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## Abstract

This dissertation argues that the critical methods developed by and used within the field of religious studies can be reimagined as an expression of the modern desire for Utopia. It investigates how applications of critical social theory occlude the category of experience either deliberately or through methodological slight. Utopia addresses this problematic of representing the existential dimension of social life through its particular formulation of social contradiction. Analyzing Utopia's own representational situation within modernity affords scholars in religion a means to consider their investments in and desires for representing society as a totality that creates the conditions for and anticipates resolutions to these contradictions.

THE DESIRE FOR UTOPIA IN THE CRITICAL STUDY OF RELIGION

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in Religion

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## Introduction

### The Desire for Utopia in the Critical Study of Religion

In this dissertation, I contend that the critical methods developed by and used within the field of religious studies can be reimagined as an expression of the modern desire for Utopia. Utopia indexes a host of ambivalent hopes and dreams, and in its colloquial sense, has little in common with the methods of historicization, ideology critique or realist politics that contribute to this branch of religious studies. In looking closely at Utopia's appeal, I have been struck by how it generates an equal dose of frustration as it represents social contradictions without presenting viable resolutions. Thus, in its representation or figural form, Utopia brings about a new kind of experience for readers, one that allows readers to feel social contradiction and to sense, at least partially, the social obstacles to resolving those contradictions. Considering how successful Utopia is in generating and representing the frustrated feelings of the social present, it is odd how its scholarship, in its dependence on social theory, ignores or occludes subjective, existential feeling altogether. This disjunction between the work of this literary figure and the means of analyzing it forms the basis of my dissertation. Critical methods in the study of religion share this problem of representing the social present within their own representations of social totality. My turn to Fredric Jameson and his psychoanalytic and Marxian approach to Utopia exposes this investment in social totality as a desire imbued with Utopia's ambivalence. When held up as a Utopian form,

critical religious studies reflects obliquely the existential and experiential contents it has otherwise eschewed.

Colloquially, Utopia signals a place of perfection and implies a good life lived in harmony with others but which is ultimately impossible. As a neologism created by Thomas More in 1516 to name both the island and the title of his satire by the same name, Utopia carries conflict within its etymology. The root, "topos" is Greek for "place or region" with the prefix of "ou" that negates, generating "non-place." Translated into Latin as U-topia, the word shifts to its homonym, eu-topos or "good place."<sup>1</sup> More's two-part book is known for its travel narrative of a land far away whose inhabitants seem inordinately happy. The reality of the place and the happiness of the inhabitants, however, is undermined throughout as the main narrator, Hythloday, whose name translates from Latin as "nonsense peddler," regales his audience with a picture of a far away place with a quirky resemblance to their hometown of London. Utopia as a word has been, since this time, positively and negatively valenced, made overdetermined by use across different historical moments and for different discursive communities. Utopia signals a host of associations that may make it unstable as a category. Instead of moving from Utopia because of this ambivalence, my project takes its ambivalence as an occasion for analysis.

Utopia's contradictory character actually presented a problem for the field of religious studies in a formulation by Jonathan Z. Smith. Early in his career, Smith

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<sup>1</sup> According to Robert Adams introduction to More's text, translations from the Latin into English present a particular challenge to the translator. The translator must preserve the complex linguistic innuendoes that saturate the text while also making the text colloquial as it would have been for his intended audience of highly-educated humanists. For these reasons, I have found annotations to More's text useful such as found in Adam's version. The footnotes explain the word play and provide supplementary texts that both show the intellectual atmosphere of More's time and also explain the impact of his text on future authors of the genre. Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. Robert M. Adams, Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 1975).



proposes that religion carries within it a tension towards place-making or orienting enterprises and a resistance or refusal to orient. In several early essays, Smith opposed the "locative" tendency of religion to a "utopian" one. Smith notes that while myths and rituals center or help the practitioner of religion locate or find place, religious traditions also preserve the role of chaos through characters and rituals. The force or source of this chaotic element is itself difficult to locate in Smith, and over time, Smith tries on various terms to mark this movement or function that is not towards place or emplacement, claiming in different essays how chaos, incongruity, or disjunction function in relation to religious myths as well as to religion scholarship itself. In one account in the essay "The Wobbling Pivot," Smith lands on the term "utopian" to describe the "no-place" perspective that values being out of place, out of orientation, to resist the confinement of the locative.<sup>2</sup> Through other iterations of this problematic of religion's relation to place, Smith eventually moves on from "utopia," turning to "incongruity" and then "difference" to signal the tensions of human existence, the social worlds that mark human life, and the scholarly projects that describe and then analyze or "redescribe" these lives. Utopia, as a no-place, is also a good place and thus, suggests its own place-making as it seeks escape. Utopia, on closer scrutiny by Smith, turned into another locative project.<sup>3</sup>

Utopia, in some sense, becomes a lost category in religious studies and while it is still used, it is done so with only weak reference to its sense of "no-place."<sup>4</sup> The import of

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Wobbling Pivot," *The Journal of Religion*, 52, no. 2 (1972), republished in *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions*, (New York: Brill, 1978), 101. For a larger discussion of this in the formation of his work, see "When the Chips Are Down," in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 1–60. Much of Smith's work are essays that are republished in a collected volume. I will refer to essay names, the titles of the collections, and the relevant page number numbers from the collections.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, "The Influence of Symbols on Social" in *Map Is Not Territory*, 129-146.

<sup>4</sup> In her introduction to a recent set of essays on contemporary religion in Southeast Asia, Joanne Punzo Waghorne recounts Smith's formula of utopia in opposition to locative, thinking of the no-place of the

Smith's insistence of religion scholarship as second-order discourse has not been lost, however.<sup>5</sup> Smith's work has been widely engaged by scholars using historicization and social theories who see the value of category formation as a scholarly task. Scholars in religious studies using critical social theory have endeavored to clarify the terms and conditions of knowledge production in the field, drawing attention to enterprises that either have sidestepped or ignored questions of category formation and use. In light of the social theories of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim, these scholars have challenged phenomenological projects like Mircea Eliade's that treat religion as a sui generis category and exempt religion from critical social analysis.<sup>6</sup> Instead of describing religion, the religion scholar's task, for these scholars, is Smith's redescription—to interpret the primary materials of religion into the language of analysis, explanation, and history.

My project addresses these critical perspectives in religious studies and draws on our shared concern that academic discourses are strongest when they are self-conscious of their contexts and constructions. I agree that an unexamined use of phenomenology of religion leads to confusion and obfuscation of the political and economic roles that

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present as an urban "Third Space" that is contested territory. I think this a fitting term for the Asian urbanity described in the book's essays. "Negotiating Place, Non-place, and No-place," in *Place/No-Place in Urban Asian Religiosity*, Springer Asia Series (Singapore: Singer, 2015), 7.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," in *Relating Religion*, 194.

<sup>6</sup> The concern is raised by Russell McCutcheon thusly: "On the one hand, the study of religion is the generally liberal pursuit of universal and yet deeply personal feeling gained largely through paraphrasing texts, claims, and behaviors inspired by, or which somehow are said to manifest, essential meanings and values, all of which is derived from experiences of god, the gods, the sacred, the wholly other, the numinous, or the *mysterium*. On the other hand, the study of religion is but one instance of the wider, cross-disciplinary study of how human beliefs, behaviors, and institutions construct and contest enduring social identity—talk about gods and talk about mythic origins are but two strategies for doing this. Although the former employs such methods as phenomenology and hermeneutics to study normally unattainable deep essences by means of surface descriptions, the latter employs social scientific tools to study how human communities construct and authorize their essentialist myths (by [sic] they grouped together and named as nationalist, ethnic, or even religious)" Russell T. McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), 16.

religion has played both historically and in contemporary academic discourse, and that this confusion re-inscribes categories that the academic study of religion should take as its task to question. However, in foregrounding how religion functions, these critical methods reduce attention to—or simply dismiss—how the subject either recognizes or resists these re-descriptions. Put simply, while the critical turn in religion scholarship accounts for society and social relations, it cannot or does not account for personal experience.

In researching Smith's work and his legacy, I was alert to how utopia disappeared but how other topics remained. Smith sustains attention to the difficulty of scholarly production, the felicity of some categories over others, and the dialectical nature of scholarship as it labors under same sky as the subjects it studies but challenges itself to present a different relation to these religious forms. In pursuing the multifaceted relations of the utopian, the chaotic, and the incongruous of Smith, I discovered the recent scholarship of Tyler Roberts, a Philosopher of Religion at Brown University. In *Encountering Religion: Responsibility and Criticism after Secularism*, Roberts lifts out how Smith makes parallels between the function of religion and religion scholarship in their task of orienting human life in time and space.<sup>7</sup> Whereas Smith brought incongruity and locative into dialectical tension, Roberts charges that Smith's work has been more recently used to dismiss incongruity altogether. Looking at scholarship in religion that uses social constructionist methods, Roberts re-reads prominent voices such as Russell McCutcheon, Willi Braun, and Steven Wassertrom and sees their work as too invested in "locating" subjects in society. Roberts concludes that scholarship becomes overly rigid

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<sup>7</sup> Tyler T. Roberts, *Encountering Religion: Responsibility and Criticism After Secularism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

and didactic when it always looks to situate or locate religion. He argues that the field of religious studies misses its remit by the academy if it depends solely on its social science side. In turn, scholarship loses the existential dimensions of human life, with the result being a flattened subject, unrecognizable as the dynamic, conflicted, embodied person that humanistic approaches emphasize. Roberts proposes a critical tack that is also constructive—a tack more amicable to theological and psychoanalytic discourses—that theorizes incongruity for religious studies scholarship as what is at risk and held *in potentia* in encounters with texts, traditions, others, and the unknown aspects of the self. In by theorizing "encounter," Roberts argues how scholars and religious others alike confront and make use experiences of incongruity.

Roberts's excellent book offers an astute means of reflecting on Smith's terms and of proposing a path to sustain incongruity as a category for scholarship. I, too, think that commitments to social scientific approaches can blind current research to incongruity as a category of scholarly concern and as a dimension of human life. However, I do not believe that critical approaches to religious studies can be effectively challenged from alternative discourses that leave behind political economy as guiding frame for the force of religious interest. I agree that religious studies is uniquely situated within scholarly discourse to attend to incongruity, however, I also am convinced that social life is more than the sum of individual psychologies, to paraphrase Durkheim. Refocusing incongruity through social theory would yield how conflict, disjuncture, and gaps are not only cognitive operations but historically distinct and fully material.

As a first move in my remapping of incongruity through social theory, I have returned to Marx and recognized how incongruity is materially-related to the

contradictions of history and production that Marx outlined in his historical materialism. Where in Roberts, incongruity remains at the register of individual experience, even as it encounters the otherness of self, text, and empirical others, Marx binds contradiction to both the finitude of being and conflicts in modes of production. This seems a ripe path for considering incongruity through social theory for religion. Critical methods in the study of religion rely on Marxian ideology critique and dialectical methods to interrogate the impacts of social life on subjective formation. Critical scholarship has also tracked the histories of the categories we as scholars use and pointed out their western, Protestant pedigree and resonances. However, less has been made of Marxian contradiction in contemporary critical projects. Marxian contradiction is not generally considered as an organizing category for the study of religion. Whereas Roberts aims recover the experiential by way of explicitly humanistic discourses, my project suggests another route to this lost or occluded dimension—the existential, lived or "experiential" aspect in religious studies—by way of the archive of social theory. I contend that a fuller consideration of Marxian contradiction can support that category of socially-constructed experience in religious studies. Let me explain.

In resituating the concern with incongruity within social theory as Marxian social contradiction, I have been struck by how critical projects in religion actively resist or avoid the subjective or existential register. This elision of personal experience in social theory is the succinct problematic of my dissertation, and it *remains* a problematic, that is, a terrain for questions and investigations and not an issue open to a single or best answer. Issues of representation are endemic to religious studies as "religion" has been a

category for what, as Mark C. Taylor says, what "slips away."<sup>8</sup> Religious studies, as a corner of the liberal arts, has worked with heterogeneity, alterity, and differences in its contents, methods, and theories. Examples of this include the use of apophatic theologies, its study of prohibitions of likeness in Abrahamic traditions, or its methods of discourse analysis that track cooperation of practices and phenomena. Instead of carving up religion for what is or is not irreducible, inviolable, representable, or debateable, I interpret the field of religious studies as one that tracks the political, historical, and linguistic valences of representation, forming sets of questions or "problematics" to study. By these parameters, I ask about the role of subjective experience for Roberts and the critical scholars he addresses. This is not to assert the legitimacy or accuracy of their claims but to speculate about the resemblance between the way religion fixes or stabilizes the incongruity of lived reality—the unknowns of temporal, material existence—and how *religious studies* fixes or stabilizes collectives and events into themes, terms, or groups for study. The status of experience, as I see, presents as an antinomy which inheres in the study of religion, one that excites and propels our field. I have found the scholarship of Tomoko Masuzawa as modeling this kind of approach of problematics. Masuzawa makes use of the contradictions of our discipline, such as our reliance on the category of origins despite its problems and the mixed legacy of Christian universalism, to great effect to reflect dialectically about the practice and limitations of methods in our field.

From within this nexus of incongruity and Marxian social contradiction, and the obstacles which inhere to religion and representation generally and to "experience" for critical methods specifically, I return to Smith's lost term "utopia." In investigating the

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<sup>8</sup> As Mark C. Taylor says in interpreting Friedrich Schleiermacher: "since religious awareness slips away in the very effort to grasp it, the unity or identity it portends can only be 'present' as 'absent.'" Mark C. Taylor, *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 22.

term's provenance, its relationship to a distinctive literary form, and its expansion into social theory via Marx, I see Utopia as a complex term with the potential to connect the social perspectives of critical theory with the experiential, personal view dismissed or occluded from social construction. I thus aim in this dissertation to give an account of this category of Utopia as a category relevant to critical social theory. My account cannot attack on all fronts religion's engagements with alterities and difference. It thus is contained to the logics and limits of representation, with attention to the seam of the socially-shaped subject who feels and thinks her temporal existence uniquely. I aim to argue and demonstrate how the figure of Utopia could reframe religion's problematic of representation, and that the opposition of subjective perspectives and social theories of religion could be remapped within a field of Utopian desire.

### **Utopian desire as a category for critical religious studies**

Much research about Utopia today is concerned with how Utopia lost its viability over the twentieth century. When considering the disappearance of Utopian thought and literature, scholars note twentieth-century political crises and violence of large nation-state conflicts in Europe.<sup>9</sup> Some focus on Utopia's dispersal into technological utopianism or bourgeois notions of romantic love.<sup>10</sup> These support a broader conception of the displacement of Utopia with a "neoliberal utopianism."<sup>11</sup> Literary theorist Northrop Frye sees the decline of Utopia as a contraction of education itself, namely, that the paralysis

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<sup>9</sup> Krishan Kumar, "Utopia and Anti-Utopia in the Twentieth Century," in *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World*, ed. Roland Schaer, Gregory Claeys, and Lyman Tower Sargent, New York Public Library (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 251-66.

<sup>10</sup> Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Howard P. Segal, *Utopias: A Brief History from Ancient Writings to Virtual Communities*, (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); and Lucy Sargission, *Fools Gold? Utopianism in the 21st Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

of the Utopian imagination is connected to the confusion about the objectives of the inner structure of the educational system, one that no longer relates arts and sciences as they once did.<sup>12</sup> Within all of these assertions are at least two implicit claims: one, that there was once a Utopia that the West has since backed away from and two, that there is some meaning to be gained by thinking against the grain of the historical moment, to reassert Utopia either on the popular front or as a scholarly object.

These two claims—that Utopia is weaker than it once was and that its contemporary scholarship is a political act—is consistent across these scholarly appraisals of Utopia. One of the most visible of these appraisals comes from British sociologist Ruth Levitas, whose work has had significant bearing on the formation of interdisciplinary field of "utopian studies."<sup>13</sup> In 1990 with the publication of her book *The Concept of Utopia*, Levitas looked to the Marx, his interlocutors from the Frankfurt School and to British Marxists to renarrate Utopia as an tool for social transformation. Responding to the proliferation of new writings on utopianism out of the political and social climate of the 1960s and 70s, Levitas diverges from a taxonomic or historical

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<sup>12</sup> Northrop Frye, "Varieties of Literary Utopias" in *Utopias and Utopian Thought*, ed. Frank E. Manuel (Cambridge, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), 25-49.

<sup>13</sup> The study of utopia as an object occupies historians of Utopia and literary theorists at several points. The Manuels' point to Louis Rebaud in 1840 with *Etudes sur les reformateurs ou socialistes modernes branding utopies sociales subversive* in Fritzie P. Manuel and Frank E. Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 10. They insert that a 1704 publication was misattributed to Georg Pasch and thus, received no attention. Lewis Mumford's *Story of Utopia* (1922) and Joyce Hertzler's *History of Utopian Thought* (1923) provide the basis for a history of the idea. The institutionalization of the field took off with the formation of The Society of Utopian Studies in 1975 and its annual conference. The peer-reviewed journal, *Utopian Studies* appeared in 1987 with the publication of select proceedings from the 1984 conference. In a similar vein and also in the mid 1970s, a professional organization for the study of American communal societies, the Communal Studies Association, began meeting in 1974 at locations of relevant interest to the society and has been publishing its peer-reviewed journal for 25 years. This development of the field is important to show how relatively recent it is to speak of utopia as an object of scholarly reflection as compared to religion as a field. Other narratives of this history can be found in Robert Tally's to his *Utopia in the Age of Globalization* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2103) and in Chapter Three, "Daring to Dream," in Tom Moylan's *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), which provides a blend of fiction and theoretical perspectives.



approach of others writing in the 1980s and instead, relates the diverse forms, contents and functions as dimensions of a single concept—"a desire for a better way of being and living."<sup>14</sup> Utopia, in its variety of forms and contents, fulfill, distort, and/or constitute what humans need, and thus, represent to them how and what to desire. Her concept has been used widely since and grounds current scholarship to label both the realized and unrealized of architecture, intentional communities, biomedicine, technology, political treatises, engineering, sexualities, economics and ecology.<sup>15</sup>

Levitas reclamation of utopia as an abiding and formative aspect of social theory and as embedded in all projects of social change is compelling. In more recent work, she has made a strong case for how the methods of sociology are indebted to utopia.<sup>16</sup> I engage her work at multiple points in this study but differentiate my own approach from hers in key ways. The most significant of these is in how I relate Utopia narrowly to its literary form as developed in early modernity. As is evident with the waxing and waning of the term, Utopia is a barometer for history's effects. More's text connects the genre of utopian fiction through its name and marks its conventions. For these reasons, I capitalize the term, using *Utopia* and not the lower-case, *utopia*. This allows me to index More's text and the literary genre that it references. This is not simply a semiotic convention but my argument: to capitalize Utopia is to historicize the term, to connect it to its places and times and its constructions within intellectual and economic locations particular to European capitalism, nation-state formation, liberal and Marxist politics, Renaissance humanism, scientific knowledge production, transcontinental ocean travel and

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<sup>14</sup> Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 7.

<sup>15</sup> Most recently in Sargisson's *Fools Gold?* and Segal's *Utopias: A Brief History*.

<sup>16</sup> Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: the Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

colonialism. To capitalize Utopia is also to situate its use as an aesthetic figure used to respond and reconstruct these histories by and for Western knowledge communities.<sup>17</sup> Capitalizing Utopia serves to relay these connections that may be referred to but not visible when seen as lower case. This is, in part, precisely because of Western forms of knowledge that apply words universally. Utopia, then, is the aesthetic figure of Utopian literature, a figure that resonates across the centuries for its ability to present—but not resolve—social contradictions. By considering the formation of Utopia as a modern figure derived from its narrative form, I align my argument with those critical approaches that use Smith and trace religious studies as a uniquely modern construction that blends European Christian hegemony, Enlightenment science, and colonialism to make its distinct academic character.

I follow this historicizing method from critical methods in religious studies because it allows me better to unfold the signifying features of Utopia. Approaches like Levitas's that apply "utopia" broadly to non-western or pre-modern cases or cultural products obscure or dilute Utopia's ambivalence or contradiction. Using the lower-case form "utopia," these theorists identify a need to collect the diversity of Utopia's contemporary contents, forms, and functions under a single definition. They broadly define utopia as a case of social dreaming, a human impulse to fill in the gaps of time, or as with Levitas, a desire for a better way of living. While there is some attempt to limit the appearance of utopia to times and places where there is more openness or receptivity to the opportunities for change of a more structural variety or to tame the diversity of utopia by offering taxonomies to catalogue different utopian types, these approaches

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<sup>17</sup> Gregory Flaxman, "The Future of Utopia" in *symplokē*, 14, no. 1/2, Discouragement (2006): 197-215, : <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40550721>.

generalize utopia in hopes of offering a definition that matches the hopefulness that utopia implies.

I fault these approaches on several grounds. In making Utopia generalizable to a variety of conditions, they erase non-European particularity and histories. In seeking a broad enough definition to collect the diversity or make sense of its overdeterminations, they lose purchase on the conflicted, contradictory character of Utopia. These contradictions are, as I argue, not a problem of perspective or definition but the key to making sense of what Utopia is. For example, how it is that some Utopias are focused on leisure while others on work, or how some are set in cities while others in the countryside. Other contradictions include how Utopia is a tool for practical political change but is also impossible, or how Utopias can be both rigid and hierarchical and egalitarian. A category useful and relevant to the critical study of religion would need to make sense of Utopia's contradictions without subsuming them.

Thus, my reading of Utopia and its relation to the study of religion is not one of religious Utopias, nor does it address expressions of Utopia in intentional communities or communal experiments.<sup>18</sup> Historicizing Utopia as a figure of contradiction related to its literary form remaps its relation to religion beyond familiar formulations. One familiar trope is to treat modern utopian literature in a line with other, pre-modern hopes and

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<sup>18</sup>The directions of analysis of religion and utopia are multiple, from literary studies of ancient texts like Augustine's *City of God* or the Benedictine monastic code to modern ones such as Campanella's *Christianianopolis* or the programs of Etienne Cabet and Robert Owen, the Ephratites, Shakers or Oneida perfectionists in the United States or the Kibbutzim of modern Israel. A well-researched and colorful introduction to these and other intersections of religion and Utopia can be found in Gregory Claeys, *Searching for Utopia: The History of An Idea* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2011). As for a survey of the various ways scholars have marked this intersection or dialectical relation of religion and utopia, or of what counts for religion in utopia or utopia in religion, I am unaware of such a work. A place to start a project of this would be to consider more fully Krishan Kumar's claim that "Christian civilization may be unique in giving birth to utopia." *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell, 1987), 19.

aspirations, as if all directed by a single *religious* ambition. The reverse also applies, where one ontological utopian impulse is treated as animating all cultural production, *including religion*. These methods do not necessarily exclude historical analysis that would treat religious and utopian features as changing or differently valenced through time. However, both approaches tend to treat one term as ahistorical or as the point for the information on which to pivot.

For example, in the case of Ernst Bloch's work, utopia is regarded as an anticipatory impulse that is a result of time's structure—an ontological condition that is easily turned into a theological or universal. I will discuss this slippage at several points in the chapters ahead, especially as it is used by Levitas. Where he most frequently uses it is to lift Marx from the debates of whether or not Marx is properly utopian, how to interpret Marx's critique of the Utopian Socialists, and how utopia can be retrieved for postmodern situations. By most accounts, Marx would seem utopian for the teleology of his project and the glimpses of the future beyond capitalism where a man [sic] mixes his days with hunting in the morning, fishing in the afternoon, rearing cattle in the evening, and critiquing after dinner.<sup>19</sup> Yet, Marx is also read more closely as anti-utopian for dismissing the explicit programs of the industrialists like Owen or Christian-inspired communalism of Saint-Simon for the way that they promised present relief and thus, focused attention away from the structural critiques of capitalism. Bloch takes Marx—and utopia—out of these arguments and plots Marxism along paths of both critique and comfort. The potentials of the temporal moment, for Bloch, structure the struggle towards liberation as itself a pleasurable, embodied project, one that enjoys its compensations of

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<sup>19</sup> "The German Ideology," *Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 160.

visual art, music, narrative, stories, fairytales, wishes, religious practices and cosmic myths for the way they both are artifacts of humanity's creative capabilities and guides for the struggle. This is, in Bloch's words, the "warm stream" of Marx that shows humanity as tender and courageous at the same time as it critiques the structures of oppression.<sup>20</sup>

Bloch's approach intersects my project at multiple points. I critique those who cling to the ontological category of a utopian impulse and thus, distance Utopia from its form, as Levitas does. But Levitas's close reading of Bloch pays off in other ways. Levitas calls attention to Bloch's Marxian anthropology—the "warm stream" of Marx—as highly relevant to the recuperation of Utopia and social theory both for contemporary social change. This is where she calls in the term "desire" to stand in against the deadening effect of social critical methods noticed by Roberts. Levitas does not work closely with the term desire and misses the role that formalizing ideas for social change has in turning them into Utopias. It is these two points, along with the ahistorical tinge of her concept, that force me to look elsewhere for a category of Utopia consonant with critical religious studies.

Bloch's focus on cultural products as the site for Utopia caught Marxian literary theorist Fredric Jameson's attention and in turn, has directed my own inquiry. I contend that it is by way of aesthetic productions and the analysis of these productions—which are themselves aesthetic products—that scholars come in contact with "warm stream" of

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<sup>20</sup> "Marxism as a doctrine of warmth is thus solely related to that positive Being-in-possibility, not subject to any disenchantment, which embraces the growing realization of the realizing element, primarily in the human sphere. And which, inside this sphere, signifies the utopian Totum, in fact that freedom, that homeland of identity, in which neither man behaves towards the world, nor the world behaves towards man, as if towards a stranger." Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, Vol. 1, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 209.

Marxian anthropology by way of the "cold stream" of critique. Jameson identifies in Bloch the religious quality of Marxism that points to an anticipated time where social life is not a matter of alienated labor. Whereas Bloch calls out this anticipation of a transformed future as a quality of time itself, Jameson attends to how aesthetic productions like literature and even Marxist theory are the means to make sense of the alienations, the social contradictions, as they appear in capitalist production. According to Jameson, the anticipation of a transformed future—the utopian moment in Bloch—is fundamentally inaccessible and "can never reveal itself directly but must always speak in figures, which always calls out structurally for completion and exegesis."<sup>21</sup> Thus, it is only by way of the forms of culture that we can access the existential, lived dimension of reality beyond our own parochial viewpoints. When handling cultural productions, however, we cannot escape the social, political, economic conditions that engendered them. Therefore, interpreting cultural productions becomes both the means to access the Utopian hope for transformation and the historical circumstances that condition and characterize the terms of this transformation.

Jameson's move to form and figure is the first in several ways that Jameson's work helps me isolate where "experience" may be available for scholars using social critical theory. As I argue through Jameson, analyzing culture with a dialectic of ideology critique and attention to form affords oblique access to the existential register of social life. Jameson's theoretical and interpretive projects see cultural products as the occasion to analyze social and existential life together. As humans piece together the scraps of their experiences and give them form, what they produce carry the not only the weight of

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<sup>21</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), 142.

their cultural moments and social formations but also what seem to be the "private" fantasies and neurosis peculiar to them. Jameson's method does not psychologize or even psychoanalyze authors. Instead, he sees how the theories of Marx and Lacan and other "greats" of the modern "west" can be read as another way that scholars are like authors; and like the *pensée sauvage* figured by Levi-Strauss, they give shape to the sensorium as they find their way in the world.

This reflexiveness about the scholarly task and its analogies in other domains excites my interest in Jameson's work in a second way for this project. My project does not read Utopia through religion or vice versa but treats both as modern knowledge productions formed around questions and obstacles to representation. This is a method of thinking by way of set of questions while recognizing the limits of all constructions. Jameson's work frequently begins with a question or dilemma faced in thought. Jameson is perhaps most widely known for his work analyzing the culture of postmodernity--a set of aesthetic patterns that he relates to the late-stage of capitalist production where industrial machines have been dismantled in favor of the speed of electronic circuits and have left a wake of disorienting architecture. I do not see his commentary on architecture as promising as his method of abstracting questions from the change we see. Jameson himself has written through a series of cultural moments that have produced a dizzying array of change in the way we communicate, conduct business, acquire and distribute material goods, and interact with strangers, new ideas, and our communities. To think these changes from the present (factoring in the social, economic, and political realities) and to track how material culture is ideologically-striated, pleasurable, and open for critique give handholds for the proliferation that is cultural life in 2017.

The third influence of Jameson on my approach is specifically for the way Jameson leverages the Utopian form as indicative of the social contradictions particular to modern, consumer capitalism. Jameson's interpretation of Utopia as the premier literary expression of the larger modern impulse to aesthetic closure gave me occasion to reflect on how scholarship relies on closure as a condition of its possibility. My argument that critical theories and methods in the study of religion are, first, aesthetic objects that are constructed as circuits of desire, stems from the import of representations and the way they substitute or stand in for a lost object (in psychoanalytic terms) or for other representations (in linguistic terms). In relating Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis to Marxist materialism, Jameson delivers a method of interpretation that situates ideology and its critique as both productions of satisfaction—both routes to pleasure—thus inscribing the scholar-subject into her own historicized location.

### **Chapter Summaries**

In Chapter One, I expand on the themes introduced in this introduction, especially how critical scholarship has resisted the experiential dimension that Roberts elevates. I argue that social theory has resources for addressing Robert's concerns, and I review critical social theory for its methods in ideology critique, dialectical interpretations, and historicization. I note how Marxian contradiction has been less engaged by these scholars and can be seen to remap incongruity with attention to political economy. I introduce the scholarship of Fredric Jameson by way of religion scholar Constance Furey to show how his work with Utopia has been recently used for thinking with religious studies and outline where my project in Utopian desire fits within current critical scholarship.



In Chapter Two, I engage the contemporary scholarship in utopian studies and chart my argument that Utopia, as a distinctly modern figure related to its literary form, provides the most useful frame for studying the problematic of representing the existential dimension of social life within critical social theory. This argument challenges several well-known and highly-cited definitions for how they do not account for the charged, ambivalent quality of Utopia. I counter that Utopia, wrapped in terms of "dream," "impulse," and "desire," generates its appeal out of its on formalization and reification. Utopia is more useful when its contradictions are not contained in a definition about desire but met through interpretative procedures using a theory of desire.

In Chapter Three, I develop my theory of Utopian desire by showing how Utopian narratives generate the feeling of encountering the structural conditions and cognitive effects of social contradiction. I first discuss the conventions of the literary form, its status as a genre, and how, as travel narratives, Utopias engage spatial operations of comparison. Fredric Jameson's Marxian and Lacanian interpretive tools are well-developed to show how the analysis of cultural forms is a dialectical operation, able to reflect on its own movement of thought while lining out the multiple social and libidinal attachments that produce aesthetic products. Jameson's own account of the contradictions which inhere with and across the Utopian form interacts with the conventions introduced earlier in the chapter. His theorization intensifies how Utopia figures a modern, existential longing for resolution and collective social arrangements, delivering this as a desire for the potentials contained in society as a totality.

In Chapter Four, I expand on how critical social theory is invested with Utopian desire by way of Levitas, Jameson, and religion scholar Tomoko Masuzawa. I discuss

how each scholar, by different means, have sought to show how social critique is affectively and libidinally invested or activated. I contend that social critique is activated with Utopian desire when it articulates a social totality and, in doing so, anticipates the analytic potential of that representation—the dual expression of living within and desiring to live beyond social contradiction. Critical scholarship can reflect more readily the existential, lived dimension of social life when it attends more closely to how it, like Utopia, is a wish-fulfilling aesthetic creation that configures and reconfigures its descriptions and explanations of society.

## Chapter One

### From Locative to Utopian: The Modern Project of Critical Religious Studies

This chapter examines contemporary religious studies debates about the uses and limits of social constructionist methods, particularly as they relate to the category of the subject. Scholars using social theory and critical methodologies have emphasized the subject as a product of social forces, resisting claims to "religious experience." Some scholars have turned their methods towards the field of scholarship itself, questioning the privilege of categories like "experience" or "religion." I introduce these debates by way of Philosopher of Religion Tyler Roberts who argues against these approaches. Roberts claims that they fix subjects within social fields and do not present the dimensions of human life that are more uncertain, ones that give rise to ethical responses. He maintains that critical approaches have lost site of the "incongruity" that religious behaviors are constructed to address. I contend that Roberts's characterization of critical methods misses how social theory, when more closely considered, presents ethical responses through the methods of ideology critique, dialectical thought, and historicization. I explain that incongruity is not cancelled or controlled by historical methods but is active within them, recognizable as historical, material, and social contradictions. This close reading of both Roberts and his interlocutors produces a framework for reimagining subjectivity for critical theory with an emphasis on contradiction. I propose that critical methods can do more to foreground the

contradictions which inhere in social life and can map these as historical formations without a loss of their constructionist approaches.

I propose the category of Utopian desire as a frame for this further methodological engagement with contradiction. Critical scholar Jonathan Z. Smith used "Utopia" as a category early in his project of redescription. I consider the history of this term and propose it again through a different formulation by way of the more recent work of Tomoko Masuzawa, Constance Furey, and Fredric Jameson. I argue that Utopia, specifically limned as desire, is a way to remap "experience" by means not considered by either Roberts or the scholars of critical religious studies. As I construct the category, it foregrounds contradiction and presents it as an object that refracts the existential, lived dimension of social life, holding onto critical social theory. I introduce this category at the end of the chapter for how it reframes the representation of experience within critical methods as an obstacle not easily resolved, one that an explicit appeal to humanistic language offered by Roberts does not satisfy and is not yet countenanced by critical studies.

### **Outline**

The first part of this chapter presents Tyler Roberts's objections to social constructionist approaches in religious studies and considers his counterproposal that both religion and religious studies both be considered as projects of "encounter." I revisit the criticisms of phenomenological methods that privilege description and depend on a *sui generis* object of study have led to a surge in social scientific approaches that handle religious behaviors as ordinary phenomena. I look at how Roberts's criticisms of social scientific approaches in the works of scholars I treat as a subset of the field—critical

religious studies. Roberts foregrounds the work of J. Z. Smith and his framing of religions as "locative" and "utopian." Honing in on the "locative" aspect, Roberts tracks how Smith's category of "locative religion" can be used to describe critical religious studies scholars who want to fix or situate all subjects and objects as products of social construction. While I agree that problems inhere in some aspects of these approaches, I contend that Roberts fails to consider the importance of political economy in his proposal of "encounter" as a way to reintroduce ethics and subjective experience into the field. I argue that social theory has resources for addressing the concerns that Roberts's raises when moving away from his characterization of critical methods. When engaged through a different lens, social theory presents ethical responses through the methods of ideology critique, dialectical thought, and historicization. I unpack these three methods as responses to Roberts for how they offer more refined approaches than what he proposes. How I differentiate myself from Roberts and the critical religious studies scholars is my claim that social contradiction operates as a background operation motivating these methods. In reference to Marx, I relate his materialist account of contradiction as a dimension of social life not emphasized as such in religious studies. This close reading of both Roberts and his interlocutors produces a framework for reimagining subjectivity for critical theory with an emphasis on contradiction. It also serves to introduce a set of questions which motivate this dissertation, questions about category formation and representation in the study of religion.

In the second part of this chapter, I begin to develop my category of Utopian desire that I argue reimagines how critical religious studies can credibly consider the existential dimension of social life that Roberts defends is occluded by social scientific

methods. Through the work of philosopher Constance Furey and literary theorist Fredric Jameson, I introduce how the term “utopia,” once used but then discarded by Jonathan Z. Smith, can be reimagined for critical religious studies. While Furey invests in “Utopian history” as a way of holding the sedimented and undetermined together, I am more interested in her gesture toward the desires of the scholar and how they may be refracted through a practice of Utopian history. “Desire” labels the affective and libidinal dimensions of knowledge production, criticism, and uncertainty. A sympathetic perspective on the historicized subject within the contradictory social sphere is recognizable as a desiring subject, a subject who desires. This chapter contributes to my argument in that it establishes that contemporary religious studies struggles for ways to represent political economy and subjective experience simultaneously and offers that the figure of Utopia can be a means to examine this problem as it inheres in critical discourses.

### **I. Incongruity Remapped: Roberts through Social Theory**

In his recent monograph, *Encountering Religion: Responsibility and Criticism after Secularism*, Philosopher of Religion Tyler Roberts identifies a waning of concern for the subject within contemporary discourses on religious studies and identifies a lack of humanism within social constructionist approaches to religious studies. Roberts introduces readers to these recent debates that frame religion as a contested category and spotlight how scholarship has toyed with, understood, or resisted the slippage of religious person and religion scholar. He identifies several scholars such as Jonathan Z. Smith, Russell McCutcheon, Willi Braun, and Steve Wasserstrom for their work in separating academic thinking from religious thinking about religion. Roberts counters that in rooting

out whatever cannot be grasped by social or scientific theory, these and other scholars have become overly-concerned with circumscribing their terms and their objects, and in doing so, have lost touch with the “incongruous” aspects of life that religion and religious studies encounters.

The terms and figures that Roberts introduces deserve attention for the lineages and problematics they represent in the field of religious studies. Field-reflexive critiques of the classifications and categories of religion have been a growing subset of the field of religious studies and have occupied the main journals of the field, as well as sprouted new journals and scholarly organizations that attend to these concerns directly.<sup>22</sup> Critical perspectives within religious studies have focused on the formation of the field within mostly Christian and Western contexts, using forms of historiography to track the field’s investments.<sup>23</sup> Criticisms of the History of Religions scholar Mircea Eliade are perhaps the most widely known and referenced, with concerns ranging from his textualist approach, his use of description and morphology, or the political dimensions of his life and theory.<sup>24</sup> Critical scholars replace treatments of religion as a distinct, autonomous, or special aspect of human life excited by religious behaviors with studies that see religion

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<sup>22</sup> The AAR and its journal, *Journal of the American Association of Religion (JAAR)*, have hosted many of these conversations, even as recently as 2014. These conversations, in part, occur in the text and footnotes below. North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR) and the journal *Methods and Theories in the Study of Religion*, along with blogs like Practicum and Culture on the Edge are new publication routes for the voices that may see their positions as held marginally by the establishment. Another analysis might consider this mainstream/marginal location within the broad religious studies discourse across times and places.

<sup>23</sup> Russell T. McCutcheon stands out here with *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse of Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Other works referenced below include those by Daniel Dubuisson, Tomoko Masuzawa, Steven Wasserstrom, and Samuel Preus. See also Ivan Strenski’s *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth Century History: Cassirer, Eliade, Levi-Strauss, and Malinowski* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1987).

<sup>24</sup> Robert A. Segal, “In Defense of Reductionism,” *JAAR*, 51, no. 1 (1983): 97-124; see, also, Jonathan Z. Smith, “A Twice Told Tale,” in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004): 362-74. Hans H. Penner “Is Phenomenology a Method in the Study of Religion?” *Bucknell Review* 18, no. 1 (1970):29-54. Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

as one cultural product among others, or as ordinary.<sup>25</sup> Lively debates and refinements have helped the field understand problems which inhere both in established theories and methods and in the terms and concepts it uses.<sup>26</sup> The goal has been a more precise approach to the diverse and contradictory contents of the field.

However, to Roberts, these criticisms have corroded a vital dimension of what funds religious reflection, practiced by scholars and adherents alike. In a careful, close reading of Jonathan Z. Smith, Roberts concludes that scholarship becomes overly rigid and didactic when it always looks to situate or locate religion. As Roberts reminds his readers, Smith critiqued Eliade for the way Eliade promoted religion as primarily a place-making enterprise. Through such concepts as the Axis Mundi and the myth of an eternal return, Eliade summarized religion as the activity of orienting a person in space and time. In “The Wobbling Pivot,” a paper delivered in 1971 and published in 1978, J. Z. Smith takes up Eliade’s work and redescribes his sacred/profane distinction as a concern with fixing the fluid or unsettled (i.e. wobbly) human experiences within time and space. In Eliade’s religious or sacred category, religion is treated as a mode of human activity to make or fund a point or location within a chaotic field of experience or, to think as Eliade does, within a cosmos. Smith uses Eliade to show that place and world-making are important questions for religious studies but are not the only activity of religion.<sup>27</sup> Smith refashions the question of religion through late antique sources and sees religious texts as not just trying to fit or place themselves in relation to others, and thus, creating worlds, or having a “locative” purpose or effect.

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<sup>25</sup> McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 23.

<sup>26</sup> Many of these reference Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (New York: Macmillan, 1963).

<sup>27</sup> J.Z. Smith, “The Wobbling Pivot,” in *The Map is Not Territory*, 101.



After identifying “Center” as a guiding image for Eliade, Smith proposes a new pair—locative/utopian—to describe the placing and displacing aspects of religion. Smith has reworked this pair over the span of his career; his earliest mention shows Smith’s caution with category formation:

In my own writings I have toyed with the distinction centrifugal and centripetal, central and peripheral, considered adopting Bergson’s classic distinction between the closed/static society and the open/dynamic one, or Eric Voegelin’s contrast between a ‘compact’ and ‘differentiated’ experience of the cosmos. With some hesitation I have settled for the present on the dichotomy between a *locative* vision of the world (which emphasizes place) and a *utopian* vision of the world (using the term in its strict sense: the value of being in no place). Whatever terminology is employed, we must be careful to preserve a sufficient sense of the experiential character of this dichotomy and resist imposing even an implicit evolutionary scheme of development ‘from the closed world to the infinite universe’ (to borrow the title of Alexander Koyre’s well-known work.)<sup>28</sup>

As Smith discusses, utopian means “no place,” and he shortly thereafter abandoned the term for incongruity and then, for difference. Smith uses “utopian” again in his collection of essays entitled, *Map is not Territory*, where “utopian” is a type of restless seeker religious orientation that contrasts “locative” types of religious behaviors that center or attach people to places. But in employing these two terms, Smith calls out how both religion and religious studies are projects of *orientation AND disorientation*, that the scholar, too, can adopt these positions.

In interpreting Smith, Roberts focuses on two of Smith’s terms: “locative” and “incongruity,” setting them up as binaries for contrast. Roberts subsumes “utopian” as another aspect of locating, but of “relocating” just in another place, not the more radical

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

dislocating of “incongruity”.<sup>29</sup> Roberts sees that the utopian, as a method of engaging hegemonic power, could be mapped as method of revolution; however, this revolutionary force is tamed for the work of collecting the group identity: “From this perspective, utopian, rebellious, and revolutionary forms of religion are in crucial respects ultimately locative, for they still seek to secure a stable place in the world for believers, even if this means that they or another group will be dislocated before they can relocate themselves.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, it is the less addressed, more animated notion of incongruity, not utopian or locative, that is the more radical force, and for Roberts, the more common and recognizably religious aspect of what constitutes religious studies.

Smith’s work has given rise to many other projects within what I have named “critical religious studies.” This makes him important for a discussion of how the modern category of religion reflects the social formations of multiple eras. His method in historical analysis addresses how religion and history are topics made available through texts and only approached obliquely. Tuning to the myths and symbols in texts of late antiquity, Smith reflects on the historian’s task and acknowledges its distinctly modern, post-Enlightenment orientation. It is this reflexivity that brings into view insights such as how “universality” is a category for modern elites<sup>31</sup> or how the “primitive” is predicated on a binary contrast to the “civilized.”<sup>32</sup> J.Z. Smith’s work shows how historians inherit and then revise or create the categories that they use.

Roberts reads J.Z. Smith against himself and sees locative patterns forming around Smith and other historicists and instead wants to refocus on encounters with the

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<sup>29</sup> Tyler T. Roberts, “All Work and No Play: Chaos, Incongruity and Difference in the Study of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 77, no. 1 (2009), 99.

<sup>30</sup> Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 72-73.

<sup>31</sup> J.Z. Smith, “Map Is Not Territory,” in *Map Is Not Territory*, 293.

<sup>32</sup> Smith, “I Am a Parrot (Red),” in *Map Is Not Territory*, 273.

incongruous, unformed, or surprising. Moving away from texts and elite forms has been a necessary correction, according to Roberts. However, in reading for particularity of place and situation through demands to historicize, scholars fall into a pattern of constant positioning and reassertion of academic legitimacy. In this move, these critical scholars of religion expose themselves to their own critique of being overly “locative” of religion, “locating both their religious subjects and themselves too securely and [so that they] are not nuanced enough in their explorations of the power of religion.”<sup>33</sup>

It is this constant resituating that troubles Roberts: the disinterested inquiry of social scientific and historicist methods miss the humanistic perspective of self and scholarship that is about encounter. Objectifying distance has been brought on by the “dead ends of critical consciousness that has emptied concepts such as ‘responsibility,’ ‘ethics,’ ‘freedom,’ and ‘subjectivity’ of critical and emancipatory force.”<sup>34</sup> For Roberts, the humanities house the tools to live with incongruity and develop “processes of reflection and representation,” responding so as “to reflect on what the ideas and practices we study might mean for us, in our worlds.”<sup>35</sup> He sees that a humanities approach would reinvigorate both the inquiry into religion and the place of the scholar in that inquiry, to acknowledge the contingency of all human pursuits.

Roberts accuses critical studies of having its own “locative” bias: as it accuses Eliade of making religion about place, critical studies makes everything about its historical location. Roberts pushes back against historicist methodology by saying that it produces a kind of “undeadness” and “evacuates our acts and our subjectivities and so

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<sup>33</sup> Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 12.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

turns them into artifacts of social formation.”<sup>36</sup> Social constructionist approaches, according to Roberts, rob the self of its affirming gestures and contact with its “finitude” and “power” and put in their place a critical attitude towards the various social formations of which the self is a part. He reclaims the humanities, theology and psychoanalysis for interpreting social relations and institutions, and in doing so, situates the self in fields of interpellation and desire. Thus, the social is present but is strained through terms such as meaning, becoming, life, and desire. He seeks a way into constructive and affirmative approaches to religious studies theory and scholarship so as to recuperate “questions of justice, meaning, and purpose” that are foreclosed by explanatory and historicist methods.<sup>37</sup>

In sum, Roberts argues humans are made into “artifacts” when seen as processes of social formation, and that the critical mind is trained to be suspicious and guarded, without affirmation. Ultimately the human is discouraged from seeing herself as purposeful, for herself or for others. Social constructionism does not allow enough nuance into the explorations of the “power of religion”, and in marking out and occupying a distanced, secularist perspective, these scholars fail to reflect the more realistic portrait of humans as experimenters. Exceptions to this are scholars such as anthropologists Robert Orsi and Michael Jackson and historians Amy Hollywood and Romand Coles who cut against the grain of traditional scholarship to explore finitude, power, and self-dispossession. In turning to the philosophers and psychoanalytic interpretations, Roberts maps out how power can be removed as an object of suspicion

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 19.

and repossessed by religious studies for an account of human responsibility, answerability, and encounter.

I agree with Roberts that there are “locative” patterns at work in some strains of critical studies. I also agree that the consequence of these and other patterns is to refuse to engage “responsibility, ethics, freedom and subjectivity” as terms because of their unexamined appeals to liberal humanism. I appreciate the turn to the humanities for the ways that they have held up the incongruous and framed uncertainty as productive of relations and of cultural goods. I want to argue, however, that Roberts’s concerns can be remedied by critical social theory and are arguably *more thoroughly* confronted by the tools and terms within the wheelhouse of critical religious studies itself. Critical religious studies has “critical and emancipatory force” within its genealogy and practices that can be leveraged for social critique. This dissertation explores how the incongruity that Roberts seeks to recuperate for religious studies can be reintroduced through critical religious studies as “Utopian”—the lost word of Smith’s project. As this chapter introduces, “Utopia” is not simply a “no place” or an “escape” from order but a wrestling with order that is ongoing, dialectical, and critical, accounting for the embodied, temperamental aspects that Roberts sees as constitutive of humanistic inquiry. Whereas Roberts gives up on the social-theoretical models and regroupes in humanities and theology, I see mediation through the figure of Utopia and its cognate, Utopian desire. In order to develop this concept of Utopian desire, I first want to survey recent critical, social and historical methods of religious studies to see how they can resist the “locative” characterization given by Roberts and also add to the political economic dimension untouched by Roberts.

### Ideology Critique: Objects of Suspicion or Ethical Position

I agree with Roberts that social constructionism, with its frame of the social, can turn the subjects of religion into objects through its attention to the function of religion to construct objects. Social constructionism has its roots in the critiques of liberalism wrought by Hegel and Marx and found anchor in the developing field of religious studies through the foundational works of Durkheim, Weber, and Berger.<sup>38</sup> By the lights of social constructionist interpretations of the field of religious studies, “Religion” is a concept that was created to name a type of social behavior, observable in collective behaviors. The method foregrounds the discretion of the analyst to frame social behavior as religious and to distinguish it from other social behaviors, and though it may be associated with what is extreme, exceptional, or socially taboo, as Durkheim remarks, religion registers at the level of ordinary *human* behaviors, institutions, and beliefs.<sup>39</sup> This human-centered feature means that religion is, in one sense, ordinary human activity.

In order to elaborate on religion as a set of social phenomena—as opposed to supernatural or psychological ones—social constructionists emphasize how the subject is always within a social field and report on how social groups shape themselves and are shaped through discourses. Language and materiality combine, taking shapes in

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<sup>38</sup> While none of these three influential sociologists of religion are strictly social constructionists, they focus the discussion of the procedures of legitimization at the level of social life which goes on to shape the roles of its actors who deeply identify with these social roles. Religion bares the brunt of this work for these academics. It is the sociologists who can detect the “reality maintenance” that is performed, often by religion, to sustain the “precarious reality constructions of empirical societies with ultimate reality.” Berger makes clear that it is both religion and theology both that obscure the constructed aspects of society. Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 32.

<sup>39</sup> Whereas Berger focuses on the cohesive function of religion that Durkheim’s theory sets out, Durkheim’s own definition of religion straddles this tension of exceptional and ordinary and sets out how the sacred is something held in a collective that can be viewed from without, “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.” Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (New York: Free Press, 1965 (Orig. pub. 1912), 62.

prohibitions, permissions, and institutions on multiple scales. Social constructionist approaches to religious studies investigate these discursive operations generally and particularly how whatever is “religious” functions to permit, restrict, or constrict behavior and potentials within social space.<sup>40</sup> In this frame, knowledge is seen as a product of social groups that often behave to sustain themselves in a field of competing interests. Religious studies should therefore do more than describe “religious” social groups: it is tasked with asking how knowledges that challenge and sustain, i.e. construct, these social groups interact with other knowledges.<sup>41</sup>

Ideology critique structures much of this discourse of social constructionism by analyzing the flows of authorization, the legitimacy of certain representations and the obscuring—intentionally or not—of others.<sup>42</sup> It is easy to mistake what is meant when critical religious studies scholars view religion as ideology. Despite efforts to nuance the word and to open it to its more general meaning of a system of ideas, its negative use—as was used by its 19th century originators—prevails. Ideology as a term was developed to describe the circulation of ideas at the expense of occluding other vital information. The way that language and behaviors disguise class interest was a main concern of Marx, along with the way ideologies disconnect from the conditions of production. Marx identified that religious ideas did this very effectively in the way that they assert a reality beyond material reality.<sup>43</sup> They also salved a wounded heart in a cruel world. As Marx

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<sup>40</sup> McCutcheon’s social constructionist definition of religion: religion is a construction of humans for “legitimizing, contesting, and monitoring social cohesion and identity.” *Critics Not Caretakers*, 14.

