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Cracks in the System: Children in Contemporary Narratives about the 1960s in America

In late 1966, in one of many iconic moments of an era defined by colorful, unrestrained events, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was confronted by members of the Students for a Democratic Society after his address to a select group of Harvard students. Barred from the speech, nearly a thousand protestors descended on the embattled Defense Secretary as he tried to slip out a back door. As students assailed him with questions about the war, an angry McNamara, before he was swept to safety by police, haughtily chastised the demonstrators. “I spent four of the happiest years on the Berkeley campus doing some of the things you’re doing here,” a bullhorned McNamara proclaimed to the crowd. “But there was one important difference: I was both tougher and more courteous” (qtd. in Wells 101).

In Peter Carey’s 2008 novel *His Illegal Self*, Dial (real name: Anna Xenos) recalls, in 1972, that Che, her seven-year-old companion deep underground in Australia, was a baby in his mother’s arms when that SDS crowd sprinted to the back of Quincy House in Cambridge to intercept McNamara and confront him with their frustrations about the war. “The mother tripped. She plunged forward as the black Lincoln sped around the corner. There was so much criticism to come, but everyone who saw her said she fell like an athlete, rolling, landing on her back with the child safe against her stomach as she slid . . . under the bumper of the rocking car. . . . This is known” (134).

Several participants and bystanders have recounted McNamara's entrapment at Harvard that day. Historians highlight what Melvin Small calls a "celebrated occasion" as an early skirmish in the burgeoning movement against the war (49). Roger Rosenblatt, a young instructor in the Harvard English Department in the late 1960s, mentions the McNamara incident in his memoir about the protest era at Harvard. Poet John Balaban, who was a graduate student at Harvard when McNamara berated the SDS activists, asserts that "that moment of public insolence—I mean McNamara's—made me suddenly ashamed of my books, my university, and the safety of my student deferment" (33). The confrontation—McNamara's superciliousness and the "impotence of the crowd"—was the catalyst for Balaban's decision to exchange his deferment for conscientious objector status. His memoir *Remembering Heaven's Face* is his account of his subsequent service in Vietnam with the International Voluntary Services and his lifelong engagement with the Vietnamese people. Fictional baby Che's involvement in the legendary melee results in his separation from his mother, the famous fugitive Susan Selkirk; his grandmother's guardianship; and the chaotic circumstances that propel Carey's narrative of Che and Dial on the run in 1972. Among the participants, observers, hangers-on, and collateral damage of the Vietnam War, the movement that opposed it, and the frenzied 1960s, surely Che, the baby son of notorious movement fugitives, is among the more obviously innocent victims. But he's not the only one.

Countless memoirs, novels, and movies about the Vietnam War peace movement present the stories of college-aged young adults, the privileged baby boomer generation of a prosperous, peaceful mid-century America, rejecting the capitalist values and complacent lives of their parents. The well-established reality is that the peace movement was more diverse than popular imagination—then and now—admits; that it brought older and working class people, people of color, and old Leftists together with defiant twenty-somethings to protest an increasingly unpopular war. But the stereotype that the antiwar movement and its rowdy cousin, the counterculture, attracted only privileged young people remains; this has been its assumed constituency at least since the SDS pronounced, in its 1962 manifesto "The Port Huron Statement," that "a new left must consist of younger people who matured in the postwar world, and partially be directed to the recruitment of younger people. The university is an obvious beginning point."

Arthur Pope, the labor organizer-underground fugitive in Sidney Lumet's 1988 movie *Running on Empty*, is the proud "red diaper baby" of "ex-Bolshevik" Jews, but his wife Annie is the daughter of a corporate executive; and when their teenaged son Danny, a talented pianist like his mother and maternal grandmother, expresses

his interest in classical music, his father dismisses it as “decadent, white-skinned, privileged . . . bourgeois crap.” In Lauren Groff’s 2012 novel *Arcadia*, it is 1973, and twenty-four-year-old Hannah—apolitical but dedicated to a self-sustaining communal life with “the fields bursting with fruits and grains, the sunshine and music, the people taking care of one another in love”—repudiates her critical, disapproving parents with the hope that they “rot in their bourgeois capitalist hell” (8). As McNamara suggested (“I was both tougher and more courteous”), the generation gap—the concept, the term—is a construction of the 1960s.

