Reading Utopia in Dark Times

**Subject:** Genre, Theory, Method

**Sub-subject:** Literary Criticism and Theory

**Keywords:** utopia, dystopia, theory, method, reading

**Review category:** Anglophone literature, media and culture

**Brief Precis of Session:**

Within the context of an increasingly dystopian sense of global crisis, how can the idea of Utopia help us galvanise political literary readings? This special session will present a roundtable discussion in which panelists consider how we can use utopian methods to understand different kinds of literary texts, reflecting upon the importance of the humanities and humanist values in “dark times.”

**Detailed Description of Session:**

This special session will take the form of a roundtable discussion with seven panelists and a presider. The roundtable will consider the idea of Utopia and its relevance for understanding literature within the context of an increasingly dystopian sense of global crisis. In recent years, neoliberalism and liberal democracy have been confronted with a series of seismic challenges – including financial crisis and austerity, national populism movements, persistent social and financial inequality, rising extremism, refugeeism and migration, increased threats to minority groups (the Jewish community, LGBTQ communities, immigrant populations, undocumented workers, the disabled), the looming threat of climate change and, mediating all of these, a hardening of discourse facilitated by online exchanges and the changing landscape of digital news and information dissemination.

Despite the seemingly relentless, dystopian nature of these issues contemporary writers are responding by using utopian registers in their fiction, anticipating alternative ways of imagining subjectivity, community and historical modes of belonging through formal and stylistic innovation. Literary scholars such as Fredric Jameson and Peter Boxall have commented on this distinctly “utopian turn” in twenty-first century Anglophone writing, as seen in the works of Juliana Spahr, Nnedi Okorafor, David Mitchell, Nalo Hopkinson, China
Miéville, Colson Whitehead, Samuel Delany, Jennifer Egan, Kim Stanley Robinson, Jim Crace, Maggie Gee, Ali Smith, Hari Kunzru and Emily St. John Mandel. This is matched by a similar interrogation of hope as an index of political anticipation in influential theoretical works by Lynne Segal (2017), Terry Eagleton (2015), Lauren Berlant (2011) and David Harvey (2000).

This roundtable is informed by scholarship in the interdisciplinary field of utopian studies, which differentiates utopian methods of reading cultural texts from the goal of Utopia itself or utopian narratives as a science fictional sub-genre. Recent analyses by José Esteban Muñoz (2009), Lucy Sargisson (2012), Ruth Levitas (2013), Robert Tally, Jr. (2013), Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor (2013), Phillip E. Wegner (2014), David M. Bell (2017) and Bill Ashcroft (2017) emphasize the usefulness of the utopian imagination as a desire for being otherwise, envisaging alternative modes of human flourishing while critiquing present socio-political formations. The panelists will consider how insights developed in philosophy, sociology, political theory, architectural studies, urban planning, cultural studies, future/anticipation studies and new materialisms have informed literary scholarship, which has similarly been developing utopian methods of reading that uncover previously overlooked currents of political anticipation within works of fiction.

In literary studies there has been a resurgence of interest in utopian approaches in the past few years, as indicated in the published and forthcoming titles by the panelists, which bring political and philosophical questions of the good society to bear on analyses of complex formal and representational strategies in fiction, poetry and drama. Panelists will deliver short position papers, which will help to structure the discussion whilst ensuring that maximum time will be available for questions and responses from the audience.

The panelists will be asked in advance of the roundtable to consider the following questions:

- What has happened to the utopian imagination in the twenty-first century?
- How can literature scholars engage with interdisciplinary utopian perspectives in sociology, political theory, architectural studies, art and design, urban planning, future/anticipation studies, new materialisms, and the study of intentional communities?
- How can utopian readings enable scholars to uncover previously overlooked formal, rhetorical, political and philosophical currents in literature?
- Can a utopian approach help scholars tackle pressing disciplinary questions and larger-scale abstractions, including the Anthropocene, the digital, environmental crisis, and financial abstraction?
- What previously utopian moments of production (and their corresponding “dark times”) throughout literary history offer insights for reading the contemporary moment?

The session will therefore engage with this year’s presidential theme of “Being Human,” particularly with respect to the importance of humanist values and the purpose of the humanities disciplines in what many scholars refer to as “dark times.” Utopias often flourish at historical moments of crisis and danger. Thomas More’s ideal commonwealth in *Utopia* (1516) inaugurated the genre of utopian literature at a time when humanist values confronted the political realities of the European wars of religion. During the rise of fascism in the 1920s and 1930s we find another important period of utopian anticipation. Ernst Bloch, for instance, sketched out his utopian philosophy in *The Principle of Hope* (1938-1947) as the Weimar Republic collapsed and the Nazis came to power in Germany.
As with previous historical “dark times” of utopian production, our own contemporary moment is characterised by a feeling of disarticulation as older geopolitical realities such as liberal democracy, globalization and neoliberalism are confronted by the retrenchment of populist and nativist movements, the growing threat of the far right, and a rise in xenophobic, homophobic and anti-Semitic attacks. As a scholarly tradition, utopian studies brings together theoretical perspectives with practice-oriented methods that address difficult questions of social division, xenophobia, colonialism, gendered violence and racial oppression precisely in order to foster alternative communities - not just at the imaginary or symbolic level in literary representation but in concrete political tactics. Recently, social movements such as Occupy!, the International Women’s Strike, #BlackLivesMatter and the Indignados have demonstrated how a utopian vocabulary remains vital in imagining new ways to develop collective political subjects in response to the ongoing catastrophes of finance capitalism, precarity, and climate change.