<sup>41</sup> Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon, eds., *A Guide to the Study of Religion* (New York: Continuum, 2000). Religion is a term used by scholars to analyze a class of objects to explain their causes and functions, or how they are attractive to individuals and societies. Also useful for showing how concepts are related to other concepts. Religion is the study of authoritative discourse. It is ordinary in that it is like other cultural objects. Braun and McCutcheon, “Introduction,” in *A Guide to the Study of Religion*, 9.

<sup>42</sup> McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 29.

<sup>43</sup> Gary Lease, “Ideology,” in Braun and McCutcheon, ed., *A Guide to the Study of Religion*, 441

described it, the deception was the institutional practices that enabled conceit to persist undetected. Twentieth century scholarship has extended this analysis of religion and other ideologies, tracking how ideology is sustained as structures of normativity that gain legitimacy and adherence through aesthetic forms or institutions. Terms like hegemony or habitus, while adding to the function and character of ideology can, as Marxist literary theorist Terry Eagleton avers, be used in such a way that waters down the power dynamics and struggle of Marx's initial critique.<sup>44</sup> All three terms, however, sustain focus on the social aspects of behavior that otherwise would devolve into stories of unique individuals acting as free, unencumbered agents. Ideology critique for religious studies is a marker of how all discourse excludes and argues that religious discourse excludes in particular way.

Russell McCutcheon lays out this role of ideology critique in *Manufacturing Religion*, noting that this is not the "harsher Marxist use of the term that denotes false consciousness or deluded thinking." He rejects these for the way they presume a "true consciousness."<sup>45</sup> Instead, McCutcheon proposes a generic alternative: "ideology denotes a process for authoring particular representations whose trace, history or context is obscured (whether intentionally or not)."<sup>46</sup> Turning to Eagleton, McCutcheon identifies how ideology performs as a political tool through unifying, orienting, rationalizing, legitimating, universalizing, and naturalizing social processes. Through figures such as Durkheim and Freud, McCutcheon sees that religion functions to obscure social

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<sup>44</sup> For Eagleton, Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and social field tend to make conflicts disappear. See, Terry Eagleton, "Ideologies and its Vicissitudes in Western Marxism," Slavoj Žižek, ed., *Mapping Ideology* (New York: Verso, 2012): 179-225.

<sup>45</sup> As M.G. Hamner has remarked, "Marx would not attest to a true consciousness but he did presume a true depiction of the sets of forces and relations of production, a depiction that was obscured by bourgeois proprieties." Private conversation, August, 2, 2016.

<sup>46</sup> McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 29.



operations, to reassert hegemony and to bolster dominant power structures. This is a well-established interpretation of religion that has been critiqued for its reductionism.<sup>47</sup>

McCutcheon detours around this criticism by claiming that reductionism is the work of functionalist theories, and he is joined by other contemporary scholars in continuing this path.<sup>48</sup> Critical methods within religious studies argue that the ideological operations of religion are especially adept at creating the illusion of closure and building absolute claims. Religion shores up other systems, and thus, deserves the attention of critics.<sup>49</sup>

For the purposes of my research, I use the term “critical religious studies scholarship” to denote these methods that view religion as social phenomena and that question the theories and methods in the field that may treat religion as interactive with the social field but as a response to a unique experience. Roberts defends this “unique experience” perspective as he articulates a framework for “response and responsiveness” to difference.<sup>50</sup> He situates his method as an enterprise of the academy that takes up concern with an attention to change:

The humanities, as I understand them, are the site in the academy where we try not only to understand the immense diversity of ways that human beings have in the past and continue in the present to reflect on and represent themselves to themselves and others, but also to respond to these

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<sup>47</sup> Introductory texts to theory and method explain how this reductionism is what has produced alternative theories and have also shown how Marx and Freud are more nuanced than a generic definition shows them to be. See Daniel L. Pals *Eight Theories of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) and Bradley Herling, *A Beginner's Guide to the Study of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015). Broadly, this is the move of poststructuralism—to show how ideology critique cannot be sustained as its own mechanism because of the faults of the subject.

<sup>48</sup> William Arnal writes about the values of functionalism in his chapter "Definition" In *Guide to the Study of Religion*, Braun and McCutcheon, ed.: 21-35.. See also Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 1978).

<sup>49</sup> Lease, “Ideology” See, also, Derek R. Peterson and Darren Walhof, *The Invention of Religion: Rethinking Belief in Politics and History*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press), 2001.

<sup>50</sup> “To ‘encounter’ religion, as I understand it, is to undertake a ‘disciplined suspension’ (to use Robert Orsi’s phrase) of one’s own locative impulses and thus allow the differences between the scholars’ own world and the world of the religious other to emerge in as much detail as possible. But the humanistic study of religion and the humanities more generally, I argue, need to think difference and encounter within the larger framework of *response* and *responsiveness*. Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 16.

processes of reflection and representation and to the processes of self and social formation, to which they not only are bound but also effect and enable. To respond, in this sense, is to reflect on what the ideas and practices we study might mean for *us*, in *our* worlds.<sup>51</sup>

For Roberts, it is the humanities, not social sciences, that offer the more precise method of handling religious texts and people. The humanities accept theological material but not its assumptions, reading religious texts through a position of humility and indeterminacy—a kind of ethical stance. The ethical position, for Roberts, is to see how “certain kinds of self-dispossession” incite the more responsible positions: there is too much certainty or self-assuring happening within the critical position, and the effort to establish authority blinds the scholar from the way religion destabilizes its subjects, and even its scholars.

I like the space that Roberts holds for the humanities within the academy, especially the way that it points to the subjective position of the scholar relative to the subjectivities of its “objects” for reflection. I want to emphasize, however, that critical perspectives have an advantage to other kinds of ethic's claims when they challenge the productions of hegemony. The normative stance within critical religious studies scholarship persists in McCutcheon and others as they call attention to where powers are unequally distributed.<sup>52</sup> Societies are not set up to serve everyone's interests equally. By pointing to how social structures are legitimated and maintained, critical scholars bring to light what is not as prominent in popular discourses and may be missing from other methods of studying religion.<sup>53</sup> As Marx assured his readers of *Theses on Feuerbach*, the

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<sup>51</sup> Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 16-17.

<sup>52</sup> McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, Bruce Lincoln, *Emerging from the Chrysalis: Studies in Women's Rituals of Initiation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 112 quoted in Craig Martin, *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion*, (New York: Routledge, 2012), 57-8.

<sup>53</sup> Martin, *Critical Introduction*, xiv.

point of philosophy is not only to interpret the world, but to change it.<sup>54</sup> Marx's legacy within critical theory is a turn in the road from the more isolated social science of Durkheim.<sup>55</sup> Social theory with this critical approach has a normative dimension. It has within it the motivation to both study and produce change.<sup>56</sup>

These histories are absent or obscured within Roberts's analysis. Roberts's concerns about the ethical dimensions of critical religious studies telescope out first with the concern that there is a lack of ethics in the critical perspective when it refuses to judge certain social formations due to its necessary detachment as a public, scholarly service and then zooms in to the places where McCutcheon appears to freely judge religious others when he describes his scholarly peers as "data."<sup>57</sup> Roberts overall is concerned that the ethics of critical religious studies are unevenly applied, "failing to explain why some kinds of socially stabilizing activities are preferable to others, they offer instead the all-to-easy language of 'transgression' and 'critique.'"<sup>58</sup> McCutcheon defends his privilege by noting that scholarly autonomy has its own ideologies or systems of thought and thus, its own exclusions, ones that its own practitioners may not be aware of. Scholarly discourse, as McCutcheon sees it, does not actively work to disguise its trace or disavow its privilege whereas religious discourse does.<sup>59</sup> When challenged about the success of scholarly discourse to police itself for its disavowed or disguised exclusions,

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<sup>54</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Theses on Feuerbach, Thesis XI* (Marx/Engels Internet Archive). Accessed at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>.

<sup>55</sup> Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

<sup>56</sup> Benhabib sees in critical theory two modes. First, a politics of the present in process, with its goal of fulfillment of a universalization of what came out of the bourgeois revolutions—"justice, equality, civil rights, democracy, and publicity". Second, transfiguration towards "the formation of a community of needs and solidarity, and qualitatively transformed relations to inner and outer nature." The transformations of "inner" and "outer" "nature"—this is the dimension of utopia. Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia*, 13.

<sup>57</sup> Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 49-70. Roberts has a close reading of the concerns of the placement of the scholar in the academy.

<sup>58</sup> Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 78.

<sup>59</sup> McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 66.

McCutcheon admits that this would be akin to pulling the rug out from under one's own feet and that a critique of the institutional setting of his own work "falls outside the parameters of this book."<sup>60</sup> Arguing against McCutcheon's privilege is part of the drive of Roberts who sees such positioning as overly defensive and guarded.

If one is to follow McCutcheon's insistence on the "radically contextualized nature of all human thought and practice," then McCutcheon plays with an ever-growing list of criteria to assure one's scholarship is properly accountable and situated. However, he excludes biography of particular subjects. This kind of bait-and-switch of McCutcheon relative to specific standards of disclosure and distance is confusing if one reads him as laying out rules for religion scholarship. McCutcheon sustains this argument through reifying "religion" and "scholarship," setting them in opposition, then reassigning descriptive scholarship to the "religious" side. Sui approaches to religion find more idealist than materialist positions, he argues, and ideology critique, what he calls "materialist and naturalist critiques," taken up against religion and sui generis approaches, "not only contextualize such idealism but, in the very act of contextualizing it, simultaneously deauthorize and challenge it."<sup>61</sup> However, what becomes apparent with McCutcheon is that religion is exclusive to groups. The object of study, then, is not religion, but people—who are treated as objects, not subjects. This objectification extends beyond religious people to scholars themselves, who are seen to be directed by interests and rewards, with appeals to authorities. McCutcheon has promoted this argument with his attention to scholars—as a group—in such categories as "caretakers" and "critics. This turn to analyze the scholar as a religious "data" may have rhetorical purpose for

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 29.

McCutcheon but without a more sympathetic account of the scholar-as-subject, it alienates scholars from each other and from their shared conditions of existence, imagining them more different than the same. It is also what leads Roberts to misread the benefits of social constructionism, its inherent ideology critique, and its ethical force.

Roberts criticizes McCutcheon and other scholars for bypassing the “messy questions of advocacy and social formation” that are central to good inquiry in the study of religion.<sup>62</sup> I would say more precisely that McCutcheon loses his argument when he characterizes scholarship as religion's opposite. I would argue that religiousness and scholarship are more precisely overlapping fields of social formations with degrees of attention to constructedness *that are always incomplete*. I maintain that social critique has this more nuanced history and the resources for taking positions that have political effects as constitutive of their purpose and are invested in social transformation, not merely disinterested inquiry. The failures of critical religious studies discourse highlighted by Roberts are perhaps failures of rhetoric but not of method, by my view, and not fatal. They instead should be treated as productive critique, helping to focus on the ways critical religious studies can better account for subjectivity and perspective in their social analysis.

#### Dialectical Methods

As remarked above, Roberts watches ethical, responsive selves treated as objects void of lived perspective in social constructionist projects. The social constructionist would respond by arguing that the analytical view is just that—one view among others and a view the scholar must inhabit and explain. Roberts sees the critical scholar as

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<sup>62</sup> Roberts includes Ivan Strenski, Gary Lease, Bruce Lincoln, Donald Wiebe, and Burton Mack for this analysis. Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 78-9.

excepting himself (as these are male scholars he references) from this treatment by virtue of his scholarly location, creating an us-vs.-them dynamic that is skewed against those who disagree with the critical religious studies approach. This section continues with Roberts's disagreement with social constructionism and how its social view of religion obscures processes of encounter and transformation. I argue that this is because he is not reading for the dialectics at work in the theory of social construction.

Roberts believes that social constructionism stabilizes itself through proposing a neutral stance on social processes, avoiding normative claims. However, this privileging of social constructionism is itself a normative claim. Others agree. Benjamin Fong describes how critical discourses, in resisting one standard, just institute another: what was "religion, experience and authenticity" becomes "discourse, discipline and power/knowledge." New monoliths, such as "Western Civilization," emerge, instituting a new universal that explains the conditions of a situation just as the liberal humanist one did and the reductionist one did before that.<sup>63</sup> By protesting so much against the "reality" of certain stable formations by calling them "nothing but constructions," critical theorists like McCutcheon lose sight of the complexity of the reality they claim to be able to explain.<sup>64</sup> Fong challenges social constructionists by pointing out their inconsistency when they argue that reality is too complex to be viewed completely but then claim that they have a leg up on analyzing this reality. He suggests that instead of advancing an argument through these oppositional constructions, social constructionist approaches would gain more traction by beginning with the shared social field of the scholar and reader and drawing out its successes and failures at sustaining a consistent reality.

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<sup>63</sup> Benjamin Y. Fong, "On Critics and What's Real: Russell McCutcheon on Religious Experience," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 82, no. 3 (2014): 1127-48.

<sup>64</sup> Fong, "On Critics and What's Real," 1145.

Fong's recommendation to preserve social construction by drawing the circle to include scholar and other would go some distance in taking the edge from critical religious studies while preserving its message. This would be consistent with a genealogy of social theory building on Marxist praxis and immanent critique, proposing self-reflexivity about the subject's class position in relation to the forces of production. But this lineage also contains a facet of science that has come under scrutiny by poststructuralists, namely the positivism of social science methods and its accompanying objectivity. Where critical religious studies appeals to scientific or rational inquiry for its authority, it depends on a western hegemony that it claims it can see through.<sup>65</sup> In order to do what Fong recommends without falling towards the positivistic side of social theory and to counter this normative, hegemonic tendency, I propose that critical religious studies re-engage a more dialectical methodology that reflects the dialectal production of the subject within the social. An attention to dialectics would both situate the subject within a livelier, more deliberative or even "messy" context, as Roberts and Fong suggest, with the recognition and force of the human, creative aspect of the social.

Dialectical approaches preserve subjective perspectives, accounting for a self as one that is constituted socially but in process. In *The Sacred Canopy*, Peter Berger emphasizes how life, society, and scholarship all function dialectically and so should be perceived as such. Berger's social theory thus no longer analyzes society as hypostatic but rather as creatively dynamic, correcting Durkheim's legacy. He reminds his readers that, "the sociological understanding ought always to be humanizing, that is, ought to refer the imposing configurations of social structure back to the living human beings who

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<sup>65</sup> For an undoing of western rationality from a non-religious studies perspective, see Bruno LaTour *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

have created them.”<sup>66</sup> Berger also dismantles a rigid subjectivity by arguing that “socialization... is always partial” and that internalization is always incomplete, with a non-social self-consciousness in uneasy relation to the social consciousness.<sup>67</sup>

Berger’s processual subject-in-formation corrects the misreading of Marxist ideology critique that ascribes ideology only to persons and not to systems. It also represents social theory’s subjectivity as malleable and troubled—a view of social theory not considered in Roberts’s survey. Through the term “social formation,” subjects are situated within a society that functions to obscure or promote some ideas and transfers this function to competing subjective, social formations.<sup>68</sup> When subjectivities are framed as social formations, scholars can distinguish between the bluntness of some ideological formations and the subtlety of others, allowing some social formations to counter other hegemonic social formations, yet acknowledging that they are all formed through political economy. Social formations, as partial or in process, point to the overlapping and contested experiences, where a single human body can be marked by multiple social formations.

Roberts does not dig deep into the references used by critical religious studies scholars for these more dynamic perspectives on subjectivity. He instead invokes humanism for this account. By pointing to more nuanced descriptions of subject formation and describing them as social processes, I aim to answer one of Roberts’s criticisms of social theory—that critical perspectives drain life from their objects of study. I do not believe that this is the case, and I want to preserve these elements of social

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<sup>66</sup> Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 8.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-4.

<sup>68</sup> Burton Mack, “Social Formation,” in Braun and McCutcheon, ed., *Guide to the Study of Religion*: 283-96.



theory as I build my case for a critical religious studies theory and method that is ethically-tuned and responsive to others. What is clearer from this correction is that Roberts takes issue with an overriding arc of social theory—its habit or pattern towards social science objectivity and positivism that is primarily engaged with social, not personal, processes. It would seem that this is a general pitfall of Enlightenment reason: reification for the purposes of abstraction. However, that does not mean that social formations are static.<sup>69</sup> Roberts might respond: if social theory attends to selves, it calls them subjects and only does so for more abstracted, less human ends, and this kind of thought pattern does not have to be the only game in town.

I agree that there is abstraction and consolidation and objectification in the theory and methods in social theory. But instead of abandoning it, I want to point out how this is more precisely just a moment of a dialectic. Thought is in motion, a dialectical procedure of integration and proposal. I want to reframe Roberts's rejection of social methods and say: if critical methods appear as “locative,” it is only because they have not brought attention to the movement of thought itself in the presentation of their work. Critical methods do not necessarily lead to deadening analysis or less responsibility per se. I would say (and am performing through this dissertation) that it produces new ethical responses and expands experience, as Roberts wants religious studies scholarship to do,

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<sup>69</sup> As McCutcheon argues, “[s]ocial formations, then, are active processes that never arrive and are never completed. In one sense, the process implied by social formation simply suggests the active constitution and reconstitution of a social group. But in another sense, a social formation denotes the continually changing results of these active processes and the context in which these processes take place—in this case social formations are more *things* than *processes* [sic]. What is crucial is to recognize that both senses are necessarily related; despite the ever-present danger of mistaking our active concepts for real things, the utility of ‘social formation’ is precisely its ability to avoid the traps of reification, all of which comes from its status as a gerund. In other words, social formation is not a thing or an it.” McCutcheon italicizes “more *things* than *processes*” to emphasize something but it ends up being against what he is saying in the whole paragraph—about process. What a delightfully juicy error! Russell T. McCutcheon, *Critics not Caretakers*, 27.

and a recognition and integration of the dialectics of thought in scholarship helps with this.

Peter Berger and J.Z. Smith both demonstrate this reflexive work as a method for religious studies. Like the social process he describes, Berger calls attention to how theorizing is a dialectical process: “Depending on the starting point, one may then be able to show how a particular theoretical constellation results from a certain practical infrastructure, or conversely how a particular social structure is the result of certain movement in the realm of ideas.” The method of scholarship then matches the contents, which have, to Berger, an “intrinsic dialecticity” as socio-historical phenomena.<sup>70</sup> The ever-incomplete aspect of human life, lived in social exchange, continues as *production*. It is a restless and expressive process.<sup>71</sup> Scholarship is one instance of other productions. J. Z. Smith lists religion as a practice of producing knowledge through making connections. As mentioned above, this is religion as ordinary, not unique or exceptional. But it is also dialectical process:

All of this is to say that the usual portrait of the primitive (the non-human ‘them’ of our cultural map)—whether in the nineteenth century negative form or our more recent positive evaluation—has prevented us from realizing what is human and humane in the worlds of other men. We have not been attendant to the ordinary, recognizable features of religion as negotiation and application but have rather perceived it to be an extraordinary, exotic category of experience which escapes everyday modes of thought. But human life—or, perhaps more pointedly, humane life—is not a series of burning bushes. The categories of holism, of congruity, suggest a static perfection to primitive life which I, for one, find inhumane.<sup>72</sup>

In this quotation, Smith contrasts the religion of “burning bushes” to the religion of “negotiation and application.” In reacting to this as “locative,” Roberts is dwelling on the

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<sup>70</sup> Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 155.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>72</sup> J.Z. Smith, “Map is Not Territory,” in *Map Is Not Territory*, 308.

products of social theory and not their production, nor the way that scholars inscribe themselves as subjects in negotiation. This issue of dialectics—of the reinscription of the scholar as a producer in a field of other producers where concepts and categories are constructions for use in an economy of knowledge production that turns with its own contradictions and resolutions—is a difficult counternarrative to sustain while making arguments and is a delicate task to insert dexterously into one’s work, both in structure and in content.

A quick example of this challenge of presenting scholarly objects as moments of a dialectical process comes from a review of Tomoko Masuzawa by Robert Orsi. Orsi follows Roberts’s concern that a too critical position leaves religion as reduced to other terms. In reviewing Masuzawa’s book *Inventing Religions*, Orsi calls Masuzawa’s work an “anti-history” for its way of wringing out earlier moments of the religious studies tradition and finding only Christian hegemony at work.<sup>73</sup> Like Roberts, Orsi wants historiography to show the fissures and lines and struggles of its process. This struggle is, however, lost for Orsi because he is looking at the “struggle” at a different register: he wants to see history from the perspective of the personal decision tree—the wins and losses—that troubled early scholars.

But Masuzawa’s project shows more that the decisions of scholars are often not their own, or more precisely, they are decisions made under conditions that are degrees of difference from our own. Masuzawa focuses her archival research less on the particular circumstances surrounding individual nineteenth-century scholars, and more on the specific rules of discourse that constituted and sustained the “reason” so valued by these

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<sup>73</sup> Robert Orsi, “On the ‘So Called History’ of the Study of Religion,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 20, no 2 (2008): 134-8. doi: 10.1163/157006808X283552

scholars. Through this, she is able to show how those rules (and Enlightenment discourses generally) are framed and anchored by diffuse Christian presumptions.<sup>74</sup> Those nineteenth-century scholars simply could not ignore or rebut these rules of discourse, then, without ignoring or rebutting reason itself. It is not only the past but now the present that is under consideration: if there is a sense that religious studies is still too Christian, to what degree is the familiar yet increasingly insufficient nineteenth century “reason” responsible? The praxis for Orsi—and for Roberts—is between something domestic or familiar and something strange or unsettled. For Masuzawa, the strange is what was supposed to be familiar or resolved. The conflict is present within the scholar—she doesn’t have to encounter others or religiousness to find it.

Dialectical methods appeal to a variety of theorists within religious studies, crossing the boundaries of social science and humanist approaches. Employing and demonstrating the dialectics at work in one’s theory would help critical religious studies from the positivistic tendencies of social science and keep discourses on social formations focused on their dynamic and creative aspects. What critical religious studies adds to a general dialectical method is the self-consciousness about thought itself within the scholarship of religion, an attunement to the social formations of scholars themselves as knowledge producers. Roberts attempts a theory of a self-conscious scholar via his own method of encounter and response. However, he fails to account for the social or political dimensions that circumscribe or limit the terms or range of thought available.

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<sup>74</sup> Masuzawa charts the historic process of how European Christian hegemony did not simply impose itself on its colonial others but constructed its identity through the material management of these outposts of commercial and cultural imperialism. The diversity that Europeans encountered produced both administrative and epistemic challenges: how to order the variety of behaviors and communities encountered. Religion became a conceptual tool for this epistemic challenge, charting differences under an umbrella of a universal phenomena variously expressed. Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), xiii.

Instead, he theologizes them, or more precisely, "*quasi-theologizes*" them by turning the limitations of one's own experience into a disorientation that he reveres.

I agree with Roberts and Orsi that texts, practices, or human/living others disorient and surprise expectations. I share with Roberts an interest in theorizing encounters and regard it as project of scholarship. Where we diverge is in how one talks about the conditions that create these encounters. Dialectical methods permit the insight of processes and incompleteness, as social formations lived as subjectivities and as social formations that are distinctive to times and places. It is not a choice between a personal decision and a subject as an effect of social processes but more that certain material and discursive conditions give rise to what is lived and experienced as personal decision. Dialectical methods can bring the scholar into the frame of this analysis, keeping attention on how scholars are ordinary humans who both create their conditions and are created by them.

To sum up the previous two sections, Roberts characterizes social constructionism as disinterested and presenting subjects as static objects. However, ideology critique has ethical norms both at the level of analysis and at the subjective level, and both are in process and (thus) changing. To examine the human creative social life—what I have been labeling subjectivity—I will further trace Roberts's notion of incongruity so as to show how he attaches it to humanism. Debates about whether or not "religious experience" can be included as data for analysis is an irritant to Roberts who wants to acknowledge it as a type of more general human encounter. I will show that "experience" and "incongruity" are better framed as contradiction. Contradiction is a more precise word than incongruity when describing the subjective experience. Marxian contradiction

communicates both how the subject is cast by the play of forces in social life and how she experiences these forces—as conflict calling for resolution. When Marxian contradiction is introduced to the historical analytics of critical religious studies, the existential, lived experiences of subjects comes into view with a social frame.

### Incongruity Remapped as Contradiction

“Incongruity” stands in Roberts’s work as the experience of the subject in the midst of undecidable or excessive arrangement. Roberts traces the term in J.Z. Smith’s work, following how Smith presented it as the religious strategy for “grappl[ing] with that which seems out of place.”<sup>75</sup> As mentioned above, this was developed alongside of a “locative” strategy of orientation. Roberts claims that Smith inadequately develops incongruity as its own strategy, one where “chaos, disorder, lack of fit” are a part of a religious disposition that is “neither overcome nor (only) a spur to a new ordering or reordering, a disposition that in some significant sense *bears* or *inhabits* chaos.”<sup>76</sup> Using his positive examples, Roberts calls out how people, texts, and the singularity of self deliver incongruity as a particularly lively place or mode. Meeting the incongruous is a challenge for both the subject-scholar and for the field of religious studies. It is also the condition of responsiveness as such, “that which stands out and cannot be incorporated into or subsumed under any kind of unified self, historical tradition, or social formation.”<sup>77</sup> Incongruity cannot be resolved but can and should be responded to by “thinking respectfully and responsibly.”<sup>78</sup> It may take shape in philosophy as an *aporia* or in experience as *liminality*. The injunction to reduce it, to see it only as the property of

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<sup>75</sup> Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 25.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 29, 30.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

another text, society, or person, or consolidated as ‘the other’, is to close off its situational givenness.

Roberts sees that critical, social methods close off incongruity, both as an object of study and as a legitimate method. If the scholar is willing to be remade in the process of engaging another’s worldview that is under critique, then perhaps there is room for the study of social formations and subjectivities: this is critique under the lights of the incongruous.<sup>79</sup> Still, Roberts does not want the political to hamper this open inquiry, this vulnerable subject or tender moment, instead conceding that it will need to be considered in due course.

Critical religious studies closes off incongruity when it patrols institutions and departments, claiming that theology tarnishes religious studies as a credible study within the university.<sup>80</sup> In seeking to separate social scientific methodologies from more humanistic or theological ones, some have seen critical religious studies dismissing the historical lineage that has mutually produced both.<sup>81</sup> Other institutional contexts may

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<sup>79</sup> Roberts quotes Saba Mahmood here: “Critique, I believe, is most powerful when it leaves open the possibility that we might also be remade in the process of engaging another’s worldview, that we might come to learn things that we did not already know before we understood the engagement. This requires that we occasionally turn the critical gaze upon ourselves, to leave open the possibility that we may be made through an encounter with the other.” He cites Mahmood further for saying that there is space for theory that is not political but that politics will enter in. I think he is misreading her for what is meant by politics. The social constructionists and I have a much broader definition of politics, one that is definitely a part of her anthropological work. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 37 quoted in Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 117.

<sup>80</sup> McCutcheon says this repeatedly. Donald Wiebe is most known for it. “To repeat, in these essays I attempt to recover for the university a study of religion governed by principles of scientific investigation and I decry the current governance of such study by religious goals. I am aware that in this attempt I might well be accused of following a political agenda. But if so, the agenda does not activate concerns foreign to the university’s aims and intentions. It is a “political” act in that it is an attempt to re-establish or re-found the discipline as it first emerged in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and in terms of which it first received legitimation as a university discipline.” Donald Wiebe, *The Politics of Religious Studies: The Continuing Conflict with Theology in the Academy*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), xvi. See, especially, Wiebe’s essay, “The Failure of Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion,” in *The Politics of Religious Studies*: 141-62.

<sup>81</sup> Linell E. Cady and Delwin Brown, ed. *Religious Studies, Theology and the University: Conflicting Maps, Changing Terrain* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002).

house theology but this accommodation may just reinforce the denominational affiliation. The object of study is still sniffed closely to check for sympathetic reasoning.<sup>82</sup>

In focusing on incongruity and encounter, Roberts elevates it as an essential human experience and associates it with religiousness. As mentioned in my introduction, religion scholarship traffics in the problematic of identity and difference, of what is fixed and what slips away. Roberts wrestles with this and decides that the doing of scholarship is its risk of undoing, of the undecidability of encounter. As I have argued thus far, there are resources for this kind of complex account of human life within social theory. Where I see the most need for a close examination of alterity as it registers in religion scholarship is in the case of “religious experience.” As I will argue, if there can be some way of accounting for something like “religious experience” within critical religious studies, then there will be ways for analyzing a subjective perspective that satisfies the social constructionists and the existential dimension of incongruity that Roberts wants centered in religious studies.

*Religious Experience, or a Claim Made within the Phantasmagoria*

The topic of religious experience has been another boundary line, policing incongruity, according to Roberts, and is at the heart of Roberts’s concept of encounter. Scholars such as Robert Segal have argued that projects that describe other’s experience and label it as “religious” are always acts of interpretation and explanation because no one else’s experience is ever directly accessible.<sup>83</sup> Critical religious studies calls on

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<sup>82</sup> This argument is fought constantly over Robert Orsi’s work.

<sup>83</sup> Segal defends reductionism only as the less-bad option than what would be feigned understanding by the non-believer of the believer. It is a compelling presentation of a familiar quandry. " Take the conventional statement that a nonbeliever can appreciate religion in a believer's own terms. As what can he appreciate it? is the fundamental question. As a response to the divine? But what can the divine mean to him when he



religious studies generally to own its redescriptive task: without immediate access to the same experience, the scholar will always be in a position to redescribe, to translate, or to propose in other language, that which is properly another's.<sup>84</sup> Also, choosing which redescriptive terms has consequences: relying on insider or "emic" categories may not add any insight or may reinscribe assumptions. Critics say it is better to choose redescriptive terms consciously, using theoretically driven etic categories, organizing and analyzing and not relying on self-evidential or the emic terms of those whom the scholar studies.<sup>85</sup> Third, religious experience discourse, beginning with Rudolph Otto and William James, emerges from the context of a humanist liberal paradigm and assumes a self-possessed individual, missing the social altogether.

More stridently, McCutcheon identifies "experience" as the way humans signal the end of signification and he treats this limit not as a condition of human finitude (and thus, a potential for alterity as such), but as a rhetorical device. By this account, "religious experience" is the signpost for upcoming claims about particularity and universality. Whether ancient or modern, any discourse on experience moves shared reality into a different register, defending the author's interpretation as inviolable. In this

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does not accept its reality? Unless he reduces it to some- thing else, can it mean anything to him? If he does reduce it to something else, can he be appreciating what a believer says it means? Would not a believer say that the meaning of the divine is above all that it is real? Would not a believer say that to appreciate its meaning is to accept it? How, then, can a nonbeliever profess to be appreciating its reality for a believer without accepting it himself?" Robert Segal "In Defense of Reductionism," 110.

<sup>84</sup> This claim of redescription is embedded within both J.Z. Smith and Russell McCutcheon. For example, in Smith's, "A Twice Told Tale," he argues that "too much work by scholars of religion takes the form of a paraphrase, our style of ritual repetition, which is a particularly weak mode of translation, insufficiently different from its subject matter for purposes of thought." 370. Smith supports religious studies reflecting on how, broadly as a science, could emphasize its project of bringing the unknown into relationship with the known. "The field of religious studies has been more persistent than many of its academic neighbors in continuing to maintain one strand of nineteenth-century neo-Kantian thought, which argued that the distinction between the natural sciences and the human sciences was a matter of explanation as opposed to interpretation." J.Z. Smith, "A Twice Told Tale," 372.

<sup>85</sup> McCutcheon, *Critics not Caretakers*, 22.

register, religious experience is hot with normativity. The scholar, however, cools this engine with her explanatory tools.

Thus, when religious experience is invoked, it is more than a defense of an individual set of sensations, one experience among others. According to McCutcheon it marks an occlusion of history by an appeal to nature, a claim to authority that refuses any challenge.<sup>86</sup> The scholar cannot unlock all of human life and culture with one hermeneutical key, but the scholar can and should point out whatever she sees as off-limits, unique, or natural and to ask how it got that way and what sustains it, taking nothing for granted. Critical scholars should approach “religious experience” discourses ready to interpret them for their implicit “shoulds.”

Is there such a thing as experience at all for McCutcheon or is it only ever an argument for authority? The short answer is “yes”—McCutcheon separates experience from the *claims to* experience: experience itself, and not just its position as authority, are approachable when treated as sociopolitical events. Experience is a “contestable by-product of a stratified, diverse community, a by-product always in need of contextualization when studied.”<sup>87</sup> He continues on the same page to elaborate the dimensions of experience: “Experience is the localized depository of complex and often virtually transparent messages communicated through, and made possible by, social life.” These “virtually transparent messages” are teachers and, in McCutcheon’s example of a John Mellencamp lyric, those teachers could teach the fear of Jesus.<sup>88</sup> Combined with other sections from McCutcheon and other voices from social theory, these notes on

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

experience begin to show how critical religious studies could expand its inquiry into the more affective dimensions of the subject that I believe Roberts is searching for.

This extended foray into McCutcheon's work shows that incongruity is not, in fact, lost in critical religious studies scholarship. It is, instead, understood as a *social* effect. Restated, there is something recognized as and called "religious experience," but it should be first examined for who it appeals to and why. There is still a subject in critical religious studies, having the ups and downs of life, getting lost and found. But this is measured through its social, political and economic extensions. The interiority that Roberts appeals to is—and here I agree with McCutcheon—a mystification of social, political and economic events that are *no less traumatic* for this reason, *no less profound or disorienting* when understood as socially constructed. Instead of retreating into a humanist camp of "self" whose disruptions are counted through psychoanalytic self-estrangement or the secularized theological terms of deconstructive thought, there are means within critical theory still to appreciate the dynamic account of human life that permits an objective account of social forces constructing subjects. Critical theory makes room for the psychoanalytic and post-structuralist positions, too. Disagreeing with several strains of critical religious studies does not mean leaving it behind. Its value is that it actually has a chance at addressing and accounting for the massive material structures that produce the experiences of incongruity that register on the level of a "self" in Roberts's system.

Marxist literary critic Raymond Williams introduces us to the subjective encounter of the experiential, as a counter to Roberts's structural account of subjective experience. Thus, Williams helps to tease out undecidability and incongruity within a

frame of social formation. This further demonstrates that social construction can be home for “experience”—but casts it as social process. It is true that the social-in-process is difficult to witness and thus, analysis of a social form such as a religious institution or a common scriptural interpretation tends to treat it as fixed. As Williams observes, analysis tends towards the past because of sedimentation where the material conflicts and uneven disruption of resources can be more easily examined.<sup>89</sup> The present recedes under the conditions of social production, requiring special effort. One is searching

not only the temporal present, the realization of this and this instant, but the specificity of present being, the inalienably physical, within which we may indeed discern and acknowledge institutions, formation, position, but not always as fixed products, defining products. And then if the social is the fixed and explicit—the known relationships, institutions, formation, positions—all that is present and moving, all that escapes or seems to escape from the fixed and explicit and the known, is grasped and defined as person: this, here, now, alive, active, ‘subjective.’<sup>90</sup>

The subject is experienced as this point of production, of its construction. If Roberts resists social constructionism, the work of Williams explains: because of “all the knowns, complexities, the experienced tensions, shifts, and uncertainties, the intricate forms of unevenness and confusion, are against the terms of the reduction and soon, by extension, against social analysis itself.”<sup>91</sup> Roberts is in one sense correct—that first-person, incongruous human life will not be reduced.

Rejecting social analysis and diving towards humanistic analysis, however, is not the way through. Williams cautions that general concepts such as “human imagination” or “human psyche” are foils for complex conditions and displace specific social

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<sup>89</sup> “In most description and analysis, culture and society are expressed in an habitual past tense. The strongest barrier to the recognitions of human cultural activity is this immediate and regular conversion of experience into finished products.” Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 128.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 129-30.

conditions.<sup>92</sup> Modern psychological or aesthetic descriptions, as well as appeals to “experience, immediate feeling, and then, subjectivity and personality” are derivations of what is more precisely instances of a social process.<sup>93</sup> Without sliding towards these other modern discourses, Williams sticks to the social register and proposes that there are “structures of feeling” that are prompted and conditions by relations that tremble and pulse, carving up social reality into what could be felt as personal or important.<sup>94</sup> While the spark of interpersonal responsibility that Roberts wants for religious studies could be threaded through these structures (what has come to be known as “Affect theory” or “Affect studies”), I instead am interested in the habits of thought that in, rejecting social analysis, push for psychology or aesthetics—to the *exclusion of social analysis*. I aim to critique this move, wanting to stay with social analysis. Can there be a social account of incongruity? Where and how are these discourses folded into each other, such that scholars can speak across these lines?

One such way is to show how incongruity can be cast in social terms. In social theory, there is language for life lived with incongruity, even in McCutcheon. There is a density to human experience: “the busy and unruly flood of material and information that comprises the phantasmagoria of historic existence.”<sup>95</sup> But can the “encounters”

(Roberts’s term) with the “phantasmagoria” (McCutcheon’s term) become the object of

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<sup>92</sup> Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 130.

<sup>93</sup> “The undeniable power of two great modern ideological systems—the ‘aesthetic’ and the ‘psychological’—is, ironically, systematically derived from these senses of instance and process, where experience, immediate feeling, and then subjectivity and personality are newly generalized and assembled. Against these ‘personal’ forms, the ideological systems of fixed social generality, of categorical products, of absolute formations, are relatively powerless, within their specific dimension.” Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 129.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 132. In Williams’s words: “We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity.”

<sup>95</sup> Russell T. McCutcheon, *The Discipline of Religion: Structure, Meaning, Rhetoric*, (New York: Routledge, 2003).

study? If, as Roberts says, these encounters and experiences of incongruity are an important aspect to religious content, my turn to *critical* religious studies is to use their tools for interpreting incongruity at the site of so-called "experience." It does this, acknowledging the reifying process of locative work but then re-animates this through the dialectic.

I am concerned to show that scholars can theorize subjective *encounters with* or *experiences of* what McCutcheon terms the 'phantasmagoria' without relinquishing the social constructionism of social theory. It requires a dialectical method that grasps such experiences as social events. It also, however, implies keeping track of a multiplicity of forces and shifts in order to hold them up for analysis. Incongruity is a call for humility and submission to this impossible task. Social constructionism responds with Nietzschean-like affirmation of the human capacity for theorizing and ordering. Social theory has other routes. Where social theory best responds to Roberts is where it shows the heterogeneity of thought, its active procedures of composition, along with the elisions. It also has within it ways of talking about the material risks of incongruity, the affective gratifications of thought achieved and then again, the material consequences of those gratifications. Leaving social theory for the humanities is not necessary to get to the fullness of incongruity.

#### *Phantasmagoria as Contradiction*

I suggest that "contradiction" is better than incongruity to mark discontinuity. This term captures both the subjective perspective of disjuncture and political economy. In using the dialectics of Marx and Hegel, a scholar comes to focus on the movement and patterns within the density of the world-human nexus. This is not to explain away the

incongruous, as Roberts fears. Instead, it is to attend to the patterning behavior and generalizing work of human thought—a remarkably consistent aspect across expressions of humans within various social configurations.<sup>96</sup> Viewing the human-world intersection as a series of incongruous events, failed expectations, or overwhelming stimuli means we view the conditions of existence as merely random, lacking any explanation or analysis, and it thus negates human agency in generating our own conditions. While the world is, indeed, dense with trajectories and effects that are too innumerable to calculate, humans consistently look for patterns so as to order their lives and create stability for their thriving. Marx’s work particularly accounts for both the moment of the incongruous and the moment of patterning—both of which are necessary for an anthropological perspective on religious activity.

Marx’s use of contradiction describes the conditions of existence more precisely than what Roberts offers or what is available at first glance with the critical theorists of religion. Instead of the incongruous or the dense phantasmagoria, Marx sets out to examine the foundations of thought and existence from a dialectical movement quite different from that of the Hegelian idea. Marx is persuaded by Hegel’s invitation to see how the outside, opposite, or other of an idea is part of its identity, and thus, necessary to include when tracking ideas and their movement into politics and philosophy. But Marx names material conditions and political economy as the engine behind these movements. Contradictions are not merely objects of thought desperate for resolution or “aufhebung”: history moves by the gears of human creativity transforming unmarked landscapes into

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<sup>96</sup> Smith makes this claim to mark humans as those who think, primitive or modern, in their reliance on myths or maps “That is to say, the incongruity of myth is not an error, it is the very source of its power.” *Map is Not Territory*, 299. Claude Levi-Strauss saw organizing mental operations as not just modern but something much more encompassing and defining, a position popularized in *The Savage Mind*, trans. George Weidenfeld and Nicolson, Ltd. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

habital space and usable goods.<sup>97</sup> The “resolutions” are through this fusion of human effort and raw material. However, under capitalism, the contradictions of thought that Hegel encounters are made of muscle, sweat and hunger. Marx never lets his readers forget this.

Drawing on Marx’s analysis of changes in the modes of production, contradiction emerges where there are ruptures within or between the conditions for existence and the descriptions or terms of those conditions. Contradictions exist between modes of production as different means of producing material goods and the social, economic, and political structures that support and reinforce different means of producing and sustaining human life. In the mode of production called capitalism, the smooth trajectory of producing goods for one’s survival or pleasure is disrupted when the good becomes a commodity and threatens the producer’s power to become existentially and economically worthless in a marketplace beyond her reach. The worker is estranged from her own productive capacity, unable to recoup her generative capacity for her own use.<sup>98</sup> Marx identifies this shift as a contradiction for a very specific reason: when the mismatch of the forces of production are labeled a contradiction, political economy can be seen to infuse thought itself. Where what is at first, with Hegel, the oppositions of thought systems are in conflict at the level of ideas, with Marx, conflicts at the level of ideas are modeled on

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<sup>97</sup>“Property is a consequence of production bounded by land or family relations, then bounded by exchange; the first where there is exchange of man and nature, the second where there the exchange of labor; physical and mental activity together, second sense is where they are separated the relation to nature produces the form of society and the form of society shapes the relation of man to nature.” Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “The German Ideology” *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 158-59. I have appreciated Anthony Giddens’s discussion of Marxist contradiction in *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

<sup>98</sup> “This contradiction between the productive forces and the form of intercourse, which, as we saw, has occurred several times in past history, without, however, endangering the basis, necessarily on each occasion burst out in a revolution, taking on at the same time various subsidiary forms, such as all-embracing collisions, collisions of various classes, contradiction of consciousness, battle of ideas, etc., political conflict, etc.” Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 161.



conflicts sustained within the ways goods and services are unevenly distributed between their producers and consumers, leaving some with more and others with less.<sup>99</sup>

Contradiction, then, is both the unpleasant experience of cognitive dissonance of incompatible premises and the disjoint of social organization that both sustains and undermines society itself. With Marx in mind, there is no neat separation nor an elegant parallelism of these two layers—no crude base/superstructural cause-effect mechanism—but that they are only separable with the tools of analysis. Likewise, other common forms or concepts developed to extend Marxian analysis emerge when looking at Marx through his account of contradiction, especially those relevant to examination of religion and society as developed by critical religious studies theorists. Ideology and history begin to take shape through an understanding of Marx's use of contradiction. Combined with an appreciation of dialectics, contradiction shows itself as formulation of incongruity tuned to materialism and political economy.

For Marx, every aspect of that production and path is possible through the stratification of society and the assigned significance to persons, objects, and temporalities. Thus, a good shorthand for the breadth of these contradictions that support both uneven material distribution and ideological difference is to see them as *social* contradictions. An example of a contradiction under capitalism is how the individual human is paid individually, separated out for her effort and paid for it. Her wage is set up as her means to survival, to procuring her means. She is independent. And yet, she is also

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<sup>99</sup> This last point, about the relation of idea and materiality is most succinctly stated in "The German Ideology," "But even if this theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc., comes into contradiction with the existing relations, this can only occur because existing social relations have come into contradiction with existing forces of production; this, moreover, can also occur in a particular national sphere of relations through the appearance of the contradiction, not within the national orbit, but between this national consciousness and the practice of other nations, i.e., between the national and the general consciousness of a nation (as we see it now in Germany)." Marx and Engels, "The German Ideology," 159.

completely *dependent* because of the divisions of labor and the complex systems that are involved in food production and shelter. Her dependency on the complex system then, further reinforces the necessity that she alone is responsible for earning enough to secure her survival.<sup>100</sup>

Contradictions stall out thought and then activate it again, just as incongruity does. However, calling encounters with otherness “contradiction” instead of “incongruity” lends a set of vocabulary to the situation that shows how imbricated humans are with the economic and political events around them. In contradiction, the encounters and responses are crossed with all manner of relations that are too easily taken for granted. If this means that humans and others are too easily “located” on a grid for Roberts, it is only because the infinite number of social relations are too complex to even think or write. As J.Z. Smith says, the map can never be the territory. The lived social relations are too vast. Analysis steps in to give shorthand to the substance that are too dense to serviceably share.

Historicization developed, in part, to manage the proliferation, to begin to track the contradictions as they played out in social formations of subjects and groups. Historicization locates. But it does so with the acknowledgment that these are relations always *in history*, meaning always in process, always in between other moments that played out in slightly other ways. In the next section, I show that historicization can be produced in ways that lets the contradictions come to the fore. With experiences of incongruity and encounter remapped as points of contradiction within history, the immanent, fully social quality of subjective incongruity can be better perceived and can engage ethically, as Roberts demands. What is needed to bridge the humanist and critical

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<sup>100</sup> Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia*, 35.

discourses is a subject aware of both its interests in theorizing and its limitations in doing so. A critical scholarly subject will need to be able to account for her own social formation within others as well as adequately describe the surplus—that phantasmagoria—as something thoroughly historical that also escapes the grasp of the theorizing human mind. If it can do this, it will be able to respond to the anxieties of the loss of the surprising or normative aspects of religious studies. Or, to put it in terms of Fong and Roberts, critical religious studies will need to show how messiness and incongruity are historical social formations that cannot be reduced by them alone. I propose that it is what lies at that point of the JZ Smith’s “incongruous”—in both its categorical and existential senses – that one can begin to articulate what may be missing—or one could say “desired”—in contemporary religious studies.

#### Historicizing "Religion"

Having considered the subject or the excess of experience/life as site of conflict for critical methods, I want to consider how it is that these scholars have endeavored to emphasize the constructed or artificial category of "religion" within modern scholarship. By means of historicization and genealogies, critical scholars have retraced the development of the field. Tracing its own investments and commitments, scholars have sought a means to bring awareness to the process of scholarship itself, turning the lamp on themselves. This method differs from an ideology critique strictly in that it talks about the usefulness of these productions—of how categories are crucial to knowledge production. This reflects an implicit normative claim that critical knowledge holds value, at minimum to perpetuate scholarship itself, and at most, to affect some degree of positive change. What historicization offers as a method is first, self-reflexivity about the

procedures of scholarship, and second, a further means to lift off the naturalizing language that sustains religion as the equivalent of "experience" itself. Historicizing "religion" is another crucial method by which critical scholars have been blamed by Roberts for excising the humanities from religious studies. I propose, however, that critique can undo its own certainties, and that, as an artifact, can be examined as an aesthetic production.

The category of religion is variously seen as "manufactured" (McCutcheon), "constructed" (Dubuisson), and "invented," (Masuzawa) by those of critical religious studies. The crafting of religion as an artefact is noteworthy. In asking questions about history of the category, one asks about the relation of ideas to materiality, with the emphasis in critical religious studies to center on the materialist foundations of knowledge and the institutions that legitimate, circulate, and reproduce knowledge and their structures. By these accounts, the category also requires an ideological critique in order to unmask its "modern," "western," or "Christian"—and even "Protestant"—agendas. The value of such work is that it reveals the dynamics of interest, economics and politics within the field, especially those built on Christian universalism, Enlightenment reason, predatory capitalism, ethnographic method, and secularization. It also shows the problematics of representation and thus, advances scholarship beyond the power dynamics of modern scientific knowledge regimes. From these critiques, religion emerges as a concept developed in situations of global contact and connects to concrete, local concerns such as colonial systems of education, resource extraction, global trade,

nation-state development, governance, law, and military actions.<sup>101</sup> Analyzing the history of “religion”—its formulations and applications in literature recognized by our field of study—is a method and a theory that contribute to what I have been calling critical religious studies.

These scholars do not begin with essence or with the claim that there is a *sin qua non* that makes something “religious.” They do not query the origins of either religiousness or even origins of the category of “religiousness” in order to seek its true nature. Such historical methods are the target, not the practice, of the critical scholars. Instead, the critical religious studies approach is to ask about how disparate elements were collected and organized into what is now is recognized, misrecognized, or both—as Wilfred Cantwell Smith brought forward as he began an insight into the category of “religion.”<sup>102</sup> Historians of the category recount the contexts and biographies of prominent scholars and pull at the intellectual movements that pressed out some terms ahead of others.<sup>103</sup> “Religion” as a category of analysis has emerged through historical procedures and may be as a term, an artifice of the scholar’s workshop, but it can not be erased. Indeed, critical religious studies depends on “religion” to assert itself as distinct from the “political,” and so becomes a point of clarification for critical religious theory

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<sup>101</sup> Scholars with remarkable texts on this topic include Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India and "The Mystic East"* (New York: Routledge, 1999); and, David Chidester *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

<sup>102</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith proposed in his *The Meaning and End of Religion* that, due to the pedigrees of its terms to define religions, the field would be helped to replace “religion” with “traditions” and “faith.” This would, according to W.C. Smith, unhook the field from the etymologically-troubled “religion” along with other constructions that do not accurately correspond to the local descriptions. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (New York: Macmillan, 1963).

<sup>103</sup> Texts that recount the historical conditions around the production of knowledge in the field of religious studies are such ones as: James Samuel Preus, *Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory from Bodin to Freud*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*; Ivan Strenski, *Thinking About Religion: An Historical Introduction to Theories of Religion*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006).

that sees religion as a sub-category of politics that functions socially in remarkable ways.<sup>104</sup> Using the category “religion” as an occasion to analyze history and society is fruitful for interpreting the historical conditions of religious thought, the historical conditions of religious studies as a discipline, and also, more substantially, the historical conditions that promote different kinds of thinking and sees thinking and categories as differentiated across times and place—thus self-reflective of a historical mode of modern thought.

With these histories in mind, some propose alternative terms to religion, such as “cosmographic formation” or a dispersion of religion into more specific cultural terms so as to unhook the field from its history of colonialism, Christian imperialism, and capitalist investments.<sup>105</sup> From this urgency to discard the category “religion” in favor of a more deeply-treated history, these voices within critical religious studies call out the constructedness of categories, the violence committed in the use of category formation, and the options available for scholarship in the midst of these problematic histories.