One of the truisms about the legacy of the Vietnam War, which ignominiously ended for the United States forty years ago, is that while the Vietnamese have largely forgotten—or moved on from—the debacle, Americans remain fascinated, even obsessed, with our country’s long, tragic sojourn in Southeast Asia. The capacious, rich canon of literary texts about all aspects of the war and its era—which American authors have explored, in all its diversity, since the late 1970s—has expanded in recent years with such traditional combat novels as Denis Johnson’s National Book Award winning *Tree of Smoke* (2007) and Karl Marlantes’ *Matterhorn* (2010); as well as Marlantes’ 2011 memoir *What It Is Like to Go to War*. Other contemporary authors, similarly inspired by the Vietnam era, have discovered their stories by moving beyond the draftees and draft evaders, the SDS partisans and Yippies and Black Panthers; beyond the flower children—to examine the participants’ children, the sons and daughters of the carefree hippies and strident revolutionaries of the Age of Aquarius. Carey’s *His Illegal Self*, Lumet’s *Running on Empty*, Joyce Carol Oates’ *Black Girl/White Girl*, and Lauren Groff’s *Arcadia* are among the recent fictional narratives whose protagonists are the credulous, often damaged progeny of the ‘60s generation, and T. C. Boyle’s *Drop City* features young unkempt children among its supporting cast.

At age seven, Che (or Jay, as his aristocratic Manhattan grandmother and guardian calls him)—the co-protagonist and title character of Carey’s *His Illegal Self*—knows that his parents, whom he does not remember, are infamous, hunted radicals. But he has no reason to anticipate or fully understand the series of accidents and injudicious decisions that catapult him into the dubious care of a hapless young woman who may or may not be his mother and a precarious new life in remote Queensland, Australia. As the novel begins, Che and his grandmother are in New York City rather than the secluded, lonely lake town where, for five years, the elderly woman has raised him “Victorian”—which means a life without friends or pets or television, but with quietude and the delights of the natural world. “Victorian,” proclaims grandma, is “better than ‘all this’” (5). The pair spend just enough time in

the city for Che to learn, from a friend in the apartment building, about his famous parents, the bank robbery that thrust them underground, and the provenance of his name. Cameron, Che's teenaged neighbor, tells the boy, admiringly, that his parents have "changed history" and that they will come to liberate Che, who is a "political prisoner" (8, 17). So when Dial—not the "hippie mother" Che assumes but a former family servant and college friend of his mother's—reluctantly agrees to take Che to see his underground mother, the notorious fugitive Susan Selkirk, Che believes that she is his mother, "an angel sent by God," come to rescue him and that now his "life will start for real" (6, 111). And indeed it does.

Che is bright, intrepid, and devoted to Dial (though his main concern throughout the misadventure they share is when he will see his father), but his age and his sheltered upbringing make for a particularly ingenuous protagonist; the third-person narrator emphasizes repeatedly that "no one had told him" about his background, that he is being taken to see his mother, or what is happening when that plan goes dangerously awry. "That was pretty typical of growing up with Grandma Selkirk," Che thinks at the novel's opening. "You were some kind of lovely insect, expected to know things through your feelers, by the kaleidoscope patterns in other eyes. . . he was used to knowing everything important . . . from hints and whispers" (3-4, 6). Though the point of view of *His Illegal Self* alternates between Che and Dial, it is Che's naiveté—exacerbated not only by his age and "Victorian" life but by Dial's reticence with him and, most significantly, by the secrets and lies necessitated by the vicissitudes of his, Dial's, and his parents' illegal lives—that drives the narrative. Dial, a hapless, self-pitying minor player in the Movement, is manipulated into transporting Che for a brief visit with his mother. When Susan Selkirk dies (in an echo of the March, 1970 Diana Oughton-Greenwich Village townhouse explosion that drove many Weather Underground members truly underground) just as Dial is taking Che to her, the reluctant intermediary and her trusting charge embark on an ambiguous adventure (much of it recounted through flashbacks) through Philadelphia, several safe houses on the West Coast (where they get running money from Dave Rubbo, though Che is not told that Rubbo is his father), and finally to "a new life off the grid in the wretched, bug-infested bush country of Australia, among hostile 'B-list hippies,' vagabonds and ne'er-do-wells" (Kakutani). Dial is overwhelmed by her impulsive (and, Michiko Kakutani notes, implausible) willingness to become caught up in a spiral of events that lands her on the "most-wanted" list, and she is ill-suited for her new life "in the heart of things primordial" (61). As a fugitive, as a surrogate mother, she is feckless and bitter: "it

was absolutely clear, even to a boy, that [she] could not take care of him. She had no idea of where she was or what she'd taken on" (109).

