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UTOPIA

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Utopia is a slippery concept. At first blush, it seems fairly obvious what we mean by the term: a theoretical ideal society and/or a literary work that describes such a society. Yet it is difficult to capture all the permutations of utopia in a single definition. Is it best understood as a genre, a mode, a style, a political project, or a structure of feeling? Contributing to the difficulty of defining utopia is the fact that arguments over its proper role and function sometimes take place in the "real world" outside of literature: in schemes of social reform, the planning of intentional communities, and other acts of political practice. Utopianism also has a psychological valence: the term is often used to refer to a type of impulse, need, or drive that some believe is inherent in the human psyche. Is fantasizing about ideal worlds hard-wired in the human brain? Or, at the very least, is it a strongly internalized cultural imperative whose sheer pervasiveness requires an explanation?

To complicate matters further, utopia is perhaps unique among literary genres in inspiring a robust theoretical conversation that often draws explicit connections between the literary and the political. Furthermore, for utopia the persistent question about how representation relates to praxis is particularly fraught and raises a series of questions: to what extent do we need to consider the political uses of utopia and the existence of real-world utopian experiments in order to understand and describe the form of the utopian novel? How do we account for parallel (and divergent) developments of utopia in different cultural contexts, in different languages, and in different literary traditions? How do we do so without artificially separating the literary, the pragmatic, and the theoretical? Finally, after all these centuries, where is utopia today?

Utopia's Beginnings

Thomas More coined the word "utopia" in his 1516 text of the same name, yet of course he invented neither the concept nor the genre. Western literary representations of ideal societies that predate *Utopia* include Plato's *Republic*, Hesiod's Golden Age, the island of the Phaeacians in Homer's *Odyssey*, the medieval Land of Cockaigne, and even the Biblical Garden of Eden. More's *Utopia*, however, not only gave the genre (and concept) an enduring name; it also codified the generic elements that subsequent authors have mostly honored: an ideal society, a traveler-narrator, a guide who explains the society's structure and rules, a return

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to the homeland, an audience waiting to hear the tale. Both the ideal society and the genre itself are governed by a rigid set of rules. Perhaps most important, the description of utopia contains a buried (or not-so-buried) critique of the traveler/author/reader's own country or society: through comparison to an ideal social organization, the flaws of the author's culture are laid bare. In the case of More's text these comparisons are more or less direct—the traveler Raphael Hythloday is given to pronouncements such as “your sheep... swallow up people: they lay waste and depopulate fields, dwellings and towns” (33)—but as we'll see later in this chapter, many subsequent utopias and dystopias have relied on satire to drive their critical points home.

The island of Utopia is located vaguely in the New World somewhere (the intradiegetic character of Thomas More conveniently forgets to ask Hythloday “in what part of that new world Utopia may be found” [13]). As Fredric Jameson points out, utopia as genre is, from its outset, “enabled by geographical exploration and the resultant travel narratives” that depict “tribal societies and their well-nigh Utopian dignity” (18). Thus from its very beginnings, utopia was a genre—and perhaps a political construct—inseparable from colonialist and racist ideologies. The tradition among More's Utopians is that their founder Utopus, “who gave his name to the island by conquest,” later “raised its brutish and uncultivated inhabitants to such a level of civilization and humanity that they now outshine virtually all other nations” (57–58). The suggestion is that even this process of “civilization” was made possible by the shipwreck of a group of Romans and Egyptians who brought with them skills and techniques “developed for the improvement of life” (54). Apparently it was impossible for More to imagine a group of indigenous Americans developing a just and rational society *sui generis*.

