Utopias of Participation: Feminism, Design, and the Futures

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This essay addresses the question of how participatory design (PD) researchers and practitioners can pursue commitments to social justice and democracy while retaining commitments to reflective practice, the voices of the marginal, and design experiments “in the small.” I argue that contemporary feminist utopianism has, on its own terms, confronted similar issues, and I observe that it and PD pursue similar agendas, but with complementary strengths. I thus propose a cooperative engagement between feminist utopianism and PD at the levels of theory, methodology, and on-the-ground practice. I offer an analysis of a case—an urban renewal project in Taipei, Taiwan—as a means of exploring what such a cooperative engagement might entail. I argue that feminist utopianism and PD have complementary strengths that could be united to develop and to propose alternative futures that reflect democratic values and procedures, emerging technologies and infrastructures as design materials, a commitment to marginalized voices (and the bodies that speak them), and an ambitious, even literary, imagination.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → *Participatory design*;

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Design, participatory design, HCI, feminism, utopianism, democracy

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1 INTRODUCTION

The design of interactive systems has been undergoing a reframing in research and practice. Where the focus was once on interfaces (e.g., in “interface design”), individual users (e.g., cognitive ergonomics), and designs as consumer products, the focus has shifted increasingly to services (e.g., in the sharing economy), geographies (e.g., smart cities), global networks (e.g., social media and the Internet of Things), and even design’s responsibility for the Anthropocene itself (Smith et al. 2017).

This shift in scale is visible throughout human-computer interaction (HCI) and design. In systems design, we see it in the transition from bespoke systems for individual organizations into enterprise and global systems and infrastructures, which has troubled and even transformed participatory design (PD) (Bannon and Ehn 2013). Ubiquitous computing, once one domain among many in HCI, now has been argued to have taken over and become coterminous with HCI (Abowd

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2012). Design's complicity with the world's sustainability problems and climate change has been explored in both HCI (e.g., Blevins 2007) and design research (Fry 1999). Social design emphasizes the responsibility of designers to meeting human's real needs, as opposed to manufacturing false desires, and contribute to human wellbeing on a massive scale (Papanek 1985). Critical and speculative design (Dunne and Raby 2014), constructive design (Koskinen et al. 2011), and research through design (Archer 1995; Frayling 1993; Zimmerman et al. 2007) have proposed that instead of producing well-crafted products for the masses, design can function as a form of research that critiques the present and/or proposes alternative futures. In design theory, some of these arguments go back decades, to Ehn et al. (2014), Simon's (1969), Rittel and Webber's (1973), and Schön's (1959) respective visions of design as aspiring to transform society for the better.

These shifts are adding considerable complexity to another aspiration of HCI and (at least some) design: the commitment to democratize IT use and innovation. PD is one of the oldest and most successful practices embracing this value. From its beginnings in the 1970s, PD has influenced HCI and design globally, in part through its influences on user-centered design. In addition to PD, several strands of HCI and IT policy have championed the democratization of technology. For example, end-user programming has sought to develop tools and other approaches to empower all users, not just software developers, to do programming (Lieberman et al. 2006). Gender HCI has sought to discover gender-related factors in computer use and better support all users (Beckwith and Burnett 2004). The so-called "maker movement" has been celebrated in mainstream media and research alike for its democratizing potentials (Buechley and Mako Hill 2010; Lindtner et al. 2016). The National Science Foundation—the major IT funding institution of the United States—"adheres to a public access policy, fostering the democratization of knowledge and resources."¹ In social informatics, the "digital divide," which distinguishes those who have access to IT resources and those who do not, remains a serious concern.

The challenge is that democratizing decisions about the interfaces, features, and functions—already difficult—is fundamentally different than democratizing decisions about the sociological and even geological worlds that we inhabit and that our descendants will inhabit. The scope of design inquiry has almost infinitely expanded, as have those whom we might identify as stakeholders. IT systems and services are now a force comparable in scale and consequences to governments—and complexly entangled with them—as American technology companies' ongoing tussles and/or collusions with United States, European, and Asian governments about privacy and security exemplify. Not only are many of these profoundly important shifts undemocratically enacted, but it is not even clear how they even *could* be democratized.

HCI and design researchers are increasingly taking up these challenges. For example, in PD research, the topic of designing design processes and institutions that entail participation has become a focal point. This includes analyses of power relations and enactments, explorations of participation as a kind of subjectivity, reflections on the benefits of PD and how they are distributed, and more. As I will show in more detail below, this research calls into focus how difficult PD's democratic ideals are to achieve in practice—and thereby establishes a need for theoretical and methodological supports. This concern is intensified as PD scales up to the design of futures, cities, societies, and the very geology of our planet.

In this essay, I explore and develop my intuition that a recent movement within feminist thought can be brought to bear on both of these concerns: falling short of democratic ideals, and the challenge of design at urban and even global scales. I do so while acknowledging (and hopefully contributing to) the influence of feminism and PD, a line of influence that goes back to the beginning of PD (Markussen 1994, 1996; Sefyrin 2010; Kensing and Greenbaum 2012, among

¹http://www.nsf.gov/news/news_summ.jsp?cntn_id=131770, accessed 6 March 2016.

others). That feminism and PD would be fellow travelers is perhaps not surprising, given that both are committed to a view of democracy that foregrounds relations of power and that proactively seek to give voice to the marginal.

That said, feminism is intellectually, politically, historically, geographically (etc.) diverse, and my goal is not to engage all the ways that feminism and PD have come into contact. Instead, I scope my analysis and discussion to the strand of feminism that engages constructively and concretely about the *tasks of envisioning utopian alternatives and the labor of bringing them about*. I do so in part because I think feminist utopianism, among all feminisms, is particularly well positioned to engage practices of futuring at scale. This is helpful because feminist utopianism draws on different intellectual resources and proposes different practices than what I have seen in PD. It is informed by feminist utopian literature, feminist political theory, literary theory, critical utopia in sociology, and the writings of Ernst Bloch (loosely associated with the Frankfurt school of critical theory). Leveraging such traditions, contemporary feminist utopian writers have reconstructed traditional utopianism in a way that preserves its best qualities—its commitment to a radically better future, shaped by a strong role for moral values—while adding a sophisticated awareness of both political and postmodernist critiques of such projects. In this literature, utopianism is positioned as a practice of democratized futuring, a form of engaged critique and design leading to action and activism. As with contemporary PD research, feminist utopianism also emphasizes the design of design processes and institutions that entail participation.

These converging trajectories thus provide an opportunity for dialogue. What theoretical and methodological resources have been developed in feminist utopianism that might be useful to PD, and vice-versa? I take this question as my launching point. I do not argue that PD must or should change to accommodate feminist utopianism or vice-versa. I will argue instead that they appear to have complementary strengths: the feminist utopians have a powerful critical and theoretical stance and over-arching methodology, but they seem to be comparatively weak at concrete and actionable design methods that are participatory. In contrast, PD has a strong tradition of developing participative design processes, but that there is a recognition within its community that it is struggling to align itself in today's globalized IT design practice and would benefit from new theoretical and methodological perspectives (Bannon and Ehn 2013; Bannon et al. 2017). As a backdrop to these complementary strengths, both feminist utopians and PD researchers see society and the human presence on Earth itself as designable and designed, and both share moral and epistemological commitments to participation and democracy.

2 CHALLENGES TO PARTICIPATORY DESIGN

From its earliest incarnation in labor movements in Scandinavia in the 1970s, PD has had an emancipatory politics inscribed in it. It is an approach that democratizes design by involving those with a stake in its implications, especially end-users, with two core principles: That those who will use the system have a voice in its design and that there is a mutual learning between the designers and stakeholders (Simonsen and Robertson 2013). Modern manifestations include a wide range of computing interventions based on critical analyses and committed to broadening inclusion, such as citizen science, ICT4D, issue-oriented hacking, critical design, and participatory art among others.