Although she resents their primitive life in the outback, Dial knows that "this place . . . off the grid . . . might be their only hope" (99). And her occasional frustration with her unexpected responsibility for caring for the stoic rich boy does not compromise her affection—even love—for Che, who is, she thinks, a "star child" (129). Dial knows that her predicament is her own fault. She is a "sucker" who falls "every goddamn time" for Susan Selkirk's appeal to help the Movement (35, 38). By the end of *His Illegal Self*, though Dial maneuvers to return Che to his grandmother, Dial and Che have come to terms with their austere lives among the Australian hippies. Bostonian Dial can "appreciate the beauty of the place, and marvel that working people could live like this, here, now. You could be poor, without snow and shit and Whitey Bulger and his boys, without spending all your life trying to escape your destiny" (251-2). And Che, who eventually acknowledges that Dial is not his mother and learns to survive alone in the bush, discovers that "these were . . . the best days he ever lived so far" (227). At the novel's denouement, the accidental fugitives conspire—wordlessly—to keep Che in Australia with Dial and the Crystal Community. Though it is a happy ending of sorts, it portends a compromised, circumscribed life for the odd couple. Finally, for Dial as for Peter Carey, it is the "famous felons" who deserve the blame for the fiasco, those young radicals whose passionate, careless politics leave innocent children, elderly parents, and aggrieved fellow travelers to clean up the mess, to carry on (34). "These people with their fucking children," Dial seethes, "thrown here, dragged there, stolen by judges, given to grandmothers, holding her hand" (44).

In *Running on Empty*, Annie and Artie have "dragged" their children with them underground. Danny, their older son, is, like Che and *Arcadia's* Bit, preternaturally mature. He is polite, caring, and protective of his peripatetic parents, whose 1971 bombing of a napalm lab nearly killed a janitor "who wasn't supposed to be there." But as Danny, at seventeen old enough for college and a serious girlfriend, years for a stable life, his mother has second thoughts about exposing her children to such a precarious, unsettled existence. "Look what we're doing to these kids," Annie proclaims to her intransigent husband. "They've been running their whole lives like criminals, and they didn't do anything. It isn't fair." The movie ends with his parents' reluctant decision to liberate Danny to live his own life, a move that inevitably breaks up the family. But Annie and Artie, who are loving parents to Danny and his younger brother, are anomalous revolutionaries in these texts. Far more common are negligent radicals like Susan Selkirk and Dave Rubbo. Or, even

more culpable, Max and Veronica Hewett-Meade, the execrable parents of Joyce Carol Oates' eighteen-year-old protagonist, Genna.

Genna Hewett-Meade, the narrator of Oates' 2006 novel *Black Girl/White Girl*, is in her mid-thirties in 1990 as she writes the "text without a title" that revisits her first year in college, 1974, and her fraught and ultimately tragic relationship with her troubled African-American roommate. Oates' title foregrounds the racially charged drama of Genna's experience at a selective women's college founded by her paternal ancestors. But the even darker parallel narrative in *Black Girl/White Girl* is Genna's oblique, hesitant disclosure of her youth as the daughter of Vietnam-era radical activist lawyer Max Meade. By the end of the novel, the calamity at Schuyler College and Genna's complicated relationship with "Mad Max" and her mercurial mother have intertwined in this portrait of a woman formed (and deformed) by her harrowing childhood.