Roberts wants scholars of the field to proceed with caution and ask about the “locative” effects of critical approaches. I can appreciate Roberts’s concern about too thoroughly placing, labeling, and suspecting scholars for their hegemonic formations, however, as I have argued, there are methods to use that would keep the uncertainty of any analytic project within view. Without placing Roberts next to each of these projects, I

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<sup>104</sup> My thinking here has been influenced by Kevin Schilbrack. Schilbrack avers that while the category of religion may be constructed, its phenomena are not. While it may distort what it seeks to name, has been used to essentialize diverse ways of living, and is too much about Protestant tradition and history, “religion” is still a useful category. He describes his position as a “critical realist view” that sees “religion” as a label for a set of behaviors that are, in crucial respects, independent of the scholar. Kevin Schilbrack, “Religions, Are There Any?” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 78, No. 4 (2010): 1112–1138. doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfq086.

<sup>105</sup> Daniel Dubuisson *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology*, trans. William Sayers (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007); Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

step back to consider if histories generally are too conclusive, too occupied with contextualization and situation. Are there examples of historical critical scholarship which undo the confidence game that Roberts accuses social constructionist methods of playing? How could such a history involve the subjective, experiential register of uncertainty for both the scholar and religious person alike?

As mentioned above, a theory of social formation would make this possible if widely and rigorously applied or if in part self-reflectively engaged by the author and reader alike. To some degree, all scholars are ever within a stream of history that they seek to examine, like embedded journalists in a conflict being waged in their name. But this only further implies that one could extend this project *ad infinitum*. Without some nuance of history and method, social formation turns to reification, losing out on the existential conditions of contradiction that play up and dominate much of what constitutes subjectivity.

History, as a theory and a method, offers up several options for troubling the too-certain means that Roberts implies. Genealogical methods and psychoanalysis have broadly introduced into the field of religious studies a less locatable history. These methods reproduce the friction of objective and subjective perspectives in history for their readers. Roberts uses psychoanalytic frames for his own investigations to consider how uncertainty is at play or involved in much of what counts as human thought. However, this does not help at all for considering social formations, political arrangements, and economic forces as constitutive of the subject. Genealogical methods can preserve religion as a distinctive occasion of analysis. Through the situational work of genealogy, the focus turns to the effects of analytic frames. Through genealogy, the

scholar shifts from asking about how to let in or accommodate the strange or incongruous to investigating the problematics of difference and otherness generally.

As anthropologist and genealogist Talal Asad observes, general “religion” fractures when compared to particular religions, even proximate Christian ones like medieval Christianity and Islam. In his explicit uses of Foucault, Asad marks how the term “religion” has been applied across different material relations and other times in which subjects were formed by different logics than those of modern colonial conditions. While Asad has drawn criticism for his textualist methods that lean away from the more tentative, particular, and immanent work of sorting reminiscent of field ethnography, Asad tackles the power/knowledge grids that fund and instigate such projects.<sup>106</sup> His starting premise does not turn inquiry simply into a witch-hunt of colonial offenses, as simply ideology critique might produce, but inspires scholars to analyze what is taken for granted, especially the operative systems, and to see through to their constructed nature. Asad applies this to his investigations of secularism and revises the linear narrative of progressive secularization. Where some see the decline of religiousness and the rise of Enlightenment values, Asad sees the shift toward the universalized nation-state, developed across terrains where scholars mixed with merchants and bureaucrats. Asad tends to say that different practices and sensibilities and habits are roped under “religion” at different times and places, which doesn’t (for him) negate the term so much as mandate a historical investigation of its “grammar.”<sup>107</sup> In his genealogy of the secular,

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<sup>106</sup> As Benson Saler argues, “[w]e do not begin, in short, with ‘concrete sets of historical relations and processes,’ but with perspectives and mediating categories—and, if we are lucky, our perspectives are flexible and adaptive enough to warrant describing them as a ‘modest view.’” Benson Saler, *Conceptualizing Religion: Immanent Anthropologies, Transcendent Native, and Unbounded Categories* (New York: Berghann Books, 1999), 101.

<sup>107</sup> Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 189.



Asad demonstrates that ‘religion’ is not to be held as secular’s opposite but that secular can be seen to co-constitute religion—and religion with diverse interests and contents.<sup>108</sup>

A second example comes from Masuzawa’s history of the field of religious studies traces how Europeans, in seeking unity for the diversity of colonial and economic contexts, “invented” the category of “world religions.”<sup>109</sup> This is the book that Orsi called an “anti-history” in his review but, as I argued earlier, is an account of the rules and principles of discourse and epistemology in the nineteenth century. Masuzawa shows how universalism was first *Christian* universalism, translated through a universal religious impulse, and provided a means for explaining diversity that still secured Christian preeminence.<sup>110</sup> This history which most notably plays itself out in the sympathetic attitude these nineteenth-century comparativists extends into present-day discourses of world religions and pluralism—a history that Masuzawa and the other

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<sup>108</sup> See also Saba Mahmood “Can Secularism be Otherwise?” Michael Warner, et al., ed., *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013): 282-99. The arguments of secularization as a distinctive procedure were set out in Asad’s influential *Formations of the Secular*. For an example of the potentials of his anthropology of secularization, see Judith Butler and Mahmood in a discussion about the Danish Mohammed cartoons controversy in 2009 Symposium, “Is Critique Secular? A Symposium at UC Berkeley,” *Public Culture* 20, no. 3, (2008): 447-452. doi: 10.1215/08992363-2008-004.

<sup>109</sup> Masuzawa treats the comparative religionists from the mid nineteenth century as an occasion to not only investigate this constitutive function of research and identity but also to reflect on the field at present. For example, in her reading of the turn of the century British scholar Henry Louis Jordan, Masuzawa weaves in the resistance to what strikes the contemporary reader as political incorrectness in order to dissolve the barrier into thinking that “we” would not commit those errors of ego-dependence as those “colonizing scholars” would. “Such value laden panoramic survey of ‘old,’ ‘inferior,’ and ‘false’ religions, with its evangelizing and missionizing agenda so unequivocally pronounced, would likely not only embarrass contemporary scholars but also offend the pluralist doctrine of today’s world religions discourse more generally. It has become a prevailing ethic and custom to edit out from both academic and public discourses on religion any sign of hierarchical valuation, any overt expression of self-serving and self-elevating motives lurking behind the work of comparison—that is, motives other than those in the interest of science *or* of the ecumenical harmony of the world. At the same time, scholars today are aware that in former times a large number of biased treatises dismissive of religions other than the author’s own were written in the name of ‘fair surveys’ and ‘comparative religion’ as we learn from the ever-resourceful Louis Henry Jordan, the explicitly partisan, apologetically motivated comparativism has long thrived side by side with, and often in collusion with, the new science of ‘comparative religion’ or ‘history of religion.’” *The Invention of World Religions*, 103. Thus, in Masuzawa, the “invention” is something both done and ongoing that contemporary scholars must recognize as having happened, still happening, and in some ways, impossible to wrest from.

<sup>110</sup> Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 95-97.

critical religious studies scholars see as problematic. While Orsi criticized this text as anti-historical, I see in it how genealogical methods set up the terms of strangeness and “religious others.” Orsi and Roberts want these others to trouble or unsettle the locative scholar. I see, instead, that they reimagine the positions of “scholar” and “other” straight out of the gate. Instead of the “play of ordinary and extraordinary” where the religion scholar and religious person share the unstable ground of wanting to explain but are unable to do so consistently or with utter confidence,<sup>111</sup> history as genealogy remarks on how the extraordinary is teased apart from ordinariness as a procedure of history and done so to various effects.

*Historicized Desire: Origin as a Case of Ambivalence*

In heeding the call to historicize, Masuzawa adds new dimensions to historiography in critical religious studies when she takes up psychoanalysis as a critical discourse available for social theory. The search for the/an origin of religion has been a target for religious studies across the twentieth century, but while religious studies may have outgrown its quest for the origins of religiousness, it still tells narratives of origins such as creation myths and in etymologies. Masuzawa reads these parallel narratives against the contemporaneous and imbricated discourse of psychoanalysis and finds religious studies saturated with a desire for origins. Psychoanalytic allusions to a return of the repressed permits Masuzawa to thread history with unconscious activity. Ambiguity comes center stage. Unlike Roberts, however, she does not attempt a direct address of the uncertainty of incongruity. Instead she watches as scholars use origin to modulate their relationship to what cannot be determined. Where origin either can refer to a plenum or a

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<sup>111</sup> Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 12.

nothingness, it settles as an “object of intense desire” because of its “hyper-cathected” status, compensating for what is fundamentally unknown and unknowable.

It is understandable—one might say that it is structurally inevitable—that origin, qua that which is at once everything and nothing, should be an object of intense desire. At the same time, it follows with equal certainty and necessity that such a hyper-cathected object should be subject to strenuous prohibition. For, that which is most acutely and singularly desired is also that which must be most stringently and energetically denied. In short, the fundamental contradiction endemic to the concept (qua everything and nothing), as well as this logical double-bind of desire and prohibition that defines and determines its function, together make an impossible object-idea out of ‘origin.’ This constitutional difficulty, it appears, haunts every deliberation on the problem of origin, openly or surreptitiously.”<sup>112</sup>

The “impossibility” of understanding origin, according to Masuzawa, seems at first an overstatement. I see, however, this impossibility as a manner of speaking towards the affective and libidinal conditions that surround contradiction. Origin questions stimulate the anxiety—and thrill—of limit conditions, which Masuzawa signals with psychoanalytic terms. She identifies the limit-issue of any inquiry into origin and calls out that limit conditions fold over onto the limits of representational logic. From a modern worldview, origin questions are speculative and are ultimately unanswerable. Yet humans ask them anyway. Origins also propose the strange thought that answers to the present are actually in the past. Again, another contradiction. With her example of origin, Masuzawa introduces how objects of study attract attention because of the way words and concepts cover over obstacles and gaps in thinking and in experience.

Masuzawa’s example of origin shows how modern knowledge production steps into new problems as it seeks to solve other ones. In this case, the nineteenth-century modern scientific approach and emerging knowledge-field of biology and evolution

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<sup>112</sup> Tomoko Masuzawa, “Origin,” *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. Braun and McCutcheon, 209-24.

piqued interest beyond classification to explanation. This then led to a shift, through such scholars as Eliade, to turn the tables of inquiry to remind scholars of the limits of knowledge, generating a new, impeachable category labeled the “sacred.” Through Masuzawa, religious studies scholarship shows how new territories and connections are generated, layering new foundations on old structures of thought while applying new technologies to erect more elaborate and nuanced perspective. Throughout, origin is not wiped away or replaced but put on hold. Through Masuzawa’s account, the history of the field is creased and glued, held together by the relationship of its objects, theories and methods. Her project refers back to its procedures of historical method as it tells a history, , denying while it speaks of denial, making contradictions as it undoes and remaps other contradictions.

As a contributor to critical religious studies, Masuzawa historicizes origin and also elaborates on the location of contradiction, not mere incongruity, within the field. In her dialectical approach, she does not fall into the locativism that Roberts charges, pulling out from within her discussion how scholarship trembles with ambivalence even as it asserts. Her discursive analysis of the discipline’s archive leaves within it the hesitations and decisions of its contributors. Where a more social-scientific reading would treat a search for origins as an ideological claim about false unity for the purpose of authority or simply as bad metaphysics, Masuzawa reads tension between renunciation and gratification. But this is not only a psychological study: her investigations play out across the backgrounds of colonial outposts and institutional relations. Thus, in moving between political economy, cultural theory, and psychoanalysis, Masuzawa unfolds the conditions for intellectual inquiry for Euro-Americans in late modernity. Her method

produces an analysis of the material conditions of thought, and thus, situates the study of religion as not only constructing objects for study but as an effect of specific conditions, in this case, late modernity's anxieties of verification and authenticity in industrial capitalism.

Masuzawa positions desire as a major term for critical religious studies. How does this square with other scholars? Subjective interests have been the primary term for thinking about desire within critical religious studies. Craig Martin, in his introduction to the critical study of religion, makes the clear distinction that socially-given identities precipitate interests, and that, distinct from desires which are short-term, interests are desires extended in time and space where those with more social capital are in positions to satisfy more of their social interests. As he explains, "By 'desire' we simply refer to the desires (in the colloquial sense) that subjects have—or, more precisely, *are socialized to have*—and which they express both explicitly (through what they say) and implicitly (through their behavior)." <sup>113</sup> Thus, desire is something that happens through socialization and that one represses or maximizes to serve interests over time. One may desire to comply with the social code in order to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the society, but one desires this because it is in one's interest—*increase in social capital*—to do so. Or it may be in one's interests to resist dominant norms to gain social capital in non-dominant groups (one can think here of the increased acceptance of tattoos in society.) From here, Martin moves to show that the subject needs to be viewed as one who is rewarded

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<sup>113</sup> Martin, *Critical Introduction*, 60. Italics in original.

through the social and that scholars should be suspicious of these reward structures, but also of who is rewarded.<sup>114</sup>

I agree with Martin that desires and interests can and should be analyzed for the ways that each legitimate subject positions differentially and that these are scripted through procedures of authorization that support hegemony. He pulls back to show that, following Lincoln, the desires that one has are those put in place by the social and that these should be seen as externally, socially directed—and that these make subjects desire what is desired for them by others with more capital.<sup>115</sup> Martin's distinction of interests as long-term and desires as short-term helpfully addresses the lived, historical condition of decision-making. What discourages me from this interpretation of the subject under social conditions is that first, interest-fulfillment is a complex, intensive process that occupies considerable material, temporal, social, and affective resources and produces substantial effects. These procedures, because of their complex operations and considerable role in social life, are given little space in critical religious studies literature. Second, as Martin says, these operations disproportionately constrain those of lower social status.<sup>116</sup> Critical religious studies theory would benefit from more attention to unpacking the range of authorizing procedures, as Martin advocates, but needs also to theorize desires as attachments that may or may not follow the logics of authorization.

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<sup>114</sup> "When confronted with a question about who is or isn't authentic, the best strategy is to not address the question directly at all, but to look behind the question and ask 'Who wants to know, and why do you need to know it?' When we are asking who 'is' and 'isn't' part of a tradition, we are wrongly searching for an essence we will not find. What we need to look at is not authenticity ('are you authentic?') but function ('how does this work?'). What kind of identification happens when we use certain words? What are their effects of this identification for us and our relationships? Who wants to know? And why?" Martin, *Critical Introduction*, 159.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 56-57.

<sup>116</sup> "The reason this ability serves a subject's interests is because when the social arrangements are not well suited to work toward the satisfaction of an individual's desires, she can change the social arrangements so that they will. Consequently, *domination takes place when subjects in particular positions have a disproportionate ability to alter those arrangements, compared with subjects in other social positions.*" Martin, *Critical Introduction*, 65. Italics in original.

Scholarship in critical religious studies thus proposes this subjective level of social analysis but rarely follows through with its prescriptions. By distinguishing one's research as distinctly critical or analytic and not religious, or by insisting on the scientific or category-directed work of the scholar as distinct from religious others, scholars excuse themselves from being objects of their own analytic tools. It is not impossible to imagine such a critical study, but it is something that takes time—and interest?<sup>117</sup> The gaze is consistently turned outwards, or more precisely, constructs an outside through the motion of separation of articulating the differences. Thus, scholarship is seen to have *legitimate* legitimating practices while other forms are less legitimate, illegitimate, irrational, or just controlling.<sup>118</sup> As J.Z. Smith's approach demonstrates, critical religious studies scholarship does not need to set itself up as divisive in order to be incisive.

Attention to the social field need not dismiss the subject's perspective within it, as this chapter has argued. But neither does it depend on a concept of a liberal individual. Desire, as I propose, bypasses the actor-agent dimensions implied by interests. It also supports subject positions which are less able to maximize their interests. It could do the theoretical work that is demanded of critical religious studies and support research into

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<sup>117</sup> "Interest" would be the internally consistent metric. At the end of his response to Paul J. Griffiths and June O'Connor in his 1998 *JAAR* article, McCutcheon points to the self-critical perspective he would employ. It would seem he has other interests to pursue, which includes scolding those who he feels scolded by. "One final point: Am I free of the very structural constraints I see operating in the work of others? Certainly not! Contextualist critiques are self-referential—how could it be any other other [sic] way? But since one can only accomplish so much in a book or an essay, not to mention this rather brief rejoinder, I leave it to others to contextualize my few contributions to the public discourse on the study of religion—but, please, no paternalistic spanking, humoring patting, or speculations on the health of my digestive system." Russell T. McCutcheon, "Talking Past Each Other: Public Intellectuals Revisited: Rejoinder to Paul J. Griffiths and June O'Connor," *Journal of the American Association for Religion*, 66, no. 4 (1998): 915.

<sup>118</sup> This kind of attitude comes forward in the situating of religion as within Enlightenment discourses of rationality and irrationality, where religious studies begins and sustains itself through sorting into one or the other. McCutcheon sets up this binary but does nothing to trouble it except perhaps to reinstate a new binary and claim the privilege of the public and dissent as the legitimate—and legitimating sphere—above privacy and experience. Russell T. McCutcheon, "Introduction to Part II: The Autonomy of Religious Experience," *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*, ed. Russell T. McCutcheon (London: Cassell Publishing, 1999), 67-73.

particular conditions—an approach advised but hard to follow through on.<sup>119</sup> Desire can be cast as a social construction, not as a private matter, and when defined through political economy, can become a figure for which to further explore what motivates both religion and scholarship in religion.

## II. Desires as Subjective Social Formations, the Case for Utopia

This chapter has honed in on how to grasp and study the subjective perspective within the layers of human thought and action, seeking a way to demonstrate that the incongruity that Roberts sees as vital to an ethical life and responsible scholarship should be viewed as created out of social life and the interactions of creative, productive forces that are difficult to track, always interrupted by other productive forces. Psychoanalysis is one way to figure these interruptions. Seeing it as a discourse rising out of the late nineteenth century as a response to bourgeois European subject formation, psychoanalysis becomes a means of redescription, alongside social theory, for the ruptures or discontinuities of reason that have been coded as religious. Blending it with historical analysis can be appropriate when considering subjective experience within the range of modernity and capitalism—both contexts for the construction of religious studies. I will consider more about the uses of psychoanalytic terms in chapters two and three as they relate to material culture and subject formation. In chapter four, I will extend Masuzawa’s query into the place of origin studies in religion and ask if the hunt

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<sup>119</sup> McCutcheon avows that while he appreciates Talal Asad’s direction set forth in *Genealogies of Religion* (1993) that studying how religion authorizes in distinct times and places as distinct traditions; keeping the scholar’s tool from carving out a universal “religion” is hard to do. See McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 134, for this blanket warning and McCutcheon, *The Discipline of Religion*, 240, for specific examples where the modern thing of religion comes to be collected as one effect.



into the past as the plenum or obscured source has a correlate in another distinctly modern formation: Utopia.

As mentioned above, J.Z. Smith describes utopia as simply a “no place” to oppose the locative impulse. He later modifies this formulation and shortly abandons the term for incongruity and then, for difference.<sup>120</sup> But in employing these two terms, Smith calls out how both religion and religious studies are projects of orientation AND disorientation. J.Z. Smith’s work shows how historians inherit and then revise or create the categories that they use. This attention to categories has had an important role in critical religious studies and also bears on how Utopia can become a conceptual tool for thinking about religious studies as a modern category. This somewhat crude formulation for interpreting religious phenomena is not striking for how it uses Utopia as much as it is for how Smith sees interpretation, redescription, and categorization as necessary yet delicate tasks of religious studies. As mentioned above, I am distinctly interested in the contingences of categories, about how they are chosen and deployed. I depart starkly from Smith’s “strict sense” of Utopia as “no place,” and instead, situate it within modernity as a term related to a specific genre of literature that then has been expanded and taken shape over the centuries since coined by Thomas More in 1516.

I take two ideas from Smith’s use of utopian here: first is the insistence of the contingency for all categories, a theme that is more thoroughly unpacked in the final essay of the volume by the same name, “Map is not Territory.” This is a guiding theme for my own research and connects me to many important concerns raised through critical

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<sup>120</sup> Smith's essay, “When the Chips Are Down” in *Relating Religion* is Smith's own account of his transition, and while he says that he has not abandoned utopia, he makes no mention of it in the other essays in the collection whereas difference reappears frequently as a category, with essays titled “Differential Equations” and “What a Difference a Difference Makes.”

religious studies. Second is his caution about the literalness of the word utopia and how this troubles the creation of the category itself on closer inspection. My dissertation takes seriously this choice of “Utopia” as a category for religion and embraces Smith’s caution that it holds multiple meanings and thus, needs careful definition.<sup>121</sup> I will go on to argue that Utopia is best understood as a uniquely western modern formation similar to yet different from the modern formation of religion. Both can be seen as human social categories responding to the political economic conditions known as modernity. This dissertation argues that Utopian desire not only describes modern forms of religiousness but also can be used to redescribe—to analyze and leaven understanding of—the motivations within the modern academic inquiry of religion.

Literary critic Fredric Jameson capitalizes “Utopia” to signal this relationship to modernity. I follow this convention. Utopia, as a literary genre, has several formal elements that make it distinct: its image of the ideal commonwealth, of a harmonious society, often removed or separated from a contrasting society that supplies characters to visit and explore this enclave both similar and different itself. For Jameson, these literary products signal a moment in cultural history coming to terms with the political and economic conditions of exploration and the transitions within England and European social life marked by transitions of trade, social organization, political institutions—all signals of the shift to a capitalist mode of production.<sup>122</sup> These productive contradictions are figured as the juxtaposition of the Utopian society and the contrasting society of the

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<sup>121</sup> I depart starkly from Smith’s “strict sense” of utopia as “no place,” and instead, see its specificity in situating it within modernity, as a term related to a specific genre of literature that then has been expanded and taken shape over the centuries since coined by Thomas More. Fredric Jameson capitalizes “Utopia” to signal this relationship to modernity. As discussed in my introduction, I follow this convention of capitalizing Utopia to mark my argument.

<sup>122</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, (New York: Verso, 2005), 1, 18.

text and then repeated by the contradiction within the name itself—Utopia as that which is both the no-place (U-topia) and the good place (Eu-topia). Utopia is well-known to trigger ambivalence as it paints a picture of a society that is enjoyed by its residents but under suspicion by its visitors.

Constance Furey turns to the form of Utopia to investigate potentials for practicing history with a critical frame, sensitive to the kind of locativism that Roberts sees with some methods. Furey responds in her essay to Roberts, Orsi and Nancy Levene—religionists seeking alternative historiography that responds to and includes excess. In an effort to loosen historicism from its authoritarian posture, she follows the turn from philosophies of history to situated histories of context, noting the influence of Foucault and Joan Scott and an implied motivating logic that “telling a different story about the past will somehow expand our options today” (mirroring a move in culture to re-narrate the past i.e. Truth and Reconciliation Committee).<sup>123</sup> Mindful of Derrida’s insight that the past haunts the present and compels the retelling as a part of mourning, Furey seeks a way into a transformative retelling, critical of the present, sensitive to the strange, and productive of new conditions. For this, Furey turns to Thomas More’s *Utopia* and Fredric Jameson’s dual commitments to utopia and historical materialism to “illuminate the theoretical dilemmas involved in critiquing history.”<sup>124</sup>

What she constructs in this evocative essay is a method of doing “Utopian history.” More’s *Utopia* is a satire, mixing the familiar and fantastical with no clear signal as to which is which. This “dialectic of fact and fiction produces a distinctive kind of realism that establishes a place for ideas that stand apart from society without claiming

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<sup>123</sup> Constance Furey, “Utopian History,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 80, no 1 (2012), 385.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

transcendence.” While Utopias are fiction, she sees that history, too, is made: “it is not an object to discover but a learning process, the ongoing work of self-critique.”<sup>125</sup> Furey argues that when scholars regard history as a creative task like writing utopian fiction, we can lift out how the unusual mixes with prevailing norms and this in turn stimulates the immanent possibilities within present. She avows that using utopia might at first seem “perverse,” with its association with stasis and an imperialism of an old philosophy of history, where progress and teleology shunt difference. However, she holds out that the fusion of criticism and construction, literalness and fantasy is a model for how history is written and “lays bare what we have invested in history and does so in a way that is formally analogous to history itself.”<sup>126</sup>

Furey roots her appreciation for the critical force of the Utopian literary form and the uncharted potentials of history in Fredric Jameson’s work. Her essay weaves his complex thinking expertly for her purposes of sketching a potent concept. By combining her summary with additional explication, I want to begin to show how Jameson’s method of interpreting cultural forms can lend nuance and texture to the aims of critical religious studies and advance a dialectical engagement with the problematic of social and subjective theories for religious studies.

The Utopian satire delivers the contradictions of History for readers as hyperbole: in More’s *Utopia*, gold is worthless, monogamy is rare, and the rational treatments for thieves were proposed by a fool. While not all Utopian narratives are so blatantly satirical, the genre is recognized for its way of re-presenting the status quo via its distorted or reformulated other. In working out the details for a sustainable social

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 391.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 390.

structure built on revised conventions, the Utopian genre hypostasizes a different status quo, freezing the world and ending History's contradictions. Furey sees in More's work a resistance to conclusions. In its structure, Utopia makes it impossible to take its alternative society as a blueprint. The juxtapositions are too tightly woven.

Just as Utopias are restricted in what kinds of fantasies they can present due to the ability of the reader to recognize society as still functional, as still inhabitable, writing and revisiting history—historiography—runs up against what has happened, the archive as it has been preserved. However, in its retelling by scholars, Furey suggests that history be considered for the way it limits and defines what can be said, but also is opened up again for its counternarratives for the present. When historians write about the past, they would do well to consider at least two dimensions of the Utopian form: first, how they are performing an immanent critique of the present, and second, how in juxtaposing the present with the past, the familiar and the strange, one is also involved with a resolution of the contradictions of capitalism. Furey turns to Jameson for this guidance on what it means to include Utopia in doing historical work: that there should be a

"renewal of Utopian thinking, of creative speculation as to the place of the subject at the other end of historical time, in a social order that has put behind it class organization, commodity production and the market, alienated labor, and the implacable determinism of a historical logical [sic] beyond the control of humanity."<sup>127</sup>

Utopian history is twofold: it is immanent critique but also "creative speculation." What Utopia produces then, at its best, is what history, too should offer: an endurance for

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<sup>127</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 110, quoted in Furey, "Utopian History," 390. This quotation appears in the essay "Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan: Marxism, Psychoanalytic Criticism, and the Problem of the Subject" and corresponds to page 393 as it appears in *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading Otherwise*, ed. Shoshana Felman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

indeterminacy, with an endless dialectical movement of “immanent critique infused with hope.”<sup>128</sup>

As I have shown, Furey’s “utopian history” is a lively concept that gives an introduction to the wealth and possibilities within Utopia and Fredric Jameson’s thinking. Jameson’s work spans six decades and is worth more attention within religious studies as it provides a way of theorizing religious tropes as part of culture from within a cultural studies/material culture method. It contributes by demonstrating ideology critique as an immanent, self-critical practice that does not deny the appeal and constructive force of culture on its critics. Jameson’s method of historicizing not only narratives or characters but also the form that culture takes turns interpretation towards the constitution of thought, again inviting the critic into her own historical moment, creating a type of “metacriticism” for thinking the tools of scholarship as well as their objects, as critical religious studies does. Furey’s essay invites further query into Jameson’s formal method and specifically, the figure of Utopia within modern literature.

As Furey demonstrates, Utopia is a fascinating and relevant form that invites reflection on the production of modern, Anglo-European knowledge and terms of verification. This dissertation extends this conversation with Jameson for religious studies and contributes in several ways. Utopia and religion have thus been conceived of as versions of one or the other. My project proposes that instead of reading Utopias as religious or religions as Utopian, I offer how their mutual engagement with concepts such as human nature, idealization, transcendence and society can be remapped as navigating the limits of representation. I am especially interested in Jameson’s focus on aesthetic forms that reflect moments of modernity. The Utopian literary form has a particular role

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<sup>128</sup> Furey, “Utopian History,” 397.

for Jameson in that it figures the contradictions within capitalism. Where Furey treats Utopia as a model for specifically historical projects, I want to say that Utopia is also a frame for the scholarly category of religion. Developed within modern Anglo-European intellectual history, both the Utopian literary form and the scholarly object “religion” are responses to political, economic and social histories of global exploration, colonization, and industrialization. In some ways, this dissertation performs Furey's account of the scholar in its “willingness to take the energy of [my] desire for novelty and put it to work in utopian history.”<sup>129</sup> Perhaps literally here as I write a utopian history of my own.

From here, one can begin to see how the strange or incongruous that Roberts and Orsi promote as necessary to religion overlap with seemingly secular forms such as Utopia. As a representation of good but impossible social arrangements, Utopia has been variously embraced and rejected over the last 500 years. Roberts's search for an analysis of religious phenomena that keeps theory open to the life of the particular can be transposed onto the secular image of Utopia that resists easy location.<sup>130</sup> The particularity, however, is not in the unknowable about another as ethnographic subject specifically or social formation generally, but in the Utopian literary text that attempts but never completes the account of a total society. The contradictions of the social world may at first seem resolved in the Utopian social order that removes various anxieties from consideration but these are never absolutely managed in the questions that linger for both Utopia's visitors and its readers.

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> "In other words, 'knowledge' in the humanities is always disturbed by the reverberations of the particular, which can never be fully subsumed by the concept or the explanation." My project, as I have been arguing, sees this relation of a generalizable particularity as another kind of logical inconsistency that religious studies coalesces around, problematizing this in its theories. In my project, I take this generalizable perspective of particularity and look at how Utopia can help scholars notice these kinds of contradictions and to question how they might relate to material relations. Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 115.

The lingering questions, such as the contradiction of the peaceful yet troubling society, the ambivalence—these are signals of what I will develop as part of the desire for Utopia—a subjectively experienced, thoroughly social encounter with contradiction, referenced through a historical deposit that can be explored but never absolutely captured. The incongruous that is central to Roberts’s reanimated, responsive religious studies is first, not exclusive to only the religious imaginary but I agree with Roberts that it is an important aspect of religious theory and method. As I have drawn out, incongruity can be actively engaged by critical religious studies through appeals to social theory where it provides access to various states of social formations, ones more proximate to subjectivity than what some forms of social contradiction provide. Where ideology critique is leavened with dialectical method and cognizance of the temporalities of society-in-process, it functions both to raise both suspicion about formations and to incite curiosity about their constitution. The creative, productive aspects of social forms re-engage the humanism that excites Roberts without collapsing the affective into aesthetic or psychological terms. Masuzawa’s use of psychoanalysis as a historical discourse draws out how the conflicts of category formation are lived tensions that register as satisfactions and frustrations.

While Masuzawa's work traces origin across the modern discourse of religious studies, my own asks about the desires for Utopia within the modern study of religion: in what ways does the figure of Utopia consolidate and redistribute the longing to resolve social contradictions? How does Utopia, signaling the ambivalent aspects of all fantasy, simultaneously resist and perform representation of social totality? This interest in Utopia—what I want to call a desire for Utopia—emerges from the contradictions of



political economy evident as cognitive uncertainty or frustration in the face of material uncertainty and frustration. Utopias—as representations of ideal social orders—attempt to resolve these frustrations but only do so in part, and always in a larger field of vision of comparison with surrounding still-contradictory social reality.

Whereas Roberts wishes to propose that the religion scholar submit to the ongoing undoing of encounter, I propose that the modern study of religion needs to see its investments in a larger movement of Utopian desire. As I articulated in my introduction, modern religious studies has been marked by a problematic of representation—a conflict of how to form categories that are adequately descriptive and redescriptive of “religious” phenomena, thereby adequately signaling alterity (or difference) that always resides both in the object of religion but also in the theory and methods of its scholars. My own contribution to this conversation is to speculate that these questions of representation, addressed through the study of religion, can also be articulated as desires for Utopia. By this, I mean that what structures inquiry and what funds the affective, libidinal investments of contemporary religious studies can be recognized as Utopian in the way that they are pulled by longings for collectivities and schematics of totality. A concept of Utopian desire speaks to the ambitions of these projects but also their ultimate failure. Total representation is impossible, and the practice of collectivity is fraught and often disappointing. Utopian desire sustains the ambivalence that both desire and Utopia signal.

Utopian desires are specific to social formations within capitalist modes of production and disruption that are encouraged by Enlightenment knowledge productions of reason and abstraction. I explore the figure of Utopia in the following chapters, tracing its history and home as a literary form. I argue that Utopian literature formalizes the

social contradictions of capitalism and intersects with other cultural forms that are more readily referenced as “religious.” As I tease out how Utopia is recognizable from its literary instances in modernity and how the literature is a cultural response to social conditions, I advance my thesis that the overlap of religious topics and Utopia is due more to the conditions and contexts of modern knowledge production broadly, since both Utopia and religious studies are engaged in a problematic of representation, albeit through different means. Thus, the concept of Utopian desire is my attempt to address the problematic of representation of the study of religion by different means. The next step in this process is to say more about Utopia.

## Chapter Two

### Representing Utopia, Representing Desire: Utopia Theory and Method Reconsidered

Religion scholars are not the only ones laboring under the incommensurability of representing the subject's experience of her own existence and the society as a structuring force of that experience. This chapter turns to Utopia Studies as a peculiar site of this problematic as it repeats the dilemma of representing the two layers—self-and social—in its object of study: for what does Utopia signify except a society of untroubled selves, reconciled to the structures that have constructed them? Like Russian nesting dolls, a theory of Utopia represents the representation of an irresolvable contradiction, resolving in theory what has been "resolved" in aesthetic form. In this chapter, I show how theories of Utopia tip into this tautological dilemma. By rereading the theories of Utopia critically and comparing them to those of historians of the Utopian form, I show how they operate as a kind of Utopian form themselves, performing the very fantasy they endeavor to define. They are thus another iteration of the desire that Utopia represents—the end of social contradictions, where self is fulfilled in its social life. Utopia is most precisely understood as a form within modernity that represents not just a general "better way of living" but an interstitial aesthetic figure used to fantasize a bridge between our immersed, existentially-limned, individual selves in the social structure and theories about how best to represent that relation. *Theories* of Utopia are thus *instances* of Utopia, and intellectual projects confronted with tensions between representations of the self and social—like critical religious studies— can be recognized as Utopian attempts to form

such a bridge in themselves, even as they study the Utopian ideals of other social structures..

Rather than being a generic, timeless fantasy of a simply better world, Utopia as we know it has a strong relationship to the genre of fiction that reflects the conditions particular to the political-economic-social transitions and conflicts of the North Atlantic, Anglo-America-European setting—a distinction I regard as necessary to understand as a category for analysis. I capitalize Utopia to signal this association with Western modernity, and my analysis pivots on this distinction. Heretofore, theorists in the field of Utopian Studies have depended too heavily on bland universals or generalizations, using a lower-case "utopia" and defined variously as social dreaming, an anticipation of the future, or a desire for a better way of being. Theirs is a busy, maybe too busy project, attempting to bring coherence to the multiple contents and methods that proliferate around the enigmatic and appealing occasions of utopias, utopianism, or utopian ideas and projects. These generalizing theories of an ahistorical utopianism have encountered a surprising lack of critical resistance and they can be critiqued for the way they erase non-Western particularity or avoid much extra theorizing about the structures of fantasy. Instead of immediately dismissing them, however, I want to use utopian theories as evidence of a modern, western Utopian form.

I contend that utopian theories are a kind of Utopian form because they “resolve” the plurality of forms, contents and function with a single phrase or formula. This is not in anyway unusual for theory to do, and in fact, can be productive. However, in doing this with Utopia, this approach privileges ideas over their expressions in material reality. Utopia has the potential to stumble over its own shadow as it endeavors to represent

society for the sake of its own theoretical understanding of society. A theory of Utopia, therefore, develops as an abstraction of the abstraction—an abstract representation of an abstract totality. I find this recursive feature of Utopia crucial for understanding how it has been and can be used, as both a theoretical approach and a subsequent form, within political and social theory.

This chapter on how Utopia Studies directs attention to Utopia as an aesthetic figure—either through its faults or through its transitions in modern history—supports my larger project of seeking ways to discuss the impasse of self and social that confronts critical religious studies. It presents Utopia Studies as another instance of this dilemma and proposes that Utopia is a figure found within modern western theoretical projects. My argument is that Utopia is a consistent presence in the modern study of religion, found throughout the forms that—falsely but fruitfully—represent social life as a totality and resolve social contradictions through social collectivity. But because religious studies doesn't recognize these forms as Utopian, treating them as pragmatic theoretical applications instead of as instantiations of a valuable fantasy, we miss a crucial opportunity for self-reflection and growth. To put it in different words: only by understanding the nature of our favorite abstractions will we be best able to put those abstractions to work for us.

### **Outline**

Reading utopian theory generatively involves layers of critique and retrieval. While I would argue these are imbricated processes, for the purposes of explication, I present Part One as critique and Part two as retrieval. Part One takes up three widely-used theories and shows how their appeals to human desire and fantasy mechanisms belie

general habits of universalization endemic to Western theory. I argue, through familiar critical routes, that universal approaches such as those proposed by Lyman Tower Sargent and Ernst Bloch conflict too much with the critiques raised in Chapter One. However, instead of using critique to dismiss them, I reinterpret them as symptomatic residues of the "utopianism" they attempt to describe. I assert that these universal claims are not conclusions but evidence of their own Utopian fantasy, resolving through theory an anxiety about, or at least the perfusion of difference. I propose that the popularity and use of these theories of a generalized utopia emerge out of this tautological satisfaction that a Utopian theory provides: If humans desire societies where dissatisfactions are resolved and conditions of lack fulfilled, then a close second to this fundamental desire will be a representation of those resolutions and fulfillments, be it a fictional narrative, a proposed social order, or a theory—itself an abstraction. I show how recursivity of theory tightens when the definition of Utopia emphasizes desire, as in the case of Ruth Levitas's work. Desire, I contend, contains its own proposal and deferral of satisfaction. To use desire to define utopianism, in short, satisfies the more specific, western intellectual Utopian desire by ending the contradiction of multiple definitions, in that competing uses resolve into a neat yet endlessly deferring "desire." I see this conflict as, again, symptomatic of a larger, more pervasive dynamic of representation and the problematic of delivering an account of social totality as it constructs subjects and the subject's perspective from within and lived as existence. I analyze this problematic by tracking how the contradictions that inhere in these conceptual projects should be interpreted as occasions for analyzing Utopia for its contradictory effects.

In Part Two, I perform a retrieval of Utopia's contradictions by tracking back through the historians and political and social theorists subsumed by the "utopian" theorists in Part One. I revisit the history of the Utopian literary form and its transposition into political and social theory. Here, Utopia capitalized signals its relationship to the island in More's titular text. By revisiting the transition of Utopia from literary form to abstraction for social change, I chart how Utopia becomes part of an emergent field of social theory, taking on parts of political theory's normative edge. As Utopia is taken up by social and political theorists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Utopia acquires the freight of abstraction and becomes mobilized by social theory to counter ideology and frame questions about the means of social change. I recover tensions about how social theory hypostasizes and loses the movements and particularity of the subjects it endeavors to describe and contend that the theorization of Utopia as "impulse," "dreaming," and "desire" signals how theory is invested with fantasies of closure and how claims of universality is a stand-in for the Utopian desire for collectivity.

By reading Utopian theory through its own history, I uncover how the Utopian theory is, in part, constructed from the fragments and failures of representation within modernity, folding within itself its own concerns with reification. For this reason and others, as I will show, Utopia should be treated as an aesthetic form or a figure. Such a project shows how theory as a genre performs a type of Utopian closure, creating shortcuts for the sake of explanation that, when put into use as abstractions, can become reified and lose the particularities of the social life that the abstractions were created to describe. The way out is by considering Utopia not as function but as form. Attending to the Utopian literary form switches attention from social abstraction and social or political

theory to commodity production and reception. As I will clarify in my last section, commodity production and reception more accurately portrays what constitutes Utopian desire than what is proposed through utopian theory.

### **I. Utopian Theory: Universalization**

Scholars have responded to the overdetermination of Utopia across different cultural sites with a variety of methods. The most common are the historical, aesthetic, and philosophical, but within each of these is a kernel of theory, attempting to isolate a Utopian essence, origin, or function. Considering the breadth of disciplines that publish in the *Utopian Studies* journal—"American studies, architecture, the arts, classics, cultural studies, economics, engineering, environmental studies, gender studies, history, languages and literatures, philosophy, political science, psychology, sociology and urban planning"—it is not surprising that there is a need for some robust theory to sustain these multiple projects. (It is also interesting to note that authors from "religion" are not significantly represented enough to warrant a mention on their website).<sup>131</sup> In order to manage the diversity of utopian forms, contents, times, places, and expressions, some scholars of Utopia give it a broad definition and collect a multitude of examples beneath it. Advancing a generalized understanding of human nature, these scholars go on to compare cultural objects for their Utopian qualities across eras and places, labeling Biblical, classical, and non-western cultural elements for their utopianism.

In this first half of this chapter, I critique the problematic tendency of these approaches to universalize, a natural impulse of anticipation or desire for a better way of living. First, I present two of these definitions on their own terms. Then, I track through

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<sup>131</sup> See the website for *Utopian Studies Journal* at: <http://utopian-studies.org/journal/>, accessed January, 9, 2017.



critiques of universality from the methods of critical religious studies, reading them as products of outmoded Enlightenment thought that generalize about human nature, subsume religious contents within them, and erase particularity and difference. This delineation of critique prepares the ground for my overall thesis: that "utopian theory" is a symptom of the Utopian desire it attempts to describe. I argue that these two utopian theories are evidence of their own claims: that modern Westernized scholars are preoccupied with "social dreaming" or express a "utopian impulse" when they turn to theorize society as a totality and fantasize a collectivity of "humanity." While Ruth Levitas's formulation of utopianism as a "desire for a better way of being" attempts to limit the universal prospect of utopianism with an assertion that those desires are socially constructed, her definition buries the social in a generalized desire that registers only at the level of the self, and casts Utopia as little more than private fantasies of self-betterment. Though it is immensely common, even typical, to view Utopia as a universal form of human thought and practice, Sargent's three "faces" or varieties of Utopia—literary narratives, intentional societies, and Utopian social theory—each occlude aspects of the real work that Utopia does in condensing the problematics of social representation.

### Utopia as Social Dreaming

Defining utopianism broadly as "social dreaming," scholar and bibliographer Lyman Tower Sargent scans archives and world history for examples of this tendency in practices, literature, and theory.<sup>132</sup> Ancient myths of paradises and speculative fiction about future lands of plenty are bucketed together, along with intentional communities and theories of social improvement. The result is an exhaustive account of fiction, non-

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<sup>132</sup> Lyman Tower Sargent, *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 8.

fiction, architecture and film alongside examples of historical projects—all enacting some dimension of “a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space.”<sup>133</sup> The efforts at instantiation through projects within history are utopian in that they are dependent on this fantasy, on the dream of the social. In bringing such diversity under the canopy of utopia, Sargent endeavors to resolve confusion about the words in wide use and to keep honest those who would like to say that they know utopia when they see it.<sup>134</sup> In other words, Sargent implies through this cataloging process that the contradictions or diversity in the examples of utopia can be handled by sufficiently broad definition and an effort at categorization. This pays off in inclusivity, and makes sense of the popular use of the word: “utopias” are produced by “utopianism,” the habit of social dreaming that is a part of both western and non-western, ancient and modern worlds. It is an elaboration of hope and a part of changing society for the better and as such, a universal phenomenon not exclusive to Judeo-Greek-Christian lineages.<sup>135</sup>

Sargent privileges utopia as a universal habit and situates religious behavior and projects within a larger, global work of social dreaming.<sup>136</sup> The “desire for a better life,

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<sup>133</sup> Lyman Tower Sargent, “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited,” *Utopian Studies*, 5, no. 1 (1994), 9. Goodwin and Taylor note how this contrast makes it a natural critique utopia is not just normal idealism because it breaks from the present social order and in doing so, critiques the social institutions. Most projects focus on the “eu” of utopia, the good life that, by definition, “does not currently exist” Barbara Goodwin and Keith Taylor, *The Politics of Utopia: A Study in Theory and Practice* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1983), 17.

<sup>134</sup> See Sargent’s discussion of Manuel and Manuel who said “they know one when they see one.” Fritzie P. Manuel and Frank E. Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 336; Sargent, “The Three Faces,” 2.

<sup>135</sup> Sargent, *Utopianism*, 66-81.

<sup>136</sup> According to Sargent, utopian experiments, such as the Oneida Perfectionists, have been formed around religious texts, communities, and leaders but are read as religious utopias, not utopian religious movements. Hebrew Bible and Christian New Testament scriptures, with their images of Zion and the Kingdom of God, are read as Proto-Utopian texts. Utopian political theories bring consciousness to ideology and a social imaginary that is seen to preserve the arms of power which consolidates in religious communities. Thus, Sargent has little in the way of theory for his interpretation of utopia and religion, leaving the associations

for order, unity and simplicity” has always been with humans and “the expression of utopianism is the most basic strata of the human experience.” Even those who oppose utopia hold out for a better situation by asserting that a utopian effort would make matters worse. Sargent naturalizes utopianism by identifying it with maximizing need fulfillment. This need fulfillment requires direction, however, and positive visions of society are necessary to direct behavior that would otherwise be directionless. This expansive reading of Utopia as ‘purposeful work to inspire’ has much in common with Joyce Hertzler's earlier survey of utopian literature. Writing in 1923, Hertzler identifies utopias as imaginary ideal societies that recede on the horizon and endlessly motivate human action on behalf of social transformation. As in Sargent's work, Biblical prophets and apocalyptic texts are considered to be outgrowths of human longing, and Hertzler's survey profiles prophets, Apocryphal literature and ancient writers like Homer, Virgil, Plato, and Cicero as examples of early utopianism. Thus, utopia is the tradition of representing ideal conditions that, through the representation of social possibility, becomes a means of transforming society. Hertzler highlights how these texts inspire change in human behavior through the way they emphasize human effort, even if in a horizon of divine activity.<sup>137</sup>

Among their contributions, surveys of utopian literatures like Hertzler's and other more recent collections provide snapshots of significant texts of the Western canon that encourage the reader to relate them contextually within history.<sup>138</sup> However, these

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stand in their expressions and not in their thematic relations or history. This is an issue for Levitas (and me) that I discuss below..

<sup>137</sup> Joyce Hertzler, *The History of Utopian Thought*, (New York: Macmillan, 1923), 49.

<sup>138</sup> Johnson's 1968 collection and Claeys and Sargent's more recent *Utopia Reader* both restate that social dreaming precedes the genre that Sir Thomas More's work, *Utopia*, inaugurates. Sir Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. Robert M. Adams (New York: Norton, 1975, orig. pub. 1516); J.W. Johnson, ed., *Utopian Literature: A*

surveys take for granted and naturalize the world views and assumptions that shaped their production. They make little effort to question or even to qualify the trajectories of liberal humanism and secularization, where the "natural" human impulse is to fantasize alternatives and the modern scholar's responsibility is to collect as many diverse examples of this. Hertzler's is perhaps the most extreme example of this progressive narrative, placing ancient texts in the stream of Anglo-American Christendom, thus building a narrative of a modern man [sic] progressively developing and striving along this axis of effort and ability. Sargent, writing after World War II, is more wary of the effects of this motivation, cautioning that physiological needs can be misunderstood and their social routes to satisfaction can in turn produce "social pathology, grotesques of the imagination and of politics."<sup>139</sup> However, both the broad definition of social dreaming and the form of the survey work support the notion that there is a general human progress at work despite its temporary interruptions.

Sargent's definition that utopias are cases or instances of "social dreaming" and are figured as "non-existent societies located in time and space" affords a narrow account of Utopia, in that this definition circumscribes Utopias as fantasies that figure or articulate social relations with specific conditions. But Sargent's framework overreaches by declaring these representations to be Utopia even when they are found outside of modernity. The assumption in these cases is that ex-modern utopianism depends on a generalized human nature which dreams in ways that modern scholars can recognize. This spreads the critical and specific work of Utopia into regions that may or may not be articulating a desire to reconcile social difference through a restructuring of social

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*Selection* (New York: Modern Library, 1968); Gregory Claeys and Lyman Tower Sargent, ed., *The Utopian Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

<sup>139</sup> Sargent, "The Three Faces," 28.

totality, and likely attributes too much modern subjectivity to the authors and adherents of pre-modern utopian narratives. Also, in extending social dreaming to individuals, texts, or communities beyond modernity by way of a generalized human nature, Sargent purports to construct a collectivity of human natures that spans diverse times and places. This reflects what I identify as the modern desire for Utopia—the creation of a collectivity of different humanities, all in cooperation with the same goal and harmonizing difference. Sargent's definition and explication of utopia as "social dreaming" is, therefore, is itself a dream of a shared human activity that finds sameness across time and space.

#### Utopia as Universal Impulse

This claim of a universal human impulse that unites humanity is most strongly articulated in Ernst Bloch's philosophical argument for a "utopian impulse." Bloch has widely influenced scholarship on Utopia. Regarded as a lesser-known member of the Frankfurt School, Bloch's weave of Marxist thought— with and against Freud and Heidegger—generates an unorthodox materialism that turns towards the unknown future, allowing for both a perspective of universal claims and an historicized aesthetics. Bloch's work impacts my analysis of Utopia at several junctures: first, in its universalization; second, in its role in Levitas's understanding of desire, and three, as it contributes to my own historicized aesthetics and category of Utopian desire developed in the following chapters.

Bloch asserts a universal utopian impulse arising from the effects of temporality on consciousness, which situate every person in a moment that is filled with an unknown future— experienced in the moment primarily in terms of fear or hope. Within both of

these orientations is recognition of the exposure to what is not yet to come into being. This consciousness of anticipation is an “enormous experiment of mediated capability of being other in process,” where the human fills in possibility with hopes and fears and plans but ultimately is met with an incalculable uncertainty.<sup>140</sup> Thus, the immediate horizon has a disruptive quality to it. This moment, when filled with the positive possible, is the impulse to hope, what Bloch refers to as a "utopian impulse," potential in ever anticipatory moment.

The utopian impulse pulls embodied human sensations of hunger into a larger schema of temporal expectation. The future starts in the present, where wishes derive from hungers and cravings are centered in bodily survival. He tracks how anticipatory consciousness constructs desires for better selves, better worlds, and the fulfillment of time itself, culturally evidenced in both the personal wishes of fairy tales, travel narratives, films, theater; and the social wishes of architecture, political plans, utopian literatures, and even the industrial relations of the 8-hour work day. The fulfilled moment-wish is evident in moral programs, music, images of an afterlife and death and the kingdoms on earth brought forward through divine intervention. Bloch situates cultural creation itself as an ontological argument, as a response to temporality. His rigorous defense of anticipatory consciousness as a necessary and useful orientation to time has been used to ballast humanist arguments within utopian theory, including Levitas's claim that Utopia is mostly recognized as it functions to excite humans to strive and achieve better conditions for living—a "desire for a better way of being."

