Drama and Utopian Forms of Relationality

Siân Adiseshiah, English Department, Loughborough University

I want to start my contribution with a hesitation about using the term "domestication" due to its profoundly gendered associations and contexts. The historical location of the intersection of women, home, and domesticity – as beyond the logic of modernity – is part of a wider narrative that has defined femininity as, in Judy Giles' words, "non-modern, without individuality or agency, a cultural and psychic space from which to escape if the promises of modernity are to be fully realised" (2004: 11). That domesticity is inextricably interwoven with femininity (femininity as a space of submission), which in turn is cast as a form of *ahistorical vacuity* makes it a peculiarly troubling as well as troublesome metaphor.

Furthermore, Black feminists, such as Hazel V. Carby (1982), have complicated the ways in which the family and domesticity have been narrated in mainstream (read white, middle-class) feminism as being central to sustaining women's oppression, by observing that black families – and women's domestic practices within black families – have often been sites of resistance during slavery, periods of colonialism, and under the contemporary racist state (see also Collins 1989). Thus, the meaning of domestication is peculiarly affected by gendered, classed, and raced contexts, and is both tainted by misogynistic alignments of femininity, passivity, and subordination, and capable of meaning quite the opposite of this within certain Black historical contexts. Thus, this discourse of domestication is by no means an uncomplicated one, and is the reason I choose not to use the metaphor to reflect on this panel's concerns with the dilution of the political charge

of utopia. Instead I refer to co-option, commodification, recuperation, appropriation, diffusion, depoliticization, neutralisation, re-signification, etc. etc. (you see, there are many other equally productive words) as an alternative set of terms to describe what has happened or is happening to engagements with utopia.

*

I am a literary and theatre studies scholar currently writing a book on utopian drama (Adiseshiah 2021). My early work was on the radical contemporary British playwright, Caryl Churchill, who, for me, offered opportunities to think through personal, political, and intellectual frustrations arising from confronting tensions between the politics of class and gender oppression (Adiseshiah 2009). As an aesthetically innovative and exhilaratingly creative playwright who is simultaneously not only concerned with political resistance and radical politics, but with fundamental systemic change, revolution, and post-capitalist possibility, Churchill held my complete intellectual attention for several years.

I framed Churchill's work with reference to a range of leftist thought, and I borrowed too from the field of Utopian Studies to supplement this theoretical underpinning. Utopianism opened up a range of conceptual and theoretical tools which helped to augment my mediation of Churchill's drama as agitational and potentially transformative. In particular, utopianism helped to make sense of the affective dimensions of political life – as staged in radical theatre – and to trace the enabling function of psychological, libidinal, and political desire. My point here is that fundamental systemic change – a radical structural break – is the political kernel around which a meaningful utopianism is most effectively scaffolded. Utopia's unique contribution is its manifestation of otherworldliness, its insistence that a completely different economic, political, psycho-social order is simultaneously "impossible" (within normative realist frames) and essential (for a sustainable planet and, what Judith Butler [2009] calls, "livable" lives).

Since writing on the utopianism of Churchill's drama – and I note here that many of Churchill's plays contain utopian aspects but are not utopias per se (e.g.

Churchill 1985; 2015) – I've become engaged in working on "proper" utopian plays: first, because there aren't very many and it is fascinating to examine the few examples in existence; second, because these utopian plays have received very little scholarly treatment (as utopias at least) but are deserving of attention; and third, because it is instructive to see how a field of study constructs quite tight definitional and categorisation rules, which place limits on its structure of thinking. In the project, I am hoping to demonstrate how centring utopian theatre makes us reconsider some of the field's framing.

There are several reasons for why not many utopian plays have been written or performed, and I don't have the space to go into it at length here, but one of them is the perceived constraints on the form of drama in production: in other words, bodies on stage engaged in live performance, and the scenographic limitations of theatre, which are more restricting than prose (as prose depends on the reader's imagination to visualise utopia). However, due to the variety of aesthetic strategies and multiple sign systems available for the production of meaning, theatre potentially offers more opportunity for a polyvocal, multi-tonal, inter-subjective, affectively (as well as cognitively) estranging encounter with the representation of utopian worlds (see Adiseshiah 2005). It is significant too that while classic prose utopias emerge in a mix of genres that share affinities with realism (travel writing, the epistolary novel, life writing), which also sets limits on the utopian proposition, utopian drama begins its life in comedy, a less bounded form where rules are flouted as generic convention (see Revermann 2014).

The socialist Brazilian theatre practitioner, Augusto Boal writes in his *Theater of the Oppressed*: "The Theater itself is not revolutionary; it is a rehearsal for the revolution" (1979: 122). Utopian drama has the potential to be a rehearsal for utopian practice, a collective encounter with a politically enabling utopianism that is at once acerbic critique and riskily reconstructive, that negates the status quo as unlivable at the same time as attempting to stage scenes of what post-capitalist life could be like – however prone to failure that endeavour might be.