Genna understands that her heritage is to live up to "the ideals of the Meades": "social justice"—'revolution'—'bearing witness for the oppressed'," like her righteous antiwar father and her abolitionist Quaker great-grandmother and namesake (37). This legacy is affirmed and reinforced by her father's caution against white privilege and his admonition, as they watch Nixon's resignation on television, that "you are too young to be touched by the shame of my generation, Genna. But you can share in our regeneration" (28). The keen commitment to "the service of justice" that evokes Genna's text without a title earlier defines her complex relationship with her unlikable black roommate and her fatal protection of Minette's neuroses and lies (2). By her own account, Genna is "anesthetized," having "learned as a young child to turn aside wishing not to see the eccentric behavior of adults, sparing both them and me" (221, 6). Like Che, who rarely inquires about what's happening to him because "it was his upbringing to 'not say,'" Genna carefully avoids the grim realities of her past, her father's illicit antiwar activities, her mother's drug-induced emotional instability, and Minette's own fabrication of the racist harassment that results in her fiery death (Carey 14). With her parents and with her roommate, Genna is deferential and ingratiating; at the end of the novel, she claims Minette as her sister. She thinks of her parents as "giants . . . deities" (113). Yet "sensitive" Veronica, invariably heavily medicated to cope with "that catalogue of woes shared by middle-aged hippie-survivors of the psychedelic revolution," has assured her then ten-year-old daughter that "'love' is an illusion of the ego, no more substantial than vapor" (23, 105, 33). While Genna is cautiously solicitous of her needy mother, she more desperately "wish[es] to please my father Max Meade who was not easily pleased" (163). The formidable Max has also professed his disavowal of the bourgeois embrace of familial love: "Something monstrous about the family. . . .

The family is about possessing and being possessed. . . . The family is private and there is no value in private life” (33-34).

But Genna, ignored by her roommate and estranged from her conventional brother, has only these self-absorbed parents, who waft in and out of her life at their convenience. Even as a young child, living in their shabby family estate overrun with Max’s dotting antiwar acolytes, Genna is easily ignored because “I was a sly one long practiced in not-seeing as I was practiced in non-hearing what was not meant for me to overhear” (75). Only slowly, reluctantly does Genna reveal the horrors that she witnessed and endured in her childhood home. Because she was “as invisible to them, as I was invisible to myself,” young Genna could quietly observe the events of the house (120). She has seen her parents “naked together, and with others. And with the children of others” (113). At eleven, she was the sole witness when one of Max’s “disciples,” drugged and desperate (like Genna) for attention and approval from his mentor, disemboweled himself with a paring knife (120). At twelve, she was bathed and kissed and caressed by one of the “girl-women” who saw that “my parents did not have time for me” (197). Genna the middle-aged narrator offers no commentary about these formative proceedings, and at eighteen she refuses to believe her “ambitious young investment banker” brother when he confronts her with rumors of their father’s crimes; it is Rickie, Max Meade’s angry son, who implicates their parents: “Those ‘adults,’ our parents. Exposing us to that life. You, at that age. . . . You don’t know what you lost, Genna. It’s in the nature of loss, you never know” (220).

Near the end of her first (and final) year at Schuyler College, after Minette Swift dies, Genna breaks down under the burden of keeping her roommate’s secrets. But her “confession” to college authorities is not that she has known that Minette has fabricated the racist harassment against her; instead Genna recounts what she knows about Max Meade’s criminal activities (250). In 1990 she takes her “shadow text” to Max when she, his “co-conspirator,” visits him in the prison to which her disclosures have consigned him (259). Genna admits that she has “betrayed” him, but notes that Max “is one of the righteous who can’t acknowledge guilt because he knows (he knows!) he is incapable of behaving in any way to justify guilt” (260). In her thirties, Genna is professionally successful but unattractive, difficult, and alone—except for the unrepentant father to whom she tends in atonement for her weakness and sins. “Between happiness and duty,” Genna notes, “I choose duty” (268).

Unlike her brother, Genna cannot directly repudiate her arrogant father, but her confession and her shadow text do. As Christine Thomas asserts, *Black Girl/*

White Girl “does not judge Minette or Genna but heavily indicts Genna’s family; her upbringing is the real inquiry of the novel.” Like Peter Carey, Joyce Carol Oates suggests that the true lingering, unforgivable suffering wrought by passionate revolutionaries was not the maiming or death of bombing victims, but the neglect, abuse, and emotional damage they inflicted upon their own children.

