A Nauseating Thought Experiment: The Technocratic Agenda and Gayle Salamon's Sexual Schema in *The Land of Milk and Honey*

During the 2025 White House Governor's Ball, the US Army Chorus performed the Musical Les Miserables' "*Do You Hear the People Sing?"* The irony could not be more clear. How could the governing power, the current United States Government administration, identify with a song about a movement rebelling *against* their current government? The tension between powerful entities, including technocrats, and their self-view as saviours is salient in contemporary politics, and often strives from a populism-adjacent, a political approach that distinguishes two groups, the 'people' and 'the corrupt elite', perspective.[1] A self-perception that Aida shares when legitimising the state of the land of Milk and Honey, hereby referred to as *Miele*. I argue that in Miele, pleasure functions as an ontological justification that stems from a technocratic distrust of the political paradigms of party democracy, and its subsequent governing of society in the Anthropocene. After outlining the relationship between Miele's technocracy and victimhood, I will then reappropriate Gayle Salamon's "Sexual Schema" to close read how Miele, through modes of food and desire, moves Aida and the narrator's relationship past personal, subjective lust to operate as an act to further solidify Miele's existence. Like the narrator's initial experience in Miele, this essay will be nauseating and intentionally so: I aim to prove it is necessary for the oppressors, Aida and the technocratic 'Miele-ians,' to view themselves as oppressed in order to justify their existence.

Technocracy, Populism and Aida's 'Placelessness'

Prior to delving into the extrapolation of Gayle Salamon's rhetoric, I will explore *why* the reappropriation of rhetoric is vital to understanding Miele's technocracy. While seemingly opposites, technocracy and populism both originate from a distrust with current governing structure party democracy; Party democracy being the remedying of social conflicts by the institutionalised political party through a means of constructing public policy that reflect the majority rule's perception of the common good.[2] Technocracy propagates itself as an alternative governing structure vested interest for the public good: one that is run by 'experts,' and whose competency, or 'expertise' becomes a justification to govern and redistribute the resources for the common good as well. Both technocracy and populism share both a perception of self distinction from the majority of party democracy, to which they villainise and distrust.

This technocratic superiority, and its subsequent alienation from the 'majority,' is best reflected in the imagery of the membrane and Aida's perception of herself. The

[1] Christopher Bickerton and Carlo Invernizzi Accetti, "Populism and Technocracy: Opposites or Complements?," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 20, no. 2 (2017): 186–206.

[2] Christopher Bickerton and Carlo Invernizzi Accetti, *Populism and Technocracy: Opposite or Compliment?* 189.

narrator first mentions the membrane when they are in the "glass eye," during Aida's recounting of her six hour disappearance during a trip to the olive grove.[3] Aida tries to account for her disappearance by timing herself on the walk towards olive grove. She experiments, but even if she "slowed as much as she was able. There was never any accounting for that lost time." The diction of "never," indicates how, while at the centre of this 'lost time,' Aida is not liable for it. It is a mystery to where this time has vanished to, and even Aida's logic is unable to justify it. This sentiment conjures up a sense of victimhood in her story: Time is out of her control. And it is through this victimisation of that story to which "she glimpsed the clear, thin membrane that separated her from this world." Furthermore, it's important to note that 'time,' the universal, integral measurement to which we measure our lives, is the factor that Aida can not control. As aforementioned, technocracy originates from an assumed distrust of contemporary political paradigms, party democracy. And it is under the lens of technocracy, that the membrane imagery and Aida's victimhood can be read as caused by a growing distrust with the world and a pillar of truth, time.

This separation is further reinforced by Aida's self-perception, insofar she refers to others as humans, but not herself. Throughout the book, Aida often refers to others as humans.

For example, on page 123, she outlines that "false optimism is exactly what got humans into this mess."[4] When Aida refers to the other Mielians as 'humans,' she is othering herself. By referring to others as human, she is implying that she, herself, is not.

But there is a paradox between Aida and the 'humans.' While she feels exclusionary from being human, as indicated by the time disappearance story, she, herself, also perpetuates this exclusion through a self distinction from her and the 'humans.' This separation allows for Aida to assert herself as an authority as an 'expert' who can dictate power structures, such as the genetic modification she does in Miele's research facilities. She is not a human, and this distinction gives her the rationalisation to rule over them.

