

“Daughters of Earth”: Experimentations in Domesticity



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As Diane Newell and Victoria Lamont note, “Daughters of Earth” was originally published in 1952 as part of a shared universe between three authors with set expectations for the worlds described in the volume. Judith Merrill wrote the novella at a moment of crisis in her life, during the collapse of her second marriage with author Frederik Pohl. Merrill felt that the instability in her life caused her to write the draft too quickly, leading to a story that she argued “leaves much to be desired” (Newell and Lamont 53). Many of her contemporaries agreed with this assessment, criticizing the story as a part of the often-disparaged subgenre of domestic science fiction. Falling into this tendency, Damon Knight argues, “Judith Merrill’s ‘Daughters of Earth’ is a truly sick-making combination of soap opera and comic book, honest ignorance and deliberate hypocrisy. Merrill has a respectable talent and is in private life nobody’s fool, and certainly nobody’s weepy housefrau; I wish she would stop pretending otherwise” (249). Knight’s analysis transforms the story into something deeply conventional, a narrative that does not live up to either the genre’s or Merrill’s potential. His reading entirely misses the experimental elements of the text and its reworking of the conventions of the genre. However, the story’s reputation has drastically changed over the years and has been embraced by authors and critics such as Victoria Lamont, Dianne Newell, Lisa Yaszek, and Justine Larbalstier, who have seen Merrill’s work as precursor to later feminist science fiction. It also represents an early effort to bring a more experimental approach to the genre and an effort to break out of the galactic suburb.

Merrill’s work needs to be placed within the context of the destruction of the popular front of the 1930s and 1940s, alongside the rise of the Cold War and McCarthyism. Ideological purges were a defining aspect of the era, occurring in locations as disparate as the university and the steel foundry. Chandler Davis notes that between the years of 1947–1950, “most institutions, from the government through the unions and universities to the American Civil Liberties Union . . . declared Communists unwelcome,” setting a precedent for the years to follow (272). Loyalty oaths utilized by those institutions not only restricted the involvement of members of the Communist Party, but also organizations with associations with the Communist Party. Radical artists had to navigate this minefield to find legitimate spaces to offer critiques of the society and avoid censure. Failure to negotiate these dangers could lead to the blacklists; that is, being unable to publish or work in the industries of popular media. The House Un-American Activities Committee deliberately sought to exclude radical artists from popular media, whether in the form of film, television, or radio, often with the collaboration of the owners of those industries. In a few cases, it led to criminal charges or expulsion from the country. Through this process, the specter of McCarthyism destroyed an entire set of cultural and aesthetic forms, as well as the organizations that helped create them.

Within that void, we began to see artistic and intellectual experimentation, albeit within the extraordinarily constrained circumstances created by the destruction of both the political and cultural infrastructure of the Popular Front. The radicals that survived the purges and the deportations of the period had to create a new style and form to be heard. While the decade of the 1950s is conventionally known for its political quiet, we can see a variety of political projects developing in a variety of manners. From an intellectual direction, writers as diverse as Herbert Marcuse, C. Wright Mills, and the slightly later work of Betty Friedan were attempting to create a type of political engagement that escaped the often-informal censorship of the Cold War period. The decade also saw a renewal of the Black freedom movement in the form of legal strategies and protest. Additionally, as Lisa Yaszek points out, a maternalist anti-war politic also became a way of escaping the censorship of a variety of political discourses and became a place of refuge for several radical and reformist projects, shifting their focus from the transformation of the country into an anti-war direction, particularly focused on the threat of nuclear war (109–13).