According to recent PD research, the transitions from bespoke to enterprise systems, from an era where PD was cutting edge to an era where its lessons have been absorbed by the mainstream, and from its use in comparatively homogeneous cultures (e.g., in Denmark) to its use in global and profoundly hybridized teams, present four key challenges for PD, as follows.

The Desire to Maintain its Firm Commitments to Democracy. In reflecting on the successes and failures of Scandinavian PD since the early 1970s, Binder et al. provocatively suggest that participatory designers have been engaged in “democratic design experiments (in the small)”

(Binder et al. 2015). They propose that design should “give up its obsession with ‘objects’ and replace them with intertwined socio-materials *things* or *thinging* that evolve over time” (p. 2). They continue:

design *thinging* is a flickering between processes of collective decision making and collaborative material making, between ‘parliamentary’ and ‘laboratory’ practices, between engagements with objects of worry as ‘matters of concern’ (Latour 1999) and the transformation of objective matter as ‘circulating references’ (Latour 1999), forging strategies and tactics of participation and representation across these practices. This performative figuration also changes over time as a flickering between gathering assemblies and appropriating objects. [...] In such an endeavor, politics and power are not external conditions that design can relate to, but with codesign as *thinging* they are at the very core of making things public. (p. 3)

Yet as PD has been appropriated in other contexts, its emancipatory politics have been diluted into corporate practices of “user centered design” (Bannon and Ehn 2013). Ann Light warns that the fact of participation alone is not sufficient to address the politics of design: Designers often unilaterally frame the project and invite participants in, which she refers to as a “benign imposition.” (Light and Anderson 2009). One challenge is how to remain committed to democratic ways of being while reflexively be aware of the dangers of imposing a Western meta-narrative of what “democracy” means on everyone else.

PD Must Configure Participation, the Roles and Agencies of Different Participants. In addressing issues surrounding new perspectives and meanings associated with the notion of “participation,” Vines et al. advocate the move to “configure participation,” that is, to consider “Who initiates, directs and benefits from user participation in design? In what forms does user participation occur? How is control shared with users in design” to maintain PD’s core value of involving stakeholders in the first place (Vines et al. 2013). This raises the question: How can a unilateral agent “configure participation” in a way that does not undermine participation?

PD Must Generate Meaningful Alternatives. In her influential essay, *A is for Alternatives*, Bødker observes that “In order for the questioning to have a constructive impact on people’s life with technology it is important that we do not only challenge, but offer alternatives as well.” She acknowledges that “processes where people, on their own, work on alternatives are rare, and hence I believe that what we can do as researchers is to work on such projects... Not so much to build their future technology but to help them realize that they have a choice” (Bødker 2003, p. 89). And once again: Who decides what constitutes viable and meaningful alternatives?

PD has High Standards of “Local Accountability.” Bannon and Ehn caution that PD should not limit itself to generating knowledge for the research community but has to be geared to the needs of local stakeholders (Bannon and Ehn 2013). In a similar vein, Winschiers-Theophilus et al. observe that “In a truthful participation, the nature of participation itself should be negotiated within the context of the project, rather than consciously or unconsciously realized as meta-participants (developers) impose pre-determined techniques which subvert local cultural norms” (Winschiers-Theophilus et al. 2010). How should local accountability be balanced with wider needs? How does this value play out in global design concerns, such as climate change?

As computation as a domain of the artificial continues to scale globally, PD is left with the question of whether its “democratic design experiments (in the small)” should or even can scale. Addressing systematic social injustice, climate change, government corruption, and poverty are not problems (in the small). If PD cannot scale, then is it even possible to view PD as a viable methodology for the most pressing IT design questions of our time? This tempts me to imagine PD as “democratic design experiments (writ large).” When I do, inevitably I am drawn to feminist utopianism.

3 TELLING UTOPIAS

Before introducing contemporary feminist utopianism, I contextualize it by summarizing classic utopianism as well as two serious critiques of it.

3.1 The Literary-Philosophical Tradition of Utopianism

The best representatives of classic utopianism are arguably Plato's *Republic*, Augustine's *City of God*, and Thomas More's *Utopia*, written in the 4th century BCE, the 5th century CE, and the 16th century CE, respectively. In each work, a philosopher articulates a vision of a just society. For Plato, this exercise was in service of his attempts to develop theories of public versus private justice, understood as a harmonious composition of parts performing clearly defined roles in service of the whole (society or the individual). Augustine's purpose was to envision a sacred society struggling in the present but victorious at the end of time, in which venal human conflicts and the institutions that enable them are all transcended in a community devoted to the love of God. For More, *Utopia* is an opportunity to envision a fully rational society in a fictionalized and somewhat convoluted way, possibly to avoid crossing the Tudors (Coverley 2010). All three render images of a homogeneous and seemingly totalitarian society, where individuality gives way to features such as common property, absolute compliance to law, controlled reproduction, and fealty to the state/God above family; on the positive side, this society lacks strife, crime, poverty, and features happy and productive citizens.

Since More, utopia has continuously served as a literary/philosophical genre (Coverley 2010). It features in works including Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Marx and Engel's *Communist Manifesto*, Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, William Morris' *News from Nowhere*, H.G. Wells' *A Modern Utopia*, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Utopia continues to inform contemporary literature, as Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* demonstrate. Throughout utopian literature, one finds themes of estrangement, travel, and radical revisions of the relationship(s) between the individual and society.

A body of scholarship on utopia has also emerged that critiques utopian literature and theorizes utopia as a kind of thinking. A survey of definitions from different disciplines sheds light on how utopia functions:

- “Utopian literature is defined by some in terms of content and by others in terms of form. There are those that define it in terms of function. [...] What appears common to most definitions of content are the ideas of perfectibility and unattainability, and what is common in form is the description of particular states and political structures. [And what is common in function is that utopian] visions provide an ideal which people can then struggle to reach”—Political philosopher McKenna (2001, p. 7).
- Utopia is a type of social dreaming: “the dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live.”—Political scientist Sargent (1994, p. 229).
- Utopia is the “verbal construction of a particular quasi-human community where socio-political institutions, norms and individual relationships are organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author's community, this construction being based on estrangement arising out of an alternative historical hypothesis.”—Science fiction theorist, Darko Suvin, cited in Sargisson (2007, p. 395)
- Utopianism as a mode of thinking and action is that which “reflect[s] on politics and society, which seeks the perfect, best, or happiest form of society, untrammelled by commitments to existing institutions.”—Political philosopher Johnson (2002, p. 29).

- Utopianism amounts to a “vision of a wholesale restructuring of our social and political universe according to some rationally worked out plan.”—Philosopher Benhabib (1992, p. 229).
- “The anticipatory thus operates in the field of hope; so this hope is not taken *only as emotion*, as the opposite of fear (because fear too can of course anticipate), but *more essentially as a directing act of a cognitive kind* (and here the opposite is then not fear, but memory). The imagination and the thoughts of future intention described in this way are utopian”—Critical theorist and philosopher Ernst Bloch, Intro to *The Principle of Hope*, emphases in the original (1986, p. 12).

Synthesizing, utopianism is commonly theorized using two foundational concepts: one is *utopia-as-vision*: the utopian narrative, the artistic picture, the architected city, the dream society. The other is *utopia-as-cognitive-act*: utopian thinking, anticipatory reasoning, thoughts of future intention seeking the Not-Yet. The two conceptions of utopia are inseparable: utopia-as-cognitive-act cannot proceed through dry abstractions or symbolic logics; it must use sociopolitical institutions, social norms, historical situations, and so forth as thought-materials in the construction of a holistic image. For example, Plato’s goal was to develop a theory of individual justice, but to construct it, he first had to develop a theory of public justice, and that entailed a society in which the abstract idea of public justice could be rendered visible and therefore examined and developed: utopia-as-vision.