In lieu of this victimhood and self-separation, how might Aida, and by extension Miele, justify their existence further? I argue Aida and Miele's technocratic victimhood aligns seamlessly with Gayle Salamon's "sexual schema," as an ontological justification. Both Salamon and Aida's rhetoric arose from an initial erasure and extrapolation of their identity. For Salamon, she cites how transsexuality and the trans identity was misconstrued to be either a fetish or an asexual identity. For Aida and Miele, their existence is assumed to be inherently malicious based on their positionality within the social stratification. And finally in both, it is through pleasure, desire and sexuality that Salamon and Aida are able to remedy this cognitive dissonance and reassert their respective identities, transgender and the superior expert, to justify their existence.

Gayle Salamon's "Sexual Schema" and Miele's Desire

[3] C Pam Zhang, Land of Milk and Honey (Riverhead Books, 2023), 42.
[4] C Pam Zhang, *Land of Milk and Honey* (Riverhead Books, 2023), 123.

Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception,* Gayle defines the sexual schema as our unthinking, lived experiences as sexual beings, constituted by its temporality and transposition.[5] She depends on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach to the sexual schema, in which he posits that sexuality is a "casual impetus for beloved objects in the world:"[6] It is not only through love or desire that the objects of affection become existent, but also through ourselves that become existent to those we love or desire as well. Furthermore, this making of ourselves, brought on by sexuality, is an embodied experience, through both the senses and thought.[7]

Fittingly, Miele is a country that not only runs on desire and pleasure, but its tenuous existence is dependent on it. As illustrated during the dining of the woolly mammoth, food is the mode to which Miele is able to assert itself through means of desire. When the employer addresses the growing political unrest that may threaten Miele's existence, he offers a plate of woolly mammoth. The narrator notes this plate, objectively, to be revolting as it smells of decay. And yet, it is through its covetousness that the investors begin to both enjoy the food and reignite their faith in Miele as a state. The narrator states they watched as "disgust becomes desire."[8] They also "called you [the narrator] the best chef in the world."[9] A chef whom they are willing to remain in Miele for. Desire, through the phenomenological sense of taste, allows the investors to solidify their citizenship and continue to fund Miele. Thus, the legitimisation of Miele is a phenomenological process based on desire.

If desire functions as the present vehicle to which Miele legitimises itself, the temporal aspect of the sexual schema further moves Miele from a fickle, present entity, to one that spans temporalities. The temporality of the sexual schema highlights how our sexual existence points to both the past and future: It points forward as it is our past experiences that dictate our present and future desires; It also points backwards as it is the collection of past experiences that become a history and a narrative that establishes the sexual self.[10]

Time is not only a throughline in Aida's disappearance story, it also spans temporal directions as Salamon describes. Aida's past experiences, time 'slipping away', have caused her to feel a separation, the "thin, clear membrane," between herself and the world. And by making clear this separation, Aida makes her separation tangible, not as a physical place to be transported to, but an embodied state of being. For it is after Aida's recounting that the narrator feels herself and Aida "traveling together at great

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[5] Gayle Salamon, "The Sexual Schema: Transposition and Transgender in *Phenomenology of Perception,"* in Assuming a Body (Columbia University Press, 2010), 46.
[6] Gayle Salamon, "The Sexual Schema: Transposition and Transgender in *Phenomenology of Perception,"* in Assuming a Body (Columbia University Press, 2010), 46.
[7] Gayle Salamon, "The Sexual Schema: Transposition and Transgender in *Phenomenology of Perception,"* 48.
[8] C Pam Zhang, *Land of Milk and Honey* (Riverhead Books, 2023), 81.
[9] C Pam Zhang, *Land of Milk and Honey* (Riverhead Books, 2023), 81.
[10] Gayle Salamon, "The Sexual Schema: Transposition and Transgender in *Phenomenology of Perception,"* 44.

speed towards the cusp of some place, perhaps the same place time had gone when Aida was small."[11] This 'place' will never be explicitly described, and counterintuitively, the narrator notes how her "body disappeared. Or rather, it changed."[12] Therefore, it is implied that the place, Miele, to which Aida is transporting the narrator and herself to is not one that is physical, and rather denoted by the body's 'disappearance' or change.

In response to this transformation, the narrator falls asleep. She describes being awoken by the cries of Aida's dogs that are "ancient and very new." And while this scene is not explicitly stated to be sexual, Zhang concludes it with desire. The narrator describes the dog's cries to be red, the color the narrator previously called "the color of desire."[13] So then, when Aida speaks of her history, Miele comes into existence. The narrator is then transported to Miele, or "some place," through an embodied transformation by means of sleep. These cries begin to draw the narrator into Miele, the technocratic state, with desire at the focal point.