Oates’s and Carey’s critiques of their young protagonists’ misguided parents and their radical companions echo, if more gently, in the Australian adults with whom Dial and Che consort in their own variation on life underground: Trevor, Rabbitoh, and the denizens of the Crystal Community, “perfumed with poverty and patchouli” (211). These counterculture drop-outs are anti-American tatterdemalions living in the bush “because they were through with rules” (138). As the adults smoke dope and argue endlessly about whether Dial and Che can keep a pet kitten in the compound, their children, “wild things with feet as hard as leather,” fend for themselves in the forest (227). They are the fictional siblings of Che (*another* young Che) and Sunshine, the five- and three-year-old naked offspring of Reba, residents all of the Drop City ranch, T.C[oragheSSan]. Boyle’s fictional commune in northern California in 1970 (8).

Midway through *Drop City*, Boyle’s commune relocates to Alaska and struggles to accommodate its individualistic native neighbors, the untamed wilderness, and its own internal frictions; in this complicated drama, the children—Che and Sunshine—are minor players in the novel and mostly ignored in the compound as well. In a counterculture community that announces itself as composed of “NO MEN, NO WOMEN—ONLY CHILDREN,” actual children are marginal inconveniences at best. The sixty-some young communards of Drop City, who have abandoned “the plastic world” for “a life of peace and tranquility, of love and meditation and faith in the ordinary, no pretense, no games, no plastic yearning after the almighty dollar,” are young, idealistic—and typically high (12, 10). For its counterculture communicants—some fleeing the draft, others looking for adventure—Drop City is easy sex, good music, and lots of drugs. To newcomers Star and Pan, “the whole scene . . . was fantastic, like summer camp without the counselors, a party that never ends” (6). But the party always ends, and the seedier underside of Drop City is racial tension, rape, police harassment, and—again—dirty, underfed, neglected children.

When Drop City’s Che, with his “bare bottom and dangling parts and his missing front teeth” wails for no particular reason, his mother soothes him with a toke from the communal joint, and “no one seemed to notice or care” (6). During the annual summer solstice Druid Day celebration, Reba cannot convince Sunshine to have

milk instead of the fresh-squeezed juice that is laced with LSD “because everybody . . . was going to commune with their inner selves today . . . in a concentrated effort to raise the consciousness of the planet by one tiny fraction of a degree” (126). “I don’t care,” Reba declares when she tells the “chicks” on breakfast detail to give her toddler the psychedelic juice; “it’ll keep her out of my hair because I need a day off sometimes too.” And betraying that her indifference to her children’s well-being is chronic, Reba warns Sunshine not to “come crying to me if you get into some kind of kid trip like . . . last time” (127). Che’s ensuing (and predictable) near drowning and Sunshine’s zoned-out retreat to the bushes only underscore the “jealousy, anger, bad sex and bad feelings” that are eroding the “free and enlightened” community (129, 139). “Tragedy [is] averted” when both children are rescued, and the adults carry on “as if nothing had happened. . . It was Druid Day. They were wiped, all of them. They didn’t want to save children, they wanted to *be* children” (149, 147).

The alluring freedom and innocence of childhood are of course important components of the prelapsarian communal life that Drop City and the Crystal Community, at their best, embody. Much as popular culture has often simplistically portrayed the antiwar movement as the raucous mid-century party of angry, spoiled college students, it has similarly failed to distinguish between the goals and characteristics of the peace movement and its less ideological cousin, the counterculture. As Von Gosse notes in *Rethinking the New Left*, “jumbling together the counterculture and the radical movements reinforces the myth that the New Left was mostly a temporary upsurge by bored, self-indulgent white kids. The counterculture was never synonymous with the broader New Left” (202). And yet, like the SDS, Weather Underground and other groups that denounced the Vietnam War as an imperialist, misguided effort, hippies, Yippies, and communalists also “rejected wholesale the benefits and privileges of adult power and authority” (Gosse 203). Apolitical or increasingly convinced that they were powerless to end the war and change traditional society, communards like Star, Pan, and Reba “adopted a very American approach. They headed for the wide-open spaces that held the bare promise of a fresh start. As they looked forward, they looked back, hoping for a more primitive way of life” (Anderson 270). The Drop Citizens’ attempt to live off the land and enjoy free love and mind-altering drugs in “the new age, free and enlightened and without hangups,” is the mid-twentieth century variant of a tradition in American life as time-honored as such mid-nineteenth century experiments in simpler, communal living as Brook Farm and other Fourier-inspired utopian communities (139). Che and Sunshine may be “undernourished, unschooled, stoned before [their] time,” but they are as well “the

original wild child[ren] . . . fed on honeydew and the milk of paradise” (303). It’s a seductive, if illusory, identity.