The relationship between colonial conquest and utopian literature is fascinatingly complex. More's Utopians practice colonization as a means of population control; when their own island becomes too crowded, they establish a colony on the mainland, “wherever the native population has redundant and untilled land” (68), and forcibly conquer anyone who resists the implementation of their laws. The Utopians “view it as an entirely just cause for war when those who possess a territory leave it idle and unproductive, denying use and possession to others who, by the law of nature, ought to be fed by it” (69). This is arguably the earliest articulation of the principle of *terra nullius*—the idea that “waste” land cannot be owned and is thus legally subject to seizure—which underwrote colonial land grabs throughout the age of exploration (and beyond). John Locke is often credited with the development of the principle; his contribution was the idea that because it is a divine injunction to improve land, anyone who “in obedience to this command of God, subdued, tilled and sowed any part of [the earth], thereby annexed to it something that was his property, which another had no title to, nor could without injury take from him” (Locke Section 32). Legal historian Richard Tuck points out that Locke was influenced in this formulation by the writings of the Dutch political theorist Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), who was in turn influenced by the Anglo-Italian jurist and “Father of International Law” Alberico Gentili (1552–1608), who “often cited with enthusiasm” the passages from *Utopia* to which I have alluded (Tuck 49). Thus, the justification for appropriating “uncultivated” lands from indigenous peoples moved from imaginative literature to political principle to real-world practice.

More's island nation followed many more politically progressive practices, however, that became standard elements of future utopias—both fictional and real-world. As the character Thomas More acknowledges of the Utopians, the “linchpin of their entire social order [is] their life in common without any use of money” (122). Jameson notes that “More's initial utopian gesture—the abolition of money and property—runs through the Utopian tradition like a red thread, now aggressively affirmed on the surface, now tacitly presupposed in milder

forms or disguises" (20). As we shall see, it was the embrace of communism from the earliest iterations of utopia that made the genre attractive to nineteenth-century socialist reformers, as well as to Marxist theorists from the nineteenth century onward. It is one of the paradoxes of utopia that a literary genre dedicated to describing idealized, perhaps impossible worlds—the word itself does mean “no place,” after all—has from its beginnings been so entangled with real-world praxis.

Of the few dozen literary utopias written in English during the three centuries following More's inaugural text, Margaret Cavendish's imaginary ethnography *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World* (1666) is currently the most canonical example. It describes the adventures of a young aristocratic woman who travels to a parallel world, adjacent to the North Pole, inhabited by rational animal-human hybrid creatures who live in total harmony. Although Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) is predominantly a satire, its final section describing the idealized Land of the Houyhnhnms has strongly utopian elements. Both texts avoid describing the “Utopian dignity” of indigenous peoples by populating their ideal worlds with humanoid animals. They do, however, enshrine other key components of early literary utopia: the abolition of private property and money, and the location of their ideal worlds in a physically separate space accessible through (arduous) travel. Not until the cusp of the nineteenth century would utopianist authors begin to locate their imaginary worlds in the future.

The Nineteenth Century

The development of progressive political ideas during the Enlightenment wrought a change in utopia. As Fátima Vieira argues, “By projecting the ideal society in the future, the utopian discourse enunciated a logic of causalities that presupposed that certain actions (namely those of a political nature) might afford the changes that were necessary in order to make the imagined society come true” (10). *Utopia* or *eutopia* (“no place” or “good place”) ceded to *euchronia* (“good era”) as authors shifted from critiquing their own societies through satirical comparison toward imagining what real-world alternatives could look like. Utopian discourse, including literary utopias, took on the prescriptive flavor of a blueprint—the description of a social organization that might, and should, happen in the future.

The nineteenth century was a period of extraordinary efflorescence for utopias: while there were about 70 English-language utopias written between 1516 and 1800, the nineteenth century saw the publication of over 400 utopian novels in English, fully half of which were published between 1887 (when Edward Bellamy's hugely influential novel *Looking Backward* appeared) and 1895 (Sargent 276, 278). Bellamy's novel and William Morris's response in *News from Nowhere* (1890) not only sparked a craze for utopia-writing that lasted over a decade; they specifically jump-started a vogue for prescriptive utopias set in the future. The two authors' utopian “blueprints” form the ends of a spectrum. While Bellamy envisions an idyllic America in the year 2000 whose just and equitable society is enabled by technological development and the gradual consolidation of capital in huge monopolies eventually taken over by the state, Morris sketches a future neo-feudal pastoral idyll in which human beings live in harmony with nature, dwell in small communal units, and labor by hand.