The notion that certain normative forms of thinking proceed by means of speculative concretizations of situated social and physical materials should resonate with designers. A substantial literature on “design thinking” (Brown 2009) and “designerly ways of knowing” (Cross 2006) suggests that designers coevolve problem-understandings and problem-solutions using concretizing methods, including sketching, prototyping, and modeling. In other words, design features its own equivalents of *utopia-as-vision* (in its sketches and models) and *utopia-as-cognitive-act* (in what is sometimes referred to as “design thinking”).

Thus, at a certain level of epistemological description, utopian thinking, and design thinking operate in similar ways. Both create holistic yet concrete representations of alternative worlds and ways of life, and do so based on normative values and goals. These representations are materialized in conventionally recognized and skilled ways: the design sketch or prototype with its themes of service, functionality, meaning, and situational fit; and the utopian narrative and societal architecture, with its themes of travel, estrangement, and sociopolitical holism. In both cases, an optimistic and teleological vision is offered: of the perfect city and of the product functioning as intended in an optimal situation. If utopia is a “directing act of a cognitive kind,” characterized by “imagination and thoughts of future intention,” as Bloch writes in his seminal work on utopia, then in some sense much if not all of design is utopian.

3.2 Utopianism Considered Harmful

In addition to underlying epistemological qualities, utopianism, and design share something else: A dubious public reputation. In design theory, writers such as Rittel and Webber (1973), Schön (1959), and Papanek (1985) reflect on the public’s skepticism toward design professionals, pointing to failures in urban planning and social policy, and more recently, environmental disaster, as reasons why the public questions professionals. Utopia’s reputation is even worse. At best, it is associated with well-intended but naïve attempts to solve complex social problems with simplistic technological solutions (Morozov 2014). At worst, totalitarian societies, including the Third Reich, have been claimed to be the outcome of a utopian project (Bloch 1986; Popper 1994). In both design and utopia, there is a historical failure to deliver results that meet real human needs. And further: there is also a bifurcation of a small, elite group of world-makers (i.e., designers and utopian

writers) on the one hand, and the voiceless public that must live with these decisions on the other. After tracing the history of the Bauhaus from its early (utopian?) days to its roles in the false pleasures of contemporary consumerism, Bannon and Ehn (2013) worry that PD might be on a similar trajectory.

To understand the feminist reconstruction of the utopian project, it is worth revisiting the two most devastating critiques of traditional utopia.

The Fantasy Critique. The first critique against utopianism states that traditional utopianism ultimately amounts to a fantasy, because the vision it proposes lacks any connection to present reality. The key problem is that utopias, in describing perfect end states utterly divorced from our everyday present, offer no concrete social strategies or tactics to get from here to there. By focusing only on the utopian future, they fail to account for our mundane present, and in particular the mechanisms for change available to us as well as the social forces that resist them. Utopias come into being “born” in their end-state; they have not arrived at this end state through social processes; they arrive there by decree, having been unilaterally legislated by the philosopher. Accordingly, utopianism becomes little more than a glorified form of escapism, something we dream about in lieu of actually doing something.

Utopianism, according to this critique, is a delusion, a mere fantasy that, by means of its pleasing lack of consequence, reinforces the status quo. It is hard to overlook the similarity of this critique to concerns in design research (e.g., Bannon and Ehn 2013; Dunne 1996; Manzini 2015; Papanek 1985 to cite but a few) that design, like mass media before it (e.g., the “dream-factory” of film, in Bloch’s words), peddles in smooth surfaces and pleasant consumerism, while masking and ultimately furthering the interests of an undesirable and unsustainable socioeconomic order.

The Totalitarian Critique. This second critique against utopianism states that totalizing logics and rhetoric are both unavoidable in utopian thinking and also crush dialogue, dissent, and the very possibility of growth. The fine line between utopianism and dystopianism is a theme common to both dystopian fiction, such as George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and political philosophy, such as Popper’s (1994) analysis of open versus closed societies, linking Plato’s *Republic* to the rise of Hitler and Mussolini.

Utopianism, according to this critique, goes from fantasy to nightmare. Here, utopias propose a state of perfection, where particulars are all unified under a single rational principle/system, but we know from history that totalizing states have historically been accompanied by domination of and violence to minorities. Again, it is hard not to see analogues to these kinds of concerns in debates about Big Data, the surveillance state, and back-room collusion between multinational corporations and the National Security Agency (NSA). That these serve as the backdrop to, at the time of this writing, a right-wing movement in the United States and Europe that wants to deport tens of millions of people—primarily defined by their minority status in race, religion, and ethnicity—again brings home the fine line between the utopian vision of the Information Society and the dystopian nightmare that it might well become.

3.3 Utopian Critiques as Postmodernist Reaction to Modernism

Taking one step back, it is possible to read both the fantasy and the totalitarian critiques as a postmodernist reaction to modernist impulses in utopian thought. The modernist impulse, an extension of Enlightenment rationality, is that of envisioning and pursuing the future as embodying the *telos* of rationality: totality, logic, technology, perfection, progress, efficiency, generalization/abstraction. This future is radically cut off from the myths, superstitions, and traditions of its own past.

The postmodernist critique asserts limits of human rationality and explores their consequences. In doing so, it offers a strong skeptical stance toward Western rationalism and the scientific

“meta-narrative of progress” (Lyotard 1984). Further, this skepticism is extended to suggest that Enlightenment rationality is in effect politically regressive, because it historically has been used to justify and perpetuate domination. In place of totalizing logics and “grands récits,” postmodernist criticism favored “petits récits”: that is, a new emphasis on local narratives that would resist or undercut grand narratives. In such a light, it is not difficult to see the fantasy critique as an articulation of postmodern skepticism: any rationalistic and teleological vision (such as a utopia) amounts a grand récit. And the totalitarian critique is an expression of the postmodern suspicion that totalizing rational systems, by unifying all particulars under a single grand récit, justify and perpetuate domination.

Postmodern arguments of both types—the rejection of grands récits and of Enlightenment rationalism—can be found not just in cultural studies but also throughout HCI and design research. Situated action and ethnomethodology (with its micro-methods and micro-interactions) would resist the universal Human Information Processor (Suchman 1987; Bannon and Bødker 1989). “Funology” was positioned to challenge the rationality of usability and function (Blythe et al. 2004). The experiences of online avatars, distinct from offline experiences of the same person, would undercut conceptions of a transcendent Self (Turkle 1995; Bardzell et al. 2014). Postcolonial voices would tell their own stories to counter Western hegemonic representations of the Oriental (Irani et al. 2010; Taylor 2011). Design tactics of “queering” would render HCI itself a “heterodoxy” (Light 2011). In PD, Binder and Ehn’s idea of “democratic design experiments (in the small)” also has the distinctive ring of the petit récit. Though seldom acknowledged explicitly, contemporary HCI and design are steeped in postmodern thinking.

3.4 After Postmodernism: A Return to Universals

The postmodern argument for petits récits is attractive for many reasons. As noted, it has a capacity to challenge and undercut grand narratives. Another benefit is that their narrow scope of inquiry also invites careful empirical study, encouraging a tight coupling between observable data and implications derived from them (e.g., in uses of ethnomethodology in HCI and computer-supported cooperative work (CSCW)). The turn to petits récits can also have the political benefit of finding and championing marginalized voices, that is, the voices most likely to challenge grand narratives (e.g., in feminist social science methodologies, explored in Bardzell and Bardzell 2011). The collective result is that the research community hears from more, and more diverse voices; the voices are more likely to be represented on their own terms; grand theories and metaphysical/ideological dogmas are replaced by limited uses of theory tightly derived from data (as in grounded theory); and results are more likely to be actionable.

Persuasive as the postmodern critique of Enlightenment rationality is in many ways, several political philosophers and critical theorists have also pushed back against it, including Jurgen Habermas and Selya Benhabib. They argue that postmodernism itself is politically regressive, because its tendencies toward relativism—visible even in sophisticated readings of sophisticated theories, such as feminist philosophers’ sympathetic appropriation of Foucault (see, e.g., McLaren 2002)—fails to confront the status quo.