Bit, the young protagonist and point of view of Lauren Groff’s *Arcadia* (2012) is, like Carey’s Che, a “star child” and, because of his premature birth, a “miracle baby” (Carey 129, Groff 186). Because Bit is undersized for his age (thus his nickname), he is (like Oates’s Genna) often unnoticed, which makes him unusually observant and, like Lumet’s Danny, uncommonly sensitive and caring. Bit’s adult, post-Arcadia work as a photographer and a teacher is predetermined by his Arcadian childhood, when he learns by keenly observing the world around him and quietly looks out for the people in it. Even when Arcadia disintegrates and, in the final third of the novel, Bit—for the first time in his life—moves to the World, he remains attached to and defined by Arcadia and its ideals of “Equality, Love, Work, Openness to the Needs of Everyone” that shelter him for his first fourteen years (7).

Bit, who is five in 1973, when *Arcadia* begins, is (and remains) the only child of Abe and Hannah. Earlier, in their Caravan, the young parents, their two dozen compatriots, and an unofficial leader named Handy have visited a variety of communal enclaves before deciding, Abe says, that “what we wanted to do was unusual. Pure. Live with the land, not on it. Live outside the evil of commerce and make our own lives from scratch. Let our love be a beacon to light up the world” (14). When one of the Free People convinces his father to sell his inherited upstate New York estate for one dollar, the group finds its Homeplace.

Like Lumet’s Artie and Annie and unlike the parents in Oates’s, Carey’s, and Boyle’s novels, Bit’s mother and father are loving (with him and each other) and attentive, though they are often preoccupied with the arduous and unrelieved work of building and sustaining the community, and Hannah is depressed after a recent miscarriage. Even more than Carey does in *His Illegal Self*, Lauren Groff emphasizes the limitations and progression of Bit’s understanding. He does not comprehend the cause of his mother’s lethargy and depression—though he believes that it is his responsibility to restore her to health and happiness. Like Drop City, Arcadia—as it thrives—attracts newcomers whose provenance and commitment to the community’s ideals are questionable, and when “the Pigs” arrive to arrest a vaguely menacing resident, Bit “is confused. He was imagining pinkness, snouts, curly tails. . . . These are black-suited men with reflective sunglasses” (38-9). When Bit and his friends in the Kid Herd are older, they are taught through State Lessons and Arcadia-developed Tutorials, but as a very small child, Bit is an autodidact; he learns by watching and listening, and by exploring the natural world. By choice, Bit does not venture outside Arcadia, and pets and personal property are prohibited in

the community, so he doesn't know, for instance, "what, exactly, a dog is, or why people want to keep them" (20). Because he is so quiet, some people think Bit is "retarded," but he is instead intuitive and bright (59). As his father reads to him ("whatever [Abe] is studying at the time [*New Politics, Anarchy and Organization, Mad magazine*]), Bit "can pick out sentences. . . . Parts of the world click into shape, like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. But the puzzle is alive; it grows; new pieces appear for him to fit together faster than he can gather them in his mind" (21). Later, "language has begun to shift in Bit. There are small explosions of comprehension every day. . . . Speech splinters into words, each phrase in its own order: Scuseme becomes Excuse Me. . . . Separate drawers emerge in his mind, now, to sort people into" (41-2).

On his own, Bit explores the natural world surrounding Arcadia. He finds—and secretly, illicitly keeps for himself—a tattered copy of Grimm's Fairy Tales, and the stories fertilize his active imagination. When the teenaged Bit ventures into the forest, he finds that "the old stories fill him up again, the forest thick with magic. . . . He wants the hold of the woods on him, the animals to crawl over him, he wants to sink into the roots of the trees and become the earth" (143).

As a little boy, trying to rescue his unhappy mother, Bit has set out on a Quest "to find the thing to save Hannah," and, alone, deep in the woods, he sees "a very old woman. It is the witch, the one he has dreamed of" (65, 67). Verda, the solitary old woman, becomes Bit's only non-Arcadian friend, and she, the fairy tales, and the silent forest converge to facilitate and illustrate Bit's innate responsiveness to the world, his centrality to Arcadia and to the novel as a counterculture Noble Savage. From the time he is very young, a naked Bit is a tiny midwife's assistant, massaging and silently soothing Arcadians in labor; after his first birthing experience, "Bit takes everything he feels now and buries it deep in him, a secret shining place to visit in his quietness, the best place he has ever known" (61). As Handy says, "That Bit Stone is plugged into the Universe, man" (113).