Most utopias written in the 1890s deliberately positioned themselves in one or the other of these “camps”—both of which, it is important to note, were predicated on communal property relations and the solution of the “labor problem” through collectivity, very much in the spirit of More's ur-text. Indeed, part of the reason for the boom in literary utopias

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during this period was the growth of socialism, in the form of both revolutionary Marxism and other “gradualist” socialist movements such as Fabianism and Great Britain’s Independent Labour Party. Both agrarian and techno literary utopianists are thus responding (and contributing) to the growth of real-world political movements and events.

This was also the decade, however, that saw a mini-boom in dystopian novels that openly critiqued the traditional communist basis of utopia. As Gregory Claeys has discussed at length, the anti-socialist utopia typically depicts a revolution that turns into a dictatorship (xii). Often such novels warn of compulsory labor or detail eugenicist schemes of population control and species “improvement” through enforced selective breeding. The ideal society of Anthony Trollope’s *The Fixed Period* (1882), for example, depends on a scheme of voluntary euthanasia for everyone at the age of 68. Walter Besant’s *The Inner House* (1888), on the other hand, describes a population-stable society controlled by elite scientists who have discovered an elixir of immortality; all its citizens live in a passionless stupor and must wait for someone to die by accident before anyone is allowed to reproduce.

Not all the novels of this period that depict state-sponsored eugenics can be characterized as dystopian, however; eugenics itself (as deplorable and evil as we now understand it to be) contained strongly utopian elements in its earliest incarnations. Francis Galton (1822–1911), who coined the term “eugenics” in 1883, responded to anxieties about the “degeneration” of the human species—supposedly caused by depleted physical strength due to urban living and lack of manual labor among the upper classes—by trumpeting the capacity of selective interbreeding of the “gifted” to bring about a “higher” type of human being. While most utopias, including More’s own, imagine the physical improvement of human beings in some form—usually through the application of healthful labor, outdoor weather, better food, and even selective marriage—it isn’t until the 1890s that eugenicist and socialist thought began to overlap in the realm of utopia.

Many prominent British socialists openly espoused eugenicist ideas. In his 1905 novel *A Modern Utopia*, H. G. Wells, who was a committed Fabian, depicts an ideal society ruled by a class of physically and mentally superior beings known as *samurai*, whom the narrator explicitly likens to the guardians in Plato’s *Republic*. More chillingly, in his pamphlet *The Decline in the Birth-Rate* (1907), Sidney Webb (a driving force behind the Fabian Society) complained that in

Great Britain at this moment ... children are being freely born to the Irish Catholics and the Polish, Russian and German Jews, on the one hand, and to the thriftless and irresponsible—largely the casual laborers and the other denizens of the one-roomed tenements of our great cities—on the other.

(16–17)

It is one thing to note that early eugenicist thinking contained a utopian element—the dream of a better society—and quite another to notice that utopia itself is deeply, perhaps inextricably, entangled with eugenicist schemes and ideals. As the political philosopher Bertrand de Jouvenel wrote in his 1946 treatise *On Power*:

Take a look ... at the way in which the master builders of Paradises, the Platos, the Mores, the Campanellas, set about it. They get rid of the clashes by getting rid of the differences These dreams are, one and all, of tyrannies, of straiter, heavier, more oppressive tyrannies than any that history has yet shown us.

(133)

Yet critiques of utopia did not have to await the twentieth century, the rise of fascism, and the aftermath of two world wars. Marx himself famously denigrated contemporary “utopian socialists” for different reasons—for engaging in “fantastic” schemes, “standing apart from the contest” in an attempt to “deaden the class struggle” and to “reconcile the class antagonisms” (Marx and Engels 255–256). According to Marx, the followers of Owen, Fourier, and Saint-Simon are distracted from the revolution by their continued fixation on the “experimental realization of their social Utopias, of founding isolated ‘phalanstères,’ of establishing ‘Home Colonies,’ of setting up a ‘Little Icaria’... and to realise all these castles in the air, they are compelled to appeal to the feelings and purses of the bourgeois” (256).