Bloch's work is rich with allusion to the development of religion as cultural expression of this fundamental utopian impulse, and his work has found reception in

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<sup>140</sup> Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 274.

theologies and histories of hope.<sup>141</sup> However, what is notable here is that both Bloch's philosophical approach to Utopia and the more data-collective style of literatures and expressions of social dreaming share the argument that utopianism is a universal or fundamental human experience. It is a compelling argument in that it cooperates with a perception that biological human necessity generates fantasies that seek resolution. These surveys echo what has been said about the place of religion by Tyler Roberts: that utopia, like religion, is a way for thinking the gap between the social world and individual experience by using social dreaming for managing the limits and obstacles to satisfaction—materially, structurally, and emotionally.

*Universal Utopianism and the Erasure of Non-Western Particularity*

While there is value in asserting Utopia as a fundamental human urge, this kind of perspective is a therapeutic expression based on acceptance of a modern bourgeois individual that obscures particularities when abstracted as a theory. The consolation of a shared, human utopian impulse misses the mark and runs the risk of treating the condition itself as a religious remnant, a “divine discontent.”<sup>142</sup> Positioning utopia as either a primal, inescapable human impulse or reading back through history and places to name

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<sup>141</sup> Jurgen Moltmann's work is perhaps the most well-known and relevant here. I wrote my master's thesis on Christian eschatology and have learned more about Moltmann from my Syracuse colleague Wendy DeBoer in her research in historical methods in religious studies. In correspondence, DeBoer notes that "Barth criticized Moltmann that he had simply "baptized" Bloch. But I think Bloch provided a way for Marxism to be incorporated into Christianity through the concept of hope and the logic of promise as Von Rad had emphasized in the Hebrew Bible. Bloch's future orientation and the prevailing interest in eschatology ushered in by the realization that humans in a nuclear age could destroy the world in one fell swoop." February 24, 2017. See Jurgen Moltmann *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of Christian Eschatology* (New York: Harper Row, 1967).

<sup>142</sup> "The idea of utopia is a striking example of man's divine discontent: his refusal to admit that he has no say in his own destiny but must submit to the harsh, disagreeable facts of existence simply because they seem unconquerable." Johnson, *Utopian Literature*, xiii.

texts or behaviors as of a single utopian fabric denies or comes into conflict with historical particularities that critical religious studies have shown to matter.

Among these denials is the erasure of non-western particularity. Using social dreaming or ideal social vision as the category for comparison, scholars can claim evidence in writings from China that yearned for a past era or Taoist concepts of harmony and equality that focus on social transformation through human effort.<sup>143</sup> Other non-western utopias are identified as products produced from the impacts of western modes of social reform, making local projects utopian in character. Japan and Latin America have examples of these texts.<sup>144</sup> Also, forms such as the Asian and African cargo cults may fall in this line as expressions of plenty. Using them as examples of utopian social dreaming, these cases lose an analysis of how politics are in themselves wish-fulfilling fantasies. A further problem comes when an ahistorical humanism displaces experiences of those within colonialization. With the broad label a wish for better living, utopia is treated positively without necessarily examining the historical consequences of this aspiration and how it is played out, especially for those in the Americas. Such historians as John Mohawk and Miguel Lopez Lozano show how what Sargent broadly calls “social dreaming” are sites of conflict. Mohawk specifically details how Platonic philosophy of ideals combined with imperial Christendom to generate a rationale for subjugating American natives and ravaging the land in the ways they did—and still do. Lopez-Lozano’s *Utopian Dreams, Apocalyptic Nightmares: Globalization in Recent Mexican and Chicano Narrative* gives testimony to how the colonizers used

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<sup>143</sup> Confucian inspired writings were descriptions of a Golden Age with an ethical imperative to improve for a perfect future. Zhang Longxi, “The Utopian Vision: East and West,” *Utopian Studies*, 13, no. 1 (2002), 18.

<sup>144</sup> Segal, *Utopias: A Brief History from Ancient Writings to Virtual Communities*, 19-23.



Utopia as a means to externalize the difference they encountered.<sup>145</sup> It also shows how writers have inverted the terms of western modernizers to reposition women, nature and culture as the ideal that was trampled in the name of a Utopian ideal. Their work highlights the negatives of Utopia and its violence to people and to the landscape for the purpose of reimagining social relations.

It is this kind of anachronism that critical scholars of religion have warned of in comparative treatments of religion. From this investigation of the “human nature” of “utopian” ambition, thought, and products, through the surveys of Sargent and Hertzler and the ontology of Bloch, I want to consider what I might call “the historical impulse to universalize Utopia.” This impulse is a modern intellectual habit formed out of an Enlightenment orientation to knowledge to generalize about human nature, coming to terms with the differences witnessed through global contact. This kind of historical treatment of utopian theory follows the work of the critical religious theorists presented in Chapter One who cautioned against universal claims as being Christian in their pedigree and assumptions. Collapsing all hopeful futures into utopia promotes the Christian, modern liberal valences of progress, making hope appear normative. These accounts do not adequately address the constitution of western scholarship and its history, shaped by western experiences of space and time that are formed through imaginaries of exploration and conquest. To a scholar of religion, they resemble the claims of universal religious impulse that is then shown to manifest variously across history. Utopia, by this design, looks like a perennial wisdom or an Eliadian universally-available Sacred, able to

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<sup>145</sup> Miguel Lopez Lozano, *Utopian Dreams, Apocalyptic Nightmares: Globalization in Recent Mexican and Chicano Narrative* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2007); John Mohawk, *Utopian Legacies: A History of Conquest and Oppression in the Western World* (Sante Fe, NM: Clear Light Publishers, 2000).

express itself under various historical conditions. Like Eliade who identified a modern malaise taking away the enchantment of every day life and advocated for the value in promoting a transcendence for its role in orienting human activity, “utopia” is a new word for uniting diverse expressions. When posited as an enduring hopeful spirit, “utopia” looks like a Tillichian Ground of Being, providing a depth to reality that is then brought to the surface through its forms of planning and proposing alternatives to challenge the disappointing present. To use a word from Chapter One, instead of religion as the counter to incongruity, these scholars have found utopia. As I will show next, Levitas endeavors to avoid the associations of a general utopianism with fundamental human nature by instead associating it with desires for better ways of being. However, her analytic method of uniting the diversity and superseding particular cases of content, form, or function with a generalized *desire* displaces Utopia's contradictions to the level of her claim. Thus, the ways that Utopia signifies the modern representational dilemma of the self and social by figuring this resolution aesthetically as a harmonized collectivity is subsumed simply as desire for something comparatively better. This displacement does not negate her work but gives the occasion to analyze how utopian theory is, as I will argue, itself a Utopian form and leads me consider form as the primary mode of theorizing Utopia.

### Utopia as Desire for a Better Way of Living

Ruth Levitas, in her widely-cited work *The Concept of Utopia*, recognizes the fluid status of "utopia"—the lower-case version—in scholarly works and wants to take account to bring some conceptual clarity to address the means and methods of social transformation. Lower-case utopianism appears in a host of places but is rarely defined.

She notes that utopia, colloquially, is seen as intrinsically impractical but widely used to connote ideas about social change, thus rendering it an "ideological battleground" for promoting or dismissing specific social programs.<sup>146</sup> This effort to collect, isolate and explain a constant among the variation leads her across nineteenth and twentieth century terrains of surveys of literature, historiography and Marxist theory. She sorts these projects for their general liberal humanist and Marxist orientations, noting how the humanist strands tend to emphasize utopian programs, whereas the Marxist ones weight towards a utopian function. Levitas's work centers on the Marxist commentators most of all and the function of utopia, who have, over time, reimagined the word and its potentials after Marx and Engels used it so pejoratively to dismiss the Utopian Socialists and their local social arrangements. Having carefully read Marx and Engels for this history, she moves on to recover the usefulness of dreaming for social change.<sup>147</sup>

Levitas's chosen Marxist commentators for her task are ones who have emphasized utopia in their own writings. Organizing chapters around their works, she draws mainly on Karl Mannheim, Ernst Bloch, William Morris, and Herbert Marcuse. She backs away from the claims of Bloch and Marcuse that identify utopia as a part of a central human nature but assures her readers that there can be a common aspect to all utopias without "making claims about the universality of utopia or the existence of a fundamental utopian

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<sup>146</sup> Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 3. Levitas's book was reprinted in 2010 with a new preface, different pagination but no substantive changes.

<sup>147</sup> Levitas's chapter on Marx and Engels is a careful exegesis of their work to identify how they construct their understanding of utopia explicitly from the schemes of Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, and Henre de Saint-Simon and counter them with their own Scientific Socialism. However, Levitas preserves them for utopia in that they "touch on a central political and theoretical debate within Marxism and beyond, namely that concerning the role of ideological processes in social change." She goes on to say that "Conceptual clarity is of crucial importance in this debate; for what Marx and Engels were rejecting as utopian, and thereby adding so substantially to the pejorative connotations of the term, is manifestly not the same as that dreaming which Lenin commended, or that which later Marxists have sough to re-insert into Marxism in the name of utopia." I do not see that Levitas adds that much light to distinguishing between ideology and dreaming in her own analysis, except by way of her exposition of others. Levitas, *Concept*, 58.

propensity."<sup>148</sup> Seeing herself as one who can pull together the diversity, she finds the functional definitions and uses of utopia more compelling but settles with a general enough definition to satisfy the range she surveys, naming the constant element as "desire—desire for a better way of being and living."<sup>149</sup>

Levitas's painstaking tracking of the ways scholars have utilized definitions of content, form, and function lead her away from any one of these definitions, having found each missing the other in some way. She holds out for an inclusive definition, to avoid having to rank contents, to allow how utopia has escaped from its literary form and ISseen in other expressions, and to consider how utopia may change in its function historically.<sup>150</sup> If utopia is seen to be drained of its politics, then she assures her readers that utopia is only the desire, and *hope* is the proper name for what transforms wishful thinking into will-full action, as hope is the domain of possibility. Levitas offers the fullest statement in her conclusion:

The essential element in utopia is not hope, but desire—the desire for a better way of being. It involves the imagining of a state of being in which the problems which actually confront us are removed or resolved, often, but not necessarily, through the imagining of a state of the world in which the scarcity gap is closed or the 'collective problem' solved. This definition goes beyond that of an alternative world, possible or otherwise.<sup>151</sup>

She insists that a desire for a better way of being should not be narrowly construed in psychoanalytic terms as an erotic drive or a constantly manifesting impulse, nor as a universal, defining universal in the sense of it being a foregone conclusion of human existence. Such an "idea of an innate impulse to utopianizing is intimately bound up with essentialist definitions of human needs and human nature," which are for her problematic

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<sup>148</sup> Levitas, *Concept*, 8.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>150</sup> Levitas, *Concept*, 198, has a quick summary of these points.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

for they way that they suggest a potentially single and ideal content.<sup>152</sup> Wanting to preserve the plurality, she defends the "socially constructed" aspect of all utopian creations as opposed to their naturalness: it is not that it is natural or inherent to construct utopias, but they are dependent on what the society wants or needs because each society will construct from its own place and time its own needs. In such cases, if there is scarcity, it is only because the society has decided that such-and-such a thing is needed and thus may or may not be scarce.<sup>153</sup> She defends a kind of particularity that allows for cross-cultural expressions of utopia in such diverse instances as Plato's writings, Cargo Cults, *The Land of Cockayne* with its rivers of milk, honey and wine and also in an (orientalized) Shangri-La. However, she also includes the "individual" pursuits of psychological states. She assures that a broad analytic definition, moving away from the function of it to compensate, critique, or catalyze for change as the Marxist interpreters favor means it does not have to attach to anything particularly but can apply to particular things.

#### *Contradictions in/of Utopian Theory of Desire*

While Levitas's exegetical work with each theorist provides useful summaries of major contributions to the study of Utopia, I contend that her method of harmonizing the variety of utopia into a generic concept of desire is not a solution but a sign of the larger problematic of representation generally that appears as contradictions in her method and theory. Despite using explicitly modern commentators, Levitas attributes Utopia to non-

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>153</sup> She cites Raymond Williams for her understanding of socially-constructed desire: 'We cannot abstract desire. It is always desire for something specific, in specifically impelling circumstance.' Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays*, (New York: Verso, 1980), 200; Levitas, *Concept*, 182-83.

modern locales. As seen above, this assumes a kind of generalizable utopianism that, I have argued, creates a kind of anachronism that weakens its usefulness as a category. She gathers her term "desire" from the Marxist commentators who focus on the function of utopia, distancing herself from the "liberal humanists" who tend more to programs and their content. Levitas gives a short review of the historians of the utopian forms, noting that they primarily have used a general definition of utopia as the "the attempt to describe in fiction or construct in fact an ideal society."<sup>154</sup>

In the first of three contradictory elements of her thesis, Levitas eschews Bloch and Marcuse for their universalizing of a Utopian impulse via ontological or psychoanalytically-explained rifts in consciousness, and goes on to develop a universally-applicable concept for any historical site that demonstrates the generic desire for better living.

Analytic definitions not only do not imply the existence and necessity of boundaries, they suggest their irrelevance. The principle of addressing the utopian aspects of different cultural phenomena implies that there are no limits to the material that can be looked at from this point of view. A consequence of adopting an analytic definition is that the issue of boundaries ceases to be a theoretical problem.<sup>155</sup>

This limitlessness and "boundary"-lessness seems ironic in the case of "utopia," first known as an island bounded by the sea, remote, and only accessible through retelling. As I will go on to argue, it is the boundaries that establish Utopia exist as a scholarly figure and interesting as a limited category for use in considering how ordinary utopian representations are themselves bounded and provisional, *as are* categories and concepts, despite Levitas's claim. I defend the claim that analyzing Utopia as desire is indeed an encounter with limitations and boundaries, but these are not confining or restrictive as

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<sup>154</sup> Levitas, *Concept*, 158.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

Levitas says but are useful for analyzing particular conditions. As I will go on to explain, Utopia is a distinctly Western, modern form, and its association with universality should be recast along two different lines that neither Levitas nor the others have considered: Utopia strides the universal and particular not as a human impulse nor a limitless concept to be applied in particular places but as its placement within an Enlightenment habit of analysis. If there *is* a universal aspect of Utopia, it is neither in its impulse nor in its concept of desire, but in how modern claims of universality represents both collectivity (plurality) and social totality (unity) at once—a shared humanity within an arc of human history.

A second contradiction is in the case of opposition or conflict or contrast of utopia that Levitas disguises with the more ameliorating or approximating terms of "desire" and "better way of being." Levitas seeks to distance it from its more critical function because she is concerned about prejudice seeping in and showing preference for some solutions or too narrowly construing what someone's scarcity gap may be. Her definition aims to recognize the neoliberal projects as well as qualitatively negative social arrangements, i.e. fascism, to be seen for their utopian aspects as they, for their proponents, are "better ways of being."<sup>156</sup> She distances herself from these right-leaning views from personal, politically practical perspective, but reserves that they are utopian because they reflect aspirations. However, in qualifying utopia to include conservative, neoliberal, or the radically right politics, Levitas waters down the disjunction that Utopia signifies:

There may perhaps be those who would exclude these on the grounds that they are not genuinely believed in by those who propagate the views—that the ideas of the New Right represent a cynical manipulation of politics. But one of the features of ideologies (including utopias) is that their proponents genuinely do believe that the social arrangements which are in

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 183-186.

their interests are also in the interests of the rest of humanity. This is not to deny that utopian images may be used for manipulative purposes. Much advertising uses images of the good life (the idyllic island, the sophisticated life of leisure and consumption, the cosy [sic] nuclear family) to sell products. Advertisements work, though, because they key into utopian images which are already present among the audience, reflecting their desires, their lack. Even at this level, the utopias current in a society tell us much about the experience of living in it, because they tell us in a way that we cannot directly ascertain where the felt absences are in people's lives—the spaces, that is, the utopia offers to fill, whether in fantasy or reality.<sup>157</sup>

There is indeed a utopianism in consumerism, of eliminating the "scarcity gap" of leisure and rest, but to assert that proponents of neoliberal policies "genuinely believe" that "their interests are also in the interests of the rest of humanity" ignores the Marxist project of ideology critique she has carefully followed. I too want to keep the possibility open of ideology and utopia as in cooperation, as related. However, I argue that Utopia, to speak back to the scarcity gap it desires to fill, must take two aspects of this gap that Levitas misses: the representational circuit of the Utopian "image" and the violence that claims to "better" imply. Many paths to "better" have been paved with bodies, and this is missing in her formulation of a general utopia. Thus, as I will argue, Utopia is not merely ameliorating or a proximate improvement but draws attention to the formation or constructedness of the scarcity that is funded by violence, viscerally experienced and highly mediated.

A third contradiction in Levitas's method in conceptualizing utopia is the silent insertion of a desiring, self-possessed individual within a stream of social constructions. Levitas insists on the "socially-constructed" conditions for the desire to arise or be enacted, that the "scarcity gap" is given by the specific conditions of specific social arrangements and insists on a broad enough definition beyond any particular form,

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 189.



content, or function so that the analysis of this desire can be tracked for historical changes. She is also careful to insist that utopia and ideology should not be separated, and resists any essential human need, seeing all needs as socially-constructed and that appeal to discrete, verifiable need would lead to an attachment to a particular content in utopia. Her approach is thus strongly reminiscent of social constructionism in Religious Studies: what makes all utopias sound like discussions of human nature is their tacit appearance of happiness, when in Levitas's eyes, they are just one more case of an occasion to register someone's values or interests:

Indeed, without the criterion of human needs and human nature we have no objective measure for distinguishing the good society from the bad, except the degree of fit between needs and satisfactions; and this does not distinguish happiness in unfreedom, the happiness of the cheerful robot, from 'real' happiness. The appeal to needs is made, in fact, to provide precisely such a (pseudo)-objective criterion, rather than make explicit the values involved in particular constructions of individuals and societies, and present this as what it is—a matter of moral choice.<sup>158</sup>

As Levitas goes on to present the socially-constructed desiring subject, she simultaneously assures her readers that these are "moral choices" directing particular utopias and later, that agents with hope are the ones transforming the nascent utopian wishes into action: "The dream becomes vision only when hope is invested in an agency capable of transformation."<sup>159</sup>

This slippage of dependent subject and liberal agent is most relevant to my own project of proposing how Utopia figures these two aspects of representation. Levitas is aware of this problematic and registers it in her discussions of Bloch and Thompson, who she says keep these two pieces—constructed subject and experience—in dialectical relation. I will turn to her use of these figures for her own ends in Part Two. For my

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 200.

purposes here, it is enough to say that her conclusion does not sustain their dialectical relation. Levitas's deployment of the term of "desire" unites the social and the individual too easily. In her use of desire, Levitas substitutes a word signifying a personal experience of contradiction—desire—for a representational contradiction—Utopia. In emphasizing the "desire for a better way of being," Levitas lets this "way of being" settle back on the individual who seeks his or her own fulfillment or expresses a "moral choice." This shifts emphasis away from "being together" as the source of concern. It puts the weight on an individual confronting society instead of a subject confronted by society. Needs are likely to be "contradictory for and between individuals," she asserts, but this contradictory condition does not trouble the coherence and confidence of her own project—that of eliminating the contradictions which plague Utopia. Her method is overall motivated by her own desire to rescue utopianism from obsolescence, arguing for continuity between the Marxist and neo-liberal utopias by bracketing utopia from action and assuring that its social relevance lies not in its ability to generate desires or represent desires but in the longings themselves—that the presence of longing is enough to secure utopia's status.<sup>160</sup> This motive —has no interest in Utopia's inherent conflicts with early modern political authority and late modern subjectivities characterized for their rifts of consciousness and the stakes of wage-labor capitalism. It is easy to understand her

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<sup>160</sup> Levitas suggests here what she says more explicitly in 2013 in *Utopia as Method*: utopia has been eclipsed in thought and to return to utopia in sociology is to preserve the motivational power that socialist utopias held in the 19th and 20th centuries. In her discussion of Bauman's claim that utopia has lost its persuasive power, Levitas remarks: "what is needed then is a new utopia to take the place of socialism, which is directed at both capitalist and socialist realities." It is an anxiety about what can be used to motivate the left to continue to pursue its "function of transformation" In her conclusion, she again names the loss: "There is no sense of who is going to effect change, or how, although such change is seen as imminently necessary, if unfortunately not necessarily imminent. But ever since the abandonment of the assumption that the proletariat would be the agents of revolution, the problem of agency as been acute." Levitas, *Concept*, 169, 196. See *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (London: Palgrave Macmillan), 2013.

solemnity, writing in the late 1980s, wondering what to make of postmodernity and its political apathy and social decadence. However, instead of applying a blanket of desire to rescue agency, I will argue that periodizing Utopia for its ability to figure—narrate, image, and represent—modern contradictions will do more for holding open the conflicts of representing experiential and constructed registers that Levitas and I both notice as an aspect of critical scholarship and its inheritance of Marxist methods.

Simply stated, Levitas uses a the concept of a gap to cover a gap, insists on a better ‘way of being’ that really is only a different moral code, and hides social construction behind a self-possessed desire. Instead of focusing my critique on these inconsistencies, I argue for seeing them as an occasion to examine how utopian theory *as method* performs its *content* by resolving formally the subject's existential perspective and the social totality used to account for that perspective. To restate my claim succinctly: If Utopia offers the fantasy of fulfillment and resolution of problems created through social intercourse, Utopian theory is a fantasy that resolves the contradiction of impersonal social and historical forces and the all-too-personal affective crush of those forces. Sargent, Bloch and Levitas all rest on the fantasy element of utopia to direct their definitions. Sargent and Levitas appropriate those theorists of desire—Bloch, Marcuse, and E.P. Thompson—for the work of fantasy, imagination, and desire without laboring with the archive of psychoanalysis. I contend that this insertion of desire performs a Utopian desire—to resolve the incommensurability, the incongruity that the legacy of social theory has left. By labeling Utopia as desire in this way, the existential dimension of the play of differential social formations is reintroduced to social theory. Although Utopia is indeed a desire, it is a desire played out on the level of form, be it theory,

fiction, or other aesthetic products. Thus, a more appropriate method examines its formal properties—its history, its features, and its circuits of production, distribution, reception, and reformation. The following analysis will show how the gaps constitute the form and attend to the contradictions themselves while admitting that all attempts, in fiction or theory, are fantasies. These are useful fantasies—and pleasurable—but fantasies, nonetheless.

Treating Utopia as a universal, ahistorical human activity erases the differences of others who scholars seek to know more about. Bloch's work in connecting art and culture across historical time and place has been criticized for being overly expansive, and ignoring crucial differences between his wide-ranging evidence for the ever-present utopian impulse.<sup>161</sup> Others have seen his universalism of utopia in all these corners of human cultural life as ultimately useless for utopian theory, for “when everything becomes an expression of utopian desire, to what degree does the category of utopia loses its usefulness?”<sup>162</sup> This is just as much in the case of Levitas's desire. As much as Levitas endeavors to call out social construction, she too is driven by the impulse to universalize, albeit more covertly. She codifies the tension that Utopia signifies with another word rife with ambiguity—desire—but at the level of the body. Her analysis of the term “desire” depends on Bloch's ontology and E.P. Thompson's description of Morris's work as an “education of desire”. Levitas's review of the historical methods of charting utopia argues that, in focusing on form, the historians do not adequately account for what produces

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<sup>161</sup> Wayne Hudson, *The Reform of Utopia* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), ch. 3

<sup>162</sup> Phillip E. Wegner, *Imaginary Communities: Utopia, the Nation, and the Spatial Histories of Modernity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 18.

utopia.<sup>163</sup> It will be shown below that the abstraction on which Levitas bases her argument on comes about through a historical process—i.e., the literary form of Utopia evolving into a social-theory abstraction—which elucidates how Levitas and others arrive at their conclusion that Utopia is structured as desire.

Thus Utopia retains more value for analysis when historicized within Euro-American fields of intellectual, political, and economic contexts. To this end, I will show how Utopia as a figure of an alternative political and social order distinguished itself from other texts and figures that represent fulfillment, satisfaction or harmony around the time of Thomas More's writing, and briefly describe how Utopia came to be associated with political change and used as an abstraction or shorthand for "the good society." This history demonstrates the seemingly mutually exclusive choices utopian theorists have made to either occlude the personal experience level in favor of social constructionist accounts; or excise political economy from experiential, descriptive methods. Levitas's lens of desire via Bloch and Thompson focuses the first horn of this dilemma, and I harmonize it with the first by historicizing it via psychoanalytic and Marxist discourse, in

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<sup>163</sup> Levitas treats Davis, the Manuels, Kumar, and Sargent in her review of utopian studies at the time of her writing in 1990, noting where these historical approaches have given nod to what motivates utopia as a project of human effort of the imagination or otherwise. Levitas point to the Manuels' reliance on a Jungian-style collective unconscious account that leads them to examine the childhood experiences of the authors they include. *Concept*, 159. See 159, 164, 167. J. C. Davis excludes Arcadia and Cockayne from being properly utopian because they idealize nature, not human effort. See *Concept*, 164. [For his summary of these two forms that give a distinct perspective on the role of "human appetites", see , *Utopia and the Ideal Society: A Study of English Utopian Writing, 1516-1700* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 20-26.] Levitas rejects the Kumar's proposal that utopia hinges on its form in literature and calls Kumar's credit to More as the genre's founder is "patently absurd" that one person could be responsible for "such a novel and far-reaching conception of the possibilities of human and social transformation" but gives him credit for saying that utopia is about a hope for a transformed future. 167. As for Sargent, at this time of her writing in 1990, he too is too interested in the form of utopia in his definition that it be thought of as "a non-existence society described in considerable detail." I share Levitas's interest in seeking what motivates the appearance or distinctiveness of utopia but share with the historical approach an interest in the circumstances of its circulation and less in what I see in Levitas as a quest for the essence of utopia.

the process establishing a more productive role for the figure of Utopia in Religious Studies.

## **II. Retelling Utopian Theory through History**

The utopian theories described above are not simply about generic, timeless fantasies of better worlds, but seek to explain the genre of Utopian literature and the conditions of its occurrence and popularity as a literary form. These conditions of production and sites of popularity are thoroughly European and American, reflecting the transitions of intellectual, political and economic modes, beginning with the Renaissance humanism, oceanic exploration and the rise of nation-states through the revolutionary and Enlightenment periods and colonialism into industrialization and the philosophical projects from Hegel and Marx. I am not proposing to undertake a project of relating these events to their textual counterparts. Instead, I want to demonstrate in Part Two that the abstraction that is valuable to the theorists is more properly treated as an historical object, seen as part of process of reception and manipulation of forms over time. I regard the definitions that the theorists above have crafted to be formulations that function as a kind of Utopian form in themselves—resolving the frustrations generated by their socio-intellectual conflicts with a narrative fantasy based on a constructed, cross-cultural collectivity of desirers and dreamers.

The historicization of these theories proceeds by introducing crucial moments in the formation of Utopia as a figure within modernity. As shown in Chapter One, the history of an idea can show not only who it serves and for what purposes but how it was constructed. The advantage of this for the concept of Utopia is two-fold: one, it clarifies both Utopia and fantasy/desire as they appear in the discourses above, and two, it

establishes those discourses in their socio-political contexts—an aspect that Levitas claims to value in her assurance of the social-constructedness of desires but ends up complicating more than clarifying. My approach is thus genealogical—I confront the formations of discursive regimes, and mark the possibilities and limitations of different times and places and how subjectivities are differentially formed. My central theme is that critical studies—in religion or other fields—need not turn all subjectivity into an object but can instead turn to dialectical methods which respect the affective and libidinal dimensions of social life *as well as* such categories as ideology, social formation, legitimation, and hegemony typical of critical discourse. I implement this theme in a novel analysis of Utopian desire, via representational forms constructed as responses to the surges of political economy within modernity, where these two seemingly incommensurable perspectives often come together. Part Two of this chapter supports this argument by offering key transitions in the development of the Utopian form and into an abstraction for use by social theorists to reflect on and theorize social change. By showing a few of these transitions, I show that the concept of utopianism as it is widely understood arises from a historical process which situates it, along with Utopia, as a distinctly Western modern product.

To direct this argument, I unfold several key moments in the formation of Utopia through historians and literary, political and social theorists. Through the work of the historians and literary theorists, I show how Utopia is an aesthetic product distinct to Anglo-European early modernity that was one of several responses to the social contradictions of its time, giving shape to the intellectual currents of humanism, the challenges to church authority, the formations of nation-states, and opportunities of

oceanic travel. Then, I discuss how political theorists have described Utopia's role in directing political programs and how Utopia came to represent itself as an abstraction of the mechanisms of social life. I turn again in the next chapter to desire and aspects of its history that were glossed by Levitas through a review of several social theorists Levitas uses for her definition,.

### Utopia as an Early Modern Literary Form

#### *Utopia at the Renaissance*

Historians Frank and Fritzie Manuel state in their “study for the continuities in Western utopian thought,” that they “are acutely aware of the temporal and geographic fractures and demarcations that separate one Utopian constellation from another.”<sup>164</sup> For them, the continuities are found in the historical conditions, not in anything universal because, for the Manuels, anything universal—theological claims of cosmic dimensions, reaching across times and human psyches— would turn utopia into more of a religious than a properly historical phenomena.<sup>165</sup> While this abandonment of the universal as religious signals their own prejudices (and ignorance about the field of religious studies), it is also a legitimate concern with the form of Utopia. Although they admit that there are occasions of Utopia showing up in non-western settings where there are “paradises on earth,” their extensive survey shows that Utopias are primarily a leftover of Platonic-Christian ideals that emphasize human capacity and combine in various manners images of an eternal or transcendent world. Where Utopias are secular, they are so in an attempt to isolate practical behaviors for effective, satisfying social relations.

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<sup>164</sup> Manuel and Manuel, *Utopian Thought*, 14.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.



*Contra* Hertzler or Sargent, ancient worlds and politics and are not Utopia for the Manuels but the “vital prehistory” of utopia as a “hybrid plant” of Hellenic philosophy and Humanist Christianity.<sup>166</sup> Utopia's history begins with the combined conditions of oceanic exploration and conquest, northern humanism with Erasmus and Rabelais, the English Civil War, Italian Renaissance architecture, German Anabaptism and mysticism, and seventeenth-century science. With the French Revolution, they see a major adjustment to Utopian narratives that take up time as a factor, making for a parallel form that might be called “euchronia.” New modes of production in the nineteenth century produce new relations to work and love. Concomitant with this historical development of the Utopian form, there is exploration of new scientific space, both within the micro levels of biology and the macro of astronomy. As with other modern forms, Utopian literature appeals to the Hellenistic virtues of perfection, transcendence and pastoral harmony that are matched in the Renaissance with Judeo-Christian allusions to heavenly and divinely-directed cities. These texts, along with an emergent interest in the human capacities for manipulating political life, meet to form Utopia.

Narrowing to the moment of early northern European history, the Utopian literary form can be seen to take shape alongside other literatures. The historian of early modern literature J.C. Davis follows the texts of early modern writers to discern their allegiance to a Utopian form and discovers that the writers of both major and minor texts between 1516-1650 do not adhere self-consciously to a model of Utopian text but devise their own. Writers of ideal societies from this era occupied diverse social roles as lawyers, diplomats, academics, country squires, administrators, merchants, soldiers and “political

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 5, 17.

intriguers.”<sup>167</sup> Commitment to a set of historical texts do not link these early modern Utopian writers as much a shared “subjection to a common mode of social idealization and its consequences.”<sup>168</sup> Thus, while Utopias do not form themselves from reference to a set of established texts, neither are they the umbrella construct for all of idealizations of society. Marking the genre of Utopian literature at this time are their references to particular idealizations that overlap conventions, such as travel and dialogue—that facilitate this agenda. Davis’s synchronic historical mapping shows religion taking shape within history, instead of serving as an archaic and unchanging deposit to be drawn on by early and late moderns alike as the Manuels imply.

### *Early Modern Types*

Davis identifies Utopia alongside four other ideal societies. Each distinguishes itself for what it says about the human, its relation to nature, institutions, and its approach to legal, educational, and bureaucratic devices. The types are, for Davis, heuristic devices for sorting a common problem of the early modern period—the problem of collectivity and the coordination of satisfactions of individuals within a community. The Utopia, Arcadia, Cockayne, Millennium, and Perfect Moral Commonwealth were less attempts to solve the problem of unlimited desires and limited satisfactions than they were articulations of the problem.<sup>169</sup> Davis lists non-Western and non-modern texts and

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<sup>167</sup> Davis, *Utopia and the Ideal Society*, 7.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>169</sup> This is my gloss on Davis's distinctions: The arcadia, named after Virgil's pastoral poem, is the most commonly recognized across cultures and speaks of a time of happiness and fulfillment where needs were less and thus, easily met. Also called the Golden Age, it commonly reflects an original condition of human life and thus, reflects to contemporary readers inherent virtues. Such examples include *Hesiod* and *Ovid* of Greek tradition, Aboriginal Australian Dreamtime, the Garden of Eden, the Chinese Taoist Age of Perfect Virtue and the Christian Kingdom of Prester John. The second type, the Land of Cockayne, is less widely reproduced. This is the fantasy of extravagance and excess, named after the medieval poem of a poor man's heaven where cooked larks fly straight into one's mouth and rivers run with wine. It is not exclusive to

narratives that speak back to these distinctive forms but preserves Utopia for the case of early modern Europe. I see in these forms how they differentially emphasize human effort in achieving satisfaction. All five forms work to resolve the problem of “limited satisfactions and unlimited human desires” but Utopia solves it not through a divine intervention or a fundamental balance of social relations or an excess of satisfactions, but by means of limiting satisfactions.<sup>170</sup> As he summarizes:

The utopian’s concern is rather to control the social problems that the collective problem can lead to—crime, instability, poverty, rioting, war, exploitation and vice. None of these evaporate in utopias. They are controlled and where possible, eliminated, and the utopian is concerned to show how.<sup>171</sup>

Davis does not permit Utopia to be used as a blanket statement for all kinds of social dreaming. Utopia does not produce myths of a golden age of paradise. Instead, the broader term, "idealization," produces multiple forms for various social uses. Restraining the use of Utopia for a type of text and not a universal impulse would be a misuse of the term for Davis, who wants to restrict Utopia not to its lineage back to More but to the

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medieval Europe. The Big Rock Candy Mountains sung of in American folk songs can be read as a contemporary example. The richest allusions to utopia come from Davis’s third category of the Christian Millennium—the 1000 years that, depending on one’s counting, comes before or after the return of Christ to earth as promised in the Revelation of John in the Christian New Testament. Rising in popularity through the rough and violent ruptures of both the German and English Reformations, millennialism captures the intrigue of the past and future, the familiar and the unknown. Instead of simpler human needs, the complexity of present humanity is pulled together and resolved into a new society brought about by divine intervention. Whereas the Land of Cockagyne or Arcadia recede in popularity after the sixteenth century, millennialism can be seen to expand, and the explicitly Christian label grows to include other European movements such as modern Jewish messianism, Jewish and Christian apocalypticism, Christian dispensationalism, and a secularized spiritual age of Hegel, Marx, and National Socialism. The appeal of millennialism is to point the present as a special time preceding or already in the midst of upheaval. It is form common through the modern era as social change brought on by colonial contact, migration, and technological innovation created new social climates. The fourth of Davis’s categories of ideal society is the perfect moral commonwealth—a pagan inspiration that leans on the image of ancient city as a construct of rationality and order. Whereas the millennium takes the disorder of the present and reorders it through drastic reconstruction, the moral commonwealth hedges on the thread of reason within the Renaissance worldview of humanity as reconstructed through the Greco-Roman tradition. The commonwealth of the medieval period was secured by a just landlord-tenant relation that preserved duty loyalty, charity and virtue.

<sup>170</sup> Davis, *Utopia and the Ideal Society*, 37.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

concerns of More's era: disorder in an emerging capitalist society with and nation-state formation in relation to an expanding globe.<sup>172</sup> In separating out utopia from other ideal societies, Davis allows for its rigidity, its closed qualities, and its totality of change to exist without the seemingly apolitical world of the pastoral or the gustatory indulgences of a Cockayne. So for Davis, "Utopia" is not genre or universal impulse but a specific kind of text that emerged within modernity.

Adding to Davis's list of ideals, Krishan Kumar constructs a sixth category—the ideal city.<sup>173</sup> Here is the pagan influence again but in the image of the Greek city-state that becomes an inspiration for More. The ideal city preserves geometric balance and lends architectural structure to its social forms. The social hierarchy of the ideal city comes to reflect a divine hierarchy of the cosmos. Utopia does not simply recombine the elements of Hellenism and Christianity but has its own inventiveness.<sup>174</sup> This Hellenistic influence carries a preference for balance and order into the Utopian project.<sup>175</sup> Order may be variously sourced or located, either in transcendent realms, such as in Augustine's *City of God* or the transcendental realm of Plato's *Republic*, but Utopia itself is focused on instantiating order by humans on earth.

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<sup>172</sup> Davis reflects on the co-construction of modernity with utopia, where the nation-state comes to dominate as the mode for managing borders and space, change and time: "Into this world of chaos, confusion, irregularity and incipient disorder the utopian injects images of a total and rational social order, of uniformity instead of diversity, of impersonal, neutrally functioning bureaucracy and of the comprehensive, the total state. He provides the imagery for the process which, I have suggested, has dominated social evolution for the last four centuries and shows no signs of losing its dominance now." Davis, *Utopia and the Ideal Society*, 9. From the perspective of literary criticism, Phillip Wegner writes extensively on the relation of utopia as a form to the development of the European nation-state. He sees the utopia in its contents and forms, as articulating the shift in powers from monarchy to a hegemonic bourgeois. See Wegner, *Imaginary Communities* and my discussion of nation-state formation that follows.

<sup>173</sup> Krishan Kumar, *Utopianism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), ch. 1.

<sup>174</sup> Kumar, *Utopianism*, 19.

<sup>175</sup> Donnelly uses Levitas to explain the classical utopia where "the expression of the desire for a better way of being in the classical utopia is centered, first and foremost, on redefining order." Dorothy F. Donnelly, *Patterns of Order and Utopia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 13.

As other historians have noted, this link of order to an ideal and its possible proximity undergoes revisions soon after More in the work of Francis Bacon's *The New Atlantis* (1624) where order is no longer the static but dynamic and progressive.<sup>176</sup> The ideal in Bacon, then, is not what is unchanging form but is in process. The Utopian form in this era reveals an interest in city-state organization and its attempts to balance the competing authorities of King and Church, evidenced in Tommas Campanella's *City of the Sun*, where a theocratic monarchy provides the structure for the ideal city. Order for these early modernist Utopias revises but never quite sheds its spiritual valence.<sup>177</sup> It is more than their visions of Platonic city-state ideal forms that unite these early Utopias—each is structured as a travel narrative with a place reached by an ocean vessel, an isolated land that requires a reporter for relaying, through dialogue with a local authority, the wonders that are found far away. This formal feature of distant travel and narrator reflect More's text and becomes a central feature of this nascent genre, one that Kumar argues is delineated within modernity for the way that texts reference and repeat features like dialogue, travel, and quotidian details relayed through a mediating narrator.

As noted above, Davis recognizes that Utopia distinguished itself for addressing the problem of collectivity and the coordination of satisfactions of individuals within a community by the tools of politics, law, resource production and resource distribution. One mechanism for coordinating satisfactions in More's text is an egalitarian model and

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<sup>176</sup> This break by Bacon is described by Davis and Donnelly alike. Robert Applebaum argues that seventeenth-century utopia is a disposition towards “earthly paradise, the millenarian future, the ancient Age of Gold, the happy constitutional democracy, the world turned upside down, the primitive church, the ideally munificent court of the ideal monarch.” Robert Appelbaum, *Literature and Utopian Politics in Seventeenth-Century England*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1–2, 5.

<sup>177</sup> “Even in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when human reason had, in different places and in various area of speculation, strongly reasserted its independence of the concept of religious order, the underlying assumption remained, for many thinkers, that the order of the universe is, finally, divinely ordained.” Donnelly, *Patterns of Order and Utopia*, 10.

the elimination of money. Belonging and shared resources were not novel to Thomas More, who had many examples of collective activity in the monasteries of his time. But instead of leaving the collective behavior to the cloister, More's *Utopia* situated it in the broader society, applying the forms of shared resources and activity to the realm of families and secular life. Literary theorist Phillip Wegner argues that More's narrative shift from cloister to public square produces a person-society relationship that we now recognize as endemic to the modern nation-state.<sup>178</sup> In More's *Utopia*, the former castes and classes are wiped away in favor of a subject in more regular relation to the social totality via a flattened hierarchy, which Wegner sees as parallel to the subsequent emergence of the European bourgeoisie.<sup>179</sup> The hold of the church and the feudal lords are replaced by the monarchs which, in turn, become the republics of Europe. Emerging from More is a foretaste of the modern individual who is identified with political entities through adherence to practices and allegiances to principles, instead of through fealty to a God or King.

This identity of the bourgeois subject as one wedded to others through European nation-state affiliation shaped subsequent renderings of *Utopia*. As the years passed and the European nation-state was naturalized as the premier social totality, the power of the once-novel bourgeoisie grew. The growing hegemony of the bourgeoisie within the new nation-state led to what Wegner calls 'operations of neutralization' to resist the inevitable counter-hegemonic attacks from emergent classes, ethnicities, merchant groups, and

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<sup>178</sup> Wegner, *Imaginary Communities*, 55-59.

<sup>179</sup> "The spatialized national subject formed in the Utopian narrative thus serves as one of the original forms of the collective subject of class—for it is by way of national identity that the bourgeoisie comes to 'identify' itself." Wegner, *Imagined Communities*, 60.

religious bodies.<sup>180</sup> These operations within Utopia are recognizable as the uniformity of taste through clothing, restricted interests, or schedules, which came to be regarded in the twentieth-century as potential threats to the unique expressions of the individual human spirit, whereas once it may have been simply a means of tempering vice that threatens that same spirit. As the new nation states emerged, the Utopian narratives that were produced from within them sought through their narratives a resolution to their burgeoning internal sub-communities. Thus, one can see later Utopian narratives carry through them a strong message of cohesion and willing collective belonging as a response to both the reality of nation-state formations and its fragility. If there is a resistance to the Utopian collectivity—as is so easily seen in dystopian narratives, but also signaled by the iterations of Utopias and their reformulations of social life—then it is the queasy unease with the violence that founds and supports the nation-state. If Utopia is laced with the quality of the nation-state, as Wegner argues, then this direct connection with state power exacerbates the anxiety of moderns all the more as they contemplate the bloody beginnings of most states. More's founder, Utopus, for example, merely arrives and sets up his ideal society.

Wegner's analysis contributes in several ways to my own argument about the importance of placing Utopia and tying it to European history: not only does More's text—and subsequent Utopias in their presentation of ideal social organization—draw on the material conditions of their time but they also displace these conditions into text and represent them in ways that more than simply inspire desire. Utopias hold and represent social contradictions at the level of form, delivering the striations of social life as harmonized fantasy. I argue that Utopia's contradictions should be held front and center

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<sup>180</sup> Wegner, *Imagined Communities*, 61.

so as to deliver the shock of their proposal simultaneously as that of their wishes. If there is a wish for harmony, it should also be registered under the lights of the violence of the nation-state. If there is a wish for collectivity, it should be scrutinized alongside the subjectivating forces of liberal legal apparatuses and the isolations of bourgeois individualism and its alienations.

Excluding pre-modern and non-European forms, Kumar insists, “Utopia may be nowhere, but historically and conceptually, it cannot be just anywhere.”<sup>181</sup> More's text is a touchstone for considering the relationship of the literary form and its social setting, of how the conditions that surround the text give rise to the text. While Levitas would like to consider the contingent conditions of Utopia, she does not recognize either the distinctiveness of More's text or how it reflects the material conditions of an early modernity. This brief survey underscores that diversity of forms such as Arcadias, Millennials, and Cockaynges should not be presumed as all examples of social dreaming or desires for better ways of living, but rather shown as distinct ways of solving a problematic of living collective life, and that Utopia is a version of that, which resolves this as a fantasy of political and economic arrangements. These arrangements, however, were distinct to the moment that we now call "modernity"—a complex historical and social shift that effected deformations of European Christianity into power heterodoxies of humanism and politically-charged millennialism.<sup>182</sup> Utopia consolidates and re-presents the violent reforming of social life into nation-states, simultaneously disavowing

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<sup>181</sup> Kumar, *Utopianism*, 3.

<sup>182</sup> Kumar references religion's response to similar contexts that stimulated utopia, such as Millennialism, which gained prominence in the late medieval period to explain the conflict between a “righteous remnant” and local authorities and mirroring the conflict of John's apocalypse that precedes Jesus' return to earth. Kumar assures his readers, however, that the passion for a divinely-sent savior may have been prevalent in medieval Europe but it is not exclusive to western modernity as utopia is. Monasticism also spans the pre-modern and modern and has lent utopia the types of social regulation that are commonly seen in the form. *Utopianism*, 19.



the constitutive violence of that same nation-state, and displacing it into discussions of an "imperial other." The social differences were being newly marked as modernity developed, taken further away from the hierarchies of the faithful and the heathen as constructed by Christian orthodoxy and moved into national identities. Contacts with difference—what will be in modernity variously known as heathens and then primitives—will be coded differently as Enlightenment paradigms of human nature take shape and give rise to new areas of study, new disciplines. I turn now to consider how the aesthetic form of Utopia concentrates this process, especially around the development of the abstraction of "society" as used by European political theory and adopted by social theorists.

#### Literary Form for Political Theory

Utopia, in signifying radical social change that is desirable but also impossible, coincides historically with political theory with the optimism and failure of modernity's two grandest proposals: liberalism and Marxism. The historical node of the French Revolution marks a change in the meaning of Utopia from a more classical mode in the Renaissance to its late modern associations with radical change. In this section, I rely on political theorists for their interpretation of their field and its relationship to the Utopian form. As they recount the history of Utopia for political thought, they note how Utopia shifts in signification as it is used by philosophers to both interpret their moment and direct its course. As producers of their time, these philosophers take up "society" as an abstraction to describe and predict their conditions. As I show, this philosophical labor situates Utopia in a matrix of constructs signaling both the mood of change and its

mechanisms—a history that will come to give Utopia its association with lack, longing, and satisfaction at the level of immanent social life.

Political philosopher Judith Shklar explains how the early modern period drew on a contemplative practice of philosophy that situates Utopia as a part of a classical mode of political engagement. She points to the image of the “virtuous pagan” that was held up to reproach the Christians of this era. Thomas More is a main voice in this era, and his *Utopia* focuses on rationality as the securer of public goods, where laws produce social harmony, not consolidated religiousness. This should be seen in contrast to the apocalyptic tone of such revolutionary visionaries as Thomas Münzer in Germany, whose religious fervor consolidated people, not laws. Shklar suggests that perhaps the contemporary ambivalence to Utopia in the late twentieth century is due to a harboring of nostalgia for the pensive mode towards alterity and alternatives from the classical era, instead of the revolutionary urgency from the revolts of the French and the Americans that have turned the intellectual mood of Utopia into a call to action.<sup>183</sup> Utopia is seen within Shklar as a vital aspect of modern political theory that reflects the models throughout the modern era for maximizing human virtues, the role of government in facilitating this, and what methods and means are best for promoting this. Shklar’s work holds out for the imaginative mode to not be dismissed as rhetoric, but to be considered alongside the normative mode of political theory.<sup>184</sup> Thus, in Shklar, we see that what

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<sup>183</sup> Judith Shklar, “The Political Theory of Utopia: From Melancholy to Nostalgia,” *Daedalus*, 94, no. 2 (1965), 370.

<sup>184</sup> Later in her career, Shklar points to Jurgen Habermas and John Rawls as doing battle over the normative models, where Habermas’s critical theory is to counter the normative but both work with a practical, as-is social form. Critical theory rejects normative political theory because it does not talk of fraternity or solidarity or any new person. “They do not offer a total critique of the actual, nor do they strive to ‘transcend,’ that is, to rise above and to transform the consumer society and the welfare state. They do not shake up the present enough by forcing us to envision a wholly new world order.” “What is the Use of

constitutes Utopia is rooted historically in the early modern period and, particularly, its reading practices. The distinctive mental operations that can be recognized as "Utopian" depend on contemplation and rumination that does not foreclose alterity or possibility.

Shklar also notes also, however, that there was a shift between the classical and modern moments that turned Utopia into a call for action. Tracking this change, political theorists Barbara Goodwin and Keith Taylor examine Utopia's relation to political theory through space and time. The influence of liberalism and Marxism on Utopia turn it from its spatial representations of a place outside of here to a time outside of now. Prior to the Enlightenment, there was a surge of non-Christian utopias that narrate travel to distant places. Utopias here emphasize a distant people and their exquisite cooperation, making use of the exotic enticements discovered through imperialism and colonialism to enact another level of experimentation: fantasy projections of alternative political orders, pulling at the similarities and differences of the European traveler and the distant Utopian resident, emphasizing the day-to-day lifestyles as they are influenced by the varying principles of these other places.<sup>185</sup> However, with the influence of the Enlightenment's focus on progress and perfectibility within an earthly realm, heaven comes to earth, so to speak: the ideal is brought within reach through human progress. Encounters with primitive groups through travel were now plotted along a timeline, with influential thinkers such as Rousseau interpreting these groups as reflecting the essential morality of humans.<sup>186</sup> The French Revolution furthered the positioning of alternative social orders

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Utopia?" in *Heterotopia: Postmodern Utopia and the Body Politic*, ed. Tobin Siebers, (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 55.

Her work connects to Seyla Benhabib on the matter of the need to move from normative, theoretical positions to actions and efforts of fraternity.

<sup>185</sup> A good list of these is found in Goodwin and Taylor, *The Politics of Utopia*, 42.

<sup>186</sup> The laws of nature could seem to be inscribed in these small communities. The free love societies of Sade, Fourier and such earlier thinkers as Dom Deschamps's *La Verite ou le Vrai Systeme* (1770), reflect

within a future time instead of a distant-yet-parallel space. Revolution, according to Goodwin and Taylor, made progress more immediate with an emphasis on temporal eruption. The revolutionaries were headed into a place in the near future, not a distant future nor a distant place.<sup>187</sup> The future of Utopias from this point on is literally the *future* of Utopias: no longer is Utopia a physical space, but spaced in time.

The shift from spatial to temporal utopias is heightened in the work of Marx and his reactions to utopian socialists. Marx focuses on Henre de Saint Simon (1760-1825), Robert Owen (1771-1868), and Charles Fourier (1772-1837) who each responded to the social and economic upheaval of industrialization and how traditional social values were being lost or were dissolving at the beginning of the nineteenth century.<sup>188</sup> These solutions attracted enthusiasm because of their ability to integrate previous norms under new conditions. Traditional families were reimagined with more permissive family structures that were larger and happier, transferring familial love to the larger group of

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Rousseau's position that modern society could be improved by studying these distant groups, emphasizing a "natural" human that could be realized once again through repositioning the human in principled ways. Goodwin and Taylor, *The Politics of Utopia*, 44.

<sup>187</sup> Goodwin and Taylor, *The Politics of Utopia*, 44–45.

