more detail than that in Consilience. But in Consilience both protagonists fill roles that the initial presentation of the project already prescribes for them: working in a bakery, as Charmaine

does, and in scooter repair, like Stan, are both roles contained in the initial list of “happy people at work” (*Heart Goes Last*, 40). They are also, much like the protagonists’ domestic life, a gendered performance: she prepares food; he is the repairman.

In the prison, both protagonists’ jobs take on an even more revealing theatricality. Stan notices early on that his work supervising the town’s poultry facility is actually superfluous, “a make-work job” (81). The real supervision is, he assumes, done by a computer. Still, he works regular shifts pretending to be the one who supervises the facility. This job is almost entirely theatrical. It does not serve any real need of the community except the need to provide full employment, which is, after all, the project’s justification for the prison and all related activities. Work, or at least something that looks like it, has to be performed in order to keep Consilience/Positron running. Stan’s job is paradigmatic for this in that it is what David Graeber would call a “bullshit job”: “a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though [...] the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case” (Graeber 26).

By contrast, Charmaine’s real job in the prison takes place almost entirely behind the scenes, and while it is morally more than dubious, it is not a “bullshit job” according to Graeber’s definition. Her job title is Chief Medications Administrator (*Heart Goes Last* 74), and that is all she is allowed to tell anyone, including her husband. Technically, though, she works as an executioner, a job title she does not use even to herself. The administration of poison to prisoners is simply called the “Special Procedure,” and Charmaine is commended for carrying it out “in an efficient yet caring way” (85). Much of this procedure is choreographed by the prison authorities, but Charmaine adds what she thinks of as a human touch by kissing the prisoner on the forehead before killing him: “She hopes she appears to him like an angel: an angel of mercy” (85). Charmaine’s angelic performance in front of the condemned and the authorities is complemented by her performance in front of her fellow inmates, which effectively conceals what she is really doing. After the procedure, she will “join the knitting circle, as usual. [...] ‘Had a nice day?’ the knitting circle women will say to her. ‘Oh, a perfect day,’ she’ll reply” (87). The knitting circle after the execution calls up the image of women knitting as the guillotine cuts off heads in Charles Dickens’s *Tale of Two Cities* (1859). But Charmaine remains unaware of such associations and does not like to dwell on what she is really doing. She is, however, very much concerned with the manner in which she does it: she is proud of being good at what she does (86) in a kind of perverted Protestant work

ethic: she seems to regard it as her vocation to kill in the nicest possible manner.

Both her carefully choreographed Procedures and Stan's "bullshit job" in the poultry facility are theatrical in ways that establish relations with spaces in the world outside Consilience/Positron. Stan's job reiterates the necessity of having waged work of whatever kind, a necessity that applies in both worlds and the key to making Consilience plausible to its inhabitants in the first place. Only if waged work is a value in itself is it significant that "so many jobs could be spawned by" prisons (*Heart Goes Last* 48). Charmaine's work performance is intimately connected to the inner workings of Consilience/Positron, which, behind the scenes is of course an unabashedly criminal operation and turns out to be selling the real convicts' organs (158). Consilience is not at all the idyllic place outside an otherwise chaotic world that it pretends to be; economically, it is fully involved. Indeed, the fact that one of Consilience's secret operations consists in organ harvesting makes the exploitation that goes on beneath the immaculate surface very clear: when the bodies of the inmates cannot be exploited in any other way, they can at least still be stripped for parts.

Because of this theatricality as well as its partial separation from the rest of the world, it is useful to think of Consilience as the type of space that Michel Foucault describes as a "heterotopia": one of those spaces that are "counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault, "Other Spaces" 24). Despite the suggestive phrasing of the "effectively enacted utopia," these counter-sites are not, however, necessarily oppositional sites or sites which reinvent the society in question. Foucault classes both the utopia and the heterotopia as spaces that "have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror or reflect" (24)—which means that a utopia is not an ideal society, but only a site "with no real place." A heterotopia, by contrast, has a real place, but one that is on the margins of the society in question. At the same time, it is always a highly meaningful site with a clear function within the society it belongs to. This function can be "to create a space of illusion that exposes [...] all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory" (27). Or, conversely, they can be heterotopias of compensation, creating "another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled" (27). For modern Western culture, Foucault names the prison and the cemetery as

examples of heterotopias alongside sites that are “capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (25), among them the theater, and heterotopias “linked to slices of time” (26), among them the museum. He specifies that heterotopias are “not freely accessible like a public place” but require more or less formalized ceremonies of entry, rendering them both isolated and permeable at the same time (26).