One way to motivate their argument is as follows. Each petit récit has as much moral legitimacy as every other one. This is a good development for marginalized voices whose ways of life deserve such recognition. But not all ways of life do. Critical theorist Alan How (2003) points out that the postmodern turn to petits récits provides no mechanisms for us to reject marginal perspectives that should be marginal. For example, consider a hypothetical community that practices cannibalism or pedophilia. The postmodern commitment to petits récits, and its accompanying skepticism of grand explanatory theories and social structures, provides few grounds to reject such a way of life. This is why postmodernism is widely seen to have a moral relativism problem. This is not

to suggest that postmodernism has no *response* to this problem; in its primary sources (e.g., in Foucault and Derrida) and also in the scholarly tradition on postmodernist thought that follows, one finds sophisticated efforts to deal with it. Nonetheless, the problem of relativism is a ubiquitous theme among both defenders and detractors of postmodernist thought (e.g., Alvesson 2002; Davis 2004; Guting 1994; McLaren 2002; Milchman and Rosenberg 2003). For a critical theory scholar such as Alan How, the best way that we can valorize some ways of life over others, and to reject the moral acceptability of communities of cannibals or pedophiles, is to commit to certain moral universals, which transcend any individual community.

In *Situating the Self*, feminist utopian philosopher Benhabib (1992) lists a number of such universal values, including the following:

- Universal respect for each person in virtue of their humanity
- The moral autonomy of the individual
- Economic and social justice and equality
- Democratic participation
- The most extensive civil and political liberties compatible with principles of justice
- The formation of solidaristic human associations

Benhabib acknowledges that such values have been rendered suspect by postmodern critiques of Enlightenment rationalism. She recognizes and agrees with key elements of the postmodernist critique: the rejection of the idea that a universal moral point of view can be deduced from a total conception of rationality; the observation that the objective, disinterested, abstract, and disembodied Pure Knower is suspiciously aligned with the male ego of the dominant social class; and that universalizing legislative rationality cannot deal with the indeterminacy and multiplicity of real life contexts and situations that have always been the basis of practical reason. At the same time, it is difficult to reject even hypothetical communities of cannibals and pedophiles without resorting to universal values.

A parallel argument concerning the limits of *petits récits* could be made for design. If the goal of design is to change existing situations into preferred ones (Simon 1969), a problem arises: how can we know which possible futures are preferred over others? Like a *petit récit*, each possible future embodies moral choices, distributes power and resources, and creates winners and losers, insiders and outsiders. Applying how is argument in this context, it seems that lacking any moral universals, we have no way to judge which futures are preferred. Further, it seems that the design literature *does* want to embrace certain moral universals: the much-debated and centrality of the concept of “participation” in PD is a good example, as is the related commitment to democratizing design, overcoming the “digital divide,” and a number of other universal values that emerge in HCI and design research on sustainability, HCI for development, universal (sic) accessibility, and more.

So we seem to be in a bit of conundrum. We have inherited what might be called a “modernist” tradition of rationalist design, in which a skilled expert produces futures on behalf of everyone. Key features of this tradition are summarized in Table 1. We also have a 50-year-old postmodernist critique of this epistemology, which has been rehearsed in diverse forms in HCI and design in the 1980s through the 2000s, and which justifiably critiques traditional ethics, utopianism, Big-D Design, and HCI as providing totalizing rationalities that yield some combination of pleasing distractions (the fantasy critique) and/or systems contributing to social injustice, domination, and environmental destruction (the totalitarian critique). Finally, there is a sense, developed in philosophy, critical theory, and HCI and design alike, that postmodernism’s *petits récits* have problems identifying preferred futures that meaningfully address issues such as democracy, poverty, sustainability, corruption, and violence toward minorities (Hakken et al. 2015).

Table 1. Traditional Ethics, Utopianism, Big-D Design, and HCI

	Traditional ethics	Traditional utopianism	Big-D design	“First Wave” HCI
Actor	Disembodied knower	Philosopher-legislator	Elite designer	User-centered designer
Activity	Legislates morality based on a philosophical conception of rationality	Legislates the just society	Mass produces the artificial world by means of attractive, functional products, specified according to the designer’s superior tastes	Supported by universalizing theories of psychology and cognitive science, extracts needs and requirements from users; designs, evaluates, iterates
Product	A finished moral system more perfect than our own	A verbal representation/image of the perfect city	Designs that embody preferred situations and replace prior situations	Usable systems (low task completion times, low error rates, low time to learn)

The intellectual challenge therefore is to find a way to preserve the moral universals, the utopian impulse, and the drive to design toward replacing the current situation with preferred ones, without relying on a now discredited modernist epistemology. How can we throw out the bathwater without throwing out the baby, too?

4 IMPOSSIBLE CITIES VERSUS POSSIBLE BUT UNREPRESENTABLE SOCIETIES

One way forward is to find ways to decouple the practice of utopianism from the contingent forms of it that the postmodern critique has discredited. Looking specifically to Table 1, I see several distinctive features of traditional utopianism as an epistemology:

- The better future is unilaterally legislated by an individual acting on behalf of everyone.
- This individual is a sanctioned “expert”: philosopher, designer, scientist.
- This individual relies on technical, systemic, and yet parochial theories (e.g., Rawlsian substitutionalism, form follows function, cognitive architectures).
- The better future comes into being in its “end state” and by the expert’s fiat; it does not emerge over time through explicit sociopolitical processes.

These epistemological commonalties point to two problematic features of utopianism in particular.

- The public is excluded from participating in the process of constructing and envisioning the utopia. The utopian image is instead legislated by a single elite individual.
- The preferred future is offered as a completed end-state, already in its final and eternal form.

What if utopianism were reconceived in a way where both of these features were rejected? What if such a reconception was developed in a serious and sustained way by an interdisciplinary

Table 2. Traditional Compared with Feminist Utopianism

Traditional utopianism	Feminist utopianism
Product-oriented	Process-oriented
A single, finished image	“Multiple possible futures-in-process” (McKenna 2001)
Legislated (e.g., by a philosopher)	Democratically participative
Deduced all at once from a fixed philosophical system	Guided over time by an evolving philosophical system
Totalizing, comprehensive	Emergent, contingent
Situated in the future	Situated in (a critique of) the mundane present to reveal opportunities for concrete action
The marginalized are dissolved into the homogeneous utopian society	Marginalized structurally given a voice
Conflict is eliminated	Conflict motivates the project and drives its process

scholarly community oriented toward social change? Such, of course, is exactly what happened with the feminist reworking of utopianism. The first move is to clarify some guiding criteria for this new utopianism. The feminist utopian approach features the following core values; utopianism should

- *Accommodate a plurality of voices (i.e., avoid totalitarianism)*. A reimagined utopia that operates on the principle that there is not one possible world that is best for all—McKenna (2001) uses the phrase “multiple possible futures-in-process.” The rejection of singular concreteness is imperative in that it allows and satisfies different conditions for different people and communities.
- *Resist relativism (i.e., uphold some moral universals)*. Utopian thinking is grounded on certain moral principles that guide our action, though they are embodied and situated in the socio-material world.
- *Explore a radically better future without attempting to define it (i.e., it is a design methodology rather than a predictive fantasy)*. This is the key move, viewing utopianism as an activity rather than a completed image.

Drawing largely from literary and critical theory, political philosophy, and religious studies, feminist utopianism is “situated, critical, and relevant to transformative politics, a view that is structured by embodiment” (Johnson 2002, p. 20). It is a form of progressive politics, situated in “historical, *this-worldly* terms, as a process that involves human agency” (Brammer 1991, p. 2; emphasis in the original). The reconceived utopianism advances a transgression of traditional utopianism as blueprints of perfect end-state, critiquing “the equation of perfection with closure” (Sargisson 1996, p. 3) in utopianism. In other words, feminist utopianism foregrounds *utopia-as-cognitive-act* over *utopia-as-vision* as a means of democratizing utopian labor as a kind of thinking. Table 2 summarizes traditional versus feminist utopianism.

