LSE Lit Fest 2016: 'When Did We Start Dreaming?' by Karma Lochrie

The 2016 **LSE Space for Thought Literary Festival** *is inspired by the five hundred year anniversary of Thomas More's* **Utopia***, often positioned as the text that marks the beginning of utopian thinking. However, ahead of the forthcoming publication of her new book,* **Nowhere in the Middle Ages** *(Uni of Penn Press, May 2016), Professor Karma Lochrie questions the tendency to assume that utopianism emerged solely with More's work. Instead, by unmooring utopian thinking from 1516 and More's text, she suggests that there are medieval utopianisms that can also animate and enlarge our understanding of the concept. So, as she asks, when did we start dreaming?*

If you are interested in issues of the imagination, dreams, nostalgia, idealism, dissidence and the quest for a better world, LSE Literary Festival is holding a series of exciting events between Monday 22 February and Saturday 27 February on the theme of 'Utopia'. Make sure you get your free tickets **today***!*

When Did We Start Dreaming?

In the midst of our five-hundred-year celebration of Thomas More's *Utopia*, perhaps we might consider not just the legacies inspired by that work but also the question that the emergence of More's book in 1516 raises: when exactly did we begin dreaming?

Most historians of utopianism tell us that it begins precisely with More and early modernity, that in fact, utopian dreaming was impossible before the historical conditions that opened up the possibility for it. I do not exaggerate the extent to which we have erected an *alpha* of all utopian thought experiments and dreaming with the date of More's publication and the surrounding conditions of its emergence. Just one example from a very reputable scholar of utopianism, Philip Wegner, should suffice:

> *The modern narrative utopia has a distinct moment of birth in the 1516 work by the English Christian humanist Thomas More, which at once introduces a new word, literary institution and conceptual problematic into the European cultural imagination (*Imaginary Communities*, xxi).*

Wegner's statement is no anomaly: it narrates the history of utopianism as it is generally understood today. By installing More's *Utopia* as the historical origin of utopian thought and literary thought experiments, we have created a rather intractable divide between the advent of dreaming in the Early Modern period and the long *durée* of dreamlessness before More.

Full confession here: I am a scholar of medieval literature and culture, that period 'before' dreams begin. By now I am accustomed to the habit of consigning everything medieval to the realm of the 'before' from which modernity takes its departure and definition. In the past twenty years, medieval and Renaissance scholars alike have made great progress in breaking down the divide between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance that has been so formative for the disciplines of history and literary history; the one exception is our narrative of utopian dreaming. On the one hand, this is understandable since there was no word for utopian dreaming before More, so any dreaming in
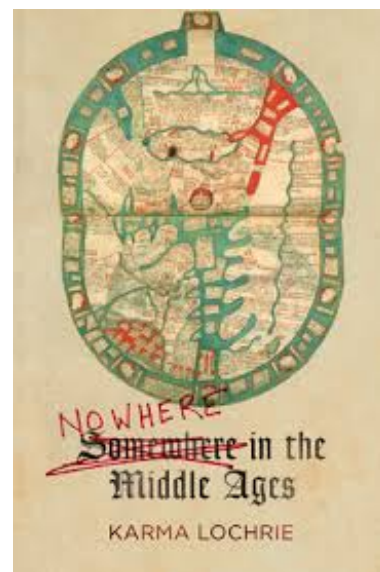
the Middle Ages would have been *avant la lettre*. Yet scholars have had little difficulty pursuing other kinds of modern categories of investigation into the past—homosexuality, heteronormativity, gender ideology and ecocritical perspectives, to name a few—so why not utopian dreaming? Is it really conceivable that medieval people were so blinkered by Christianity that they could only imagine ideals in the afterlife and at the end of history? Or that they simply had not encountered the historical conditions that allowed More to imagine an alternative society in the present and somewhere off the coast of America?

Image Credit: The Land of Cockaigne, Peter Bruegel the Elder (Wikipedia Public Domain)

As a medievalist with a history of skepticism toward such claims on behalf of the Renaissance, I was and continue to be skeptical, and what is more, I think this particular narrative of the origin of utopianism has seriously restricted the ways in which we think about utopianism exclusively in terms of More and his legacy. A utopianism that is premised on the abjection of the past—a utopianism, by the way, that I seriously doubt More would have recognised—is a utopianism that languishes in the thrall of More and modernity. It is this utopianism that has been declared exhausted or obsolete in the twenty-first century, despite the efforts of scholars like Fredric Jameson to theorise utopianism with science fiction. Yet there are other kinds of theorists, like Elizabeth Grosz, who although neither a utopian scholar nor a medievalist, has been arguing for the indispensability of the past for imagining alternative futures.

It is in the spirit of her work that I have just completed a book forthcoming in May 2016 from the University of Pennsylvania Press, *Nowhere in the Middle Ages*. The title puns on the Greek derivation of More's word, 'utopia', meaning both 'no place' and 'good' or 'happy place'. 'Nowhere in the Middle Ages' is the presumption with which scholars understand the history of utopianism, that is, that More developed his complex dream *ex nihilo*. The title also gestures to the opposite claim my book makes: that utopian dreaming does indeed exist 'somewhere in the Middle Ages', sometimes in forms that seem to presage More's island culture and often in ways that diverge from that model. By 'unmooring' utopianism from the historical moment of 1516 and More specifically, I aim not to diminish More's work or the crucial debt that modern utopianism bears to it and his coinage of the concept. Rather, I would propose that medieval utopianisms animate and enlarge a thought project that both exceeds *Utopia* and engages with it. Medieval utopianisms are not simply prologues to More; they represent larger historical projects of dissidence, idealism, nostalgia and imagining alternative mirror-societies that circulated across historical divides into the modern period and even beyond it.

So, when did utopian dreaming begin? I don't know the answer to this question, but I do know it didn't begin with More, nor did it always take the form of the fully formed and regulated polity that *Utopia* is. When medieval dreaming takes the form of an alternative island society both somewhere and nowhere, as it does in the Middle English poem, *Land of Cokaygne*, it bears uncanny echoes of More's island as it, too, satirises contemporary cultures. Or when John Mandeville engages in utopian dreaming in the form of a travel narrative, we are introduced to a world that challenges much of the European and Christian centrism of the late medieval West with a utopian cosmopolitanism that contrasts markedly with the provincialism of More's Utopian culture. As we use 2016 to consider the legacies of utopian dreaming, let us at least consider expanding our histories and theories beyond and behind the 1516 publication of Thomas More's *Utopia* to see what non-modern archives and dreams might avail us.

Karma Lochrie is Professor of English at Indiana University, where she teaches and works in the fields of medieval studies and gender and sexuality studies. She is the author of four books, including, most recently, *Nowhere in the Middle Ages* (forthcoming from the University of Pennsylvania Press, May 2016) and *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn't* (University of Minnesota Press, 2005), as well as numerous articles.

Note: This feature essay gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.