For most theorists writing in the wake of Marx, the construction of detailed blueprints for a specific future society has been seen, at best, as a distraction from the immediate and pressing tasks of social change and, at worst, as an ideological, compensatory sop akin to religion. As the historian and scholar of utopia Ruth Levitas argues, however, the “real dispute between Marx and Engels and the utopian socialists is not about the merit of goals or of images of the future but about the process of transformation” (41). In other words, the Marxists and so-called “utopian socialists” debated primarily the *means* by which a workers’ paradise will be effected: through an actual revolution, or through “an appeal to all classes on the basis of reason and justice” (60).

A deeper difference between the two “sides” is the extent to which they see the description of blueprints for utopia—including in literary texts—to be inherently transformative or a dangerous distraction from the pragmatic business of revolution. (As we shall see, the question of the psychological function of utopia becomes a particularly lively one for the Marxist theorists of the early twentieth century.) That said (and *pace* Marx himself), the conflict between Marxism and “utopian socialism” should not be overstated. Levitas argues that it is less stark than it appears, noting that “an outline of the principal features of communist society can be pieced together from the writings of Marx and Engels,” who can thus be seen as indulging in their own blueprint-making (46). As Roger Paden notes, Marx and Engels incorporated a number of specific elements cribbed from British and French utopian thinkers in their own descriptions of the post-revolutionary workers’ paradise. More importantly, they

took from the Utopian socialists a specific conception of what it was to be a politically engaged Utopian thinker.... Utopianism, in this view, is a political project involving the description of an ideal society to be used both as a goal to guide social reform and as a normative standard to critically evaluate existing societies.

(69–70)

Morris’s *News from Nowhere*, the most influential and widely read utopia by a British socialist author, elegantly fudges the question of how the new social organization is to be effected. In chapters entitled “How the Change Came” and “The Beginning of the New Life,” the historian Old Hammond describes to William Guest, the Victorian time traveler-narrator who has found himself mysteriously transported to an ideal future England, how their utopian society came about. Morris includes both gradualist elements—the influence of newspapers, the formation of powerful unions—and revolutionary elements—a massacre in Trafalgar Square and brutal police and military crackdowns—in his imaginary account of “how the change came.”

However it envisions the transformation coming about, the nineteenth-century literary utopia still retains a laser-eyed focus on problems of labor and distribution, often sketching

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ideal social organizations in which labor is undertaken freely, without official remuneration, and in return everyone is supported by a centralized economy administered by the state. Usually money as such does not exist. The keen student of the century's utopias will notice, however, that the literary imagination often falters when it comes to envisioning true social equality. The women of Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, despite their separate-but-equal industrial army, are still considered "ornaments" who leave the men to their cigars after dinner, while a rigid gendered division of labor (men in the fields, women in the house) still pertains in *News from Nowhere*. Neither novel has anything at all to say about race relations.

More subtly, many authors fail to perceive how their ideal societies are propped up by the same problematic institutions as their real-life ones. As Dr. Leete, the twentieth-century utopian "explainer" in *Looking Backward*, proudly explains to his guest from the nineteenth century, money no longer exists in their ideal society: "A credit corresponding to his share of the annual product of the nation is given to every citizen ... and a credit card issued him with which he procures at the public storehouses ... whatever he desires." Each credit card, moreover, "is issued for a certain number of dollars," which serve "as algebraical symbols for comparing the values of products with one another" (51). That is, for all of Bellamy's powers of imagination, he seems incapable of imagining a society without money.

While this insight is perhaps an unfair quibble, we see deeper economic problems at work in Morris's *Nowhere*. As Old Hammond explains to Guest:

[I]n the last age of civilisation men had got into a vicious circle in the matter of production of wares. They had reached wonderful facility of production, and in order to make the most of that facility they had gradually created (or allowed to grow, rather) a most elaborate system of buying and selling, which has been called the World-Market; and that World-Market, once set a-going, forced them to go on making more and more of these wares.