Miele's 'placelessness' can also be read through Salamon's transposition and transcendance. Transposition is brought about by Merleau-Ponty's ambiguity on where desire originates in the body. Firstly, she highlights how desire puts the self in relation to the world. She stresses that desire does not need to be satisfied, rather, the notion of desire becomes an impetus that moves the self towards the world.[14] She argues that Merleau-Ponty's refusal to locate desire and the sexual schema is a deliberate 'placelessness' that allows for an "unyolking of bodily parts from bodily pleasures."[15] "Unyolking" is the key aspect to defining transposition: The essence of sexuality, and the sexual schema, is *not* the body part or the behaviour of these body parts, but rather the "general function" that means to arouse and animate the body to begin with. So then, by an engaging in sexual relations with the world, transposition returns and solidifies the sense of the trans self as it removes the denotement of sexuality by bodily parts that imply a strict gender, and rather allows sexuality to represent the very being itself.

This combination allows for transcendence: a Merleau-Pontian sentiment that posits since the sexual schema is an intuitive, unthinking experience, then existence, as a pre-reflective state, and sexuality are integral with each other. That is to say, there is no sexuality without our animated being and it is through our sexuality that we reach out towards the world. So then sexuality *transcends* the sexual itself and takes on new meaning. And thus, through transcendence, sexuality permeates our every act. And because of this permeation of existence and sexuality, when engaging in sex we are constructing a self that moves from existing for oneself to existing for others.[16]

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[11] C Pam Zhang, *Land of Milk and Honey* (Riverhead Books, 2023), 42.
[12] C Pam Zhang, *Land of Milk and Honey* (Riverhead Books, 2023), 41.
[13] C Pam Zhang, *Land of Milk and Honey* (Riverhead Books, 2023), 11.
[14] Salamon, "The Sexual Schema: Transposition and Transgender in *Phenomenology of Perception,"* 50.
[15] Salamon, "The Sexual Schema: Transposition and Transgender in *Phenomenology of Perception,"* 51.
[16] Salamon, "The Sexual Schema: Transposition and Transgender in *Phenomenology of Perception,"* 57.

Transposition speaks to the integral role desire and pleasure play in Miele. Unsurprisingly, then, in the moment where Aida and the narrator consummate their relationship, she recounts h

ow she, "naked in Aida's arms, was a new self I met for the first time."[17] The narrator's new self is once again demarcated with a dissolution of the former self, once that wasn't concerned with Miele. She counts sex as "only this fall through touch, through taste, through scent and breath and pulsing absolution." Through an emphasis of the senses, the phenomenological sexual self reasserts itself. Furthermore, sex itself is not written plainly, but rather through an ambiguous string of food imagery, which further associates sex to Miele, the country based on food. Similar to Salamon's argument for transness, through this ambiguity of desire's location on the narrator's body, sex transcends its' erotic meaning to represent Miele's ontological existence. An existence that is not purely physical, but also an imbuing of the senses and pleasure.

Moreover, through her desire and pleasure by being with Aida, the narrator's being begins to change. A change that begins to dictate her political decisions: In response to both the proposed harsher policies for the top two percent and the establishment of the national food bank, the narrator admits that "a year earlier, I would have voted yes, too. I did not know what I would say, who would speak out of my mouth."[18] Once again, because of the narrator's existing sexual relationship with Aida, Miele delivers the technocracy distrust to the narrator. For it is only after she had begun to engage in a sexual relationship with Aida, that her political views changed. Finally, it's vital to note that the narrator admits to not knowing "who would speak out of my [her] mouth." This once again revisits the dissolution of herself and elicits a relinquishing of power from herself to Miele. Her previous self, who formerly would have voted against Miele, is dissolved. She is now acting on her desire and pleasure with Miele as the context.

Conclusion

Both contemporary technocracy and populism are founded on a dissatisfaction of the overarching governing structures they exist in. This dissatisfaction delivers patronising, technocratic sentiment to help the public as they, themselves, are unable to do so. In this configuration of technocratic logic, the reappropriation of intellectual, generative work such as Gayle Salamon's "sexual schema," becomes relevant. Through Salamon, Miele seeps into every interaction through desire and pleasure. And as a result, Miele is able to legitimise itself as not only a country, but as an authoritative, governing entity.

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[17] C Pam Zhang, *Land of Milk and Honey* (Riverhead Books, 2023), 117.
[18] C Pam Zhang, *Land of Milk and Honey* (Riverhead Books, 2023), 117.

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