The panelists offer different perspectives on how we can use utopian approaches and methods to uncover such “spaces of gathering” in our literary readings. Banerjee and Freedman’s influential, award-winning scholarship examines the relationship between the utopian imagination and political science fiction. Similarly, Wagner-Lawlor’s research uncovers feminist utopian interventions in speculative literature. Tally Jr. and Wegner’s field-defining studies of utopianism, spatiality and modernity seek to reposition the articulation of utopian dreaming within overlapping histories across the world system that persist into, and beyond, postmodernity and globalization. Finally, the younger panelists on this roundtable - Haines, Grattan and Edwards - have already distinguished themselves as scholarly voices insisting on the persistence of the utopian imagination within the twenty-first century, examining Anglophone literature through utopian readings informed by biopolitics, affect theory, and new temporality studies.

People:

**Expertise and Scholarship** *

*Please provide information on this participant's scholarship and experience, particularly that which directly relates to the session topic. Length may not exceed 200 words.*

**Presider:**


**Speakers:**

Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor received her PhD at Yale University. She specializes in utopian literature and theory from the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries. Her most recent monograph is *Postmodern Utopias and Feminist Fictions* (Cambridge UP, 2013). She has published dozens of articles, in *Feminist Studies, Utopian Studies, Contemporary Women's Writing, Nineteenth-Century Literature, The Journal for French and Francophone*
Philosophy, and others. Wagner-Lawlor is currently writing a book on plasticity in relation to theories of utopia and hospitality. She is writing and publishing on artwork created from plastic detritus, and is a frequent blogger for the Plastic Pollution Coalition, a global alliance of individuals, policy-makers, research institutes and organizations working to reduce the impacts of plastic pollution on the environment, and on human health. Finally, Wagner-Lawlor was co-curator of Plastic Entanglements: Ecology, Aesthetics, Materials, a major international exhibition at the Palmer Museum of Art at Penn State in 2018.

Christian P. Haines is an assistant professor of English at Dartmouth College. His first book, A Desire Called America: Biopolitics, Utopia, and the Literary Commons, intervenes into contemporary utopian literary theory and will be published by Fordham University Press in 2019. His work has appeared in journals including Criticism, Genre, Cultural Critique, LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory, and boundary 2, as well as in The Routledge Companion to Literature and Economics, Neoliberalism and Contemporary American Literature (UNH Press), and What’s Wrong with Antitheory? (Palgrave). He serves as a contributing editor for Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities and is co-editor of a special issue of Cultural Critique, “What Comes After the Subject?” He is currently researching a second book, The Scored Life, on financial abstraction and contemporary culture, as well as editing a special issue of the minnesota review, “Is there a place for the commons?” (Fall 2019).


Anindita Banerjee is Associate Professor of Comparative Literature at Cornell University. Banerjee’s research focuses on science fiction and technocultural studies, utopian studies, environmental humanities, media studies, and migration studies across Russia, Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and Latin America. Banerjee’s first monograph, We Modern People: Science Fiction and the Making of Russian Modernity (Wesleyan University Press, 2013), won the Science Fiction and Technoculture Studies book prize from the University of California and was praised in Science magazine, The Times Literary Supplement, The Los Angeles Review of Books, The Times Higher Education, Comparative Literature Studies, Science Fiction Studies, Slavic Review, and Isis. She is an editor of three other books, Science Fiction Circuits of the South and East (Oxford Peter Lang, 2018); Russian Science Fiction Literature and Cinema: A Critical Reader (Academic Studies Press, 2018); and South of the Future: Speculative Biotechnologies and Care Markets in South Asia and Latin America (SUNY Press, forthcoming). Banerjee is a founding co-editor of the book series Studies in Global Science Fiction at Palgrave Macmillan, and an editor of the journal Science Fiction Film and Television at Liverpool University Press. She is completing a second single-authored book titled The Chernobyl Effect.

Sean Grattan is Lecturer in American Literature at the University of Kent. His first monograph, Hope Isn’t Stupid: Utopian Affects in Contemporary American Literature
(University of Iowa Press, 2017), examines the often denigrated place of utopian literature and theory within the contemporary American literary landscape. Grattan is currently at work on a second monograph project tracing an aesthetics of cognitive mapping in contemporary American literature. Grattan’s research interests include contemporary American literature, twentieth century American literature, gender and sexuality studies, African American literature, utopian literature, transnationalism, and affect theory. He has published essays on Colson Whitehead, Toni Morrison, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, and William S. Burroughs and recently co-edited a special issue of Cultural Critique titled “What Comes After the Subject?”

**Caroline Edwards** is Senior Lecturer in Modern & Contemporary Literature at Birkbeck, University of London. Her first monograph, *Utopia and the Contemporary British Novel* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), develops a new strategy of reading utopian anticipation within literary realist narratives that demonstrate the persistence of the utopian imagination in the twenty-first century. Edwards’ work on contemporary writers has also led to two co-edited books: *China Miéville: Critical Essays* (Gylphi, 2015) and *Maggie Gee: Critical Essays* (Gylphi, 2015). She has published in such journals as *Telos*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Textual Practice*, *Contemporary Literature*, *ASAP/Journal*, the *New Statesman* and the *Times Higher Education* and written chapters for a number of collections, including *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction, 1980 to the Present, Science Fiction: A Literary History, The Routledge Companion to Twenty-First Century Literary Fiction* and the *Palgrave Handbook of Utopian and Dystopian Literature*. Her research has been featured on BBC Radio 4, BBC Radio 3 and BBC One and in 2017 she curated an exhibition for the Museum of London on “Imagined Futures.” Edwards is a founding member of the British Association for Contemporary Literary Studies and a director of the scholarly publisher the Open Library of Humanities.