(80)

Yet as we soon learn, the new anxiety in this utopia is that instead of a surplus of consumable objects there will be a surplus of laboring bodies: Nowhereians worry that the supply of pleasant labor will dry up. Thus, emigration becomes an integral part of the new economic organization:

Those lands which were once the colonies of Great Britain, for instance, and especially America—that part of it, above all, which was once the United States—are now and will be for a long while a great resource to us . . . [F]or nearly a hundred years the people of the northern parts of America have been engaged in gradually making a dwelling-place out of a stinking dust-heap; and there is still a great deal to do.

(84–85)

Even in a world with abundant sustenance for all, a new scarcity is imagined; emigration becomes a necessary prop to the system, just as colonial markets were necessary to maintain adequate economic demand for products and goods. While most Victorian literary utopias are activated by deep skepticism about nineteenth-century capitalism's optimistic discourse of simultaneous infinite growth and self-contained sustainability, their critique of capital often results in depictions of a future society that is unable to escape the same contradictions as the one from which it sprung.

The Twentieth Century and Beyond

The twentieth century saw two crucial developments in utopia. First, the concept was taken up by Marxist philosophers associated with the Frankfurt School—perhaps ironically, given Marx's own antipathy to the term—and given serious consideration as both a political force and a psychological drive. Second, literary utopia seemed to disappear, muscled out by a wave of dystopias and utopia-dystopia hybrids—novels depicting worlds that think of themselves as utopian, but which readers are clearly meant to revile and condemn. Indeed, both trends could be seen as continuing to dominate utopian discourse up to the present moment—but as we shall see in the final section of this chapter, there is perhaps a bit of hope left when it comes to literary utopia, a little bit of energy left for imagining and describing ideal worlds, even if it is found in unlikely places.

The writings of the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, particularly his multi-volume treatise *The Principle of Hope* (1954–1959), have been enormously influential on later utopian theorists. Bloch's crucial contribution is his description of the "utopian impulse," a general orientation toward utopian hope that spills over from the political and literary realms. For Bloch, the utopian impulse manifests in either concrete or abstract forms. The former, which he also calls "anticipatory" utopia, refers to reality-directed schemas of social reform such as intentional communities and revolutionary praxis. The latter, abstract or "compensatory" utopia, refers to personal wishes and daydreams and can be found in an array of cultural formations such as music, architecture, popular culture, myths, daydreams, and medicine. The former are social and the latter are selfish; the former are (or can be) properly Marxist while the latter are essentially ideological.

Yet Bloch is careful not to draw artificial or untenable distinctions. The distinction between concrete and abstract utopia is one of function rather than form; both kinds of impulse can be found in different kinds of cultural production. For Bloch, "hope" is a central term; indeed, it forms part of the title of his magnum opus. There is a core of political energy to be harnessed in even the most selfish, rubbishy dreams of a better future; the trick is to precipitate a nugget of concrete utopia from the dross of compensatory, abstract longings. For Bloch, what remains is "an unfinished forward dream" that "can only be discredited by the bourgeoisie—this seriously deserves the name utopia" (157).

Bloch expends a lot of space attempting to distinguish concrete from abstract utopia, wheat from chaff, yet there is an unsatisfyingly circular feel to his analysis: concrete utopia is what survives after the passing of the ephemeral trappings of particular wishes, yet this perdurable "cultural surplus" is by definition concrete utopia. As Fredric Jameson waggishly notes,

There is here at work the same hermeneutic paradox Freud confronted when, searching for precursors of his dream analysis, he finally identified one obscure aboriginal tribe for whom all dreams had sexual meanings—except for overtly sexual dreams as such, which meant something else.

(3)

Yet as Ruth Levitas points out, it is ultimately unimportant that the criteria are obscure by which concrete utopia is distinguished from abstract utopia. Bloch's project is fundamentally to rehabilitate utopia "within Marxism as a neglected Marxist category" (107).