A radical utopianism opens up opportunities to think more expansively (both on and off the stage) about identity, personhood and subjectivity, and to become more keenly alert to how marginality is produced and sustained in the political

contemporary. Utopianism affords the possibility of moving beyond the well-worn fiction of "the individual versus the collective" (a fiction crucial to anti-utopian rhetoric) to reimagine 'selves' and 'others' in radically different constellations – as inter-subjectively interlaced in networks of mutual dependency and care – as well as acknowledging continuing tensions and frictions.

If we draw on the existing body of philosophical work that recognises the fictionality of the individual and repurposes and develops that for utopian thinking, this helps both to facilitate a critique of existing structures of privilege and discourses of oppression, and simultaneously makes visible the possibility of new forms of relationality. David Bell suggests it may be possible to develop Gilles Deleuze's concept of the "dividual" for this purpose (Deleuze 1992; Bell, 2017: 114). Markedly different from the self-contained indivisibility of the "individual," the dividual can be broken down into several parts. Whilst for Deleuze the dividual is a dystopian figure (the dividual as interpellated in multiple ways for the benefit of capital), Bell suggests the concept could be used for utopian ends, as a figuration of subjectivity that has the potential to produce alternative, revolutionary attachments.

This resonates with what Jeremy Gilbert in *Common Ground* calls "infinite relationality": individuation within a web of infinite relationality as always ongoing, and as ontologically open or becoming (2014: 98). Like Bell, Gilbert is enthused by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's concept of the multitude as a creative collectivity – as an infinite network of singularities (2004). Pertinent to the theme of the conference, this utopian sociality of "infinite relationality" is not anthropocentric; instead, it produces human ontological entanglements with non-human animals, nature, and technology. This must surely figure as an essential philosophical component of what this panel would like to see as a re-radicalising of utopia as a force for systemic change.

I'll conclude with a brief reflection on institutional structures and logics in terms of academic discourse, the neoliberal university, and of our own Utopian Studies Society. It is inspiring to see an increasing number of scholars, like the cultural theorist, Sara Ahmed (2016), undertake various acts of challenge to the university's and academic scholarship's perpetuation of privilege and oppression.

And it is welcome that some academic conferences are thinking through much more carefully the ways in which structural logics perpetuate existing forms of power and are trying to find ways of making conferences more accessible and prioritising the centring of marginalised voices. Whilst our field of study, and our Utopian Studies Society, must engage in a continual process of self-critique, and endeavour to find new and different ways of disseminating scholarly research and participation in academic discussion, we also need to recognise the limitations of academic discourse, structures, and institutions, and reach beyond these scholarly boundaries to involve ourselves with, or initiate, new, utopian practices – such as collectives, campaigns and activist ventures – that seek to practise a "politics of transformative change" to repeat Darren Webb's words.

Works Cited

Adiseshiah, Siân (2005) "Utopian Space in Caryl Churchill's History Plays: *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* and *Vinegar Tom*", *Utopian Studies* 16.1, 3-26.

------ (2009) *Churchill's Socialism: Political Resistance in the Plays of Caryl Churchill,* Newcastle: CSP.

------ (2021, forthcoming) *Utopian Drama: In Search of a Genre,* London: Bloomsbury.

Ahmed, Sara (2016) "Resignation is a Feminist Issue", Feminist Killjoys Blog, Available online at https://feministkilljoys.com/2016/08/27/resignation-is-a-feminist-issue/ (Visited 20 October 2019)

Bell, David (2017) *Rethinking Utopia: Place, Power, Affect,* Abingdon: Routledge.

Boal, Augusto (1979) *The Theater of the Oppressed*, London: Pluto Press.

Butler, Judith (2009) *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable,* London: Verso.

Carby, Hazel V. (1982) "White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood", in *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in the 1970s*, London: Routledge, 212-35.

Churchill, Caryl (1985) *Vinegar Tom*, in *Caryl Churchill Plays 1*, London: Nick Hern.

------ (2015) *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, London: Nick Hern.

Collins, Patricia Hill (1989) "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought", *Signs* 14.4, 745-73.

Deleuze, Gilles (1992) "Postscript on the Societies of Control", *October* 59, 3-7.

Gilbert, Jeremy (2014) *Common Ground: Democracy and Collectivity in an Age of Individualism,* London: Pluto Press.

Giles, Judy (2004) *The Parlour and the Suburbs*: *Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity,* Oxford: Berg, 2004.

Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri (2004) *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, London: Penguin.

Revermann, Martin (2014) *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Comedy*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP.