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CASEY A. JERGENSON

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## INTRODUCTION

The history of utopian literature since the late nineteenth century has been marked by generic ebbs and flows. Kenneth Roemer observes that “Between 1888 and the early years of the twentieth century, at least 200 literary utopias appeared in the United States alone” (93). This profusion of optimistic visions of a better future was relatively short lived. The subsequent decades saw a generic reversal in response to the Great Depression, World War I, and the rise of authoritarian regimes that professed utopian aspirations. The literary turn from utopia to dystopia—part of the broader cultural phenomenon called Modernism—produced nightmare visions of futures in which human thought and action were controlled by combinations of physical coercion, psychological conditioning, and eugenic manipulation. The hegemony of dystopia in the early and mid-twentieth century eventually gave way to a brief renaissance of utopian thought in the 1960s and 1970s, as authors—in tandem with the rise of second-wave feminism, the Civil Rights movement, and so on—began once more to imagine better futures. These literary texts—authored primarily by women, such as Ursula K. Le Guin and Marge Piercy—are what Tom Moylan has called the “critical utopias,” texts that “reject utopia as blueprint while preserving it as dream” (*Demand* 10). The fading of the revolutionary possibilities of the 1960s, the onset of neoliberalism in the 1980s, and the consolidation of the globe under late capitalism after the end of the Cold War resulted in a cultural shift back to dystopia. Raffaella Baccolini, among other critics, has described this as “a ‘dystopian turn’ in Anglo-American science fiction” (520).

For the purposes of this dissertation, the dystopian turn of the 1980s marked the beginning of a period of speculative fiction production that continues to the present day. This is the period that I define as “contemporary,” and it is characterized by a profusion of dystopian and post-apocalyptic texts in every narrative medium.<sup>1</sup> If we take this generic distribution at face-value, it seems symptomatic of the utopian idea’s retreat from cultural production since the end of the Cold War. This raises questions regarding how we should interpret the relatively uncontroversial genre history I have outlined above. Is the oscillation between utopia and dystopia symptomatic of broader cultural shifts between optimism and pessimism, hope and despair?

This interpretation is implicitly present in a great deal of criticism, but there are reasons to be skeptical of it. The most important reason, for the purposes of this dissertation, is that utopian and dystopian narratives cannot be correlated in any straightforward, one-to-one manner with a prevailing cultural mood. Conditions of poverty, precarity, ecological breakdown, or political oppression may very well result in a profusion of dystopian narratives, but this is not always the case. Degrading conditions may lead just as easily to compensatory visions of a world in which those conditions have been ameliorated. As Roemer writes of the utopian narratives of the 1890s, “The destructive effects of the industrial revolution undermined belief in the inevitability of progress. But this dystopian challenge to progress also set up a tension that

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of this writing, Lyman Tower Sargent’s online annotated bibliography of utopian literature lists 126 publications in 2019 (*Utopian Literature*). Sargent provides a brief annotation for each entry but does not systematically classify all of the entries by genre. His annotations explicitly label only 72 (57%) of the 126 texts as dystopias, but most of the other texts are also dystopias that are simply not labelled as such. Sargent’s bibliography also only includes novels and short stories, omitting films and television series, so it is a limited source of statistics on the relative proportions of utopian and dystopian narratives in recent years.

created fertile grounds for utopian theory and literature” (82). The prevailing material and ideological conditions in any historical moment will become sedimented in that moment’s cultural productions, and it is certainly worthwhile to consider the generic oscillation described above in that context. The primary danger of such readings, however, is that they may lead to reductive definitions of the political functions of utopian and dystopian narratives.

These genre distinctions sort texts into different categories based on the nature of the dominant social order they describe. These labels should not be understood as describing the text’s politics or the position of the utopian idea within it. As we will see below, a number of critics drew attention to this in the 1990s and early 2000s; their valuable responses to this insight generally involved revising the traditional genre categories to accommodate a greater degree of political complexity within them. This included redefining the dystopian narrative to acknowledge the possibility for these bleak and frightening narratives to contain utopian hope. These projects nonetheless retain an investment in traditional genre categories that, I argue, are decreasingly useful in understanding the politics of contemporary speculative fiction.

I argue that to grapple with the political and generic complexity of contemporary speculative fiction, it is useful to deemphasize the traditional genre categories organizing utopian literary studies and to approach utopianism as a discourse. I define utopian discourse as a body of thematic concerns, procedures of representation, and patterns of formal organization traceable through a wide range of speculative fiction texts that are invested in the politics of radical social betterment. This body of textual practices is informed by the basic problematic of utopian representation: that, as the “good place” that is “no place,” utopia cannot be represented. Works of utopian discourse, therefore, generally refrain from offering blueprint images of a “perfect”

society. They instead explore utopia's conditions of possibility, lending conceptual content to the utopian idea, embodying that content in the text, and then orienting it toward unrepresented horizons of utopian possibility. This understanding of literary utopianism disengages it from the genre of utopian narrative, allowing us to track it through contemporary works of dystopian and post-apocalyptic fiction, science fiction, and fantasy that otherwise may be illegible as utopian texts. Doing so reveals that hope is a major structure of feeling in speculative fiction today, despite the paucity of recent texts depicting "good" societies.

### **Utopian Genre and Utopian Discourse**

Identifying the place of the utopian idea in recent speculative fiction is difficult because the traditional genre taxonomies posited by critics cannot readily be projected onto the generic hybridity of much of this literature. Compounding the problem is the absence of any general agreement among critics as to how the various genres descending from Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) should be taxonomized in the first place. As Lyman Tower Sargent writes, there is disagreement regarding "what belongs within the constellation of ideas, concepts, and literary genres that hover around utopia, but there is something like a consensus that there is such a constellation" ("The Three" 2). For the purposes of literary studies, the three most important points in this constellation are the genres of utopian, anti-utopian, and dystopian narrative.

Moylan provides the most useful and nuanced elucidation of these genres in his monograph *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* (2000), where he argues that the tendency among some critics to use the terms dystopia and anti-utopia interchangeably is an error that leads to the misconception that dystopia is utopia's antithesis. This faulty opposition, he suggests, can lead to reductive analyses that treat utopian narratives as expressions of hope for radical social



betterment and dystopian narratives as pessimistic ruminations on the social ills that invalidate such hopes. Moylan's insight—shared by Baccolini, Sargent, and others—that dystopian narratives often include spaces for hope, leads him to reconfigure the utopia/dystopia dichotomy by prying apart the terms anti-utopia and dystopia, insisting that only the former is necessarily adversarial toward the utopian idea. Anti-utopian narratives are generally dystopian insofar as they imagine violent, frightening, or degraded futures, but not all dystopian narratives are anti-utopian. According to Moylan, dystopias often

affiliate with a utopian tendency as they maintain a horizon of hope (or at least invite readings that do), while others [...] retain an anti-utopian disposition that forecloses all transformative possibility, and yet others negotiate a more strategically ambiguous position somewhere along the antinomic continuum. (*Scraps* 147)

Anti-utopia thus becomes utopia's antithesis, and dystopia is shifted onto the fraught and contested generic terrain between them. A dystopian narrative's position on the continuum is decided by its stance toward the politics of social betterment. If the narrative contains in its narrative form, plot, or world-building articulations of positive social alternatives, and if its conclusion is open-ended enough to allow for the possibility that these alternatives may be realized in some unrepresented future, then it has a utopian dimension. If it lacks these things, instead framing its oppressive future society as closed, totalizing, and unchangeable, then it falls nearer the anti-utopian end of the continuum.

Moylan, therefore, simultaneously critiques and reinforces the traditional genre taxonomies that group texts according to the political texture of the dominant society they represent. This project was not the only one in the 1990s and early 2000s that complicated earlier tendencies in the criticism. Sargent noted that the term dystopia "has been generally neglected by

critics” and that major recent texts “undermine[d] all neat classification schemes” (“The Three” 7). Baccolini argued for the increasing prominence of “a new oppositional and resisting form of writing, one that maintains a utopian horizon in the pages of dystopian science fiction” (518). These critics were responding to the traditional genre triad’s inadequacy when applied to the complex utopian and dystopian production of the later decades of the twentieth century and to the neglect of dystopian literature within utopian studies up to that point.

The strength of these projects is that they stress that the politics of a text’s dominant society do not necessarily correspond to the politics of the text. This important insight is limited, however, when it is informed by an investment in the traditional genre categories, and when it thus leads to some reconfiguration or multiplication of those categories.<sup>2</sup> Projects such as Moylan’s can spotlight important lines of difference within and between genres, but I will argue that the attempt to contain all this complexity within an improved genre schema speaks to the decreasing applicability of such schemas to the speculative fiction of recent decades. Fewer and fewer texts that engage with the utopian idea are amenable to such classification. This is further complicated by the fact that some of the most compelling of these texts resist classification along other generic axes as well, such as the opposition between science fiction and fantasy. N. K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* Trilogy, for instance, which I discuss in Chapter One, explores processes of social transformation through a generic hybridity that draws on the conventions of utopia, anti-utopia, dystopia, fantasy, science fiction, climate fiction, and post-apocalyptic narrative.

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<sup>2</sup> The clearest example of this is Moylan’s penchant for appending the modifier “critical” to a traditional genre category in order to designate some more nuanced subset of texts within it.

All of this returns us to the basic problem of identifying what utopian literature is in a period in which traditional utopian narratives are rarely written. I argue that this problem is best dealt with by conceptualizing literary utopianism in discursive rather than generic terms. Previous critics have also approached utopianism as a discourse while deemphasizing the traditional genre categories outlined above. Fredric Jameson, for instance, beginning with his 1977 article “Of Islands and Trenches,” has defined utopian discourse as a type of praxis based on textual procedures that negate and neutralize the contradictions inhering in some “real world” social referent. Ruth Levitas, while not using the term “discourse,” has similarly defined utopianism as “the expression of the desire for a better way of living” (“Looking” 291). These definitions have the strength of defining utopianism in terms of process, seeking to elucidate the political functions of the utopian text rather than dwelling on the content of its representations. My approach to utopian discourse differs from these by placing a heightened emphasis on the specifically textual elements of the work, the ways in which utopian content is instantiated and organized within a codifiable discursive logic. I draw here on Michel Foucault’s definition of discourse, according to which “whenever, between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations), we will say, for the sake of convenience, that we are dealing with a *discursive formation*” (38). A discourse, or discursive formation, is a system of concepts, thematic concerns, representations, formal arrangements, and so on organized around a particular subject-matter.

Probably the most famous example of discourse analysis is Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1979). While the internal dynamics and political functions of Orientalist discourse are very

different from those of utopian discourse, such that any comparison between the two must be very limited, there are some basic homologies and discontinuities that I will point out here to clarify my approach. Said uses the term “Orientalism” to designate the body of knowledge generated out of the centuries-long process by which Western writers have textually constructed “the Orient.” Orientalism, however, is not reducible to any particular subset of texts. It is instead an internally coherent system of representations, images, associations, forms, and concepts that are woven into the Western cultural imagination. Orientalist discourse may thoroughly permeate one cultural production while making brief and intermittent forays into another, cutting across genre distinctions in the process. Said’s project, therefore, is not only applicable to texts that explicitly represent the Near and Middle East: it equips us to detect Orientalist discourse in its subtler manifestations, such that we begin to see it in unexpected places and thereby arrive at a more critical awareness of Western culture’s constitutive antagonisms, assumptions, and exclusions. My approach to utopian discourse is roughly analogous insofar as it involves articulating patterns that can be disengaged from the traditional genre of utopian narrative and traced through a much broader field of cultural production.

This comparison to Orientalist discourse is only helpful up to a point. One of the defining features of Orientalism is the conceptual content that it projects onto the Near and Middle East. Said writes, for instance, that “The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, ‘different’; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal’” (40). Said makes two interrelated claims here about representations of “the Oriental”; the first claim has to do with the conceptual content invested in these representations (irrationality, depravity, juvenility, and difference) and the second has to do with how these representations are formally coordinated with other

representations (the binary positioning of “the Oriental” relative to “the European”). This latter claim is about the formal relationships between figures in works of Orientalist discourse, the ways in which characters, images, and concepts are organized in service of a certain ideological function.

It is the second type of claim that is applicable to analysis of utopian discourse. Utopia—the object of utopian discourse—has no stable content. The term *utopia*, derived from Greek, compresses the dual meanings of “no place” and “good place” into a verbal and conceptual unity. As a good place that can never actually exist, *utopia* functions as an empty signifier, a vessel that we fill with our individual and collective dreams for social betterment that, by definition, will always be nonidentical with the utopian idea. Because of this, utopian discourse may construct utopia as egalitarian or hierarchical, anarchic or ordered, decentralized or centralized, feminist or patriarchal, pastoral or urban, technophobic or technophilic.<sup>3</sup> This indeterminacy is one of the conditions of utopian discourse, which is informed by the problematic nature of reifying the utopian idea through representation. Utopian discourse, therefore, is defined not by the nature of the content that it projects onto the utopian idea, but by the ways in which it instantiates and organizes that content.

Utopian content, for the purposes of this project, is whatever set of political theories, ethical or moral values, or principles of social organization an individual text affiliates with the utopian idea. This content, I argue, can be embodied and explored in the text’s storyworld, its narrative structures, and its aesthetic patterns. My readings are therefore just as concerned with

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<sup>3</sup> Some critics would disagree with this. Russell Jacoby argues, for instance, that for any political project to qualify as utopian, its aims and values must bear at least a vague resemblance to More’s *Utopia* (8-14).

patterns of figuration, narrative perspective, narrative time, and sentence-level stylistics as they are with represented social groups: cities, cults, families, tribes, syndicates, and so on. Each of my chapters elucidates a part of the discursive logic through which texts project content onto the utopian idea, instantiate that content in the text, and organize it within temporalities structured by deferral and anticipation. Chapters One and Two argue, respectively, that utopian discourse is *anticipatory* and *dialectical*. They track the patterns of deferral through which texts frame their utopian content as inchoate, unfinished, and in process, ultimately projecting its fulfillment into unrepresented futures beyond the closure of the narrative. These chapters are primarily concerned with the formal consequences of utopia's identity as "no place." Chapters Three and Four focus on utopia as "good place," tracking the processes through which texts offer affirmative embodiments and representations of utopian content and processes of social change. These chapters argue, respectively, that utopian discourse is *constructive* and *recursive*.

My chapters will frequently reference older texts, and I do think that the contemporary texts I focus on are part of a discursive genealogy that reaches back to More's *Utopia*. It is beyond the scope of this project, however, to suggest that these chapters collectively offer a transhistorical account of how utopian discourse has functioned in all times and places. This is an engagement with speculative fiction in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and its primary aim is to demonstrate the endurance of the utopian idea in recent speculative fictional texts that may seem generically distinct from the older tradition of utopian narrative.<sup>4</sup> This contributes to efforts within utopian studies to reframe the proliferation of bleak visions of

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<sup>4</sup> Utopian discourse can also appear in non-speculative fiction genres, but that is also beyond the scope of this project.

futurity in recent decades, allowing us to understand these texts as being, very often, vehicles for utopian hope. This period, according to the narrative of the dystopian turn, commenced in the 1980s with the onset of neoliberalism and capitalist globalization. While I want to deemphasize the genre distinctions this periodization is based on and stress the vibrant presence of utopian discourse in literature throughout this period, it is undeniable that the speculative fiction of these decades has a dystopian inclination and that this says important things about contemporary culture. My first two chapters, therefore, focus on utopian discourse in post-apocalyptic and dystopian narratives, respectively. In the last two chapters, I move on to texts that are more generically ambiguous and that engage in more ambitious projects of utopian representation.

### **Chapter Outline**

Chapter One argues that contemporary utopian discourse is *anticipatory*. In other words, anticipation is a discursive principle that conditions structures of narrative closure, representations of historical time, and the development of utopian content. Works containing utopian discourse always associate specific values or concepts with the possibility of social betterment, but they frame this content as inchoate and provisional. They then defer the fulfillment of this content into unrepresented futures, so that utopia is never actually represented in the text and subjected to the reification that such representation entails. Utopia therefore functions in the text as an absent presence, generating hope for social betterment that the text never codifies into a prescriptive blueprint.

This ethos of deferral can be traced back at least to the critical utopian narratives of the 1960s and 1970s, but my readings in this chapter focus on a specific subset of contemporary speculative fiction texts that are uniquely skeptical of utopian representation and uniquely

disposed to the patterns of deferral and avoidance described above. This is the post-apocalyptic narrative. Many of these narratives use the apocalyptic end of civilization as a device that enables characters to workshop alternative value systems and modes of social organization. The chapter culminates in readings of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and N. K. Jemisin's Broken Earth Trilogy (2014-7), both of which use apocalyptic catastrophes to explore the material and epistemological conditions that could enable the development of fundamentally different configurations of the social. Importantly, however, these narratives stop short of fulfilling those projects. Their ambiguous and open-ended structures of narrative closure generate hope while refusing to reify that hope into a prescriptive image of a better future.

Chapter Two argues that utopian discourse is *dialectical*, that its figuration of utopian possibility unfolds through the procession of oppositions within the text. My readings in this chapter focus on recent dystopian narratives to demonstrate that the utopian function of these texts often hinges on how they stage conceptual, social, and formal oppositions. Here, too, the contemporary texts continue a discursive genealogy that reaches back to previous periods of cultural production. A common trope in the modernist dystopian narratives, for instance, is the conflict between the dystopian regime and some oppositional entity contained within it. In some of these texts, such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), this opposition is static and closed, or it is undone through the defeat of the oppositional entity. In dystopias organized by utopian discourse, such as Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), the opposition is dialectical: it is dynamic and processual, and its movement through the text's conclusion signals that the text's dystopian storyworld is subject to historical change. The utopian dialectic stops short of resolving oppositions into a representation of a full-scale utopian society, but it does establish



trajectories within the text that move toward utopian horizons. The contemporary texts I focus on in this chapter are Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam Trilogy* (2003-13) and Chang-rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* (2014).

Dialectical structures facilitate the deferral of utopia's fulfillment in the text, but they are also devices for attributing content to the utopian idea. The dialectic demarcates a space of ideological contestation within the text, and this is the conceptual space within which the process of articulating utopia commences. Chapter Three builds on Chapter Two by considering utopian discourse's *constructive* tendencies, the various means through which texts instantiate positive political content and then thematize that content as utopian. The pre-twentieth century utopian narratives that sought earnestly to offer visions of a better society are early examples of this—what differentiates recent texts is their heightened awareness of the pitfalls of representation, their emphasis on process and incompleteness as fundamental qualities of the utopian idea, and their use of aesthetic and narrative forms as textual locations where utopian values can be abstracted from their imperfect social embodiments. I focus in this chapter on China Miéville's *Bas-Lag Trilogy* because of the scope, ambition, and variety of its procedures of utopian construction. These procedures, I argue, are characterized by an aesthetic of excess, a regime of compulsive description and creation that determines everything in the trilogy from its sentence-level stylistics to its metaphorical relations to its world-building.

Informing my project is the principle that utopia's status as "no place" renders its representation problematic. Jameson has theorized this condition in terms of epistemological constraint, according to which the author's embeddedness within a certain historical moment delimits her or his ability to imagine the radically new (*Archaeologies* 170-1). Awareness of this

condition informs the patterns of deferral that I discuss in my first two chapters. As Chapter Three indicates, however, utopian discourse only becomes legible as such through the projection of some kind of political content onto the utopian idea. In Chapter Four, I seek to reframe the text's position within ideology in more positive and affirmational terms than those offered by Jameson. The reliance of a utopian vision on extant political theories, ethical and moral value systems, and so on is what I describe as the *recursive* form of utopian discourse. Utopian discourse is recursive in at least two senses: 1) the author's compositional process necessarily involves a dialogue with the past that brings it to bear on the present, and 2) this condition is projected onto the utopian processes that unfold within the text, as characters engage in similar dialogues with the past in service of projects oriented toward social transformation.

My readings in this chapter focus on Ursula K. Le Guin's critical utopias, which, in the societies they imagine, their representations of political praxis and historical time, and their structures of narrative temporality, present an ongoing dialogue between the present and past as the route toward a better future. Le Guin also actively theorizes this principle in her non-fiction. Le Guin's commentaries on the relationship between utopian discourse and the historical past are both descriptive and prescriptive. She identifies a condition that all utopian authors are subject to—enclosure within and reliance on history—but she reframes this as a positive condition that authors should embrace. Turning to the past can be a countermeasure against the troublesome alignment between utopian discourse and other cultural logics that valorize progress, growth, expansion, and so on.

## CHAPTER ONE

### “EVERY SECOND OF TIME”: ANTICIPATION AND CATASTROPHE IN POST-APOCALYPTIC FICTION<sup>1</sup>

This chapter is about the patterns of deferral through which texts position their utopian content within open-ended, processual temporalities that project its fulfillment into an unrepresented future. Utopia thus manifests as a potential that is never fully activated within the text. This is what I describe as the *anticipatory* form of utopian discourse. This principle is informed by the ethos of unsayability that characterizes utopian thought. There are two major bases for this ethos: the first of these is transhistorical and has to do with the conceptual and linguistic origins of the utopian idea; the other is historically specific and rooted in the ideological conditions of the post-Cold War era. When Sir Thomas More coined the term *utopia*, he compressed the dual meanings of “no place” and “good place” into a conceptual unity. Utopia is the good place that is no place. This contradiction has generated a body of theory, sometimes called *negative utopianism*, that meditates on the paradoxical task of imagining utopian social organization when such imaginings by definition fail to embody their object.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Part of this chapter has been published in my article “Negative Utopianism and Catastrophe in Margaret Atwood’s MaddAddam Trilogy.” *Utopian Studies*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2019, pp. 486-504. Copyright © 2019. The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA. This article is used by permission of the Pennsylvania State University Press. Another part of this chapter has been published in my article “‘In what direction did lost men veer?’: Late Capitalism and Utopia in *The Road*.” *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2016, pp. 117-132. Copyright © 2016. The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA. This article is used by permission of the Pennsylvania State University Press.

<sup>2</sup> For a useful overview of the history of negative utopian thought, see Russell Jacoby’s chapter “An Anarchic Breeze” in his monograph *Picture Imperfect* (2005).

This is a condition of utopian cultural production in any historical moment, but I argue that speculative fiction texts since the end of the Cold War are marked by a heightened awareness of it. The association between utopianism and some of the most devastating political projects of the twentieth century, the post-Cold War consolidation of the globe under neoliberal capitalism, and the plurality of existential threats looming over the globalized world are a few of the possible reasons why traditional utopian narratives are rarely written today while dystopian and post-apocalyptic narratives have soared in popularity.<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, I focus on recent texts that partake of the cultural mood that Mark Fisher has described as “‘capitalist realism’: the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it” (2). According to this line of thought, the impossibility of imagining utopia is less a consequence of Sir Thomas More’s semantic choices than it is a symptom of the epistemological constraints placed around human thought and action by the ideologically homogeneous world in which we live. Utopia, in the texts discussed below, is not a social condition that can be known and embodied; it can only exist as a latent potentiality in the storyworld, animated by the barest minimum of utopian content and positioned by the text’s conclusion as a sign of hope.

I focus in this chapter on a specific subset of contemporary speculative fiction texts in which these dynamics are especially pronounced: post-apocalyptic narratives. Post-apocalyptic narratives are extremely popular today, seemingly validating Fredric Jameson’s frequently cited insistence that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism”

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<sup>3</sup> Ruth Levitas writes that “There is a strong anti-utopian strand in contemporary politics [...] The discourse of the Cold War, revived at the end of the 1980s, contained two implicit equations: ‘Utopia = Totalitarianism = Communism = Marxism = Socialism’ and ‘Communism = Totalitarianism = Fascism’” (“Looking” 297).

(*Archaeologies* 199). I argue that while these narratives imagine bleak futures of entropy, decline, and catastrophe, they also have a stubborn tendency to gesture toward their negation: the emancipated society. The texts that I discuss below frame the end of civilization as the precondition for a utopian futurity, situating utopian possibilities not in the potentials of reform or revolution, which are easily coopted by or contained within ideology, but in the indeterminate aftermath of catastrophe. While catastrophe facilitates within the text the epistemological break on which utopian construction is predicated, utopia cannot be visualized without its reabsorption into the quotidian and compromised realm of the author's imagination, hemmed in on all sides by ideology.<sup>4</sup> The texts below therefore array utopia's predicates by clearing conceptual and geographic space in the storyworld for workshopping new configurations of the social, but they only embody those alternatives tentatively and on small scales. Their conclusions then project the possibility of a better future into the space beyond the end of the text. Post-apocalyptic narratives undoubtedly serve critical and cautionary functions through their frightening extrapolations into the future, but a more holistic understanding of the range of political positions available to these texts needs to include the ways that they can venture beyond critique and gesture toward utopian horizons. I will begin this chapter with a discussion of negative utopian thought and the theoretical basis for the anticipatory form of utopian discourse. I will follow this discussion with readings of novels by Cormac McCarthy and N. K. Jemisin that model this logic.

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<sup>4</sup> Some criticism uses the terms positive/negative as markers of value (synonymous to good/bad), such that "negative utopia" means something approximating dystopia or anti-utopia, and "positive utopia" refers to a "good" utopia in the vein of More's founding narrative. In this chapter, the terms positive/negative designate approaches to representation rather than the desirability of a given society. These two alternate meanings of the term are, however, imbricated. As demonstrated below, "bad" utopias (dystopias or anti-utopias) are often the starting point for negative utopian exercises, serving as a social referent that the text negates by gesturing toward an absent alternative.

### Negative Utopianism

One of the starting points for my argument is the seemingly counterintuitive insight that dystopian and post-apocalyptic narratives often have utopian valences. This insight is not particularly controversial in utopian studies today; Tom Moylan influentially suggests in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* (2000) that dystopias are scattered along the generic continuum between the dialectically opposed cultural impulses of utopia and anti-utopia: some falling near one pole or the other, while “yet others negotiate a more strategically ambiguous position somewhere along the antinomic continuum” (147). Dystopian narratives, Moylan argues, can be just as hospitable to utopian hope as they are to anti-utopian pessimism. Attempting a statement of the range of political expression allowed by the genre’s conventions, Moylan writes

The dystopia that works with an open, epic strategy maintains a possibility for change or identifies a site for an alternative position in some enclave or other marker of difference, or in some way in its content or form manages to establish an estranged relationship with the historical situation that does not capitulate; whereas the anti-utopia-as-dystopia that recycles a closed, mythic strategy produces a social paradigm that remains static because no serious challenge or change is desired or seen as possible. (*Scraps* 157)

The distinction here between an “open, epic strategy” and a “closed, mythic strategy” refers to Darko Suvin’s work on narrative closure as a determinant of textual politics.<sup>5</sup> Suvin and Moylan, importantly, position utopian hope in textual structures that generate indeterminacy and irresolution. The openness of a narrative’s conclusion can indicate a potential for utopian social change, but that potential is not realized within the narrative. Lucy Sargisson similarly notes that while closure and perfection are qualities regularly attributed to utopianism, they are

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<sup>5</sup> For Suvin, the utopianism of a narrative is largely dependent on the success or defeat of the storyworld’s “novum,” a term he draws from Ernst Bloch. The novum is “a totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author’s and implied addressee’s norm of reality” (*Positions* 76).

conspicuously absent in most utopian narratives—especially those informed by feminist discourses, in which she finds an “absence or redundance of the concept of perfection” (2).

There is an important difference between this structural allowance of utopian hope, the fulfillment of which is perpetually deferred, and existent utopian social groups instantiated in a narrative’s storyworld—a distinction between “utopian enclaves of resistance *or* horizons of hope beyond the pages of the text” (Moylan 180-1, emphasis added). By identifying these as the primary utopia-facilitating devices in dystopian fiction, Moylan iterates a major point of contention in utopian criticism and theory—the value of positive descriptions of utopian content relative to textual structures and patterns that evoke utopia while avoiding its representation.

Utopian enclaves are common features of dystopian and post-apocalyptic texts.<sup>6</sup> Many narratives that depict frightening or degraded future worlds embed within them spaces that resist their logic and testify to the possibility for things to be different. Margaret Atwood uses the term *ustopia* to describe this genre convention; in an essay reflecting on the principles that inform her novels, she writes “*Ustopia* is a word I made up by combining utopia and dystopia—the imagined perfect society and its opposite—because, in my view, each contains a latent version of the other” (*In Other Worlds* 66). What is the nature of this latency, however? The examples of ustopia that Atwood subsequently offers, drawn from her own novels, are dystopian landscapes perforated by small utopian enclaves, or they are utopian communities established after the collapse of a dystopian order. Ustopia codifies the kinship between utopia and dystopia that

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<sup>6</sup> Jameson writes that in many post-apocalyptic texts “the end of the world may simply be the cover for a very different and more properly Utopian wish-fulfillment: as when (in John Wyndam’s [*sic*] novels, for example) the protagonist and a small band of other survivors of the catastrophe go on to found some smaller and more livable collectivity after the end of modernity and capitalism” (*Archaeologies* 199).

Moylan and others have noted; inhering in Atwood's definition, however, is a contradiction between positive and negative articulations of the utopian component of the utopian totality. It is odd to refer to an existent utopian community, however small and undeveloped, as "latent." Latency suggests potential that has not yet been activated, that remains dormant, waiting for realization—a presence that has yet to fill the space of its absence. This is the language of negative utopianism. All of the novels discussed in this chapter describe conflicts between better and worse modes of social organization, but the better alternatives are always framed as prefiguring some condition that waits, in Moylan's words, "beyond the pages of the text."

This tendency speaks to an acute awareness of the problems of utopian representation. The concern with utopia's unsayability is, again, arguably endemic to utopian discourse across historical periods, but it is also differentially articulated across those periods. Jameson has offered some of the most influential formulations of the difficulty of imagining utopia "in the windless closure of late capitalism" ("Of Islands" 2). Jameson's theories of utopian discourse, worked out over the course of the last few decades, are informed by the principle that no author can break out of the constraints thrown by history around human thought and action. He writes in *Archaeologies* that any representation of utopia will be hemmed in by the author's "inescapable situatedness: situatedness in class, race and gender, in nationality, in history—in short, in all kinds of determinations, which no biological individual can evade" (170). The vocation of utopian discourse is, therefore, not to imagine the new, but to negate and neutralize the contradictions of some pre-existing "real world" social referent. That the images generated from this process are inevitably derived from pre-existing material is a symptom of the author's containment within history, but the act of attempting unsuccessfully to imagine utopia can have



the salutary effect of raising the reader to a more critical awareness of that shared condition of containment.<sup>7</sup>

The novels discussed below are informed by a similar concern with the constraints hindering the representation of utopian social organization, and their response is to imagine a situation in which those constraints have been undone, liberating the human imagination to think beyond them. To theorize this pattern in recent post-apocalyptic fiction, it is useful to return to the work of one of Jameson's predecessors—Walter Benjamin. Russell Jacoby's genealogy of negative utopian thought traces it to "The prohibition against 'graven images' found in the Old Testament" (84), and he dwells on the work of a group of thinkers whom he refers to as "the Weimar utopian Jews—intellectuals such as Ernst Bloch, Gershom Scholem, T. W. Adorno, and Walter Benjamin" (92). Benjamin provides concepts that are useful in understanding how certain post-apocalyptic narratives today seek to navigate a milieu that is uniquely unaccommodating to utopian hope.

Treating Benjamin as a utopian thinker is somewhat counterintuitive given how insistently his work is oriented toward interpreting the past: his historical materialism calls for analyses of history that spotlight the utopian potentials lying dormant within it.<sup>8</sup> History is full of human subjects, events, and cultural productions that are incorporated into dominant historical

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<sup>7</sup> See *Archaeologies* (170-81). I provide a more detailed analysis of Jameson's theory in Chapter Two.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin's work is indebted to Ernst Bloch's eccentric hybridization of Marxist historical materialism and theological thought. Ruth Levitas's commentary on Bloch is also relatable to Benjamin's project: "Not only a broader field of literature, but also architecture and music may be important vehicles of utopia [...] All of it ventures beyond the present reality, and reaches forward to a transformed future" ("Educated Hope" 14). The elucidation of such utopian impulses does not leave one with any coherent vision of a better society, but rather with evidence of humanity's unconsciously ubiquitous longing for it.

narratives in ways that tend to elide or suppress their subversive elements.<sup>9</sup> Benjamin codifies this insight in his claim that “*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins” (“Theses” 255); according to this view, dominant histories omit, domesticate, or demonize all that is adversarial to the status quo in order to tell a story that confers legitimacy on that status quo. The historical materialist must liberate these moments from their instrumentalization by the powerful, identifying in the precarious edifice of the past those dissonant parts that, removed and held under the light of day, cause the whole to tremble.

Benjamin describes these dissonant elements of history as “dialectical images”: images in which complex social and symbolic relations converge, testifying to a relation between present and past that gives the lie to the dominant narrative. The image makes the chasm between narrative history and material history legible, and in this image the historical materialist “recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past” (“Theses” 263). In this “Messianic cessation of happening,” the dominant historical narrative goes silent for the beholding subject, enabling her or him to re-narrativize the historical moment in oppositional terms. This, importantly, is a *narrative* procedure in which a disruptive intervention in the unfolding of the dominant historical narrative unveils some kind of utopian content in the past that can be repurposed in the present.

Benjamin’s ideas about social change turn on the possibility that an analogous process can occur in the material world—that a “Messianic cessation of happening” can arrest a collective, rather than just individual, consciousness. This is what Benjamin anticipates when he

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<sup>9</sup> Susan Buck-Morss describes the basic premise underlying Benjamin’s thought when she states, simply, that “it matters who owns time” (“Historical Pragmatics” 76).

concludes his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940) with one of the most well-known expressions of negative utopian thought:

We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future [...] This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogeneous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter. (264)

Jameson writes that messianic time “is the notion of the non-announced, the turning of a corner in which an altogether different present happens, which was not foreseen” (*Valences* 176–77).

How does “an altogether different present” arrive? Spurning the deterministic tendencies of more orthodox forms of Marxism, Benjamin places utopian hopes in the possibility that the contingent and unpredictable movement of history will periodically cause ideology to falter.

In one of the notes compiled in *The Arcades Project* (c. 1940), Benjamin briefly defines three “basic historical concepts: Catastrophe—to have missed the opportunity. Critical moment—the status quo threatens to be preserved. Progress—the first revolutionary measure taken” (474). One of the theoretical undertakings of *The Arcades Project* is the redefinition of catastrophe. The dominant order will always characterize events that damage or destabilize its hegemony as catastrophic. Benjamin reverses this, claiming that “The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are ‘status quo’ is the catastrophe” (473). The catastrophe Benjamin refers to above, therefore, is not the moment when history stops and ideology falters. Rather, it is the moment when the window of opportunity forced open by that interruption slams shut, when ideology is reinscribed and the status quo is reconstituted.

These moments of interference carry radical possibilities. The story told by the powerful stalls midsentence, and the silence that ensues may continue unabated, or it may end as the old sentence resumes, or a new sentence may begin, patterned according to a new grammar and a

new aesthetic, spoken by new speakers. This Messianic cessation is difficult to conceptualize or describe, and what may follow from it if the destructive preservation of the status quo is averted is utterly unthinkable. Benjamin insists on the possibility of utopia—on the need for utopia—while avoiding the reification that would attend its naming. We must think utopia and not think utopia at the same time. The anticipatory form of utopian discourse is the narrative corollary to Benjamin's negative utopian logic. If traditional utopian narratives seek to imagine better societies only to arrive in disappointingly familiar locales, texts structured by anticipation orient themselves toward some unthinkable destination outside of ideology and then decline to represent it.

The texts below project utopian hope into the radical indeterminacy that follows from the end of civilization, when the remnants of humanity can begin anew without the conceptual and political constraints thrown around human thought and action by ideology. These texts contain utopian content, but this content is characterized by a wary minimalism, and it is written into anticipatory temporalities that defer its fulfillment. In the context of the globalized world, where geographical or conceptual spaces immune to commodification and cooptation seem nonexistent, these texts seek to maintain the possibility of utopia by declining to name it.

### **Anticipating Utopia in the Twenty-First Century: *The Road* and *The Broken Earth Trilogy***

My argument in this chapter works, again, with two genealogies of negative utopian thought—the transhistorical and the contemporary—that are imbricated in complicated ways. Politically ambivalent post-apocalyptic narratives are certainly not unique to the twenty-first century. Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s 1959 novel *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, for instance, occupies an

intensely ambiguous position on Moylan's continuum of utopian and anti-utopian persuasions.<sup>10</sup> The novel describes a human race seemingly condemned by its innate proclivity for self-destruction. The Cold War ended in a nuclear holocaust that killed off most of the world's population; the novel follows the monastic Albertian Order of Saint Leibowitz—named for a scientist who survived the apocalypse and founded the order—which maintains and safeguards a collection of documents, called the “Memorabilia,” saved from the fall of civilization. In a narrative that spans centuries, Miller describes the reconstruction of civilization and, along with it, the redevelopment of the nation-state and the reinvention of potentially destructive technologies. In the novel's closing section, one of Miller's monastic protagonists contemplates the probability that humanity is on the verge of annihilating itself once more:

When the world was in darkness and wretchedness, it could believe in perfection and yearn for it. But when the world became bright with reason and riches, it began to sense the narrowness of the needle's eye, and that rankled for a world no longer willing to believe or yearn. Well, they were going to destroy it again, were they—this garden Earth, civilized and knowing, to be torn apart again that Man might hope again in wretched darkness. (285)

Humanity does, indeed, “destroy it again,” but in the novel's closing lines, a group including a number of Leibowitzian monks blasts off from Earth in a starship, bound for a colony in the Alpha Centauri system, taking the Memorabilia with them. Humanity knowingly flings itself back into “wretched darkness,” but the novel's lack of closure preserves the possibility that next time, perhaps, humanity will avoid this fate, and maybe even construct a better world. The novel thus instantiates in its narrative structure both the epic and mythic narrative modes formulated

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<sup>10</sup> Suvin prefigures Moylan's implicit privileging of such ambiguous texts when he writes that “the deadly earnest blueprint and the totally closed horizons of ‘new maps of hell’ both lack aesthetic wisdom” (*Metamorphoses* 55). “New maps of hell” is a reference to Kingsley Amis's 1960 book of the same name, which deals with dystopian elements in postwar science fiction.

by Suvin; it authorizes readings that treat it as a pessimistic rumination on humanity's essential irrationality and the cycles of destruction to which this leads, but there are elements of the novel that complicate this anti-utopian reading. The abbey is a utopian enclave that in each historical period resists the logic of the surrounding society, and the escape of the starship at the end of the novel, with the scientific knowledge enshrined in the Memorabilia, may initiate a new phase in a closed cycle of "mythic" recurrence, or it may open the novel's conclusion toward a utopian horizon even as the literal horizon of the setting erupts into flames.

Miller's suspicion that humanity may lack the capacity for survival—a more fundamental concern than whether humanity lacks the capacity for utopia—reemerges powerfully in contemporary post-apocalyptic fiction. By attributing the fall of civilization to human irrationality and hubris rather than to the functioning of a particular social or economic system, *A Canticle for Liebowitz* can be read as a novel that is less concerned with political commentary than with meditating on human nature. Treating the apocalypse as a symptom of humanity's essential brutality has the effect of blunting any social critique in the text while also seeming to invalidate efforts to find utopian discourse within it. If the text frames humanity as evolutionarily predestined to consume itself, then how can it also contain hope for a better future?

Much of the critical conversation surrounding Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) turns around the question of its politics—particularly whether it should be read in political terms, at all. There are good reasons for this. *The Road* is not obviously political. The cause of its apocalyptic event is never identified in the text, its depictions of human relationality seem limited to the interpersonal level rather than the socio-political, and it does not offer much hope that civilization can be renewed. The ambiguity of the apocalyptic event is a particularly

controversial point. Steven Frye addresses the significance of this ambiguity when he notes the tendency among critics to read the event as either a nuclear disaster or a meteor strike: “A nuclear holocaust would be the result of human evil, and the meteor or asteroid the outcome of natural evil” (*Understanding* 169). The former possibility would invite a reading of the novel as a social critique, while the latter would suggest that it is better understood as a meditation on humanity’s existential insignificance.

Some critics have, rightly, pushed back against readings that assume that *The Road*’s apocalypse was caused by nuclear power. Dana Phillips writes that “the critical discussion of *The Road* has been skewed by an impression, possibly erroneous, that in it the end of the world is brought on, and not merely exacerbated by, human agency: specifically, by all-out nuclear warfare” (176). According to this view, the tendency to attribute the apocalypse to human agency may be a distortion of a narrative that is simply focused on other matters. John Cant accepts the nuclear disaster reading but qualifies it by noting that the world of the novel is not wholly consistent with the aftermath of such an event. He attributes these inconsistencies to McCarthy’s choice to privilege the novel’s allegorical structure over its scientific accuracy, claiming that “the ‘nuclear holocaust’ is a metaphorical explanation for the state of the world that McCarthy creates as his wider metaphor for the condition of man in the realization of his cosmic insignificance” (269). Cant focuses on the event’s formal role in the narrative, reading the novel as an expression of humanity’s “cosmic insignificance” and taking the nuclear disaster as a plot point that simply facilitates the text’s existential musings.

These readings liken the father and son to many other McCarthy protagonists: Job-like figures locked in hopeless struggles against a harsh and implacable universe. In McCarthy’s

Border Trilogy, it is possible to identify the antagonistic force opposing John Grady Cole and Billy Parham as the advance of modernity and the technologies and ideologies associated with it. In *The Road*, however, only traces of these processes remain, and the novel does not offer a clear reason for their passing, leaving open the possibility that the apocalypse had little or nothing to do with the destructive potentials of modern civilization. Any reading of the novel as social critique that starts with the apocalyptic event seems to be built on an unstable foundation.

How does one read a novel that seems to simultaneously demand and refuse a politicized reading? David Huebert's ecocritical reading of *The Road* registers some of the difficulties here by deemphasizing the apocalyptic catastrophe and locating the novel's political valences elsewhere; he writes that

in *The Road* McCarthy is more interested in how his characters respond to their journey of torments than what, precisely, causes the horrors they endure. Whether or not he intends to portray a post-climate-disaster world, in this novel McCarthy depicts the imminent and universal horror of a terrestrial climate irrevocably altered. (69)

Complicating the moral binaries that govern many readings of the novel, Huebert characterizes the father and son as "ecological cannibals" who represent the extractive and consumptive logic of capitalism, and he states that "the profusion of cannibals populating the text suggests that the cause of the disaster was ecological cannibalism" (74). Huebert's ambivalence is symptomatic of novel's complexity: he acknowledges that the catastrophe is not named before claiming that the text's political function is not cancelled or lessened by that omission, but, nonetheless, a reading of the catastrophe as an ecological disaster caused by human action becomes central to his argument.



This complexity in Huebert's reading is common in politicized readings of *The Road*. Christopher Pizzino's reading takes a less travelled route by arguing that *The Road* goes beyond social criticism to express utopian hope. He writes that in the world of the novel, "There is still the possibility that life can be lived on other terms than those of murder and cannibalism, and that this life can come not from remembrance of the past but from an ethical commitment to futurity" (360). Key to this reading is the boy's growing insistence on expanding the father's ethics beyond their immediate familial contexts and into broader communal contexts. Contrasting the father's orientation toward the past with the boy's orientation toward futurity, and situating the novel's utopianism in the latter, Pizzino deemphasizes the catastrophe in a manner similar to Huebert and other critics. His article includes only one oblique reference to it; he writes that "Whatever destroyed the world has had the effect of a nuclear winter" (362). Pizzino acknowledges the absence in passing but does not present it as essential to the novel's politics.

I argue that the novel's refusal to name or identify the catastrophe is an element of its negative utopian structure. It is the point where the narrative's patterns of omission are most obvious and striking. Huebert and Pizzino's readings, considered in relation to each other, track the novel's socially critical and socially constructive functions, respectively. Huebert, like many other critics, elucidates some of the novel's critical operations on global capitalism while Pizzino demonstrates that the novel goes beyond critique, and that in it "The possibility of human care defined in new (non-familial, non-individualistic) terms is asserted as a fundamental reality that makes utopian thinking and feeling possible" (367). *The Road* does, in fact, contain both of these movements. It makes available a reading in which the dynamics of global capitalism have led to

an apocalyptic collapse of human civilization, in the aftermath of which a few survivors combine in ways that suggest the possibility for new forms of social relationality, with the realization of those forms deferred beyond the narrative's conclusion. *The Road* conveys this narrative through understated procedures of symbolic compression, however, rather than through overt political commentary voiced by the narrator or a character.

Much of this process takes place on the level of imagery, as the father and son move through a landscape littered with the skeletal remains of twenty-first century America. *The Road* constantly meditates on historical time despite its refusal to offer any neat account of the events leading up to the narrative present, and these meditations are often organized around the father and son's interactions with the material remains of consumer culture. Benjaminian historical materialism provides useful terms for understanding the historicizing functions of material objects in *The Road*. Benjamin writes of his approach to historical narration in *The Arcades Project* "Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't say anything. Merely show [...] the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them" (460). Rather than offering a conventional narrative account of an historical epoch—for Benjamin, nineteenth century Paris—this method calls for an amassing of verbal and imagistic artifacts that enter into relation with each other to produce a vision of the epoch in non-linear terms that move away from the teleological structures of bourgeois history writing.

*The Road*, similarly, does not narrate the origins of its post-apocalyptic world; it instead represents this world as riddled with the material and ideological residues of global capitalism, which linger on as a microcosmic afterimage. The father and son navigate this wasteland by

means of a “tattered oilcompany roadmap [that] had once been taped together but now it was just sorted into leaves and numbered with crayons in the corner for their assembly” (42). Artifacts of modern society such as the map generally remain anonymous, seldom associated with a brand name or identifying label. The roadmap’s association with the fossil fuel industry has clear implications in the context of an ecologically-scoured landscape, but the term “oilcompany” remains nonspecific, allowing readers to scan over it uncritically when a pointed reference to BP or ExxonMobil would make this more difficult.<sup>11</sup> The father and son pass through “the ruins of a resort town,” but the resorts and the town remain nameless (29). They see billboards featuring “a pale palimpsest of advertisements for goods which no longer existed,” but the novel does not provide a description of these goods or any mention of the corporations that produced them (128). In an often-cited moment, the father reflects on “The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true [...] The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality” (89). The relics of consumer culture, once luminous repositories of monetary and cultural value whose names participated in the “sacred idiom” the father refers to, have relapsed into their material character as various configurations of matter, some of which are useful and some of which are not. Meditations such as these on the ontology of former commodities allow the novel to explore what remains when ideology fails—in this case, when the implosion of consumer capitalism evacuated its products of their monetary and cultural values.

Many critics have noted that one brand name does appear twice in *The Road*: Coca-Cola.

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<sup>11</sup> Huebert offers a similar reading of a scene in which the father remembers watching, as a child, while men doused snakes with gasoline and burned them: “it is significant that the men burn the snakes with gasoline, the single substance most recognizable as a catalyst of climate change” (74).

By the door were two softdrink machines that had been tilted over into the floor and opened with a prybar. Coins everywhere in the ash. [The father] sat and ran his hand around in the works of the gutted machines and in the second one it closed over a cold metal cylinder. He withdrew his hand slowly and sat looking at a Coca Cola. (23)

The man's first impression of the object relates to its materiality. Only when he looks at it is he able to associate the material object with its now irrelevant brand name. The coins scattered across the ashen floor are reminders of the decommodification of objects such as the Coca-Cola. The coins and the soft drink no longer exist in relation to each other as exchangeable signifiers of value, a point echoed later in the novel when the father finds a small round object in a field and cannot tell if it is a coin or a button. In this later scene, after identifying the object as a coin, the father "looked about at the gray country and the gray sky and he dropped the coin," discarding an object that has become worthless in the context of the desolated world (204). Brian Donnelly, in his analysis of the grocery store scene, suggests that McCarthy chooses to label the Coca-Cola can because of the brand's cultural resonance, noting that "the expanding corporate machine that is Coca-Cola has worked to forge an ideology for its customers, one that promotes the product and its consumers as part of a global family of happy, peaceful, refreshed drinkers" (71). This association seems superficial and hollow in the context of the novel's present, which demonstrates that even if capitalist production was not directly responsible for the demise of that happy, familial world, it was incapable of ensuring its reproduction.

The father and son enter a drugstore at one point where "The pharmacy was looted but the store itself was oddly intact. Expensive electronic equipment unmolested on the shelves [...] Sundries. Notions. What are these?" (183–84). The father's question "What are these?" foregrounds the ontological instability of the material world in a historical period in which the

relation of humans to that world has changed irrevocably. The function of passages like this is twofold: they describe a disoriented consciousness reeling from the radical disruption of normality, and they contribute to the novel's persistent accumulation of artifacts of consumer capitalism. This accumulation—a roadmap associated with the unsustainable and extractive practices of the fossil fuel industry, Coca-Cola cans that evoke globalization and neoliberal capitalism, desolate resorts and useless technologies that symbolize the decadence and waste of consumer culture—adds up to an indictment that is never stated but constantly implied.

Susan Kollin uses the grocery cart the father and son carry their belongings in to offer a neat expression of the processes of symbolic compression at work, here: “as a symbol of late-capitalist consumer culture [...] the cart is a reminder of the irrational exuberance that characterized the economy of contemporary America” (161). A tension arises from the grocery cart's insertion into a context of scarcity and hunger, given its association with abundance and its previous function as a tool that facilitated consumption. Kollin also notes that the image of the man and the boy dressed in ragged clothes and pushing their belongings down the road in the cart is also a stereotypical representation of urban homelessness, compressing in the cart symbolic evocations of the related phenomena of extreme excess and deprivation in contemporary American society (168).

The novel's sparse cast of characters also participate in this historicizing project. Much of the novel is devoted to representing the ontological instability that follows from catastrophe, but it also demonstrates the persistence of the “sacred idiom,” the structures of meaning enshrined as reality before the catastrophe and revealed as contingent in its aftermath. Jameson writes in *Archaeologies* that “the social totality is always unrepresentable, even for the most numerically

limited groups of people; but it can sometimes be mapped and allow a small-scale model to be constructed on which the fundamental tendencies and the lines of flight can more clearly be read” (14). Representing social totalities through compressed, small-scale models is important both to the novel’s socially critical and socially constructive functions. These models demonstrate the survival of global capitalism’s valorization of competition and consumption but also the possibility that society may be rejoined on more just and equitable terms.

“In what direction did lost men veer?” the father wonders midway through the novel (116). The social practices of the apocalypse’s disoriented survivors indicate that they tend to veer in one of two directions: some toward cannibalism, and some toward community. Like *A Canticle for Liebowitz*, *The Road* compels readers to question whether humanity is doomed by evolution or by ideology. McCarthy’s corpus is very preoccupied with atavistic constructions of human nature. Given this, it is reasonable—perhaps necessary—to read the cannibalism in the text as a representation of humanity’s reversion to its animal instincts in reaction to extremity. These characters may be read as submitting to the meaninglessness of the post-apocalyptic condition and suspending the outmoded moralities that in this world prove to be liabilities and obstacles to survival, such that the world is quickly “populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes” (181). The value system passed from father to son is rooted in the distinction between the animalistic “bad guys” who engage in murder and cannibalism and the Promethean “good guys” who carry the fire and seem imbued with spiritual energy. The son, as embodiment of love and goodness, appears to the father as a being “from some unimaginable future, glowing in that waste like a tabernacle” (273), set in stark opposition to the one cannibal that the pair encounter up close: “The reptilian calculations in those cold and shifting eyes. The

gray and rotting teeth. Claggy with human flesh” (75). The text supports a reading that frames the cannibals as embodiments of humanity’s animal instincts and the son as the bearer and representative of the spiritual energy symbolized by the fire.<sup>12</sup> Essentializing the characters in this way, however, by contrasting a brutal human nature with the spiritual principle embodied by the son, risks eliding other readings.

The cannibalism in the novel may be read not as a regression to some bestial state outside of ideology, but rather as a performance of ideology, a behavioral residue of consumer capitalism that foregrounds the persistence of its logic and the intensity of its hold over human consciousness. Brian Donnelly notes the connection between the pre- and post-apocalyptic forms of consumption described in the novel: “the supermarket epitomizes just the sort of self-consuming society McCarthy sends to its demise [...] Cannibalism as a metaphor for consumption is realized in this novel” (71). The image of the cannibal referenced above describes an intersection of animal instinct and instrumental rationality. Particularly disturbing—and also evocative of the nightmare creature of the novel’s opening—is the reference to the “reptilian calculations” taking place in the cannibal’s brain. Reasoning, a uniquely human operation, is presented as cold-blooded and inhuman in this passage, where it reduces humans to consumable objects and legitimizes cannibalism as an amoral means to an end.<sup>13</sup>

Clearly, these small pockets of human society are not capitalistic, but the cannibalistic present and the capitalistic past are related by a shared set of ethics and assumptions and,

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<sup>12</sup> See William Katerberg’s *Future West* for a useful distillation of the tendency among critics to view the dystopian narrative as overtly political while sometimes denigrating the post-apocalyptic narrative for apolitical tendencies.

<sup>13</sup> For more thorough accounts of cannibalism in the novel see Huebert’s “Eating and Mourning the Corpse of the World” and Jordan Dominy’s “Cannibalism, Consumerism, and Profanation.”

arguably, a relationship of historical causality. The cannibalism in the novel may be understood as continuous with economic mechanisms that facilitate the consumption of the labor of the disempowered for the material nourishment of the rich, that conceive of the human subject as an instrument of production and consumption, and that fetishize competition and self-interest. *The Road* projects capitalist ethics into a post-apocalyptic context of hunger and scarcity remote from the legitimizing ideological operations of the past, and it describes the brutal consequences of those ethics when carried to their logical extreme.

Not all of the apocalypse's survivors revert to cannibalism, though, and here it is worth remembering Benjamin's definition of catastrophe. *The Road* describes two catastrophes: the disruption of history and the way humanity responds to it, the dissolution of civilization and humanity's subsequent failure to replace the old order with more equitable and humane social relations. The naturalization of inequality is a basic feature of the post-apocalyptic world and of the society that produced it. The past has not been cleanly swept away, and those elements of pre-apocalyptic social relations resurrected by survivors of the catastrophe contribute to the future's hellish character. Any substantial break from the antagonistic modes of relationality institutionalized before the apocalypse and seemingly legitimized by the material conditions ensuing from it is, indeed, revolutionary.

The father/son relationship is the primary locus of utopian content in the text, though that content is characterized by the same wary minimalism that informs Theodor Adorno's dictum that "There is tenderness only in the coarsest demand: that no-one shall go hungry any more" (*Minima* 156). Adorno's claim is an acknowledgment that any but the most basic of propositions for social betterment will be mired in ideology. The father and son's value system, predicated on



a generalized altruism and compassion, a willingness to share and to help others rather than reverting to self-interest in the face of extremity, is presented in this spirit. The father's repeated insistence that he and the boy are "carrying the fire" describes an attempt to practice a mode of social relationality that is entirely antithetical to the horrifying alternatives in the text.

The past and present have been thoroughly demystified for the father by the novel's beginning, but he seeks to forestall this process in his son. The father's resistance entails an imbrication of the spiritual and the socio-political as he uses Christian terms and symbols to articulate a belief system defined by communal values. The father reflects early in the novel that "If [the boy] is not the word of God God never spoke," immediately associating the son with divinity (5), and he elsewhere describes the boy as a "Golden chalice, good to house a god," alluding to the Arthurian cycle and the grail legendarium (41, 75). He "evoke[s] the forms" (74), adopting Christian images and applying them to a new spiritual being in whom he sees the wasteland's only instance of goodness and salvific potential. These textual moments should not be construed as an attempt by the father to maintain traditional religious faith, nor should they be viewed as efforts to construct a wholly new system of belief. The father, reminiscent of Benjamin's historical materialist, instead selects fragments of the traditions of the past and remobilizes them, adapting them to the social and material realities of the post-apocalyptic world while maintaining the values of love and goodness that animated them.

These values cannot be practiced in isolation, however, and it is here, importantly, that the father and son diverge. The father is hesitant to interact with any other survivors, but the boy understands that their value system obligates them to relate in a certain way to those they encounter. Late in the novel, the father asks the boy if he would like to hear a story, and the boy

declines, saying “in the stories we’re always helping people and we dont help people” (268). This moment, Lydia Cooper notes, “suggests that [the boy] sees the necessity of a functional correlation between fictional ideas and real-world praxis” (232). The ideas of the father impel the boy into the risky acts of kindness and generosity that the father avoids. Paul Knox discusses the centrality of community to the stories and lessons the father imparts to the son: “surviving the wasteland requires re-creating the communities that the apocalypse has erased—even if those communities will exist only in the imagination” (97). The novel focuses on the relationship between the boy and his father, but their orientation toward the rest of the world—their conviction that they are among the “good guys”—presupposes the existence of other good guys and situates community at the heart of their value system. These values answer Thomas Schaub’s question regarding “the status of the ethical, as well as the reason for being, in the absence of the social” (158). The ethics of the father and son are predicated on their enduring faith in the possibility of the social, in the potential for society to be, if not renewed, at least rejoined communally and on a microcosmic scale. The father fails to practice these values while the son does not, and the son’s persistent aspiration toward community is, for Pizzino, the point of departure for the novel’s utopianism. He writes that the son represents “a new position different either from his father’s or from that of the cannibalistic ‘bad guys’” (363). Pizzino also points out an overlooked element of the narrative’s structure. When the son sees a boy in the ruins of a town and begs his father to go looking for him, the father refuses. The novel then concludes, after the father’s death, with another father making the opposite choice, reaching out to the son and inviting him to join his family. For Pizzino, this is confirmation that “the man had, from the first, been mistaken not to risk contact with others” (364).

This affirmation of an other-oriented praxis that privileges communal sharing and mutual aid imbues the novel's conclusion with a hopeful note rare in McCarthy's corpus, a faint utopian energy that is in tension with the overwhelming bleakness surrounding it. The closing image of brook trout with its nostalgia for a past "which could not be put back. Not be made right again" seemingly acknowledges that humanity's progress toward extinction is irreversible (287).

Suvin's mythic and epic temporal paradigms are both present, here. To understand the bittersweet tone of the conclusion, it is useful to turn again to Benjamin's theory of messianic time. Benjamin uses the figure of the Messiah not to indicate a hypothetical future savior, but rather to describe an historical potentiality. To live in messianic time is to lead an anticipatory existence, to see the future not as a homogeneous perpetuation of the status quo, but as a temporal field of radical indeterminacy, every second of which carries the possibility of unimaginable change. Catastrophes, for Benjamin, are caesuras in time, unforeseeable events that arrest the destructive trajectory of history and disrupt the logic of the status quo, making visible the utopian potentials constellated across the social and material worlds, such that the possibility for revolutionary change flashes in on the historical subject "with the sobriety of dawn" (*Arcades* 474).

The son has often been described as a Christ figure, as a redeemer imbued with divinity, but he is also a messianic figure in the Benjaminian sense. The son represents the historical potential for a just, equitable, and sustainable society, even if the ecological conditions under which such a society could feasibly be established have passed. The novel never clarifies this feasibility. Early in the novel, after the father makes a wooden flute for the son, the son pipes "A formless music for the age to come. Or perhaps the last music on earth called up from out of the

ashes of its ruin” (77). The father is torn, here, between understanding the son as a representative of “the age to come” or as a final, fragile embodiment of human decency. Later in the novel, however, the father seems to project the values embodied by the son beyond the end of the narrative when he describes the son as “looking back at him from some unimaginable future, glowing in that waste like a tabernacle” (273). The son and the radical consciousness that he carries are thus associated with the “unimaginable future” beyond the conclusion of the narrative. This consciousness, importantly, diverges from both the severely limited altruism of the father and the instrumental logic of the cannibals: it is a consciousness in which the self/other dialectic is resolved through an utter surrendering of self-interest, such that each becomes “the other’s world entire” (6).

There is little substantive content here to extrapolate into a detailed model of utopian social organization. Negative utopianism is, again, a set of textual practices oriented toward an imaginative horizon beyond or outside of ideology. This horizon can, by definition, never be reached, because the moment utopia is codified in positive terms it is reabsorbed within ideology and ceases to be utopia—the good place that is no place. The negative utopian text must evoke the concept of utopia without instantiating it in its fictional world; utopia must be present and absent all at once—present, in fact, in the very space of its absence. It is in this context that the novel’s refusal to name or identify the apocalyptic event becomes meaningful. Critics such as Dana Phillips are correct to point out the uncritical assumptions of readers who take for granted that the apocalyptic event was caused by human action. They err, however, in casting this ambiguity in the text as evidence of the novel’s supposed apoliticism. *The Road*’s withholding of the kind of exposition so common in dystopian and post-apocalyptic texts, in which civilization’s

decline is narrated in the service of one political position or another, is in fact essential to its negative utopian structure, and to the historicizing project that unfolds on every page of the novel.

*The Road* demands that its readers perform what Ursula K. Le Guin once called an “Archaeology of the Future” (*Always* 3) It asks us to sort through the Benjaminian “rags and refuse” of postmodernity where they lie in charred constellations of condemnation and hope, silently speaking, in the closing words of another McCarthy novel, of “the world to come” (*All* 310). Historical narratives can write with or against the ideological grain, but they cannot escape the range of political positions available in their historical moment. An account of the apocalypse attributing it to nuclear warfare or some form of ecological disaster caused by human irrationality and hubris would domesticate and familiarize the novel’s politics by bringing them within that range of positions. The apocalypse remains unnamed, however, and the novel contains no overt political commentary.

*The Road* allows readers to find within it a narrative of social decay, catastrophe, and utopian possibility. McCarthy’s minimalistic aesthetic compresses this narrative into the relations among symbolically freighted objects and characters, however, such that the novel’s socially critical and constructive functions are always only implied, made available to readers but never insisted upon. The apocalypse is not named, but it is alluded to and described. The novel avoids historical narration, but its material world demands to be historicized. Its characters do not discuss politics, but their words and actions are saturated by ideology, and the father/son relationship instantiates utopian values that are never realized on any larger scale. The procedures of social critique and positive utopian construction that characterize much post-

apocalyptic fiction are absent, here, but *The Road* constantly traces the outline of that absence that, according to the logic of negative utopianism, cannot be filled without sacrificing its subversive power.

The conspicuous absences in *The Road* simultaneously invite and frustrate politicized readings. The sheer quantity of criticism dealing with the insoluble question of the text's politics is the mark of its success as a negative utopian exercise, but it also speaks to one of the pitfalls of negative utopian thought and the anticipatory form of utopian discourse: the avoidance of representation risks rendering the text's politics obscure or even illegible. If utopian discourse defers any concrete vision of a better society into an unknowable future, how useful can it be to marginalized people struggling to better their conditions of existence? What is lost when we cede the ability to imagine a radically better society? And, at what point does such a text cease to be utopian?

*Annihilation* (2014), the first novel of Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach Trilogy, usefully dramatizes what is at stake in how we answer these questions. *Annihilation* describes an ever-expanding region called Area X where humans are transformed, by forces eluding scientific explanation, into plants and animals. The protagonist, a biologist, frequently reflects on the inadequacy of scientific and ethical categories for accounting for Area X, which is assimilating the known world into a reality wholly outside of human comprehension. She notes of this process near the end of the novel "I can no longer say with conviction that this is a bad thing. Not when looking at the pristine nature of Area X and then the world beyond, which we have altered so much" (192). The novel thus explores a process of ecological and, ultimately, social transformation that is entirely incomprehensible to humans and that the protagonist describes as

being positive. The final pages of the novel offer no clarity or closure. *Annihilation*, therefore, has some thematic and structural similarities to *The Road* and other post-apocalyptic works of utopian discourse, but it also spotlights some of the limits of these texts. Commenting on Jameson's insistence that utopia is an unrepresentable alterity, Ruth Levitas writes that "not only society, but our very selves, must be reconstituted in utopia [...] Utopia might actually entail (imagining) a self so radically transformed as to be, rather, an annihilation" ("Looking" 303). If the radically different ontologies that utopia is predicated on lead to perpetual deferrals of representation and, in some texts, to representations of society and humanity that are barely recognizable as such, then how should we appraise these texts' politics?

I will conclude this chapter with a reading of a post-apocalyptic narrative that balances these strictures on utopian representation with its embrace of overt political commitment. N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth Trilogy* (2015-7), diverges from the usual conventions of post-apocalyptic narrative in several ways. The protagonist is a woman of color who spends much of her life as a slave, and the narration of the apocalypse and the social conditions that preceded and succeeded it is focalized through her perspective. The apocalyptic event itself is intentionally caused by another subaltern subject for the purpose of destroying an unjust civilization so that a just one may be built on its ruins. *The Road* represents, albeit ambiguously, a standard social critique conveyed by post-apocalyptic narratives, and the *Broken Earth Trilogy* replicates that critique with crucial differences. In Jemisin's trilogy, the pre-apocalyptic civilization is destroyed only indirectly by its own irrationality and cruelty—the actual destruction is carried out by the victims of that irrationality and cruelty.

The Broken Earth Trilogy is set in a fantasy world on a geologically unstable continent called the Stillness. History in this world is a succession of civilizations that rise only to be destroyed by natural disasters. The current civilization is sustained through the enslavement of orogenes: humans with an ambiguous magical connection to the earth that allows them to manipulate seismic processes. The narrative is primarily focalized through an orogene named, at various times, Damaya, Syenite, and Essun, whose life story testifies to the injustices of the current civilization. There are complicated procedures of transposition at work in Jemisin's world-building. While the small, agrarian towns and villages scattered across the Stillness are characterized by the pseudo-medieval social relations, technologies, and modes of production familiar from other fantasy world-building projects, elsewhere in the Stillness readers encounter advanced technologies and developed urban spaces that prevent any one-to-one correlation between the Stillness and some "real world" time and/or place. This means that historicizing the trilogy in terms of the contemporary moment is a complicated endeavor; this is not a straightforward transposition of today's geopolitics onto an imagined world.

There are important homologies, however. The primary one for the purposes of this chapter has to do with the closure of geographical and conceptual space. The Stillness is a massive continent unified under the Yumenescene empire, which enslaves orogenes and uses them to quell the continent's seismic volatility. In short, this is a homogeneous world order that depends upon the exploitation of subaltern groups, that is impermeable to change, and that is violently hostile toward resistance. This condition is dramatized when Syenite and her mentor, Alabaster, escape to an island off the coast of the Stillness, where a small egalitarian society exists unbeknownst to the authorities. This enclave, one of the few instances of utopian content



in the trilogy, is eventually found and destroyed. Syenite escapes and goes into hiding, adopting the name Essun. Alabaster also escapes, and, years later, he uses his power to destroy the Stillness's capital city, opening a massive rift across the continent that ensures that most of humanity will die off.

Jemisin describes an unjust civilization sustained by exploited labor and threatened by ecological disaster, so inhospitable to alternative modes of social organization that the only way to create positive change is by destroying it and starting anew. The thematic contours here are similar to those of other socially critical post-apocalyptic narratives, but Jemisin makes this all far more explicit than does McCarthy. The trilogy ends with Essun and her daughter, Nassun, tapping into a repository of magical energy that allows them to seal the fissure across the Stillness and ensure that humanity will survive the apocalypse and be able to rebuild. The final lines of the trilogy gesture toward the better future that awaits humanity. Essun tells the trilogy's homodiegetic narrator, Hoa,

“I want the world to be better”  
 [...]
 “It might take some time.”  
 “I don't think I'm very patient.” But you take my hand.  
 Don't be patient. Don't ever be. This is the way a new world begins.  
 “Neither am I,” I say. “So let's get to it.” (*The Stone* 398)

Jemisin has said of this conclusion, “This is a world that for millennia has lived with oppression and is built upon oppression. It's been burned down. What will happen now, well, I don't know. There's hope” (Hurley 474). This narrative closure is predicated on an openness and uncertainty that could lead to any number of possible futures, including one characterized by radical social betterment. Jemisin thus situates the trilogy within the tradition of post-apocalyptic narratives

that have a utopian horizon, but she does so critically, intervening in this tradition rather than simply participating in it.<sup>14</sup>

Part of what makes the trilogy more optimistic than many similar works is the role that Jemisin attributes to choice and agency in her depictions of social structures and revolutionary efforts to transform them. Condemning the injustices that organize life in the Stillness, Alabaster writes

*Some things are so broken that they can't be fixed. You have to finish them off, sweep away the rubble, and start over [...] They could've chosen a different kind of equality. We could've all been safe and comfortable together, surviving together, but they didn't want that. Now nobody gets to be safe. (The Stone 299-300)*

By attributing social relations in the pre-apocalyptic civilization to choices made by agential humans, Jemisin diverges from the many texts that map dystopia as a vast, impersonal, bureaucratic entity, such as Franz Kafka's *The Trial* (1925), George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), and Terry Gilliam's film *Brazil* (1985). Viewed positively, the latter approach to representing dystopia affords opportunities for examining the ways that material, institutional, and ideological structures can constrain human thought and behavior, leading average people to participate in unjust systems for which no one is entirely responsible. Viewed critically, such representations risk deemphasizing the role that individual people with agency have in propagating and maintaining such systems. In the Broken Earth Trilogy, dystopia is the result of human choices rather than impersonal processes of technological development or bureaucratic ossification.

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<sup>14</sup> In the same interview, Jemisin notes the tendency of post-apocalyptic narratives to follow white male protagonists who, with the fall of civilization, are able to live out an array of "power fantasies" (469).

This heightened respect for human agency also grants more space to transformative politics. The Stillness's dystopia is destroyed by the resistance of a former slave, and the blighted continent is then restored by another former slave and her daughter. The trilogy, again, ends with Essun and Hoa planning to go forth into the world healing from catastrophe and change it for the better. The trilogy's conclusion thus states a commitment to utopian change while also implicitly reasserting the unknowability of such change.

Jemisin's project is an important counterweight to others discussed here because it demonstrates that the anticipatory form of utopian discourse, and the wariness toward representation that generally attends it, can coexist with optimistic affirmation of revolutionary politics. The trilogy is also important because by making the linkage between apocalypse and utopianism explicit, it is able to confront the obvious ethical problems with this linkage. What does it mean to cast utopian social change as desirable if the mechanism needed to facilitate such change is an apocalyptic end to civilization, with the immeasurable human suffering that would entail? Jemisin acknowledges the implications of this, suggesting that "sometimes a revolution is necessary; sometimes you do have to burn it all down. I want to depict realistically what that'd be like. If you burn it all down, a whole lot of people get hurt" (Hurley 473). In the trilogy and her commentary on it, Jemisin declines either to endorse or condemn Alabaster's act and the mass suffering it causes. She does, however, stress the lack of alternatives, such that the question of a humane and practicable route to radical social betterment remains unresolved.

## CHAPTER TWO

### UTOPIAN DIALECTICS IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S MADDADDAM TRILOGY AND CHANG-RAE LEE'S *ON SUCH A FULL SEA*<sup>1</sup>

After the text establishes ground for utopian hope, through some attribution of content to the utopian idea, it projects that hope into a future beyond the text's conclusion. Darko Suvin writes, accordingly, that "Utopianism [...] establishes orientations: vectors of desire and need toward radically better horizons" (187); this language emphasizes the principle that utopian discourse is a process, one organized around textual trajectories and lines of flight that never terminate. This chapter theorizes what I term the *dialectical* form of utopian discourse. This organizing principle, which I will refer to throughout this chapter as the utopian dialectic, establishes trajectories of hope, "vectors of desire and need," through intratextual oppositions between concepts, represented communities, and/or aesthetic and narrative forms.

Dialectical structures are uniquely suited to negotiating utopia's contradictory identity as "good place" and "no place" due to these structures' capacity 1) to specify utopian content by localizing the utopian idea to the terms of specific oppositions, while 2) deferring that content's reification through the dialectic's processual nature, according to which any resolution will itself be riddled with contradictions that reenact the dialectical process. This chapter begins with a discussion of Theodor Adorno and Fredric Jameson's dialectical approaches to literary

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<sup>1</sup> Part of this chapter has been published in my article "Negative Utopianism and Catastrophe in Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam Trilogy." *Utopian Studies*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2019, pp. 486-504. Copyright © 2019. The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA. This article is used by permission of the Pennsylvania State University Press.

utopianism; I then move on to analyze the utopian dialectics of a series of modern and contemporary dystopian texts, arguing that the politics of these texts are often determined by their staging of conceptual, social, and formal contradictions. Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam Trilogy (2003-13) and Chang-rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* (2014) are my primary examples. The utopian dialectics of the MaddAddam Trilogy unfold primarily within the social and political oppositions structuring its storyworld; in *On Such a Full Sea*, however, this process is articulated through the procession of narrative and aesthetic oppositions. Collectively, these examples demonstrate that dialectical structures can mediate the text's engagement with the utopian idea on the levels of represented social content and formal composition

### **Negative Dialectics and Utopian Discourse**

Dialectical structures have organized the expression of utopian hope in literature since the bifurcated structure of Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516). The classical utopian narrative followed More's precedent by staging encounters between travelers from the author's milieu and representatives of the utopian society. The ensuing educative process is more didactic than it is dialectical, but the opposition between a "real-world" setting and its utopian negation, with the latter acting back upon the former to catalyze change, follows the rudimentary dialectical movement of *thesis-antithesis-synthesis* often attributed, albeit controversially, to Hegel.<sup>2</sup> The dialectic is far from being a singular method, however; even the formulation "the dialectic" is objectionable insofar as the definite article reifies a variegated intellectual tradition into unitary coherence. My identification of dialectical thought as a method also runs against more essentialist iterations of this tradition, such as Soviet dialectical materialism, which once

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<sup>2</sup> Jameson's *Valences of the Dialectic* (2009) provides a reading of Hegel's dialectic and its reception (57).

hypostatized the dialectic as a law of nature (Balibar 3). There is considerable conceptual distance between dialectical materialism and the Western Marxisms of the Frankfurt School, Jameson, and others who frame dialectical thought as a hermeneutic, just as there is considerable aesthetic distance between the classical utopias and the more narratively complex dystopian novels discussed below.

Any treatment of utopian dialectics must therefore be capacious enough to account for the multiple ways that dialectical structures can organize texts while also being limited enough for the category to have some coherence. An example from Chapter One illustrates this difficulty. Utopian dialectics are discernible in *The Road* in at least three imbricated oppositions. The father's nostalgia for the pre-apocalyptic world stages 1) an opposition between the past and the present. The novel gradually collapses this opposition by revealing the continuities between the two terms, however—the homologues between pre-apocalyptic consumer capitalism and post-apocalyptic cannibalism. The past is thus disqualified as the novel's primary locus of utopian content, and this structural role passes to the father/son relationship. This sets the terms for 2) the opposition between consumer capitalism/cannibalism and the praxis of the father and son, with the latter standing as the antithesis of the former. No sooner does this praxis emerge as a locus of utopian content, however, than it becomes riven with contradictions that move the dialectic to yet another register: 3) the internal structure of the father/son relationship, itself, as the father's pragmatism and the son's idealism diverge into conflicting yet mutually-sustaining visions of an ethical post-apocalyptic social relationality. The son's idealism is, of course, what emerges as the privileged term and what invests the ambiguous conclusion with a faint utopian hope, but this hope is marked by undecidability. What these oppositions share is that they stage

conflicts between social forms and thereby demarcate conceptual spaces within which utopia is to be thought. While the collective movement of these oppositions generates a nebulous collection of utopian values and practices, however (communal sharing, mutual aid, and so on), these never materialize into any coherent vision of the storyworld's "unimaginable future" (273).

My formulation of this process builds on and revises a theoretical genealogy. Marx famously argued that history moves dialectically, that social contradictions—preeminently the contradiction of capital and labor, wherein the capitalist imperative to generate the former necessitates the exploitation of the latter—intensify until they can no longer be sustained by the prevailing social order, necessitating revolutionary change.<sup>3</sup> It is a longstanding penchant of Marxist hermeneutics to find traces of this process sedimented in cultural productions, to detect within them formal contradictions that are symptomatic of economic contradictions in the author's context. This analytic procedure is problematic for its unidirectionality, which reinscribes the "vulgar Marxist" base/superstructure relationship in which the former determines the latter, but also for its overriding preoccupation with contradiction. What if such readings impose an interpretive straitjacket on texts by organizing their plurality and fragmentation into a series of oppositions so that the critic can trace them back to some generative contradiction in the prevailing mode of production?<sup>4</sup> This is a real danger, but utopia is, again, a fundamentally dialectical concept due to its verbal compression of the contradictory meanings of "good place"

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<sup>3</sup> I prefer the term "opposition" to "contradiction" because the former is more flexible and less freighted with theoretical associations, but when discussing the work of theorists who use "contradiction" I mirror their language.

<sup>4</sup> Adorno takes up this perspective in *Negative Dialectics* when he discusses the possibility "that whatever happens to come into the dialectical mill will be reduced to the merely logical form of contradiction, and that [...] the full diversity of the non-contradictory, of that which is simply differentiated, will be ignored" (*Negative* 57). Adorno dismisses this danger by arguing that dialectical thought is not an imposition but rather the adaptation of consciousness to a fragmented and alienated social reality.

and “no place” into a conceptual unity. The dialectical structure of utopian discourse is therefore an example of what Jameson has described as a “local dialectic [...] a local law of this or that corner of the universe, a set of regularities observable here or there, within a cosmos which may well not be dialectical at all” (*Valences* 16). Dialectical relationships have always permeated literary expressions of the utopian idea, and they generally serve as a means of negotiating the good place/no place contradiction on which the genre is founded.<sup>5</sup>

My understanding of this formal tendency is informed by the work of Adorno and Jameson, who both identify dialectical structures as essential to the functioning of utopian discourse, though they formulate the role of these structures in different ways. For Adorno, contradictions statically bear witness to the absence of their own resolution (utopia). For Jameson, utopianism is a function of contradictions that generate utopian content through a procedure that he describes as negation and neutralization. Adorno’s theory is an important antecedent of Jameson’s; in Adornian negative dialectics, contradictions perform their utopian function by spotlighting the ontological gulf between ideological categories of thought and the objects or social phenomena to which they claim to apply. The mere existence of the contradiction implies a not-yet-existent state in which that gulf is bridged. “Regarding the concrete utopian possibility,” Adorno writes, “dialectics is the ontology of the wrong state of things” (*Negative* 61-2). In the right state of things—an unalienated and uncontradictory existence—dialectical thought would be unnecessary, and perhaps even impossible. We do not

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<sup>5</sup> The contradictions of More’s *Utopia* are many: the narrative’s bifurcated structure, which facilitates its presentation of Utopia as England’s negation; the authority of Raphael Hythloday’s voice even as his name suggests that he is a liar; the tonally earnest promotion of Utopia as a better society and the satirical jabs at this position; the provenance of Utopia’s nonviolence and egalitarianism in imperial violence and dispossession: the list goes on. This is why the perennial question about *Utopia*’s sincerity—whether it is a genuine blueprint for a better society or a satire—misses the point: it is both. *Utopia* stages the good place/no place contradiction by imagining a good place riven by internal contradictions that reveal that radical social change still lies beyond human imagining.



live in utopia, however, and the contradictions of the “wrong state of things” necessarily impress themselves on our cultural productions. Adorno writes of this process that “The unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form” (*Aesthetic 7*). The text, according to this formula, should refrain from resolving the contradictions inherited from its social context.<sup>6</sup> It should instead allow the contradictions to crystallize formally such that they imply their unrepresentable resolution: “A successful work [...] is not one which resolves objective contradictions in a spurious harmony, but one which expresses the idea of harmony negatively by embodying the contradictions, pure and uncompromised, in its inner-most structure” (“Cultural Criticism” 208). What does it look like for a text’s form to embody contradictions without resolving them?

Adrienne Rich’s much-anthologized poem “Diving into the Wreck” (1973) exemplifies the procedure that Adorno attributes to “successful” artworks. The poem features a singular communal narrator who “embodies the contradictions” of dominant models of gender and subjectivity while demonstrating the ideological constraints preventing their resolution. The speaker oscillates between grammatically contradictory pronouns—male and female, singular and plural—to situate the exploration of the wreck, as an extended metaphor for feminist revisions of patriarchal historical narratives, within a communal reauthoring of history. The speaker’s expression of a more complex gender identity than that afforded by the binary categories of male/female is enacted through alternation between male and female images and pronouns that inscribe both poles of the opposition in the same subject:

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<sup>6</sup> Resolving contradictions is, rather, the work of ideology: the neoliberal capitalist claim that individual greed and self-interest paradoxically serve the common good is an example of how ideology represents the relationship of individual and collective under capitalism in non-antagonistic terms—first naturalizing greed and self-interest as essential qualities of human nature and then elevating these qualities as engines for collective betterment.

And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair  
 streams black, the merman in his armored body  
 [...]
   
 I am she: I am he (72-3, 77)

The conspicuous lack of a gender-neutral, singular third-person pronoun in English leads the speaker to use the language of the traditional gender binary to express an identity that subverts it and for which English lacks an adequate vocabulary.<sup>7</sup> This interrogation of English pronouns and their limits crescendos into grammatical incoherence as the speaker strains to articulate a subjectivity that in addition to being both male and female is also both singular and plural:

We are, I am, you are  
 by cowardice or courage  
 the one who find our way  
 back to this scene  
 carrying a knife, a camera  
 a book of myths  
 in which  
 our names do not appear. (87-94)

The “We,” “I,” and “you” of the first line comprise “the one who find our way” back to the wreck, carrying the “book of myths” that is the patriarchal construction of history. By compressing the “We,” “I,” and “you” into the singularity of “the one” and then re-pluralizing this oneness through the possessive pronoun “our,” the speaker initiates a grammatical crisis that reveals the ideologico-linguistic structures that will not allow the dialectic of individual/collective to resolve into a new mode of subjectivity. The poem’s formal contradictions are thus symptoms of the “wrong state of things” that the poem reveals without presuming to rectify. As Rich writes elsewhere, “poetry / isn’t revolution but a way of knowing / why it must come” (“Dreamwood” 16-18).

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<sup>7</sup> I exclude the word “it” due to its dehumanizing connotations.

“Diving into the Wreck” exemplifies Adorno’s injunction to allow social contradictions to crystallize unresolved in the work’s formal structure such that they evoke, without naming or specifying, their resolution. Adorno describes this unknowable resolution as “harmony”—a condition that cannot be represented, only evoked as an “idea” through the embodiment of its failure (“Cultural Criticism” 208). The intense negativity of Adorno’s dialectic is both what makes it utopian and what limits its utopianism. Its primary political function is critique; as a static indictment of a contradictory social reality, it cannot generate any positive utopian content. This avoidance of reification is also an avoidance of any constructive prescription for social betterment. This is an important point of departure for Jameson’s theory of utopian discourse: Jameson tracks the genesis of representations that occupy the position of harmony that Adorno leaves vacant, utopian content generated through negative dialectics that ultimately reify into a positivity that is then subject to further acts of negation. The two theorists therefore locate utopianism in related but distinct textual functions of contradiction. For Jameson, utopian texts materialize within their storyworlds the negativity that Adorno argues cannot be embodied without dispersing its subversive potential.

Jameson tracks the ways that texts generate utopian content through processes of negation and neutralization rather than dialectical synthesis and combination. Resolution of social contradictions through dialectical synthesis produces, for Jameson, a “bad Utopianism” that “in fact seeks to have it both ways, and to define itself by exploiting everything supposedly positive about both poles of the opposition” (*Archaeologies* 179). The Greimasian semiotic rectangle provides Jameson with the conceptual framework for a more nuanced critical operation. If “bad Utopianism” resolves social contradictions, then good utopianism negates and

neutralizes them. If we begin, for instance, with the contradiction between *capitalism* and *socialism*, resolution through dialectical synthesis would generate a third term that borrows from both poles of the initial opposition, yielding something like *social democracy*. Negating the initial opposition, rather than synthesizing it, produces a new opposition between negative terms. The opposition between the positive terms *capitalism* and *socialism* thus becomes an opposition between the negative terms *not capitalism* and *not socialism*. It is the encounter of these negative terms that produces the neutral term: some preconceptual entity that resists codification and that Jameson identifies as a dynamic and tension-ridden space of utopian potential. If synthesis produces a “both/and,” neutralization produces a “neither/nor”: “Not both at once, but neither one nor the other, without any third possibility in sight” (*Archaeologies* 180). Of course, once the neutral term is named and codified, it falls comfortably back within the realm of ideology. The text’s subversive trajectory thus ossifies into some kind of utopian content that will be riven by contradictions of its own, such that it, too, must be subjected to procedures of negation and neutralization.

Adorno and Jameson both describe ways that texts can stage contradictions such that those contradictions perform a utopian function, but both theories are problematic insofar as they are predicated on rigid and totalizing claims about the role of contradiction in utopian discourse. These are both examples of what Jameson has described as “local dialectics,” formulated with reference to specific bodies of cultural production. Adorno was interested in avant-garde aesthetics while criticizing art containing overt political commitment, and this emphasis immediately excludes the vast majority of recognizably utopian or dystopian literature as well as any substantive focus on represented content. Jameson writes primarily about the utopian

narrative, proper, or about works of science fiction in which he identifies utopian operations, and he is relatively less interested in other speculative fiction genres such as dystopian narrative and fantasy.<sup>8</sup>

My formulation of utopian dialectics is more expansive in two ways. It cuts across genre distinctions and textual levels to define utopian discourse based on textual patterns and functions rather than on the nature of the dominant represented society. Any account of utopian discourse cannot limit itself to a blinkered focus on aesthetics or on represented content, as these textual levels often work in tandem to express utopian hope. It also demonstrates that while the deferral of utopian representation is an essential function of dialectical structures, this function is dependent on an initial moment of positivity in which the utopian process is situated within the terms of a social, conceptual, or formal opposition. This positivity is necessary to establish utopia as a possibility within the storyworld. It is by staking out a field of ideological contestation—freedom versus happiness, individual versus collective, capitalism versus socialism—that the text demarcates the space within which the articulation of utopian content commences.

### **Totalitarianism and Resistance in the Modernist Dystopias**

Baccolini, Moylan, and others have convincingly demonstrated that dystopian narratives often contain utopian content, but the nature of this content varies between individual texts and literary historical moments. While I am primarily concerned with contemporary texts, here, I will

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<sup>8</sup> In *The Seeds of Time* (1994) Jameson wrote “I should like to disjoin the pair Utopia/dystopia [...] the dystopia is always and essentially what in the language of science fiction is called a ‘near-future’ novel” (56). More recently, in the chapter “Journey into Fear” in *Archaeologies*, he walked back this definition of utopia and dystopia as qualitatively different, acknowledging the work of Moylan and others on the utopianism of dystopian narratives. Jameson’s view of fantasy is similarly ambivalent—see “The Great Schism” in *Archaeologies* (57-71).

preface my main analyses with brief readings of three major modernist dystopias: Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). These texts demonstrate that the utopian/anti-utopian function of dystopian texts is very often determined by their staging of textual oppositions, and they offer points of comparison that reveal how contemporary texts participate in this longstanding genre convention while also modulating it in historically specific ways.

Fascism and state socialism provided the raw material for many modernist dystopias, with the result that these narratives tend to depict societies organized by totalitarian regimes that concentrate absolute power in a single individual, party, or class. Representations of intensely centralized power often correlate to an emphasis on revolution as a means of creating utopian change, regardless of the success or efficacy of those efforts. Baccolini and Moylan describe this tendency when they write that the conventional dystopian text “is built around the construction of a narrative of the hegemonic order and a counter-narrative of resistance” (“Introduction” 5)—a resistance that is generally “crushed” (“Introduction” 7). This is why, in their view, these narratives can at best generate hope for the reader—not for the protagonists—while the dystopias of the later twentieth century more reliably maintain hope within their storyworlds by accommodating some possibility for utopian change. The utopian dialectic in dystopian fiction often takes the form of thesis (totalitarian regime) encountering antithesis (revolutionary opposition). The first two stages of this dialectic are easily identifiable in most of these narratives, but the third—the moment of synthesis or resolution—is more problematical. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* stages the first two moments of the dialectic only to then collapse them, ruling out any possibility of utopian resolution by rendering it structurally impossible. In *We*,

utopia is present only negatively in the form of anticipation and deferred realization. In every case, the function of the dialectic is to signal (or foreclose) possibility within the storyworld while any extensive representation of a utopian future or the process of social change leading to it remains absent.

The paradigmatic dystopian narrative, Zamyatin's *We*, is also one of the clearest examples of utopian dialectics in dystopian fiction. The traditional contest between happiness and freedom as utopian values is mapped onto the socio-political antagonism between the totalitarian OneState and the "Mephi" revolutionaries.<sup>9</sup> Daily life in OneState is organized by a strictly regimented schedule called the "Table of Hours" that mandates the quantities and sequences of work, sleep, leisure time, and sex that supposedly maximize human happiness. The cost of this state of happiness is freedom, and it is the goal of the Mephi, led by I-330, to shake OneState's "Numbers" out of their anesthetized contentment. Phillip Wegner argues that the Mephi functions as OneState's dialectical opposite while falling short of being a straightforwardly utopian alternative. *We*, he suggests, contains "both thesis and antithesis within itself. By so doing, Zamyatin is able to point toward the limits, the *dystopian* propensity, when either possibility is taken as an end in itself" (163). Wegner arguably overstates the equivalence between OneState and the Mephi—the novel clearly privileges the latter over the former—but he is undoubtedly right that the primary function of this dialectic is to initiate the utopian process that unfolds through the end of the novel.

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<sup>9</sup> Late in the novel, the revolutionary leader I-330 says to D-503, the protagonist and first-person narrator, "Surely you see that only differences, differences of temperature, only contrasts in degree of heat, only that makes for life? And if throughout the universe all bodies are equally warm, or equally cool... You've got to smash them into each other" (169). Taken as a formula for utopian discourse, this moment clarifies the structural affinity between utopias, in which all bodies are equally warm, and anti-utopias, in which all are equally cool, and their difference from dystopian and critical utopian narratives that contain within themselves life-giving gradations of warmth and cold.

*We* ends with D-503, the protagonist, being subjected to a medical procedure that amputates his imagination and ensures his obedience to OneState, but the conflict between the two opposing collectives is not resolved. The specter of an absolute counterrevolution that effectively ends history looms over the conclusion of the novel, but this outcome is never realized, and its likelihood is subverted by an earlier exchange in which I-330 tells D-503

“My dear, you are a mathematician. You’re even more, you’re a philosopher of mathematics. So do this for me: Tell me the final number.”

“The what? I...I don’t understand. What final number?”

“You know—the last one, the top, the absolute biggest.”

“But, I-330, that’s stupid. Since the number of numbers is infinite, how can there be a final one?”

“And how can there be a final revolution? There is no final one. The number of revolutions is infinite.” (168)

Closure and openness compete throughout the narrative and it is important to note that the rather pessimistic tone of the conclusion does not fully coalesce into a defeat of revolutionary possibilities. The novel’s conclusion leaves open the possibility that the oppressive conformity propagated by OneState will be permanently reconstituted, or that it will be overthrown by a freer and more egalitarian collective that will, itself, be subject to future revolutions, perennially remobilizing the dialectic of individual and collective in the unending social and cultural flux that is, for Zamyatin, the very essence of utopianism.<sup>10</sup>

In Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, as well, the mapping of the social landscape is the textual level where dialectical structures are most legible. As in *We*, the storyworld is bifurcated between a dominant dystopian order and an alternative space that accommodates different social

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<sup>10</sup> In his 1924 essay “On Literature, Revolution, and Entropy,” Zamyatin writes that “harmful literature is more useful than useful literature: because it is anti-entropic, it militates against calcification, sclerosis, encrustedness, moss, peace. It is utopian and ridiculous” (15). This undercuts the anti-utopian trope that casts utopias as closed and changeless societies that will inevitably rely on violence to maintain their closure.



relations. Here, the opposition is between the World State and the Savage Reservation. This socio-spatial opposition again correlates to the ideological opposition between happiness, stability, and order, on the one hand, and freedom, anarchy, and emotion, on the other. The Savage Reservation is by no means a utopian entity, however; it is presented in highly racialized terms as squalid, dirty, and full of violence, ignorance, and prejudice. It is never more than a stage for a few healthy atavisms that the World State has filtered out of its citizens' social experience.

Similarly, John the Savage's fascination with Shakespeare is an example of the dystopian narrative's conventional mobilization of nostalgia as an instrument of critique, but, as in *The Road*, the protagonist's longing for the past does not offer a formula for utopian change. The communities in *Brave New World* that may have a utopian dimension are only referenced briefly—never visited by the characters or described in any detail. These are the islands where dissidents such as Bernard Marx and Helmholtz Watson are sent as punishment for their nonconformity: “All the people who, for one reason or another, have got too self-consciously individual to fit into community-life” (227). The islands are, collectively, a third space that offers an alternative to the original opposition between flawed terms, though the contents of this third space remain unspecified.<sup>11</sup>

The balance between social conditioning and state violence as forms of control varies among dystopias. In *We* they are roughly in equal proportion; in *Brave New World*, eugenic and

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<sup>11</sup> It is important to note, of course, that this is an elitist utopianism. Jameson describes *Brave New World* as “an aristocratic critique of the media and mass culture” (*Archaeologies* 202), and Patricia McManus similarly notes of the novel's critique that “Huxley was committed to the high reaction of a self-conscious ‘intellectual’ elite against ‘mass democracy’” (89). What matters is the islands' formal role in the narrative, as a third space that mediates between two flawed alternatives.

pharmacological manipulation make force largely unnecessary; in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the Party's mechanisms for regulating truth and, by extension, human thought and behavior, are reinforced by extreme violence. "If you want a picture of the future," O'Brien tells Winston Smith, "imagine a boot stamping on a human face—forever" (267). The novel gives readers little reason to doubt this prognostication. Moylan, again, argues that dystopias tend to be variously positioned along the ideological continuum between utopian and anti-utopian cultural impulses; *We* is positioned near the utopian end of this continuum and *Brave New World* near the anti-utopian. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is also located in anti-utopia's borderlands; it replicates the socio-political structure of the earlier novels' storyworlds through the opposition between the Party and Goldstein's revolutionaries, but it then undoes this opposition in a chilling reversal that reveals Goldstein's revolution to be a fabrication of the Party itself, one that shores up the Party's power rather than subverting it.

Crucially, however, the suffocating closure of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s storyworld is disrupted through a narrative maneuver. As Moylan has pointed out, in the appendix at the end of the novel titled "The Principles of Newspeak," a first-person voice discusses the history of Oceania, IngSoc, and Newspeak using the past tense (*Scraps* 162-3). The relation of this appendix to the narrative itself is ambiguous. It may be read as a paratextual note that exists outside the storyworld, or it may be read as a document emerging from a radically transformed future within the storyworld. Larry Caldwell writes of the appendix that the "temporal ambivalence of the verbs and of the adverbial locutions expressly confounds the Party's 'forever' and destabilizes its closed narrative" (qtd. in *Scraps* 163). According to this reading, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* displaces the utopian dialectic from its traditional locus in the text's storyworld to a

different textual level, establishing a formal contradiction between a narrative that rules out any possibility of an “after” to its socio-political regime and an adjacent counternarrative that seems to confirm the existence of that impossible “after.”

These three novels are often lumped together by critics as the classical dystopian novels that provided the foundation for the twentieth and twenty-first century prominence of the genre. All three describe oppressive and dehumanizing future societies. Their relationships to the utopian idea vary radically, however. The crucial factor here has to do with process. Adorno and Jameson’s utopian dialectics have contrasting temporalities: Adorno describes a state of epistemological arrest in which the contradictions of our alienated social reality have crystallized within the text while remaining utterly resistant to reconciliation, while Jameson describes a fitful process in which a social referent is neutralized into a utopian entity that is no sooner represented than it must be subjected to further acts of neutralization. The dialectics of the novels discussed below, I argue, follow a more constructive trajectory.

### **Utopian Dialectics After the Cold War**

The landscape of dystopia shifted in the late twentieth century. While totalitarian dystopias in the vein of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are still produced, the main antagonist in most post-Cold War dystopian fiction is global capitalism. In this context, the traditional antagonism between a totalitarian regime and a revolutionary opposition may seem outdated. Lucy Sargisson’s description of late twentieth century feminist utopian fiction holds true for shifts in the dystopian narrative at this same time. She writes that “it is [...] common to find in contemporary feminist utopian literature and theory several worlds, often contrasting, none perfect. These worlds play speculative, meditative or critical roles rather than instructing as to

the creation of a perfect world” (20). Sargisson identifies, here, the possibility that plurality and multiplicity—formal configurations not necessarily reducible to contradiction—have had an increasingly prominent role in literary utopian production in recent decades. Dialectical thought may seem to provide an outmoded approach to contemporary texts, but my argument in this chapter is that these models of utopianism are not mutually exclusive. Utopian dialectics can, and often do, exist alongside other formal tendencies in contemporary dystopian literature.

The arc of Margaret Atwood’s work offers a clear illustration of the literary historical shift from the totalitarian dystopia to the global capitalist dystopia. Chris Vials notes that Atwood’s 1985 novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* participated in “an earlier language on the left: antifascism” through its representations of a militaristic, centralized, authoritarian state that founds its authority on myth and nostalgia (245). Gilead, the novel’s future United States, is ruled over by a despotic regime that enforces order and obedience through violence. This regime is opposed by the revolutionary “Mayday” group that eventually rescues the protagonist, Offred, before she is captured by the regime’s secret police. Readers learn in the epilogue that Gilead eventually collapses and is apparently succeeded by a more just society. In Atwood’s later MaddAddam Trilogy, as in much post-Cold War dystopian literature, there is not such a clear enemy to oppose. Each novel of the MaddAddam Trilogy alternates between chapters set in a dystopian society and chapters set in the post-apocalyptic world that ensues from the dystopia’s collapse. This bifurcated temporality affords description of the pre- and post-apocalyptic experiences of two utopian micro-societies that emerge within and in response to the neoliberal capitalist dystopia that dominates most of the trilogy.

*Oryx and Crake* (2003) describes a posthuman species produced through genetic engineering—the Children of Crake, or the Crakers—as they develop social and cultural forms in the wake of an apocalyptic pandemic that all but exterminated humanity. The Crakers are engineered such that the genetic bases of humanity’s vices are subtracted from their genome; the novel’s descriptions of this process follow Jameson’s prescriptions for the generation of utopian content through creative procedures of negation and neutralization. The primary utopian entity in *The Year of the Flood* (2009) is the God’s Gardeners, a religious eco-cult living in a social enclave within the dystopian order that preceded the apocalyptic pandemic. The Gardeners model the pitfalls of utopias constructed conceptually through the additive procedures of synthesis and implemented in the social world through conventional modes of political praxis. *MaddAddam* (2013) meditates on the failures of both groups while situating an unrealized utopian potential in their combination—the Crakers and Gardeners begin to merge genetically, socially, and culturally in the novel’s conclusion, but the resolution of this dialectic remains unrepresented. *MaddAddam* stages the conditions of possibility for utopia—the catastrophic dissolution of global capitalism and the potential, within this indeterminate space, for genetic, social, and cultural hybridizations that cannot be predicted. The trilogy therefore dramatizes three different conceptual operations on social contradictions: neutralization, synthesis, and infinite deferral.

The dystopian society of the MaddAddam Trilogy is a product of extrapolation: it is a meditation on what the future might look like if social contradictions that produce injustice and oppression prove insoluble. Shari Evans points out that the distinction between totalitarian and neoliberal dystopias is embodied formally in *Oryx and Crake* through its scarce references to

government institutions; the novel, she writes, “portrays an inability to envision a clearly structured political society. The novel gives glimpses of a collapsing world and its social order only through the very limited perspective of what seems to be the last human” (35-6). What readers do see is that the distinctive features of neoliberalism—deregulation of markets, erosion of the public sphere, elimination of welfare programs, extractive economic practices, and so on, have produced a world in which nation-states are rarely referenced, New England has a subtropical climate, and multinational corporations exercise extreme violence to protect the circulation of capital. The wealthy live in corporate compounds while everyone else lives in the impoverished and disease-ridden “pleeblands.” A militarized police force called the CorpSeCorps is the only governing entity mediating between these spaces, generally by violently protecting corporate interests.

As Atwood notes elsewhere, however, dystopias tend to contain the seeds of utopia within them. The Gardeners are the most traditional utopian entity in the trilogy insofar as their utopianism is a matter of social organization rather than genetic engineering, and they therefore provide a logical starting point for an analysis of the trilogy’s utopianism despite the fact that they do not appear prominently until its second installment. The Gardeners are a human collective attempting to reorient themselves in relation to each other and to the natural world, opposing the dominant order not through violence, but by establishing spaces within it where alternative social relations may be practiced. As such, they are one of the “enclaves of resistance” that Moylan cites as a major type of utopian content in dystopian fiction (*Scraps* 180).

*The Year of the Flood*, which focuses on the God's Gardeners, follows the conventions of the classical utopian narrative more closely than does *Oryx and Crake*, the first novel of the trilogy. It is narrated, primarily, by two women—Ren and Toby—who are affiliated with the Gardeners, but the narrative is also interspersed with homilies in the first-person voice of Adam One, the group's leader. These homilies describe the history and philosophy of the Gardeners, complementing the accounts of the group's day-to-day activities offered by Ren and Toby and expressing the odd synthesis of scientific and religious discourses that comprise the Gardeners' philosophy. This discursive hybridization is an effort to resolve one of the major oppositions defining the trilogy's dystopia: the opposition between science and the humanities—art, literature, ethics, religion and spirituality, and so on. In the world of the trilogy, profitable forms of knowledge are valorized, while unprofitable ones, which, importantly, provide conceptual models for critiquing the ethics of the former, are marginalized. *Oryx and Crake* stages this conflict through the ongoing dialectic between Crake, who represents the consequences of unchecked positivism, and Jimmy, whose ineptitude in the laboratory is coupled with a love of language and an aptitude for storytelling. The novel describes the consequences of science employed, by the corporations, on behalf of extractive, exploitative, and profit-driven economic practices, and, by Crake, in the service of a rationality liberated both from humanist ethics and the allure of profit.

The God's Gardeners attempt to heal this cultural opposition through dialectical synthesis, investing their doctrines with both an acknowledgment of modern science and an affirmation of religious belief. Adam One states in one of his homilies

we affirm our Primate ancestry – an affirmation that has brought down wrath upon us from those who arrogantly persist in evolutionary denial. But we affirm,

also, the Divine agency that has caused us to be created in the way that we were, and this has enraged those scientific fools who say in their hearts, “There is no God. (*Year 51*)

Adam One goes on to describe how God “created us through the long and complex process of Natural and Sexual Selection, which is none other than His ingenious device for instilling humility in Man” (*Year 52*), and he concludes by thanking God “for having made us in such a way as to remind us, not only of our less than Angelic being, but also of the knots of DNA and RNA that tie us to our many fellow Creatures” (*Year 53*). The Gardeners thus advocate a hybridic environmentalism that borrows from a variety of secular and religious discourses.

The Gardeners are based in a compound in the pleeblands of what was once, presumably, Boston. Over time, however, the Gardeners grow in size and prominence, becoming less centralized as they establish outposts in the “Exfernal world” and place agents in the corporate compounds. Each branch of the Gardeners maintains an “Ararat”—a hoard of supplies stored away in preparation for the Waterless Flood that, like the literal flood of Genesis, will wipe the greater part of humanity from the Earth. The name of the Gardeners’ home—Edencliff Gardens—suggests its utopian aspirations, and Toby’s first impression of it evokes the name’s biblical referent: “She gazed around it in wonder [...] Each petal and leaf was fully alive, shining with awareness of her. Even the air of the Garden was different” (*Year 43*). The beauty and liveliness of the Garden starkly contrasts the squalor of its urban surroundings. The rooftop, socially and spatially insulated from the dystopian cityscape, serves as a locus where alternative configurations of the social can be practiced.

These alternative configurations are predicated on egalitarianism and ecological sustainability. The Gardeners are vegetarian. They practice skills that are environmentally



friendly and that allow them to avoid participating in consumer culture, and they frame their relationship to material objects in terms of use rather than possession. Ren comments on one of their dwelling places near Edencliff Gardens that “The Gardeners didn’t exactly own the building, because ownership was wrong, but somehow they controlled it” (*Year* 79). This is an instance of the tonal ambiguity saturating Atwood’s portrayal of the Gardeners. The structure of property relations among the Gardeners is never described in detail, and here, as elsewhere, the relation of the Gardeners’ principles to their practices seems dubious. The looseness of the Gardeners’ abandonment of the property form may be a case of pragmatism defeating idealism, but this has social consequences: “Adam One insisted that all Gardeners were equal on the spiritual level, but the same did not hold true for the material one” (*Year* 44). The frailty of the Gardeners’ utopianism appears as their procedures of synthesis and reconciliation—of science and religion, society and nature, self and other—produce new fissures and contradictions.

The ambiguity surrounding property forms among the Gardeners bleeds into their gender relations and sexual mores. While ostensibly advocating equality and egalitarianism across lines of gender, the Gardeners are ultimately a patriarchal and heteronormative group. When Toby is sexually assaulted by Mugi, Pilar tells her “We never make a fuss about such things [...] You must forgive him in your heart” (*Year* 104). Calina Ciobanu notes of the trilogy’s representations of patriarchy that “the trilogy as a whole insists that any possibility of imagining a posthuman future will depend not just on situating humankind as one species among many, but on unsettling mankind’s primacy in relation to womankind as well” (154). The Gardeners, in keeping with Jameson’s criticisms of “bad Utopianism,” reiterate in their social relations many of the ills

plaguing the society they resist, while Adam One generally explains these failures away through evasion or euphemism.

A schism within the Gardeners prompted by a disagreement over the relative merits of passive and violent resistance results in the formation of MaddAddam, a group of revolutionaries who actively sabotage corporate projects. Adam One's countercultural activities are tolerated by the CorpSeCorps because they do not pose any substantive threat to corporate interests. The aggressive opposition of Zeb and the MaddAddam saboteurs is more threatening, but because of this it is stamped out. MaddAddam's origin in the God's Gardeners leads the CorpSeCorps to attack and scatter Adam One's followers as well. Oppositional politics prove to be ineffective, caught between a quietism that is sustainable precisely because of its futility and more radical methods that are promptly suppressed. *The Year of the Flood*, therefore, may be read as lending support to the view that political praxis is not a viable route to utopia.

The trilogy never clearly identifies the constraints that the Gardeners fail to transcend. They may be biological, ideological, or both. In any case, the failure of politics as a route to positive social change leads Crake, in the first novel of the trilogy, to search for a different one:

“Let's suppose for the sake of argument,” said Crake one evening, “that civilization as we know it gets destroyed [...] Once it's flattened, it could never be rebuilt [...] All it takes,” said Crake, “is the elimination of one generation. One generation of anything. Beetles, trees, microbes, scientists, speakers of French, whatever. Break the link in time between one generation and the next, and it's game over forever.” (*Oryx* 223)

Crake imagines something far more radical than a healing of social contradictions, here: an apocalyptic end to human civilization that will forcibly create a posthuman future.

*Oryx and Crake*, like *The Year of the Flood*, describes a crumbling and decadent neoliberal society brought to its critical state by human greed. The groups and individuals trying

to ameliorate social ills are few and comically ineffective, reduced to rehearsing platitudes and carrying out acts of sabotage on a small scale. The novel introduces Crake's particularly antiutopian brand of genetic determinism in this context. War and other forms of competition are, in Crake's formulation, based not in economic imperatives or religious or ethnic tensions, but in human sexuality. According to this view, humans are torn between competing impulses toward unfettered promiscuity and unwavering fidelity, and this conflict leads to psychological torment, repression, and the redirection of sublimated sexual energy into war, competition, consumption, and so on.

The implication of this theory that innate human imperfections preclude egalitarian and sustainable social organization is that utopian humans must have the capacity for utopia wired into them. In the Crakers,

Gone were [humanity's] destructive features, the features responsible for the world's current illnesses. For instance, racism—or, as they referred to it in Paradise, pseudospeciation—had been eliminated in the model group [...] Hierarchy could not exist among them, because they lacked the neural complexes that would have created it. Since they were neither hunters nor agriculturalists hungry for land, there was no territoriality: the king-of-the-castle hard-wiring that had plagued humanity had, in them, been unwired [...] Their sexuality was not a constant torment to them [...] there would be no family trees, no marriages, and no divorces. They were perfectly adjusted to their habitat so they would never have to create houses or tools or weapons, or, for that matter, clothing. They would have no need to invent any harmful symbolisms, such as kingdoms, icons, gods, or money. (*Oryx* 305)

More important than the social content described here is the formal contingency of the description on negation. The Crakers' distinctive qualities—those that might qualify as utopian—are described here primarily in terms of absence: the lack of “the neural complexes”

that create hierarchy, the absence of any need for material possessions or symbolic structures, and so on.<sup>12</sup>

Jameson's commentary on the problems inherent in utopian visions predicated on synthesis, rather than on negation and neutralization, is useful in understanding the difference between the Gardeners and the Crakers. The Gardeners seek to reorganize social relations on a microcosmic level within a dominant dystopian system. The reliance of this process on synthesis carries with it the consequence that this new society is clearly sewn from the same fabric as the old, the injustices and irrationalities of the dominant order persistently reiterating themselves in subtle and insidious ways in the Gardeners' practices. The development of the Crakers, however, was not an additive process in which salutary elements of existing social materials were recombined to produce some better alternative. Rather, it was predicated on subtraction, as Crake removed from his design all the human qualities that he believed led to suffering. Rather than seeking to resolve social contradictions, Crake seeks to remove the Crakers from those contradictions entirely.

For the Crakers to thrive, they must have space in which to do so. Crake, through his position with the pharmaceutical corporation RejoovenEsense, designs a medication and uses it, unbeknownst to his employers, as a vector for an extraordinarily effective pathogen of his own making. Crake arranges for Jimmy to survive the ensuing pandemic so that he can shepherd the Crakers to safety. As *Oryx and Crake* and *MaddAddam* demonstrate, however, Crake's efforts to subtract humanity's vices from the Crakers are not entirely successful. The Crakers are already

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<sup>12</sup> Crake's genetic determinism is, arguably, internally contradictory insofar as it identifies human sexuality as the primary source of violence, inequality, and so on, when it is not clear that all of his interventions in the human genome are reducible to this.

becoming recognizably human, in ways antithetical to Crake's design, by the end of *Oryx and Crake*. Jimmy constructs a mythology for them in which Crake and Oryx figure as deities, and they develop a love of stories and storytelling. At the end of the novel, they build a likeness of Jimmy that allows them to "send out [their] voices" to him, indicating that they are developing art and a grasp of symbolism (361). This process continues in *MaddAddam*, which describes the interactions between the Crakers and the surviving Gardeners as they navigate the post-apocalyptic world. Much of the novel is devoted to Toby's friendship with the young Craker Blackbeard, whom she teaches to read and write. Toby grasps the implications of these lessons only after Blackbeard has enthusiastically embraced them. She wonders "Now what have I done? [...] What comes next? Rules, dogmas, laws? The Testament of Crake? How soon before there are ancient texts they feel they have to obey but have forgotten how to interpret? Have I ruined them?" (*MaddAddam* 204). The Crakers clearly retain cognitive abilities that Crake sought to amputate from them. Late in the novel, Blackbeard takes over the storytelling duties that Jimmy had previously passed on to Toby. In the concluding section, Toby and Blackbeard's journal entries alternate with each other, culminating in Blackbeard's "Story of Toby," which describes Zeb's death and Toby's journey away from the group of survivors. The novel's ending seems to justify, to a limited degree, Toby's concern that writing and reading may corrupt the Crakers. Blackbeard becomes a leader because of the narrative authority passed on to him by Toby, and he evidently prepares to propagate this hierarchy into the next generation by passing on his knowledge to the hybridic children of human/Craker unions.

As with much of the trilogy, the political implications here are ambiguous. The development out of egalitarianism and into hierarchy, the production of power through

knowledge, and so on may be read as ominous. But, this conclusion also seems to situate the future of the human and Craker races in the negotiation of otherness. According to Shelley Boyd “Atwood suggests that there is hope, but only through interspecies communion” (172). Atwood stages a new dialectic, here, returning to the starting point of the utopian procedure described by Jameson, but the resolution of this dialectic is deferred beyond the trilogy’s conclusion.

Atwood’s trilogy may be understood as an effort to explore the problematic nature of utopian representation. While the conceptual content of the Crakers’ society is dependent on negation, the embodiments of that content reify it back into positivity. A nameless lack of hierarchy becomes recognizable as egalitarianism. The Crakers are “neither hunters nor agriculturalists,” but they can be described instead, in positive terms, as nomadic gatherers. The trilogy’s utopianism is not located in the God’s Gardeners or the Crakers, but in the dialectic between them. *MaddAddam* moves this dialectic toward a resolution as the two groups begin to merge, but, importantly, that resolution is deferred past an open-ended conclusion of the sort that, as Suvin and Moylan have noted, maintains a utopian horizon.<sup>13</sup>

The utopian dialectics of the MaddAddam Trilogy are located primarily within and between social groups in the trilogy’s storyworld. Other aspects of the trilogy’s composition contribute to these dynamics, though. The trilogy’s bifurcated narrative temporality facilitates its staging of social oppositions. Its modulations of narrative perspective stage a contrast between the singular, masculine focalization of *Oryx and Crake* and the more egalitarian splintering of narrative authority in *The Year of the Flood* and *MaddAddam*. There are traces, here, of the

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<sup>13</sup> See Suvin’s *Positions and Presuppositions* and Moylan’s *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*.

aesthetic and narrative formal contradictions that Adorno identifies as constitutive of textual politics.

Utopian dialectics can organize texts on these other formal levels in multiple ways. In the dialogic structure of the classic utopias, the oscillating narrative temporality of the MaddAddam Trilogy, and the grammatical patterning of “Diving into the Wreck,” we see dialectical relationships functioning as broad organizing principles. The frame narratives and epilogues of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* are interventions that unexpectedly enact a subtle switching of the text’s political charge, revealing utopian horizons beyond the closure of the narrative. These effects depend on how narrative or aesthetic forms are coordinated with the social content represented in the text.

The relationship between these textual levels is one of the concerns of Chang-rae Lee’s 2014 novel *On Such a Full Sea*. While the MaddAddam Trilogy conducts its utopian experiments primarily in the represented space of the storyworld, *On Such a Full Sea* uses communal narration to place narrative forms at the forefront of its utopian project.<sup>14</sup> Susan S. Lanser describes communal narration as “a spectrum of practices that articulate either a collective voice or a collective of voices that share narrative authority” (21). This spectrum consists of “a singular form in which one narrator speaks for a collective, a simultaneous form in which a plural ‘we’ narrates, and a sequential form in which individual members of a group narrate in turn” (Lanser 21). Lanser’s definitions indicate a kinship between the effects of

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<sup>14</sup> The MaddAddam Trilogy, again, has some very interesting narrative formal elements that are worth considering in the context of its utopianism, but it is important to remember that these elements are fairly common in Atwood’s fiction, generally. The trilogy’s narrative temporality, for instance, with its oscillations between present and past, also appears in other, non-dystopian, Atwood novels such as *The Robber Bride* (1993), *Alias Grace* (1996), and *The Blind Assassin* (2000).

communal narration and the recurring preoccupations of much utopian and dystopian literature, in which demarcations of subjectivity, contours of thought and perception, and patterns of multivocality are often framed by the text as symptomatic of or homologous with the social structures acting on the characters.<sup>15</sup>

Such a relationship itself constitutes a dialectical interaction between textual levels, but in communal narratives the text's perspectival dynamics are themselves necessarily contradictory. According to Brian Richardson, simultaneous communal narration, or "we" narration, provides "an essentially dialectical perspective" (58). Sundry perspectives are funneled through a pronoun that compresses them into a discrete unit. The "we" is defined by this contradiction between plurality and singularity, and its politics are determined by the text's staging of that contradiction. Richardson argues that "We" narration can be framed as a formal correlate to a "new, more communal, and more egalitarian society" (56), but he also notes that the category of the "we" lacks a fixed political allegiance.<sup>16</sup> It can be associated with communal social forms that challenge neoliberal values, such as individualism and competition, that validate a wide range of extractive and exploitative economic practices. It can also, however, enact an oppressive elision of difference by representing a multiplicity of individual subjects with diverse interests

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<sup>15</sup> Communal narration can be a means of investigating some of the major questions of utopian and dystopian literature: how do economic and political structures act on individual and collective? Should the prospect of a more-or-less unified collective consciousness inspire utopian hopes for a social order founded on solidarity and egalitarianism, or should it incite dystopian fears of mindless conformity and the erasure of the individual subject?

<sup>16</sup> Despite his reservations, Richardson claims that "The vast majority of 'we' texts valorize collective identity in no uncertain terms" (50). Amit Marcus, alternately, argues that "we" narratives tend to "portray life within a community as fraught with (internal and/or external) conflicts and controversies rather than being harmonious, peaceful, and cooperative," and he questions "why there are no twentieth-century 'we' narratives that would express such a utopian vision" (158).



through a homogenizing voice. Cast in this way, the “we” may function as a narratological expression of a communal body that is stifling, uniform, and hostile to individual expression.

All of these contradictory meanings associated with the “we” perspective are present in *On Such a Full Sea*, which, in Lee’s words, is “as much about the telling as it is the tale” (Leyshon). The basic characteristics of the unnerving future it imagines—environmental degradation, thorough corporatization of social life, and authoritarian political structures—are common to many contemporary dystopias.<sup>17</sup> The novel is narrated, however, by the community of a futuristic Baltimore—called B-Mor by its inhabitants—as it grapples with the legacy of Fan, a young woman who forsook the anesthetizing comfort of B-Mor to search for her lost partner, Reg. The voice of B-Mor’s population is riven by ambivalences and antinomies that work themselves out over the course of the novel, culminating in a formal shift, in the novel’s final lines, that signals a reformation of the communal consciousness. The communal voice serves as the novel’s primary means for modeling processes of social change, exploring relations between individual and collective, and signaling utopian possibilities.

The storyworld of *On Such a Full Sea* is both predictive and cautionary. Privatization of the public sphere, unregulated corporate activity, and other markers of the neoliberal era have ravaged the environment, warmed the climate, and reduced cities to blighted slums. National governments have been replaced by an association of multinational corporations that administer services and regulate daily life in a steeply stratified system of settlements. The wealthy and powerful live in affluent towns called Charter villages that are isolated from the outer world by walls and security forces and protected from the climate by elaborate geoengineering

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<sup>17</sup> The socio-spatial layout of this future is in fact very similar to that of the MaddAddam Trilogy.

mechanisms. Industrial cities such as Baltimore and Detroit have been repurposed as production facilities populated and maintained by imported laborers from Southeast Asia and designed to supply the Charter villages.<sup>18</sup> The communal fabric of the facilities is engineered to ensure an efficient and orderly production process, while daily life in the Charters is centered on the consumption of goods produced in facilities like B-Mor. The pre-dystopian inhabitants of Baltimore and other industrial cities have been driven out by the gentrification processes described above and forced to make a living in the open counties: vast spaces outside of the Charter villages and production facilities where the majority of the population must survive without access to basic services.

The dystopian nature of this imagined world emerges from the contradictions and elisions in the communal narrator's representation of it. For instance, in an early chapter that describes the provenance of B-Mor and the process by which Chinese villagers were brought in to build and staff the production facility, the narrator writes that

The originals were brought in en masse for a strict purpose but with their work- and family-centric culture intact, such that they would not only endure and eventually profit the seed investors but also prosper in a manner that would be perpetually regenerative.

And while all this is true, and uplifting, and everyone you might greet on a stroll down Longevity Way will automatically trill *It is fine* or *It is right*, one has to accept that deformations have appeared on the surface of our serene terra,

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<sup>18</sup> The centrality of Southeast Asia to the novel's vision of the future puts it in conversation with techno-orientalist dystopias such as the film *Blade Runner* (1982) and the television series *Firefly* (2002-3) and *Maniac* (2018). Stephen Hong Sohn writes of techno-orientalism, a discourse that associates Southeast Asian cultures with technological sophistication, that "In traditional Orientalism, the East is often configured as backwards, anti-progressive, and primitive. In this respect, techno-Orientalism might suggest a different conception of the East, except for the fact that the very inhuman qualities projected onto Asian bodies create a dissonance with these alternative temporalities" (8). Christopher Fan notes that *On Such a Full Sea* avoids techno-orientalist terms, suggesting that "the novel problematizes not only our desire to conflate Asian subjects and technology but also our countervailing liberal desire to dismiss such a desire as racist and then bestow some form of humanism on the racialized subject" (678). The novel's collective subject is one of the primary structural means for this critical interrogation of Western, liberal humanism and its construction of the subject as singular and autonomous.

where even the most positive feelings can begin to pool, and seep down through new fissures, and trickle away. (19)

The narrator expresses a limited awareness here that the communal dynamic of B-Mor exists to serve the needs of capital. Any subversive potential that may attend such an awareness is shunted into an insistent belief that this communal investment in the production process is a thoroughly salutary condition, only for this optimism to give way to an acknowledgment of the “fissures” between the community’s work-oriented culture and the alienating and numbing social relations it produces. The novel is shot through by this basic tension between its “real” world, which the reader is never allowed unmediated access to, and the narrator’s reading of that world, which is riddled with ambivalence.

The communal narrator occasionally reflects on the nature of this mediation. In an early passage describing the repeated retelling of Fan’s tale, the narrator admits that “we can’t help but build upon what is known, our elaborations not fantastical or untrue but at times vulnerable to our wishes for her, and for ourselves” (33). Later, the narrator acknowledges that Fan’s story is partially a product “of our own shifting perspective on that brief period, what we have come to overlay upon her journeys as we revisit them over time” (156). The narrator’s mediation of Fan’s journey constantly destabilizes itself by reminding the reader of its own contingency, such that the facts pertaining to Fan, her motives, and her experiences remain inaccessible beneath the novel’s discursively flat surface.

This flat discourse produces a tension between sameness and difference. Structurally, the narrative alternates back and forth between passages in which the communal narrator describes life in B-Mor and passages relating Fan’s search for Reg. Embedded in the story of Fan’s journey are conversations with secondary characters who tell Fan their own stories. This form

does not create a layering or a juxtapositioning of differentiated voices, however, because all of these passages are narrated in the voice of the communal “we.” A seemingly trivial feature of the novel’s formatting is the lack of quotation marks framing moments of direct speech. Lines of dialogue are usually indented to set them off from the rest of the text, but aside from an occasional colon, there are no other formal features demarcating them. A characteristic example of this is the following exchange between Fan and Quig while they are driving through the counties on their way to a Charter village:

Something she couldn’t explain, then, made her say to Quig from the backseat of the car: Whatever you’re looking for, I’ll help you find.

He didn’t answer right away, tapping at the wheel with his long fingers. Loreen was dozing, her jaw sunk, her tarnished lower teeth jammed together like kernels on a stunted ear of corn.

You’re going to help me find a well drill?

No, she said. The other thing.

The other thing, he repeated, his tone raised.

Yes, she said. This was, in fact, only the second conversation they’d had.

(109)

The lack of quotation marks, along with the general paucity of direct speech and the narrator’s repeated reminders of the text’s mediated character, cues the reader to understand these moments of dialogue as a sort of implied indirect discourse. Statements that seem to be framed as direct speech are subverted by the absence of the conventional formal markers that set off this type of discourse, serving as a reminder that every verbal utterance in the text is mediated through the diegetic voice of the community. The narrative is discursively flat rather than layered, univocal rather than polyphonous. It is not the tale of Fan; it is the tale of a community working through its crisis of purpose and identity through an act of narrative creation. This is the significance of the narrator’s claim that their “elaborations [are] not fantastic or untrue”; the truth-value of the

constructed narrative of Fan lies not in its relation to Fan's "real" experiences, but in its status as a projection of communal fears and desires.

Frankfurt School critical theory, particularly Adorno's description of capitalism as a totalizing system, seems to inform the novel's positioning of its communal narrator within the relations of production structuring life in the settlements. Adorno argues that the pervasive reification of culture and social life under capitalism leads to a uniformity of consciousness that precludes any semblance of autonomous, unideological thought or action. Only critical awareness of this condition enables the subject to resist permeation by ideology. Commodification alienates individual subjects from the material world and from each other, but this radical differentiation is coupled with the systematic accommodation of social life to the demands of production and consumption, the reduction of all things to universal, monetary measures of equivalence. Adorno writes that under capitalism

The network of the whole is drawn ever tighter, modelled after the act of exchange. It leaves the individual consciousness less and less room for evasion, preforms it more and more thoroughly, cuts it off *a priori* as it were from the possibility of differencing itself as all difference degenerates to a nuance in the monotony of supply. ("Cultural Criticism" 198)

Adorno's emphasis on negativity proceeds from this conviction that late capitalism is an inescapable total system: a system that isolates the subject from others while simultaneously binding all together in an anesthetizing consciousness that precludes any difference not amenable to production and consumption. The subject permeated by ideology can at best unmask social contradictions in order to foster in others a critical awareness of them.

*On Such a Full Sea* describes such an unmasking, as a disruptive event—not apparently political by design—jars B-Mor's population out of complacency and toward a more critical

awareness of itself and its position within dystopia. Fan's departure rends the once integral community into a "we" and a "she," an "us" and a "her," and this fracture spurs the community into a cycle of self-reflection and narrative creation, its meditations on its own composition and its constructions of Fan's story alternating with and informing each other. The progress of this dialectic between the community and its constructed Other is measured through the narrator's shifting attitude toward Fan. Two impulses compete in the narrator's imagination: to pathologize Fan as deviant and irrational, and to valorize her as an extraordinary individual who transcended her circumstances in the performance of an act that encapsulated the repressed dreams and desires of the community.<sup>19</sup> These two impulses are introduced and juxtaposed in the novel's early pages. The narrator reflects in their opening description of Fan, "Nor would anyone have thought that [Fan] could do the thing she did. Such a lamentable action!" (3). The narrator's characterization of Fan's departure as "lamentable," however, is followed almost immediately by the observation that "she could appear to possess a special perspective that one might automatically call 'wisdom' but is perhaps more a kind of timelessness of view [...] Perhaps Fan truly had that kind of clarity, and not just a semblance of it" (3). This coupling of criticism and admiration, fear and the uneasy recognition of possibility, is soon followed by a passage that refracts these perspectives through the metaphor of the fish tank.

Fan's role in B-Mor is to manage one of the fish tanks in which the community produces food for the Charter settlements. Like B-Mor, these tanks are insulated spaces that appear to be

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<sup>19</sup> Marcus writes that in "we" narratives that include what he terms "exclusive disorienting discourse," "only a single member of the 'we' group has the courage, impertinence, or naiveté to violate the group's norms. Such a member's subversive destabilizing discourse engenders ambivalent feelings within the community—reverence and hostility, fascination and aversion, admiration and contempt" (148). Fan is never granted unmediated speech in *On Such a Full Sea* and therefore has no opportunity to vocalize "disorienting discourse." Marcus's description is still applicable to Fan's effect on the novel's "we" narrator, however.

self-contained, functional ecosystems, when in fact they are carefully engineered and monitored such that they efficiently perform a role in the production process. Fan's aptitude for navigating her fish tank—moving naturally through it while remaining, somehow, an outsider—parallels her status as a member of B-Mor's community who possesses unique capabilities that set her apart. Describing Fan's tendency to sit at the bottom of the fish tank holding her breath, as if she could exert "a different kind of force that would transform not her but the composition of the realm, make it so the water could not harm her" (6), the narrator speculates

And if that is an indication of her instability, everything else that happened makes sense and no more needs to be accounted for.

But let's suppose another way of considering her, which was that she had a special conviction of imagination. Few of us do, to be honest. We wish and wish and often with fury but never very deeply. For if we did, we'd see how the world can sometimes split open, in just the way we hope. That it and we are, in fact, unbounded. Free. (6)

Fan's prodigious ability to hold her breath under water, stretching the natural constraints imposed on her by her environment, as if she has power to "transform [...] the composition of the realm" is a metaphor for her status in the community of B-Mor. She is uniquely resistant to the milieu she is immersed in, and her departure, which the narrator struggles to comprehend, does indeed transform the community. This passage further illustrates the community's polarized appraisals of Fan's departure. The first appraisal, expressive of the logic of the status quo, brands her as unstable, while the second expresses a recognition of the emancipatory possibilities opened by her act. The narrator's continual movement between these poles is enclosed in a broader trajectory away from the former "way of considering her," which is most prominent in the novel's early pages, and toward the latter.

These two examples of the narrator's vacillation between criticism and admiration are embedded, in the novel's early sections, within an attitude that may be described as uneasily condemnatory. Roughly a quarter of the way through the novel, the narrator remarks that

[Fan's] endeavor was misguided and wrong and maybe plain crazy, akin to someone waking up one day and deciding he's going to scale Kilimanjaro because he can't stop imagining the view from the top [...] And while it's easy to say this is a situation to be avoided, isn't this what we also fear and crave simultaneously, that some internal force which defies understanding might remake us into the people we dream we are? (79)

This passage adheres to the same dialectic structuring the judgments of Fan excerpted above. A critical sentiment is followed immediately by a corrective that considers Fan's act from an opposing perspective.<sup>20</sup> There is little qualification of the narrator's insistence that Fan's departure "was misguided and wrong and maybe plain crazy," but the relative strength of this denunciation places emphasis on the shift in perspective that follows—both in the immediate corrective to the critical statement and in the narrator's general shift, after this moment, toward open longing for the daring and imaginative freedom that Fan represents. Acknowledging the fear and craving comingled in their construction of Fan, the communal narrator voices their desire for an "internal" compulsion, not subject to ideological and material constraints, to well up and spur them toward an agentic transformation of the social world. Shortly after this passage, the narrator admits "And the funny thing, it occurs to us, is whether what Fan committed, as well as the fact that she left us, was aberrant at all" (96). This growing capacity to remove Fan's

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<sup>20</sup> The critical moment in these formulations is often couched in terms that attribute it to a subset of the community, however, or that explicitly pose the critical attitude as one possibility among many. For instance, at the end of the first chapter, the narrator notes that "Some [...] can hardly utter her name without a stony jaw, unable to forgive Fan for what she did before disappearing" (10). Fan's unforgiveable, pre-departure act was the poisoning of her fish, possibly because she, by virtue of her imaginative acuity, became aware of the metaphors of the fish tank and chose to "transform" the world of the tanks irrevocably, just as she does to B-Mor through her departure. But, significantly, it is only "some" who cannot forgive Fan for this act. This is one of the important moments—symptoms of growing divisiveness—in which the "we" differentiates into smaller units.



behavior from the realm of pathology is soon followed, roughly a third of the way through the novel, by the affirmation “Was it Reg we were yearning for? Was it Fan? Yes. Let it be heard. We can speak it now” (104). Following this declaration, the criticisms of Fan’s actions dwindle away, replaced by a clear desire to identify with her. The “now” in the excerpt situates this transition as a moment in a temporal continuum; the community’s ability to “speak” its “yearning” for Fan and Reg is linked to the progress of its narration of Fan’s journey.

As the community’s constant retellings of Fan’s narrative accumulate, and as the community grows farther away in time from Fan’s departure, the narrative’s correspondence to the “facts” of Fan’s journey likely decreases. The narrator repeatedly affirms this and contemplates its implications:

Whenever we tell the story of Fan, details are apt to change. You don’t mean to alter anything; in fact, your intention is the very opposite [...] isn’t it the truth that, despite your fealty to the story, a moment will arise that compels a freelancing, perhaps even a rebellious, urge? [...] we can’t help but add a little of our own special imprint, a tiny remarking here, a slight miscoloration there, and sometimes even more than that if the feeling is intense enough. (210)

As Lanser indicates, communal narration is not a unitary device. The narrative of *On Such a Full Sea* is apparently told by a collective speaking in unison as a cohesive unit. The uniformity and integrity of the communal voice is continuous with the novel’s thematic concern with the homogeneity of consciousness under capitalism. The reflections excerpted above on the historical progression of Fan’s narrative evoke, however, Lanser’s definition of sequential rather than simultaneous communal narration: Fan’s tale has been told by many tellers since her departure, and these tellings have informed and inflected subsequent tellings, all of which have altered in minor ways their source material. Is the unified tale of the novel’s “we” the telos of this aggregate and recursive narrative accumulation? Or, is this telling simply one iteration of

Fan's tale isolated out of a narrative polyphony unfolding over time? The communal narrator's easy transgression of temporal bounds suggests a third option—that this singular narrative is a sort of summary, modeling through its evolving judgments of Fan the trajectory of the community's narrative reconstructions of her tale through the generations since her departure.

This narrative polyphony is not actually present in the text of the novel. It is merely referenced by the “we” as a precondition of the narrative it tells, instantiating again the tension between sameness and difference, singularity and multiplicity, that defines the “we” perspective. The perpetual resolution of diversity into a homogeneous narrative voice that ostensibly contains difference even while effacing it terminates in the novel's epiphanic conclusion, which may suggest a shift in narrative perspective that correlates with the community's arrival at a new self-awareness. The final chapter of the novel describes how the period of unrest following Fan's departure from B-Mor fades back into a complacent acceptance of the status quo. A mysterious administrative body “has reversed some of the more disheartening measures of recent times” as a minor compromise that encourages cooperation and docility without substantively changing daily life in B-Mor (336).

The reinscription of the status quo is not perfect, however. Occasionally, someone will “rise up from a chair in an eatery or a tea shop [...] and without having to utter a word say to all: So what is this?” (337). Strangers will exchange glances on the street and feel the desire “to exchange all kinds of notations again, even the most improbable tales and rumors, to report everything we know of our Fan, who we're sure can somehow hear us a little better now” (338). The result of the community's questioning of itself and of the powers ruling it is a more nuanced and critical awareness of how it is positioned in the broader society. Attending this altered

consciousness is an unequivocal appreciation for Fan that marks a major shift from the ambivalence of the novel's early pages: "We simply wish her to know that we are here, and not unsatisfactory, and that in this regard she can please pay us no great mind" (338). The community seems to have learned the lesson of Fan's narrative. Consequently, it no longer needs her. The final lines of the novel emphasize this point as the community addresses the absent Fan:

But sometimes, we're sure, you're much closer than we know, waiting out word of Reg in some modest but nice place [...] We can almost see it now, small but tidy, emptied of its household save for a black-clad girl, the brightest shape we know.

Don't hurry, Fan.

Stay put for now.

We'll find a way.

You need not come back for us. (352)

The final four lines of the novel suggest a formal shift with important thematic ramifications. The third and fourth lines contain plural first-person pronouns, but the indentation and lineation of the statements place them in the same format that the novel uses to set off lines of direct speech. Most of the novel's instances of direct speech are attributed to individual characters while being mediated through the communal narrator's diegetic voice. The last four sentences, however, seem to represent a new modulation of that voice. The sentences are attributed to the community, but their formatting, and the grammatical possibility for each utterance to stand alone, suggests that they may be spoken by distinct individuals within the community. There is a tension, noted above, between the "we" narration of the novel's form and the sequential communal narrative that the former is a product of and a commentary on. The framing of the conclusion may indicate that as the community completes Fan's narrative and accepts it as an expression of its own desire for liberation and agency, the homogeneous communal voice splinters back into polyphony.

The communal reconfiguration signaled by these lines is anticipated and enabled by Fan's assertion of an individualized love that had no place in B-Mor's lukewarm and undifferentiated amity, in which "in essence everybody was like a cousin" (Lee 91). The novel presents an individual's seemingly apolitical act as a disruptive event powerful enough to de-reify the thought of a community, opening a space in the communal imagination for emancipatory dreams. The novel, like the *MaddAddam Trilogy*, does not describe what happens next, though. It ends in a Joycean epiphanic moment that seems charged with possibilities that are not fulfilled within the pages of the novel. These possibilities are very ambiguous. There is little indication that the community's reformed consciousness will correspond to a radical political praxis. Indeed, the community's halfhearted revolution ended in the reinscription, albeit imperfect, of the status quo. The closing lines may, furthermore, easily be read as spoken by the same diegetic voice that narrates the rest of the novel.

Indeterminacies such as these are integral to the novel's structure, and to the utopianism of its conclusion. *On Such a Full Sea*, even in its relatively hopeful ending, never presumes to resolve its formal contradictions. Such a resolution might have been accomplished through an epilogue representing an idyllic future in which the injustices of the past have been abolished and replaced by equitable alternatives, described through the sequential communal narration that the novel's conclusion gestures toward and which arguably resolves the opposition between plural and singular forms of first-person narration. This is, however, a negative utopian narrative like others discussed in this project, informed by the same preoccupation with unsayability and the same wariness toward resolutions.

Sequential, like simultaneous, communal narration is an ambivalent form. One might argue that sequential communal narration reinstates a neoliberal hierarchy of values that privileges the category of the individual over that of the communal. A more determinedly optimistic reading might claim, instead, that it creates a progressive discursive egalitarianism. This reading can also be turned on its head, though. What if situating diverse voices on the same discursive plane reduces them to a common level of equivalence, reflecting the passage from quality to quantity, incommensurability to exchangeability, that characterizes postmodernity's thorough commodification? Progressive and retrograde valences accrue to this form as they do to any other. The utopianism of *On Such a Full Sea's* conclusion, therefore, is not a property of a particular mode of narrative perspective; rather, it is the potential for transformative change figured by the unresolved dialectical tension between the dominant form and its corrective. This moment of ambiguous mobility will presumably crystallize into another imperfect form, but the novel does not describe that outcome. It instead concludes in the tension-ridden moment of transformation, when the antiquation of the old communal consciousness testifies to the possibility for radical change, the possibility for the community to continue revolutionizing itself toward a perpetually deferred utopian condition.

### **The Limits of the Dialectic**

Dialectical relationships are so pervasive within literary utopianism due to their capacity, as suggested above, to negotiate the tension on which the genre is founded: utopia as “no place” and utopia as “good place.” The most successful utopias have thematized this basic contradiction by representing good places that are imperfect or unfinished, that work toward an ideal that they never quite embody. Through the arraying of oppositions, utopian dialectics specify the fields of

ideological contestation within which the utopian process commences, necessarily lending a baseline of content to the utopian idea even if this content never reaches any final expression.

The positive components of this process have too often been underemphasized in utopian theory. In Jameson's review of *The Year of the Flood*, he writes of the God's Gardeners that "Functional hierarchy (the Adams and the Eves) is here made palatable by co-operative egalitarianism and a serene acceptance of the frailties of human nature [...] Regressive it all is, however (and it is always helpful to wonder what politics today could possibly be otherwise)" ("Then"). Jameson nods to the Gardeners' progressive impulses only to declare these impulses circumscribed by a broader regressive character, one that can be attributed to the epistemological straitjacket of ideology. In the context of degrading ecosystems and a rapidly warming climate, it is worthwhile to question the usefulness of a utopianism that shuns blueprints for a habitable future and dismisses traditional modes of political praxis as futile or compromised. The danger is that this tendency may sanction an ethos of paralysis and resignation that is in fact perfectly amenable to the status quo it claims to despise, and that is of little use to marginalized and oppressed peoples struggling to better their material conditions of existence.

The MaddAddam Trilogy's tonal pessimism certainly resonates with Jameson's theory of ideological closure, but the trilogy's unrelenting satire does not spare the avatars of this diagnosis. Late in *Oryx and Crake*, Jimmy is living with his college girlfriend Amanda and her two artist friends. The friends, who are insufferably pretentious, describe society as "a sort of monster, its main by-products being corpses and rubble. It never learned, it made the same cretinous mistakes over and over, trading short-term gain for long-term pain" (243). When Jimmy accuses the artists of offering criticisms rather than answers, they respond that "correct

analysis was one thing but correct solutions were another, and the lack of the latter did not invalidate the former” (243). The trilogy also does not offer solutions, but it is keenly aware that while this stance has a long history in the utopian tradition, it does not provide a strong basis for transformative politics.

The trilogy’s tendency to explore routes to social change only to dismiss them raises questions about the political functions of utopian discourse in the twenty-first century. Is the utopian idea best expressed through wary and minimalistic allowances of hope, or through more brazen images of emancipation? Atwood’s treatment of the eco-friendly Gardeners is satirical, but it is also, in the spirit of utopian ambiguity, rather earnest. It suggests that while this particular utopian vision ultimately failed to transcend its social constraints, it is still, in Jameson’s words, “helpful to wonder” how things might be otherwise.

CHAPTER THREE  
EMBODYING UTOPIAN CONTENT  
IN CHINA MIÉVILLE'S BAS-LAG TRILOGY

To distinguish between utopian discourse and the utopian genre is to argue that there are distinctly utopian patterns of representation and formal organization that can be detached from the traditional genre conventions of the utopian narrative. Chapters One and Two argue that two important tendencies of utopian discourse are its resistance to narrative closure and its dialectical structure. These formal tendencies must, however, organize and act upon some kind of utopian content in the text. Utopian discourse, therefore, is also *constructive*: it posits ethical values, political theories, or modes of social relationality and then frames these as potential building materials for a better society. Utopian content is a necessary component of works of utopian discourse, even in texts that seek to minimize this content in order to navigate the definitional impossibility of imagining utopia. Utopia's contradictory identity as "good place" and "no place" leads texts to embody utopian content in such a way that it works against its own reification; utopian discourse therefore presents its content as dynamic, subject to change, and situated within open and undetermined historical temporalities.

I begin this chapter by discussing major approaches to theorizing utopian content, arguing that these are generally limited by an impulse to assign value to different approaches to instantiating content and an investment in traditional genre categories. I respond to these tendencies by elaborating the more capacious understanding of utopian content outlined above. Finally, I offer a reading of China Miéville's Bas-Lag Trilogy that underscores the limits of



existing theories of utopian content and that demonstrates the specificity of utopian discourse as a mode of engagement with the aesthetics and politics of social betterment. The first two novels of the trilogy are exercises in two differing categories of utopian content: the impulse and the program. *Perdido Street Station* is a novel organized by subtle utopian impulses, while *The Scar* approximates the conventions of the genre utopia by describing a fully formed utopian society. Crucially, however, the utopian content of both novels is ultimately static. In *Perdido Street Station*, it is dormant and unrealized, and in *The Scar*, it is fully realized and resistant to change. *Iron Council*, the third novel, exemplifies utopian discourse by presenting a series of failed utopian programs while writing these failures into an anticipatory, future-oriented temporality. Utopia is continually embodied and continually dissolving, receding into the future, but, in the novel's optimistic closing image, "always coming" (564).

### **Theorizing Utopian Content**

Tom Moylan's compelling work on literary utopianism informs my argument in this dissertation, but it also exemplifies the problematic investment of much utopian theory in the traditional genre categories of utopia, anti-utopia, and dystopia. As such, his work demonstrates some of the limits of this approach while also providing valuable insights into how texts instantiate utopian content. These insights are spread across Moylan's definitions of two subgenres of utopian writing that he terms the "critical utopia" and the "critical dystopia." In his influential book *Demand the Impossible* (1986), where he discusses the revival of the utopian genre in the 1970s, Moylan writes that

A central concern in the critical utopia is the awareness of the limitations of the utopian tradition, so that these texts reject utopia as blueprint while preserving it as dream. Furthermore, the novels dwell on the conflict between the originary world and the utopian society opposed to it so that the process of social change is

more directly articulated. Finally, the novels focus on the continuing presence of difference and imperfection within utopian society itself and thus render more recognizable and dynamic alternatives. (10-11)

Moylan shows how critical utopias internalize and thus undermine two major tropes of anti-utopian arguments: that utopian social organization is unattainable, and that such social organization would necessarily be oppressive. Critical utopias follow the most basic convention of the utopian genre by offering expansive representations of imagined societies framed by the text as radically better than “real world” alternatives, but they differ from earlier narratives by stressing openness, heterogeneity, and a capacity for change as necessary features of any radically better society. The troublesome standard of “perfection” often attributed to the utopian idea is thus rendered irrelevant.

Keeping pace with shifts in cultural production during the 1980s and 1990s, Moylan’s later criticism shifted to a focus on the utopianism of dystopian narratives and the ways in which these narratives can be unlikely vessels for the utopian idea. I discuss his work on dystopia in previous chapters, but I will reiterate here his claim that the utopian functions of dystopian texts tend to be articulated through “utopian enclaves of resistance or horizons of hope beyond the pages of the text” (*Scraps* 180-1). Of course, only some dystopias contain these elements, and this leads Moylan to describe them as “critical dystopias”: dystopias that are framed by the text as historically situated, perforated by dissident elements, and subject to change.

Moylan’s definitions are useful, but they are limited by their attachment to the traditional genre categories that partition utopian thought. To present the “critical utopia” and the “critical dystopia” as separate genres is to suggest that there is a qualitative difference between them, when, I will argue, the difference between them is better understood quantitatively. What

differentiates them is the scale and scope of the utopian content they contain. Critical utopias and critical dystopias mutually 1) imagine non-existent societies, generally set in the future, 2) position these societies as products of historical change that are, therefore, subject to further historical changes, and 3) encode utopian content into the text's narrative form, aesthetic composition, and/or represented social relations. The difference between the critical utopia and critical dystopia is articulated through the third category—utopian content. In a critical utopia, this content is more prominent in the text; in a critical dystopia, it appears on a smaller scale, but its role in the text is the same: to express qualities that could define a better society in a possible future.

The possible textual locations for utopian content can be grouped into two broad categories: *utopian programs* and *utopian impulses*. Utopian programs, for Jameson, are efforts to imagine and implement utopian social organization (*Archaeologies* 3). Most genre utopias represent utopian programs textually while, in some cases, seeking to inspire similar programs in the real world.<sup>1</sup> Jameson presents utopian programs as efforts to activate or embody utopian impulses. Jameson borrows the latter term from Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*, in which, Jameson writes, "Bloch posits a Utopian impulse governing everything future-oriented in life and culture; and encompassing everything from games to patent medicines, from myths to mass entertainment, from iconography to technology, from architecture to eros, from tourism to jokes to the unconscious" (*Archaeologies* 2). What these disparate examples share is that they are all

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to clarify the utopian program's relevance to literary production, specifically. I focus here on how texts *represent* utopian programs. Texts do sometimes participate in, contribute to, or inspire utopian programs, but it is very rare for this to happen on any measurable scale. Bellamy's *Looking Backward* is one of the few examples of a text that inspired utopian programs in the real world. The only recent work in the genre that has had a discernible impact on political praxis is *The Handmaid's Tale*, but it would be problematic to call this impact utopian.

unlikely repositories for radical political energies. Many of these examples would be viewed skeptically by a typical Marxist: myth for its ahistoricism and tourism for its commercialism and its power disparities, for instance. The utopian impulse in such cultural productions and practices is, according to Bloch, evidence of humanity's constant, unconscious longing for a better world.

Utopian discourse, I argue, can articulate utopian impulses on two interrelated textual levels: the text's storyworld and its formal composition. At one point in *The Road*, for instance, the boy plays a tuneless song on a wooden flute that his father has made for him, and the father thinks of it as a "formless music for the age to come" (77). This is a utopian impulse that exists for the characters, coloring their experience of the storyworld and the possibilities it affords. There is no concrete image of a better society, here; there is only a figure of hope (the son) engaging in an act of creation that is defined by its divergence from preexisting aesthetic conventions and its anticipation of a coming future.<sup>2</sup> This moment is an entry in the patterning of textual elements that makes *The Road* itself legible as an artwork animated by utopian impulses. Some of these elements are formal; McCarthy's lyrical prose, for instance, is sometimes read by critics as serving a compensatory function relative to the horrific events that it describes<sup>3</sup>. This argument is most frequently made of *Blood Meridian*, but a similar case can be made for *The Road*. McCarthy's lyrical minimalism both is and is not commensurate with its subject matter.

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<sup>2</sup> Music is a frequent location for utopian content in literature. One of the only discernible utopian impulses in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* occurs immediately before Winston Smith and Julia's capture, when Winston hears a prole woman singing a song and, despite the song's ideological, mass cultural function, hears in it "the vitality which the Party did not share and could not kill" (220). The technically perfect but bloodless music of OneState in *We* is an inverse example—a music devoid of any utopian impulse that is instead a straightforward aesthetic correlate to the state's oppressive structures.

<sup>3</sup> See Steven Frye's "*Blood Meridian* and the Poetics of Violence" (2014).

The novel's short, declarative sentences and clipped dialogues correlate to the post-apocalyptic world's material and conceptual scarcity, but Bloch would observe that the prose contains an aesthetic surplus that exceeds this paralleling of form and content.<sup>4</sup> So, texts can describe utopian impulses in their storyworlds that are available for the characters to perceive, experience, and act upon, and these can complement or interact with utopian impulses in the text's formal structure that are available only for the reader.<sup>5</sup>

Utopian discourse, as I define it in this project, is capacious and eclectic. A non-exhaustive list of textual locations where texts can instantiate utopian content includes: 1) representations of social organization, ranging from large-scale social structures to interpersonal relationships, and including treatments of space and place, 2) patterns of figuration that compress political meanings into the text's imagery, plot, or setting, and 3) formal features such as narrative structure, focalization, or sentence-level stylistics that the text associates with political meanings. I argue that utopian discourse cuts across traditional genre distinctions and that the tendency to assign value to the possible embodiments of utopian content listed above is based on shaky assumptions about reader response and the social efficacy of the literary text. More important than whether a text articulates its utopian content as an impulse or a program is how

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<sup>4</sup> The trajectory of the following passage exemplifies McCarthy's tendency to frame stretches of spare and declarative descriptions with a more lyrical and subjective voice: "Soggy volumes in a bookcase. He took one down and opened it and then put it back. Everything damp. Rotting. In a drawer he found a candle. No way to light it. He put it in his pocket. He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe" (130).

<sup>5</sup> The utopian impulse is thus a fraught and controversial hermeneutic category—the primary danger is that almost anything can be interpreted as a utopian impulse, when to spread the utopian category so widely is to risk making it less meaningful. Jameson notes this when he writes that "To see traces of the Utopian impulse everywhere, as Bloch did, is to naturalize it and to imply that it is somehow rooted in human nature" (*Archaeologies* 10).

the text thematizes this content as “good” and then frames it as a sign of concrete utopian possibility.

### **The Utopianism of Monsters in *Perdido Street Station***

The Bas-Lag Trilogy borrows from a wide range of genres, but it is above all a work of fantasy, and its utopianism is thoroughly imbricated with its fantastical elements. The fantasy genre has not always enjoyed a reputable status within utopian studies. Darko Suvin famously described it as a “subliterature of mystification” in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979), and notable critics reinforced this judgment over the subsequent decades (9).<sup>6</sup> China Miéville has been an important voice in the pushback against this stigma. In a 2013 talk titled “Marxism and Halloween,” he offered a compelling argument for celebrating the fantastical on historical materialist grounds. Central to this argument is the distinction between a pragmatic Marxism that partakes of post-Enlightenment rationalism and a “Gothic Marxism” that spotlights the limits and elisions of that rationalism. According to Margaret Cohen, whom Miéville cites in his talk, a major feature of Gothic Marxism is its “valorization of the realm of a culture’s ghosts and phantasms as a significant and rich field of social production rather than a mirage to be dispelled” (11). Contrary to more secular and “scientific” Marxisms hostile to the supernatural, Gothic Marxism affirms the political importance of images of alterity.

Miéville claims that what lies outside of human knowledge is “awe and dread” (“Halloween”), and that to dismiss the cultural images of this awe and dread is to be complicit

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, Fredric Jameson’s chapter “The Great Schism” in *Archaeologies* builds on Suvin’s definitions while nuancing them, offering a comparatively more positive reading of fantasy while ultimately reinforcing the hierarchical privileging of science fiction.

with rationalism's erasure of the chasm between knowledge and reality. This is one of the pillars of Miéville's Marxist argument for the political utility of monsters.<sup>7</sup> Their radical alterity subverts the rationalist pretension to know the universe: as figures of the unknown and unknowable, monsters enact a subversion of bourgeois epistemologies that is relatable to Marxist ideology critique. Essential to this argument is what Miéville calls the *abcanny*. The *abcanny* is Miéville's response to what he sees as the inadequacy of the Freudian uncanny as an ontology for the monstrous. The uncanny is that in which the familiar and the unfamiliar cohabit. The *abcanny* is that which resides wholly beyond knowledge and recognition; it is, in Miéville's words, that which "we did not know, never knew, could not know, that has always been and will always be unknowable" ("On Monsters" 380). The *abcanny* surfaces frequently in Miéville's fiction, which teems with creatures and phenomena that elude description and that are never fully explained within the texts.

To understand the politics of the *abcanny*, it must be put in conversation with another key concept in Miéville's thought. The *abcanny*, after all, is not the only alterity dwelling in the preconceptual space beyond knowledge: this is also the sea in which utopia is islanded. In his essay "The Limits of Utopia," Miéville acknowledges the most fundamental quandary of utopian thought when he writes that "if we take utopia seriously, as a total reshaping, its scale means we can't think it from this side" (25). In *October*, his account of the Russian Revolution, Miéville describes this ethos of unsayability and deferral as a "political *via negativa*, an apophatic

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<sup>7</sup> The other, more obvious reason why Miéville insists on the importance of monsters is their historically ubiquitous use as a trope in racist, sexist, and classist discourses. According to Miéville, such reactionary usages need to be rigorously criticized, and the figure of monstrousness needs to be appropriated and mobilized toward the more progressive ends described here.

revolutionism” (305). Negative utopianism is woven through Miéville’s fiction and non-fiction, and while he never explicitly links this strain of thought to the abcanny, I argue that the imbrication of these concepts is constitutive of his aesthetic in the Bas-Lag Trilogy.

A moment in Miéville’s essay “Close to the Shore” models this aesthetic by hybridizing two influential figurations of the utopian idea. One of these is Walter Benjamin’s angel of history, propelled into the future by the storm of progress even as he struggles against its momentum and seeks to “make whole what has been smashed” (“Theses” 257). The other is Ursula K. Le Guin’s porcupine, which she borrows from the Swampy Cree phrase “I go backward, look forward, as the porcupine does” (“A Non-Euclidean” 171). Miéville notes the contrasting directionality of these images. Benjamin’s angel moves into the future while gazing into the past; Le Guin’s porcupine moves into the past while gazing into the future. True to his fascination with hybridity, Miéville combines these images into a monstrous figure of utopian praxis: “Our utopianism is always-already a chimera. *Angelus erethizon*: a porcupine with celestial wings; a seraph bristling with spines [...] It will move, perhaps, as it is just possible we might, with a new motion neither and both animal and divine” (“Close” 9). The utopian and the abcanny are domesticated the moment they are concretized into an image, but Miéville resists this through images that strain toward a strangeness resistant to classification, suggested here in the ambiguous dialectic of the “animal and divine.” As Miéville writes in “The Limits of Utopia,” “What utopias are are new Rorschachs. We pour our concerns and ideas out, and then in dreaming we fold the paper to open it again and reveal startling patterns” (25). Miéville’s utopian/abcanny images are hybridic, transgressive, and profoundly strange. They look like monsters from one angle and, from another, like signs of hope.



To situate this aesthetic among the approaches to utopian content outlined in the previous section, it is useful to note the continuities between Gothic Marxism's interest in the politics encoded in "a culture's ghosts and phantasms" and Bloch's insistence on the ubiquity of utopian impulses animating unlikely cultural productions. The utopian impulse is legible as a surplus in the image that exceeds its most literal or obvious meaning; by seizing upon this hidden surplus of meaning, the critic can unlock a subversive reading of the image that rescues it from its ideological function. The utopian/abecanny images in Miéville's work, especially *Perdido Street Station*, are usually monsters that perform a literal role in the novel's plot and setting while also functioning figuratively as signs of the "awe and dread" beyond knowledge, language, and ideology. Strangeness and hybridity, as exemplified by the angelic porcupine, are important features of the monstrous image, but equally important is the aesthetic through which this alterity is mediated. In *Perdido Street Station*, Miéville represents monsters through what I will call an aesthetic of excess, one that consists of exhaustive descriptions that never aggregate into totalizing images of the monsters. These profuse descriptions are the primary means by which the novel inscribes political meaning onto the monstrous body, but the failure of these descriptions to ever add up to a totalizing image preserves the monster's alterity. The monster thus serves as an ideal figure for the utopian/abecanny.

New Crobuzon, the greatest city-state in the fantasy world of Bas-Lag, is a teeming, industrial metropolis populated by humans and a diversity of humanoid "xenian" species. *Perdido Street Station* opens with a traveler emerging from the wilderness and gazing upon the city for the first time, describing it with a blend of rapture and revulsion:

*Its light wells up around the surrounds, the rock hills, like bruise-blood. Its dirty towers glow [...] Railways trace urban anatomy like protruding veins. Red brick*

*and dark walls, squat churches like troglodytic things [...] What trick of topography is this, that lets the sprawling monster hide behind corners to leap out at the traveller? It is too late to flee. (2)*

Here, as in the rest of the trilogy, Miéville's imagery is sensual and grotesque. The city is like a bruise, a network of veins, a crowd of "troglodytic things." This accumulation of likenesses aggregates into an assertion not of similarity, but of identity: simile becomes metaphor. The city is a "sprawling monster."

The monstrous New Crobuzon is a dystopia that, to apply Margaret Atwood's words, contains a "latent" utopia within it (*In Other* 66). *Perdido Street Station* is largely about the signs of this latency. The novel presents the city's governance, economy, urban geography, demographics, and so on as generating a wide range of social contradictions. The city's diversity produces both xenophobia and cosmopolitanism, racial hatred and interracial solidarity; its nascent capitalist economy generates both exploitation and labor unionism; its geographic congestion results in both urban squalor and vibrant, interconnected communal spaces. It is the last of these points that leads Christopher Kendrick to describe the city as having an "immense utopian appeal [...] for all its considerable violence and disorder" ("Socialism" 15). The brutality of the city's authoritarian government, working in tandem with organized crime rings and the major companies, actively suppresses this potential, which remains legible in the constellation of utopian impulses scattered across the city's socio-spatial landscape.

As noted above, however, Miéville also inscribes these politics onto the bodies of literal monsters, such that these monsters become figures for social processes and political formations. Steven Shaviro's 2002 article "Capitalist Monsters," for instance, influentially argues that the slake-moths, the primary monsters in the novel, are figures for capitalism (286-7). This line of

criticism is undoubtedly right to emphasize the novel's anti-capitalism, but it risks overlooking the utopian impulses embedded in these critical elements. This is why Kendrick's comment about New Crobuzon's "immense utopian appeal" is important—it registers that the city's "violence and disorder" are dialectically paired with countervailing utopian tendencies generated by the same set of social preconditions ("Socialism" 15).

Perhaps the clearest example of this aesthetic logic in which the monstrous, the capitalistic, and the utopian converge is a description of New Crobuzon's most representative citizen: a Remade mob boss named Mr. Motley. "Remaking" is a punitive measure practiced by New Crobuzon's authoritarian government. Criminals, dissidents, and so forth are sent to "punishment factories" where their bodies are surgically altered, most often through the addition of animal and/or mechanical parts. The logic of Remaking is usually straightforwardly punitive. A Remaking might make the performance of daily tasks exceedingly painful or difficult, or the Remaking might reflect the individual's crime in some way. Sometimes, because the Remade are used for slave labor, a Remaking might make an individual's body more suited to a particular kind of manual labor.

The most monstrous case of Remaking in the trilogy is undertaken willingly, and for aesthetic rather than punitive reasons. Motley has paid to have his body Remade so thoroughly that it has become a hybridic assemblage of organic parts that the novel only describes in fragments. Readers first encounter Motley through Lin, an artist whom Motley commissions to create a sculpture of him:

Scraps of skin and fur and feathers swung as he moved; tiny limbs clutched; eyes rolled from obscure niches; antlers and protrusions of bone jutted precariously; feelers twitched and mouths glistened. Many-coloured skeins of skin collided. A cloven hoof thumped gently against the wood floor. Tides of flesh washed against

each other in violent currents. Muscles tethered by alien tendons to alien bones worked together in uneasy truce, in slow, tense motion. Scales gleamed. Fins quivered. Wings fluttered brokenly. Insect claws folded and unfolded. (42)

The grammatical parsing of this passage into staccato independent clauses reflects the fragmentation of Motley's body and the fitful nature of Lin's apprehension of it. Her gaze does not linger on any one of his parts; it instead skips from fragment to fragment, all of which are in motion (note the recurring subject-verb structure and the scarcity of objects). This is not a sustained contemplation of a static object, but rather a dynamic and failing effort to perceive something that continually frustrates perception. Importantly, this paragraph-long description, vivid and detailed as it is, gives very little sense of what Motley actually looks like.<sup>8</sup> What this passage dramatizes is the chasm between phenomenology and ontology, the incommensurability of the perception with an object that exceeds it. Miéville undertakes the paradoxical task of describing the indescribable through a representational procedure of expansive—even compulsive—description that fails to aggregate into any coherent image of its object. What this self-conscious failure of representation communicates is sheer alterity.<sup>9</sup>

Motley's body is an example of the *abcanny* because it is a totality that cannot be conveyed as such in language, or apprehended as such by the perceiving subject, who can only

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<sup>8</sup> Motley notably insists of his body later in the novel "This is totality" (115).

<sup>9</sup> Miéville sometimes represents the *abcanny* through an aesthetic minimalism that declines description of the *abcanny* object and instead defaults to thematic reflections on its indescribability. In another early moment in *Perdido Street Station*, the protagonist Isaac Dan der Grimnebulin describes a region of Bas-Lag called the Cacotopic Stain, which was transformed years before by a deadly supernatural force called "the Torque." The region, he says, is populated by "things I wouldn't even bother trying to describe [...] makes a total mockery of our sentience [...] the Torque is unknowable" (232). Here, we see a minimalism that does not seek to describe the indescribable object, but that instead underscores its indescribability as its defining characteristic. This is not, however, the dominant aesthetic of the trilogy.

respond to it with “astonishment and terror” (42), and a frantic and failing effort to comprehend it.<sup>10</sup> Carl Freedman’s reading of *Perdido Street Station* politicizes Motley’s body by treating it as a figure for global capitalism. He writes that “the almost unimaginable Motley [...] personifies the increasing multiplication of commodities during the current epoch [...] As capital becomes more and more nearly ubiquitous, it becomes [...] more and more difficult to see or grasp” (38). Freedman’s reading illuminates an aesthetic continuity between Miéville’s representation of monstrosity and his representation of capitalism, one which is clearly apt given Motley’s role in the plot as an organized crime boss allied with New Crobuzon’s government and its capitalists. William Burling has made a similar argument, claiming that “the collective details of [Motley’s] physical appearance serve as a metaphor for the nearly incomprehensible complexities of capitalism” (334). What these readings omit is the way that this same aesthetic organizes Miéville’s treatment of a third ungraspable totality: utopia. Motley is a capitalist monster, in Shaviro’s terminology, but he is also a utopian monster.

Motley does not figure global capitalism and utopia in separate moments; he instead figures the latency of the latter within the former, and in that sense, he is a synecdoche for New Crobuzon, itself. What makes Motley an embodiment of capitalism? As Freedman notes, Motley’s body is an assemblage of commodities insofar as he bought them and paid for their surgical attachment (38). Given that each part (wings, scales, fins, and so on) is itself a synecdoche for one of Bas-Lag’s xenian species, he represents the commodification of cultural and racial difference under global capitalism. The riotous cacophony among these parts, as in the

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<sup>10</sup> Lin’s “astonishment and terror” echoes the “awe and dread” that Miéville associates in “Marxism and Halloween” with the encounter with the unknowable.

line “Tides of flesh washed against each other in violent currents,” figures New Crobuzon’s interspecies violence, and more broadly the racial tensions that ensue when multiculturalism and diversity are contained within a global capitalist system that foments economic competition between races and nations.

Around the same time that Miéville was writing *Perdido Street Station*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argued that while global capitalism is extractive and exploitative, it also establishes the conduits of trade and communication that, if democratized and put in service of “the multitude,” could provide the infrastructure for an interconnected and multicultural world organized on a more equitable basis than that afforded by capitalism.<sup>11</sup> Motley’s body valorizes the species-differences that in New Crobuzon occasion so much xenophobia and violence. Irreducible difference and diversity are, here, constitutive of wholeness. This diversity is not organized hierarchically—in the description excerpted above, there are no locational markers. Miéville democratizes the metaphor of body as polity by making Motley into a chaotic intermingling of parts, none of which are subordinated to any other. And, as Motley himself insists, this chaos constitutes an aesthetic unity.<sup>12</sup> There are reasons to take this assertion seriously, despite the fact that Motley is one of the novel’s chief villains. His soliloquies about the aesthetics of the “hybrid zone” are metacommentaries on the composition of the novel itself

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<sup>11</sup> See *Empire* (2000).

<sup>12</sup> There is a utopian impulse, too, in Motley’s bending of Remaking to aesthetic ends. Derkhan, an art critic and writer for a revolutionary newspaper called *Runagate Rampant*, tells Isaac at one point that writing about art and revolution is “the same thing [...art is] a bringing together of...of everything around you into something that makes you more human, more khepri, whatever. More of a person. Even with Remaking a germ of that survives” (94). This appropriation of Remaking—a torturous instrument of the state—as a metaphor for art and revolution is elaborated more thoroughly in *Iron Council*.

(41), and these principles, as indicated above, are also essential to the novel's utopian content. The utopian impulses of Motley's body are suppressed by the character's more loathsome qualities, just as the utopian impulses of New Crobuzon are suppressed by its authoritarianism, inequality, and so on.

As this analogy between New Crobuzon and Motley suggests, *Perdido Street Station's* utopian content manifests on at least two textual levels: the literal social struggles that occupy one of its major subplots, centered on a strike of vodyanoi dock-workers, and the metaphoric encoding of these struggles in the primary narrative of monster hunting.<sup>13</sup> These plots have different outcomes, however. The vodyanoi strike is brutally suppressed by the militia, and a separate militia detachment concurrently raids the headquarters of the dissident newspaper *Runagate Rampant*, destroying the press and arresting its leader. There is little indication that radical social change is possible in New Crobuzon's near-future, and the city's utopian impulses remain dormant. *Perdido Street Station's* approach to navigating the representational problems posed by radical social change is to shift the primary locus of utopian content from the strike plot, which ends midway through the novel, to the monster-hunting plot. As Freedman and Kendrick have argued, this is not a shift away from political engagement but rather a resituating of the novel's politics in its metaphorical structures, where the overturning of capitalism can be enacted figuratively (*Art 41*, "Socialism" 20).

The monster-hunting narrative follows Isaac, a scientist and inventor, as he seeks to destroy the slake-moths that he unwittingly helped to unleash upon the city. Slake-moths are large, winged insects with kaleidoscopic patterns on their wings that they use to hypnotize their

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<sup>13</sup> Vodyanoi are an amphibious humanoid species that share characteristics with frogs.

prey. The slake-moths feed on dreams. Their wings, in the words of one character, “tap the frequencies of the dreams that are...ah...*bubbling* under the surface of the sentient mind. They focus them, draw them out into the surface” (374). Once the dreams have been brought to the “surface” of the victim’s mind, the slake-moth drinks them, leaving behind a zombified body drained of sentience. The slake-moths were brought to New Crobuzon as part of a government research project, but when their management proves to be too dangerous and costly, the government sells them to Motley. Motley values the slake-moths because their feces—the invisible residue of digested dreams—is an ingredient in a potent hallucinogenic drug called “dreamshit,” which allows the user to experience the dreams of the slake-moth’s victims. A complicated series of events results in Isaac acquiring a caterpillar that, unbeknownst to him, is a slake-moth in its larval stage. When the caterpillar metamorphoses into a mature slake-moth, it escapes from its enclosure and rescues the slake-moths then being held by Motley, and they begin to prey upon the city’s populace. As they fly about digesting their meals, the slake-moths’ feces rain down upon the city, fertilizing the population’s sleep and causing an epidemic of nightmares that creates further sustenance for the slake-moths.

Isaac and his companions ultimately destroy the slake-moths by using the novel’s primary science fictional conceit: crisis energy. Crisis energy is a latent force inhering in all matter that is generated out of the tensions within it. According to the ontology of crisis theory, reality itself is constituted by unstable tensions between contradictory forces.<sup>14</sup> Isaac builds a crisis engine, a machine designed to harness crisis energy, and uses it to kill the slake-moths.

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<sup>14</sup> The real-world referent for this theory is dialectical materialism, which asserted, among other things, that nature is organized dialectically. This invocation of dialectical materialism carries a complicated history with it, given that tradition’s association with a range of Soviet pseudo-sciences under Stalin.



Shaviro, Freedman, and Kendrick have all found a robust anti-capitalist politics encoded in this narrative. Freedman reads the slake-moths as metaphors for capitalist production, likening their predatory consumption of dreams to capitalism's consumption of the productive capacities of the infinitely replaceable worker. Freedman describes this as "the vampiric function of capital, sucking the creative powers and ultimately the life out of the wage-earning proletariat" (33). In Kendrick's similar argument, the zombified slake-moth victim is the consumer of a thoroughly commodified mass culture. He likens the slake-moths to "television, or more generally, the culture industry": a medium for ideological spectacles that deaden the subject's creative and critical faculties ("Monster Realism" 270). Importantly, for both Freedman and Kendrick, the capitalist monsters are undone by the dialectical force of the crisis engine. The dialectic destroys capitalism.

The struggle against capitalism fails in the strike plot only to be sublimated into the metaphorical relations of the monster-hunting plot, where the opposite outcome is achieved. As Kendrick argues, "the moth plot is only a continuation by other, broader fantastic means of the social struggle for the city. It thus helps to make Isaac's crew [...] legible as a working-class alliance, and its rescue of the city's imagination an epiphany of class consciousness" ("Socialism" 20). I will add to this that the slake-moth plot also dramatizes the limitations of a Marxist politics organized primarily by anti-capitalist critique. As is true of Motley, the slake-moths are capitalist monsters, but they also have other referents that need to be identified in order to clarify the novel's utopianism.

While the novel's descriptions of the slake-moths are more comprehensive than the descriptions of Motley, such that they lack the performative inadequacy of the latter, we learn

that one reason why the slake-moths are so difficult to kill is that they “live in several planes” in addition to the material (379). The descriptions on the page only apply to one of their planar embodiments. As is true of Motley, the slake-moths are overdetermined figurative intersections for the abcanny, for capitalism, and for utopia. The novel’s first description of a slake-moth occurs when the one Isaac has been raising escapes from its cage and hypnotizes Isaac’s colleague, Lublamai. Miéville writes of the slake-moth’s wings that “They were irregular, chaotic in shape, random fluid whorls; but mirror-perfect left and right, like spilt ink or paint patterns on folded paper” (254). Compare this to the quotation excerpted above from Miéville’s “The Limits of Utopia”: “What utopias are are new Rorschachs. We pour our concerns and ideas out, and then in dreaming we fold the paper to open it again and reveal startling patterns.” Miéville uses the same image to describe the dream-stirring patterns on the slake-moth’s wings and the Rorschach-like contours of utopian alterity. This parallel, regardless of any intentionality on Miéville’s part, can catalyze questions about how the slake-moths’ wings, full of beautiful and shifting patterns that stimulate the subject’s dreams, might carry more positive political meanings.

Kendrick’s comparison of the slake-moths to television and the culture industry is particularly useful, here. In this reading, the moths are figures for a mass culture that lures the subject into consumption of cultural productions saturated by ideology. As Bloch has argued, however, even the most degraded and commodified of cultural productions contain utopian impulses. An example of this is his argument about advertisements.<sup>15</sup> The advertisement’s cheap and tawdry appeal to desire as a way of motivating commodity consumption has a utopian

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<sup>15</sup> See pages 343-344 of *The Principle of Hope*.

impulse within it. The advertisement channels the subject's dissatisfaction with his or her conditions of existence into desire for a commodity that will ostensibly satisfy the subject's want. When the acquisition of the commodity does not, in fact, allay the desire, the cycle begins again. The structure of feeling that the advertisement elicits is, at its core, utopian. It is predicated on a desire for betterment, on the subject's recognition of lack in his or her current condition and the subsequent will to fulfill that lack through action. The problem is that this structure of feeling is commandeered by consumerism, such that its energy is redirected into channels that perpetuate capitalism rather than challenging it. Commodity culture thus works "to transform every real and possible need into a weakness" (Bloch 344).

There is a similar process at work in the slake-moths' relationship to their victims' dreams. The slake-moths are indeed monstrous embodiments of television and of mass culture, but the utopian impulses within these phenomena are preserved in their inscription onto the monstrous body. When Miéville uses the Rorschach image as a metaphor for utopian production, he differentiates between two stages of creation: 1) the pouring of ideas onto the page, and 2) the *dreaming* that folds the paper in two and then opens it to "reveal startling patterns." It is the process of dreaming that injects the utopian vision with strangeness and alterity, that makes it both more and less than a blueprint.<sup>16</sup> The slake-moths stimulate this creative potential that could be mobilized toward positive ends, but they then siphon it off and leave behind a living corpse: a figure for the subject whose creative capacities are drained by capitalist production and whose desires for a better life are channeled into consumerism.

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<sup>16</sup> Miéville is not the only author to use dreaming as a metaphor for utopian production—the most famous example is Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971), which literalizes the metaphor through a protagonist whose dreams alter reality.

To identify *Perdido Street Station*'s capitalist monsters as simultaneously being utopian monsters is to see them as constituted by contradiction and, in the language of the novel, crisis. Crisis theory states that the ontology of things is dialectical, that things have a natural tendency to become their opposites. New Crobuzon and its monsters are all defined in the time-present of the narrative by capitalism, but they contain its suppressed opposite as well. The utopian impulses documented above are signs of this subordinated opposite that everything in the novel tends toward.

In *Perdido Street Station*, it is the activation of crisis that leads to the metaphorical destruction of capitalism. The crisis that Isaac initiates involves two of the novel's monstrous characters: the Weaver, a massive interdimensional spider who performs a sort of aesthetic maintenance on the fabric of reality, and the Construct Council, a self-aware network of robots. The Weaver's interventions in reality are organized by an esoteric aesthetic sense that to human perception is aimless and inscrutable, and it speaks in a roiling, unmediated stream of consciousness. "For the Weaver," Isaac realizes, "dreams and consciousness were one" (630). The Construct Council is the Weaver's psychological opposite. Its calculations are rational and amoral. Isaac feeds these two psychic streams into his crisis engine, where they encounter a third input: the consciousness of a dying man named Andrej. The crisis is initiated when the engine registers that the Weaver/Council inputs, taken additively as one consciousness constituted by dreams and rationality, is both identical and not identical to Andrej's consciousness. Analyzing the relationship between these inputs, "the crisis engine arrived at two simultaneous conclusions:  $x=y+z$ ; and  $x\neq y+z$ . The operation that had been carried out was profoundly unstable. It was paradoxical, unsustainable, the application of logic tearing itself apart" (633). Neither the

Weaver, the Council, nor the various human and xenian characters succeed independently in destroying the slake-moths. When Isaac routes all these inputs through the crisis engine, however, they unleash an unimaginable power that explodes the capitalist monsters.

Dreams and rationality: this combination evokes Miéville's advocacy for a Gothic Marxism that welds the tradition's scientific aspirations to a recognition of the importance of societies' dreamworlds. Crucially, however, this dialectic is translated into praxis only when brought into contact with a proletarian subject (Andrej). This conclusion figuratively enacts the destruction of capitalism that fails in the novel's strike plot, but this does not lead to any change in social relations in New Crobuzon, itself. Isaac and his companions have saved the city, but they are then forced to flee from the New Crobuzon militia and from Motley's henchmen. The conclusion is bittersweet, and it is important to note that there is no discernible utopian orientation to the narrative's conclusion. In the literal social world of the novel, the dominance of New Crobuzon's authoritarian capitalist ruling class remains intact. In the monster-hunting plot, capitalism has been detonated, but so have the latent utopian impulses within it. This is a novel about the crisis energy inhering in global capitalism, its precipitous inclination toward its latent utopian opposite. The destruction of the slake-moths metaphorically undoes this crisis.

The aftermath of the final confrontation with the slake-moths suggests that the Weaver, at least, sees something lost in their destruction. Isaac looks down on the slake-moth corpses and sees that "Their wings had faded to a pale, drab dun, without pattern or variation" (654), and the Weaver suggests "PATTERNS INHERE EVEN IN THESE THE VORACIOUS ONES PERHAPS I JUDGE QUICK AND SLICK TASTES FALTER AND ALTER AND I AM UNSURE" (654). This passage leads Sandy Rankin to write that "The Weaver, UNSURE,

recognizes his kinship with the slake-moths and recognizes patterns of dynamic possibility even in the murderous/voracious slake moths [as] fragments of immanent utopian potential” (253). This reading is part of Rankin’s larger argument that the Weaver is a utopian figure and that “we need not only rational, strategic Marxism, but also Bloch’s *weird* speculative philosophy, a vastly hopeful Marxist philosophy” (249). These traditions, the novel indicates, complement each other. The Weaver is unable to defeat the slake-moths on its own: it is only when the Weaver’s dream-consciousness is joined with the Construct Council’s AI-consciousness that it is able to initiate the crisis. This is a Marxism in which the irrational and the rational are bound together in a dialectical unity, and in which neither element dominates the other.

The aesthetic excess of *Perdido Street Station* primarily works by overdetermining its settings, monsters, and so on to reveal the utopian impulses within them. The utopian content, here, consists of these impulses scattered across the social and metaphorical landscapes of the storyworld.<sup>17</sup> It engages the utopian idea through understated and even covert means, lending it a minimal degree of content while refraining from any large-scale act of construction. Where *Perdido Street Station* differs from, for instance, *On Such a Full Sea* is in its comparatively closed ending, which lacks the optimistic orientation toward utopia of the other novel. In the terms of Chapters One and Two, the novel is rigorously dialectical, but it is not anticipatory. Its utopian dialectics terminate in the novel’s conclusion in stasis and an apparently thorough

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<sup>17</sup> There are moments in *Perdido Street Station* that prefigure the more robust acts of utopian construction in *The Scar* and *Iron Council*, however. It includes numerous scattered descriptions of communities beyond and within New Crobuzon with varying political charges, some of them positive. Perhaps the most notable of these occurs early in the narrative, when a character describes garuda social organization. The garuda are a winged humanoid species seemingly related to eagles; they live in a desert region where they practice a form of egalitarianism based on a value system that takes individual choice as its organizing principle. Such constructive moments occur on a small scale and are not central to the narrative. Larger scale visions of utopian social organization are deferred to the later novels.

reinscription of the oppressive status quo. *Perdido Street Station* should therefore be understood as the first stage of the Bas-Lag Trilogy's experiment in utopian discourse; it shows that for utopian content to function as a sign of hope and possibility, it must be organized within an anticipatory historical (and narrative) temporality.

### ***The Scar, Iron Council, and the Route(s) to Utopia***

I devote more space in this chapter to the New Crobuzon-centered novels in the trilogy due to their continuities of plot, setting, and theme, but the second novel, *The Scar*, also contributes to the trilogy's utopian project in ways that bear mentioning here. In generic terms, *The Scar* is *Perdido Street Station*'s opposite: a utopia rather than a dystopia. Here, however, I emphasize the novels' discursive similarity due to their mutual positioning of their utopian contents—different though they are—within temporalities that cast doubt on the possibility of radically positive social change.

Bellis Coldwine, the protagonist of *The Scar*, is a former lover of Isaac Dan der Grimnebulin fleeing New Crobuzon upon learning that Isaac's friends and colleagues are being arrested and questioned by the city militia. She boards a ship bound for a colony of New Crobuzon called Nova Esperium, but, en route to the colony, the ship is commandeered by pirates from the floating city of Armada. In Armada, Bellis and her fellow passengers find a relatively egalitarian society that ignores the caste-distinction between Remade and "whole" that organizes much of social life in New Crobuzon.

Built of hundreds of ships lashed together with ropes and walkways and organized into a federation of semi-autonomous boroughs called "ridings," Armada slowly chugs its way through the seas of Bas-Lag, surviving on an opportunistic combination of piracy and trade. This,

however, is a society enabled by a particular set of historical determinants—namely, the fact that Bas-Lag is just entering its colonial period, and there are still many blank, or at least hazy, spaces on New Crobuzon’s maps of the globe.<sup>18</sup> Armada is by far the most fully realized “good” society in the trilogy, and the novel is largely about its material conditions of possibility. These, Freedman argues, are endangered by the rise of capitalism and colonialism, which are beginning to establish the durable conduits of trade and communication that will facilitate the gradual closure of global space, shrinking the spaces on the map not yet fully incorporated into the spheres of influence of New Crobuzon and the other major city-states (64).

An overlooked feature of the novel is its representation of global space, which continues some of the aesthetic patterns of *Perdido Street Station*. While the earlier novel is preceded by a fairly detailed map of New Crobuzon, the later two novels, which are largely set elsewhere in Bas-Lag, are conspicuously map-less. Instead, the novel orients its readers and its characters through exhaustive narrative descriptions of global space, ones that, reminiscent of the earlier novel, are characterized by a performative insufficiency. Space, for the characters as for the reader, is discursively constructed. Consider, for instance, Bellis’s reflection on the Gengris, a grindy-low-controlled region through which New Crobuzon hopes to build a trade route:

At its easternmost edge, Cold Claw Sea was separated from the saltwater of the Swollen Ocean by a tiny strip of land: a ribbon of mountainous rock less than thirty miles wide. The sea’s sharp southernmost tip—the point of the talon—was almost directly north of New Crobuzon, more than seven hundred miles away [...] lodged like an impurity in the sea’s jag was an extraordinary, dangerous place, something between an island, a half-sunk city, and a myth. An amphibious badland about which the civilized world knew next to nothing except that it existed and that it was dangerous. (134)

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<sup>18</sup> See Freedman’s chapter on *The Scar* in *Art and Idea* and Kendrick’s “Monster Realism” for discussions of *The Scar*’s representation of the historical transition from mercantilism to capitalism.



There are many passages like this in the novel, where detailed descriptions and quantifications of geography slur into myth and speculation. This concern with the discursive construction of space allows *The Scar* not only to replicate a period of “real world” historical change, but also to allegorize the generic shift effectuated in the utopian genre by that change. Colonial encounters—in the Americas, for instance—initially served as an inspiration and catalyst for utopian narratives that placed their utopias in uncolonized regions. Early modern utopias, following More’s *Utopia* (1516), were most often set in remote parts of globe as yet relatively unknown to Europeans; Susan Bruce writes that these utopias “insisted on the location in real space of the communities they described [and] rejected any temporal relocation” (xii). The colonization of global space eventually contributed to a different approach to literary utopian production, as temporal rather than spatial dislocation became the genre’s primary mechanism of estrangement.

*The Scar* is concerned with how the globe’s increasing consolidation under a totalizing economic and political system—a process ominously beginning in Bas-Lag—shrinks the spaces in which autonomous utopias can exist or be imagined.<sup>19</sup> Bellis understands the consequences of this process when she reflects late in the novel that if the city succeeds in taking the Gengris “A constellation of places that were so far little more than myth would open to New Crobuzon. With trade, colonies, and all that they entailed” (576). *The Scar*, despite containing the most highly developed utopian content in the trilogy—and following the genre conventions of the utopian narrative most closely—lacks an anticipatory temporality. The upheavals in Armadan society

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<sup>19</sup> A reference in *Iron Council* to the possibility of grindylow serving with the New Crobuzon militia suggests that the city eventually succeeds in incorporating the Gengris into its empire (351).

throughout the narrative conclude in a reinscription of the status quo, and this return to normalcy is contextualized within a broader historical temporality that casts doubt on the sustainability of the Armadan model.<sup>20</sup> As Freedman points out, “the pirate utopia of Armada must inevitably be a fragile, temporary one [...] as imperialism achieves a firmer and firmer grip on the nations and sea-routes of Bas-Lag, Armada must, surely, be suppressed eventually” (64). *The Scar* is only the second stage in the trilogy’s utopian project, however. It goes on, in *Iron Council*, to imagine a more dynamic utopianism, one that, instead of struggling to establish and maintain a “good place” in the interstices of imperial power, seeks to transform its center.

*Iron Council* is a complex mediation between utopian impulse and realized utopian society. It centers on the failed efforts of revolutionaries to translate the former into the latter, but the novel’s final pages concretize this failure into an image of hope and possibility. Utopia is continually being filled with and drained of content throughout *Iron Council* as it seeks to work through trial and error to a vision of the good place that never quite materializes, but that, in the final words of the novel, is “always coming” (564). The novel is thus a prolonged effort to imagine utopian content while navigating the good place/no place contradiction on which the concept of utopia is predicated, modeling utopian discourse within a complex intersection of genre conventions that cannot be classified under the traditional rubric of utopia, anti-utopia, and dystopia.

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<sup>20</sup> Sherryl Vint argues that *The Scar*’s conclusion does, in fact, leave open utopian possibility. This argument is based on the role of possibility theory in the novel. She argues that “Tanner’s revolutionary moment thus does not mark the end of the novel or the process of social struggle but instead leaves the horizon open to new possibilities” (284). Vint compellingly demonstrates that possibility theory has a utopian dimension, but her reading of the conclusion is troubled by the fact that Tanner’s uprising prevents Armada from engaging in “possibility mining” and instead reinstates the status quo.

*Iron Council* is divided into thirty-five chapters and ten parts, but there is a more basic tripartite organization to the narrative. In the first part, New Crobuzon is on the verge of revolution, and a council of revolutionary groups called “the Caucus” is organizing the city’s working classes. Judah Low, one of the novel’s protagonists, learns that the government has discovered the location of the Iron Council: an egalitarian community that lives on and around a perpetually moving train. Judah, followed by a group of friends, leaves the city to warn the Iron Council that the militia is pursuing it. This narrative is interwoven with the story of a young Caucus-member named Ori, who becomes frustrated with the Caucus’s slow grassroots organizing and leaves it to join a group of vigilantes and assassins led by a mysterious figure named Toro. The second part of the narrative, titled “Anamnesis: The Perpetual Train,” is a long flashback that describes Judah’s backstory and the origins of the Iron Council. Years before the main narrative, a New Crobuzon company called the Transcontinental Railroad Trust (TRT) sought to build a railroad across the continent to facilitate trade and expand the city’s influence. Judah takes part in an uprising of railroad workers who commandeer the train and create an egalitarian society around it. The Iron Councilors continually disassemble the tracks behind the train and re-lay them ahead of it, so that the train never stops moving and can slowly rove across the continent. The final part of the novel narrates the Iron Council’s journey back to New Crobuzon as the Caucus morphs into a new entity called the Collective and begins a revolution against New Crobuzon’s ruling class.

There are three social groups, each correlated with a specific praxis, that contribute to *Iron Council*’s utopian content: the stiltspear, the Iron Council, and the Caucus/Collective. None of these three are presented as a replicable model for a utopian society, but they are all organized

by qualities that the novel frames as better than the available alternatives in the storyworld. The novel also contains metaphorical relations similar to those described above in *Perdido Street Station*, in which monsters and science fictional concepts become locations for theorizing utopia and revolution.

Of the societies referenced above, the stiltspear appear first, and they are essential to the novel's theorizing of history, imperialism, and the relationship between what Benjamin calls "the oppressed past" and utopian programs in the present ("Theses" 263). The "Anamnesis" section opens with Judah working as an agent for the TRT. Agents like Judah are sent ahead of the work crews to perform ethnographies of the indigenous peoples that the train will eventually encounter as it cuts across the continent. Judah is assigned to study the stiltspear—a xenian species of tree-people who live in a vast wetland southwest of New Crobuzon. After spending time with the stiltspear, Judah becomes fascinated with their culture. They live in small tribal units; their villages are integrated into the wetland such that they have little impact on the environment, and their social relations seem to be relatively peaceful and egalitarian. Their "language is deep-structured with courtesy. To be rude takes effortful and irregular declensions" (151). Stiltspear culture and social relations thus differ radically from New Crobuzon's, which are embodied most immediately by the TRT. The stiltspear have roughly the same relationship to the TRT and New Crobuzon that Native American tribes had to, for instance, the Union Pacific Railroad and the nineteenth century United States more generally.

In keeping with *Iron Council's* engagement with the genre conventions of the Western, Judah evokes the character-type of the male Anglo-American subject who "goes native" upon encountering an indigenous community that he identifies with and, in some cases, sides with

against his fellow colonizers. One problem with this trope is that it tends to involve an uncritical romanticizing of the indigenous community that perpetuates stereotypes of the “noble savage” variety. This is what Miéville resists, however.<sup>21</sup> The stiltspear—murdered, dispossessed, and displaced by the TRT—figure modernity’s history of imperial violence, but they are not presented in the novel as a replicable model for a utopian society. Their utopian function is more complicated. During his ethnography, Judah sees stiltspear children using thaumaturgy—the trilogy’s term for practices that are part magic and part science—to create mobile figurines out of mud and sticks. Adult stiltspear use a related technique—an intervention in time rather than in matter—to catch fish. They perform a rhythmic chant that immobilizes the fish by trapping it in a singular moment isolated out of the sequential flow of time. This kind of thaumaturgy is called, in the language of the novel, golemetry. Golemery is the creation of golems: it is an intervention in some preexisting substance of reality that shapes it into a particular form and then sets it in motion. Judah eventually masters golemery and uses it as a weapon on behalf of the Iron Council; more importantly, as the novel’s primary science fictional conceit, it assumes the role performed by crisis energy in *Perdido Street Station* and becomes a metaphor for revolution.

Miéville strives here for a meditation on utopia and indigeneity that is more complicated and nuanced than that offered by, for instance, Le Guin’s *The Word for World is Forest* (1976) and *Always Coming Home* (1985), both of which offer societies modelled on Native American cultures as relatively straightforward utopian alternatives. Miéville’s intervention in this subset of utopian thought affirms its impulses while avoiding its wholesale positioning of utopian hope

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<sup>21</sup> In his “Marxism and Halloween” talk, Miéville describes James Cameron’s *Avatar*, probably the most popular science fictional iteration of this trope, as racist.

in a romanticized, non-Western past. In “Close to the Shore,” Miéville pointedly notes that Sir Thomas More’s eponymous island has a colonial history. The island that became Utopia was once a peninsula with a civilization of its own called Abraxa. King Utopus conquered Abraxa and enslaved its inhabitants, using their labor to dig a vast trench sundering the new kingdom, Utopia, from the mainland. The interminable recurrence of such processes of conquest and renaming throughout real world history leads Miéville to insist that “A start for any habitable utopia must be to overturn the ideological bullshit of empire, and, unsentimentally but respectfully, to revisit the traduced and defamed cultures on the bones of which some conqueror’s utopian dreams were piled up” (7).

Judah rushes to document stiltspear culture before it disappears forever, but he ultimately leaves them to rejoin the TRT and use golemetry to aid the revolution against it. Judah thus enacts Miéville’s call to “revisit” and learn from the cultures effaced by imperialism without romanticizing them—still, however, putting what he learns in service of a future-oriented praxis. This is the meaning of Miéville’s angelic porcupine: utopianism must move forward while looking to the past, and move backward while looking to the future, equipped to rescue the memory of what has been lost and to remobilize it in the fight for what is to come.

Golemety’s metaphorical function is first suggested in the “Anamnesis” section.<sup>22</sup> A friend of Judah’s who studies golemetry in New Crobuzon’s university describes the practice as follows:

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<sup>22</sup> The stiltspear are, again, an indigenous people who most immediately evoke the Native American tribes massacred and displaced by the United States’ western expansion, but golemety’s real world origin in Judaism also needs to be registered. Judah is named after the historical rabbi Judah Loew who legendarily created a golem to protect the Jewish community of sixteenth century Prague.

The unalive, though, is inert because it *happens to lie just so*. We make it meaningful. We do not order it but point out the order that inheres unseen, always already there. This act of pointing is at least as much assertion and persuasion as observation. We see structure, and in pointing it out we see mechanisms and grasp them, and we twist. Because patterns are asserted not in stasis but in change. Golemetry is an *interruption*. It is a subordinating of the static *IS* to the active *AM*. (205)

As is the case in *Perdido Street Station*, Miéville's monsters and science fictional concepts are politically overdetermined, even though *Iron Council*'s telling of revolution is much more literal than that of the earlier novel. Golemetry's metaphors are similar to those of crisis theory. Both golemetry and crisis theory assert that the material world is organized by invisible structures that, if properly acted upon, allow the subject to wield immense power. As Judah reflects at one point not long before the railroad uprising, "*Golemetry's an argument, an intervention*" (208). The golem-maker looks upon matter and apprehends the hidden order within it, the patterns by which it is organized, the lines of tension and connection. The golemetric "argument," "persuasion," or "intervention" then urges this matter into a determinate shape and sets it in motion—in defense of the oppressed and against the ruling classes. The order of the material entity that can be reshaped and urged into motion is analogous to what Marx saw as industrial capitalism's unwitting organization of the working class into socio-spatial coordinates that could, with the right catalyst, slip instantaneously from passivity into action, stasis into change.<sup>23</sup>

The TRT relies on both Remade and "free and whole" workers for its project, but the former are slaves while the latter work as wage-laborers. When the TRT's funds begin to disappear and payments to the wage-laborers become infrequent, they begin to strike. In one of the early strikes against the TRT, when the wage-laborers put down their tools, "Judah stands

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<sup>23</sup> See Part I of "The Manifesto of the Communist Party" (1848).

among them, as shudder with excitement [...] *An intervention*, he thinks” (221), linking the strike’s intervention in the power relations surrounding the train project to golemetry’s intervention in the fabric of reality, itself. Ultimately, the work stoppages lead to a moment of violent conflict that literalizes the golemetry metaphor. The TRT’s security force is beating a Remade boy as a mass of workers looks on, and, as he stands among the workers, “Judah feels the thing in him reach out, the oddness and the good in him reach out and push them, and it makes him *smile* even in this blooded heat, and they move” (241). Judah imagines the mass of workers as a golem organized and urged into motion by the “good” within him. The workers drive off the security force overseeing them, commandeer the train, and flee across the continent, engaging in multiple battles with the TRT and the New Crobuzon militia before they successfully escape. Judah’s actual golems—made of dirt, railroad ties, and whatever other materials lie at hand—are here as elsewhere integral to the revolutionaries’ success.

The Iron Councilors level the caste distinction between Remade and “whole.” Most of the free wage-laborers flee the train after the uprising, but some, including Judah and his occasional lover Ann-Hari, who emerges as the Council’s leader, remain with the Remade. The Councilors express comradeship by calling each other “sister,” renouncing the masculinism of the term “brother” (265).<sup>24</sup> Ann-Hari, evoking *Perdido Street Station*’s conflation of the monstrous and the utopian, describes the uprising as a “Remaking” (251). Remaking is a practice that

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<sup>24</sup> The invented term “chaver” is also used by the novel’s revolutionaries as a rough equivalent for “comrade.” The Councilors’ adoption of “sister” may be a way of registering that the technically gender-neutral “comrade” retains a masculine charge.



enmonsters the criminal and the dissident: here the term is appropriated to describe the transformation of the oppressive order by the enmonstered underclass.<sup>25</sup>

After the Council escapes from the militia, Judah leaves. He returns to New Crobuzon to tell the Iron Council's story: "The truth, escape, a new life, a rolling democracy, Remade arcadia" (295). Readers do not learn more about the Council's social relations until the novel's third part, when Judah, Cutter, and their companions have found the Council in a remote corner of the continent. Railroad tracks have been laid down in a huge circle, and the train rolls around it slowly and perpetually, "neither sedentary nor nomadic" (341). The neither/nor language is an indicator that the utopianism here resembles Jameson's theory of neutralization, and Cutter's early impressions of the Council reinforce this by repeatedly emphasizing its resistance to taxonomy: "There were no cognates of this life. There was nothing like this. [...] He could not map the alterity he felt. [...] *These are new people*, he thought. *They ain't the same as me*. [...] *I didn't make this place, so it didn't make me*" (346-7).

Miéville's utopias tend to be mobile, but the circular nature of the train's motion figures the Council's attainment of social stability—a condition similar to Armada's at the end of *The Scar*. The Iron Council needs to move again in order to save itself from stagnancy, but also, and more immediately, to save itself from the approaching militia. The stiltspear, earlier in the novel, continued the trilogy's concern with the closure of global space under imperialism; the Iron Council, like the stiltspear and Armada, is another example of a utopian enclave that depends for its survival on the existence of spaces not yet integrated into the expanding fields of imperial

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<sup>25</sup> The metaphor is further elaborated later in the novel as the Collective is forming in New Crobuzon: "The Collective. It was a Remaking [...] an old word began to change" (459).

power. Judah recognizes this when he tells the Councilors “You couldn’t stay hid forever” (351), but he fails to follow this diagnosis to its logical conclusion, instead urging the Councilors to hide again—to flee into even more remote reaches of the continent. Earlier in the novel, the leader of the Council’s Remade contingent, Uzman, declared that the Council’s decision to run from the militia was “Utopian” (253). The alternative that he proposed was for the Council to stand its ground in the wilderness while sending messages to the labor unions in New Crobuzon urging them to join in the fight, with the goal of profoundly altering social relations in the city. He is overruled, however, and the Council flees. Twenty years later, when Judah confronts the Council with the same dilemma, the Councilors decide that instead of fleeing imperial power, they will join in the effort to overturn it—a decision that follows more logically from Judah’s recognition that a society safeguarded by perpetual flight from New Crobuzon’s influence will never be sustainable.

The trilogy is repeatedly preoccupied by this problem. The utopias it describes are relatively small and their existence is precarious, predicated entirely on their geographic isolation from the emerging imperial order. A lasting utopianism would, accordingly, have to transform that order. This is the final stage of the trilogy’s utopianism: an effort to imagine a utopian program that actualizes the utopian impulses of *Perdido Street Station* while avoiding the unsustainability of Armada in *The Scar*. This effort brings problems of its own, however. Most of the New Crobuzon-centered chapters of *Iron Council* follow the young revolutionary, Ori, who has been taking part in underground meetings organized by *Runagate Rampant*. *Runagate* and the organization built around it are one of the most influential groups in the Caucus, alongside a diverse array of labor unions, activist groups, and so on. The “Runagaters” advocate

grassroots organizing among the working classes aimed at generating mass support for an insurrection against New Crobuzon's ruling class. Ori, frustrated by what he perceives as the Runagaters' passivity and inaction, seeks out and joins a terrorist group led by a masked vigilante named Toro. The "Toroans" assassinate, rob, and intimidate wealthy people and government officials, substituting violence for the Caucus's incremental formation of a working-class movement.<sup>26</sup>

The praxis of Toro's group is framed by the text as a superficial, inorganic, and ineffective approach to social change. As Curdin, a prominent Runagater, tells Ori at one point, "shock and shooting ain't enough" (76), and the novel reinforces this in its later chapters, when Ori helps Toro to assassinate the Mayor of New Crobuzon only to find that the act had no meaningful impact on the class struggle in the city. At this point, the revolution is already underway, and the Caucus has become the Collective—an egalitarian and democratic city within a city, controlling large swaths of New Crobuzon and beginning to radically reorganize social relations within them. The Collective is short-lived, however. It is defeated by the militia before the Council can arrive to reinforce it.<sup>27</sup> When Cutter is unable to convince the Council to change course and flee, avoiding the near-certain demise that awaits them in New Crobuzon, Judah prepares a final act of thaumaturgy. He lays mechanisms along the tracks outside the city, and when the Iron Council clatters out of the wilderness and toward the waiting army of militia,

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<sup>26</sup> The historical referents here are forms of praxis such as Blanquism and Narodnik terrorism; see pages 71-72 of Freedman's *Art and Idea* for a discussion of the latter and its relationship to Leninism.

<sup>27</sup> One of the novel's subplots involves a costly and unpopular war between New Crobuzon and the mysterious city-state of Tesh. The war is one of the catalysts for the Caucus's revolution, but when Judah and his companions learn of a Tesh plan to destroy the city, their thwarting of the plot has the side-effect of ending the war and allowing the New Crobuzon militia to focus on destroying the Collective. The war with Tesh is to the Caucus's revolution what World War I was to the Russian Revolution.

Judah builds a golem out of time. The time golem envelops the train and binds it in “a clot in diachrony” (541), a moment isolated out of sequential time within which it is invulnerable.

The Iron Council thus becomes what Kendrick describes as a “monument to a revolution frozen in time” (“Socialism” 23). Freedman discusses the ethical ambiguity of Judah’s act at length, observing that while Judah has likely saved the Council from annihilation, he does so by “depriving them of that autonomy of decision-making without which the revolutionary project becomes deeply problematic at best” (77). Judah thus embodies the dialectic of individual action versus collective praxis elsewhere resolved unambiguously in favor of collective praxis and mass democratic action. There are numerous examples of this dialectic throughout the novel—the Toro/Caucus opposition is one, but it is also seen in the formation of the Iron Council, when “Judah is one of a conclave [...] struggling for strategy [...] But parallel to them, something raucous and collective is emerging” (252-3). It appears again in the early days of the Collective, when, as Curdin later recounts, “People on the streets were moving much faster than the Caucus [...] We had to run to catch up” (487). This is also a preoccupation in *The Scar*. The rebellion of the Brucolac and his vampiric followers against Armada’s would-be dictators, though right in its motivations, “was a doomed adventure without the people of their own riding behind them” (580). This contrasts Tanner Sack’s rebellion at the end of *The Scar*, which sought the same result but in which “there was no chain of command, no order, no hierarchy, nothing but a rugged, contingent democracy” (619).

Just as crisis theory is troubled by its association with dialectical materialism, golemetry is troubled by its relationship to Leninist vanguardism and, more broadly, theories of revolution that stress the coordinating role of individual actors with respect to “the masses.” In the

metaphorics of golemetry, the proletariat is comparable to unthinking matter controlled wholly by the will of the one who animated it: this, arguably, is more a caricature of Leninism than it is a figure for democratic revolution.<sup>28</sup> Freedman identifies the fantastical elements of the novel as “utopian signs—or figures, or placeholders—for social forces whose precise nature cannot yet be identified” (81). The more immediate function of these elements, I argue, is to embody already-existent social forces and political ideas, some long past, that a utopian praxis must grapple with. They collectively figure a past strewn with broken utopias. This is the content that the trilogy sifts through in order to find fragments of substance and longevity that can be lifted out and used to build something new.

Utopian discourse is predicated on the inscription of its content within an anticipatory temporality, its orientation toward a horizon of radical social betterment. This is what differentiates *Iron Council*'s conclusion from the conclusions of *Perdido Street Station* and *The Scar*. The Collective has been crushed but the Council has been saved, and in such a way that it is “*always coming*” (564). When Cutter asks Judah how long the time golem will hold the Council, Judah responds “Don’t know. Perhaps till things are ready” (543), indicating that the time golem will eventually expire, releasing the Council back into sequential time at some unknowable moment in the future when, perhaps, conditions for revolution will be more favorable. And, as Cutter and the Collectivist Madeleina write in *Runagate Rampant*, “‘Order reigns in New Crobuzon!’ You stupid lackeys. Your order is built on sand. Tomorrow the Iron

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<sup>28</sup> Nicholas Birns notes that while Judah’s overriding of democratic choice is framed ambiguously by the novel, Ann-Hari’s defense of democracy is troubled by the fact that she is also “potentially authoritarian” (208).

Council will move on again, and to your horror it will proclaim with its whistle blaring: *We say: We were, we are, we will be*" (561).

### **From Utopia to Uchronia**

The Bas-Lag Trilogy instantiates its utopian content on multiple textual levels. I focus here on the trilogy's representation of imagined societies and on its encoding of utopian ideas in its monstrous bodies and science fictional concepts, but much could be said about the trilogy's narrative form, as well. The epilogue to *Iron Council*, for instance, is narrated by a lyrical communal voice that expresses the endurance of collective hope in New Crobuzon even after the failure of the revolution: "*There we will come to Iron Council. There we will come to the perpetual train, truly perpetual now perhaps poised always poised forever just about its wheels just about to finish turning*" (562). The trilogy is best understood as a massive and diverse exercise in utopian discourse that arrives in the final pages of the last novel at an image that promises future revolutions. The discussion of utopian content inevitably involves the discussion of utopian time.

Paradoxically, it is a stoppage of time that secures the trilogy's future-oriented, anticipatory temporality.<sup>29</sup> The Council is "always coming," and Cutter and Madeleine write of the Council "*We were, we are, we will be.*" The Council as utopian sign is more than just a future possibility—it is something that is always abiding within the social fabric of New Crobuzon. The novel affirms the principle that utopianism is an open-ended process while, through this

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<sup>29</sup> Birns notes the philosophical ambiguity of this moment when he points out that "Judah's golemized Iron Council becomes synchronic and circular—two adjectives that certainly sit ill at ease with Marxism" (208). His comparison of the time golem to Benjamin's angel of history suggests a dialogue between the novel and Benjamin's idiosyncratic Marxism, however, which fixates on moments of historical temporal arrest as moments when alternatives become momentarily possible (206). See Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" and the section titled "On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress" in *The Arcades Project*.

experiment in time, trying to articulate a temporality that is not simply linear and progressive. Utopian discourse, as I have defined it, is predicated on the narrative's evocation of a future beyond itself, its framing of time and history in such a way that radical social betterment is a concrete possibility within the storyworld. This temporality is itself an example, however, of how all utopianisms are articulated from within history, with the attendant constraints that Jameson and others have documented. How is a utopian temporality of anticipation different from conventional linear models of time that have been critiqued from a broad range of theoretical angles as bourgeois, teleological, and heteronormative? Can theories of utopian futurity be external to or exempt from the thoroughly ideological association between progress and historical time? And if we forswear such temporalities altogether, what implications does this have for utopian discourse?

## CHAPTER FOUR

### JOURNEY AND RETURN: RECURSIVE TEMPORALITIES

#### IN URSULA K. LE GUIN'S CRITICAL UTOPIAS

The definition of utopian discourse I have offered thus far is difficult to dissociate from concepts of progress and linear time. To describe utopian discourse as anticipatory, dialectical, and constructive is to freight it with the ideological baggage discussed at the end of Chapter Three, lending credence to Ursula K. Le Guin's warning that "the utopian imagination is trapped, like capitalism and industrialism and the human population, in a one-way future consisting only of growth" ("A Non-Euclidean" 173). This is a legacy of nineteenth century shifts in the genre, when the closure of global space by imperialism led authors to use dislocation in time rather than space as the mechanism for distancing the utopian vision from their audience's milieu. Unlike nineteenth century texts such as Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), the texts in this dissertation do not actually represent the utopian future—they instead represent its conditions of possibility while deferring its realization. This is a response to the political and aesthetic shortcomings of the older genre utopias, but the contemporary texts nevertheless maintain the conventional projection of utopia into the future. What, if anything, rescues utopian discourse from the charge that it is infected by capitalist, imperialist, patriarchal, and heteronormative patterns of thought and representation?

I argue in this chapter that the success of individual texts in contending with these associations depends on how they frame what I will describe as the *recursive* form of utopian discourse. As Fredric Jameson has exhaustively demonstrated, any text's utopian content will be



derived from extant social relations, political theories, or ethical systems. This is a consequence of the author's embeddedness in history: our images of a better future will always be dependent on the past they seek to break from. In this chapter, I argue that contemporary utopian discourse is distinguished by self-aware interrogations of this condition. Rather than claiming a radical novelty of vision, these texts actively represent their utopian content's reliance on the past. Recursion thus becomes an intratextual formal principle that organizes the text's representations of historical time, revolutionary praxis, and utopian social organization. In Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*, for instance, characters revise and repurpose images and concepts from Christian traditions to articulate alternative modes of social relationality. In Chang-rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea*, the communal narrator's continual retellings of Fan's narrative represent the process by which successive generations reimagine and reapply her revolutionary act. We see a similar process in China Miéville's *Iron Council* when Judah appropriates golemetry from the vanishing indigenous culture of the stiltspear and uses it in the struggle against imperialism and capitalism.

All of these texts project the author's condition onto the characters, such that the characters excavate the storyworld's past for content that can be reimaged within the context of the present and then repurposed in service of new struggles for emancipation. This, in part, is an answer to Jameson's theory of ideological closure—these texts reconceptualize the role of history in utopian production in more positive terms, and they use this as a counterweight to the progress- and future-oriented tendencies I have discussed in previous chapters. In these texts, moving forward into a better future is a function of looking to the past. I focus in this chapter on Le Guin's critical utopias, which seek to reimagine utopia's situation in the future in non-linear

and non-teleological terms. This project is predicated on a range of recursive forms that organize the texts' narrative arcs, representations of social change, and meditations on the nature of time and history. Rather than denying or struggling against the past, these novels embrace it and frame it as indispensable to any effort in the present to forge a utopian future. I conclude the chapter by using these readings of Le Guin to question the value of theory and criticism that defines utopian discourse in terms of its limitation by an inherited political imaginary.

### **History and Narrative Time**

As in the previous chapters, I will track recursive forms as they manifest on various textual levels; in Le Guin's novels, they are uniquely pervasive, organizing the texts' narrative arcs, representations of history and political praxis, and meditations on the nature of time. Darko Suvin's bifurcated schema for analyzing temporality in speculative fiction narratives is a useful starting point for this discussion, as it is predicated on the conventional opposition between linear and cyclical models of time that Le Guin seeks to complicate.

Suvin frames this opposition as the difference between "epic" and "mythic" constructions of time, and he argues that these differing temporalities can be used to demarcate the formal spectrum on which most speculative fiction texts are situated. For Suvin, epic time is diachronic and historical. The epic narrative explores the storyworld's social, political, and economic relations, and it affirms the possibility for these relations to be changed over time through individual and collective action. These narratives generally have open-ended conclusions that facilitate the projection of the text's "novum"—its utopian content—into the future. The epic narrative, Suvin writes, is a

chronicling of a unique series of events [...] instead of and as opposed to the mythic reconfirmation of cyclic processuality [...] the real alternatives and

choices of the “epic” novel, teleologically connected with the unforeseeable outcome of the story [...] will refuse the mythological homeomorphy where all cycles and all agents are, centrally, such transformations of each other which can bring forth neither truly new values nor a hesitation as to the empirical success of existing values. (*Positions* 78)

Epic narratives present history—the changing of societies and of subjects—as a contingent and undetermined process unfolding through comprehensible and verisimilar relations of cause and effect. This is consistent with how my first three chapters have defined utopian discourse, which represents history as a dynamic process and defers narrative closure in order to accommodate utopian hope and possibility. This conception of history has, arguably, a teleological orientation that imbricates it with concepts of progress and linear time. Suvin ascribes complex forms and trajectories to epic narratives, describing them as “flowing, eddying, meandering and rushing forth” (*Positions* 77), but he also casts these movements as being “teleologically connected” to the conclusion. Taken collectively, these descriptions ascribe a range of possible shapes and movements to epic narratives while always enclosing these within a general trajectory from Point A to Point B.

Mythic narratives, by contrast, always return to Point A. As the quotation above indicates, mythic time is synchronic and cyclical. It is organized by a “homeomorphy where all cycles and all agents are [...] transformations of each other.” The myth has no mooring in historical time, and any represented social relations are abstract and lacking in substance. The world simply is the way that it is. The mythic narrative, therefore, must always return to where it began with nothing having fundamentally changed. The heliotropism that orients everything in the narrative toward this point of departure/arrival warps relationships of cause and effect out of verisimilitude in order to reaffirm the ahistorical laws of the storyworld. The paradigmatic

example of this in modern science fiction is Isaac Asimov's short story "Nightfall" (1941), which describes an alien world with six suns in which night occurs only once every two thousand and forty-nine years. When this happens, it unleashes a panic that destroys civilization. The survivors then rebuild civilization only for the process to repeat itself two millennia later. Such a narrative presents time as an endlessly repeating cycle in which nothing really changes, rendering hope a structural impossibility. The problems with mythic time lead Suvin to assert that "modern SF is then—in proportion to its meaningfulness—under the hegemony of the epic" (*Positions* 77). Suvin casts epic time as politically progressive and mythic time as conservative, exemplifying the tendency among some utopian theorists to present cyclical time as the dialectical other to linear time and then to associate it with closure, repetition, and stagnancy, making cyclicity an even more problematic spatial metaphor for utopian time than is linearity.

The main limitation of Suvin's framework, for the purposes of this chapter, is that it cannot account for the recursive tendencies of utopian discourse, for narrative forms and representations of historical time that are cyclical as well as linear, that depend on creative acts that move from the present to the past in order to bring the past into the present. There is an intimation of this when Suvin describes the critical utopias of the 1960s and 1970s as representing "a spiral and ongoing development" (*Positions* 83), but he never develops this insight. For this, it is useful to return to Walter Benjamin. Benjamin never would have endorsed any cyclical theory of time, but his version of historical materialism has a cyclical form insofar as it calls for interventions in the past that identify its emancipatory moments and then bring these to bear on contemporary social struggles. For Benjamin, history is a contingent material process that is retroactively organized into exculpatory narratives of progress by the ruling class.

The vocation of the historical materialist, in Benjamin's view, is to identify obscured or domesticated revolutionary events, movements, or subjects in the "oppressed past" and then isolate them out of the dominant historical narrative, making them legible as signs of concrete utopian possibility ("Theses" 263). The historical materialist thus rescues this radical moment from its cooptation or elision by the dominant narrative.

This operation, which takes hold of repressed utopian energies in the past and drags them into view of the present, is not an effort to return to the past or reconstitute it in the present; it is instead, as Susan Buck-Morss writes, "a transforming rescue of tradition that is the antithesis of reactive return" (77). Of course, falling into "reactive return" is one of the dangers of utopianism's dialogue with the past, and this is why the wariness of much utopian theory toward texts that are not sufficiently adversarial toward history remains important. Utopian texts can frame the past in ways that are uncritical, regressive, and dangerous. They can ignore or deny the inevitable reliance of all utopian visions on extant social forms, pretending to a novelty that is in fact just a lack of self-awareness. They can also idealize a moment in history and then posit a return to or replication of that moment as the ultimate horizon of utopian hope. This is a defining trait of fascist and ethno-nationalist politics, and it demonstrates that a utopianism oriented unidirectionally toward the past is at least as problematic as its inverse.

The political imaginary of any utopian text will be inherited and therefore subject to the limitations theorized by Jameson, but my argument that individual texts thematize this condition through their narrative forms and represented utopian content is specific to postmodern and contemporary texts. This is not to say that older texts necessarily lack this internal structure and the self-awareness it implies. All three of the major modernist-era dystopias, for instance—

Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—set elements of the storyworld's past in opposition to its dystopian present. Only *We*, however, frames the past in a way that prefigures the later texts, and this is because the novel's revolutionaries refrain from idealizing that past. They instead use elements of it, critically, in service of their efforts to construct a radically new future. In *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the future is comparatively closed, and the past is idealized and reified in objects such as Shakespeare plays in *Brave New World* and the contents of Mr. Charrington's antique shop in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Beginning with the critical utopias of the 1960s and 1970s, it became more common for utopian texts to have internalized the examples of earlier, pseudo-utopian projects that either fetishized the past or sought to break from it entirely, and this resulted in more self-reflexive meditations on historical time.

### **Rescuing the Past in Ursula K. Le Guin's Critical Utopias**

In Chapter Three, I reference Le Guin's essay "A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be" and the porcupine that Le Guin uses as a figure for utopian praxis. Le Guin adopts the porcupine from the Swampy Cree phrase "I go backward, look forward, like the porcupine does," and she applies the phrase to utopian discourse by suggesting that "In order to speculate safely on an inhabitable future, perhaps we would do well to find a rock crevice and go backward" (171). This suggestion may elicit the well-founded fears noted above regarding utopian projects animated by desire for an idealized past, visions that reject progress in favor of equally problematic dreams of return. The theory of historical time that Le Guin develops throughout her critical utopias is more complicated than this, and it begins, in her earlier works, as an effort to free the utopian idea from its entanglement with concepts of progress and linear

time. Her 1971 novel *The Lathe of Heaven*, for instance, is about the dangers of trying to design a better future for humanity and then force its implementation. The protagonist, George Orr, has the power to alter reality through his dreams. George falls under the influence of Dr. Haber, a psychiatrist who seeks to harness George's dreams and use them to recalibrate reality. Explicitly drawing on Taoist philosophy, Le Guin stages an opposition between George, who represents balance, equilibrium, and presence, and Haber, who values knowledge, change, and progress. Le Guin presents this as an opposition between East and West, a Taoist and a Christian worldview.<sup>1</sup>

It is possible to read *The Lathe of Heaven* as an anti-utopian novel, but it is more accurate to understand it as critical of the particular kind of utopianism represented by Dr. Haber, as well as by Orgoreyn in *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), A-Io in *The Dispossessed* (1974), and the People of the Condor in *Always Coming Home* (1985). It is the totalizing post-Enlightenment drive to impose an order on reality through discursive and political power. Le Guin uses the yin-yang symbol to represent this utopianism and its opposite:

Utopia has been yang [...] Bright, dry, clear, strong, firm, active, aggressive, lineal, progressive, creative, expanding, advancing, and hot [...] What would a yin utopia be? It would be dark, wet, obscure, weak, yielding, passive, participatory, circular, cyclical, peaceful, nurturant, retreating, contracting, and cold. ("A Non-Euclidean" 180-1)

This passage is a useful guide to the symbolic system that structures much of Le Guin's work. Her early novels, especially *The Lathe of Heaven* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*, make it clear that Le Guin personally prefers "yin" values of passivity and inaction, but ultimately the organizing principles for Le Guin's ethics and politics are balance and equilibrium: a condition

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<sup>1</sup> See Le Guin's introduction to her edited version of the *Tao Te Ching* for insight into the role of Taoism in her work.

in which neither the yin nor the yang predominates. After all, when Haber insists that “Life [...] is essentially *change*,” George partly agrees, saying “That is one aspect of it [...] The other is stillness” (139). George himself embodies this balancing of oppositions. When he takes a series of personality tests, Haber tells him “you are so sane as to be an anomaly [...] Where there’s an opposed pair, a polarity, you’re in the middle; where there’s a scale, you’re at the balance point” (137). George, therefore, embodies an understanding of time and praxis that unites action and inaction, change and continuity, line and circle.

*The Left Hand of Darkness* theorizes this synthesis on a larger scale by representing a process of utopian social change while rejecting progress as a category for conceptualizing that change. The most famous image from this novel is the androgynous alien body of the Gethenians, who have both male and female sexual organs and who, therefore, lack gender categories.<sup>2</sup> Genly Ai, an envoy from a league of worlds called the Ekumen, travels to Gethen to persuade its various societies to join the emergent interstellar order. The two major nation-states on Gethen are Karhide and Orgoreyn. Karhide is ruled by a king, but social life in the state is organized around close-knit communal units called Hearths, and the state is comprised, politically, of myriad and diverse Domains with their own leadership and a degree of autonomy in their doings. Orgoreyn is a centralized, rigidly administered police state in which citizens are classified as “digits” and “units” (79), reminiscent of Zamyatin’s “Numbers” in *We*. Increasing centralization of political power along with cultural shifts toward jingoistic nationalism in

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<sup>2</sup> See Mona Fayad’s article “Aliens, Androgynes, and Anthropology” for an analysis of the novel’s complicated engagement with the traditional gender binary. David Lake’s article “Le Guin’s Twofold Vision” is also useful as an overview of the other symbolic and conceptual oppositions in the novel.



Karhide create escalating tensions that threaten to ignite into war: a form of extreme and widespread violence that the Gethenians had, previously, never conceptualized.

The Gethenians are, historically, peaceful people for whom “progress is less important than presence” (50), and they approximate Le Guin’s description of what a “yin” society would look like. She writes that it would be

A society predominantly concerned with preserving its existence; a society with a modest standard of living, conservative of natural resources, with a low constant fertility rate and a political life based upon consent; a society that has made a successful adaptation to its environment and has learned to live without destroying itself or the people next door. (“A Non-Euclidean” 190-1)

This is a society that is concerned with reproducing its existence through sustainable social, economic, and biological rhythms; it is not concerned with expansion or growth. Gethenians have a planet-wide, cross-cultural disposition toward these values. Le Guin makes this plausible through a practice that Jameson has called “world reduction,” through which “the sheer teeming multiplicity of what exists [...] is deliberately thinned and weeded out through an operation of radical abstraction and simplification” (*Archaeologies* 271). By imagining gender out of existence, Le Guin does away with gender roles and inequities. By imagining a planet in a perpetual ice age, she is able to imagine societies that are “predominantly concerned with preserving [their] existence.” In short, she carefully engineers a world in which the kind of society she summarizes above can function.

Even so, there is some difference between the major nation-states of Gethen. Orgoreyn is a more organized and progress-driven society. Genly describes the Orgota as “Lords of the Earth” and likens them to “Other cults on other worlds” that insist on humanity’s primacy within the universe: “cults of dynamic, aggressive, ecology-breaking cultures” (233). Orgoreyn has a

powerful state apparatus, exerts total control over its citizenry, conducts an expansionist, jingoistic foreign policy, and is invested in growing its power. Karhide is a more passive and disorderly society. Its culture is represented in microcosm by the Handdarata, an order of mystics who practice a philosophy of inaction and non-interference, and whose valorization of darkness, silence, ignorance, and other negatives functions as a critique of positivist systems of knowledge. The political crisis backgrounding the narrative is precipitated by a shift in this traditional system of values, as Karhide begins to emulate Orgoreyn's more progress-driven, statist tendencies.

Progress is the destructive force leading the Gethenians toward war, and so the novel undertakes the seemingly paradoxical task of representing utopian social change that is distinctly antithetical toward concepts of progress, expansion, growth, development, and so on. This project largely depends on the novel's narrative form, which embodies the motif of "journey and return" that Le Guin theorizes more fully in *The Dispossessed*. The two primary narrators in *The Left Hand of Darkness* are Genly and Estraven, and the telling of the main narrative takes the form of a dialogical alternation between their first-person perspectives. This pattern is broken up by chapters consisting of ethnographic reports that document Gethenian social forms or transcribe Gethenian myths and legends. These chapters bracket the chapters contributing to the main narrative. Chapters One, Three, Five, Eight, Ten, Thirteen, Fifteen, Eighteen, Nineteen, and Twenty are narrated by Genly. Chapters Six, Eleven, Fourteen, and Sixteen are narrated by Estraven, and Chapters Two, Four, Seven, Nine, Twelve, and Seventeen are ethnographic documents. The novel is therefore what Samantha Castleman has described as "a polyphony of narrative voices which often become jumbled, intertwined, and contradictory" (11). The story begins and ends, however, with Genly's voice.