Consilience in *The Heart Goes Last* can be described in such terms, and in all cases, the relationship in which it stands with the outside world is connected to work. To begin with the last point, the town is accessible under certain conditions, but not to everyone. It is a gated community, and the inhabitants are chosen from a pool of applicants and have to go through an initiation phase that involves signing papers and listening to presentations. This initiation is, as March has observed, reminiscent of starting a new job (22). It even suggests that the new community is exclusive, just like a coveted employer: Stan and Charmaine are effectively convinced that the Positron Project is not “interested in just anyone” and that “[s]ome of the people on the bus can’t possibly make it into the Project” (37). From their experience applying for jobs, they assume that everyone on the bus will go through a selection process, and this makes them nervous: “‘What if we get rejected?’ [Charmaine] asks Stan. ‘What if we get accepted?’” (37). Similarly, they think of their first contact with the Positron Project very much like an assessment center: they encounter a friendly atmosphere but are convinced that “naturally they’re being scrutinized, though it’s hard to figure out who’s doing it” (38). The initiation for Consilience/Positron is thus essentially an application process for a job.

Once they are inside, Consilience has qualities of both theater and museum, both of these also connected to work in ways which I have already discussed in more detail above. The slice of time Consilience recreates is the 1950s, that is, a time that elicits nostalgia for ordinary people having ordinary and secure jobs. And its theatrical qualities bring together apparently incompatible spaces, such as the cell in which executions take place and an ordinary space of work in which Charmaine can say to herself with obvious satisfaction that “[i]t’s good to be good at what you do” (86).

Last, and most interestingly, this particular heterotopia has a function with regard to the outside world. This function is certainly very much on the side of what Foucault terms heterotopias of compensation (“Other Spaces” 27). After all, the idea of Consilience is to create a perfect space in which everyone is employed and has a meaningful, well-ordered life, in

opposition to the world outside with its unemployment, chaos, and crime. It opposes the deliberate creation of what look like ordinary jobs to the temporary waitressing jobs outside. However, there are arguably also elements of the heterotopia of illusion there, and these are most visible in Positron Prison. The ways in which the Positron Project functions ultimately expose the outside world's ideas about meaningful work and a meaningful life: after all, what happens in the prison in particular emerges as exploitation—not just of the inmates' labor power, but even of their dead bodies—only thinly masked by the euphemistic rhetoric that both Charmaine and Consilience apply to it. The community poses as well-ordered suburbia with “happy people at work” in both the town and the prison. But the more or less hidden activities behind the façade recall the conceptual overlap between prison and factory—an overlap which, as Fludernik argues, is carried over to the present with “the recent metaphor of carceral warehousing [which] completes the alienation and reification process inherent in the industrial system by constituting the final result of a process of dehumanization” (465). The Procedures are not just a damning feature of Consilience/Positron; the dead inmates' body parts are bought in the outside world, implicating and connecting both spaces through exploitation.

The Novel as Heterotopia/U(s)topia

The fictional world of *The Heart Goes Last* contains both the chaotic space outside (a world which is ultimately enlisted against Consilience) and the seemingly well-ordered Consilience/Positron space. The town and prison can therefore function as a heterotopia for the society they belong to, and in a relatively straightforward way, because both exist in the same fictional world. On the other hand, things are not quite so straightforward when it comes to the function of this fictional heterotopia with regard to our own “work society.” A novel, which creates fictional spaces only and which is accessible to all readers, can function as a utopia or dystopia or maybe as both at the same time. Nonetheless, I would like to point toward ways in which the novel's political commentary depends on the functions of its heterotopian space with regard to the world surrounding the novel, not just the fictional world that surrounds Consilience.

Indeed a concern with the spatial is written into Atwood's treatment of speculative fiction outside *The Heart Goes Last*, too. Thus, in her essay “Dire Cartographies: The Road to Ustopia” (*In Other Worlds* 66–96), she describes utopian and dystopian writing as a cartography of the unknown

(69–70). At the same time, she also questions the distinction between utopia and dystopia in ways that resonate with her fiction, not least *The Heart Goes Last* (but also the *MaddAddam* trilogy). She states that it is more appropriate to use the term “ustopia” instead of utopia and dystopia because “each contains a latent version of the other” (66). Utopias can be dystopian when viewed “from the point of view of people who don’t fit into their high standards” (66), whereas in each dystopia there is “a hidden utopia, if only in the form of the world as it existed before the bad guys took over” (85).