This approach to utopianism is feminist not only because it emphasizes qualities of participation, advocating for the marginal, and action, but also because it treats gender centrally. It enables us to “imagine new ways of being ‘sexed’ that are less costly to both men and women” (Cornell, p. 24, cited in Johnson 2002). Feminist philosopher Seyla Benhabib posits that utopian thinking is “a practical-moral imperative” (Benhabib 1992, p. 229) and argues that “for we, as women, have

much to lose by giving up the utopian hope in the wholly other” (Benhabib 1992, p. 230). Echoing Benhabib, Toril Moi warns that feminism risks becoming irrelevant without the distinctive political vision and the emancipatory impetus of utopianism. In her words, “to deprive feminism of its utopias is to depoliticize it at a stroke: without a political vision to sustain it, feminist theory will hit a dead end” (Moi, cited in Johnson 2002). In a similar move, Drucilla Cornell argues that because utopian thinking “demands the continual exploration and re-exploration of the possible and yet also un-representable... without utopian thinking... feminism is inevitably ensnared in the system of gender identity that devaluates the feminine” (Cornell, cited in Johnson 2002). Collectively, Benhabib, Moi, and Cornell motivate why and how utopian thinking should be central to feminist concerns and that a retreat from it is detrimental to feminist projects. Such reasoning would seem to generalize to any political/activist program, including PD in its political-emancipatory modes.

The idea that utopia is “possible and yet also un-representable” effectively inverts traditional utopianism, which is a full representation whose realization is impossible. As Levitas writes, the feminist utopian impulse “is driven by anticipation, by the recognition of patriarchy as an unnatural state, and by the belief in and pursuit of an alternative” (Levitas 2013). A similar argument can be extended to other social ills, such as poverty, social injustice, and environmental destruction—all of which are all human-caused, and therefore can be undone by humans (i.e., it is possible), although we are not exactly sure what such a society would look like (i.e., it is unrepresentable).

Such a description could equally apply to much of PD, where the shortcomings of the status quo are understood, but the shape and direction of the intervention is unclear. Common to both PD and feminist utopianism is a centering on process that is democratic, participative, and emergent. How they differ is in the specific tools they bring. PD brings design methods that support collaborative design—workshops that engage in collective critique, fantasizing, and ideation (Greenbaum and Madsen 1993); PD ethnographies (Blomberg and Karasti 2013); mutual learning; storytelling and enactments; traditional design methods (e.g., sketching, prototyping, scenarios); and so forth. Feminist utopianism brings revamped traditional utopian methods, including an orientation toward a radically better future (not an incrementally better one) and tools for envisioning alternative societies (e.g., utopian narrative conventions, use of images). Feminist utopianism also brings a commitment to moral universals that has absorbed postmodern critiques of rationalistic approaches to universals; this provides a basis to scale beyond *petits récits* (e.g., PD’s democratic experiments “in the small”) toward much larger democratic experiments.

5 TREASURE HILL: A DEMOCRATIC DESIGN EXPERIMENT (GONE AWRY)

I turn now to a particular case, which not only exemplifies many of the issues I have introduced here, but indeed was one of a handful of cases I used “to think with” in order to work out many of these ideas for myself. The case is the story of Treasure Hill, a hillside village in Taipei, Taiwan, which became the site of a government-led urban renewal project between 2007 and 2010 (Figure 1). The project was pursued under the auspices of Taiwan’s implementation of a global policy strategy—cultural and creative industries, also known as the creative economy—whose aspirations can readily be characterized as utopian. My presentation of the case takes the following structure: after a quick background, I offer two different narratives of Treasure Hill to foreground how problem framings of intervention in and for the creative economy diversely represent not only progress and intervention, but also humans as subjects. I follow these narratives with a critical analysis to explore how a democratically pursued public project that was guided by a utopian vision configured participation in a way that rendered invisible its most harmful consequences thereby enabling them. This harm includes the destruction of a tight-knit yet low-income community through the dispossession of its members’ autonomy and property.

Fig. 1. Treasure Hill is situated in a steep hillside, facing away from downtown Taipei.

5.2 Background

Culture and creative industries (CCI) policies, which became globally popular in the late 1990s, were taken up with enthusiasm in Taiwan's policy community. The basic concept of CCI policies is that cultural production can be industrialized and bring with it numerous benefits. Cultural production includes arts, crafts, and design; media production (e.g., Hollywood, BBC, Bollywood), as well as tourism and heritage (e.g., Kyoto's temples, Greece's ruins). Benefits of CCI include generating GDP (e.g., about 8% of the UK's GDP is from the cultural and creative industries (Taiwan Ministry of Economic Affairs 2004); stimulating creativity and innovation, thereby driving industrial growth in other sectors; creating high-paying and high-quality jobs; and cultivating public taste for that culture. In Taiwan, a central strategy is to develop creative industrial clusters, analogous to other forms of industrial cluster, where all of the elements (e.g., design, supply, engineering, manufacturing) of a given industry are collocated (e.g., in an industrial park). Nearly half of Taiwan's CCI budget is dedicated to the establishment of creative parks and creative villages, where designers, artists, entrepreneurs, and engineers (e.g., makers and inventors) work side-by-side, often with a public-facing side (e.g., shops, scenic gardens, fablabs, exhibitions, and classes) to attract consumers. A nation-sized vision, based in a globally recognized policy framework, seeking to bring about transformative socioeconomic and cultural change, with synergistic connections across industrial sectors, that improves citizens' quality of life in both the workplace and in leisure, Taiwan's CCI policy has more than a whiff of the utopian.

6 TWO TALES OF TREASURE HILL

The case of Treasure Hill is about a recent implementation of the creative economy initiative, but the village itself is much older. At the conclusion of the Civil War in China in 1949, a few dozen Kuomintang (KMT) soldiers who fled from China to Taiwan established an off-the-grid commune on Treasure Hill in the outskirts of Taipei beside a water utility plant. Over the years, they attracted a number of workers from the water plant to live there as well. Using natural and reclaimed materials, they built a few hundred small houses. Using discarded pipes, they (illegally) piped in water from a nearby water utility plant. They farmed the land for vegetables and kept several pigs. The residents built a micro-town, micro-society, and functioning micro-economy off the grid. More than 500 individuals in over 200 households lived in the community in 1991.

Fig. 2. A sign (left) and mural (right) inside Treasure Hill artist village.

Meanwhile, the city of Taipei grew. What was once a remote hilltop facing away from the city was now in the middle of the city, between Taiwan's flagship university and the river. By 2000, Treasure Hill's village seemed to be a slum, and its ad hoc buildings lodged on a steep hillside were a human disaster waiting to happen in a country known for typhoons and major earthquakes. Treasure Hill was identified by NGOs and the Taipei City Government as an area needing urban renewal. Under the auspices of the Cultural Creative Economy policy, the city government renovated the commune, bringing its buildings up to code, running a legal water system, and so forth. Closed down in 2007 and reopened in 2010, Treasure Hill now hosts an artist village, including Taiwan's first and arguably most significant hackerspace, OpenLab Taipei.

Treasure Hill is held forth as a case study of successful historical site preservation, meeting rising citizen demand for parks and other public quality of life facilities and for beautifying the city. The idea was to create a "Symbiotic Art Settlement," bringing together the poor residents of Treasure Hill with young and rising artists, investors, and tourists (Figure 2). Everyone would win: the original residents' houses would transition from slums to modern housing; artists would be able to set up studios for a fraction of the market rate, even as visitors would come and buy their goods. Citizens would have a new park to visit, featuring both spectacular scenery as well as cultural works. Out of town tourists would have another attraction to consider. Today, Treasure Hill is indeed an urban park and a tourist attraction.

But this narrative of Treasure Hill masks another, darker story. Only a minority of the original residents stayed. Many were forcibly evicted to make way for Taipei's new creative residents. Many were placed in public housing elsewhere in the city, while others were simply turned out. In a sad irony, the evicted residents had been creative makers as well: they had made houses, a functioning utility system, a sustainable community farm—in short, a viable village with a sufficiently quaint architectural style that it could be renovated into an attractive cultural park. Nonetheless, they were not the creative actors of the creative economy, and so they were forced to leave. In short, this utopian project led to mixed outcomes, successfully championing creativity and the arts but doing so at the expense of dispossessing a vulnerable population, in spite of its undeniable creativity.

6.1 The Subjects of Treasure Hill

The case of Treasure Hill reveals some of the sociopolitical costs and ironies involved in creative economy policy initiatives. These become analytically visible when examined from a utopian

perspective. In this section, I unpack how the dispossession that occurred on Treasure Hill might be traced to a methodological shortcoming of democratic interventions in general, including PD. In a word, the shortcoming is that the act of (democratically) construing alternative futures also (democratically) construes some individuals and (more abstractly) their ways of being in the past. But placing them in the past (I will argue) not only rejects them, but it can go further and even render them as “sick” or repulsive—an effect intensified because this construal has been democratically enacted and thereby morally sanctioned. To make this argument, I use theory to analyze the Treasure Hill narrative(s): Ruth Levitas’ utopia as method, and Athena Athanasiou’s analysis of dispossession.

I begin with Ruth Levitas’ *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (2013). According to Levitas, there are three distinct but interrelated forms of utopian thinking in service of the imaginative reconstitution of society: archaeology, ontology, and architecture, as follows:

- *Archaeology*. In traditional archaeology, broken and fragmented pieces of the past are collected, organized, and then used to reconstruct a past way of life. Levitas proposes that we can use such a method to future. In this method, we collect raw materials such as images of good society embedded in political programs and other aspirational discourses; treating these images as utopian “glimmers” of that good society, we reconstruct a future way of life.
- *Ontology*. In this mode, Levitas encourages us to ask questions such as: What *kinds* of people do societies develop and encourage? What are identified as needs/lacks, and what are the fulfillments or wholes that complete (and also reveal) them? Who are the inhabitants of utopia, and how will they feel, want, and behave differently than ourselves? This is “ontology” because it seeks to understand the people and positions that society encourages.
- *Architecture*. Architecture is the constructive, design-oriented component, and it is already well developed in traditional utopianism. Architecture refers to the design of institutions, policies, organizations, and so on. This mode is informed and even inspired by archaeology and ontology. For Levitas, the outcome of this activity is *provisional hypothesis submitted for dialogue and critique*, not a prediction of what will happen nor a deduction of what should happen given a certain theory of human rationality. The key here is that architectural designs are submitted to democratic processes, not dreamt up in a philosopher’s or dictator’s head.

Taiwan’s move toward the creative economy can be analyzed on these following terms:

- The *archaeological* images out of which the vision is constructed include cultural traditions, existing cultural and creative industries (e.g., tourism, design consultancies), the attractiveness of creative professions (symbolized in amateur-professional makerspaces), the function and nature of industrial clusters, urban renewal and gentrification, as well as metaphors of health (e.g., projects like Treasure Hill are sometimes referred to in Taiwan as a form of “urban acupuncture”—where an urban illness is eased through precise intervention).
- The *ontological* perspective identifies social roles that it wants to support: artists, crafters, designers, heritage experts, inventors, and entrepreneurs form a new industrial partnership, located in spaces that bring value to their cities, and in activities that are rewarding, high-paying, and promoting of Taiwanese culture and identity.
- The *architecture* (and literal architecture) that renovates under-utilized urban spaces into culture and creativity parks and culture industry clusters. In the case of Treasure Hill, the initial intentions of the government were to create a symbiotic society in which its low income residents stayed in Treasure Hill and would be integrated into an energizing art

community to be introduced to the site, while also bringing the site up to code. The original plans to create this symbiotic community would have been among the first urban experiments of its kind in the world (Wang 2010; Zhang 2005).

However, the renovated land had also become very valuable—its once-remote location now near the center of bustling Taipei—and the plan changed so there was no room for the “squatters” in this renovated place; they were promised alternative public housing, but even that proved difficult for the city to deliver. In fact, protesters hindered the project for years, before they were finally forcibly evicted in 2007. Less than 10% of the families that moved out returned in 2010. Sun Tsai-Hsia, one of the protesters, who had lived in Treasure Hill for more than two decades, commented: “This place is home, but the police forced us out like we are common criminals. My father built our house and now the city government has seized it. Is there no justice?”

City official Lee Yong-Ping responded: “We are not tearing down houses or chasing out residents. The renovation project is to fix the houses and underground public utilities. We are here to preserve the place.” (Mo 2007). Quotes from authorities expressed confusion about protests, asserting that they were trying to save Treasure Hill. But that sensibility confuses saving the *space* with saving the *way of life* it once supported. When collocated people are abstracted into places, then *actual people as living bodies* are abstracted into *subjects*, which in turn alters their rights and responsibilities.

6.1.1 How Benevolent Interventions Lead to Dispossession. Anthropologist Athena Athanasiou argues that dispossession refers to “processes and ideologies by which persons are disowned and abjected by normative and normalizing powers that define cultural intelligibility and that regulate the distribution of vulnerability...” (Butler and Athanasiou 2013). In the Taiwan example, the precursor to physical dispossession is a set of discursive moves that re-construe the residents into an abjected social role, or subject position. For the many people living on Treasure Hill, their living bodies transition from “war heroes” (in the 1950s) and “community members” (the subsequent decades) to “squatters” (in 2007) and thence to “welfare recipients” (by 2010), depending on how Treasure Hill is construed as a place (i.e., a community-settlement, an urban area needing intervention, and finally a cultural park). Once they have been discursively re-constituted as “squatters,” the residents are trespassers subject to government power, paving the way for their physical removal from the site and eventual conversion into welfare recipients, living in government housing for the poor.

The case demonstrates that *participation is mediated by a structure of subject positions*, some of which are preferred and others abjected. This structure is akin to Levitas’ utopian method of “ontology” in that participation entails identifying the *kinds* of people who will exist in the future society and what relations exist among them. On Treasure Hill according to the creative economy regime, these positions included something like the following: policymaker, artist, squatter, maker, inventor, and tourist. In traditional PD, one often encounters humans occupying structural roles like designer, end-user, manager. And in ICTD/HCI4D literature, one often finds subject positions like these: (Western) researchers/“We,” (non-Western) local authority figure, (non-Western) users/“they.”

Social roles structure when and how speech is made, and by whom, and with what effects. Dialogue does not just happen; rather, it is mediated by, is an outcome of a system or regime comprising “principles, institutions, and procedures” which “enable articulation of the voice of ‘others’” (Benhabib 1992). Collections of subject positions such as those in the previous paragraph are produced by principles, institutions, and procedures, and ideally they should be participatively enacted. Clearly, in the creative economy discourse of Treasure Hill that did not happen: the residents do not see themselves as “squatters” and “trespassers.” This foregrounds a chicken-and-egg

problem with implications for both democratic social policy and also PD: one must be part of a system to participate in it (i.e., to be a subject of it), but the system can only be designed by participants.

Another way the government discursively contained residents (intentionally or not) was to create a policy narrative around the creative economy and urban renewal, guided by a set of principles, institutions, and procedures that abjected and thereby disabled the articulation of the residents, who were not relevant to this economy. The protagonists of the creative economy, the abstraction of collocated bodies into a type of place, the metaphors of “renewal,” “acupuncture”—all discursively conspired not only to silence the voices of the original residents, but also to obfuscate the injustices that inevitably come home to roost not in discourse but in living bodies (Benhabib 1992), that is, the forcible removal of people from their homes, the breakup of families and neighbors, and the discomforts of their new housing. Treasure Hill shines a harsh light on the stakes of what Light refers to as the “benign imposition” of the designer framing a PD project can be.