Judith Merrill operates in the intersection of those two discourses, using the language of science fiction to avoid the forms of political censorship of the era, and to create a new discourse to engage with middle- and working-class women, drawing from and mutating the dominant literary form of the domestic melodrama. Merrill creates an intersection between domestic melodrama and science fiction to accomplish that exploration, drawing on the forms of cognitive estrangement found in science fiction to begin to mark the political contours of the present, by beginning to imagine it as a contingent historical moment. Merrill explicitly frames her engagement within these terms, noting that the genre allows for an exploration of forbidden topics, radical possibilities foreclosed by the political repression of the era. The generic work of Merrill begins to explore the cracks and fissures contained in the newly created domestic sphere, connecting it to the larger political structures that had been obfuscated. She begins to create a new feminist aesthetic, engaging with and criticizing the variety of expectations put upon women to stabilize the structures of Keynesian mass production. We can see the inklings of the rise of a series of new feminist struggles, struggles against the newly created domestic structures designed to preserve capitalist accumulation through the common labor of women as consumers and mothers.

That experimentation took its fullest form in "Daughters of Earth." The novella is concerned with the everyday life of domesticity and women's experiences within that sphere, but the narrative spans several generations and moves from the confines of the household to the outer reaches of the solar system and beyond. The narrative shifts out of the confined critique of *Shadow on the Hearth*, and its inability to imagine an alternative to the conventional post-war nuclear family, to the possibility of the breakup of that formation. As Yaszek notes, it is constructed through a fictionalized account of "journal excerpts, newspaper clippings, and oral stories" producing a story that is far more discontinuous, fragmented, and scattered than the more conventional domestic melodrama. She continues, "[l]ike other feminist authors ranging from Virginia Woolf in the 1920s and 1930s to Joanna Russ in the 1970s and 1980s, Merrill refuses to subsume the experiences

of women into a single voice but rather insists on the multiplicity of women’s subjective experiences” (37).

The novella follows multiple generations of women as they take part in the expansion of humanity throughout the solar system and beyond. The story opens with Martha’s experience watching the first flight to colonize Pluto. It then moves to the perspective of her daughter, Joan, and her contributions to that process. The story shifts to its focus, the effort of Joan’s granddaughter, Emma, to help settle a planet, Uller, outside the solar system. This thread of the story follows her as she lands on the planet, loses her husband to one of its native inhabitants, and gradually learns that his death was caused by his inadvertent attack of the indigenous Ullern. Emma’s storyline is intertwined with a story of the debates between the settlers on whether they should develop lines of communication and collaboration with the indigenous inhabitants of the planet, or annihilate them. It then ends with her daughter’s diplomatic efforts between the two settler groups that establish peace between them and also allows for cooperation with the indigenous residents. Stemming from this, the humans and Ullerns together plan a mission to move to even more distant planets, a mission that Emma’s granddaughter, Carla, will take part in.

The opening passage immediately establishes the scope and ambition of the narrative as one that proposes to radically rewrite the conventions of the genre. It promptly enters into conversation with three major genealogical traditions. First, Yaszek notes the immediate resemblance with the patriarchal narrative of the Bible (36). However, it deliberately reverses the patriarchal lineage of that text, shifting to a lineage of mothers, rather than fathers. The passage moves quickly from that logic into a set of tropes more closely linked to the expectations of the science fiction audience for the second genealogical tradition: the enlightenment narrative of the Promethean scientist revolting against the gods to bring light to the masses, and a parallel narrative of the birth of the genre and subculture of science fiction. However, these narratives, too, are challenged through the implications of the previous paragraph, which notes that, “this story could have started anywhere” (Merril, “Daughters” 55), marking the contingency of the beginning of the scientific narrative—the third tradition—even its arbitrariness. Each of these origin stories gestures towards the inability of those narratives to represent a set of experiences conventionally and socially linked to women. The two familiar narratives, science and science fictional, are then themselves implicitly marked as patriarchal, and set aside as the model for the narrative arc, which then offers an alternative to the singular promethean figure through an alternative pairing of an anonymous man and woman.

The concluding statement, “But in this narrative, it starts with Martha,” provocatively offers a kind of year zero for the story (56). We are promised a new narrative, a genesis that will translate into a new genealogical formation, operating in a matrilineal manner. At the same time, we are promised a new way of imagining the future, a new form. This promised futurity moves beyond the simple explanation of a strategy to avoid the censorship that Merrill offers as her reason for writing science fiction. It gestures towards a radical alterity and the possibility of a social symbolic that no longer operates in the register of patriarchy. Merrill’s narrative attempts to

produce rhythmic tension between domestic convention—the desire to settle—and the desire to explore, discover, and colonize. Those alterations and that sense of alterity are then framed in the experience of the body as it adjusts to different spaces in the cosmos:

But however we learn to juggle our bodies through space or time; we live our lives on a subjective time scale. Thus, though *I* was born in 2026, and the *Newhope* landed on Uller in 2091, I was then, roughly, 27 years old—including two subjective years, overall, for the trip.

And although the sixty-one years I have lived here would be counted as closer to sixty-seven on Earth, or on Pluto, I think that the body—and I *know* that the mind—pays more attention to the rhythm of planetary seasons, the alterations of heat and cold and radiation intensities, than to the ticking of some cosmic metronome counting off whatever Absolute Time might be. (59)

Change is mapped on to the body in its experiences “on a subjective time scale.” One must understand that basic fact to engage with the shifts of historical time, which cannot be understood as “the ticking of some cosmic metronome counting off whatever Absolute Time might be.” Absolute time then stands in for empty homogeneous time, which is supplanted by the time of revolution in its most literal sense. The subjective time of the body is produced through the revolution of planets around the sun, “the rhythm of planetary seasons, and the alteration of heat and cold and radiation intensities.” Rather than gesturing towards some form of geographical anthropology, the subjective experience of the body is defined by the dialectic of environment and the social structures designed to survive it. The naturalized structures of days and years become contingent within the context of space travel. At the same time, the narrative continually emphasizes the third part of the dialectic in rhythms of planetary seasons and planetary travel, which is most directly captured in the way that social reproduction is made analogous to the experiences defined by the revolution of planets:

We still progress through adolescence and education (which once ended at 14, then 18, 21, 25 . . .) to youth, marriage, procreation, maturity, middle age, senescence and death. And in a similar way, I think, there are certain rhythms of human history which recur in (widening, perhaps enriched, but increasingly discernible) moderately predictable patterns of motion and emotion both.

A recognition of this sort of rhythm is implicit, I think, in the joke that would not go away, which finally made the official name of the—ship?—in which you will depart *The Ark* (for *Archaic?*). In any case, this story is, on its most basic levels, an exposition of such rhythms. Among them is the curious business of the generation, and their alterations: at least it was that thought (or rationale) that finally permitted me to indulge myself with my dramatic opening. (59–60)

The conventions of social reproduction and the revolution of the planets are linked through the common concept of ‘rhythm.’ The ‘rhythms’ of human history are linked to the cyclical rhythms of the developmental phases of human life, “to youth, marriage, procreation, maturity, middle age, senescence and death,” and therefore implicitly linked to the seasons. The cyclicity of the rhythm is put in tension with the progressive narrative of expansion. These contradictory concepts are held together by the dialectical form of “the curious business of the generation, and their alterations.” The story claims to explicate the slow and evolutionary expansion of this structure, which evidently allows for its own explication. It not only makes the claim that the narrative will provide a description of profound transformations in everyday life due to space travel, but also in the meaning contained in the continuing patterns that are revealed by those transformations. Within this context, the passage both recognizes and disavows the religious dimension of revelation through its reference to the Ark, while refusing to acknowledge the biblical reference, dismissing it as a shorthand term for the archaic. If we take the disavowed metaphor of the Ark seriously, spaceflight becomes a secularized version of that narrative, gesturing towards a new social compact. The flood is replaced by the vacuum of space and each new planet points to the creation of a new social symbol. In effect, God’s promise not to flood the Earth is replaced by a rewriting of the norms of the family.

At the same time, the stability of the narrative is continually undercut to emphasize its fragmentary and partial nature. The story uses the narrator’s, Emma’s, voice as a prime technique to disrupt any real sense of a conventional narrative. That voice enters the story to apologize for tangents and distractions. It also constantly rejects any position of authority within the narrative and goes as far as to continually slip between first and third person when describing what she did as a child and as a younger woman. That element is established after the first section of the novella.

Frankly, I hesitated for some time before I decided it was proper to include such bits in what is primarily intended to be an informational account. But information is not to be confused with statistics, and when I found myself uncertain, later, whether it was all right to include these explanatory asides, done my own way, with whatever idiosyncratic eccentricities or godlike presumptions of comprehension might be involved. (58)

The narrative at this moment marks itself as an interstitial one, refusing to embrace any sense of authority or conventionality. The “information” provided in the narrative is contrasted with “statistics,” creating an implicit opposition between the personalized and individualized “information” provided in the story with the homogenized knowledge that is then represented by statistics. Instead, the story will be frequently interrupted by the narrator and will be told with “whatever idiosyncratic eccentricities or godlike presumptions of comprehension might be involved.” The narrator is working with fragments and refuses to weave those fragments into any semblance of a whole. In effect, the narrative brings together a fictionalized ethnography of everyday life that will later define many feminist texts with a strongly modernist fascination with the fragmented self. That experimental writing is combined with science fictional figuration that

would be recognizable to readers of the genre. It's a narrative that synthesizes modernism, pulp, and conventions of domestic melodrama.

Those intertwining stories span generations as a way of projecting the possibilities of other forms of domesticity and family structure. It opens from the perspective of a mother, Martha, whose daughter will eventually be involved in space colonization, as she watches the first flight to Pluto. Her perspective is defined by the domestic melodrama, dependent on the normative complaints of the nuclear family. Martha, as a mother, is terrified of the prospect of space flight and resentful of its intrusion into her family's life. Her interior monologue develops this sense of complaint, through her sense of disconnection from the official narrative, both from the nationalist narrative of the journey as represented by the canned speech of the president and the expectations put on her as a mother that she has internalized. The interiority of Martha becomes the small voice of protest against these narratives, a disruption to the hegemonic force of the Cold War space race. However, this stalled dialectic of complaint radically shifts with each succeeding space journey. Although the narrative oscillates between domestic conventionality and exploration, each succeeding generation of women lives a profoundly different type of life than the one before, destabilizing the naturalization of any form of domestic arrangement. Those shifts are captured in the description of the colonization of the planet Uller, generations after the initial story of Martha and through the experience of her great granddaughter Emma after her husband's death.

Despite the hardships of the early years of settlement, the colony is distinguished from its Midwestern antecedents. Rather than producing “typically frontier-puritan monogamous family patterns, divorce was, of necessity, kept easy: simply a matter of mutual decision, and registration” (97–98). The colony, while still implicitly operating within a hetero-normative logic, shifted towards a far more informal social contract of marriage. This shift in the practices of marriage is presented in moral terms, as a part of the ‘enriching’ of the rhythms of history. The shift from the general history of the colony to the history of Emma reinforces this change. After the death of her husband, Emma takes on multiple lovers and remains the moral center of the story. Her actions allow her to feel empowered as an individual, but they also let her recognize the multiplicity of emotional and romantic relationships that are possible. The narrative moves towards an abandonment of the idealization of any type of relationship along with the need to compensate for the inevitable failure that is tied to that idealization. Just as significant is Emma's working relationship with Jose Cabrini, the main advocate for cooperation with the Ullerns, and their combined effort to understand the alien life form, creates a relationship that is emotionally foundational, but not romantic. The passage gestures towards a pluralistic approach to family structure, while never fully explicating that multiplicity. That gap points to a recognition of the contingency of any family structure, but it also cannot concretely imagine what that might look like.