<sup>188</sup> The discussions of Marx and Engels on the "utopian socialists" to set out the distinction of "scientific socialism" are canon for Marxism, where on close reading, is not so much with the visionary figures themselves as much as with those clinging to the programs and do not advance the awareness of class and its antagonism. The central text for this is "Manifest of the Communist Party" in Tucker's edited *The Marx-Engels Reader*, with the relevant text on 498-9. For a longer discussion of Marx and Engels connection to the Fourierists, the Owenites, and the Saint-Simonists, see Levitas's excellent review Marx and Engels's correspondence and published works on these projects. *Concept*, 47-58. For a review of the lives and ideas of Saint-Simon, Owen, and Fourier, see Chapter One, "The Utopian Socialists" in Vincent Geoghegan, *Utopianism and Marxism*, (New York: Methuen, 1987), 8-21. Chapter Two, "Marx, Engels and Utopianism" is similar to Levitas's account, but his book more thoroughly connects with the party politics of this history. Martin Buber's *Paths in Utopia* also manages a similar historical legacy of practical socialism as the three men referenced above, but with more of an argument than analysis of the Marxists arguments. Goodwin and Taylor see the three iconic utopian socialists referenced by Marx and Engels and historicized them three in line with Icarianism, a kind of Christian sect founded with the ideas of Étienne Cabet and the German artisan movement inspired by Wilhelm Weitling as reactions to the revolutionary fervor of Europe from the late eighteenth century. See Chapter Six, "Movements for Utopia-1" for these in summary and Chapter Seven, "Movements for Utopia-2" for the Marx-Engels response and account of the political milieu of Europe in the nineteenth century. Goodwin's earlier monograph focuses on this era. Barbara Goodwin, *Social Science and Utopia: Nineteenth Century Models of Social Harmony* (Hassocks, UK: Harvester Press, 1978).

society. The lack of harmony among communities impacted by industrial work was offset by programs that buffered these changes. Utopian socialists regarded politics as function of administration, not government, promoting reason and science while refusing liberal individualism. The liberal individual brought out the competition of interests and contributed to the tensions experienced all around. The end of guilds and loss of bargaining power with industry left workers without enfranchisement. Social utopias responded to the social and cultural conditions brought about by capitalism, industrialization, and movement from traditional social relations and modes of production. The three most well-known—Fourier, Owen, and Saint-Simon—agreed on the goals of harmony and cooperation but not how to get there. Each took different tacks on integrating industrial models of production, of private property versus common ownership, and place for religion in making this work.<sup>189</sup>

### *Utopia as Abstraction for Society*

As shown above, Goodwin and Taylor draw attention to how Utopia transitions from literary form to political tool. Through their work, I point to how modern philosophy took the conditions of global exploration and turned them for thought and reflection. What I also pull from them is the way political theory found in Utopia a means to abstract politics from historical context, contributing to the formation of the discipline.

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<sup>189</sup> Religion worked in favor of the socialist utopian movements. Religious groups, especially Christians, were attracted to those leaders and organizations that countered the selfishness and individualism seeming to undermine the common goods of harmony, community and cooperation. As Goodwin and Taylor note, religion was seen as an ally to the movements because it “created a sense of attachment without which no movement can endure for any length of time.” Christianity was the main force behind this connection, however Judaism helped in the Saint-Simonian movement after 1835. Other bonds were exploited: Fourier used anti-Semitic teachings to attack commercial classes. The religious liberties and new land available in the growing United States brought out the most of the religious experimentations with novel societies. Religion hinged utopian socialism to the past, be it through coloring science with religious quality, the social mysticism of Saint Simon, or reforming Christianity to be more counter-cultural and radical, in such cases as millenarianism of the US. Goodwin and Taylor, *The Politics of Utopia*, 133.

While some would like to see political theory emphasize the positivist and empirical modes, Goodwin and Taylor highlight the role of abstraction in any theoretical endeavor. Because Utopia is formed through speculation and imagination, it is also a form of abstraction and thus, connected to political theory more than political history or the study of political institutions.<sup>190</sup> As they see it, Utopia plays a role in political theory where there are alternative proposals that extend or emphasize an aspect of the present, such as John Rawls's ideal of justice as driving political life or the contest of anarchic groups within an open context of mutually beneficial associations as articulated by Robert Nozick.<sup>191</sup> Reviving a past golden age, however, is not Utopian, nor can it simply be used to justify the present. Instead, constructive political theory that both criticizes the present and provides it with a replacement can be called Utopian. Both political theory and literary narratives address human problems and harmonize conflict through novel political and social arrangements.

Goodwin and Taylor advance my analysis of the transposition of Utopia from literary work to abstract concept—from *Utopia* to utopia—by way of articulating political theory's co-optation of Utopia's formal features and its representational dynamic. Utopia is not merely an alternative social order en total that provides a blueprint for an ideal social order or even just a workable adjustment. Instead, Utopia provides a heuristic

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<sup>190</sup> Goodwin and Taylor, *The Politics of Utopia*, 21.

<sup>191</sup> For Goodwin and Taylor's discussion of Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, (New York: Basic, 1974), see 51-52. For their brief treatment of Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), see 65. Their overall concern with these two liberal voices in regards to utopia is that they cast utopia as a hypothetical present that ends in justifying the present. Another tack in relating these liberal voices to the matter of utopia would be to draw out the status of the individual and its natural abilities to seek its own good. This, however, is beyond the scope of this dissertation because it would demand a resituating of the categories of "subject" along the lines of "individual" in a more Anglo-American philosophical register and would depend on tackling the premises that are orthogonal to strand of Hegel that I am taking up. For more discussion on how society and politics might structure around rights and obligations, see the collection of essays in Shlomo Avineri and Avner de-Shalit (eds). *Communitarianism and Individualism*, Oxford Readings in Politics and Government, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

"nowhere" from which to gather and perceive what is otherwise too close. By this argument, the unreality of Utopia is not an impediment to political theory, but integral to its imaginative work. This imaginative labor is the intellectual work of abstraction:

The academic separation of utopianism from ‘realistic’ political thought proceeds via the challengeable assumption that imaginative representations do not convey truth, whereas an *abstract* account of reality does so. But often the necessity of abstraction, which distinguishes all political theory from political history or the study of political institutions, *a priori* removes it as far from reality and verifiability as does the invention of an imaginary world.<sup>192</sup>

To restate: abstractions—categories and concepts created to tie together, re-describe, and explain phenomena in other terms—are themselves not real things. They do important work, however, in that they are constructions that can be used for interpreting and perhaps even predicting. Like an abstraction, Utopia is not a real thing but provides a different position from which to view and test.

Such an insight further extends Utopia and its overlaps with theoretical endeavors, ones that have brought forward not only the work of Bloch and Levitas, but also, as I will suggest in Chapter Four, theories used in the study of religion. As political theory depends on abstractions to distinguish it from political history or the study of political institutions, one can also say that critical religious studies makes use of abstractions to distinguish its projects from its descriptive and historical counterparts. Connecting how it is that theories of religion overlap with Utopia in other ways will need further discussion. What is important at this moment is that Utopian forms are leveraged for political thought specifically in the way that resemble other "no-things" like theoretical abstractions that collect and re-describe data so as to perceive the present from a different—and hopefully more precise—vantage point. This homology of theory in general and Utopian form in

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<sup>192</sup> Goodwin and Taylor, *The Politics of Utopia*, 21.

particular is not to be globally applied. Instead, as I argue in Chapter Four, the Utopian form relates specifically to the development and use of the abstraction of a social totality—the fantasized construct of a bounded, coherent system known through its differentials.

In sum, Utopia, as I have discussed, is affected by these intellectual and historical streams of Europe. Utopia signals a change in relationship to political futures and possibilities, from spatial examples that create self-reflection and contemplation of current conditions, to temporal logics of transformation. The meaning of Utopia changes to reflect its orientation to political alterities. This first occurs with the possibilities created through liberalism and the French Revolution, with time stretched into an alternative, progressively available society located in the same place but in an “out there” future. Utopia shifts again in the nineteenth century as industrialization concentrates labor and production in cities, spurring both utopian programs and political and social thought on the political role and welfare of the worker. The criticism of liberalism and the utopian socialists by Marx and Engels inaugurates another era for utopia and utopianism, one that develops a perspective integrative of politics and economics and religion, and one that refracts utopia and harnesses the appeal of totality, practice, and abstraction and deploys it for what comes to be known as social theory.

Having considered how Utopia becomes a mobile, modern concept formed from reflection on revolutionary events, Enlightenment philosophy, Marxist historical materialism, and the emergence of political theory as a discourse, I now consider several sites of its transposition into social theory. Social and political theory shows how mobile Utopia can be, how its operations are a part of a more general kind of intellectual labor of



comparison and contrast. This intellectual labor, however, enjoys a distinctly modern, post-Enlightenment style of abstraction, category formation, differentiation, and evaluation. These operations are in many ways related to what happens within the process of reading Utopian literature—comparison, contrast, and evaluation. In the following chapter, I will say more about how the Utopian literary form consolidates and miniaturizes society, and thus colludes with other imaginative projects and fantasies that give Utopia its particular charge by relating the subject and the social totality. Yet, before turning to the particular literary form, I want to further expand how social theory has adopted social totality for its own uses of describing and effecting change at the level of structure and how, in this project, it gets caught, in ways as religious studies has—between a static version of society for the benefit of tracking, authorizing, and legitimizing practices in ideology and an active, open-ended logic of the subject's experience of unfolding time and possibility.

#### Historicizing Social Theory for Utopia—and Vice Versa

The relationship of social theory to Utopia has both historical and thematic connections: social theory emerges from the nineteenth century to correlate the complex relations of economics, politics, and culture to individual experience. Society, for political theory, is an artifact for manipulation. In social theory, society is an object of study. The normative claims on political theory subsume Utopia under the work of improving political relations. Social theory's normative work is more ambiguous. The emphasis is on charting the elements within society to show their relationships. Social theory shares with Utopia this ambiguous relation to normative claims, its abstraction as theory, and its interest in mapping the social as a totality with intricate moving parts.

Goodwin and Taylor claim that, if Utopia has waned at the end of the twentieth century, it is in part due to the rise of social science and its modeling of society as a totality working in harmony. Ralf Dahrendorf, writing in the middle of the twentieth century, calls on sociology to move on from this kind of utopian treatment of social contents.<sup>193</sup> Where sociological theory fails to see the disruptive elements of society, it lapses into treating society as a static entity with its elements in too-tightly bound cooperation to reflect social process properly. While Dahrendorf, Michel Foucault, and others have transformed sociology and its concepts, the ties of abstraction, representation, and critique remain to link Utopia and social theory. These links play out in interesting ways for social theory and Utopia, as well as for religious studies, with its methods influenced by these theorists. In reviewing Levitas's sources, specifically Karl Mannheim, Ernst Bloch, and E.P. Thompson, I find cases of how scholars struggled with the analytic tool of social totality and its reifying effect as they sought to use social theory for social transformation. Through revisiting these thinkers and their concerns, I raise up how Utopia, cast as a conceptual operation of desire, attempts to suture the problematic of representing the subject as both self-knowing agent and as effect of social process, leaving the word "desire" to perform a host of functions of loss, comparison, and aspiration in the face of an awareness of the structuring force that social theory attributes to a historical entity called "society."

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<sup>193</sup> Ralf Dahrendorf, "Out of Utopia: Toward a Reorientation of Sociological Analysis," *American Journal of Sociology*, 64, no. 2 (1958): 115–27.

*Mannheim*

An early and influential social theorist, Karl Mannheim, charted Utopia within the social sphere, naming it as a force of novelty within social change.<sup>194</sup> Mannheim is consistent with Bloch and Manuel's conception of "utopia" as a broad impulse to betterment. He also notes the comprehensiveness of utopia and its investment in what not currently in existence. Where he departs from them is his Marxist language that names ideology as the force of sedimentation and contrasts this with Utopia as a force of disruption. As mentioned above, Levitas sees how this puts Mannheim in line with others who see Utopia in its function, not in its forms or functions.<sup>195</sup> Mannheim is seeing that social movements, in working towards better social conditions, use representations of ideal social conditions to motivate their causes. Utopia is an idea that shatters the present ideological frame. If ideas seem revolutionary or even authoritative, they will be tested against the social givens and ideas of the time: wishes will rise and fall until they are so bursting with urgency that they supersede the order around them. According to Mannheim, they take over because the wish overwhelms with so much promise of connecting people to the levers that power their existence, from an interpretive frame to the actual material controls of their conditions of existence. Mannheim sees the root of utopias within the alienation and oppression of their current systems.

Paul Ricoeur's interpretation of Mannheim highlights not just the relation of ideology and utopia, but also what distinguishes the form of utopia—its literary roots—as a means to deliver its uses and roles within social processes. This becomes important for what is possible for society. If utopia is confusing or too heterogeneous to categorize, it is

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<sup>194</sup> Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology Of Knowledge*, trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985).

<sup>195</sup> Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, 69.

because of its role of representing either what is outside of society or alternatives to what society has to offer. This is not a single alternative but is often quite diverse. The debate then begins about whether or not this alternative is actually better. The consistency of contents—the revised family order, the organization of political life, the distribution of material goods—can be a distraction for an analysis of utopia, Ricoeur claims, for first identifying how utopia is structured to produce a position from which to analyze the dense relations established within society. In order for any alternative to be registered as better, it first must construct itself as a meaningful, significant difference. “Nowhere” of utopia gives it this position of difference from which to launch a legitimate alternative. It then becomes subject to judgment.

It is this approximate distance provided by utopia that engages it within the gears of ideology. Ideology, as defined by Marx and expanded by Ricoeur, fundamentally functions “to pattern, to consolidate, to provide order to the course of action.” If ideology distorts the real relations of existence for the purposes of a ruling class, it does so to enable the current authorities to continue. Thus, ideology has a conservative function.<sup>196</sup> Utopia is disruptive to this conservative function where it subverts not only present authorities but also undermines these authorities’ claim to legitimacy. Utopia challenges power, both those with power and, more substantially, the ways power works without resorting to violence. Ricoeur expands Mannheim’s theorized relationship between ideology and utopia with this emphasis on how utopia inspires and, paradoxically, can produce violent revolution. Ricoeur also adds to Mannheim by exploring how utopia’s pathology corresponds to ideology’s pejorative valence of manipulation: both are most

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<sup>196</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Ideology and Utopia as Cultural Imagination,” in *Being Human in a Technological Age*, ed. D.M. Borchert and D. Stewart, 107-125. . (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1979)

destructive when they distance themselves from the material conditions. The dysfunction of ideology is distortion and dissimulation; utopia loses its potency for exposing the operations of power when its images detach into regressive nostalgia or a distraction for acting, or, in Marxist terms, the praxis of lived existence. Ideology and utopia are thus connected through their roles in indexing different moments in the social imaginary. Both traffic in the symbols of the culture, in the representations, ideas and conceptions that preserve social relations within material conditions. They compliment each other in the ways that they stand in as figures at different points in the concealment and critique of real relations.

Levitas revisits Mannheim—and Ricoeur's reading—in her final chapter and concludes that, for the purposes recognizing the human desire for better living in its fullest sense and as still active in the present day, both Left and Right politics can be seen for their ways of better living, even if they are conservative in their direction. I think this a correct reading of Mannheim, but, by losing the Marxist critique in her definition by proposing a comparative "better way of being," Levitas loses the oppositional force that Utopia signals, especially at the level of social totality and the way that Utopia signifies social reorganization as the source of that improvement. Also missing in Levitas's reading is the representational economy that Utopia is embedded in. I can understand how Utopia and ideology can collapse into one another, however both maintain their life through material culture as the source and destination for the imagination and this is not sustained by Levitas's definition towards impulse or desire. Levitas's use of desire, in uses of Mannheim, Bloch, and others in the Marxist lineage implies this representational lineage but then centers back on the affective or energetic level. While desire may be aligned

with more affective registers via Luce Irigaray or Gilles Deleuze in reaction to the psychoanalytic discourses of desire, these thinkers are not in her genealogy.<sup>197</sup> I agree that Utopia and ideology need to be seen in their cooperative work, and that Utopia cannot alone be thought of as a novel insight or *novum* that refreshes social life and motivates social transformation; it does still carry alterity to the status quo that is more than a comparatively better condition. As I argue in the next chapter, Utopia is best analyzed as a historical figure, not as a concept, and both ideology and Utopia carry within them the social contradictions of their historical contexts and, to different degrees, formulate solutions and satisfactions of better ways of living. What distinguishes Utopia from ideology is how it images the social totality through representation and offers the

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<sup>197</sup> Levitas's engagements with the discourses of desire comes up in the new preface to the reissue of *The Concept of Utopia* in 2010. In responding to critics and interlocutors, she reports: "Others have been puzzled by the category of desire, wrongly assuming a Lacanian reference, and this too would have merited further explanation, or at least a disclaimer. Lacanian psychoanalysis makes me lose the will to live, which seems a dystopian rather than utopian effect; and the Blochian of desire, hunger, longing has a broader existential reach." xiii-xiv. She nods to Deleuze here, saying that "Lacan's theorization of desire can be brought to bear on questions of utopia, and the work of both Gilles Deleuze and Slavoj Žižek is important here." xiv. However, she stays with Bloch and Marcuse, not broaching either Deleuze or Lacan to clarify her position. As I see these genealogies, Deleuze and Irigaray both are arguments against Lacanian psychoanalysis with emphasis on affect, materialism, and intimacies whereas Lacan's (and Jameson's) route is with narrative, language, and structuralism. To link Utopia to these discourses, as I am arguing, requires an account of form, and not only impulse. Lucy Sargisson connects Irigaray and utopia via theme of transgression in *Contemporary Feminist Utopias* but as I propose in Chapter Three, the connection is better mapped by form than theme. As for Deleuze and Utopia, Deleuze's remapping of desire is an extensive revisioning of power (of the Foucaultian kind) and affect. This would be a fruitful exploration that could easily include Bloch's temporal, anticipatory ontology. Deleuze's desire fits well with Bloch's impulse but in a less universal way. Deleuze offers this definition in an interview: "But why? For me, desire does not comprise any lack; neither is it a natural given; it is but one with an assemblage of heterogeneous elements which function; it is process, in contrast with structure or genesis; it is affect, as opposed to feeling; it is 'haecceity' (individuality of a day, a season, a life), as opposed to subjectivity; it is event, as opposed to thing or person. And above all it implies the constitution of a field of immanence or a 'body without organs', which is only defined by zones of intensity, thresholds, gradients, flux." Deleuze, section D in "Desire and Pleasure" trans. Melissa McMahon, editorial forward Francois Ewald, [www.artdes.monash.edu.au](http://www.artdes.monash.edu.au). accessed 01/16/2012. One path connecting Deleuze and Utopia is through Bloch's use of process and open temporality, mapped by Susan McManus in "Fabricating the Future: Becoming Bloch's Utopians," *Utopian Studies* 14, no. 2, (2003): 1-22. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20720008>. For my own treatment of the potential relationship of Deleuze to Utopia via the constitution of collectivities, see Holly White, "Desiring Utopian Subjects: Collectivity and Its Discontents," in *Hope and the Longing for Utopia: Futures and Illusions in Theology and Narrative*, ed. Daniel Boscaljon (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014), 58-78.

"better way of being" through a proposed collectivity that can disarm the antagonism of the self and its situation. To reorganize Levitas's formulation, what distinguishes Utopia is that it calls out the scarcity gap as socially constructed and satisfies the subject through a reorganized society. As always, this is a fantasy, an impossibility, but, in its proposal and formalization, society does change, if only in the way that it reflects on its own construction and sees possibility where there was once nature.

*Bloch and Thompson*

As mentioned above, Levitas makes the most use of Bloch and E.P. Thompson for her own theory of desire and utopia for reasons that relate strongly to my own project of clarifying the representational dilemmas of social constructionist and existential dimensions of subjective life. Levitas is aware of this problem and registers it in her discussions with Bloch and Thompson, but most forcefully in the conclusion of her chapter on William Morris. Here, Levitas sifts through the arguments left over by E.P. Thompson, Perry Anderson, Paul Meier, and Michael Lowy about the reception of Morris as Marxist. The concerns run along the lines that claiming Morris for both Marxism and Utopia leaves behind a legacy of Marxist antipathy to Utopia. In a moment, I will explain more of what is at stake in these exchanges about Morris for my own reading of Utopia specifically. Levitas's closing paragraphs, however, gesture to what I regard as central to Utopia and its relation critical religious studies: the problematic of the obstacles scholars face in representing self and the social world.

In these paragraphs, Levitas raises sets of pairs that seem not to resolve: Marxism and Utopia, Romanticism and utilitarianism, knowledge and desire. Levitas presents that these are just formulations of another question: it is not a choice between Romantic and

utilitarian, or a problematic relationship between "Marxism" and "utopia." "The real problem," she explains, "is how we should think about the future and, specifically, how we should think about feelings and about experience." Any effort at synthesis—or claim of synthesis—is misguided:

In the form of knowledge versus desire and the cold and warm streams, Thompson and Bloch propose their dialectical relationship, stopping short of a synthesis which overcomes the difference and tension between them. If some writers manage to synthesize the two it is a fragile synthesis, constantly in danger of disintegrating into its component parts.<sup>198</sup>

The route through is a dialectical relationship provided by Thompson and Bloch who stop short of a synthesis. But here, as in the end of her work, Levitas truncates the movement of the dialectic. As I argued above, she does not provide enough ballast for her use of desire and leaves out the role of representation in this construction, ending on the side of a humanist self that she, in other ways, so carefully frames as constructed. Her own use of desire could do more for "thinking about feelings," depending, from what I can tell, too much on aspects of Thompson that exceed her discussion. I posit this dependence because of her rejection of the psychoanalytic streams in Bloch and Marcuse. I will first discuss her presentation and rejection of Marcuse's and Bloch's psychoanalysis, then her hesitant use of Bloch, and finally the arguments that sit behind Thompson's own dependence on desire to frame the problematic that Levitas and I are both addressing.

*Psychoanalysis: Marcuse and Bloch*

While Levitas appropriates Bloch and Marcuse's Freudo-Marxist language of desire, she disavows the erotic, libidinal components of their projects.<sup>199</sup> She gives only

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<sup>198</sup> Levitas, *Concept*, 130.

<sup>199</sup> See footnote 197 above for the note about Levitas's unexplained yet acknowledged resistance to Lacan and with it, a larger stream of sexual and intimate attachments. For a more robust, embodied look at



eight lines to Bloch's re-reading of Freud, an argument that hinges on reworking daydreams, night dreams, and fantasy as not part of a repressed unconscious memory of unacceptable sexual fantasy but as a part of the filling in of consciousness with anticipation.<sup>200</sup> The more sustained attention to psychoanalytic language is through Marcuse, but even after a chapter-length treatment of his promotion of Freudian drives and their surfacing in commodity culture and repression through wage labor economy, Levitas denies any association of libidinal or erotic force to her use of desire. After raising their use of desire as it relates to utopia, she strikes out the claims to psychoanalysis as used by her sources of desire by how they have associated utopia with an essential human impulse: "The idea of a utopian impulse is, however, both unnecessary and unverifiable. The idea of an innate impulse to utopianizing is intimately bound up with essentialist definitions of human needs and human nature, which are themselves deeply problematic." While I agree that an essential utopianizing is problematic, and separately, that a Freudian account of innate drives is problematic, Levitas does not offer a better account of the mechanisms of desire other than that they are socially-constructed and not unrelated to ideology, as discussed above. She shifts to associating the lack of an innate utopian impulse with an anxiety about its contemporary expression, not offering any hint how desire has anything more to do with sexual difference, conscious and/or unconscious processes, or repression. Desire, here now

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Bloch's potential for discourse that weave sexuality, erotic attachments and time, see José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

<sup>200</sup> Levitas short synopsis of Bloch's is an accurate enough gloss of Bloch's treatment of Freud, however, her book's conclusion about utopia as desire centers on Bloch's conclusions from this argument with Freud and more about desire could be explained through a longer engagement with Bloch's 40-page argument that Levitas gives eight lines, found between pages 86-87. For Bloch's discussion, see *The Principle of Hope*, 78-118. A closer look at what Levitas could mean about the process or openness of Bloch can be found in Ben Anderson, "Transcending without Transcendence: Utopianism and an Ethos of Hope," *Antipode* 38, (2006): 691-710.

attached to utopia, emerges untroubled, consistent, and directive, offered by social conditions, disconnected from the body but attached to subjects.

Levitas situates Bloch in a stream like William Morris that flows with both Marxism and Romanticism, finding trouble with the places that Bloch veers in and out of his materialist commitments and relies too heavily on the satisfactions that aesthetics provide individuals for both their experiences of fulfillment and as outlets to express their hopeful futures. Where her uses and criticisms of Bloch most intersect my questions about the problematics of representing self and social registers in critical work are in her characterization of him as insufficiently materialist for her own sensibility. Levitas avers that Bloch depends heavily on a Marxist historical materialism for his analysis of utopia that directs towards a future of an un-alienated society where equality and fraternity become available after a revolution towards socialism and then to full communism.<sup>201</sup> She is skeptical that this Marxist teleology can really be so associated with the broadly available anticipatory consciousness that is within all wishes, and sees where his argument would be helped by delineating the contents and forms that divide the less-purposeful abstract wishing from its more explicitly practical political concrete "will-full" projects towards those ends.<sup>202</sup> Where Levitas's criticisms grow cloudy are where she identifies Bloch's way of endeavoring to weave together what Bloch himself calls the "cold" and "warm" streams of Marxism—the cold stream of analysis, of a "science of

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<sup>201</sup> Levitas, *Concept*, 96-97.

<sup>202</sup> The slide first moves from wishes to actions, and then from abstractions to concrete: "All wishful thinking thus draw attention to the shortcomings of reality, a necessary step on the way to change. In addition, the Not yet is intended to convey not just the interdependence of want an satisfaction, but the drive from one to the other, towards change—not just wishful, but will-full thinking." Her discussion of his abstract and concrete distinction proceeds in the next section and later his failure to give more specifics of content that would distinguish the abstract and concrete utopias. Levitas, *Concept*, 88-90, 100.

conditions," and the warm of the "passionate pursuit of un-alienated experience."<sup>203</sup>

Levitas argues that Bloch too heavily depends on the warm stream for his position of utopia, focusing on aesthetic works as a broad expression of utopianism that he disconnects from the processes of material production and his emphasis on subjective experience.<sup>204</sup>

While I agree with this observation of Bloch's work, I do not think that her own work does much more to escape this tendency towards the liberal-humanist pole that she keeps pressing as the alternative to the Marxist formulation. Her introduction of his chapter lifts from his *Principle of Hope* that "dreams of a better life" –from daydreams escape to religious forms—are what direct actions that go on to transform the future.<sup>205</sup> The chapter's concluding sentences also hold out his utopia for the way it "involves fundamental questions about the human condition and its future" and his refusal to "abandon faith in that future."<sup>206</sup> As mentioned in Part One, her definition of desire relays a more individualized "better being" than the collectivity and coordination of satisfactions of individuals and community that I see operating in the historicized form of

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<sup>203</sup> Levitas, *Concept*, 93. She quotes part of what I lift here from Bloch: "Only coldness and warmth of concrete anticipation together therefore ensure that neither the path in itself nor the goal in itself are held apart from one another undialectically and so become reified and isolated. And the conditional analysis on the whole historical -situational stretch emerges both as an unmaking of ideologies and a disenchantment of metaphysical illusion; precisely this belongs to the most useful *cold stream* of Marxism. Through it Marxist materialism becomes not only the science of conditions, but at the same time, the science of struggle and opposition against all ideological inhibitions and concealments of the ultimately decisive conditions, which are always economic. To the warm stream of Marxism, however, belong liberating intention and materialistically human, humanely materialist real tendency, towards whose goal all these disenchantments are undertaken. From here the strong appeal to the debased, enslaved, abandoned, belittled human being, from here the appeal to the proletariat as the turntable towards emancipation." Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, 209.

<sup>204</sup> Levitas, *Concept*, 105. She also lists his weakness of "the failure or refusal to provide clear or verifiable criteria fro his distinctions; and a teleology which suggest that history has a goal rather than simply that human beings have purposes"—points I mentioned above.

<sup>205</sup> Levitas, *Concept*, 86.

<sup>206</sup> For her discussion of his specific concern about his too broad use of forms and unspecific Marxist, concrete utopian contents, see Levitas, *Concept*, 101-02.

Utopia. Also, it makes no use of the relationship of Utopia to the abstraction of "society" as a fantasized social totality that enables scholars to derive a socially-constructed subject. Instead, it leans back on the work of desire, yet an anti-psychoanalytic formation of it.

*Education of Desire: E.P. Thompson*

Thus, Levitas's use of desire derives most from E.P. Thompson's description of William Morris. In her chapter on Morris's role in English Marxism, Levitas lifts from Thompson's biography of Morris a phrase that originates with French critic Miguel Abensour: the "education of desire." In claiming Morris as both a writer of Utopias and not just romances, and also as a visionary for a socialist society of England with proper revolutionary credentials, Thompson follows Absensour in recognizing a new kind of Marxism with Morris, one that resisted a Marxist tradition that "was becoming enclosed within a self-confirming doctrinal circularity" and instead had a more heuristic, Utopian discourse, one that rejected Engel's strict scientism and the classical Utopianism of "juridico-political model building."<sup>207</sup> What was released with Morris's *News from Nowhere* was precisely something romantic and archaic—sounding of fantasy—to present "alternative values sketched in an alternative way of life."<sup>208</sup> In detaching from

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<sup>207</sup> Edward P Thompson, *William Morris: From Romantic to Revolutionary* (New York: Pantheon, 1977), 789-90. Absensour's study of the Utopian textual tradition and Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890), combined with John Goode's writing on Morris, connect with Thompson's own appreciation of Morris and Thompson's project of reclaiming Morris for an ethical-political Marxism. There is much in the archive of Morris to argue for or against his Marxist credentials and how close or far he was to the historical materialist Marxism of the more party-political strands of Marxism of England from Morris's time to Thompson's first edition of his biography in 1955. Thompson's own project is a part of this reception history of Morris.

<sup>208</sup> This is Thompson quoting his own translation of Abensour (p. 298) in Thompson, *William Morris*, 790. The text of Absensour's is in French and seems to neither have been translated into English or even much circulated. I could not locate it through Worldcat. According to the footnote, Absensour was on track to publish his doctoral thesis at the time of Thompon's revised edition of *William Morris* published in 1977. The footnote for Thompon's citation of Abensour to aid in your own search: M. M-H. Abensour, "Les

naturalism, from precision, Morris offers a "challenge to the imagination to become immersed in the same open exploration.

And in such an adventure two things happen: our habitual values (the commonsense" of bourgeois society) are thrown into disarray. and we enter into Utopia's proper and new-found space: *the education of desire*. This is not the same as "a moral education" towards a given end: it is, rather, to pen a way to aspiration, to 'teach desire to desire, to desire better, to desire more, and above all to desire in a different way."<sup>209</sup>

This is Thompson quoting Abensour, who will then be quoted by Levitas with the same formulation. I repeat this as both recognition of the archaeology of this idea—which is repeated often in other texts about Utopia—but also for its potential in contributing to my own analysis of the role that the figure of Utopia has as both aesthetic object and its signifying position in the problematic that I have been addressing throughout my dissertation—the obstacle of giving both a social constructionist account and what is more casually called a "humanist" version of the subject—incremental spatiotemporality, immediacy, or the strike of affect that feels like and goes by the name of "just living life."

Thompson's concern with Morris centers on just this question: "Was Morris a Marxist or a not-Marxist?" Here, Thompson reflects in his text a question that biographers of Thompson have pegged to Thompson's own position within English Marxism and an argument that Thompson had with both the stricter materialism(s) of the socialist party in England from the 1950s and with Althusser's structural Marxism in the 1970s. The argument, as Anderson portrays it, is that Thompson opposes "desire" to "knowledge" and then privileges "desire," which Anderson rejects as a "fashionable philosophy of Parisian irrationalism." Anderson associates it with Deleuze and Guattari's

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Formes de :L'Utoie Socialiste-Communiste", these pour le Doctorat d'Etat en Science politique, Paris 1, 1973, esp. chapter 4. Forthcoming as *Utopies et dialectique du socilaisme*, Pavot, Paris (1977?).

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 790-91.

Anti-Oedipus and "the expression of a dejected post-lapsarian anarchism. Intellectually, the category operates as a license for the exercise of any fantasy freed from the responsibility of cognitive controls."<sup>210</sup> Anderson's own analysis moves between Morris's and Thompson's Marxisms, but Thompson is Anderson's ultimate target in the way that Thompson's Marxism has more than enough romanticism of its own, calling out where Thompson overcorrects for the structuralism around him, linking "values" with "feelings" against "ideas" in *The Poverty of Theory* (1978). Levitas work wades into Anderson's evaluation, coming out on the side of Thompson in her concluding paragraphs, as mentioned above: Thompson wins the day because he does not attempt a synthesis of feelings and thought, but allows them their dialectical relation.

This dialectic of Thompson's work is not explicit in Levitas. But reading more of Thompson shows how his method of social history weaves the "cold" and "warm" streams. One of the most famous passages from *The Poverty of Theory* addresses how crucial human experience is in Marxist history and Marxist praxis:

Experience walks in without knocking at the door, and announces deaths, crises of subsistence, trench warfare, unemployment, inflation, genocide. People starve: their survivors think in new ways about the market. People are imprisoned: in prison they meditate in new ways about the law.<sup>211</sup>

In this particular polemic against Althusser's "irrational" and "theological" Marxism, Thompson makes vivid what is at stake in his own commitments to social history as a method: to draw out what in Marx made Marxism necessary. Resisting what he saw as rigid materialism within both places of Marxist practice and theory, Thompson set out to articulate the formation of a class as a process of both conditioning and agency, and that

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<sup>210</sup> Perry Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism* (New York: Verso, 1980), 161.

<sup>211</sup> *The Poverty of Theory and other Essays* (London: Merlin, 1978), 200-01. Quoted in Scott Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory: E.P. Thompson, The New Left, and Post-War British Politics* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2011), 199.

while the productive relations of capitalism might create the contours of class, they did not offer how the consciousness of class would be particular to different social locations.<sup>212</sup> Seeing the formation of class in motion, he highlighted the cultural and psychological resources that factory workers drew on for their own consciousness, specifically the discourses of birthrights and freedom of expression from the British Enlightenment.<sup>213</sup> Thompson, through readings of Giambattista Vico and William Morris together, saw how human actions appeared simultaneously free and unfree, and that there was a dialectical relation of particular individuals to their social locations that could not be accounted for in Marxist materialism.<sup>214</sup> In a biography of Thompson's intellectual work and its relation to his nuclear activism, Michael Bess summarizes that for Thompson,

Human agency, therefore, was alike a form of play taking place within limits—limits whose evolution the players could consciously influence over time. Each individual possessed a finite yet open-ended opportunity to contribute to the shaping of culture.<sup>215</sup>

Thompson resisted the reduction of humans to abstract categories, using close readings of specific historical circumstances as his method to draw out how individuals synthesized both the structures that impinged on them and their own role in interacting with and potentially changing their structures.

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<sup>212</sup> A close reading of Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* is put to use for analyzing his perception by other English Marxists in Theodore Koditschek, "The Possibilities of Theory: Thompson's Marxist History," in *E.P. Thompson and English Radicalism*, ed. Roger Fieldhouse and Richard Taylor (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 71.

<sup>213</sup> Koditschek, "The Possibilities of Theory," 72.

<sup>214</sup> In his chapter on Thompson, Bess recounts the risks and oppositions that Thompson held that distinguished his intellectual work as reflecting his political commitments to social life of people and how Thompson's resistance to structural Marxism was because of how it failed to address the needs of those he studied. Michael Bess, *Utopia and the Mushroom Cloud: Four Activist Intellectuals and Their Strategies for Peace, 1945-1989* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 122.

<sup>215</sup> Bess, *Utopia and the Mushroom Cloud*, 122.

This background of Thompson is imported into Levitas, not made explicit. But, by rejecting explicitly psychoanalytic, erotic desire, in focusing on the "cold" and "warm" streams that Bloch highlights, and in referencing the arguments in British Marxism over Morris's legacy, Levitas suggests this archive is what is guiding her formulation of desire as common to places where scarcity gaps, constructed under particular historical conditions, generate interest in making life better. Levitas wants utopia to exceed any form, to be known as experience itself:

Utopia does not express desire, but enables people to work towards an understanding of what is necessary for human fulfillment, a broadening, deepening and raising aspirations in terms quite different from those of their everyday life. Thus *News from Nowhere*, as a critique of alienation, does not just ask us to think about an alternative society, but invites us to experience what it would mean to be fully in possession of our own humanity—an experience which Bloch claims is offered to us through artistic works in the ‘fulfilled moment.’<sup>216</sup>

I agree with Levitas that Marxism—or more generally critical, social constructionist approaches—struggle to work with human experience in their texts and that desire is related to this articulation. I, however, argue that there are ways other than hers, more inclusive of the ruptures that Thompson endeavors to include that are theoretically tuned and methodologically coherent with critical theory. This is my figure of Utopia that interprets Utopia for its contradictions, for its explicit appeals to fantasy, and for its address to the affective, libidinal dimensions of collectivity that Bloch calls forth but that Wegner warns of as dimensions of a nation-state subjectivation and individualization that excludes as it includes—a process still underway. I argue that staying focused on the Utopian literary form delivers something of the experiential that Levitas wants to capture with "desire." Theory is here to play a role in this labor, but differently than her more

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<sup>216</sup> Levitas, *Concept*, 141.



straightforward analytic directs or the affective charge that is carried in Abensour's/Thompson's "education of desire" that too easily is wrapped in its own tautological vortex. The materiality she endeavors to insert with desire too quickly disintegrates with her formulation, and what might be a generic fantasy becomes indistinguishable from something properly Utopian.

This chapter argued that the weaknesses of a generalized utopian theory, rather than failings, are evidence of the presence of another valuable discourse struggling to hold up the subject and its particularity within structural methods of analysis. Utopian theory brings these two points of view together by defining Utopia as a dream, an impulse to fantasy, and as desire. These efforts, I contended, are displacements of two orders: one, of the structural dilemma of sustaining both of these perspectives at once—the concrete relation of subject to society and the fantasy of a perfect and total society—and two, of Utopia's role in signifying contradiction, specifically the contradiction of sustaining those two in perspective to one another. Simply said, Utopia both enacts and represents the enactment of this contradiction. Thus, naming Utopia as fantasy is not "wrong," but the theoretical labor in collecting social diversity and contradictory elements under one heading that is, itself, a label for the rifts of social contradiction, creates itself as a Utopian form. This is not merely another case of another modern malady, however. Utopian theory holds insights to its own formation that can be attended to through its history. When Utopia's history is engaged, Utopia is seen not only for how Utopia (it, or, the genre) reflects the abstraction of "society," but also how the genre *inflects* this abstraction, shaping it as it is used in the study of religion, carrying in it intonations of collectivity and oppositional logics as residues of its Utopian history. As I

retraced Levitas's use of desire through its particular locations in twentieth-century European and English Marxism, I found more to recommend that Utopia and desire are more suitably understood through this history—the one that shows the conflict of representing raw existence and the productive fantasy of social totality as a part and parcel of critical theory. From this point, I want to pursue how this dilemma—the problematic of representation—is figured by Utopian narratives. There is much that is consistent between my understanding of the role of Utopian literature and Thompson's—something I will develop next. I want to show, however, that psychoanalytic discourses have a role to play in understanding the desire for Utopia as it affects modern life generally and critical projects specifically.

## Chapter Three

### Utopian Literature: Formal Conventions and Figuration

This chapter continues my argument that critical approaches in Religious Studies can be supported in their dilemma of representing the structuring forces of society and the subjects structured by these forces by considering how the figure of Utopia signifies this diremption. As I argued in the previous chapter, theorists of Utopia dissolve historical and social differences in attempting to create a more widely applicable, generalized "desire." In seaming the contradictions of Utopia, they collapse into unity what is better viewed for its differences. This leaves unexamined some suppositions about coherent subjectivity of desire—a critique that is immanent to the use of desire and dreaming but that go unexamined. In short, scholars such as Sargent and Levitas propose that Utopia is about desire, but lack a theory of desire. I have proposed that by historicizing Utopian theory for these investments, critical scholars can make better use of Utopia by naming it as a figure that displaces the contradictions experienced by western, modern subjects into an aesthetic, delivering a pleasure of a temporary resolution. This chapter further examines Utopia as an aesthetic figure within modernity and its role as a deposit for modern fantasies. By analyzing the Utopian literary form and how it consolidates and represents self and social through the dual expressions of social totality and collectivity, critical scholars of religion can consider how intellectual projects may reflect dimensions of a desire for modern Utopia. I will make these applications to Religious Studies explicit

in Chapter Four, considering there how the Marxian desire for social transformation is predicated on representations of social totality and collectivity.

In this chapter, I will further explain how I derive my category of Utopian desire from modern literary form and the Marxist literary criticism of Fredric Jameson. As explicated in the previous chapter, scholars of Utopia should not subsume its violent aspects into a well-modulated desire, but instead interpret it as a historicized, modern figure. Here I continue with these Marxist approaches and argue that, in representing the idealized society, Utopia is more precisely a formal resolution of social contradictions that offers a means to analyze the material conditions that form subjects and inform subjective perspectives. I first consider how the genre of Utopian narrative fiction, taking its cues from More's inaugural satire about a distant island, figures itself as a genre of boundaries. I argue that the Utopian literary form suspends both the fantasy of satisfaction and the blunt reality of social contradiction simultaneously through its conventions of travel and boundary crossing. I then consider, through Jameson's Marxist and psychoanalytic frames, how modern literary forms generally, and the Utopian literary form specifically, hold together the desires that inflect and accompany modernity and capitalism, particularly those that speak to the anxieties that arise from social contradictions. Jameson regards literature as a repository of ideological and libidinal investments that can bring into view the pleasures of analysis as well as put the interpreter into contact with conflicts of analytic and existential perspectives with which modern humans wrestle. Literature holds the ideological wish fulfillments of their communities, yet also can be sites for confronting the ways that society delivers those ideological fantasies to the reader through their place in symbolic and imaginary

networks. Jameson, I contend, offers a robust historicism along with a means to consider the existential, lived dimension of social life, inclusive of that affective and libidinal attachments that limn and contour that social life and give off the impression of "personal experience." I conclude from Jameson's formal method that Utopia develops as a figure within modernity for holding together two, entwined desires: one, of representing social life as a totality for analytic and explanatory purposes and two, for ending the experiences of incongruity or conflict that appear as generated from the production, distribution, and organization of material and social life. As such, Utopia is a fantasy of the fulfillment of the self through the social—a cognitive fulfillment of social totality and an affective fulfillment of collectivity.

I am particularly drawn to how Jameson's formal method bridges the immediacy of the present with the difficulty of thinking this present and how critical thought is an extension of this difficulty. He notes the obstacles to formulating thought under the conditions of western commodity culture—specifically American-style—conditions which include the "techniques of mystification practiced by the media and particularly by advertising in its enormous expansion since the onset of the Cold War" in the 1970s. Since that moment, he perceives a further expansion, an "invincible universality of capitalism." Even with social gains on the left, socioeconomic alternatives to capitalism seem not only unviable, but unthinkable.<sup>217</sup> The most recent (2016) of his published writing, an essay called *An American Utopia*,<sup>218</sup> answers his own challenge to think Utopia under these conditions, offering both diagnosis and prescription with a large dose

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<sup>217</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, xvii; Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, xii.

<sup>218</sup> Fredric Jameson, *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army*, ed. Slavoj Žižek, (New York: Verso, 2016).

of self-conscious humor.<sup>219</sup> His keen attention to the present cultivates a type of historicism that tracks present knowledge production as consciously *modern* in its formulations of history, change, and abstraction for the service of analysis and *postmodern* in its awareness of the faults, failures, and inadequacies of the project of thought—all within micro and macro climates of capitalist reification, commodification, and instrumentalization. Out of the present tense, Jameson looks around and understands the moment as marked by a crisis of representation. In postmodernity, representation is not conceived as a dilemma, but as an impossibility; "reason, turned cynical, has been displaced by art and the multiplicity of images, none of which corresponds to 'truth.'"<sup>220</sup> He observes how this is distinct from modernism's own crisis of representation that took on "heroic formal invention and the grandiose prophetic visions of the modernist seers."<sup>221</sup> The present tense of postmodernity does not lead to or excuse relativism; it demands new commitments to history and to praxis with the awareness of these as always incomplete and both useful and longed for in the face of the proliferations of social life into more and more forms due to reification and commodification.

By interpreting the Utopia as a modern figure within a postmodern moment, I identify Utopia as providing the pleasures of an imaginary social wholeness along with a potential interpretive satisfaction of glimpsing the saturations and sedimentations of the social on the subject. I conclude that Utopia can be a means for critical religious studies scholars to investigate these twin desires—one, of representing social totality through

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<sup>219</sup> In the first two pages of this essay, Jameson catalogues the present, particularly of power as it has been theorized and how it is distinctively deployed by nation-states against their own citizens since the 1960s and concludes that: "This is the situation in which I want to propose a project which I can't be sure whether I am proposing a political program or a utopian vision, neither of which, according to me, ought to be possible any longer." "An American Utopia" in *An American Utopia*, 1.

<sup>220</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 212.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*

social construction and two, of the attunement of the self to the social as collectivity and the possibilities of the end of social contradiction. Interpreting Utopia for these aspects generates perspectives relevant to the critical study of religion for the way that the Utopian form is itself a "social construction"—a constructed society. This overlap affords a momentary glimpse of the scholar's affective attachments to analyzing society for its constructedness.

### **Outline**

In Part One, I claim that Utopia develops as a figure for thinking social change and difference by way of its status as an aesthetic object—specifically modern literary fiction. If Utopia has come to signify a desire for a better way of living (as Levitas avers), it does so by the way that modern readers have encountered narratives of travel to isolated communities that function smoothly and present happy inhabitants. When Utopia is seen through its literary forms and conventions, it removes Utopia from the category of philosophical concept to one of aesthetic figure and directs attention to how thought—especially thought about Utopia—is a matter of comparatives, sustained by a logic of spatial relation. I advance these claims by first discussing some of the issues that are raised by isolating Utopia as a genre of literary fiction and discover the homology of Utopia and genre: that both are made possible by their boundaries. Like in Chapter Two, Utopia again is mired in representational problems related to its own form. I untangle these threads by describing some features of Utopian literature, turning specifically to how the narratives themselves are constructed out of differential space and assert new spaces for thought because of the traveler or narrator. Utopias, then are travel narratives of alternative, self-sufficient societies that move the reader dialectically between worlds,

generating a mix of familiarity and unfamiliarity that ultimately propels the reader to recognize their own social world and its complex problems. Utopias are and are not like other narratives: they rely on structures of narrative satisfaction but present them spatially instead of through a temporal resolution of plot. Here, I note some closely related genres like dystopias and Science Fiction and compare them for how they differently figure the crux of the Utopian form—spatial difference—and how difference is both a register for otherness as social groups but also, in the postmodern turn, differential subjectivities. Thus, claims of a Utopian future are more precisely understood primarily through an aesthetic logic of spatial and not temporal difference.

In Part Two, I (re)turn to Fredric Jameson from Chapter One. Jameson's analysis of modern western literature highlights the role cultural products have not only in circulating and expressing ideological contents but also in relaying historical shifts through diverse literary forms. Jameson's thought affords both a materialist-historical and Lacanian analysis of cultural production that supports my argument that Utopia can be a useful tool for framing the problematics of representing attachments and affections that afflict and comfort, at the same time as proposing these as social constructions to be analyzed as aspects of a social totality. I relate Jameson's broad Marxist formalism to Utopian literature specifically. Jameson underscores how narrative Utopias frame and consolidate the social contradictions of capitalism for those in Western Europe and North America. Their attention to quotidian details and revised human political and material intercourse are representations of societies both similar to and different from those of their authors and readers. Jameson adds dimensions to historical materialism and formal



analysis that permit a historicization of thought and categories themselves, not just the works he analyzes, making him a particularly rich addition to critical methods of religion.

### **I. Utopian Literary Form—a Genre of Boundaries**

A common or conventional understanding of Utopia is that it represents a perfect or an ideal society. In this section, I argue against this traditional definition of Utopia to privilege the boundaries of Utopia and to argue that recognizing the constructedness of an alternative, fictional society catapults one to consider the constructedness of thought itself. In the previous chapter, I argued that Utopia has historical connection to a particular moment of European nation-state building and becomes abstracted as something more general through its use by political and social theory. In this section, I continue with this argument by showing how the political realities of modernity get translated through the literary form of Utopia and then, in the ways that thought can be considered as a spatial operation. I contend that fixations or fantasies of satisfaction in the modern era are signified through wholeness or totality, especially as it can be characterized as a human-directed society. First, I discuss this wholeness as it presents in anxiety of boundaries of the genre of Utopia itself. I present three theorists of Utopian genre, each of whom demonstrates for me how intellectual claims have material and political dimensions. These are the historical conditions of nation-state formation, differential category formation in modern scholarship, and sexual politics in the late twentieth century. I reference how theorists have defined the Utopian genre of literature and in so doing, demonstrate the inherently historical and political dimension of all category formations. These topics are particularly relevant to my questions of the critical study of religion in that each reflects a different dimension of the problematics of representation inherited

from modernity now more evident within our late capitalist, postmodern situation: the necessary but limited nature of category formation; the political and economic material realities as informing these categories; and the assumed modern, masculine liberal subject of knowledge production that has been challenged by psychoanalytic interpretations and feminist restatements.

I determine from these discussions that several Utopian literary conventions can serve as a means to investigate these problematics because of the "wholeness" that Utopia represents. I identify several conventions for discussion: Utopias are travel narratives that have boundaries that people cross, moving the reader dialectically between worlds and generating a mix of familiarity and unfamiliarity that ultimately propels the reader into a realization or recognition of estrangement while simultaneously satisfying the reader through the double closure of a narrative ending and the Utopian society. Said another way, the fantasy of satisfaction, fulfillment, or wholeness is given shape as a bounded society that redirects attention to material, lived, social reality. After discussing these conventions and the reading protocols that they demand, I consider how Utopia transitions from literary form into cultural signifier or figure. Drawing on the work of Louis Marin, I propose that the heightened drama of estrangement propels Utopia into a figure that ties its signification back to an aesthetic form more than to a philosophical concept. Through this analysis of the Utopian literary form, I clarify how Utopia, when recognized for these mechanisms of its literary production, is in a longer line of representational logics that wrestle with the presence/absence of signification. Thus, Utopia is layered with several kinds of satisfactions and deferrals which are, in Lacanian discourses, the movements that constitute desire itself.

## Utopia Literary Genre

Deciding the boundaries of a genre is, in some senses, a reflection of the boundary-making projects across modernity. This can be seen in three discussions of Utopian genre. The first is with how the effort to claim a territory of a specific genre of "Utopian literature" is an intellectual mirror to the material history of European nation-state development. Phillip Wegner makes use of the homology of Utopian genre and the form of Utopias as discourses of boundary in his argument for interpreting Utopian literatures as reflective and constitutive of modern nation-state, where the double move of bounded collectivity of place and people—a *nation*— and the "abstracting social mechanism, the *state*" combine to form a contradiction of a universalizing move and a contracting, particularizing gesture.<sup>222</sup> Wegner relates genre formation to modernity and Utopia: genre itself comes into being through its crossing of boundaries—national culture, temporalities and canons or sets of other literatures, forming and reforming like an institution with its own sets of conventions and practices. As the genre becomes rigid enough to be recognized, it then becomes "portable" in the sense that its conventions can be picked up by other literatures and reference other places.<sup>223</sup> Wegner claims that the development of the Utopian narrative and the institutionalization of the nation-state each are reflections of this kind of movement and formation of genre: genre disseminates like a nation-state and also is a vehicle of nation-state dissemination.