But the Treasure Hill narrative had another twist. In this case, the residents’ voices *were* heard eventually, thanks to protests and press coverage, NGOs, and the work of academics in the Graduate Institute of Building and Planning at National Taiwan University. Once heard, residents’ voices offered a powerful counter-narrative to the city government creative economy narrative, revealing gaps and confounds in the city’s narrative. Among other things, the residents’ counter-narrative shows that what counts as cultural creativity must operate inside the system or regime in order to be cultural creativity. That is, otherwise indiscernible acts of creativity and value creation are treated in radically different ways (i.e., one is valorized and invested in, while the other is dismantled and removed), in spite of the fact that both sets of “creators” worked with local materials, actively sought to build community through making, contributed toward the increasing real estate value of the land, creatively innovated new designs, and oriented themselves in service of Taiwan. One odd consequence is that the residents, by being dispossessed of their homes on Treasure Hill and moved to “legitimate” housing, had their citizenship “regained”—at the cost of starting at the bottom rung of society, but nevertheless within society. That is, they were “made” into citizens.

6.1.2 Abjecting Both (Embodied) Individuals and (Abstract) Ways of Being. The case of Treasure Hill embodies many of the utopian themes I have been developing so far. It is easy in hindsight to second-guess the city and national governments—for their failures to live up to ideals of democratic participation and transparency, for destroying a community, for dispossessing a community of its *de facto* property, and for subsequently enjoying the benefits of that community’s newly acquired property. But to be fair, there was one complexity that must have been hard for the government to deal with. The residents’ lack of a clear legal status—the kind that conventional property owners enjoy—put them in a politically liminal position: neither constituents nor foreigners. Lacking a clear status, they also lacked the rights, responsibilities, and forms of reciprocity attendant on an ethics of justice. The moment the government recognizes the settlement, it is no longer “off the grid”—and the residents are in that moment recognized as citizens and trespassers. Accordingly, they lose all their *de facto* rights over the community and neighborhood.

It is evident that there is a link between supporting cultural creativity and dispossession in Treasure Hill, which adds a wrinkle to dispossession theory: earlier, I quoted Athanasiou claiming that the dispossessed are “abjected.” The “abject” refers to parts of ourselves that are no longer “ours”—sweat, urine, the placenta, and even corpses. Key to the abject is that not only is it rejected, but it is also *repulsive*. A hiring committee might reject an applicant, but he or she is typically not seen as repulsive. But discursive evidence that the residents were not only rejected but found repulsive is visible in metaphors of the village being “sick” (and hence subject to cleansing, “renewal,” and “urban acupuncture”), and in the unflattering term “squatter.” In other words, subject positions

(i.e., social roles) themselves can be abject—that is, initially they are a part of the principles, institutions, and procedures, but then they are cast out and thereby repulsive. This analysis of the dispossessed on Treasure Hill highlights those subject positions and/or ways of being that are not wanted in the new utopia; they do not simply disappear, but instead become abject. The creative makers of the Creative Economy are valorized; the creative makers of an off-the-grid village are repulsive. Understanding the dispossessed is not only a key strategy for being able, as an activist, to help advocate for them or get their voice represented (which is good in itself), but it also serves a critical purpose in calling to our attention those ways of being that are the rejected former part of the social regime.

6.1.3 The Risk to Utopianism and Participatory Design. The feminist notion of utopia as “multiple possible futures-in-process” (McKenna 2001) is intuitively appealing. It is pluralistic, non-deterministic, infinitely negotiable, and agile. But Treasure Hill helped me to understand that it has a potential dark side. A subject position that is valorized in one future can outlive its purpose in another, and when futures quickly replace each other, they can produce abject subject positions. The same living embodied being is capable of occupying multiple subject positions, which have the potential to change over time. When living embodied beings inhabit such subject positions, they are vulnerable to pain, dispossession, being silenced, and other forms of injustice.

This can happen as a result of a PD process as well, particularly one that reconfigures social relationships in pursuit of a better way of being and doing. It is the potential result of Light and Anderson’s “benign imposition” (2009), and arguably is what played out in the labyrinthine social relations analyzed in Winschiers-Theophilus et al.’s “Being Participated” (2010). In short, *the principles, institutions, and procedures designed to ensure that marginal voices are heard might also be the very forces that marginalize certain voices in the first place through abjection.*

Yet a glimmer of hope—fragmented and imperfect though it is—also shines through Treasure Hill. It is the fact that the voices of the residents were eventually heard, that in an important way they were able to resist their abjection as “squatters” and to propose an alternative regime and set of social roles, which many (if not, in the end, the city government) found persuasive. Nonetheless, they reasserted not only their rights, but also their cultural creativity: “My father built our house,” protested Sun Tsai-Hsia, “and now the city government has seized it” to make use of it as a cultural treasure, a site of heritage and of creative economic development. The government’s response—that it was merely trying to save the place—is a tacit acknowledgement of Sun’s position: it is the *place* that deserves intervention. It is characteristic of feminist analysis that it attends to actual living bodies as one axis of inquiry—how they are distributed, the labor they undertake, what forms of control they are subjected to, where they are neglected or in discomfort, and so on. The discursive regime of the creative economies in this case failed to be accountable to actual living bodies, focusing instead on spaces, places, and economically productive social roles. One glimmer of hope for utopian cognition—and PD—is methodological, that is, that committing to attend to actual living bodies is a tactic that can help well intentioned principles, institutions, and procedures to hear the voices of the marginal; and further, that the possibility of abjection is both revealing (it highlights the difference between two regimes’ respective social structures) and consequential (it harms actual living bodies).

7 FEMINIST UTOPIAN PARTICIPATORY DESIGN

In this essay, I have traced and developed a line of thinking about how PD and feminist utopianism might inform or shape one another. Though I see this as a two-way, mutual influence, I have focused here on how feminist utopian thinking might address some challenges that have been

articulated in the PD research community. Specifically, I earlier summarized four concerns raised in the PD research literature: PD's desire to maintain its firm commitments to democracy in an era of ubiquitous and global IT; the necessity to, and practical and ethical challenges of, configuring participation; the imperative to generate meaningful alternatives; and the imperative to meet high standards of local accountability.

These issues are all complex and multidimensional, but what struck me most forcefully was the issue of how these all face the challenge of scaling up. As has been pointed out in the research, classic PD typically involved the development of bespoke systems for teams working on well-defined professional tasks. Within such contexts, PD was methodologically able to engage politics and conflicts in sensitive ways—even if, as Bannon and Ehn write, it was depoliticized as its methods were exported to industry and transfigured into user-centered design. That notwithstanding, recent PD research clearly emphasizes matters of politics, using sophisticated theories and project experiences to unpack questions of power and “real” participation (e.g., Bratteteig and Wagner 2014) and to problematize how participation comes to be framed (e.g., Light and Anderson 2009; Vines et al. 2013; Winschiers-Theophilus et al. 2010). My analysis of Treasure Hill, which suggests that even the democratic co-construction of alternative futures can have the unintended consequence of rendering individuals abject and thereby subject to dispossession and other forms of violence, hints at both the mechanisms and consequences of framing participation.

My utopian readings, however, prompted another series of difficult questions: what can “participation,” “meaningful alternatives,” and “local accountability” mean in the context of IT design meant to contribute to transformative changes in human-caused problems, such as climate change, patriarchy, intercontinental refugee crises, mass extinction, poverty, and so on? Is global participation possible or desirable? Is it reasonable to hope for “meaningful alternatives” for problems such as these? Does PD's commitment to “local accountability” still make sense as a value, for instance, on a topic such as climate change?