At the same time, the inventiveness of the narrative, its attempt to create a fictionalized memory of the experience of generations of women, continues to reproduce the private/

public binary that defines the far more claustrophobic narrative of *Shadow on the Hearth*. The exclusionary nature is most directly evident in the description of the conflict between the native Ullerns and the colonists. The novella refuses an easy narrative of either presenting the indigenous population as monstrous or radically innocent. Instead, the understanding of the conflict and resolution is presented through the loss of Emma's husband, and her attempts to understand that death. She eventually realizes that the death was an accident due to a lack of knowledge on both sides of the conflict. At the same time, this somewhat sentimental journey excludes a thorough political examination of the social and political arrangements that defined the situation. We are offered little detail on how the colonists divided themselves into two opposing camps, or the nature of the forms of cooperation between Ullerns and humans, or the kind of society that is produced through that cooperation. Instead, we are offered a brief comment, putting those questions to the side:

Thad Levine wrote the story of the bitter three years' quarrel in the colony, and wrote it far better than I could. You have heard from me, and probably from a dozen others, too, the woe-filled history of the establishment of Josetown. Jo himself wrote a painstaking account of the tortuous methodology by which the Ullern code was worked out, and I know you have read that, too. (107–08)

This passage elides any attempt to explore the social transformation that is intertwined with these changes in the domestic sphere. It ducks this question by claiming a lack of competency, placing the political narrative into the hands of the conveniently off-stage Thad Levine. While the story's length made the inclusion of long didactic passages on economics, sociology, and political conflict impossible, its near absence keeps the story ensconced in the domestic sphere. Despite the text's attempt to re-imagine social reproduction outside the regulatory norms of domesticity, those norms continue to have a profound hold on the imagination of the text. Just as significantly, the refusal to place the political questions of the impact of colonization within the text neutralizes the potential anti-colonial critique of the text, leaving the ethical question of the engagement with the Other intact, but erasing the questions of power and racialization central to that critique. In effect, the occlusions of the text are perhaps as significant as its engagements. The violence of colonization is condemned, but egalitarian cooperation cannot be represented.

Merril's work begins to challenge the conventions of the domestic melodrama by showing the limitations of the isolated nuclear family in *Shadow on the Hearth* and by imagining transformations of the domesticity and marriage in "Daughters of Earth." However, neither narrative entirely escapes the regulatory structures of the genre that it attempts to subvert. Merrill offers a critical and symptomatic engagement with her present, a present that is powerfully defined by the mutually implicated ideological formations of the Cold War, McCarthyism, and the "Feminine Mystique." That engagement allows for a critical exploration with those intertwined formations, exposing the structures of domination and coercion contained within them and gesturing towards the possibility of an alternative form of domesticity in the future. However, it will take the later work of Joanna Russ, Ursula Le Guin, and Samuel Delany to move questions of

social reproduction from the space of the privacy of the household into the political space of the public sphere through a renewed engagement with the utopian form.

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Originally from Minnesota, **Robert Wood** received his dissertation in comparative literature from the University of California-Irvine. His dissertation focused on feminist science fiction in the twentieth century, from Charlotte Perkins Gilman to writers such as Judith Merril, Ursula Le Guin, and Samuel Delany. It critically engaged with the formal shifts in the subgenre of feminist science fiction as the authors respond to changing social conditions and narrative conventions. The dissertation looked at the genre as a critical lens that can help understand the creation of a disciplinary regime of domesticity in the United States and its resistances. His broader interests are social movements and subcultures, science fiction, fantastic literature, modernism and the avant-garde, and literature of social critique. His theoretical interests include cultural studies, feminism, historical materialism, literary criticism, and other forms of critical theory. He has taught at the University of California, Irvine, Santiago Canyon College, Irvine Valley College, and other schools. Along with these academic concerns, he has been involved in a variety of activist projects, ranging from anti-war movements, the anti-globalization movement, to union activism and efforts to create a truly public university.