In the end, Bloch was successful—if we measure success by the extent to which utopia has been taken seriously as a category by Marxist and other leftist critics in the twentieth

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and twenty-first centuries. Jameson, the most prominent such critic, sidesteps the hermeneutic problems in Bloch's original schema by reinscribing abstract-vs.-concrete utopia as a question of form: "the properly Utopian program or realization will involve a commitment to closure (and thereby to totality)" (4). It is the "very impress of the form and category of totality which is virtually by definition lacking in the multiple forms invested by Bloch's Utopian impulse" (5). The totalization of closure is a key feature of utopia beginning with More's island, which has been terraformed by the colonial conquerors: they "caused a channel fifteen miles wide to be excavated at that end of the peninsula joined to the mainland, so surrounding it with the sea" (58). We can see a commitment to closure in nearly all (dare one say "all?") literary utopias ever since: either geographical separation (islands, hollow earths, Hyperborean poles, extraterrestrial colonies) or temporal separation (ideal civilizations—usually also geographically enclosed—that exist in the future or the past).

The work of Herbert Marcuse, a psychoanalytic-Marxist critic and member of the Frankfurt School, potentially points another way beyond the impasse between liberatory and ideological views of utopian impulse. For Marcuse, the psychoanalytic reality principle contains first a necessary element—the control of anarchic selfishness in the process of socialization—and second a "surplus" element, whose function is to ensure dominance and hierarchy (*Eros & Civilization* 35ff.). Different modes of production are associated with different modes of domination and thus different modes of repression; Marcuse names the particular form that surplus repression takes under advanced capitalism the "performance principle," and does so "in order to emphasize that under its rule society is stratified according to the competitive economic performances of its members" (*Eros & Civilization* 44). The performance principle has several crucial features:

- 1 It renders labor pervasive and all-encompassing for "Work has now become *general*" (*Eros & Civilization* 45).
- 2 It necessitates the repression of Eros: "repressive desublimation" sanctions and allows certain performances of libido that are channeled by and contained by the system of domination (*One-Dimensional Man* 59ff.).
- 3 It tragically curtails the realm of human freedom:

the free space which the individual has at his disposal for his psychic processes has been greatly narrowed down; it is no longer possible for something like an individual psyche with its own demands and decisions to develop; the space is occupied by public, social forces.

(*Five Lectures* 14)

Utopias are entirely about imagined alternatives, and Marcuse elaborates how difficult it is for subjects of modern capitalism to imagine an alternative to a social organization governed by the performance principle. In the last pages of the "Phantasy and Utopia" chapter of *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse works through the implications of an imagined—that is, utopian—"non-repressive reality principle" (*Eros & Civilization* 155). Because our current social organization is characterized by (unnecessary) anxiety over scarcity and the inculcation of false desires, it easily co-opts any attempts to "improv[e] or supplement[] the present existence by more contemplation, more leisure" (*Eros & Civilization* 157). A utopian non-repressive reality principle would require nothing less than a complete reorganization of the psyche, an alteration in "the balance between Eros and Thanatos," a reactivation of "tabooed realms of gratification," and the pacification of "the conservative tendencies of the instincts" (*Eros & Civilization* 158).

Eros, or the pleasure principle, is the source of the utopian desire for a better world. While it is constantly struggling against forces of surplus repression, Marcuse envisions a world in which a non-repressive reality principle allows for the sublimation of Eros into non-alienated labor, labor that occasions true satisfaction and joy. One of the ways this process can be effected is through imagination and the arts, what Marcuse terms "the aesthetic dimension":

Imagination envisions the reconciliation of the individual with the whole, of desire with realization, of happiness with reason. While this harmony has been removed into utopia by the established reality principle, phantasy insists that it must and can become real, that behind the illusion lies *knowledge*. The truths of imagination are first realized when phantasy itself takes form, when it creates a universe of perception and comprehension.... This occurs in *art*.

(*Eros & Civilization* 143–144)

This is especially true, we might add, in one particular form of art: the imaginative utopia.