This multivocal dispersal of narrative authority also has the effect of disrupting the progression of the main narrative with fragments of Gethenian culture. Castleman argues that this pattern “repeatedly aligns new Gethenian information to familiar Ekumen frames” for the purpose of facilitating empathy across lines of difference (13). It also has the effect of creating an oscillation between present and past, as Genly, who assembled and coordinated all these texts, uses stories out of Gethenian history to contextualize the events of the alternating chapters. This representation of the present’s entanglement with the past is mirrored by the arc of the main narrative. Genly’s mission begins in Karhide, but, after he runs afoul of the King and inadvertently precipitates Estraven’s banishment, he journeys to Orgoreyn. There, he is arrested and sent to a euphemistically termed “Voluntary Farm,” or forced-labor camp. Estraven rescues him and the two trek across the ice sheet covering the northern latitudes of Gethen, arriving back in Karhide and signaling Genly’s starship. Karhide then commits to joining the Ekumen at the end of the novel, with the other nations of Gethen soon to follow. The journey begins and ends in Karhide, just as it begins and ends with Genly’s voice, and its outcome is the synthesis of the two opposed nation-states through their mutual absorption into the Ekumen. Karhide and Orgoreyn have changed for the better, but Le Guin makes a concerted effort to dissociate this betterment from progress. The two nation-states abandon their statist, expansionist ambitions and instead return to traditional values: presence over progress, sustainability and survival over the pursuit of power. It is a journey and return, a movement toward a better future that welcomes the new (membership in the Ekumen) while also returning to the old (the values that predominated in both states for most of Gethenian history). Moving forward is a function of going backward.

*The Left Hand of Darkness* represents utopianism as a recursive process, one that moves into the future through cyclical returns to the past, evoking Suvin's description of the "spiral and ongoing development" of utopian production in the 1960s and 1970s. As in her other novels, Le Guin borrows eclectically from real world history in constructing the societies of Gethen. Orgoreyn is reminiscent of the Soviet Union, and Jameson has described the basic texture of Gethen, in unfortunately dated terms, as being like "some Eskimo High Middle Ages" (*Archaeologies* 267). The novel's utopian content is, of course, also drawn from real world sources with relatively little mediation. The mystical philosophy of Handdara, with its skepticism toward positivist constructions of knowledge, is drawn from Taoism. The Ekumen is a sort of interstellar United Nations. Critics have debated how to appraise the Ekumen as a locus of utopian content, of course. Jamil Khader describes it as possessing "tremendous imperial and capitalistic powers" and as motivated by an "expansionist ideology" (116). David Higgins reads the Ekumen as a counterpoint to the way that so much science fiction world-building implicitly or explicitly validates imperialism; the Ekumen, in his reading, is a cosmopolitan entity defined by "its refusal to enforce hegemony and its willingness to be changed by the Other" (350). Both readings are certainly authorized by the text: like all utopian content, the Ekumen is thoroughly contradictory, an ambiguous crystallization of the novel's ideas about social betterment, but one which cannot outpace the baggage of its real world referents.

*The Dispossessed* is, both for better and for worse, a more narratively and conceptually coherent novel than *The Left Hand of Darkness*. This is because the later novel is, to some degree, an effort to retroactively theorize what the earlier novel does. *The Left Hand of Darkness* exemplifies utopian discourse as I define it in this project: it meditates on various utopian

contents through the dialectical movement of contradictions, which leads to an open-ended and anticipatory conclusion. And, all of this depends on dialogues with the past. The author repurposes material from real world history to imagine social alternatives, and she constructs analogies for this process in the novel's narrative form and represented processes of social change. Both are simultaneously cyclical and linear, oriented toward the past and the future: the chapter sequence continually brings the past into the present, the narrative arc ends where it began while emphasizing that this point of departure/arrival has fundamentally changed, and the represented societies move into a better future only by virtue of their return to older principles. *The Dispossessed* is organized by the very same dynamics, but it also explicitly theorizes them through the voices of the third-person narrator and the protagonist, a physicist named Shevek. The later novel thus offers a more systematic and comprehensible theory of time, history, and utopian praxis precisely by losing the messy, unruly quality that makes *The Left Hand of Darkness* more formally aligned with Le Guin's anarchism. Lewis Call notes this when he writes that "The discourse of *Left Hand* can never become totalizing or totalitarian, for such a fate would require far more unity and stability than the text actually possesses" (91-2). So, the earlier novel's incoherence is, paradoxically, constitutive of a unity connecting its narrative form, its world-building, and its thematic reflections on anarchism.

Like *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Dispossessed* describes a bifurcated storyworld influenced by Cold War politics. The alternating settings for the novel are two planets: Anarres and Urras. Anarres was settled in the storyworld's past by a group of anarchist revolutionaries from Urras. Urras is the larger and more prosperous planet, and the chapters that take place there are set in A-Io, a powerful capitalist state. Jameson notes that the novel's primary opposition

“seems at first glance a fairly straightforward and unproblematical transposition and fictionalization of the contemporary division of our globe today between the so-called Free World (in her book, the wealthy planet Urras) and the socialist bloc (its barren and revolutionary satellite Anarres)” (“Of Islands” 8). He goes on to demonstrate that the novel’s reinscription of Cold War politics is in fact more complicated than this description allows, however, as the Anarres/Urras opposition is reconfigured by a much more directly referential opposition between the major nation-states on Urras: capitalist A-Io and state socialist Thu, both of which have centralized and coercive state apparatuses (“Of Islands” 8). The novel’s critique is therefore predicated on its multiple transpositions of Cold War politics onto the Anarres/Urras system. According to this reading, A-Io stands in for the capitalist West, Thu is an analog for the Soviet Union, and Benbili—the impoverished state where A-Io and Thu wage their proxy wars—represents the Third World. Anarres thus becomes a third term that offers an escape from the flawed alternatives of capitalism and socialism.

The primary science fictional conceit in *The Dispossessed* is the principle of simultaneity: the theory that time is an already-existent totality in which past, present, and future abide with each other in an eternal co-existence. Shevek illustrates this through the metaphor of a book. He explains to a group of listeners that “The book is all there, all at once, between its covers. But if you want to read the story and understand it, you must begin with the first page, and go forward, always in order. So the universe would be a very great book, and we would be very small readers” (222). Shevek frames the theory of simultaneity as an essential complement and counterpoint to sequential models of time, according to which time is a linear succession of moments that tick in and out of existence as they occur. According to simultaneity theory,

sequency is a subjective human experience, and it does not correlate to the objective shape of time. Shevek says that,

[Simultaneity is] an effort to strike a balance. You see, Sequency explains beautifully our sense of linear time, and the evidence of evolution. It includes creation, and mortality. But there it stops. It deals with all that changes, but it cannot explain why things also endure. It speaks only of the arrow of time—never the circle of time. (223)

The subjective experience of time as a succession of moments, the progression of biological life from birth to death, and the processes of atrophy and decay that affect all matter are forceful demonstrations of sequential, linear time. Shevek points out, however, that “Time goes in cycles, as well as in a line” (223). The changing of seasons, the phases of the moon, and the rising and setting of the sun are all cyclical processes, though linear processes of change can occur within these cycles and the accumulation of cycles can itself become constitutive of a linear succession. These entanglements of linear and cyclical time lead Shevek to claim that “time has two aspects. There is the arrow, the running river, without which there is no change, no progress, or direction, or creation. And there is the circle or cycle, without which there is chaos, meaningless succession of instants, a world without clocks or seasons or promises” (224). Shevek understands that simultaneity, like sequency, only partially and imperfectly accounts for these two aspects of time. He seeks to solve this problem through the “General Temporal Theory,” which he intends to be a grand synthesis of sequency and simultaneity that accommodates linearity and cyclicity, change and stasis, novelty and repetition within a unified theory of time.

The concept of the promise, which Shevek references at the end of the quotation above, moves these theoretical reflections from the realm of physics to the realms of ethics and politics. The act of making and keeping a promise is an affirmation of the linear and cyclical aspects of

time. As Daniel Jaeckle observes, “At the moment of promising, the future is in the present just as in the act of keeping the promise, the past is in the present” (81). To make a promise is to project an ethical commitment forward into an unforeseeable future, and to keep the promise is to return to the past moment of commitment and acknowledge its continued impingement on the present. The promise’s structural affirmation of the unity of past, present, and future is, for Shevek, the basis for ethical action. “To break a promise,” he says, “is to deny the reality of the past; therefore it is to deny the hope of a real future” (225). *The Dispossessed* explores the implications of this theory within two realms of human action that, it ultimately suggests, are in fact the same: the personal and the political.

Shevek’s partnership with Takver is the focal point for the novel’s investigation of the role of promises in interpersonal relationships. Odonianism, the novel’s anarchist philosophy, deconstructs and dismisses traditional values deemed “propertarian” by Odo, the movement’s founder. Monogamy seems to fall neatly into this category, and indeed, Odonianism jettisons the moralism and misogyny structuring sexual relationships on Urras. On Anarres, “No law, no limit, no penalty, no punishment, no disapproval applied to any sexual practice of any kind, except the rape of a child or woman” (245). Consequently, “there is no legal or moral sanction against infidelity” (246), and most Anarresti view monogamous life-partnerships with mild skepticism, regarding them as atavistic holdovers from their society’s propertarian, capitalist past.

Odo, however, had chosen monogamy, and she made space for it within her body of thought. It is worth noting here that some of Le Guin’s critics, most famously Samuel Delany (1977), have argued that despite its radical impulses, *The Dispossessed* reaffirms a range of



traditional values surrounding gender and sexuality. Katherine Cross argues that “Le Guin created a nominally egalitarian, gender-neutral society where homosexuality and polyamory were permitted, yet refused to explore that fascinating setting at any length” (1336). Regardless of how we appraise the novel’s treatment of monogamy, it is organized by the logic of the promise, which the novel frames as an ethical category distinct from the moral categories offered by organized religion, and which offers the connective tissue joining the novel’s theory of personal ethics to its theories of political praxis and historical time. Shevek, accordingly, views his promise to Takver as following logically from his understanding of time:

Fulfillment, Shevek thought, is a function of time. The search for pleasure is circular, repetitive, atemporal. The variety seeking of the spectator, the thrill hunter, the sexually promiscuous, always ends in the same place [...] It is not a journey and return, but a closed cycle, a locked room, a cell [...] It is not until an act occurs within the landscape of the past and the future that it is a human act. Loyalty, which asserts the continuity of past and future, binding time into a whole, is the root of human strength; there is no good to be done without it. (334)

According to this view, to renounce monogamy and life-partnership as tainted by the property form is to choose an “atemporal” succession of sexual relationships that will exist solely in the present, extending neither into the past nor the future. Monogamous partnership is based instead on the promise, on a commitment in the past that constrains the subject in the present and that extends indefinitely into the future.<sup>3</sup> It involves a movement into the future that is guided by continual returns to the past through the act of abiding by and reaffirming the promise. To live as if time is only cyclical is to consign oneself to stagnant repetitions of the same; to live as if time

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<sup>3</sup> Other passages in the novel frame monogamy as the form of relationship that best fulfills non-propertarian values such as giving and sharing. When a younger Shevek, earlier in the novel, is rebuffed by his friend, Gimar, he tells her “Life partnership is really against the Odonian ethic, I think” (50). She responds “Having’s wrong; sharing’s right. What more can you share than your whole self, your whole life, all the nights and all the days?” (50).

is only linear is to unmoor oneself from any responsibilities to a past that has vanished and a future that has not yet come to be. Le Guin suggests that these conceptions of time, each ostensibly the structural opposite of the other, lead to the same thing: a nihilistic undermining of any basis for ethical action.

Shevek understands that a subject “who had this sense of responsibility about one thing was obliged to carry it through in all things” (333). This is where the personal becomes political. Le Guin wrote *The Dispossessed* with an acute awareness of what happens when the promise of revolution is broken. As noted above, A-Io’s main political rival is Thu, an authoritarian, socialist nation-state. Thu is an obvious analog for the Soviet Union, and just as there is a family resemblance between socialism and anarchism as real world political theories, Thuvian state-socialism shares a genealogy with Odonianism. When Chifoilisk, a Thuvian agent, seeks to persuade Shevek to flee A-Io and give his theoretical work to the Thuvians, he appeals to this political common ground, telling Shevek “We’re products of the same great revolutionary movement of the eighth century—we’re socialists, like you” (135). Shevek rejects this identification, saying “But you are archists. The State of Thu is even more centralized than the State of A-Io. One power structure controls all, the government, administration, police, army, education, laws, trades, manufactures. And you have the money economy” (135). He goes on to frame this difference between authoritarian socialism and non-authoritarian anarchism in terms of the original revolutionary promise that spawned both traditions, telling Chifoilisk “You fear we might bring back the revolution, the old one, the real one, the revolution for justice which you began and then stopped halfway” (138).

It is worth recalling that Marx, himself, conceptualized socialism as a transitional stage between capitalism and communism—a dictatorship of the proletariat charged solely with its own dissolution. Shevek’s indictment of the Thuvian revolution as an abortive attempt to create an emancipated society is, of course, a critique of its real-world referent. Le Guin was not a Marxist, but she articulates here a standard Western Marxist critique of the Bolsheviks and of the Soviet Union—that the Russian Revolution was a moment of concrete utopian possibility that quickly became unmoored from its origins, with horrifying results. It was a journey without return.<sup>4</sup> Jaeckle writes that the function of permanent revolution in Le Guin’s sense is not “to drive the system unceasingly to a better future but to keep the Promise first articulated by Odo alive. Improvement, therefore, is always a return to the founding principles of Anarres” (82). This anchoring to first principles constrains revolutionary action in the present and prevents actions inconsistent with those first principles. According to this logic, the Russian Revolution was lost the moment it was defended by violent action inconsistent with its goal of emancipation.

The promise thus forges an integrity of action that unifies means and ends. As Shevek explains, “To say that a good end will follow from a bad means is just like saying that if I pull a rope on this pulley it will lift the weight on that one” (225). An argument late in the novel between two revolutionaries in A-Io puts this principle in terms of praxis. When one of the

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<sup>4</sup> As China Miéville writes in *October*, “Fleetingly, there is a shift towards workers’ control of production and the rights of peasants to the land. Equal rights for men and women in work and in marriage, the right to divorce, maternity support. The decriminalization of homosexuality, 100 years ago. Moves towards national self-determination. Free and universal education, the expansion of literacy [...] And though those moments are snuffed out, reversed, become bleak jokes and memories all too soon, it might have been otherwise” (317). This history looms over many of the texts discussed in this project. Zamyatin was a Bolshevik before the revolution, but he quickly became critical of the state that emerged from it. This is reflected in *We* when I-330 says of the revolutionaries who founded OneState, “they were right, they were a thousand times right. They only made one mistake: Afterward they got the notion that they were the final number” (169).

characters insists that she will fight back if the police break up a planned demonstration, the other rebukes her:

“Join them, if you like their methods. Justice is not achieved by force!”  
 “And power isn’t achieved by passivity.”  
 “We are not seeking power. We are seeking the end of power” [...] “The means are the end. Odo said it all her life. Only peace brings peace, only just acts bring justice.” (295)

The promise, as an ethic for revolution, entails a radical alignment of means and ends maintained through continual returns to first principles. The obvious objection to this model is that it seems to preclude any possibility for newness and change, condemning any such revolution to a backward-looking preoccupation with the past. This is precisely what has happened to Anarres at the time of the narrative; it has become an insular society hostile to change, with bureaucracy, groupthink, and convention filling the void vacated by the state apparatus. As Shevek’s friend Bedap observes, “Kids learn to parrot Odo’s words as if they were *laws*—the ultimate blasphemy” (168). Odonianism has become a source of ossified traditions and conventions rather than a set of principles to return to so that they can inform new revolutionary processes in the present. As Jaeckle explains “the paradox and beauty of Le Guin’s conception is that, because circumstances are always changing, the return to founding principles always takes society to a new place” (82). When Shevek, Bedap, and a handful of likeminded Anarresti found the Syndicate of Initiative, they do so with the goal of renewing their society’s revolutionary promise, returning to its first principles so that Anarres can begin to change again.

This theory of revolution is also an explicit reflection on the recursive form of utopian discourse. The earlier chapters of this project have characterized utopian discourse as a mode of writing oriented toward the future, perennially anticipating a radical newness that cannot yet be

imagined. We see similar temporalities in Suvin's work, when he dismisses cyclical models of time as regressive and argues instead for the political primacy of epic time, with its open-ended horizons and its validation of history's indeterminacy. Jameson, in a similar spirit, conceptualizes literary utopianism as a struggle against its own permeation by an inherited political imaginary, the success of which is directly proportionate to the force with which the text negates the past that it depends upon. In *The Dispossessed*, these tensions simply dissipate. Time is both cyclical and linear, and the impingement of the past on every utopian vision is not something to bemoan or struggle against. As Shevek reflects late in *The Dispossessed* "The thing about working with time, instead of against it [...] is that it is not wasted" (334). For Le Guin, any utopian praxis that is oriented unidirectionally toward the past or the future will find itself working against time. It will try to force time into a circle that perpetually leads back into an idealized past, or it will try to force time into a line that progresses unfettered by history into an idealized future.

*The Dispossessed*, again, is less formally radical than some of Le Guin's other novels. Its narrative form seeks to embody its theory of time, but it does this in relatively straightforward and conventional ways, with chapters that narrate Shevek's experiences on Urras as an adult alternating with chapters that narrate his life on Anarres before his journey. The effect of this is a continual temporal oscillation that intertwines the past and the present. It also illustrates the function of the Odonian promise. We see Shevek's repeated engagements with Odonian values as he grows up on Anarres and as he wrestles with how to apply them to his work, his relationships, and his politics. These narrative returns to the past frame Shevek's experiences on Urras, as he struggles to keep the Odonian promise in a society that is hostile to it. The novel

ends as Shevek travels back to Anarres on a Hainish spaceship, having broadcasted his General Temporal Theory to all the known worlds, completing an arc of journey and return much like Genly's in *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

Tom Moylan has critiqued this narrative arc as absorbing the novel's political contradictions into an overly neat synthesis in which nothing has in fact changed for the dispossessed peoples of Anarres and Urras. He writes that "despite the implied suggestion of a spiral of repetition with forward motion that breaks beyond a given circle, the structure of the novel goes in a compensating circle" (*Demand* 116). He points out, furthermore, that Shevek's General Temporal Theory enables the invention of the ansible—a device that allows instantaneous communication between any two points in the universe—such that the novel concludes with a vision "based on information technology and the collapse of oppositions in a unified system" (*Demand* 116). This seems more a prefiguration of capitalist globalization than a utopian rupture of the status quo. Moylan's Jamesonian critique of the novel ultimately insists that it "falls victim to the historical situation it opposes" and "ensures that the enclosure of life by the dominant system is preserved more than it is negated" (*Demand* 119). What Moylan finds missing from the novel's narrative arc and conclusion is a rupture event of the sort that I discuss in Chapter One: a narrative hinge moment that allows the author, inevitably immersed in "the historical situation [she] opposes" to represent a dramatic shock to the system that will allow qualitative changes to occur. Le Guin's recursive forms self-consciously forge continuities in time when, as Moylan and other theorists argue, utopian change is predicated on discontinuity.

This line of critique leads directly back to the problem of utopian representation. The problem with Moylan's critique is that, according to its own Jamesonian logic, if Le Guin had

concluded the novel with a catastrophe that threw the alignments of power in the Anarres/Urras system into disarray, or if she had described a successful revolutionary rupture in A-Io that toppled the state apparatus and its capitalist allies, this would hardly have extricated the novel's political imaginary from "the historical situation it opposes." This, I think, is the application of Shevek's observation quoted above about "working with time, instead of against it [so] that it is not wasted"; if all utopianism is recursive and trapped within history, then perhaps it should make use of history rather than struggling to escape it.

*Always Coming Home* is partly an effort to explore this tension by developing the recursive temporality of *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed* while situating within it a decisive rupture event that separates time into a late capitalist pre-history and a utopian after-history. It describes a future people, called the Kesh, living in northern California long after a period of ecological breakdown that effectively ended modern civilization. The book consists of a novella broken into parts and interspersed throughout the text alongside poems, songs, plays, drawings, and short narratives. These fragments are bracketed by intermittent commentaries by an anthropologist, a quasi-authorial figure, studying Kesh culture. Narrative perspective in *Always Coming Home* is, thus, very complicated. It is multivocal and communal, but its myriad voices are mediated by an overarching narrative authority that organizes and coordinates them such that they offer a vision of Kesh society.

This society is relatively egalitarian and peaceful, lacking private property and concepts of ownership. Lisa Garforth contrasts "[Kesh culture's] ecocentric, relational and phenomenological conception of the lifeworld, and Western modernity's rational, objective and external apprehensions of self, time and space" (401). This is more or less the same conceptual

opposition structuring the novels above, especially *The Lathe of Heaven* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*. *Always Coming Home* is another effort to represent an anarchist utopia while developing a narrative form that corresponds to anarchist social organization, one consisting of an intermingling of diverse aesthetic and discursive forms and a plurality of speakers. This structure is reminiscent of the Benjaminian constellation, expressed most fully in *The Arcades Project* and its amassing of voices that collectively articulate the historical moment. The complex relations that emerge out of the coordination of these voices mean that every individual voice contributes to the narrative process while that process remains irreducible to any of its constituent parts. The voices exist on a common discursive plane, even as their qualitative distinctness—their participation in different genres and mediums and their attribution to different speakers—reflects a culture that accommodates diversity of expression. Complicating the politics of this discursive egalitarianism is its mediation through the anthropologist. The anthropologist's voice both enables and cancels the novel's perspectival heterogeneity, continually re-containing this heterogeneity within a singular mediating subject.

The other effect of the constellation as narrative form is that it represents an unspecified mass of historical time in non-linear terms, meaning that it goes beyond theorizing simultaneity by seeking to represent it. Past, present, and future are so thoroughly entangled that they cannot be distinguished from each other, and the categories, as such, decline in importance. Garforth notes that “the spectre of eco-apocalypse” hovers over the novel (401), but the novel never narrates the collapse or situates it temporally in relation to any of its other events. This is in contrast to major climate fiction novels such as Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* (2017), which progress linearly and are highly



specific about their chronology. When Le Guin's anthropologist meets a Kesh man with interests and expertise that approximate those of an historian, she finds that "To him, it appears, chronology is an essentially artificial, almost an arbitrary arrangement of events—an alphabet as opposed to a sentence" (169). The man "doesn't perceive time as a direction, let alone a progress, but as a landscape in which one may go any number of directions, or nowhere" (171). In moments like this, *Always Coming Home* seems to involve an entirely different operation on the line/circle dichotomy, one that neutralizes the opposition rather than synthesizing it.

As much as the novel's formal radicalism seems to resist any codifiable schema, its temporality is in many respects consistent with the earlier novels. The social relations in the text are represented as reliant on and in conversation with the storyworld's past, and these same relations are part of the author's dialogue with real-world history. The novel's title hearkens back to the role of homecoming in Shevek's General Temporal Theory, and the story of Stone Telling—the most substantial of the text's fragments—iterates the journey/return arc familiar from the earlier novels. The accumulation of fragments gradually aggregates into a vision of Kesh culture, but it does so as a result of the anthropologist's archival project which interweaves the Kesh past with the present of its documentation—a project introduced by the anthropologist in an initial passage titled "Towards an Archaeology of the Future" (3).

This archaeological project is analogous to the novel's composition, and Le Guin nods to this in passages that treat the anthropologist as a quasi-authorial figure. The novel draws very directly on Native American cultures to articulate its vision of a utopian future, such that this, more than any other Le Guin novel, may be fairly critiqued for its nostalgic projection of the utopian idea into the past. The novel, furthermore, never adequately addresses the way that the

anthropologist's assembly of knowledge about the Kesh evokes her discipline's fraught colonial history. By imagining a future in which the indigenous peoples of North America seem to have outlasted their colonizers, Le Guin inverts imperial history in politically ambiguous ways.

Regardless of how we appraise *Always Coming Home*, Le Guin's rationale for her project is an important commentary on utopian discourse. She insisted a few years before the novel's publication,

I am not proposing a return to the Stone Age. My intent is not reactionary, nor even conservative, but simply subversive. It seems that the utopian imagination is trapped, like capitalism and industrialism and the human population, in a one-way future consisting only of growth [...] Go backward. Turn and return. ("A Non-Euclidean" 173)

Le Guin's comments here are clearly prescriptive. She says that "Turn and return" is what utopian discourse *should* do: it should counter capitalistic, growth- and progress-oriented tendencies as they make their perpetual incursions into the utopian imagination. Her comments are also descriptive insofar as they articulate a basic quality of all utopian discourse—that it involves a dialogue with the past, and that the utopian content it projects into the future is contingent on what has already existed. The strength of Le Guin's project is that it apprehends the historical constraints on utopian discourse theorized negatively by Jameson, and it re-theorizes them positively, finding in utopian discourse's inevitable permeation by history a countermeasure against capitalist postmodernity's unhinged charge into the future.

### **Beyond Negativity**

Le Guin's work is something of an outlier in this project, given that my argument is about utopian discourse in contemporary speculative fiction, and Le Guin is arguably not a contemporary author. She wrote her most important novels in the late 1960s and early 1970s,

placing them outside most periodizations of contemporary literature. This means that she wrote the novels above in a fundamentally different world than the one contextualizing the other works in this project. As noted above in connection to Moylan's critique of *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin's utopianism is based on acts of political praxis and aesthetic creation that forge continuities in historical time. More recent texts, especially those written after the collapse of the Soviet bloc, tend to predicate utopian change on catastrophic rifts in historical time. While the other texts in this project are often formally and thematically distinct from Le Guin's novels, however, they also rely on recursive forms to articulate their utopian content. This content in *The Road*, for instance, is furnished through the father's archaeological sifting of the storyworld's pre-apocalyptic past, a process that allows him to rescue conceptual fragments that can be positively repurposed in the present. Le Guin's project is useful because it is a uniquely self-reflexive and explicit meditation on these dynamics that organize the later texts in subtler ways.

Even so, there are undeniable differences between these approaches to representing time and utopian change. Le Guin's injunction to "Go backward. Turn and return" ("A Non-Euclidean" 173), is a reminder that the impulse of utopian discourse to move toward the new can lead it into troubling complicities with the social phenomena it opposes, situating it "like capitalism and industrialism and the human population, in a one-way future consisting only of growth" ("A Non-Euclidean" 173). Her ideal of utopian change conducted through pacifism and a revolutionary commitment to the past may understandably seem outmoded in the context of the twenty-first century and the condition that Mark Fisher describes as "'capitalist realism': the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (2). Framed critically,

Le Guin's utopianism involves the recapitulation of already-existent social forms that, by definition, will be enclosed within ideology.

This tension invites questions, however, about whether Fisher's definition of capitalist realism, which is essentially a restatement of Jameson's theories of ideological closure, is itself becoming outmoded as the twenty-first century progresses. The contradictions of late capitalism are currently splintering the ideological homogeneity posited by Fisher and Jameson, such that the totalizing world order they theorize seems increasingly precarious. It may be that Le Guin's comparatively hopeful utopianism, formulated in the last major progressive period in American history, is acquiring renewed relevance as dreams of radical social transformation, such as the Green New Deal, are gaining traction again.

## CONCLUSION

Jameson's claim that the new cannot be imagined from within the epistemological limits imposed by history has become something of a truism in utopian theory and criticism. It is useful, however, to reconsider the idea that any utopianism that borrows its content from the past will invariably be compromised. Part of my argument in this dissertation is that to define utopian discourse in terms of its inability to produce a truly novel vision of the future is to conspire in limiting the use-value of utopian literature, theory, and criticism. It is obviously not helpful to overstate this use-value—no utopian text is likely to lead to the radical reorganization of society—but it is worthwhile to consider the implications of criticism that often seems preoccupied with documenting the inevitable failures of its objects of study.

I have tried in each chapter to practice a relatively more positive and affirmational approach to utopian discourse; after all, there are a wide range of critiques to be leveled at the negative utopian principle that radical social betterment cannot be imagined or represented. It may be seen as an overly intellectualized and fatalistic cop-out that exports a lack of political imagination and energy on the Left into an abstract realm of ideological constraints that we, as individuals, can do little about. It offers little in the way of practical routes toward social betterment while characterizing efforts toward that goal as contained within the status quo.

I frequently reference Tom Moylan's work in this dissertation, and particularly his excellent book on dystopia, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, but his reading of *The Dispossessed* exemplifies some of the limitations of Jamesonian ideology critique (*Demand* 91-120). Moylan

provides an accounting of the novel's utopian impulses and the constellation of social ills that those impulses militate against. After recapping the novel's framing of this opposition, he steps back to reveal that the very terms of the conflict are circumscribed by ideology, such that the novel's efforts to imagine a radically better society are, ultimately, contained within conventional modes of thought and representation. The problem with Moylan's reading certainly is not that it is wrong. Most of his critiques are fair, and they illuminate uneasy continuities between Le Guin's utopian vision and the ideological formations it ostensibly critiques. There is certainly nothing to be gained by pretending that *The Dispossessed* is more radical than it is.

The first third of Moylan's chapter is devoted to recapitulating the novel's utopian content, while the remaining two-thirds are spent exhaustively documenting its inadequacies. This is a strange allocation of space and focus in the context of a book that Moylan describes as a study of texts united by "the celebration of emancipatory ways of being as well as the very possibility of utopian longing itself" (*Demand* 12). What would it look like for utopian theory and criticism to emulate the literature by making hope their organizing structure of feeling? This certainly would not mean overlooking the flaws of *The Dispossessed*, but it might mean registering those flaws, considering them seriously, and then moving on to examining the text's emancipatory impulses and the complex ways that it articulates them. This, in fact, is the tone of most of Moylan's work, so while his reading of *The Dispossessed* represents what I consider to be counterproductive tendencies in the criticism, it is not representative of his body of work.

This relatively more positive tone is also reflected in Jameson's more recent work. In *Archaeologies of the Future*, after chapters that recapitulate the problematics of utopian representation, Jameson writes that utopia's unknowability can impel us into

a meditation on the impossible, on the unrealizable in its own right. This is very far from a liberal capitulation to the necessity of capitalism, however; it is quite the opposite, a rattling of the bars and an intense spiritual concentration and preparation for another stage which has not yet arrived. (232-3)

Here, Jameson maintains the principle that utopian social organization cannot be imagined, but he reframes this principle in comparatively optimistic terms. Reading and writing utopian literature become exercises in readiness rather than acts that merely, as he has suggested elsewhere, “mak[e] us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment” (*Archaeologies* xiii). It is useful to consider this more positive turn in the context of recent conversations in literary studies about the horizons of ideology critique as a methodology. Elizabeth Anker, Rita Felski, and others have argued that the various schools and methods of ideology critique have revolutionized literary studies in profoundly positive ways, but that an overly narrow focus on the text’s positionality within fields of power can foreclose other, more affirmational, ways of reading it. Anker and Felski thus advocate “exploring new models and practices of reading that are less beholden to suspicion and skepticism, more willing to avow the creative, innovative, world-making aspects of literature and criticism” (20). In all of my chapters, I have tried to balance critique with affirmation, acknowledging the problematics of utopian representation while focusing on the strategies that texts use to navigate them. The texts in this project do not capitulate to ideology or pretend that they are free of it; they instead meditate self-referentially on the difficulty of imagining routes to radical social betterment while seeking, nonetheless, to imagine them.

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## VITA

Casey Jergenson graduated from Creighton University in 2012 with a Bachelor of Arts in English. After a year of service in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps Northwest, he began his graduate studies at Loyola University Chicago, where he studied modern and contemporary fiction, Marxist cultural theory, and utopian literature. His work has appeared in *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* and *Utopian Studies*.