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<sup>222</sup> Phillip E. Wegner, *Imaginary Communities*, 2. Wegner connects his discussion of the racializing force of nation-state formation through Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 1992).

<sup>223</sup> "The successful dissemination and subsequent flourishing of a genre then results from its inherent 'portability,' its capacity to be carried into and redeployed in contexts quite different from those within which it first emerges." Wegner, *Imaginary Communities*, 8.

Utopian fictions reproduce the spatial logics of nation-states by the bounded, isolated and organized groups they encounter through some travel escapade, reflecting geographies of the maps available in the real worlds of their authors while at the same time producing interior space of imaginative production in the readership developing within these colonializing contexts—readers at home reading of abroad and developing new horizons of interior subjectivities. Referencing Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, Wegner points to how the reified Enlightenment conceptualization of space as a static construct is more precisely "an open-ended, conflicted, and contradictory process."<sup>224</sup> Thus, the genre of Utopian narratives results from larger political contradictions: the extension of rights and privileges to citizens of states when the dominant understanding of these same rights is constructed out of exclusions and otherness. Reflecting on specific Utopian literature, as Wegner shows, is an occasion to consider how the author-readers of particular places articulate the contests of who belongs, how they belong and where belonging occurs as ambivalences of the violence necessary to secure belonging. Like the time traveler Julian West in Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1889), returning home from the idyllic future is a nightmare—a terrible outcome. Thankfully, it *is* only nightmare: West wakes up again, restored to Boston in 2000. And like his middle class Americans he is addressing, they too should learn to forget their European immigrant pasts and come into assimilationist ideology. Wegner's spatial analysis of Utopian genre directs attention to the ways in which the material conditions—in this case, spatial markers of national identities—are reflected in the texts

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<sup>224</sup> Wegner, 13. For Wegner's discussion of Lefebvre and other modern spatial theorists, see *Imaginary Community*, 10-17. See, also, Henri Lefebvre *The Production of Space*, trans. David Nicholson-Smith, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

themselves at both the level of a formal convention, e.g. a traveler, and the sentiments expressed through these forms, e.g. belonging.

A second means for considering Utopian genre for modernity is the way that genre allows the reader to move dialectically between worlds. Asking this question of the division of literature from non-literary Utopias, Gary Saul Morson resists the collapse of fiction and non-fiction for the genre of Utopia where political tracts cozy up to satires and Science Fiction, as in the case of J.H. Hexter's *More's Utopia: A Biography of an Idea*.<sup>225</sup> Morson distinguishes Utopia's fictional aspects as part of a "contract" for the reader that does not present a plausible sequence of events like a novel but yet, has a realism—that is still different from realism as a genre.<sup>226</sup> Utopian fictions propose, claim and assert in ways that novels do not and thus require different reading protocols than novels—a distinction I make below. His larger argument, however, is to situate Dostoevsky within a field of Utopian genre, despite the Russian writer's notably anti-Utopian texts such as *The Brothers Karamozov*. His proposal moves to advance Utopia with three neat criteria: written with a nod or in a tradition to previous Utopian works, depicting an ideal society, and advocating the realization of that society *when viewed as a whole text*.<sup>227</sup> His re-reading of Dostoevsky's *The Writer's Diary* is a larger project than what my own research undertakes, but Morson's challenge to view Utopian texts "as a whole" so as to consider

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<sup>225</sup> Morson's discourse on Utopian literature as a genre is within a treatment of Dostoevsky. The larger conversation involves parody and anti-utopianism of Dostoevsky, thus developing genre as something done in dialectic relation. Gary Saul Morson, *The Boundaries of Genre: Dostoevsky's Diary of a Writer and the Traditions of Literary Utopia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981); Jack. H. Hexter, *More's Utopia: a Biography of an Idea*. (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1952).

<sup>226</sup> Morson, *Boundaries*, 76.

<sup>227</sup> My italics here. His succinct list begins on p.74 and goes through p.78, yet could be said to continue for the rest of his text as he turns to distinguish "anti-utopias" and "meta-utopias," forming all in dialectical relation. But this list is "a work is a literary utopia if and only if it satisfies each of the following criteria: (1) it was written (or presumed to have been written) in the tradition of previous utopian literary works; (2) it depicts (or is taken to depict) an ideal society; and (3) regarded as a whole, it advocates (or is taken to advocate) the realization of that society." Morson, *Boundaries*, 74-8.

them for their polemical role raises the question of the relationship of the *category* of a genre and the *conventions* of that genre. Is there something about the "whole text" that relates to the wholeness or completeness of the society that it represents? This slippage of the tools of analysis and the form of the work are framed within Fredric Jameson's theorizations as a case for historicizing critical approaches—attending to how arguments and analytic tools reflect particular concerns of historical moments and resemble their aesthetics. Jameson does not make an explicit point about this collusion of wholeness at the level of analysis and form, addressing instead another register in Morson on irony, modernity and Utopia, but I want to hold out that Morson's association of Utopia with wholeness can offer insight into the general social reception of Utopian literature and help to understand its ability to generate a particular kind of desire that is recognizable as Utopian.<sup>228</sup>

The third account of the Utopian genre comes from a consideration of late modern and postmodern feminist Utopian fiction, introduced by literary theorist Lucy Sargisson. Sargisson argues against a traditional reading of utopianism that makes it about closure, perfection, and blueprints and emphasizes instead its subversions of status quo and foregrounds process, imperfection and uncertainty.<sup>229</sup> She develops Utopia for its logic of transgression and argues that this applies to the way that late twentieth century science fictions cross the boundaries of Utopian genre, as feminist theory resists the conventions

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<sup>228</sup> Jameson reviews Morson for his claim of irony—where the synthesis of opposites are constructed within a text and develops a reflexivity that wraps up Utopia and its opposite, anti-Utopia, within its boundaries. Jameson regards this as a style of modernity, "an aesthetic and aestheticizing fashion, valorizing art as the space in which the incompatibles can reach a positive kind of fullness," Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 179. For this larger discussion of Morson in Jameson, see *Archaeologies*, 176-180.

<sup>229</sup> "Only an understanding of utopia that destroys old perceptions of genre, transforms them into something new, and thus revives utopianism, can adequately reflect the conventions, needs and wants of contemporary malcontents. And so, the critical utopia does not blueprint, but rather it privileges social change in process. It embraces imperfection and uncertainty" Lucy Sargisson, *Fools Gold?: Utopianism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 11.

of philosophy.<sup>230</sup> This argument for heterogeneity as a fundamental feature of the genre of Utopia serves, in Sargisson's work, to focus on how Utopia can "anticipate the possibility of radically different 'nows,'" to "explore alternative states of being to those presently existing—to stretch and expand our understanding of the possibility, thus making a multiplicity of radically different futures not only desirable but also conceivable."<sup>231</sup> I do not disagree with her valuing of feminist discourses—fictional or philosophical—to challenge and critique hegemonies, but I find it more relevant to consider that Sargisson retrofits a definition of Utopia specifically for the political work of feminism so as to include a range of fictions within the second half of the twentieth century. The debate to preserve "Utopia" for feminist politics is countered by standpoint theories that, as Sally Kitch argues, avoid the lure of the idealized in all its forms. Realism, not Utopia, makes use of the "gaps between human beliefs and practices" and though Sargisson's redefinition of Utopia promotes complexity and ambiguity, it does not easily work with the contradictions that will appear in all desires for political change:

Utopias have few strategies for combating such inherent contradictions. Acknowledging the difficulty of achieving perfect consistency should make realist theorists humble about [their] suggestions and analyses. It should alert [them] to the many cases in which social change should be

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<sup>230</sup> Sargisson is optimistic about French feminist philosophers Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray and their ability to provide the ballast for thinking alterity. "In order not to oppress the other, for example, we must greet it *as* other and learn to know it, not to assimilate it. This approach to the other is non-possessive." Sargisson treats feminist philosophical and feminist fictional texts together and lauds both forms for asserting a non-dominating authority. Both forms offer utopian vision for Sargisson in presenting an image of the end of the hierarchical binary of men over women in favor of differentials and plurality: "The function of the utopian society is that of the dispassion or dislodgement of power from the hands of men—not, however, to erect a new totem of femininity, but to render the concept of power *over* defunct. To paraphrase Cixous, the desire expressed is the one to destroy the space of domination: 'If I take over the world, let it be to dispossess myself of it immediately, let it be to forge new links between myself and the world.'" Lucy Sargisson, *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism*, Women in Politics (New York: Routledge, 1996), 195, 209.

<sup>231</sup> Sargisson, *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism*, 52.

pursued incrementally, provisionally—in jagged rather than in straight lines.<sup>232</sup>

Kitch sees little achieved for feminism in this move to redraw the genre of Utopia for the concrete, practical work of feminist politics. Utopia is too invested in fantasy, too rooted in a metonymic fallacy that reduces social complexity to a single or small set of problems to fix. The language of Utopia is too redolent with leaps. Realism believes in social change but starts with the premises of variation and complexity. Feminism can be optimistic and action oriented without being Utopian.<sup>233</sup>

What I want to preserve from Sargisson's Utopia-of-transgression is both the concern about what is feminist in Utopia and the implication of her term "transgression." She argues for a broad definition of Utopia as transgressive in its function for its provision of heterogeneity and multiplicity at the place of the subject away from the oppositional logics of representation—a binary of is/is not—that have too long held sway without account for their construction from exclusions. What I want to press from a contemporary feminist standpoint in analyzing Utopian literature is how the Utopian literary form—be it an early modern version like More's or a contemporary feminist science fiction of Ursula LeGuin's like *The Dispossessed* (1974) with its contrasting planet/moon societies—is the construction of a total society where subjects are in harmony with that society. With LeGuin, however, the harmonies are incomplete, in varying stages of discord. From this moment of history, after the labors of many kinds of feminism in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, harmony is decidedly *not the case* for subjectivities within modern, class-based societies. This is more radically stated

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<sup>232</sup> Sally Kitch, *Higher Ground: From Utopianism to Realism in American Feminist Thought and Theory*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 177.

<sup>233</sup> Kitch, *Higher Ground*, 111.



with psychoanalytic terms, especially in Luce Irigaray's critique of Lacan, where the Phallic subject is ever deriving its confidence from an Other who appears to hold the secrets of the self, an Other that is the position of Woman and thus, is barred from subjectivity itself.<sup>234</sup> Sargisson's main contribution is not in her preservation of Utopia for feminism as much as in raising how philosophy and psychoanalysis had excluded, written over, or further removed the category of Woman from registering as a legitimate social subject, different from a masculine, white, able-bodied, western bourgeois or middle-class subjectivity. The contributions of feminist critiques of the perfections, wholenesses or fullnesses of modernist aesthetics has yet to (and may never) be written through theories of social construction. My own project, while not so explicitly referencing these contributions, is indebted to them, regarding the figure of Utopia as an occasion to analyze the limitations of all theoretical projects while acknowledging their conditional usefulness.

While Sargisson treats transgression as a function of Utopia, as its goal of transformation through its disruption of normativity, I regard the transgression as something that is first recognizable through Utopia's literary conventions. If there is a desire or interest in transgression, it is a postmodern response to the closures of modernity, and thus, has become a rallying cry, its own new postmodern norm. This

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<sup>234</sup> The writings of Irigaray are impossible to summarize effectively, but I will say that I am ever-grateful for *Speculum of the Other Woman* and *I Love to You*. Also, Elizabeth Grosz's writings on Irigaray, along with Kristeva and Le Doeuff, have been valuable in my understanding of these women's contributions to philosophy. *Sexual Subversions* (1989) and *Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*. Ellen Armour's work communicates the difficulty that feminist writings have faced and the "necessity of completion" with the attention to the ever-incompleteness of thought. See, Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Gillian C. Gill, trans. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985); Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists*, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1989); Grosz, *Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Irigaray, *I Love To You: Sketch of a Possible Felicity in History*, trans. Allison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1995); Ellen Armour, *Deconstruction, Feminist Theology, and the Problem of Difference: Subverting the Race/Gender Divide*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

reasserts the distinctly modern character of Utopia and its production of boundary for some purpose, some use, and to ask this as a question—about what and who boundaries serve. In this way, I ask how it is that Utopia presents society as a construction, reduction, or reconstitution of the multiplicities of its functions to socialize—to educate implicitly and explicitly—into its orientation. Thus, to consider Utopia at this moment is not to contrast it to perfection, blueprint, or idealization but how it signals modern preoccupations with totality or wholeness—of functional completeness—that mirrors in the satisfaction of its subjects a relation to that totality. "Feminist" Utopias may earn their label from their address of sexual difference or multiple sexualities, their reimagining of kinship relations or reproduction, or their risks of hospitality.<sup>235</sup> However, I argue that they are Utopian, not for their emancipatory potential explicitly, but for their formal features of enclaves that sit at a distance that both require some traveler and some world en total to generate questions about the constructedness of subjectivity, of social relations, and of "society" as an abstraction. Their political value may be in their contents as they achieve satisfactions or pleasures from these relations but also may not hinge on these contents.

To summarize, a question of a genre of Utopia will pulse with other generic delineations—parody, satire, romance, myth, political tract, realism—without necessarily

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<sup>235</sup> In the case of feminist Utopias and the label, there are several books that collect and describe this particular genre. *Postmodern Utopias and Feminist Fictions*, by Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor, treats feminist fictions and Utopias for their hospitality and the recuperation of imaginative inquiry. Francis Bartkowski's *Feminist Utopias* focuses on the signification of family as a recapitulation of the state. Bartkowski applies feminism to the occasions where the "everyday life of women becomes an exercise of willful imagination, demanding revolutionary transformation." Feminism is utopian when "longing and desire, anger and despair, are reshaped by hope" and fiction helps with this "in that a narrative sets the pattern of these desires and transformation as if a potential future had erupted into the reader's present,"9-10. See also Marlene Barr, et al., *Future Females, The Next Generation: New Voices and Velocities in Feminist Science Fiction Criticism* (London: Rowan & Littlefield, 2000); and Jennifer Burwell, *Notes on Nowhere: Feminism, Utopian Logic, and Social Transformation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

settling easily. I pull from Wegner's identification of Utopia with "scaled space" in contrast to character or setting descriptions in other genres such as modern novels or romances to give a handhold for grasping some elements of political economic conditions of the production, reception and analytic moments of Utopia.<sup>236</sup> This includes the present moment of my analysis in 2017 where the transgressions or boundary markers of Utopia echo a present political economic contradiction of the refugees and the reinforcement of national identities while capital flows unimpeded. Utopia is rife with these kinds of contradictions: it suspends the possibility of a good place while at the same time saying it does not exist; it holds out an image of peaceful co-existence while offering only memories or traces of the violence of its foundations (even Morris's telling of the revolution that brought on the epoch of rest is not in the minds of his primary hosts); and it suggests itself as the ultimate social arrangement while simultaneously depending on Utopian literatures to make it recognizable as a Utopia.

I will further unfold other contradictions that mark Utopia later in this chapter. What this genre discussion holds into view for my argument is that what is recognizable as Utopian literature is the particular way that it presents narratives of boundaries and crossings, reflects how modernity has variously thought itself through this formulation of geography and spatial relations, and references particular histories such as nation-state formation and liberal subjectivity (as differentially formed and unevenly distributed or even actively withheld). Utopia—when seen first as a literary form of boundary crossing—forces into its definition political economy and subjective forms. This makes Utopia a commentary on how the lines of "society" are drawn to include and exclude and that these boundaries have conceptual use and existentially experienced effects.

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<sup>236</sup> Wegner, 12-13.

To repeat from my earlier investigation into critical methods in the study of religion: representing social life means drawing boundaries around a thing called "society" that then allows for describing and explaining behavior particular to groups of people, permitting scholars of religion to point to how religion functions ideologically. Utopian fiction is a process of boundary-making in many similar senses in that it depends on a construction or fiction called "society"—a miniaturization of social life and condensation of complex relations—so as to reveal insight that would otherwise be difficult to describe or relate. But isn't the society that religion scholars describe real, whereas the Utopian one is not? Neither are real in the absolute sense, a fact critical religion scholars would do well to remember, since they are forever in the process of boundary creation in their formations of categories. In this simple sense, social constructionist approaches are built on the desire for Utopia—to represent social life as a totality, depending on a kind of objective status, that miniaturizes the vast and intricate social field into a bounded and isolated whole that is also, visible and available to the traveler/scholar who returns to deliver news of the peculiar yet fascinating ways that others function that is, at all times, a reference to and recognition that the source or present society of the traveler/scholar is also summoned and related to these operations. Naming social constructionist approaches as, in part, a desire for Utopia can offer a means for critical scholars to catch in their view the affective and libidinal dimensions of social construction, all the while seeing them as particular to modernity, weighted with political and economic concern. I turn now to describe these literary conventions—of travel narrative, social totality, and boundary crossing—as formal features of the genre

that excites questions about the influence of institution, organization, and order on the existential, affective and cognitive dimensions of human existence.

### Convention of Travel after the "Age of Discovery"

As the Renaissance enjoyed the new access to the "old world" of the classics, it also enjoyed the surprises of the "new worlds" coming into view through ocean exploration.<sup>237</sup> As mentioned above, More's text is in two parts— Book One, a commentary on the state of affairs in London and Book Two, a travel narrative to the island Utopia. This text has inspired many commentaries as to its form of satire, its structure, its historical conditions, and its proposals—all of which situate it as a product of its esteemed author, its specific audience of Erasmus and friends, and its unique two-part form.<sup>238</sup> It earns this attention, however, mostly from the other texts which borrow and extend its formula of a distant land discovered by accident by a curious explorer who returns to tell of not just a community but a fully complex society with similar-yet-different methods of sustaining itself materially and through a social order. It is also relevant to consider how the narrator functions as a literary device to make the comparison to another society explicit. A century after More's text, Francis Bacon pens *New Atlantis* (1629), disguising a more scientifically advanced England as another island in the sea. John Harrington's *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656) presents a government balanced across several centers of power but not as a fictional narrative, whereas Thomas Campanella's "The City of the Sun" (1623) recapitulates the travel

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<sup>237</sup> J. C. Davis "Utopia and the New World, 1500-1700" in *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World*. ed. Roland Schaer, Gregory Claeys, and Lyman Tower Sargent, 95-118, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>238</sup> For commentary on More's use of satire and social commentary, see Robert C. Elliot, *The Shape of Utopia: Studies in a Literary Genre* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), Chapter 1. For considering the relationship between Book One and Book Two, see J.H. Hexter's *More's Utopia*.

narrative and dialogue form of More's text, along with the account of the fantastic land with unusually named sub-groups that say something of their type—a convention picked up and carried on as part of the satirical travels of Gulliver in Jonathan Swift's popular eighteenth century tale.<sup>239</sup> The travel narrative form continues, but with a shift from spatial exploration to time. Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888) and William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890) reflected the late nineteenth century's progressive attitudes with a focus on the future as the traveler's destination. This movement to temporal distance is captured with H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) who added the machine to the leap made in sleep by Bellamy and Morris. As the twentieth century Utopian form morphs into its dystopian cousin and is displaced by the more prolific and imaginative genre of Science Fiction, travelers and their tales persist as the convention for encountering alternative, self-sufficient societies.

This convention of a distant land visited by a mediator is crucial to appreciating how Utopia comes to be compared with political treatises and deployed as a rhetorical tool for promoting social change. As literary theorist Peter Ruppert explains, the reader occupies a vital place alongside the other places of the Utopian narrative: the place of the Utopia, the home of the traveler, and then the empty place that is generated in the mind of the reader.<sup>240</sup> These places are set up by the boundaries—walls, trenches, moats—that are indispensable features on the maps of Utopias. Utopias produce a critical effect through the dialectic of the familiar and unfamiliar, similarity and difference. By providing a "shocking mirror," Utopias and other forms like science fiction, myth, fantasies and

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<sup>239</sup> A very quick survey of literatures for comparison can be found in "Utopian Traditions: Themes and Variations" Lyman Tower Sargent in *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World*, 2000. 8-17. For segments of a variety of texts, see J. W. Johnson, *Utopian Literature*, 1968.

<sup>240</sup> Peter Ruppert, *Reader in a Strange Land: The Activity of Reading Literary Utopias* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986).

folktales do not merely mirror but deflect the source world as strange. While permeable with its boundaries as a genre (like each literary example of Utopia has permeable but meaningful boundaries), the category of Utopian literature is a "heuristic device" permitting insight into forms of alienation and injustice.<sup>241</sup> Ruppert wants to pull the dialectical form of Utopia—its back and forth between the multiple places—into the dialectical procedures of both reading for pleasure and reading for analysis.<sup>242</sup> The reader, then is pulled into imaginative work:

Once we recognize the deficiencies within the boundaries of utopia itself, then reading utopias can no longer be simply a question of accepting or rejecting utopian values: in rejecting utopia we are left with the intolerable social reality that it has exposed, and conversion to utopia implies that we can get outside of time and history—a possibility that, even in utopia, exists nowhere. Unable to simply convert to utopia, the reader is also unable to return unchanged to the actual world of strife, conflict and history. Thus, suspended in the gap between history and utopia, or between 'now' and 'nowhere,' the reader is provoked to engage on her own terms the problems, aspirations, and the potential solutions that constitute the inspiration of utopian thinking and of utopian activity.<sup>243</sup>

In Ruppert's frame, the text activates the reader to engage the "intolerable social reality" of her own world, "the actual world of strife, conflict and history." These conditions are the social contradictions in the life of the reader that have been raised to a cognitive level through the defamiliarization procedure of the Utopian text—a text that renders society as an object with more porosity, more mutability than formerly thought.

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<sup>241</sup> Ruppert, *Reader in a Strange Land*, 40.

<sup>242</sup> "Literary utopias are capable of evoking different responses in readers because, as boundary works, their functions can be seen differently, and their effects on readers can be realized in different ways. It is our own performance as readers that determines to a great extent which of their potential effects are realized." The boundary language plays well both for how boundaries in the utopian text are mirrored by the boundaries of generic categories across Ruppert's own text. *Reader in a Strange Land*, 50.

<sup>243</sup> Ruppert, *Reader in a Strange Land*, 75.

### The Utopian Form as a Figure for Representational Logics

Literary Utopias, then, are neither dogmatic nor programmatic as once thought but sites of openness for thought ironically produced by the closure of a fictional society. The enclosure of the society is replicated in the closure of the Utopian literary form. Thus, Utopia not only signals the lived contradictions of material inequalities in the face of the promise of equality within liberal democracy, but also sustains cognitive contradiction. French philosopher Louis Marin investigates Utopia for the way that it signifies the gap within modern representational logics. Marin distinguishes Utopia for its way of making finite—bringing into space—modern semantic geographies such as "horizon, frontier and limit."<sup>244</sup> Marin takes the slippage of Utopia as a Greek neologism as his point of departure for considering Utopia for the way that it "defines certain modes and modalities of literary, political, and philosophical imagination and thinking in modern times, modes and modalities themselves related to specific historical and ideological contexts in Europe"<sup>245</sup> For Marin, Utopia is a figure in discourse that rests over a gap, what Wayne Hudson in his interpretation of Marin calls "utopian sublime," a place of "the other of any place: the gap between two frontiers, neither this nor that."<sup>246</sup> According to Marin, Utopia plays out a neutralization of the negative and positive of Hegel. The juxtaposition that More invests in his *Utopia* appears as a Hegelian contradiction to Marin. Thus, Utopia is not a concept but a figure—a textual product that is a practice of signification. As it refers to its negation, its own absence, Utopia marks the indifference to its difference.

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<sup>244</sup> For Marin's discussion of the totalization of Utopia to frame or contain the horizon or frontier, see Louis Marin, "Frontiers of Utopia: Past and Present" *Critical Inquiry*, Vol 19, No. 2 (Spring, 1993): 397-420.

<sup>245</sup> Marin, "Frontiers," fn 27.

<sup>246</sup> Wayne Hudson, *The Reform of Utopia*, 23.



Marin takes Utopia as the occasion to analyze language's differential features and its inherent contradictoriness as it makes visible what is already present and hides what cannot be seen. Thus, the importance of Utopia is not its standing as one kind of literature or narrative alongside others within modernity but the fact that the Utopian aesthetic form displays the representational logic of language in ways that structure a response to what is not present and not presentable.

Actually, every text performs an equivalency between space and discourse. The utopic text, however, is a remarkable form of it because it places the performative definition of text in general next to its own project, its own specific signified. The 'content' of utopia is the organization of space as a text. The utopic text, in its formal makeup and operational procedures is the constitution of a discourse as space. In other words utopia brings about an interesting equivalency between its referent—that about which it speaks, its particular project—and its emitting, receiving and transmitting codes. The content of its message is not the transmission of the message but the code of transmission.<sup>247</sup>

Utopic practice is, then, spatial play that signifies in a textual system. It is about representation and the limits of representation, the differences between an icon and a schema, a reconciliation of the impossibility of representation, where no-thing can be represented. Thus, for Marin (and Jameson) all fiction is "utopic," at the level of ideology and representation and also in self-referencing its place as non-place. Marin's deconstructive, linguistic interpretation of Utopia as a figure for language's gap in representation is a radicalizing of Utopia within a post-structural moment. The burden that Utopia bears is related to the fictions' forms and the ways that they make visible the divisions that make for language.

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 9.

### Narratives of Space, not Plot

Because of these representational logics of Utopia, the literary form depends on different satisfactions than do other narratives. Theologian Paul Fiddes finds Utopia in line with other more religious forms that substitute a plot ending with an end-of-history ending. Using literary theorist Frank Kermode, Fiddes maps how the ends of narrative unify the whole and express the ultimate ordering factor.<sup>248</sup> Utopia can be confused with messianic and millennialist religious texts because of the temporal “end of history” aspects to each of them. Narratives have a surplus of meaning, provided by the structure of metaphor that displaces one image for another. Because narratives structure to organize human experience into time, their ends are particularly important. Christianity, especially, has made use of narrative’s powerful ordering properties and has thus, impacted western historical methods in treating all stories as like a Christian drama of redemption.<sup>249</sup> The western sense of time has integrated both Christian and Jewish traditions of time’s fulfillment, not just its passage, seeing fulfillment through an end. Fiddes exploits the poststructuralist linguistic turn to discuss the metaphoric aspects of language and how meaning is displaced at the level of all signification. In the spacing of language, he finds an immanent space for the irruption of transcendence.

Fiddes advances my discussion of Utopia by showing how the immanence of Marin’s deconstructing figure of Utopia relates to the general narrative form. Fiddes displaces Bloch’s impulse to Utopia with an impulse to narrative. While I disagree with Fiddes’s conclusion where he leaves behind the deconstructing Utopian figure for an

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<sup>248</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, *The Promised End: Eschatology in Theology and Literature*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000); Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

<sup>249</sup> Fiddes, *The Promised End*, 9.

immanent instance of Christian apophysis in a Derridian differential spacing of language and time, I appreciate how he emphasizes that segmenting time and space is satisfying. Fiddes separates Utopian narratives from others by how unmotivated they are by plot. The closure is not in the end of the narrative as much as it is the "closure" of the society. Thus, closure is constructed along a different axis: the temporal closure of plot is still present in the return of the traveler, but the satisfaction is found on a register of spatial and social organization, where social contradictions are resolved by way of the relation of the Utopian subject to her society, yet left unresolved or open for the traveler in the narrative and for the reader. Marin's more philosophical register delivers how the Utopian formal convention of travel and the closure of the society generates a particular subjective formation—a reader—prepared to confront her own unknown by the confidence supplied by the textual return and the boundedness of the textual object itself:

Any travel is, first of all, a moment and a space of vacancy, an unencumbered space that suspends continuous time and the ordering of loci. *The ideology of the travel* implies a departure from a place and a return to the same place. The traveler enriches this place with a large booty of knowledge and experiences by means of which he states, in this coming back to the 'sameness,' his own consistency, his identity as a subject. *The utopian moment and space of travel*, on the contrary, consists in opening up, in this ideological circle, in the tracing out of its route, a *nowhere*, a place without place, a moment out of time, the truth of a fiction, the syncopation of an infinity and paradoxically its limit, its frontier.<sup>250</sup>

Utopian literature distinguishes itself, then, for the ways it generates a particular kind of reader—a subject "satisfied," ironically, by an encounter with a nowhere. In Part Two of this chapter, I will return to examine the ideological dimensions of this identification with the traveler and will relate this to Jameson's method, for reading Utopian literature for its ways of reflecting modern desires. For now, it is relevant to consider that it is aspects of

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<sup>250</sup> Louis Marin, *Utopics: Spatial Play*, (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press 1984), 204.

the Utopian literary form that hold aspects of the appeal of Utopia and generates desires particular to modernity in the way that thought and political, social and economic conditions co-constitute one another in ways more complicated than any simple Marxist base-superstructural account would have it.

In addition to the closure of the Utopian enclave, the porosity of the traveler, and the narrative satisfaction displaced onto the reveal of the society itself, Literary theorist **Northrop Frye** notices how the Utopian narrative form bears a mythic quality for its condensations of complex social connections. Utopia often features in-common property where leisure and movement are minimized and the individual is perceived as part of a social whole. The pastoral at the center of Utopias is, by Frye's account, the relief of anxiety through simplicity, through nature, and through an anti-intellectualism, such as the eighteenth century collision of nature and society reflected in Rousseau, the nineteenth century's break from the industrial age city with a retreat to the woods at Walden Pond, or Morris's Thames tour and hayfields in *News from Nowhere*.<sup>251</sup> Utopia is, at root, a simplification and in this way, is a genre of Romance for Frye. Its potency and appeal is in surfacing social procedures and the latent potentials of society, simplifying them, and thus becomes a myth that connects certain social facts together.

Using the terms of the layers of consciousness, Frye labels the residues of unconscious material coming into consciousness through the Utopian form, growing in popularity around times where there is greater social transition, such as in More's era and in the nineteenth century. Thus, Frye is able to account for the rise of interest in Utopia at different moments of modernity: Utopian literature emerges where there is change and a collective, social compulsion to reacquaint with and reassemble the practices of social

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<sup>251</sup> Northrop Frye, "Varieties of Literary Utopias," 40

life. Utopia appears on occasions of swift transition where, in Frye's terms, the "ritual habit[s] necessary to life" intensify and bring to consciousness the operations of life that, over time, are habitualized and return as background.<sup>252</sup> This can be used to explain the shifts in genres around Utopia, such as the political tracts of the eighteenth century or the passing of Utopia and the rise of Science Fiction in the twentieth century. In sum, Utopia is not a perfect state of freedom but an imaginative practice in 'visualizing possibilities' for the purpose of seeing ritual habits and their formation compelling insofar as they address latent aspects of a social contract and make evident the commitments that bind the society.

The psychoanalytic language is strong with Frye's work, and his layers point to, in some part, how social material is buried and manifested structurally. This attention to the psychoanalytic interpretive potentials of literature draws a comparison to Jameson who is also keen to recognize the latent and manifest dimensions in literature. While both are useful for thinking how literature can be read for its function for culture to figure and thus negotiate its transitions and arrangements (what Marxists generally think of as contradiction), Frye does not have a way of sustaining this in the language of subjects in relation. Instead, he reinscribes literature's appeal—and the reader's desire for it—for the way literature reminds readers of a singular, transfigured body.<sup>253</sup> Jameson can abide that Utopian literature may have some appeal in this way, but it is more about the relations of bodies, relations of subjects, and their coordination through political economy.

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<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>253</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957). For a longer discussion of Jameson's use of—and distancing from—Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, see Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 69-74.

### Dystopias and SF—Similarities and Differences in Texts of Difference

These generic features explored thus far—of a total society with a permeable boundary that enables passage for a traveler and a reader—have offered how the juxtaposition of social orders raises to the cognitive level social contradictions and features them as representations. The location of the satisfaction is not in the resolution of the plot but in the contentment of those citizens of the Utopia, a projection of a desire of the reader, as Ruppert might explain. What happens when this contentment is unconvincing or even repulsive? These have earned the reputation of dystopia or anti-utopia. Literary theorist Krishan Kumar combines these two in his reading of the modern Utopian form.<sup>254</sup> Kumar traces this literary sub-genre to H.G. Wells, especially *The Time Machine* (1895) which mocked socialist hopes that he saw in his fellow socialists of Bellamy and Morris whose Utopian visions were positive. As two sides of the same literary genre, Utopia and anti-utopias are to be seen through their reactions to one another as they figure social relations, integrating new technologies and political events coming down the pipe of late modernity.

But Kumar's analysis centers on content, not necessarily on form, to construct the genre. Literary theorist Tom Moylan's expansive studies of the distinct but overlapping forms of utopia, dystopia, anti-utopia, and critical utopia, and critical dystopia extend beyond the scope of Kumar's project.<sup>255</sup> Kumar's anti-utopia is for Moylan (and Jameson) brought under the resisters to Utopian thought tout court. Like Kumar's, Moylan's work is deeply committed to the texts themselves, but Moylan tends toward the formal aspects that connect the diverse literatures whereas Kumar's is more

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<sup>254</sup> Krishan Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*, (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell, 1987).

<sup>255</sup> Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*, (New York: Methuen, 1986).

towards the texts' reactions to socialism. Moylan's larger project is focused on the marginal Utopian forms—specifically the critical utopias of the 1960s and 1970s and then, the dystopias of the twentieth century that have much in common with Science Fiction. Moylan reads Jameson closely throughout, agreeing that Utopia and dystopia are not opposites as they both stage a social totality but that they differ more at the level of form—that it is the narrative quality of the dystopia and its focus on a dissatisfied, misfit protagonist that distinguishes it from its pair.<sup>256</sup> Because the dystopian's trope towards more conventional fiction with its protagonist and plot, I will stay closer to the strangeness of the Utopian form with its more spatial than syntagmatic logics.

It is worthwhile to note another tree in this forest of genres of social totality and difference—that of Science Fiction, or SF. Darko Suvin characterizes the genre for the way it produces a "cognitive estrangement"—a dislocation that produces a question about epistemology that tests the limits of recognition.<sup>257</sup> Philosopher Rosie Braidotti summarizes that SF defamiliarizes the "here and now" both reflecting and provoking unease.<sup>258</sup> For its force in producing unease, Braidotti separates it from Utopia for its less uncanny, more hoped features, whereas Suvin puts Utopia as a socio-economic sub-genre of the larger SF, a convention followed by Moylan and Jameson both.<sup>259</sup> All agree that SF has displaced Utopia in postmodernity, where alterities are reformed, and as Braidotti

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<sup>256</sup> Thomas Moylan *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, 141. See, also, Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 56.

<sup>257</sup> Suvin's work has been widely read and cited by Utopian commentators such as Ruppert and Jameson, as well as Thomas Moylan. His theory of Science Fiction as "the literature of cognitive estrangement" is set up in the first chapter. I also appreciate his construction of the "zero world" as the "empirically verifiable properties around the author" in the sense of a "central reference point in a coordinate system, or of the control group in an experiment." Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1979), 11.

<sup>258</sup> Rosie Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013).

<sup>259</sup> Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 61.

has described, the human is decentered and remapped as continuums of animal, extra-terrestrial and technological becomings.<sup>260</sup> Braidotti's reading of SF with Gilles Deleuzes's nomadology and Julia Kristeva's abject bodies shows how SF calls for representation of and resistance to the traumas and fears of global capitalism: there affirmation in SF that is more than nihilistic.<sup>261</sup> Her work is highly suggestive that SF is the more precise cultural form for analyzing the conditions of postmodernity.

My own project does not contradict Braidotti's but takes on a narrower task in staying with the modern critical discourses of social construction and psychoanalysis still widely used by scholars of religion. SF may have surpassed Utopia in popularity and thus, bears the marks of the particular struggles of the political, economic, technological and ecological crises of the present. However, when situated within the field of literary fictions—as literary texts and not a wider claim about film or postmodern culture generally—the shared material culture of the fictional text is still in operation and crosses both SF and Utopia. Citing the SF and literary criticism of Samuel Delany, Moylan notes how both Utopia and SF demand a similar "reading protocol"—where the author delivers substantive pieces in sequence, not through summary but through emerging patterns, demanding that the reader make sense along the way.<sup>262</sup> This is necessary because of the dominance of space over time in both Utopia and SF, though it is severely more

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<sup>260</sup> Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 183.

<sup>261</sup> Braidotti's chapter "Cyber-teratologies" referenced here is as good as any to draw on for her overall critical-ethical project of sexed bodies, materialities and political economy. Her final sentences to this chapter offer something of her appeal to how the grotesque instructs on the unwelcome aspects of biological life: "It is against the contemporary forms of nihilism that that a critical philosophy of immanence needs to distoxicate us and to re-set the agenda in the direction of affirmation and sustainable subjectivity. In this project, the metamorphic company of monsters—those existential aristocrats who have already undergone the mutation—can provide not only a solace, but also an ethical model." Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 211.

<sup>262</sup> Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, 8. Samuel R. Delany "Some Reflections on SF Criticism" *Science Fiction Studies*, 8, no. 3 (1981), 235. Moylan also draws on Delany's "Reading Modern American Science Fiction," Richard Kostelanetz, ed., *American Writing Today*, (Troy, NY: Whitston. 1991): 517-528 for his appreciation of the technologies of reading SF.



pronounced in SF. These texts parallel features of an aesthetic sublime that is thematically linked to romanticism, where the text supplants the reader with a "secular sense of magnitude that displaces and relocates the individual in a process both terrifying and satisfying."<sup>263</sup> Comparing this to the aesthetic sublime of Marin's neutralization is subtle but distinct: the alterity of SF and Suvin's estrangement does not force open empty, disorienting space in so much as an initial disorientation that the reader then puzzles out, accepting the estranging details as inadequate knowledge, not the aporetic structure of Utopia. This inadequate knowledge is carried out through the lack of syntagmatic sequence in the text: "Writing *within* the fictive culture, the [SF] writer sets the level of relevant information higher than a reader's actual knowledge, since no actual reader can actually know that world."<sup>264</sup> These subtle differences are significant but derive from the same convention: the extreme encounters with other-worlds in the SF genre and the human-scale worlds of Utopia both center the society as a protagonist. Moylan pursues Utopia and SF forms in tandem for the way they both deliver the political through an aesthetic form. SF, like Utopia, is engaged with the registration and treatment of identity and difference, but SF makes further demands on the reader to assemble society from the scraps of an alien world.

#### The Narrative Form of Utopia—A Genre of Representational Logics

To summarize, Utopian fiction relies on the traveler's movement to generate a movement of thought in the reader—to consider her own social location and its conditions in light of those of the conditions encountered vicariously through the narrator. The new attention to the present draws out the social contradictions experienced

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<sup>263</sup> Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, 7.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

by the reader who then, is activated to consider how her own situation may be differently ordered. Utopia refracts the historical conditions of its production, connecting not only the specifics of the Utopian society—its contents—to the societies of its reception, but also the mechanisms of comparison and how it stimulates thought and action. These mechanisms are its representational dynamics: of how the cognitive contradictions encountered in the Utopian literary form project and reconfigure the social contradictions of historical existence. In Ruppert's words, the Utopian literary form, through the dialectical relation of the text and reader, reveals the contradictions of her present condition but also "some genuine utopian content—the yearning for community, social harmony, more authentic human relationships"<sup>265</sup> It is worth noting here that these relays of social and cognitive contradiction contribute to another dimension of representation — Utopia's transformation into an abstraction for use in social and political theory.<sup>266</sup>

Thus, Utopia develops as a figure within modern Western (Anglo-European) thought that signifies the idealized social arrangement and the fulfillment of the modern self through its development initially as literature. As I have argued, to appreciate the role of Utopia in modern Western thought is to understand first its formal conventions of travel and representing society as a functioning totality—of social life condensed and in miniature. To *desire* Utopia, then, is not just to desire a better way of living. It is, in part, to desire the ability to represent social life in its totality—to be able to communicate how society constructs subjects. That raises the desire for Utopia as a cognitive capability. The ability to represent social totality is not the only desire that the figure of Utopia offers: Utopia also offers the ability to show that subject as reconciled or "happy" within this

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>266</sup> This can be seen in Mannheim, Marcuse and Bloch and the later utopian theorists like Ruth Levitas discussed in Chapter Two and Kitch, and Sargisson as discussed above.

social world. Happiness is what Ruppert refers to as "genuine utopian content" and what Levitas found in her study: that of the "better way of living," meaning the end to the chaffing, the friction, and disappointments created from social inequalities, misuse or abuse of resources, or whatever it is that is seen to be the cause of strife *that could be addressed by a different social arrangement*. This happiness or harmony is, as I defend, best understood as collectivity, or the recognition, acceptance, and appreciation for the subject's place within a particular social group. In sum, the desire for Utopia is both the desire to represent society as a totality and the desire for collectivity, or the end to conditions of social contradictions and thus, experiences of friction or mismatch at the existential level. I regard these desires as twined with one another, registering both as ideological pleasures but distinct for the position of the subject. While the desire to represent social totality shows the subject as the knowing subject—the one with the perspective to explain and describe, the desire for collectivity is the perspective of the subject within the social relationship where the particularity of the individual is matched and in cooperation with the others of the collective.

In the following chapter, I will show more of how these two desires can be seen operating within the critical study of religion. Before that, however, I want to further expand on how Utopia, as a figure is best referenced through cultural production. Using the Marxist interpretative work of Fredric Jameson, I discuss next how cultural products become repositories for and redistribute these twin desires for representing social totality and collectivity. Through the Marxist and psychoanalytic frames of culture offered by Jameson, I will be able to better account for how Utopia moves from the settings of Utopian literature into the realms of culture more broadly. As I overall argue, critical

religious studies struggles with its remit to present both "self" and "society," favoring the pole of a reified society that allows scholars to explain and compare the ideological dimensions of religious behavior and forms. As referenced through Jameson, this difficulty is not exclusive to Religious Studies but is developed out the critical approaches of distancing and objectivity more generally that sit alongside capitalism's reifying work. However, these reifications elide the particularities of subjective perspectives—the lived or existential dimension of social formation. I propose that Jameson's formal analysis of literature brings better into view the anxious and pleasurable dimensions of social life and how these are both constructed by culture and lived—what is, in a word, desire.

## **II. Fredric Jameson and the Figure of Utopia**

By way of an overview of Fredric Jameson's Marxist and psychoanalytic methods, I continue my argument that critical methods are caught in a problematic of representing both the existential, lived dimension of social life alongside their projects of outlining how social life structures subjects. Jameson's reading of cultural artifacts as "symptomatic" of the conflicts and motions of capitalism offers a means to consider this problem. His complex account of how cultural forms absorb and redistribute the libidinal connections that give the quality of attachment and desire in social life is a thicker, more nuanced alternative to ideology critique as it has been thought of in critical religious studies by those addressed in Chapter One. In addition to adding to the discourses of dialectical methods, ideology critique, and historicization, I introduce Jameson as a theorist who raises the figure of Utopia in modernity as a particularly rich site for

investigating how social theory struggles to represent the existential, lived dimension of social life as it focuses on society's structuring forces. Utopia, as a figure that reflects the optimism and ambition of social life outside of capitalism, has various roles in Jameson's work across his fifty years of writing. In reviewing Jameson's distinctive method of cultural theory, I address several dimensions of his use of the figure of Utopia, specifically how its literary form can be read as a symptom of the conflicts of capitalism's social contradictions across modernity through its representational conflicts and its signification as social life "solved" to the satisfactions and happiness of Utopia's inhabitants.

#### Dialectical Method, Ideology Critique, and History in Jameson

American cultural theorist Fredric Jameson has not been used much by critical religious studies except as a justifying voice for the broad call to "[a]lways historicize," as recited by Russell McCutcheon or in Constance Furey's interest in the political use of renarrating history.<sup>267</sup> In analyzing cultural products from American and European contexts, especially those of the nineteenth and twentieth century, Jameson is most recognized for his periodization of late-stage capitalist culture as "postmodernity" and his innovation of "cognitive mapping" as a modification for postmodern Marxist thought

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<sup>267</sup> A survey of the journal *Theory and Method in the Study of Religion* shows only four references to Jameson's work directly: Furey's article and its response; a review of Lincoln's *Gods and Demons Priests and Scholars* with two sentences about Jameson's *Political Unconscious* and a 2008 article that cites his most popular *Postmodernism*. Roland Boer has probably written the most about Jameson in relation to Utopia and religion. See *Criticism of Religion* Chapter One "The Stumbling Block of Fredric Jameson" where he dialectically situates Utopia and religion. Boer, *Criticism of Religion: On Marxism and Theology, II*, (Boston: Brill, 2007). Also, Boer "Religion and Utopia in Fredric Jameson" *Utopian Studies*, 19, no. 2 (2008): 285-312. Boer follows a dialectical method for Jameson, both religion and utopia and then also, for their mutually conservative or liberatory quality. Where I disagree with Boer is to see this liberation in terms only as rupture or event *from* the conserving work. As mentioned in my introduction, this is not my project, though it is an interesting and related topic worth more attention than I can offer here.

where full explanation is foreclosed.<sup>268</sup> Though mainly treating the narrative forms of literature and film, he submits theorists and philosophers to equal critical attention, historicizing their projects within their own locations and concerns.<sup>269</sup> Jameson emphasizes the "ideological and situational nature of all thought" and draws on the dialectics of Hegel and Marx, noting how both are self-conscious of their production. Though cognizant of both influences on historical analysis, Jameson favors the Marxist dialectic for how it regards the contradictions as not only logical inconsistencies that need reformulating but also as processes that stratify social life into groups or classes.<sup>270</sup> Jameson's method highlights one strain of the "superstructure"—modern literary forms—to reflect on the ways that ideology is codified and redistributed in narrative form. He resists any such bifurcation of the economic from the cultural dimension,<sup>271</sup> as both are

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<sup>268</sup> "An aesthetic of cognitive mapping—a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system—will necessarily have to respect this now enormously complex representational dialectic and invent radically new forms in order to do it justice. . . . The political form of postmodernism, if there ever is any, will have as its vocation the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping on a social, as well as a spatial scale." Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logics of Late Capitalism*, (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 54.

<sup>269</sup> Two examples of this: Jameson reads Hegel as 'conservative' for the way that Hegel recognized the "moral anarchy inherent in capitalism" and was gravely concerned that any sort of social change in the Prussian state would have led to a recapitulation of the revolutionary terror of 1793 in France. This explains for Jameson Hegel's investment in time's passing as the movement of history to a new socio-economic situation. Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 346. Jameson leverages a similar critique of Durkheim as a conservative for his interest in preserving the bourgeois parliamentary state situation within the Third Republic and the threats to secular institutions from both Right-leaning factions and working-class agitation. The 'eternal' drive of religion could be seen to be the stabilizing force under what might seem like the possibility of complete social breakdown. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 292.

<sup>270</sup> *Marxism and Form*, 340. In this case, he is discussing the self-consciousness created with critical projects of Marx and the companion dialectics of Hegel. "In this light, the difference between the Hegelian and the Marxist dialectics can be defined in terms of the type of self-consciousness involved. For Hegel this is a relatively logical one, and involves a sense of the interrelationship of such purely intellectual categories as subject and object, quality and quantity, limitation and infinity, and so forth; here the thinker comes to understand the way in which his own determinate thought processes, and indeed the very forms of the problems from which he sets form, limit the results of his thinking. for the Marxist dialectic, on the other hand, the self-consciousness aimed at is the awareness of the thinker's position in society and in history itself, and of the limits imposed on this awareness by his class position—in short of the ideological and situational nature of all thought and of the initial invention of the problems themselves."

<sup>271</sup> As he remarks in his essay "An American Utopia," "I will not pursue the theoretical debate on base and superstructure, which has its own history and complications, except to say that I feel that it is

concretely lived, particularly as recognizable in and by the middle-class.<sup>272</sup> This does not exclude the working class (or other classes, for that matter) from his analysis: only to pull forward how cultural forms and their ideologies show the relationship and antagonism of classes and that the discussion of culture never can be separated from materiality and individualized bodies—a feature of Marxism that Jameson stresses throughout his work.<sup>273</sup> This aspect of Marx—the lived experience of ideology—is evident in Jameson's increasing references to Freudian and Lacanian interpretations of the relation of the individual psyche to the social world.

Jameson's dialectical criticism is anti-systematic, reflecting a Marxian 'permanent revolution,' and thus resists systematic presentation.<sup>274</sup> Unfolding the questions of the present, Jameson characterizes contemporary intellectual conditions as inhospitable, demanding both immanent thought AND consciousness of class conditioning.<sup>275</sup> Dialectical criticism is self-critical in its structure and reflects the movement of thought. If thought does reach stasis, or an abstraction abandons its empirical roots, it can be challenged by seeing this abstracting tendency as itself historical, an "idealizing

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methodologically useful when taken as a starting point for questions and problems, rather than as a solution of any kind. Base and superstructure are in other words a beginning and not a conclusion, a laboratory experiment (whose results are often very different from each other) and not the tenet of some quasi-religious belief or orthodoxy." Jameson, *An American Utopia*, 44.

<sup>272</sup> Jameson reads Marx against Hegel's temptation to separate off idea from material reality. "Rather, for Marxism the emergence of the economic, the coming into view of the infrastructure itself, is simply the sign of the approach of the concrete." *Marxism and Form*, 322.

<sup>273</sup> Jameson tracks this emphasis on the concrete back through *The German Ideology* which bears repeating: 'We do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated., thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. . . . Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. *They have no history, no developments*; it is rather men who, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life." Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, trans. Roy Pascal (NY: 1947), pp. 14-15. Italics are Jameson's. Quoted in *Marxism and Form*, 326.

<sup>274</sup> Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 362.

<sup>275</sup> Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 283.

tendency" that has settled into disciplinary domains which reflect the division of labor itself. It is within this modern knowledge production that dialectical thought and method intercedes:

In this sense the anti-idealistic thrust of Marxism simply aims at breaking the spell of the 'inverted world' of conceptual thought. The dialectic is designed to eject us from this illusory order, to project us in spite of ourselves out of our concepts into the world of genuine realities to which those concepts were to apply. We cannot, of course, ever really get outside our own subjectivities: to think so is the illusion of positivism; but, every time they begin to freeze over, to spring us outside of our own hardened ideas into a new and more vivid apprehension of reality itself is the task of genuine dialectical thinking.<sup>276</sup>

Jameson's attention to the present of historical thought reflects the dialectic of Marxian praxis. Simply said, Jameson shows thought at work.