At the same time, we are witnessing the emergence of new technologies with the potential to coordinate on a global scale: social media, Big Data, GPS, microrobotics, fiber optics, ubiquitous cameras and sensors, mass censorship, global logistics, natural language processing, drones, consumer-friendly fabrication, cloud technologies. We often hear about the potential social benefits of (most of) these technologies, much like we once heard about the democratizing potential of the Internet. But as legal scholar Persily (2017) has recently asked with the title of his journal article, “Can Democracy Survive the Internet?”, emerging global technologies have as much potential to undercut as to perpetuate democracy. Persily points to Russian meddling in the US election, bots generating “fake news,” partisan news bubbles, and so on.

These prompt questions about how participation in, say, Big Data, could be configured (we already know something about how it presently is configured). How will coordination among the world's fiber networks, drone services, ubiquitous sensors, and data processing capabilities valorize and abject certain ways of life? What will dispossession look like, how will it unfold, how will it be legitimated, as humans become more dependent on our networks and data? Is there any way for the coordination of these global technologies to be democratized, and how might IT research and design communities contribute to such a project?

These questions can be as discouraging to confront as questions about obliterating poverty or structural racism or sexism. But here I believe feminist utopianism can offer some theoretical and methodological support—feminists (and advocates of many other forms of social justice) have taken on such discouraging questions for decades. For me, the first step is not to turn away from utopianism as wishful thinking, but instead to embrace and pursue it as the basis of having any politics at all. Next is to pursue a form of utopianism that takes seriously postmodern critiques of

its modernist form (i.e., that takes seriously the fantasy and totalitarian critiques) and yet which commits to some universal values (e.g., Benhabib's proposed universal respect for each person in virtue of their humanity, democratic participation, formation of solidaristic human associations). Key to this alternative utopian epistemology is the inversion of traditional utopianism, by replacing traditional utopianism's fully described but impossible to achieve utopian image (e.g., a perfect city) with a possible-to-achieve but impossible-to-represent image. If we agree with Levitas—that a problem like patriarchy is not natural and therefore that humans have the wherewithal to eradicate it, even if we do not yet know what that might look like—then the participatory strategy would seem to entail the construction of processes, institutions, or other mechanisms by which millions or even billions might propose post-patriarchal futures and concrete actions to pursue them.

And here is where I see PD as playing a key role. Much of the feminist utopianism I have read works primarily with textual materials: traditional philosophy, feminist theory, social policy, and narrative fiction. PD's materials are much more tightly coupled with computational materials, often in global contexts—software systems, the social production of IT decisions, sociotechnical infrastructures, distributed coordination. At the same time, PD also retains its commitments to democracy: PD challenges the over-optimistic narratives of the democratization (whether by questioning the optimistic claims of citizen science or by confronting the legacies of colonialism transposed into IT “solutions” for the developing world) while developing, testing, and refining participatory methodologies.

The combination of feminist utopianism and PD suggests to me a pair of interrelated tactics that are worth developing and testing. One is for PD to develop design methods that work with common utopian tropes—utopia-as-vision (city, journey, etc.) and utopia-as-cognition. PD has methods like fantasy workshops that arguably do this work. What I am imagining is a mode of PD that is much more ambitious with the construction of those “fantasies”—beyond wish fulfillment and toward a mode of fictional thinking that aspires toward literary/philosophical seriousness. Hints of this are already unfolding in the design community, e.g., design fictions, critical design, and so forth. My intuition is that design and the literary imagination have only just begun to explore their mutual potential.

The other tactic is the application of a long-standing feminist commitment to attend to the bodies of those with whom we are concerned (see, for example, Benhabib 1992). This is not the same as a call for taking embodiment more seriously in design, though that is important, too. Rather, it is a way of understanding sociotechnical infrastructures starting with the dispositions of human bodies within them, rather than such systems' technical features and capabilities. That is, it includes a focus on what our bodies are doing and not doing; the forms of physical suffering (pain, entrapment, boredom, diabetes) that sociotechnical systems contribute to; and the denials of pleasure (including breathing fresh air, self-expression, social interaction, experiencing sexual gratification, purposeful action, etc.) likewise inscribed into them. In doing so, it also encourages us to notice the ways that future technologies will participate in social conflicts, e.g., by differentially positioning male/female/trans, black/white, old/young, citizen/immigrant, and poor/wealthy bodies. And as we saw in the Treasure Hill example, a consistent focus on bodies also makes it more difficult to talk ourselves out of noticing the violence we are doing.

In some ways, these two tactics can work together. That is, the literary imagination often entails a serious exploration of embodied experience: the bewildering journeys of Haruki Murakami's existentially lost protagonists, Charles Dickens' impoverished laborers, or Jane Austen's heroines aching to burst from their social and physical confines. Such works suggest that the utopian only fully comes into its own when oppressed bodies are emancipated, and when freedom—to move, to grow, to speak, to engage, to love—is experienced in the flesh. And, it is in the fleshly experience that the urge to tell a story arises in the first place. PD can bring to such an imagination decades

of experience pursuing creative imagining of IT design oriented toward democracy, sophisticated awareness of contemporary social conflict, and emancipation. A feminist utopian PD seems to me to be positioned to blend mature methods of democratic co-creation in socially conflicted situations with mature methods of literary imagination about embodied experiences.

There is, in addition to all of this, a role for academic design researchers. Among other activities, the intersection of PD and feminist utopianism calls for more extended critiques of design and/or policy interventions at scale. The above analysis of Treasure Hill as an implementation of CCI policy is one example of critiquing larger-scale interventions, and it is one of a series of such studies that my colleagues and I have conducted on CCI implementations in Taiwan. Reading such experiments from the perspective of design might provide glimpses of what a PD at scale could be (or where it could go wrong). In the Treasure Hill example, I came to appreciate how the social roles of participation are legislated and re-legislated as preferred futures emerge and shift; I saw how once-acceptable social roles over time became abject, and that this led to forms of violence and also ways that these became hidden in plain sight. In a study of Taiwanese hackerspaces—another focal point of Taiwan’s CCI policy—my colleagues and I found another instance where the sort of bottom-up cultural creativity that the government ostensibly supports was neglected and even hindered by the policy designed to support it; we inferred that part of the problem is a lack of appreciation for the contents of cultural creativity (Bardzell et al. 2017). In a study of a major public design exhibition-event (Freeman et al. 2017), which converted over a dozen city blocks into a permanent public park, my colleagues and I saw the very concept of the CCI turned into a massive scale experience prototype for Taiwan’s public, even as it was made exclusively by Taiwanese designers, engineers, crafters, and fine artists, in other words, serving as a proof of concept. Even so, the exhibition was subject to a firestorm of controversy, which played out in a highly partisan electorate and a freewheeling media. Collectively, these studies are helping me understand how design, from macro-scale to micro-scale, is helping (and in some cases failing) to democratize and to concretize the utopian vision of Taiwan’s cultural and creative industries.

I am but one person and this is one person’s agenda. But I see others similarly offering insights about public interventions at scale. For example, there is an emerging cluster of research exploring nation-sized design experiments in East Asian cities, such as Singapore and Shenzhen (e.g., Ong 1999; Ong and Collier 2004; Lindtner, 2015; O’Donnell et al. 2017). Similarly, in *Making Futures* (Ehn et al. 2014), there is a section featuring several chapters devoted to analyses of and design interventions within the creative industries of Malmö, Sweden, focusing on class struggle. These works for now are published under a variety of disciplinary headings, including anthropology, area studies, design, HCI, and STS.

In short, all of the key elements are in place for a PD understood as democratic experiments (write large): participatory methods, empirical studies of urban- and nation-sized design projects, a rich critical theoretical landscape (informed by feminist utopianism among many others), literary resources, IT expertise, and shared democratic values. So perhaps the most fundamental—and impactful—potential of feminism’s reconstitution of utopianism is to move the design research community past any skepticism of utopianism, because such skepticism intentionally or otherwise has the regressive effect of limiting us to petits récits and incremental progress. A revived utopianism sanctions, even demands, us to speak and to act according to our deepest held values, to extend their benefits beyond ourselves and our immediate groups to everyone, in a gesture of hope.

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