The crucial twentieth-century development in the domain of literary utopia was its near disappearance. The first dystopias appeared, as we have seen, as critical responses to the boom of late-Victorian utopian novels, and the two modes co-existed for a decade or so before dystopia gained the upper hand. The novels of H. G. Wells at the turn of the century, particularly *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899) and *A Modern Utopia* (1905), inaugurated a powerful vision of utopia gone awry through the betrayal of revolutionary ideals. Yet as the title of the latter suggests, it is not entirely clear to what extent Wells is predicting, excoriating, or endorsing various authoritarian elements of the societies he depicts. Wells was committed (or perhaps reconciled) to the necessity of a world-state in order to effect social reform, but his literary visions of such worlds shimmer between utopia and dystopia, refusing to resolve definitively into one or the other.

Wells arguably brought forward contradictory elements in utopia—totalitarianism, uniformity, repression, eugenics—latent in the genre all along that were picked up and developed by the authors of dystopias in the years following the world wars. The most influential of such novels were Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *1984* (1949), and Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962). All three depict future worlds characterized by state brutality and a compliant populace, and concern themselves primarily with the problem of free will under a repressive regime. Utopia secured by authoritarianism was a central—perhaps the central—theme of dystopian novels throughout much of the twentieth century. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), for example, one of the most important dystopias of the century, imagines a future theonomic American society in which women are subjugated to a patriarchal political order that brutally represses their freedom using Christian scriptures as the basis for secular law. At the time of its publication—indeed, at the time of the writing of the first draft of this chapter—such a society seemed a far-fetched thought experiment; with the recent Supreme Court decision overturning *Roe v. Wade*, the United States has moved dramatically closer to the repressive dystopia that Atwood envisioned. (Please visit www.safeabortionwomensright.org for ways to help safeguard reproductive freedoms around the world.)

If there is a general theme to dystopias from the latter decades of the twentieth century until today, it would be civilizational collapse rather than the growth of Stalinist authoritarianism. Often such collapse is brought about by environmental catastrophe in the form of uncontrolled climate change, pandemic, nuclear war, or other ecological disaster, and the societies (which are not always civilizations) that follow are just as often chaotic as they are

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totalizing and repressive. Notable examples include *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson (1992), *The Children of Men* by P. D. James (1992), *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler (1993), *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy (2006), *The Windup Girl* by Paolo Bacigalupi (2009), the MaddAddam trilogy by Margaret Atwood (2003–2012), and the Hunger Games trilogy of young adult novels by Suzanne Collins (2008–2010).

Some of the novels on the above list skirt the blurred and contested boundary with science fiction—as do the handful of recent novels that can be characterized as proper utopias. Fredric Jameson's enormously influential critical work *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (2005) traces the long entanglement of the two literary modes. Classifying science fiction is a notoriously tricky and thankless task, but a rough-and-ready definition would include narratives that depict space exploration and extraterrestrial civilizations, advanced science and technology, and/or time travel. Ursula K. LeGuin's *The Dispossessed* (1974) and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) are examples of important science fiction novels that are also utopias in the traditional sense. Many of the science fiction novels of Kim Stanley Robinson imagine future worlds that are utopian in their basic outlines. Robinson has recently provided an influential definition of utopia as “a positive course in history ... the best possible given where we are, given our technological base” (Nolan 65). His recent novel *The Ministry for the Future* (2020), published after the interview in which this definition was proposed, imagines a near-future world that has responded in useful ways to catastrophic climate events; it could be characterized more accurately as technocratic speculative fiction than science fiction per se. Another notable locus for literary utopianism is Africanfuturism. According to Nigerian author Nnedi Okorafor (*Lagoon*, 2014), who coined the term,

Africanfuturism is concerned with visions of the future, is interested in technology, leaves the earth, skews optimistic, is centered on and predominantly written by people of African descent (black people) and it is rooted first and foremost in Africa. It's less concerned with 'what could have been' and more concerned with 'what is and can/will be'.

(Okorafor)

It is undeniable that literary utopias are thin on the ground at the moment, and have been for over a hundred years. It is something of a commonplace to note that after the horrors of the twentieth century—which show few signs of abating in the twenty-first—the distaste for optimistic visions of the future makes perfect sense. And yet, if not now, when? The writing, reading, and analyzing of literary utopias seems more important than ever, as the urgency of imagining other modes of social organization becomes increasingly apparent. The alternative is worse.

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