Jameson's method differs in slight ways from the kind of criticism that constructs an implied narrator or reader, such as that popularized by Wayne Booth in his influential *Rhetoric of Fiction*, which treats the novel as a single cultural communication.<sup>277</sup> This method is consonant with Ruppert's literary Utopia discussed above and its ability to generate an "outside" of the text for the reader. Jameson cautions against this approach, however, for how it too easily presupposes "a class of reader" that wants a uniform message from a text.<sup>278</sup> This impulse should be, in Jameson's terms, read historically itself, as a symptom of its own era or class.<sup>279</sup> Jameson's dialectical method moves across the abstract and existential, constructing them as positions to be occupied and abandoned. Attention to the form of art, especially the literary form—which is primarily the novel for moderns—is a way to track the positions, to gather together distance and proximity, the

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<sup>276</sup> Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 372.

<sup>277</sup> Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd edition, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

<sup>279</sup> "Indeed, the very attempt to think through a noncontradictory, universally valid (and thereby ahistorical, nondialectical) reformulation of the concept of point of view is itself historically symptomatic." *Ibid.*, 358.



infrastructure of society and the individual. Classes and conflict come in and out of focus, depending on one's position in relation to the novel but they never disappear from view. Such an approach to reading literature positions Jameson squarely within the historicizing methods of critical religious studies but situates this scholarship as aesthetic production.

Through this close attention to Marxian dialectics, Jameson can attend to cultural production primarily as historicized aesthetics. This is his style of ideology critique. Through this, he counts critical scholarship as cultural production, averring that theory yields its own pleasures of production and consumption and is also subject to ideology critique. As discussed in Chapter One, critical religious studies shares this project by including religious studies scholarship in their purview of how culture legitimates and authorizes particular social formations—especially those that preserve and reinforce moneyed interests. For Jameson, the dialectical nature of thought in modernity means that ideology critique cannot be swiftly and simply dispensed.<sup>280</sup> Jameson is consistent with critical religious studies scholars in that ideology promotes and demotes social groups, legitimating some while delegitimating others. Also, ideology produces social formations where there is not only relations between the “base” and “superstructure,” but also relations between points of production.<sup>281</sup> Thirdly, following Althusser, Jameson sees ideology as a part of a necessary illusion, one that interpolates and thus, is crucial to subject formation. Through this lens, cultural objects can be seen as elaborations, distortions, and transformations of their historical circumstances, and are a part of a field of abstractions—including conceptual categories—of the concrete conditions of existence. Altogether, Jameson treats his objects tirelessly to historical analysis:

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid., 373.

<sup>281</sup> Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 18-25.

everything, according to Jameson, is political and historical where the history of class struggle is all of history.<sup>282</sup>

His work can add to critical methods in religious studies by presupposing the pleasures of ideology and by explicit inclusion of theory as aesthetic production. The cultural critic is allowed to enjoy her cultural products at the same time as she links them to their historical conditions. Instead of distance, Jameson's cultural criticism embeds him and his readers in the fields of cultural consumption and production that simultaneously inscribes his theorists both in history and then, in the sphere of cultural productions themselves. His approach takes on the contrariness reminiscent of Adorno and Horkheimer and their inheritors and turns it to ask: what about negative critique was historically necessary or conditioned, and what made their approach to commodification a political intervention into the blindness of leisure so dominant in the mid-twentieth century?<sup>283</sup> Jameson does not imagine that those conditions of terror of fascism have disappeared since the 1940s and 50s, that he and others are somehow free to move on, but he does question the authority one claims in railing against the culture industry or how the outside of capitalism has all but evaporated. Suspicion of cultural products, in the form of ideology critique, is not over or complete; however, the investigations are more precise, more situated, *more historically located*, when they take into account the appeal that cultural products have to "us" as critics as well as "them" as consumers. Jameson dissolves this model of critical authority, of lording insight over the duped masses, replacing the other effects of ideology critique with the immanent critique of historicization. The pleasures of critique are for their explanatory authority—an authority

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<sup>282</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>283</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Pleasure: A Political Issue," in *Formations of Pleasure* (Boston: Routledge, 1983), 3.

that is also ideologically situated and constructed. The historicization of the critic presumes legitimation but with some cognizance of the procedures of ideology. How thoroughly the critic can examine her own location—or would want to delegitimize her own authority—is a self-critical position that dissolves ideology critique. Jameson avoids this distortion with his turn to history and then, to psychoanalysis for this limit conditions of analysis.

As becomes clearer, Jameson's injunction to "Always historicize"—echoed by McCutcheon for critical religious studies—is a thorough and layered process.<sup>284</sup> It is an injunction that brings together the urgency to think the present with ideology critique through monitoring and inciting the dialectical procedures of thought. It is not historicism, where the stages of political economy are reductively applied within a totalized schema for history.<sup>285</sup> However, this does not leave totalizing narratives out, as a glib poststructuralism would conclude. Jameson insists it is not so simple to abandon the modern interpretive frameworks: they are too thoroughly baked into modern thought and also are useful. Jameson transposes the term mediation from the register of literary and cultural analysis of aesthetic forms to the larger, historical register where mediations become

a device of the analyst, whereby the fragmentation and autonomization, the compartmentalization and specialization of the various regions of social life (the separation, in other words of the ideological from the political, the religious from the economic, the gap between daily life and the practice of the academic disciplines) is at least locally overcome, on

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<sup>284</sup> This kind of thoroughness is valued by the critical religious studies theorists, especially McCutcheon, whose work is in many ways dedicated to this injunction, performing an ode to the phrase by supplementing his final paragraph in *Manufacturing Religion* with Jameson's quotation. McCutcheon turns to quote Thomas Huxley as evidence of this need to historicize for religion, specifically, in order to show religion as the "fabrication of men's hands." 213.

<sup>285</sup> Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 27

the occasion of a particular analysis.<sup>286</sup>

Taking this account, then of history and its mediation, the unity from a totalized history is a "merely formal and empty one" except insofar as it permits more concrete and local mediations *which are themselves the stuff of history*:

Such momentary reunification would remain purely symbolic, a mere methodological fiction, were it not understood that social life is in its fundamental reality one and indivisible, a seamless web, a single inconceivable and transindividual process, in which there is no need to invent ways of linking language events and social upheavals or economic contradictions because on that level they were never separate from one another.<sup>287</sup>

While concrete and finite, it is also not easily grasped, except through its cultural forms. "History can be apprehended only through its effects, and never directly as some reified force."<sup>288</sup>

Jameson falls within a peculiar fault line of contemporary historical methods by staying close to the Marxist materialist history in the midst of more Foucaultian models of discourse analysis that scholars such as Tomoko Masuzawa and Talal Asad demonstrate. Noting this shift towards power/knowledge analysis in religious studies, Constance Furey draws out how Jameson's approach at first appears anachronistic compared to the disruptive retellings of particular histories that operate with "the (usually implicit) conviction that telling a different story about the past will somehow expand our options for today."<sup>289</sup> Jameson abides in the philosophy of history camp that persists in concerning himself with teleology and materialism. Yet he does so through a radicalization of what he means by history. It is not "History, in the bad sense—the

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<sup>286</sup> Ibid., 40

<sup>287</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>289</sup> Constance Furey, "Utopian History," 389.

reference to a 'context' or a 'ground,' an external real world of some kind" that is treated as 'linear history'.<sup>290</sup> Instead, as he unfolds over his introductory chapter of *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson offers a History that is akin to the Lacanian Real, complete with capitalization. Influenced by Althusser, Jameson sees History as an "absent cause" of a synchronic system of social relations as a whole. "History is what hurts, it is what refuses desires and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis, which its 'ruses' turn into grisly and ironic reversals of their overt intention."<sup>291</sup> Or, in Furey's words, History is "what we cannot escape, should not want to escape, what we hope fully to embrace by forswearing fantasy or promises of transcendence."<sup>292</sup> Jameson does not promote a legible history but a History that is always in need of reading, forever in surplus of what can be interpreted but yet, sets the impulse for interpretation. There is simply too much reality—of persons, intertwined with social identities, desires, consumption and production patterns, intricacies of biological life interacting with inert matter and other lives to produce what is modern society and its subcultures, spanning the globe—to be codified or managed through any conceptual map or descriptive enterprise. And yet, humans persist in this effort. History is both the social contradictions of capital and the response to these conditions—the cultural aesthetic products and intellectual formulations made in response to these conditions, which then, in turn, reproduce the conditions.

History, then, for Jameson, is a dense material process not readily accessible to any one mode of interpretation, be it Marxist, psychoanalytic, humanistic, or social scientific. This is, as I introduced in Chapter One, an important dimension of Jameson's

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<sup>290</sup> Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 35.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>292</sup> Furey, "Utopian History," 393.

historicization: that there is both the history of synchronic and diachronic relationships and then, how these are read as a part of a Lacanian Real—that "which resists symbolization absolutely."<sup>293</sup> Having considered Jameson's use of Marxist critical terms and his relationship to the critical methods of religious studies, I want to now show how it is that Jameson's use of psychoanalytic terms makes way for the discussion of Utopia as a figure that speaks to the representational dilemma of the subjective, existential perspective in critical modes that is elided in favor of these critical formations. It is from here that I now want to consider more deeply how psychoanalysis plays out in Jameson's reading of literature, how the Lacanian Real of "History" in Jameson connects with this elision and how representations of Utopia confronts the dilemma of "experience" for religious studies.

#### A Marxist-Psychoanalytic Aesthetic Method

Because of his historicizing focus, Jameson's project coincides with social construction but does so in ways not taken up thus far in critical religious studies. His employment of psychoanalytic discourses, especially Jacques Lacan, is particularly relevant to my overall argument that critical discourses struggle to maintain perspective on the so-called "experiential" dimension at the same time as they deploy tools to point to social forces. Whereas Ruth Levitas—through Ernst Bloch and E.P. Thompson—wants to call out the "warm stream" of Marxism against the structuralist "cold stream" caricatured as Althusserian, Jameson takes a different path. He, like Levitas, recognizes that there is habit of or preference for determinism or social analysis within Marxism but does not lift, like Levitas, only the words of psychoanalysis. As discussed, Levitas uses

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<sup>293</sup> Seminar I, from Lacan, cited in Jameson, "Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan: Marxism, Psychoanalytic Criticism, and the Problem of the Subject." in *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, 384.

"desire" from Bloch and Thompson but dismisses psychoanalysis as ahistorical, too taken with instincts or a universal collective unconscious. Jameson's use of psychoanalysis with Marxism generates a method distinctive from the Freudo-Marxisms of Bloch and Marcuse mentioned in Chapter Two. Jameson's psychoanalytic uses are historicized for their role in describing bourgeois life within industrial capitalism and for the way that Freud and Lacan after him can be treated as products of their time, speaking to their times. Since those conditions of bourgeois family life, of individualization by capitalist reification, and of the material cultures of novels, historical analysis, Enlightenment scientific reason, and image reproduction are still active aspects of contemporary life since Jameson's earlier works in the 1970s to the present, psychoanalytic terms have relevance for critical religious studies, despite their passing from popularity. In this way, psychoanalysis is like Utopia in that it is a vestige of modernity that is activated within and alongside of postmodernity's material conditions.

The greatest value that Jameson's discussion of psychoanalysis offers my own argument is its own foregrounding of the elision of subjective perspectives from within Marxist critique. In an essay from 1977 that Furey refers to for her category of "Utopian History," which is revisited with citation through both his 1981 *The Political Unconscious* and in his 2005 *Archaeologies of the Future* (and thematically in his most recent 2016 *An American Utopia*), Jameson leverages the discourses of Jacques Lacan for addressing the crisis of the subject in Marxism. As he sets out in the beginning of his essay,

The attempt to coordinate a Marxist and a Freudian criticism confronts—but as it were explicitly, thematically articulated in the form of a problem—a dilemma that is in reality inherent in all psychoanalytic criticism as such: that of the insertion of the subject, or, in a different

terminology, the difficulty of providing mediations between social phenomena and what must be called private, rather than even merely individual, facts.<sup>294</sup>

As is evident, Jameson struggles what to call this dimension, having so thoroughly rooted himself within the Marxist analytic of social totality and its affordances of social and historical contexts. He refers in a footnote to Hegel for help for the "classic description" of the "unique experience of the individual subject" burying yet further in parentheses the qualities of this dimension: "sense-perception, the feeling of the here-and-now, the consciousness of some incomparable individuality".<sup>295</sup> If psychoanalysis is construed for its "pre-verbal, pre-social facts" or archaic unconscious experience, Jameson wants to arrest this interpretation.<sup>296</sup> He also wants to separate his own subject from that of Anglo-American individualism or Deleuzian assemblages, wanting to think the subject as that which is inserted within ideology, which can see itself as constituted by its social surrounds and which yet, knows something of its own distinctive perspective.

Jameson does not propose to resolve the problematic of representation but raises it for consideration and demonstrates how literary interpretation permits perspective into this dilemma uniquely. He is not set on *decoding* literature through Marx or Lacan but *transcoding* it—showing how literature, Marxism, and psychoanalysis are each separately invested in similar-yet-different ways. Each is invested in narrative and necessitates praxis of interpretation. What compels the relation of these three is how they each afford a means for Jameson to develop a "materialist philosophy of language."<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>294</sup> Ibid., 338.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid. footnote 1. Jameson references Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*, Chapter 1 ("Certainty at the Level of Sense Experience") for his gloss on Hegel and how this is turned into the abstraction of language.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid., 389. "[A] materialistic philosophy of language reserves a status for scientific language of this kind, which designates the Real without claiming to coincide with it, which offers the very theory of its own incapacity to signify fully as its credentials for transcending both Imaginary and Symbolic alike.



Marx has a well-known materialist method that connects the changes of production and society, giving a case for how language as ideology is imbricated with materiality. What Lacan adds is to shift the western philosophical notion of opposing dumb matter/nature to consciousness/culture by regriding this language imbued with materiality.<sup>298</sup> Lacan's schematic of the three sectors or orders (the Imaginary, Symbolic and Real) are the terms he uses to show the materiality of language as it registers for subjects. Each is an occasion where language links and makes available dimensions of perception—both at moments of developmental achievement and throughout life. I will discuss these orders briefly in a moment. What is important to mark at this moment in my discussion is to consider how literature functions for Jameson as a peculiar means of considering the problematic of representing the subject's perspective. Literature stands in for the way that it can be interpreted as a repository or distribution point for wishes and fantasies— aspects of that particular "individual" dimension that Marxist critical discourse speaks to but struggles to speak of.

#### Literary Texts as Objects for Psychoanalytic Interpretation

Modern literature, specifically novels, present a fascinating case for a discourse that delivers the connections of social life while also generating or producing affects that seem wholly personal or private. Jameson uses Freud to unpack how it is that aesthetic products like novels offer pleasure in their production and reception both. In a text on the connection of daydreams to the creative process, Freud describes how daydreams distinguish themselves from nightdreams: nightdreams in Freud's system are only known

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<sup>298</sup> Ibid., 390. More precisely, the limits of signification are met in materiality.

through their "afterwork" of retelling and interpretation in the analytic setting.<sup>299</sup>

Daydreams, however, are the gratifications of a narcissistic ego, frequently self-pitying or self-aggrandizing, and eminently uninteresting, embarrassing, or even repulsive to reveal to others. Yet, Freud contends that literature and other cultural productions are just disguised narcissistic wishes, dressed in the images available to the author, made palatable by disguise. Narcissistic pleasure then is found in two dimensions: the expression of the wish and the formal pleasure of its disguise. Like a joke, there is a discharge of psychic energy by way of the shortcuts and displacements of the aesthetic work.<sup>300</sup> To use an example relevant to my argument in favor of Utopian literary forms, Utopian literature could be seen to abide by this process, where the peccadilloes of the author—e.g., William Morris's narrator's constant remarks on the edifying architecture—are cloaked with broader cultural appeal, i.e. a proposal of an epoch of rest where pleasures are widely available and reflected in the health and happiness of this account of life along the Thames. Jameson's insight into this scenario is that Freud's transposition of narcissistic fantasy to aesthetic object depends on the ideological contents of the era for its reception and popularity, and that the "private" fantasy itself was only ever first available because of the social economy and its particular formation: "There are no personal ideologies, except by a metaphorical transfer in which the function of purely private associations and symbolic images in the psychic economy of a given individual is compared to the dynamics of the social economy generally."<sup>301</sup> This relation of private

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<sup>299</sup> Jameson discusses Freud's essay, "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming," in at least two places. See *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols. ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), Volume IX, 143-153. My discussion from Jameson's point of view draws from *Archaeologies*, 45-56 and the full text of "Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan."

<sup>300</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. A.A. Brill (New York: Dover, 1993).

<sup>301</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 48.

wish to ideology is, I would propose, what is happening with Levitas's use of desire, where the social world provides the "wants" that are yet experienced as privately held "desire."<sup>302</sup>

Jameson wants to further account for how it is that novels package wishes under heavy disguise and thus, become compelling enough for circulation and in turn, circulate fantasies as ideology. It is under these conditions that Jameson turns to a "symptomatic" reading of cultural objects, whereby all cultural artifacts are to be read as symbolic resolutions of real political and social contradictions. This formulation is Althusser's imbued with Lacan's terms, showing the debt of Lacan in his analysis in *The Political Unconscious* (1981) that he carries into his later work on Utopia. Jameson cautions that the political unconscious is not a solid or coherent story, not a "master narrative," but a construct: "it exists nowhere in 'empirical' form and therefore must be re-constructed on the basis of empirical 'texts' of all sorts, in much the same way that the master-fantasies of the individual unconscious are reconstructed through fragmentary and symptomatic 'texts: of dreams, values, behavior, verbal free association, and the like."<sup>303</sup> The reconstruction begins with the cultural products of our time, especially fiction, which with its investments in narrative, are privileged sites for the history-becoming-conscious—historicity itself.<sup>304</sup> What one finds in this unconscious are the remnants of life lived outside of capitalism, memories of belonging to something other than the apparatuses of the state. To summarize: the stories that groups tell themselves, left in the fictions that are written and read—should be looked at not for what they say just about themselves but how they say it—what structures they use to tell. This leads Jameson to

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<sup>302</sup> See Chapter Two above.

<sup>303</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 283.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

focus on the forms that different cultures use: fairytales, epics, detective fictions, realism, romance, or Utopias. Each of these can be looked at for how they are residues of the "private" wish that was never actually privately held. The fantasies that are distributed in fiction, while registering affectively and consumed "privately," are social, ideological objects. However, because literary fictions use aesthetics to generate affect, they are also mostly distinct from treatises from Marx or even psychoanalytic case studies. And these differences from *and similarities with* the contemporary analytic discourses of Marx and Lacan give a means to reflect on the whole scene of language use, albeit from different angles.

The scene of language use—broken out into three distinct but interrelated orders of Imaginary, Symbolic and Real—is brought into fuller view through Lacan than what Freud could say in his time, according to Jameson.<sup>305</sup> These three dimensions of language are not easily summarized but their evidence in literature helps to make my point that literature is useful for accessing desire and libidinal aspects of social life. Different than the interpretation of dreams or the decoding of the *meaning* of symptoms, Jameson details Lacan for the way that art is not just a repressed social life but is more of a symptom for considering the "perpetual alienation" that conditions subjectivity as such.<sup>306</sup> This alienation occurs in all three orders and each traffics with language: the Imaginary in the dualities and oppositions of identification, the Symbolic with the differentials and the abstractions of language, and the Real with the limits of language.

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<sup>305</sup>"[It] is at least clear that the nineteenth century is to be blamed for the absence, in both Marxism and psychoanalysis, until very recently of a concept of language which would permit the proper answer to the objection [of 'naive semanticism']. Lacan is therefore in this perspective an exemplary figure, provided we understand his life's work, not as the transformation of Freud into linguistics, but as the disengagement of a linguistic theory which was implicitly in Freud's practices but for which he did not yet have the appropriate conceptual instruments." Jameson, "Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan," 386-87.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, 374.

Less differentiates the various discourses of fiction from social constructionist terms than the critical scholars mentioned in Chapter One would have one think. Literary fiction, however, has more ready access to the Imaginary register or order of language, offering more descriptive accounts of objects that appeal to the perceptual associations and hold these in spatial relations that center a perceiving "self." Objects are affectively charged and valorized as their connection to the body as part-objects—a relationship that is first seen (but repeated in life) in what has since, in Lacanian terms, been called "the mirror stage." This translates into fiction where there are objects in fuller description. Adding to this, literature also presents the social worlds and characters to chart a path through, which readers identify with. Said another way, cultural objects—Marxism and psychoanalytic interpretations, along with literature and other discourses—do not signify the self's wishes but are all lines of fiction—"dans une ligne de fiction," which underscore the psychic function of narrative fantasy in the attempts of the subject to reintegrate his or her alienated image."<sup>307</sup>

To review: the unconscious and desire are not the instincts or drives, nor should they be discussed as expressions of a better way of living that is either repressed or held privately, as Levitas has described. Language pervades and constructs subjects at levels of materiality, from the part-objects of libidinal attachment that are given by way of language as discrete objects during language acquisition and then, as the otherness of language itself, that is never one's own private cipher but held by a social system that also holds and orders subjects in relation. This perspective holds for Jameson in his recent writing in *An American Utopia* that also shares with the concern of envy alongside desire:

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<sup>307</sup> Ibid., 353.

The primacy of desire in Freud remained essentially personal, and included the 'otherness' of the family in a merely casual fashion. Lacan was able to insert otherness into the heart of Freud's path breaking conception of desire, and to offer a picture of desire from which the presence of the Other—big or small—is never absent, so that in a sense, or rather in all possible senses, individual desire is the desire of the Other, is the Other's desire. This socialization of desire itself now at one stroke renders the attempts to build a bridge between Freud and Marx, between the two great scientific discoveries which characterize modernity unnecessary. For now the psyche is already essentially social, and the existence of the Other is at the very heart of the libidinal, just as all our social passions are already drenched in the psychic. But we must grasp the originality of this view, whose power is negative rather than positive, for the universal envy which is necessarily at the heart of all social life is not some positive desire, but is rather envy of the *jouissance* or satisfaction of the Other.<sup>308</sup>

This concern of the negative, less savory feelings when confronted with others' desires was notable to Jameson in his first articulation of Lacan in 1977. Nothing is so simple as an expressed desire, but this is then immediately challenged by the "envious rage at the gratification of others" disguised as a larger or more commonly-held sentiment and the formal play of language.<sup>309</sup> Thus, what sets Jameson apart from both critical religious studies scholars and utopian studies scholars is raising the representation of "experience" as a problematic, holding out that this is visible in contrast to cultural products such as literature, and that desires are subtended by others and their desires, configuring a subject caught by and carried through language that is not always pleasant.

Widening the view of the novel and revisiting the ideological dimensions of Jameson's interpretations of literature resituates Lacan for use in Marxist analysis of literary form. As mentioned above, the stories that groups tell themselves (be they fictional or theoretical!) should be considered for not only what they say but also the forms they take. Fairytales, epics, detective fictions, realism, romance, or Utopias—each

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<sup>308</sup> Jameson, *An American Utopia*, 74.

<sup>309</sup> Jameson, "Imaginary," 341.

can be looked at as residues of the "private" wish that was never actually privately held. Here is a case for the different genres that appear and succeed under different conditions, be they shifts in the novels of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries or across other eras and their concomitant modes of production. The text, a social-symbolic act, is efficacious—it serves the community it is written for both by guiding it and also figuring what is otherwise unrepresentable. Jameson imports the structural logics of Claude Levi-Strauss's analysis of myth for his interpretation of the modern literary form.<sup>310</sup> Jameson points to Levi-Strauss's analysis of Caduveo facial decorations and their design, one of duality and symmetry, for how they reflect or enact the social hierarchy. This is different from their more egalitarian neighbors. In the Caduveo, the "real social contradictions, insurmountable in their own terms, find a purely formal resolution in the aesthetic realm."<sup>311</sup> From this example, Jameson extracts an interpretive model that is able to cooperate with his particular definitions of ideology and History. For ideology, the form is not just shaped or informed by ideology but the aesthetic form itself is ideological: its characteristics, materials, and situation all playing together to make the imaginary resolution to the social problem or the contradictions which cannot be surmounted in the intercourse of resource production.<sup>312</sup> Thus, the form of the art indicates information about the organization of the society.

A simple example of this is how the novel—a privately consumed, personal narrative developed to reflect the European social relations—etches the individual onto a

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<sup>310</sup> Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 77-82.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.* "This interpretive model thus allows us a first specification of the relationship between ideology and cultural texts or artifacts: a specification still conditioned by the limits of the first, narrowly historical or political horizon in which it is made. We may suggest from this perspective, ideology is not something which informs or invests symbolic production: rather the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions.

transforming landscape which then transforms the individual. The political conditions of modernity are read by Jameson on the surfaces of the novel, which become a "political allegory" for a "sometimes repressed ur-narrative or master fantasy about the interaction of collective subjects." Novels are not individual texts for individuals but "grasped as 'utterances' in an essentially collective or class discourse."<sup>313</sup> Modern history appears in literature, then, as revolutions, market economies annulling old aristocracies, with a changing cast of collectivities, from the proletariat and the masses in industrialized cities to the transnational forces of communism and fascisms, super-states and global corporations marking characters and plots. Thus, Jameson's formal analysis interrogates History in terms of a context both diachronic and synchronic (a method familiar to literary analysis) but also posits History as an immanent subtext that is fundamentally not representable. History, in short, is that which is inaccessible to us except in textual form, or in other words, "that it can be approached only by way of prior (re)textualization."<sup>314</sup> This confrontational but unresolved sense of History comes into contact with the concerns raised in Chapter One by Tyler Roberts as incongruity. But with Jameson, it is now materialized, an effect of political economy.

#### Utopia in Jameson

Two key points can be taken from this summary statement about the value of Lacan for Jameson—points that are crucial to my argument for both the problematic of representation in the study of religion and the role Utopia can have in mediating this problematic. First, is that cultural products are dense ideological formations that refract libidinal attachments as social objects. Second, that what is ever thought of as existential,

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<sup>313</sup> Ibid., 80. The political conditions of modernity are quickly summed in a lengthy sentence here.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 82.



private, or "experience" is in a chain of relations—of Otherness—that keeps any claim to experience distant from any sort of interior or liberal self. The effect is that, with a psychoanalytic frame of Lacanian desire applied at the site of cultural products, a dialectical method of interpreting culture, where this method is always the unity of theory and practice, elicits the effect of a simultaneous subjective and social perspective. As Jameson reflects in his most recent writing on Utopia in *An American Utopia*:

To put it methodologically, where in other systems the operation of transcoding is unavoidable—we must pass from a language of subjective or psychological individuality to a very different terminology governing the social or the collectivity (a passage involving a mediation I tend to describe in terms of a translation process)—here transcoding is unnecessary and the same code can apply to either reality.<sup>315</sup>

Jameson employs this primarily to literature while recognizing the narrative overlaps both novels and Marxist historical materialism. These two narrative forms echo with a third narrative—the "personal" dimension where subjects string events into stories to interpret existence. When this is applied to the distinctive Utopian literary genre, the subjective or "individual" aspect is brought into closer relation to its already collective identity. Collectivity, in Utopia, disrupts the presumed modern individuality and offers subjectivity as it is both constructed by others and also, shows this constructedness as satisfying, untroubled, and harmonious, or, as I have said other places, resolved of its social contradictions.

This is, then, how Utopia becomes a figure for modernity. Within capitalism, the genre with the most telling fragments of the political unconscious is Utopia.<sup>316</sup> Utopia is

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<sup>315</sup> Jameson, *An American Utopia*, 75.

<sup>316</sup> And its post-industrial counterpart, Science Fiction. Jameson takes the popularity of Science Fiction as a queue for considering what has replaced Utopia in the late twentieth century for the function of thinking with social contradictions within postmodernity and particularly in mapping the "geopolitical Imaginary" as he does with regards to William Gibson in his 2003 article, "Fear and Loathing in Globalization" or with

particularly ripe because it symbolically resolves social contradictions but then, delivers contradiction back in the form itself and across the genre. Jameson's formal analysis allows those contradictions to be read across multiple literary works within the same genre of Utopia: some Utopias emphasize work while others leisure; abundance solves some social problems whereas in others, thrift is the solution; and political centralization marks some Utopias while others depend on a democratic complexity. Utopian literature, then, gives access to the micro disjunctures—History—at the level of form through the way that Utopia—as a literary form and as a figure—is caught up in giving and taking, presenting and withholding, attending to the present while projecting some other time or place beyond. Reading symptomatically allows the unacknowledged desires and expressions of socio-political life to be read across the surface of the text.

It is from Jameson's near-obsessiveness with trying to think the present that Utopia comes in as a remnant of modernity. As discussed already, Utopia references the material conditions of travel and exploration, of French and English revolutions of an emergent middle class, and the increased comfort provided by mechanized production and factory labor that simultaneously constructed a new class of urban workers to first produce and then consume these goods in the twentieth century. Jameson insists on holding Utopia within view of his theoretical work despite its negative associations with fascism or the failed Soviet state. Jameson does not exclude these from his interpretations of Utopia, recognizing Utopia is just as associated with xenophobic or racist group practices as with collective class consciousness or desires for better ways of being. What

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the aliens of Olaf Stapledon where Jameson interprets how Stapledon's variety of his "alien life forms is determined by semic oppositions which seek (structurally and narratively, which is to say unconsciously) to resolve social contradictions." Fredric Jameson, "Fear and Loathing in Globalization," *New Left Review*, (Sept-Oct. 2003): 384-92 reprinted in Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 130.

is most important is that Utopia will simmer as unconscious impulse within modernity due to the contradictions of capital until brought into more conscious projects.<sup>317</sup> While an absolutely impossible goal, full consciousness—like Utopia—is a fool's errand *and* a worthy effort. The praxis of a dialectic applies.

Whereas Utopia has been thought of as hope and change, psychological fulfillment, particular communal groups, political treatises, or technological advancement, Jameson associates Utopia most with its formal operation of representing the material contradictions of capitalism and raising these contradictions to the level of the form itself. To read Utopia as either a blueprint or an impossibility would be to misread Utopia, and what it demands instead is a dialectical method. The formal method of Furey describes the dialectic as it operates with regards to Utopia's stubbornness in being formalized at all:

In Utopia, this far-away land, there are no clear divisions between unfamiliar and familiar, novel and known, critiqued and approved. This is the point. Absolute difference sounds intriguing, but not only is it both theoretically and practically impossible, it's not what Utopias offer anyway. They put existing pieces together into a non-existent form, like Homer's chimera, a never-before seen animal with the head of a lion, the body of a goat, and the tail of a serpent. This is not merely the familiar rendered strange, but dialectically so: distinctive in a way that leverages critique, it enables us to see where we are while imagining that it could be otherwise.<sup>318</sup>

Utopia compels through this instability of representation both in its form and its content, what Jameson describes as not just about content of Utopia—the city its features, its kinds of relations—but about what it can and cannot register: “The representational

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<sup>317</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 8-9. Also, recall: with Lacan, Utopia-as-unconscious is not "beneath thought" but "the language of the Other," speaking with authority because it is the object of desire.

<sup>318</sup> Furey, "Utopian History," 387.

relations established between the form and the content of the Utopia.”<sup>319</sup> Beyond the contradiction of the name itself, Utopia generates its fundamental appeal by being simultaneously both strange and familiar, and thus only accessible by way of dialectical movement. This is evident in the example of Utopia's closed off island that is available by way of a familiar traveler who mirrors the reader's imaginative participation in the space.<sup>320</sup> These have been noted above.

What Jameson adds is how Utopias (the literary form)—by entering into the circuit of representation in being written out and shared—spread Utopia (the figure) across materiality and fantasy, where in taking form, it annuls itself as the possibility of actually being *the* Utopia.<sup>321</sup> In Freudian language, the Utopian text would need to obey both the pleasure principle and reality principle simultaneously—to deliver *jouissance* and also, to keep itself in the realm of the believable, possible, long enough to appear realistic in human terms of relation, meeting objections of the reader along the way.<sup>322</sup> In these ways, Utopia depends on being moved into representation where it then, in being caught in several contradictions, points back to the ways that social life itself is always mired in the material contradictions that Marx described as intrinsic to capitalism's development. Because of the literary Utopia's particular ability to deliver capitalism's contradictions into view, Jameson marks Utopia for special attention in his Marxist, formalist method.

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<sup>319</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies*, xiii.

<sup>320</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies*, xx. In Furey's reading of More's *Utopia*, the "reader who wants something different encounters the well-known author, sanctioned by reputation, and the familiar thereby mediates what is yet unknown" "Utopian History," 390.

<sup>321</sup> Jameson sounds very Derridian in these moments where he avers that Utopias continue to decide that which is undecideable, or as postulating the possibility of the impossible. Published in 2005, The introduction to *Archaeologies* appeared when these turns of phrases had more cultural force.

<sup>322</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 223.

This attention of form, as mentioned, does not excuse content. At the level of content, Jameson identifies the absence of money as More's fundamental principle.<sup>323</sup> Utopias distinguish themselves for their details on how to arrange social life, such as Saint-Simon's administration, Bellamy's industrial army, Morris's aesthetic directive, or Callenbach's ecological harmonization. If these programs are of the authors' predilections, they also are responses to larger social or historical situations. These contents of Utopia—the ways that the society is organized for maximum fulfillment and satisfaction—are woven from the economic necessities of their time. Throughout, however, is the abolition of money and property, "run[ning] through the Utopian tradition like a red thread" that is "now aggressively affirmed on the surface, now tacitly presupposed in milder forms or disguises."<sup>324</sup> Jameson does not leave the questions of resource distribution to a matter of Utopian contents: he also regards this will to economic satisfaction as mirrored in the Utopian enclave itself, a kind of mental space that has been stilled and quieted against the rush of historical change.

In this relationship of the contents that abolish money and the form that creates an enclave from which to launch a comparison to expose the conflicts of the present society, the Utopian form highlights anxieties of capitalism and attempts to puzzle its resolution. As discussed in Part One above, other literary theorists proposed that the imaginative force is constructed through the bounded island that is then traversed, reported on, and generative of alternatives outside of the text. Jameson emphasizes the "closure" of the island that is mirrored in the closure of the narrative. This is repeated in the concepts and categories that distinguish the text from others and thus, "close" it off. As mentioned

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<sup>323</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid., 20.

above, this closure has the paradoxical effect of opening up to other possibilities. What Jameson adds to this analysis of the Utopian form is that in being a genre about islands and enclaves, it constructs social life as a bounded form, a totality and that this total formation displaces thought:

Totality is then precisely this combination of closure and system, in the name of autonomy and self-sufficiency and which is ultimately the source of that otherness or radical, or even alien, difference already mentioned above and to which we will return at some length. Yet it is precisely this category of totality that presides over the forms of Utopian realization: the Utopian city, the Utopian revolution, the Utopian commune or village, and of course the Utopian text itself, in all its radical and unacceptable difference from the more lawful and aesthetically satisfying literary genres.<sup>325</sup>

Thus, as contrast, it is not just that Utopian literature generates imaginative possibilities—difference—by its representation of a different society. The more radical possibility Jameson upholds is that Utopia, as imagined enclaves within the existent world, does not offer only alternatives but somehow is "felt to replace our world altogether."<sup>326</sup>

It is important to note the inclusion and radicalization (dare I say *Aufhebung*?) of Ruppert's formal analysis of contradiction. Whereas Ruppert treats the transpositions of marriage practices and technological innovations as temporary resolutions of lived social contradictions, and he regards the Utopian form itself as igniting a cognitive contradiction that redirects the reader's attention to her own experiences of contradiction, Jameson sees how Utopias both displace the immanent social world and occlude thought—in other words, they generate antinomy. Jameson here reflects a kind of deconstructionism, inscribing the formal contradictions of Ruppert's Utopia within the

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<sup>325</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid., 38.

Late capitalist moment, arriving at the situation where Utopias continue to try to decide that which is undecidable.<sup>327</sup> Thus the contradiction is more overwhelming, stepping the analysis of the Utopian form back into the open-endedness of temporality, like Bloch.<sup>328</sup> Jameson widens the scope of the effect and place of Utopia's contradictory force to the point of seeming to "replace our world altogether." To reiterate: the social totality —of representing society en total—has effects beyond the ability to deliver social contradictions. While Utopia does this, it does more.

It could be leveraged that Jameson overstates his case for social totality and its role in delivering both contradiction and antinomy to present interpretation. Jameson sees the contradictions of Utopia also across the genre in the way that some texts promote a pastoral while others a city life. The oppositions multiply across the texts: work/leisure; abundance/thrift; political centralization/democratic complexity; individuality/collectivity.<sup>329</sup> Utopia figures the obstacles met in social discourse and attempts a solution. In this effort, Jameson finds that it is the formation of the collective itself, its presupposed unity of individuals, that shocks and disorients, earning the proper name of Utopia. Thus, if Utopia strikes an ambivalent tone, this is as much to do with its structuring of contradictions as with the historical record of twentieth century political failures. The Utopian form is then, for Jameson, its combination of its consistent contents that attempt to resolve lived social contradictions and the effect of these attempts when circulated through an aesthetic of written, fictional narrative.

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<sup>327</sup> Ibid., xvi-xv.

<sup>328</sup> The totality of the form of utopia and the philosophy of history that can see the whole is a question of temporalities for Furey. Her pull of Derrida into this conversation signals her recognition of the blur of time and its representation.

<sup>329</sup> Jameson's chapter "Utopia and Its Antimonies" from *Archaeologies* does the most work of showing the contradictions at the level of content and how these drive toward the contentment of the Utopian citizen. His discussion of the Utopian subject in this chapter bears comparison with the liberal Utopian subjects of Levitas and the proletariat Utopian subject of E.P. Thompson. See this conversation in Chapter Two.

### Utopia as Figure of Desire, not Concept about Desire

Jameson differs from Levitas in two ways that I find particularly salient for my considerations of Utopia: first, the claim that desire depends on representation—on taking form—and, in doing so, becomes something for introjection and projection. The second, the claim that desire always refers to a collectivity—a determinate set of ideological material, in many cases, a social class—that constructs itself differentially from an Other. Both these cases of desire relate it directly to ideology but an expansive definition of ideology that inscribes all social activity within it. With this kind of encompassing definition of ideology, the question arises: how can we see outside of it? The answer is by the differential logics that construct it; that is, by the particularities of a text that appear as odd or strange, and therefore do not satisfy. To return to an example from Morris, there is something aberrant to me about the sexual attention given to the women within the text, particularly the attentions that are differently given to different women, with Morris lingering on the details of younger women. I can read this as nineteenth-century bourgeois sexism because my social formation is differently constructed from that of the text, whereas the romanticism of the rowing along the Thames is quaint but appealing for my positive associations with exercise and fitness as a part of beauty.

To summarize: where there is a desire for Utopia, there is a representation of ideological material. The material aligns enough with a particular social formation that it reasserts and legitimates this formation. How it distinguishes itself from other literature is in its particularly modern wish-fulfilling fantasy of aligning the "individual" (made so by capitalist reification) with its formative institutions. It delivers the pleasure of this fulfillment aesthetically—as a formal closure—but does so incompletely, prompting



desire to keep going, to keep searching for its Utopian object. Utopian literature, in as much as it presents the reality principle as the Utopian social order, subtends the private wish as ideology. Yet as a representation, Utopias return the gaps of all representations, all systems of signification, and echo with the qualitative incommensurability of what is particular, isolate, "me" and "my" desires and what are the systems, discourses, and languages that "I" am embedded in. Utopia as a figure stands for the aesthetic, linguistic object of desire—the private wish of the end of social contradiction and the modern scientific orientation that representing social life "just properly enough" is what can precipitate this end.

#### Utopia in Critical Religious Studies

In this chapter, I have argued that the Utopian literary form generates the ambivalence that moderns encounter with Utopia and contributes to Utopia's association with desire. I explained how Utopian narratives are primarily travel narratives of alternative, self-sufficient societies that move the reader dialectically between worlds, generating a mix of familiarity and unfamiliarity that ultimately propels the reader to recognize their own social world and its complex problems. By operating with a logic of spatial relations of difference primarily, Utopia develops as a figure of wholeness or totality. This totality, as I proposed through Jameson's Marxian-Lacanian method, has several representation effects. It comes to signify the resolution of social contradiction at the same time as it generates awareness of the social as a "whole." This makes for a displacement or, as Marin calls it, a "neutralization" of the present, as if to replace it. Utopia becomes associated with desire not only through its wish-fulfilling fantasy quality against the modern conditions of capitalism but also through its insertion into the circuits

of ideological and libidinal relations. It amplifies these circuits through its simultaneous "resolution" of social contradiction in form and its failure because it is ultimately someone else's fantasy and also always impossible for the restructuring of everything to everyone's satisfaction.

This chapter on the representational dynamics of the Utopian figure continues my overall argument that critical approaches, particularly ones in religion, face a dilemma in presenting the existential lived dimensions of existence alongside their explanatory arguments. Utopia offers a means to consider this problematic. I contend that critical approaches are invested in Utopia by way of their dependence on representing social totality and imply social collectivities in their formulation of social construction. They come across as dry, objective, or overly locative in that they emphasize the social totality and analyze subjects by their various social formations. However, critical methods contain in them a kind of "Utopian seed" as they draw on their explanatory tools of social totality and historicization. Through these tools, they reference the Real of History, the frictions of social contradiction, and the political potentials that are within the descriptions of formations as always social, thus not isolated or individual. Thus, explanatory projects of social construction are linked to the existential by way of the aesthetic figure of Utopia. When critical religious studies is read for its Utopian connections or as an expression of a desire for Utopia, it turns from being an account of society's structuring forces and subjectivizing procedures to offering an oblique glimpse of the existential, lived dimension of social life. Never fully representing "experience," it offers explanatory *jouissance*, recognizes the psychic pull of History, and delivers the

Utopian wish of collective association. I will continue this mapping of Utopian desire to critical religious studies in Chapter Four.

## Chapter Four

### Utopia as Method: Encountering Representational Dilemmas

This chapter connects my argument to others who make similar claims about the problematics of representation in social constructionist methods. I have argued Utopia is uniquely situated to provide a means of considering the problematic of representing social constructs and existential life for critical religious studies. I examine a similar claim by Utopian Studies scholar and Sociologist Ruth Levitas and distinguish my narrow use of Utopia as a modern figure from her more generalized utopia. My distinction preserves the historical and thematic connections of Utopia to sociological methods while holding on to its connection to its aesthetic form. I contend, contra Levitas, that the existential, lived dimension of social life that has been repressed through the twentieth century should not be revived through an appeal to secularized religious tropes. I argue instead that it is in the analysis of the consonance of Utopia and critical projects, in their shared aesthetic of representing social totality, that the existential is raised obliquely. For existence to be "represented" in critical religious studies, it will need to emerge via a dialectical method of reading and interpreting social life without an explicit articulation. Utopia does not immediately present itself in critical religious studies but is uncovered by symptomatic readings. Tomoko Masuzawa takes a symptomatic approach to reading scholarship in religious studies in her own "quest" for origins. Her method of reading origin provides a parallel to my own in reading Utopia. By her approach, I show how desire is an apt term for how complex aesthetic figures like

Utopia inhere in critical projects and energize scholarly work in unconscious ways. Raising attention to the Utopian aspects of critical religious studies invites in an aesthetic-critical perspective and opens to the affective and libidinal dimensions of scholarly practice.

### **Outline**

In my goal to develop the category of Utopian desire most relevant to critical religious studies, I consider the work of Ruth Levitas and her claim that contemporary sociological methods suffer from a repression of its utopian history and themes. Both sociology and utopia are reconstitutions of society, and social methods, she argues, would benefit from a stronger association. I present her work as it intersects with my own position within critical religious studies. In her claim of the shared historical foundation of sociology and utopia in the nineteenth century, I find the overlap of the explanatory value of representing society as a discrete object. I separate my Utopia from her own lower-case, more broadly defined "utopia" when it comes to the value she gives to its explicitly normative role and to how it can communicate a range of universal, existential, and positive themes. Levitas depends on overtly secularized religious tropes to carry messages of temporal and spatial heterogeneity she finds in life and ascribes to utopia. While I agree that utopia generally can signal these differential dimensions of existence, I argue that my own figure of Utopia makes a better case. Supported by the dialectical, critical method of Fredric Jameson, I argue that an historicized Utopia makes existential "experience" an aspect approached obliquely rather than through explication.

In Part Two of the chapter, I turn to Tomoko Masuzawa's Freudian symptomatic reading of origin in religious studies scholarship. Like Jameson, Masuzawa offers a

complex, historicized account of psychoanalytic desire. Steering psychoanalysis away from an account of innate drives, Masuzawa shows how figures like origin come to signify potent associations. I compare her project to mine for the ways that prohibitions function in scholarly discourse. Masuzawa's argument about how the desire for origins fuels religion scholarship has been tremendously influential. Because of her impact on the field, it is important for me to contrast what she claims about origin to what I am arguing about the useful fantasy of social totality. Where Utopia is a representation of social totality, it is a fantasy that serves a purpose for critical religious studies. This overlaps with origin. By following Masuzawa's lead, I introduce desire as a historicized tool for interpreting the attachments and interests of scholar-subjects.

### I. Utopia as Method-Levitas and Jameson

In a late-stage career reflection, Sociologist Ruth Levitas considers the relationship of Utopia to sociology through the histories and repressions of the field in her series of essays *Utopia as Method: the Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*. In this text, Levitas revives her argument from *The Concept of Utopia* published 23 years previously with the definition that utopia is, at its core, "the desire for being otherwise, individually and collectively, subjectively and objectively."<sup>330</sup> (For my discussion of Levitas, I return to her lower case "utopia" to signal our differences.) She expands this definition further, arguing that utopia and sociology both imply a normative perspective and that both demonstrate the relationship of social structures and their effects on social life. Levitas avers that her primary reason for bringing utopia to sociology's attention is that there is a need for

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<sup>330</sup> Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: the Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*, xi.

exposing the limitations of current policy discourses about economic growth and ecological sustainability. Utopia facilitates genuine holistic thinking about possible futures, combined with reflexivity, provisionality and democratic engagement with the principles and practices of those futures. And it requires us to think about our conceptions of human needs and human flourishing in those possible futures.<sup>331</sup>

This visionary introduction expresses both political and ecological urgency for western ideals that are, by implication, either absent or threadbare in her scholarly field and in need of (re)assertion. While permitting that utopia includes the possibility of "utopianism of right-wing politics," her wish is plainly for constructions which provide more egalitarian, more ecologically-sustainable relations, ones which switch to biofuels, protect subsistence farmers, and "deliver secure and sustainable livelihoods and ways of life for all."<sup>332</sup>

I do not object to her political interests, and her connections of utopia to sociology are salient to my own interest in the representational dilemmas that critical social theory raises in regards to subjective life. However, I contend that my formulation of the Utopian figure is better suited than hers to address the obstacles of critical methods. Because of the kind of capillary quality of Levitas's utopia—going in so many places with its various ways of promoting social change—her analysis disperses Utopia across so many domains that Utopia's contradictions appear as a problem of application instead of as the operation of Utopia itself. Said simply, Levitas's broad definition attempts to contain Utopian contradiction instead of explain it.

To track the import of this distinction, I look at how Levitas relates her utopia to sociology through its mutual historical development and how utopia might be developed as a method. I first investigate her claim of the shared historical foundation of sociology

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<sup>331</sup> Ibid.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid., xiii, xii.

and utopia in the nineteenth century. This includes how her reflects utopian position. Then, I will examine how Levitas regards utopia as a method of social analysis. This reflection includes her argument that utopia is normative and that it offers sociology "holistic thinking." I find her claim to utopia's holistic perspective particularly relevant because of how she perceives sociology to exclude existential, lived experience. I contend, however, that her appeals to holism does not effectively reintroduce this dimension for my argument. She relies on secularized religious tropes that sound too close to what religion scholar Craig Martin calls "individual religion." To counter these limitations of her project, I revisit Fredric Jameson and his proposal of "utopia as method." Overall, I contend that Levitas's generalized "utopia" raises relevant concerns to critical religious studies that are, after consideration, better addressed by my own theorization of Utopia for how it figures social contradiction.

#### Shared History of Sociology and Utopia

For Levitas, the shared aspects of utopia and sociology are that both are "imaginary reconstitutions of society." Her argument is not against any specific text or method in the field, only against the concern that twentieth century institutionalization has stripped sociology of its association with utopia: sociology has turned away from its utopian past and, in turn, repressed its interest in the future, its normative dimension and "the existential dimension and what it means to be human."<sup>333</sup> While offering a glimpse into the sociology of utopia, her attention is mostly on utopian dimensions of sociology and how, over the twentieth century, these aspects have been driven underground, returning intermittently through such political-theoretical perspectives as feminism and

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<sup>333</sup> Ibid., 85.



the realism of Rawls and Rorty. Levitas's recovery of the overlapping history of utopia and sociology and her assumptions about how they both reconstitute society supports my claim that Utopia condenses social life in service of critical thought.

Her primary mode of recovery of utopia and sociology is to show this shared history. Pointing to the end of the nineteenth century, Levitas presents each as subtending the other, "where there is sociology as utopia, as well as utopia as sociology."<sup>334</sup> Reading utopia back into sociology, Levitas returns to Auguste Comte, Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim for evidence of social theory's congruence with utopian themes. She then picks up the overlapping sociological/utopian writings of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and finally returns to the authors of nineteenth century utopias—Edward Bellamy, William Morris, and H.G. Wells—to frame her discussion. Gilman and Wells stand out in this list for their writings of both sociology and literature. Through Gilman, Levitas sees the end of the nineteenth century as a site for opportunities for emergent forms of gender relations.<sup>335</sup> Wells's sociological writings are frequently ignored in sociological discourses, and Lewis Mumford was to use Wells as an example in his complaint that social scientists, in their antipathy to utopia, had turned their discipline dull and were guilty of "not being good scientists by not being any good at literature."<sup>336</sup>

Sociology was utopian at the start, she argues, because it was normative: early figures proposed the good life in the midst of their analysis. In Comte, she identifies his value of social laws that stabilized and precipitated change and that he "argued for a

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<sup>334</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid., 74. Levitas identifies utopian themes in Gilman's *Women and Economics*, investigating the division of labor by gender where women's dependence is seen as detrimental to social life. Gilman's sociology is that it is structures of production, not ideology, which are what create new conditions and opportunities for women, and that these conditions are ripe for more independence of choice for women--an "emergent utopian state".

<sup>336</sup> Ibid., 93.

scientific organization of society matching individual aptitudes to occupational roles."<sup>337</sup> Comte's interest in making work more satisfying through matching ability to occupation becomes Levitas's basis for the normative edge of sociology. From Marx, she reads against his condemnation of the unscientific utopian socialists (an argument she makes in *Concept*) by associating Marx with a voluntaristic and idealistic perspective of social change. Marx wanted the world "to be otherwise" and held a vision of the "good society" (though resisted formalizing it) and this, under her lights, is appropriately utopian.<sup>338</sup> Marx also held "biography and history together," making sociology both collective and individual. From Durkheim, she takes his claims to "normal" society as an implicitly utopian ideal. Her reading of Durkheim bears attention for my own project, since it is not his normativity but his use of *society* as an object of analysis that lends him his Utopian dimension.