This playful attitude toward genre and fictional world is reflected in literary criticism’s diverse descriptions of Atwood’s treatment of speculative fiction. Thus, Howells, describing dystopias as “fictional scenarios of prophecy and warning [...] imagining possible futures, hopefully to prevent them happening,” classes *The Heart Goes Last* as dystopian along with the *MaddAddam* trilogy (“Dire Cartographies” 21). Arguably, though, this idea of a warning that can prevent a dystopian future at least includes the idea of a world that is not dystopian, too. Elsewhere, Howells complicates the idea of *The Heart Goes Last* as dystopia by looking at its serialized origins and corresponding investment in popular genres like romance and the gothic, which “exploit[s] the appeal of popular culture material in order to engage readers’ interest in her satirical analyses of North American mass consumerism and her warnings against uncontrolled corporate power” (“True Trash” 304). The creation of a dystopian space in the novel is thus a genre convention among others, and one which serves a political purpose. In a similar vein, Megan E. Cannella complicates the idea of dystopia by applying the concept of a “transgressive utopian dystopia” to *The Heart Goes Last*, while Miceli points out that the dystopian-looking outside world in the novel is not dystopian because it is too close to post-financial crisis reality: not a warning but an only slightly exaggerated description of reality. And Winstead argues that Atwood’s speculative fiction is only speculative in the sense of “‘real’ speculation—that is, the economic and political speculation that we understand as nonfictional” (228) and that it is a “technological object” in the real world through the “agency of language itself” (231). Winstead employs this argument to relate *Oryx and Crake* to Atwood’s nonfiction book about debt, *Payback*, in which Atwood thinks about the real-world implications of debt as “an imaginative construct” (2). In this reading, economic speculation and speculative fiction can both be seen as having effects in the real world. Indeed, this ties in with other readings of the *MaddAddam* novels in particular, which, together with their

websites, have been read as acts of creating a new reality (Macpherson 86).

As for *The Heart Goes Last*, it is certainly a political novel concerned with the reality of the present—through its concern with the social consequences of a financial crisis but also with the implications of a scenario in which the state lets a corporation set up a state within the state, to enter which the inhabitants effectively have to sign away their rights. But in contrast to the “ustopian” cartographies Atwood describes in *Of Other Worlds*, this novel constructs not an unknown space to be filled with monsters and heroes of various kinds, but an extremely well-ordered, limited, and knowable space, and one that mirrors sets of relations that are also relevant to the real world and to its relationship with work in particular. The novel’s dichotomies of inside/outside, work/crime, and “ordinary job”/exploitation are all spatially encoded within the novel, but not without significant ambiguities. In *Consilience*, the prison is inside but the town is outside; on the other hand, the town is also inside and the outside world is outside. Criminality literally generates jobs, but work is also represented as the opposite of crime in *Consilience*, even though its founders themselves engage in criminal practices. And the project’s ostensible focus on the creation of meaningful work in both the town and the prison helps mask its real economic foundations, for which the ordinary jobs are just a theatrical façade.

These relations all stand in relation to real-world discourses about the social function of work in the present; about who is entitled to meaningful work in the first place and whose exploitation is rendered invisible. In this regard, the novel itself could be regarded as a kind of heterotopia—a possibility which Foucault suggests for novels, not in “Of Other Spaces,” but in a radio essay that covers roughly the same ground, entitled “Les heterotopies,” and in which the novel as a literary form is likened to the garden as one of those heterotopias which juxtapose several incompatible sites in one (45). Thus, despite the fact that novels are not real spaces, they could be understood as mirroring sets of spatialized social relations in a similar way, by juxtaposing incompatible sites in one imaginary place (possibly, like the mirror, as a mixture of utopia and heterotopia). In *The Heart Goes Last*, the novel’s spatially encoded treatment of work can be read in such a way.

Conclusion: Work Society and its Others

Thus, what Consilience renders visible is all about what one might call, according to Weeks, “the problem with work”: a society in which waged work is endowed with a promise it cannot fulfill: “it neither exhibits the virtues nor delivers the meaning that the ethic promises us in exchange for a lifetime of work” (14). It is only in a society that has internalized a work ethic that makes work an end in itself that the appeal of an idea like the Positron project can be understood to make sense even for a moment. When the prospective inhabitants of the town and inmates of the prison are triumphantly told that the solution for their problem consists in a prison because “if every citizen were either a guard or a prisoner, the result would be full employment” (Atwood, *Heart Goes Last* 49), this proposal should sound deliberately absurd. But it is, like the economic crisis the characters experience, only a slight exaggeration. The logic that something is good because it creates jobs is certainly familiar to the reader as well.

The novel does not quite leave it at that; in the end, Consilience/Positron is publicly exposed through an elaborate plot planned from within. Not everyone who has bought into the idea of a meaningful life through work also buys into the necessity of organ harvesting for profit. Interestingly, in this exposure plot, the character who plans it, Joycelyn, enlists the support not just of Stan and Charmaine but also of those who remain on the margins of “work society”: a journalist whose career is interrupted by illness, Stan’s brother Conor, who is a successful criminal, a group of actors between engagements, who earn their living as Elvis impersonators in Las Vegas, and two former prostitutes. These characters are all in danger of being excluded, both by society in general, and by Consilience/Positron, which might have a use for their bodies but which does not otherwise have a use for the sick, the delinquent, or the unsuccessful. Yet it is those who have no place in Consilience who must ultimately save the novel’s work-centered society from its own worst excesses.

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