Verda, Bit's personal wise woman, of course recognizes the boy's special qualities: "you give me hope for the next generation, she says" (107). It is Verda who situates Arcadia within the long tradition of utopian communities, as, "in her anchorite's rasp," she recounts for Bit and Hannah the story of her great-grandfather's communal experiment with the Divinists, who "believed that people could become perfect, therefore divine" (105). Presaging the strains that will doom Arcadia (and Drop City and other alternative communities), Verda explains how the Divinists' commitment to free love and communal "ownership" of children conflicted with unsanctioned romantic attachments and the larger society's mores. Indeed, wise

Verda articulates the common theme of all of these narratives when she opines that “when children are involved in these things...the cracks in the system become clear... There was nothing binding the community. The center would not hold” (106)

The nineteenth-century Divinists fail. After a decade, under the strain of poverty, too many newcomers, increasing harassment from the local police, and a drug-induced bacchanal on Cockaigne Day (a midsummer celebration much like Drop City’s Druid Day), Arcadia crumbles too.¹ Though Bit’s parents and a few other original Arcadians return to live near the Homeplace—which one of Handy’s sons later turns into the corporate headquarters of his computer animation company—the community founded to help its members “live pure and truthful lives” disintegrates (30). Yet, *Arcadia* allows the possibility of a sustained simple life. In another acknowledgement of the utopian tradition in American society, occasionally, throughout the novel, the Arcadians’ Amish neighbors appear—to lend oxen and plows, to smoke pot with Bit and his teenaged friends; at the end of the novel, to help middle-aged Bit care for a dying Hannah. Getting stoned with the oddly dressed Amish boys, Bit envies “the Oldest Utopians . . . for generations, they’ve lived the most perfect lives they can believe in. . . . What a relief it would be to live always among family. To be among people who all look like you, think like you, behave like you, have the same God to love and fear. . . . He feels the loss for something he’s never known” (160).

At the end of the novel, in 2018, with an epidemic threatening to make all of America another vanished Arcadia, Bit takes his teenaged daughter Grete and his dying mother back to the isolated old Homeplace—now a sanctuary from the epidemic. Bit lives in New York City, where he raises Grete after Helle, Handy’s daughter and his childhood friend and lifelong love, abandons her husband and child. Unlike Bit, who would have been content to spend his life in Arcadia, Helle—another wild child—has rejected it at every opportunity. When the two are reunited in their mid-thirties, Bit shares with Helle his ideal, Arcadia-like life: “a tight, beautiful community, filled with people he loved like family, living closely and relying on one another, a world with music and stories and thought and joy, of earthly happiness” (201). But Helle counters with her own memories of growing up in Arcadia: “it was cold. . . . We never had enough to eat. We never had enough clothes. . . . Handy let me drink the acid Slap-Apple when I was like five. . . . We were like guests at the Mad Hatter’s table, but didn’t even know the world was flipped around” (201). Helle, one of Handy’s large, neglected brood, remembers an Arcadian childhood more like Che’s and Sunshine’s than that of Bit, the treasured only child.

Near the end of the novel *Glory*, Hannah's Amish friend, mediates between Bit's idealistic and Helle's cynical view of Arcadia. Bit asks Glory why she left her life in the world to return to her Amish community:

It seems a give-and-take, you know? Freedom or community, community or freedom. One must decide the way one wants to live. I chose community.

Why can't you have both, says Grete, frowning. I think you could have both.

You want both, Glory says, you are destined to fail. She looks at Bit. I remember when your people were here, it was the big debate among my family. What to do? . . . Naked people, drugs, loud music! You were like babies, you could do nothing. You didn't know how to plow a field. But we couldn't let you starve. Eventually, we had a meeting and agreed to help enough to feed you, but let you disintegrate on your own. And . . . you did. . . . Too much freedom, it rots things in communities, quick. That was the problem with your Arcadia.