### *Durkheim as Utopian*

Whereas Levitas avers that Durkheim was explicitly antipathetic to utopia, she reads his 1893 text, *The Division of Labor in Society*, as presenting utopian vision. Durkheim writes, "the actual state of the world [is] pathological, contrasted with a benign normality which should have emerged, and which must and will."<sup>339</sup> Durkheim proposes "normal" and "abnormal" forms, setting up a contrast of a non-existent-yet-normal of highly-divided labor societies verses pathological forms where the "division of labor ceases to bring forth solidarity"<sup>340</sup> The maldistribution of workers to jobs and the

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<sup>337</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid., 69, quoting Durkheim, *Division of Labor in Society*, trans. George Simpson (New York: The Free Press, 1964), 353.

weaknesses in non-familial bonds like social clubs or even the state's failure to secure the coordination of different social elements threatens the modern society. Durkheim's evolutionary perspective, while mentioned, is folded in as a utopian aspect of his thought, reading his "normal" mode as a guide for sociologists and wider readers to see the better society that is possible.

Levitas's reading of Durkheim serves as a useful case study for considering the purchase gained by a narrow definition of Utopia. Her overdetermined concept of utopia shines brightly across a range of material, washing out distinctions that I see as crucial for treating Utopia, specifically its complex representational logics, its critical potentials, and its associations that make it rise and fall in currency. For example, she seeks out examples that support a universal utopia, citing Durkheim that "[m]en have long dreamt of finally realizing in fact the ideal of human fraternity' and that such aspirations 'can be satisfied only if all men form one society, subject to the same laws.'"<sup>341</sup> This equates utopia with human nature, which, as I argued in Chapter Two, is a claim that gives so much to Utopia that it overlays a western ambition and behavior on those who have suffered from its force. This seems a cruel twist. Second, this equation renders all aspiration as utopian, erasing what might distinguish my version of Utopian longing with economic or political valence—a distinction Levitas does not make. Is it that all longings are for political and economic change through total social revision? Levitas's concept of utopia is too abstracted, too inclusive for the political, institutional, or intellectual shifts that she is pushing for. Third, her comparison of Durkheim's thought to themes in Wells's *A Modern Utopia* for the purposes of establishing their mutual interests seems more like a

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<sup>341</sup> Levitas, 69.

general attitude of intellectuals than of Utopia specifically.<sup>342</sup> In contrast, I contend that Durkheim's and Comte's normative visions, especially Durkheim's "normal" and "abnormal" categories, are better when historicized as a remnant of a Eurocentrism and its evolutionary theory of society.<sup>343</sup> This does not remove these sociologists from my own considerations of Utopia, but treats them by different criteria. It isn't normativity that makes Utopia but how these norms offer a resolution a resolution to contradictions produced in industrial capitalism—the alienations of subjects constructed through a labor economy. Levitas's formulation of utopia involves Durkheim's arguments of moral and ethical claims that while relevant for proposing a normative dimension to sociology is more precisely a discussion about relative social goods. I would say that Durkheim's potential as an author of Utopia—in my sense—is more through his emphasis on the value and means of sustaining social solidarity.<sup>344</sup> This social solidarity is constructed both out of love for others and loyalty to society—two phenomena that, according to Ernest Wallwork, lose their distinction in *The Division of Labor* text.<sup>345</sup> In this way, it is Durkheim's aspiration and interest in preserving collective associations in all of society's "evolutionary" expressions that makes him, by my lights, Utopian.

Beyond his emphasis on collective associations, I more strongly associate Durkheim with Utopia in his dependence on and use of the abstraction of "society" to

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<sup>342</sup> Levitas claims that in minimizing the artistic production for itself in *A Modern Utopia* is like Durkheim's suspicion of the arts as disruptive to social cohesion or that both advocate for social organization that support increasing individual freedom. Levitas, 82.

<sup>343</sup> Levitas only treats his sexism, not his Eurocentrism or evolutionary perspective in her text. Durkheim both allows the norm to be dependent to the historical moment but then part of a larger evolutionary perspective on social change. Craig Martin argues in *Capitalizing Religion* that Durkheim is "ethnocentric" in his ordering of primitive life. I think Eurocentric is a more precise term. *Capitalizing Religion: Ideology and the Opiate of the Bourgeoisie* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 26.

<sup>344</sup> Ernest Wallwork's reading of morality in *The Division of Labor in Society* guides my attention to this aspect of Durkheim. See chapter "Science of Morality, 1885-1893." in *Durkheim: Morality and Milieu*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972).

<sup>345</sup> Wallwork, *Durkheim*, 45.

guide his theory and method of sociology. Levitas sees this connection as so foundational that utopia and sociology itself are at risk when postmodernity questions, among other tightly-held assumptions, society as a totality.<sup>346</sup> However, Levitas layers extra expectations onto utopia, calling it "holistic, social, future-located, unequivocally better and linked to the present by some identifiable narrative, and one which embeds a view of human flourishing."<sup>347</sup> I contend that the Utopia of sociology is not the ideal or good society of normative comparison; it is instead how Utopia articulates the relationship of social structures and their effects on social life. This is how social totality functions: imagining the society as a totality that generates its subjects from its institutions.

If Durkheim *does* imagine society as better than it is, then it is by means of an optimism endemic to his era for a progressive direction of change, a wish or assumption in line with Marx *that depends first on an analytic of "society" that can be described functionally*:

Although we set out primarily to study reality, it does not follow that we do not wish to improve it: we should judge our researches to have no worth at all if they were only to have a speculative interest. If we separate carefully the theoretical from the practical problems, it is not to the neglect of the latter; but ... to be in a better position to solve them.<sup>348</sup>

I contend, therefore, that sociology is Utopian not for its interest in social reform but for the form to reach that that reform—by tracing structures to behavior, interests, and desires that determine the dispositions of society's members and by comparing these structures for their configurations and effects. Levitas says it is in Durkheim's specification of a good society, of its ultimate unrealizability and the voluntarism needed

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<sup>346</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid., 71, citing *Division*, 33.

to get there, that makes him utopian.<sup>349</sup> While these are elements in Durkheim, I argue against Levitas that they should not be used as the basis of claiming them as "utopian" because they can just be as easily claimed for a realist position—a position he claims for himself against a utopian one.<sup>350</sup> Levitas acknowledges Durkheim's claim against utopia but calls him utopian anyway on the basis of the "normal" society set to contrast the precarity of his surrounding social situation and established as a "goal."<sup>351</sup> But Durkheim resists the term goal. Instead of exposing these dimensions of Durkheim as contradictory, Levitas overlays her intention without acknowledging the text's resistance to the utopian label.

#### Utopia as Method of Social Analysis

As I have proposed, what makes sociological analysis Utopian is its ability to derive critical insight from treating human life through the lens of a social totality—an innovation that is shared between sociology and the form of Utopia. Levitas includes this nod to social totality but adds several other dimensions, two of which bear on my argument for Utopia. One is that of the normative agenda of utopia and two is utopia's ability to speak to the whole of life—"of the existential dimension and what it means to be human."<sup>352</sup> I will address these two dimensions of her method separately. First, I contend that her account of normative debates is not directly Utopian, by my formulation of the figure of Utopia, and that hers supposes a more direct temporal or future direction. Second, I address her claim that utopia captures the sense of existence that is lost in

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<sup>349</sup> "But for Durkheim, as for [Raymond] Aron, to be utopian is something else entirely. It means to specify the future good society in detail, to be unrealistic, and to adopt voluntaristic models of social change." *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>350</sup> Durkheim, *Division of Labor*, 408-9.

<sup>351</sup> Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, 71-72.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

critical methods. It is this second one that most directly relates to my own interest in Utopian desire for critical religious studies. While I agree with her appeal to utopia to reintroduce sociology to its "existential dimension," I contend that her proposal as it stands suffers from a generalized, liberal utopianism. By way of Fredric Jameson, I will sustain that Utopia can serve to introduce the existential dimension but will have to go by other routes than what Levitas proposes.

### *Normative Method*

For Levitas, any normative assertion stands as enough of a utopian element to generate the kind of comparison to spark interest in things being otherwise. This is a dimension Levitas sees as repressed within sociology, a "speculative mode" of "possible futures open to criticism and debate."<sup>353</sup> Thus, by her account, the normative or prescriptive dimensions that sit with social critique as a method should not be ignored but embraced. As mentioned above, Levitas sees how early sociologists insert norms within their analytic and explanatory theories of social forms. Utopia, she argues, has been since rejected by sociology because of its evaluative content, contrasting utopia to science that seeks out an "is" and not an "ought." Sociology could bear to learn from utopian literature as they "contain narratives of the place in history of both originating and alternative societies, of how we got *here* and how we might get *there*."<sup>354</sup> Levitas challenges the separation of description and evaluation, not so as to "collapse this distinction, but to admit normativity as a proper aspect of sociology itself" by arguing that "evaluation and openness to the future are intrinsic to description and explanation" and through the

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<sup>353</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid., 74.

example of feminist challenges to academic practices that were—in the 1970s and continue to be—both methodological and substantive.<sup>355</sup>

As discussed above, Levitas unearths the normative elements in early sociology. In another gesture to preserve the normative, she describes her own scholarly method as utopian in its hunt to draw out evidence in political claims and policy initiatives of the "good society." Calling it an "archaeological" mode of sifting through the cultures to lift out the shards and fragments of the "good society" that are buried, Levitas pieces together these remnants and occlusions through imaginative reconstruction to show how social orders that claim pragmatic objectives are also latticed by ideas of what makes for human flourishing.<sup>356</sup> Her examples of research from the United Kingdom on the implied or explicit rhetorics of meritocracy, civil society, and economic growth in New Labor to resist the neo-liberal and neo-conservative utopias of the new-Right demonstrate how sociological research can sustain the "ought" within the "is": by bringing these aspects of discourse to light, sociology can move into democratic debate the implicit or the partial embedded within policies. One such example from her reflections on the utopianism in meritocracy is how state-funded schools have not made private-pay education (what are called "public schools" in the UK) obsolete or irrelevant in the UK despite claims and initiatives to improve and support education since the 1950s. Meritocracy is a platform of the Labour Party but so is equality, and these cannot easily sit side by side, with meritocracy promoting social mobility (up as well as down) whereas equality can be a platform for sustaining the inequalities as they stand (i.e. if everyone gets the same

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<sup>355</sup> Ibid., 92; 95-97.

<sup>356</sup> Ibid., 153-54. Levitas summarizes her method here.



benefit, then those who start out with more still have more afterwards).<sup>357</sup> The method of utopia that Levitas applies in this example is how meritocracy harbors in its rhetoric the utopian collective norm of fairness and openness while at the same time is challenged by the individualizing forces of markets and competition—decidedly un-utopian for the way they instrumentalize human productive capacity. Levitas's method of archaeology to recover the competing norms in order to trace the interactions of policy, rhetoric, influence, and quality of life is a compelling case for how sociology can both study value claims at the same time as assert the relative merits of policies for how they actually do what they promise to do.

As an outsider to sociological methods, I find Levitas's use of normativity in relationship to Utopian formations compelling. However, her claim of its "utopian" quality is more interesting to me for the way that her use of "utopia" in this case depends on the collective norm of fairness against individualizing forces and that *this collective value* is what makes society better. This matches my own definition of Utopia for its ability to signify collective social arrangements within a dominant liberal capitalism. Thus, I would argue that this is a Utopian norm because of the value of collectivity, and not that normativity in sociology is generally utopian. I think that Utopia—as collectivity and social totality—can be located through an archaeological method but think that it should also include a focus on the contradictions of Utopia. I will explain how Jameson adds to Levitas's method at the end of this section.

### *Holism Method*

My second frame for considering Levitas's utopia as method is her claim that utopia recovers a lost vision the subjective perspective within sociology. As quoted

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<sup>357</sup> Ibid., 155-64.

above, "Utopia facilitates genuine holistic thinking about possible futures, combined with reflexivity, provisionality and democratic engagement with the principles and practices of those futures."<sup>358</sup> This definition of holism at first would suggest that it is a kind of mapping of various social processes in coordination. However, such a view must also make "connections between economic, social, existential and ecological processes in an integrated way."<sup>359</sup> She goes on to add that sociology could most be helped by utopia through a "holistic approach" that connects "individual biography and history"—what Levitas names as "the essence of the sociological imagination."<sup>360</sup> What has been lost to sociology is an evaluation of life from a normative perspective of "human flourishing," a perspective she shares with sociologist Andrew Sayer, whom she quotes:

Sayer suggests that '[a]s sentient beings, capable of flourishing and suffering', we are 'particularly vulnerable to how others treat us' and that 'our view of the world is substantially evaluative'. Wellbeing is an objective condition. It is also relation: we exist not as discrete individuals but necessarily embedded from the outside in relations with others.<sup>361</sup>

Later on the page, Levitas contends that, "[a]lthough he does not present it as such, Sayer's argument is also deeply utopian. He addresses, as I do here, the existential before the institutional." This existence is the one that is suspended "between the present and the future."<sup>362</sup> Comparing these ideas to Bloch's temporal unfolding, Levitas insists that when utopia is added to sociology, sociology can more fully accept its history that permits a category of human nature that itself is completed through culture.<sup>363</sup> Levitas sees what I have identified: that Utopia opens to the existential. However, to claim utopia as holistic

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<sup>358</sup> Ibid., xi.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>360</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>361</sup> Andrew Sayer, *Why Things Matter to People: Social Science, Values, and Ethical Life*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007) Front matter, quoted in *Utopia as Method*, 179.

<sup>362</sup> Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, 179.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid., 176.

thinking overdetermines Utopia and erases its contradictions. In her account, holism begins to speak with agential human subject that, in my formulation, does not sit with critical methods, especially those in religion.

For utopia to be a useful method to sociology, Levitas asserts that it needs to include the "ontological mode" that gathers together the claims to a good society and human flourishing along with the existential, a dimension of being that includes the experience of time and of affect.<sup>364</sup> She bundles these features together as elements of the "warm stream" of Marx that have been forced "underground" by critical approaches.

Sociology is comfortable with utopia only as an element in the social imaginary that is the object of explanation. It repeatedly approaches utopia and retreats from it. And yet the impulse towards social transformation, there at the origin of the discipline, does not go away. The warm stream runs underground. Both the general diffusion of utopia across culture (in Bloch's sense) and the parallels between sociology and utopia (in Wells's sense) would lead us to expect this. For the excitement and promise of sociology lies in this presence; the disappointment lies in its recurrent repression and denial.<sup>365</sup>

In this case, it is critique that she claims that is pressing the warm stream of Marxism away. I might add that it is not only critique but scientific positivism that displaces this dimension of Marxist attention to human flourishing. Levitas is not alone in catching how critical, social scientific methods, active in Marxist historical materialism, can turn Marxist critique rigid. It is a concern of Bloch's, an argument waged between E.P. Thompson and Louis Althusser, an interest of Perry Anderson, and an abiding focus of Fredric Jameson. Each has found a way into the "warm stream" by way of Utopia. It is also overreliance on the "cold stream" of ideology critique, historicization and dialectical criticism that concerned religious studies scholar Tyler Roberts. As discussed in Chapter

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<sup>364</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid., 101-102.

One, Roberts identified in Russell McCutcheon, Steven. Wasserstrom, J.Z. Smith and others an overly "locative" approach that did not have room for considering incongruity. This dissertation points out this representational dilemma within critical approaches and considers that Utopia has a role to play in its engagement for contemporary religious studies arguments.

I want to distinguish myself from Levitas's reclamation of existential perspectives through Utopia by way of my narrower definition of Utopia that I have established thus far and with the critical tools that Fredric Jameson uses. The reason for this is that Levitas unnecessarily bundles so much within her definition of a general utopia that it becomes confused with a left-liberal perspective and in doing so, borrows religious tropes to speak address the specialness of the transformative power. Thus, the second way her holism intersects with my own use of Utopia for critical religious studies is negatively. Levitas naturalizes utopia through Bloch and does so in such a way that returns his religious language the fore. Her method of utopia as a process of recovery works hard to reintroduce an unalloyed "utopian marvelous" and a "quality of grace" that can be used to address "what it means to be human."<sup>366</sup> Social conditions contribute to the desire for alternatives, however, utopia is cast as an experience of "grace": "Everything that reaches to a transformed existence is, in this sense, utopian."<sup>367</sup> In using Bloch to help figure a view of humanity with "moral and existential depth", Levitas defers to secularized religious language. This, she admits, is due to "evacuation of existential depth from secular culture." She cites Paul Tillich as offering a secular grace, in line with the perennial philosophy, of "the incursion of redeemed experience into the mundane, which

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<sup>366</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid., 5.

transform both our relation with ourselves and our relations with others."<sup>368</sup> These references to a secularized religious sensibility hold also for how encounters with aesthetic objects like the color blue or music invite this transcendence that she calls utopian. Utopia enters in to substitute for representational failure: "The use of 'otherworldly' or utopian metaphors may illustrate the limits of language. It may also suggest that, as with colour, music's affective character is associational rather than intrinsic." The presence and absence of color and music—the spacing of color and the spaces of musical rest—is utopian for its suspension.<sup>369</sup>

I argue that while religion and utopia may both culturally signal the failures of representation, the encounters of heterogeneities of time or space, or of a post- or trans-individualism that confronts the individualizing forces of capitalism, a scholarly approach needs to go further to explain this connection. Levitas renders utopia as a model for holistic thinking, thus expanding the concept of utopia across many domains, including secular-religious transcendent experience alongside of normative claims for a "good society" and hopeful futures. She has brought in universalism, human nature, aesthetics, temporality and social transformation together as one word. What develops through her claim to holism is not only a confused notion of utopia but also a kind of secular religiosity that adds meaning, value, awe, and poignancy to life and calls this "utopia."

I find this too-confused a figure for thinking alongside of critical religious studies. Craig Martin's category of "individual religion" seems to capture a dimension of Levitas's utopia. Martin identifies how contemporaries in sociology of religion have failed to take

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<sup>368</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>369</sup> Schoenberg and Mahler to Bjork and Branford Marsalis. She lists them one after the next with quotations for how they each express "a yearning beyond visible expression" Ibid., 50. It is so much reverie for musical expression without the balance of what might also an ideological function to music.

into account research from religious studies and have unreflexively employed spiritual/secular distinctions.<sup>370</sup> In preserving individualism as a category, they have imported a privilege of freedom in their claims and repeat insider accounts. Whether or not this is intended—if it is a rhetorical slippage of an insider's claim to freedom or the sociologist's assertion of their freedom—the assertion overall points to a lack of theorization or reflection about the perceived or actual autonomy claimed by sociologists. Martin argues how such slippage is little more than repeating what is hegemonic:

Social theory at its best explains how individuals or individual choices are *products* of social forces. To explain things by pointing to individual choice is in fact not to explain them at all. . . . To posit self-causing monads, even out of apparent respect for individuals, is to turn social theory into liberal ideology, or worse, theology—for what is more theological than self-causing agents, unmoved movers, which escape causal fields yet make effects in the world?<sup>371</sup>

Martin's argument against the category of individual within social theory as it relates to religion is instructive in critiquing religion where it is defended as a distinctive, non-socially prescribed experience and in troubling the private/public binary about religion—a distinction that fails to hold up when and since private choices of faith come to influence public policy or sentiment, or inversely, "choices" are promoted and legitimated by public conditions.

Martin identifies in sociology that claims to spirituality reinforce a concept of an individual that is not active in early sociologists like Durkheim, and that claims to experiences like "grace" or "transcendence" within sociology reinsert liberalism within a

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<sup>370</sup> Martin, *Capitalizing Religion*, 33-34. The scholars who have brought forward critical reflexivity about the categories in contents are those in Chapter One--J.Z. Smith, Tala Asad, Daniel Dubuisson, Russell McCutcheon, and Timothy Fitzgerald. Those who have preserved individualization and secularization that Martin takes to task are "Peter Berger, Robert Bellah, Robert Wuthnow, Wade Clark Roof, Steve Bruce, Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, and Laurence R. Iannaccone." 34.

<sup>371</sup> Martin, *Capitalizing Religion*, 22-23.

sociological discourse that does not support a category like the "individual." I follow Martin in thinking that the individual is derivative in Durkheim: it has no substance but is an effect of social totality. To avoid Levitas's collapse of utopia and into religion and a reinsertion of a liberal individual, I have emphasized how it is that Utopia refracts the existential dimension and signals the diremption of "biography" and "history" within social theory. This is a subtle yet crucial distinction for considering Utopia alongside critical approaches in religious studies. Utopia cannot be approached so directly as Levitas presents in her wish to preserve holism. I go by way of other means, ones that make use of psychoanalytic and postmodern terms and conditions of social life that have rendered the subject more suspiciously.

#### Jameson's Archaeology of Utopia as Method

Levitas's utopia-as-method bundles utopia's functions such that the figure becomes overdetermined. As a counter to this, I argue that Utopia is a figure that carries the existential dimension through its aesthetic form. Utopia in this way maintains its critical value by highlighting social contradiction, but not explicitly characterizing or representing the existential dimension. Instead, the subjective, lived quality is encountered through the Utopian representation as a wish-fulfilling object. As is the case with Freud, this wish is never truly fulfilled, as is the case in Lacanian desire that the proper object does not exist except as Symbolic and Imaginary language—itsself always in deferral. I traced these moves in Chapter Three. In revisiting Jameson's take on Utopia, I can better set up how critical religious studies can see its own projects for their desires for Utopia.

The archaeological methods of Jameson apply here more than Levitas's.

Jameson's archaeology attends to the different modes of production that settle and layer within culture, never fully passing out of use but which are covered over and then heaved up again by history's work. This archaeology is active in Jameson's own "Utopia as Method," an essay published in 2010, five years following the first appearance of his collection, *Archaeologies of the Future*.<sup>372</sup> In the essay, he revisits the book's main themes as if responding to interlocutors and critics of his reading of Utopia through literary form. Jameson shares Levitas's primary concern of "ecological catastrophe" and also admits that there is a pervasive cynical reason that makes Utopia difficult to consider at this historical moment—a perspective that coincides with Levitas's observation of the repressed of utopia.<sup>373</sup> Levitas lists a variety of causes but Jameson focuses on one: the saturation of global capitalism. If postmodernity is to blame, it is because it coincides with this event and because the ideas are a part of an infrastructure of capitalism.

This grandness of Utopia as the counter to capitalism sounds in some sense hyperbolic compared to Levitas's multiple small repressions and their counterbalance of diffusive utopian events, from musical performances to political policy to the structuring of thought towards normative ends or ontologies of the future. I contend, however, that Jameson's concentrated approach does more to target Levitas's concern—that of the loss of holistic approaches to social analysis that include the existential and subjective drives

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<sup>372</sup> Fredric Jameson: "Utopia as Method, or the Uses of the Future," in *Utopia/Dystopia : Conditions of Historical Possibility* ed. Prakash, Gyan, Helen Tilley, and Michael D. Gordin (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010), *eBook Academic Collection (EBSCOhost)*

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.*, Section I. Also in his view: "worldwide poverty and famine, structural unemployment on a global scale, and the seemingly uncontrollable traffic in armaments of all kinds, including smart bombs and unmanned drones (in armaments, progress does apparently exist!)--leaving pandemics, police states, race wars, and drugs out of the picture."



and desires that activate social change. The lack of content that he gives to Utopia broadly is precisely the point:

that what is important about Utopia is not what can be imagined but what *cannot* be imagined. [T]he utopia, I argue, is not a representation but an operation calculated to disclose the limits of our own imagination of the future, the lines beyond which we do not seem able to go in imagining changes in our own society and our world (except in the direction of dystopia and catastrophe).<sup>374</sup>

In speaking back to Levitas, I would say that she invokes Utopia not because "utopia" (in its many styles and types) is being repressed but that Utopia is a signifier for what is repressed within capitalism. Said another way, Utopia is the figure that speaks for what cannot be said within capitalism.

In Jameson's use, Utopia speaks of the grand overhaul of society, not just counterforces or pragmatism. It isn't so much that utopia is being repressed by anyone but that it has lost its footing or its soil has eroded. The conditions that Jameson is reporting on overlap with Levitas: the shift from the late nineteenth-century highpoint for Utopia and the subsequent 120 years:

The waning of utopias is thus a conjecture between all these developments: a weakening historicity or of a sense of the future; a conviction that fundamental change is no longer possible, however desirable; and cynical reason as such. To this we might add that sheer power of excess money accumulated since the last great world war, which keeps the system in place everywhere, reinforcing its institutions and armed forces. Or maybe we should adduce a different kind of factor, one of psychological conditioning—namely, that omnipresent consumerism, having become an end itself, is transforming the daily life of the advanced countries in such a way as to suggest that the utopianism of multiple desires is here already and needs no further supplement.<sup>375</sup>

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<sup>374</sup> Ibid.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid., section "Virno."

Thus, Jameson's viewpoint on the waning is that it occurs not from a socially-forced resistance or fear (that defines repression) as much as capitalism's steady advance.

Under these conditions, Jameson's method for Utopia recognizes that there are repressions of Utopia, as Levitas argues, but that recovering it or retelling it will not be so straightforward as providing evidence of hopeful projects or feelings of collectivity. Capitalism, as Marx points out, demands interpretation because its forces bend and distort. Marx's methods have been refined through interpreters like Althusser, who brought forward that the imaginary relations to the real conditions of consistence will never be completely unfolded and smoothed out for complete and total explanatory access. However, tracing the creases can offer clues for where capitalism will fold itself again. In this way, Jameson appreciates the complexity and difficulty of repression that Levitas misses by some of her bolder, more hopeful claims to the normative contents that fit her own ideological profile. This profile is hard to unpack because of its sympathies with both left-leaning projects and humanities disciplines. Unfolding her method from within my own opens up the question first of how to interpret Utopia as a repressed object.

Jameson's archaeologies keeps to the claim that periodizations mark distinct material relations but also are heuristics for explanatory purposes. Periods, such as postmodernity, mark differences and should not be seen in any evolutionary sense. Instead, they function as a style or structure of knowledge that makes use of distinctions in service of the mode that is most dominant. Jameson's archaeological method is similar to Levitas's in its description of sifting and reworking of silences. However, in referencing Lacanian psychoanalysis directly, Jameson points to both the inherent

failures in this process and the ugly or unsavory—the "noxious"— that creates the ideological folds:

The utopian impulse, therefore, calls for a hermeneutic, for the detective work of a decipherment and a reading of utopian clues and traces in the landscape of the real; a theorization and interpretation of unconscious utopian investments in realities large and small, which may be far from utopian. The premise here is that the most noxious phenomena can serve as the repository and hiding place for all kinds of unsuspected wish fulfillments and utopian gratifications; indeed, I have often used the humble aspirin as the unwitting bearer of the most extravagant longings for immortality and the transfiguration of the body.<sup>376</sup>

Jameson goes on to offer Walmart as his noxious example of present-day Utopia. In Walmart, there is the expression of unification through the standardizing UPC or the shipping container and the advance of capitalism of its size and monopoly transform the market qualitatively, that "which abolishes the market by means of the market itself."<sup>377</sup> Like Levitas, Jameson is on the hunt for the future that is in the present, but searches by way of a dialectical relation where ambivalence is transformed into points of positive and negative viewed simultaneously. As stated above, the attention to the form of Utopia (in this case, as the enclave of Walmart) and the dialectic prevails over the content. In attending to the present in its complexity, the Marxian dialectic triggers the existential dimension without representing it explicitly.

By giving his attention to the despicable of Utopia, the "better" of Levitas matures from the "good"/"bad" drama of a Lacanian Imaginary and its binary. Jameson's method, practiced with Walmart, is future-oriented, like Levitas's:

This kind of prospective hermeneutic is a political act only in one specific sense: a contribution to the awakening of the imagination of possible and alternative futures, a reawakening of that historicity which our system—

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<sup>376</sup> Ibid., section "Wal-mart."

<sup>377</sup> Ibid.

offering itself as the very end of history—necessarily represses and paralyzes.<sup>378</sup>

While I can appreciate the need for a future (for it is a future that makes the present, in some respects, bearable), it is not the focus of my insertion of Utopia into critical religious studies so much as is the attention historicity. Critical religious studies offers historicity through its emphasis of historicization. This is the temporal edge of Utopia that I see active in critical religious studies. While historicization IS thought to be a deadening project, according to critics like Roberts or even Levitas's objective-seeking social theorists, the dialectic of Jameson makes the present a constantly renewing source for analytic potential.

Instead of the future as the home of Utopia, I would propose it is the present that Utopia addresses, where method relates the potentials of explanation and calls out instances of collective organization. My own account of Utopia acknowledges that utopia has been repressed but acknowledges this as an operation of capitalism. In regards to the repression of accounts of existential or lived dimensions of social life, Levitas is correct to note the strong anxiety stemming from critical social-science arguments but a Marxian approach to these questions is more successful in framing the repression as part of the larger problematic of representation.

As this dissertation has argued, these methods include seeing this occlusion as a problematic of representation that is tricky to overcome or perhaps impossible. The figure of Utopia represents social life as a totality and addresses its payoffs but concedes its limits and failures. Setting up a narrower definition of Utopia based on aesthetic form delivers the opportunity to glean the existential dimension from a dialectical encounter

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<sup>378</sup> Ibid., section "Method."

with the text. It also permits the *jouissance* of explanatory power that is both potential and risk of closure. In these narratives, the collectivity of Utopia is ushered in through its associations of a harmonious community or at least, a society where the subject has been reconciled to her subjectivation. Instead, the desire for Utopia, as I have been treating it, is a longing that is met with satisfaction and frustration, possibility and threat. If there is a way in which Utopia educates, it is through showing how to sustain attention through the levels of contradiction and antinomy that present themselves in thought, in material conditions. Jameson offers this more sober account

The desire called Utopia must be concrete and ongoing, without being defeatist or incapacitating; it might therefore be better to follow an aesthetic paradigm and to assert that not only the production of the unresolvable contradiction is the fundamental process, but that we must imagine some form of gratification inherent in this very confrontation with pessimism and the impossible.<sup>379</sup>

Thus, in the figure of Utopia, the existential, lived dimension of social is not fully formed as an agent who possesses desire but is instead a subject transversed by desire, immersed in but not reducible to it. The psychoanalytics of Lacan name this subject through the language of the Other that delivers the Imaginary for identification, the Symbolic for its differential potentials, and the Real that resists representation all together. This formulation coincides with the social constructionist positions of critical social theory while still permitting the actuality, the reality of the subject's perspective within the social.

I turn now to consider how an historicized desire can function to limn the attachments to Imaginary narratives of fullness or emptiness like Utopia represents. I consider how Tomoko Masuzawa uses Freudian repression more deftly than Levitas has

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<sup>379</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 84.

done and how claiming Utopia as a desire funds critical religious studies and thus, can be an opportunity to have an "encounter" with "incongruity" that Roberts argues is integral to the field.

## **II. Desire in Critical Religious Studies—Masuzawa**

Desire, in its colloquial use, connotes passion or strong feeling. Yet, this surface level, dime-store Romance sense of desire is not as useful as psychoanalytic models. Relating desire to Utopia has, thus far, involved reading against those utopian scholars deploying it without much reference to its psychoanalytic meanings. It also has involved Jameson's Marxist-Lacanian approach of reading backwards through literature. Desire is difficult to address head on—a claim further supported by Tomako Masuzawa in her text *In Search of Dreamtime: The Quest for the Origins of Religion*. In this text, Masuzawa argues that desire is a result of repressive forces—prohibitions of social and representational dimension. In an effort to limn this difficult term, I track Masuzawa's project to show how desire signals a limit of representation. Using it to describe how origin functions for religious studies scholars, Masuzawa points to the dissolution of certainty in knowledge production. This corresponds with my own argument that desire, as used in utopian studies scholarship, signals subjective attachment that is otherwise prohibited or difficult to sustain in social constructionist models of analysis. I first examine how the term "interests" displaces desire as a category in social construction because of desire's connotation of innate drives. I then examine Tomoko Masuzawa's use of psychoanalytic and deconstructive methods in order to demonstrate how desire can serve as a term in critical, historicizing projects. Through her work, I argue that there are strong comparisons between how origin and Utopia function discursively to signal the

limits of representation and demonstrate that critical religious studies benefits from unseating its certainties through psychoanalytic terms.

Desire is not a word commonly used in ideology critique, though it is common to post-structuralist approaches.<sup>380</sup> Subjective "interests" have been the primary term for thinking about desire. As I discussed in Chapter One, Craig Martin, in his *Introduction to the Critical Study of Religion*, makes the clear distinction between interests and desires. In his account, socially-given identities precipitate interests. As opposed to desires which are short-term, interests are desires extended in time and space such that those with more social capital are in positions to satisfy more of their social interests. In short, Martin reads desires as subjectively held but socially given "interests" that represent those groups by which the subject is formed. As seen in Chapter Two through Levitas and E.P. Thompson, desire may be used to indicate a strongly-held interest that connects a subject to latent political potentials. While Levitas recognizes the psychoanalytic portent of the word via Bloch and Marcuse, she herself is skeptical of psychoanalytic essentialism and seeks a historicizing corrective.<sup>381</sup> Levitas turns back to Miguel Absensour and E.P. Thompson to find examples of desire that animates subjects even as they are situated within social milieus. I agree with Martin interests deserve attention and with Levitas that

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<sup>380</sup> Indeed, it is common to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their counter to psychoanalytic narratives in *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983). Foucault explicitly uses pleasure to avoid Freudian associations. By no means is Freud and Lacan the only way to discuss desire, or even how there might be a desire for Utopia. Another route would be through Luce Irigaray's critiques of Freud and Lacan for their positing of desire as phallic lack. Other routes exist through this terrain of desire. In considering how it might be to work more explicitly with Foucault and Masuzawa and the bourgeois subject within Utopia would be with Laura Ann Stoler's *Race and the Education of Desire : Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham : Duke University Press, 1995). She only touches on Utopia in her project as it too, is invested in the bourgeois subject constructing itself a grammar of race. There is much more to say about how Utopian desire is racialized but this will have to wait for another project.

<sup>381</sup> Levitas, *Concept*, 8.

there is value in preserving desire that is not essentialized instinct or collective unconscious.

### **Repressed Wish for Origins**

As I outlined in Chapter One, Tomoko Masuzawa adds psychoanalytic perspectives to her method of historicization in re-reading the archive of the field of Religious Studies. Her text, *In Search of Dreamtime*, demonstrates this method. Counter to Mircea Eliade's own claim that Religious Studies has abandoned its search for origins of religion, Masuzawa proposes that this perspective has only been repressed. Masuzawa uses "origin" to mark the scholars' relations to the indeterminacy of knowledge production generally, noting where origin is mobilized around unknowns. Origin is always a reconstructed narrative of temporal difference, reconstituted as either a time of fullness or a void. Masuzawa calls origin an "object of intense desire" because it serves to compensate for what is fundamentally unknowable. Where origin either can refer to a plenum or a nothingness, it is inflected with libidinal energy and attachment, drawing to it fantasies and projections generated from the present. It is further cathected because of its inaccessibility via knowledge and then, is "hyper-cathected" through its prohibition in religious studies scholarship, according to Masuzawa's interpretation, thus becoming an object of desire. "In short, the fundamental contradiction endemic to the concept (qua everything and nothing), as well as this logical double-bind of desire and prohibition that defines and determines its function, together make an impossible object-idea out of 'origin.'"<sup>382</sup>

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<sup>382</sup> This phrase is from her shorter rehearsal on origin in the study of religion in her chapter "Origin," 210.



It is important to note how Masuzawa's account of desire is constrained to Freudian terms of repression. Desire is synonymous with wish, an idea or representation that is excited with psychic energy because of its relationship to the drive for pleasure. This is pleasure of the diffuse sexual variety of Freud that connects bodies to objects of satisfaction. Wishes are mostly sublimated, tracked into other forms of satisfaction because of the fragmentary quality of the wish or its prohibition, either internally (psychically) or socially. When the wish cannot be sublimated, the result is neurosis from repression of the wish. Other results of repressed wishes are psychosis or hysteria, where the wishes are distorted or irrecoverable. Masuzawa does not claim that there is an innate desire for narratives about origins but instead that religious studies scholars have a particular relationship to origin narratives because of the construction of the field of scholarship, both in its quest for the origin of religion itself by scholars like E.B. Tylor or through its interest in narratives or myths of origin, in such scholars as recent as Mircea Eliade.

Seen from the perspective of the modern scholar, then, it is precisely the difference in the management of the desire for origins—that is, whether to embrace this desire and to form a whole system of beliefs and practices around it, or to renounce this desire and to build science at a critical distance from it—is what distinguishes the subject (the scholar, or "Western man," as Eliade calls "him" explicitly) and the object (the religious person, "the premodern," the "archaic," the "primitive") of this scholarship<sup>383</sup>

Masuzawa positions desire as a major term for critical religious studies by historicizing desire and showing the overlaps of the discourse of religious studies and Freud, along with the material conditions informing these discourses. One such historical condition is

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<sup>383</sup> Masuzawa, *In Search of Dreamtime* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 15.

the mechanical reproduction of images in photography.<sup>384</sup> Another such condition is those of colonialism and its dispersal with the early interest in theorizing origin in religious studies that then is sublimated through a study of origin myths of so-called "primitives." Masuzawa's attention to desire distinguishes her project from other critical methods that reread the field and point to the problems of claiming a universal longing for the sacred, to the strained binary of archaic/modern, to the authorization of certain conduct or to assumed, unexamined phenomenological methodologies. Through the frame of desire for origins, Masuzawa can show how religious studies scholarship operates a series of repressions. In this way, Masuzawa's project is more a study of repression than desire itself.

### Origin and Utopia

Having examined the figure of utopia (what I designate as a particularly modern, formally-inflected Utopia) since Chapter One, and considered "origin" through Masuzawa, I am able to link more directly "origin" and "Utopia." Having reviewed conceptual and literary perspectives, I conclude that what makes Utopia compelling is its framing of logical and social contradiction at the level of its form. In this way, Utopia functions like origin does in becoming an object of intense desire because it too, signals the double-bind of representing a prohibited object. I have counted Utopia as formalized fantasy. This separates it from other theorists of utopia who have broader definitions and label communitarian groups or ruptures in time or experiences of transcendence as "utopian." My articulation of Utopia as a form that sets up a spatial comparison of

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<sup>384</sup> Ibid., 13-20. She relates the desire for origins to proliferation of copies through photography. There is a drama or dance ongoing with origin/copy, beginning/repetition—a drama recorded by Walter Benjamin who notes the repetition-without-origination of photography.

similarity and difference expands on the ambivalence that Utopia holds for these thinkers. By emphasizing its formal aspect, Utopia turns from a feeling to a fantasized object that, like origin, is cathected like an object. The ambiguity of how "real" Utopia is, along with how "perfect" it might be, how plausible it should be, how "natural" or non-supernatural it is, or how its ideality displaces or nulls other Utopias, signals how Utopia marks a place of indeterminacy and holds cultural attachments. Like origin, Utopia appears conceptually possible but is fundamentally unknowable. Like origin, Utopia substitutes as both fullness and void in a point of time or space. In this way, Utopia expresses, like origin, the "fundamental contradiction" of being both everything and nothing. Using Masuzawa, I would say that, like origin, Utopia grows as an object of desire to the degree it is prohibited from its knowability. Capitalizing Utopia is my way of distinguishing myself from a generalized use that resists how "utopia," like "origin," is used discursively by moderns to project their own desires and to universalize them.

Origin and Utopia can also be related by how they use narrative temporality to orient the present. While other scholars make work of Utopia's temporal directions—either past or future—my project sets up Utopia as primarily an object in space. As I have claimed, Utopia is a particularly modern thought/literary form responding to early modern material conditions of global exploration, mercantilism, early capitalism, and nation-state formation, and is an outgrowth of intellectual movements of scholasticism and humanism. This makes Utopia not a promise of fulfillment in the future (or the recollection of a Golden Age or Eden) as much as a human project, subject to a Reality Principle of sorts, where the only "magic" is that of the resolution of social tension, absent of any supernatural influence. In following the convention of modern Utopian

literature, I narrow Utopia to its spatial dynamics. This reduces its associations to time, and thus to teleology. Thus, the proximate aspects of Utopia privilege comparison over normativity. This does not mean that Utopia does not have a normative edge but that its primary role is generative, not prescriptive. This distinction serves to direct how it is that the desire for Utopia in critical projects focus primarily on the effects of comparative norms and not regulative ideals, as some kinds of utopia imply.

### Desire for Utopia

The desire for Utopia could be mapped as a case of Freudian repression but I argue that is better considered through Jameson's Marxist-Lacanian materialism. Utopia's fall from popularity has been argued as a consequence of twentieth century politics, its dispersal across capitalism, or, as Levitas argues, a repressive force with scholarship away from normativity. Jameson contends that capitalism's expansion and its late-stage appearance in culture as postmodernity has swallowed up the possibility of thinking Utopia. Reading this as Masuzawa does origin, Utopia has faced prohibition by capitalism's reach, further excluding it from conversation or consideration. A Freudian psychoanalytic reading of utopian studies could also be applied, pointing to the disjunctions and confusion in definition as a case of repression. However, as I presented in Chapter Three, Jameson's Lacanian formulation mixed with Marxist materialism provides a better means for seeing that desire is primarily movement and circulation that folds in ways to produce culture. In short, I have demonstrated the necessity and usefulness of linking link desire and Utopia without resorting to innate drives. I find that Jameson and his use of Lacan's psychoanalysis is more useful precisely because it attends to subjectivity as an unfixed, endless process without devolving into an account

of innate drives. Also, instead of pretending to be able to describe experience through social theory, Jameson raises it as a question, holding it as a point of inquiry that cannot be resolved or directly addressed. Lacan is useful for this because his account of subjectivity is one that is sustained only through the Other of language, where the subject is not self-possessing and desire is situation of lack.

Thus, it is Masuzawa's analysis of discourse, her association of discourse with the affective attachments, and her unseating of scholarly knowing subjectivity that is more relevant to my examination of desire than the determinations of psychoanalytic terms or motions per se. Masuzawa insists that historical consciousness and confidence of the modern interpreter was never as stable as it appeared, and through her deconstructive method, she directs her reader's attention to the postmodern undoing of this assumed stability, thereby deftly presenting the very project of theorization as uncertain and fragile. As the texts of her esteemed scholars come under her careful and generous treatment, the "strangeness of time appears sometimes on the textual surface" and her readers too are brought into the strangeness of temporality and in so doing, become "estranged" from the image of "Western man" that these figures hold up for scholars. As Masuzawa undoes familiar temporalities, she undoes familiar subjectivities:

Somehow, we are estranged from that picture [of "Western man"], from the image of him standing, confronting the panorama of global history before his eyes, as if he alone were riding on the neck of Chronos. Perhaps we begin to imagine a new picture, just as the moment when we feel our own ground giving way, drifting irrevocably to time and to history.<sup>385</sup>

Her work addresses the instability of subjectivity, draws her figures with sympathy and thus, obliquely accounts for the existential dimension by way of following her figures

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<sup>385</sup> Ibid., 179.

through the breaks in their texts, as if in following the turns, ruptures, and leaps that is the subjective experience of time.

From this perspective, what is most relevant from Masuzawa to my discussion of the desire for Utopia is first to consider that scholarly interest is guided by affective attachments to explanation. Critical religious studies is not exempt from these attachments. Masuzawa reads the formative voices in the field not to unseat them but to unseat the dominant interpretative strategies. The same criticisms hold: problems of western exceptionalism, Christian hegemony disguised as secular pluralism, and an ahistorical essence of religion are addressed. She uses the method of psychoanalysis to attend to how scholars, too, are subjects made through the folds of these discourses and thus, cannot just overturn them or believe they can exceed their history. Masuzawa's work is a methodological innovation within critical religious studies for its way of inscribing critical scholars within the spheres of theories that have been mainly been used on "religious others."

### **III. Desire for Utopia in Critical Religious Studies**

My own innovation is to bring the insights about desire and origin from Masuzawa to bear on the figure of Utopia and how it, like origin, is at work in the field of religious studies. As I discussed in Chapter Two, Utopia has only thinly been related to psychoanalysis in utopian studies recently yet still deploys its terms of "dream" and "desire." Where scholars like Levitas have connected Utopia and desire, it has been to draw out the subjective or "warm stream" of Marxist critique in contrast to the "cold stream" of Althusserian structuralism. The exception to this has been in the work of

Fredric Jameson. As I examined in Chapter Three, Jameson does not try to marry these two streams through a concept of Utopia but holds them together as a problematic of representation for critical social theory. He proposes a materialist analytic of language to deliver the existential, lived dimension of social life obliquely through the examination of cultural objects. His formal method matches the concerns of critical religious studies as it is a dialectical approach that attends to ideology critique and historicization.

By way of Jameson and his frame of a problematic, I propose that Utopian desire can function as a critical lens for better assessing the dilemma within critical religious studies of representing human life (or "experience") as both socially constructed and particular. As I have demonstrated, there is no simple way to resolve these two orders into one representation and remain invested in project of critical analysis. From the constructivist point of view, experience is a part of a humanist liberal paradigm that should be deconstructed along with the notion of a stable subjectivity. Also, claims to "religious experiences" are problematic for their claims to exceptional experience and also for the accessibility by scholars.<sup>386</sup> As Russell McCutcheon avers, experience is invoked often rhetorically as a "a substantive if indeterminate terminus for the relentless deferral of meaning."<sup>387</sup> Hidden in claims to experience is an implication of "should," by McCutcheon's account. McCutcheon admits that there is "experience," but that it should be treated as "virtually transparent" for the way that is so embedded in social life.<sup>388</sup> This is McCutcheon's way of resisting the liberal privatization of experience. Such concerns

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<sup>386</sup> This summary of experience for religious studies is rehearsed in Benjamin Fong and considered again in Jason Blum, "Retrieving Phenomenology as a Method for Religious Studies," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 8, no. 4 (Dec. 2012): 1025-48.

<sup>387</sup> For McCutcheon, the rhetoric of experience equals the end of signification: "a substantive if indeterminate terminus for the relentless deferral of meaning." McCutcheon, *Critics, Not Caretakers*, 8.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*, 9. Experience is the "localized depository of complex and often virtually transparent messages communicated through, and made possible by, social life."

prompt critical scholars to declare their works as projects of "redescription," as J.Z. Smith proposed, in addition to the task of description, thereby removing the scholar from the presuppositions of knowledge or claims to shared experience. In Bloch's terms of the cold and warm streams of Marxism, critical religious studies has chosen the cold stream.

Tyler Roberts argued as much in his charge that social constructionism is overly locative. The criticisms of phenomenological methods as crypto-theological and a broad suspicious tone in the academy has separated religious studies scholarship from its affirmative, humanist aspects, according to Roberts. While Roberts does not explicitly support a revival of experiential language, he seeks a humanistic approach that thinks itself as "responsive." Roberts lifts examples of scholarship that "make possible acknowledgement of and forms of concerted attention to the flux and excess of 'life.'"<sup>389</sup> He defends the claim that while the hermeneutics of suspicion expanded knowledge of human motivation in valuable ways, it has "withered into method weakly supported by an ideology of knowledge for knowledge's sake."<sup>390</sup> Roberts concludes his argument in *Encountering Religion* pressing for an account of human life by religious studies scholarship that moves beyond demystification and instead allows encounter, incongruity, and affirmation. In short, Roberts reports on an absence of humanistic inquiry in critical methods, a dearth of thought that supports transformative experiences.

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<sup>389</sup> These ideas are woven from the penultimate page of Roberts's text: "As genealogists and historicists, we know how to reduce religion to social context and how to explain religious practices and ideas in terms of power, conflict, and identity. There no doubt is much to unmask in religion, as in other human activities. When the hermeneutics of suspicion emerged in the nineteenth century, our sense of who we are and of the possibilities for understanding human motivation, action, and society was expanded in valuable ways. But that affirmation has lost its force, withered into method weakly supported by an ideology of knowledge for knowledge's sake. As a result, critical suspicion increasingly fails to 'press to the limits of experience': human life becomes reduced to power and interest and for many it is no longer clear how we can remain intellectually honest while making moral or religious claims upon one another or how we can affirm the traditions and forms of life that make us, in large part, what we are. When demystification comes to define the study of religion, an the academic enterprise more generally, we lose sight of what it means to find an affirm our place in relation to others." Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 232.

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.



As I have argued, the figure of Utopia contributes to critical religious studies for its signal of this conflict of presenting the humanistic discourses that Roberts proposes alongside of the critical prohibition to "experience." Calling it a *desire* for Utopia signals the ambivalence towards this project. As outlined above, hypercathected objects like origin and Utopia become signals for the obstacles of representation by scientific-scholarly means. Introducing Utopia in the way that I have defined—an aesthetic figure based on its history within Western modernity—delivers a means to reflect the ambitions to representation of social totality and collectivity as they stand in critical methods. Calling it a *desire for* Utopia shows this project as one charged affective and libidinal investment, material through and through. Thus, scholarly efforts at representing social totality or collectivity in terms of social construction, social formation or otherwise is not an objective project. It is also not merely a case of interests. To contend that social construction depends on a desire for Utopia is to situate or locate (as Roberts might say) without overly determining the subject within this location. To argue for a desire for Utopia within social constructionist methods is to introduce the project of analysis as an aesthetic, and thus, a site or deposit of attachments.

By way of conclusion, I want to include an image of Utopia from Jameson that shows its imbrication with the explanatory investments of theory and method. In facing the present conditions of capitalism and its ability to reify and then commodify and resell back to us the best of our Utopian ideas, it is incumbent on the theorist of Utopia to face these conditions with some form of optimism.

What human relations might be without commodification, what a life world without advertising might look like, what narratives would model the lives of people empty of the foreign bodies of business and profit—such speculations have been entertained from time immemorial by

Utopian fantasists and lend themselves to at least an a priori, external, and purely formalistic characterization. We can, in other words, say what a properly Utopian literature might look like even if we are utterly incapable of writing one ourselves. But the Utopian literature of the past was largely positive, or even affirmative (in a bad Frankfurt-School sense); its "dreams of rest" (Morris) bore all the earmarks of compensation and denial, repressing what its fantasy mechanisms were unable to process, leaving out the negative and the body, suffering and death, as well as everything that cannot be solved in interpersonal relations. But the truth value of fantasy, the epistemological *bon usage* or proper use of daydreaming as an instrument of philosophical speculation, lies precisely in a confrontation with the reality principle itself. The daydream can succeed as a narrative, not by successfully eluding or outwitting the reality principle but rather by grappling with it, like Jacob's angel, and by triumphantly wresting it from it what can precisely in our or its own time be dreamt and fantasied as such.<sup>391</sup>

As I have argued, the difficulty of representing subjective, existential perspectives within critical religious studies can be sustained through engagements with cultural products as aesthetic objects, thick with the affective attachments and pleasures that narratives of closure provide. Explanatory projects and redescriptions are Utopian even as they resist the contents of Utopia, forming themselves as enclaves for thinking within the streams of History and alongside the buzz of the phantasmagoria. I offer a challenge to critical religious studies to recognize its Utopian desires in its fantasies of explanation and speculations on the constructedness of subjects. As it confronts and integrates aesthetics into its methods and objects of study, it will serve to offer not subjects as transparent but faceted. As scholar-subjects consider the folds of their constructions and perceive them as aesthetic products, there will be more occasion to catch the refractions of social life that strike as the complex tumble of existential life.

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<sup>391</sup> Jameson, *Seeds of Time*, 74-75.

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