Bit thinks of the poverty of the last years of his childhood, the kidlets with scrawny limbs and terrible teeth, the drugs, the cash going to relief efforts, to . . . the Trippies and Runaways. . . . Well, says Bit slowly, I guess that's as good an interpretation as any. (268)

Groff's Arcadia slowly but inexorably collapses under the same pressures that bedevil Drop City, as well as Brook Farm and other real experiments in communal living: too much work, too little money, too many freeloaders, the inevitable tensions among so many people living together, and harassment from the conventional world. But, through Bit, Groff acknowledges the shimmering possibility of a simple, shared life.

Long after he has moved to the World, gone to college, married and lost Helle, Bit the Manhattanite suggests to his father, before Abe's death, that he and the other baby Arcadians have all settled in the city because "the closeness. . . the connection" that Arcadia embodied exists now only there: "it wasn't the country that was so beautiful about the whole Arcadian experiment. . . . It was the people, the interconnection, everyone relying on everyone else, the closeness. The villages are all dying now, small-town America is dying, and the only place where the

same feeling exists now is here, in the city . . . This, here, now, is more utopia than utopia” (208). In 2018, Bit and his old friends gather at a cocktail party: “there lives a sympathy so deep in their marrow that a single word spoken by a stranger can spark the same light in each. A woman calling out *trip?*; and they think *Trippies*... they hurtle through life aging unimaginably fast, but each grasps a silken edge of memory that billows between them and softens the fall. For a breath, Bit can hardly bear the love he has for his friends” (221-2). Bit Stone and *Arcadia* understand that “stories don’t have to be factual to be real,” that the experiment is worth trying even if it fails (208). After Hannah dies, Bit will leave Arcadia and return to the city to raise his teenage daughter, now with a new love and the promise of a happier life. As the novel ends, he takes Grete to Verda’s decaying cottage and tells her about his “magical” friend. Grete thinks her father imagined the old woman. It doesn’t matter, *Arcadia* suggests; stories don’t have to be factual to be real.

As the quite recent publication of these narratives indicates, the Vietnam War and social upheaval of the 1960s remain relevant in contemporary American society. The fictional focus on the children of the passionate young radicals and counterculture partisans bespeaks the rippling reverberations of the events of those vertiginous times. Attitudes change over time. The Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial on the mall in Washington, D.C., for instance, originally dismissed as “a big black hole in the ground,” is now the most-visited national monument in the nation’s capital (Mason 80). Vietnam veterans who were excoriated as crazed baby killers in the years just after the lost war are honored military heroes today. But as the war’s veterans have gained respect, its opponents have been increasingly demonized. Presidential candidate Barack Obama faced a campaign crisis in 2008 when it became known that he was a neighbor and acquaintance of former SDS member and Weather Underground co-founder William Ayers. In his 2003 novel about the antiwar movement, *The Company We Keep*, Neil Gordon’s still-hiding activist-protagonist admits that “people love to see us fall. . . . we asked for it. With all our proclamations, communiqués, declarations” (181). Or, as cultural critic H. Bruce Franklin notes, the Vietnam antiwar movement is “the . . . movement we are supposed to forget” (47).

These texts create—in Bit’s parents, and Danny Pope’s—loving if misguided parents who raise mature, morally admirable children. On her deathbed, Hannah—who, like Annie Pope, struggles to stay true to their early values more than her husband does—asks Bit to forgive her. Bit knows that “she means Arcadia, their common wound, how she had pushed toward perfection but, tiring, turned away. It is true that most of the children of Arcadia rebelled. . . . It’s the ancient story: the

deliberate rejection of what gave birth to the youth and created the man. . . . He can't be separate. It is impossible. He is part of the whole." So Bit tells his dying mother "there is nothing to forgive" (275-6). But Bit is an anomaly. Helle and her brothers, much like Che and Sunshine, and Genna Hewett-Meade, are the broken progeny of parents dedicated to revolution or free love or the next great high and therefore decidedly, tragically indifferent to their own inconvenient children. "When children are involved in these things . . . the cracks in the system become clear" (Groff 106).

Notes

1. In his detailed history of *The Movement and the Sixties*, Terry H. Anderson notes how, as the 1960s ended and the counterculture grew in size and visibility, an inevitable backlash ensued. After Woodstock, the Manson Family's murder spree, and the debacle of the Altamont Speedway Free Festival (all 1969), the mainstream media increasingly attacked the counterculture. "State and federal officials commenced a massive campaign" against drug use and "communes were also attacked" (284).

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